



Altruism in tourism: Social Exchange Theory vs Altruistic Surplus Phenomenon in host volunteering



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ABSTRACT

Taking into consideration the scarcity of research on volunteering and altruistic behavior of host communities, this exploratory study examines altruism in tourism from the viewpoint of members of voluntary tourism associations. A literature review reveals two general types of altruism, i.e. reciprocal and true, as well as two theoretical constructs, namely Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Altruistic Surplus Phenomenon (ASP). By taking a sample of 21 members from two voluntary tourism associations located in the municipality of Veria, Northern Greece, this study confirms that reciprocal altruism is one of several motives for participating in voluntary tourism associations. Additionally, it is shown that ASP is more adequate than SET to interpret the study groups' social behavior.

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Introduction

Altruism is the basis for some socially acceptable activities such as volunteering, charity, philanthropy, and blood donation (Piliavin & Charng, 1990). However altruistic behavior, such as helping strangers, may expose individuals to risky social environments and attract criminals. For instance, Homant (2010, p. 1199) suggests that being helpful to strangers “may leave one vulnerable to a crime committed by the person being helped, such as a scam or a theft of some sort”. Nevertheless, altruistic behavior is generally described as a selfless behavior that benefits third parties' welfare and by doing so it provides an understanding “of social solidarity in modern societies” (Wuthnow, 1993, p. 344). Due to its significance in understanding social behavior, altruism has been studied in social sciences, in contrast to selfishness and the dominant self-interested behavior of modern man, who focuses prominently on personal achievements and goals.

A remarkable fact related to altruistic behavior is “that the word ‘altruism’ did not exist until 1851” (Wilson, 2015, p. 4), when the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1851, cited in Wilson, 2015) introduced this term by juxtaposing it to egoism, and by considering it compatible with a higher and purer moral system of living. However, the origins of the concept of altruism can be identified in the ancient Greek philosophy and drama in the form of self-sacrifice, as in the case of Euripides' Alcestis. The concept of altruism is also found in the early Christian philosophy, where the Greek term ‘agape’ referred to selfless and “divine love for humanity” (Wuthnow, 1993, p. 346). In social sciences, Emile Durkheim – one of the founding figures of sociology – noted the importance of altruism by opposing it to egoism (Wuthnow, 1993), although altruism as a

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concept gained increased scientific interest in sociobiology only during the 70's (Fennell, 2006; Wilson, 1975). Nowadays, a key issue that needs to be further explored concerns the way modern societies understand how altruistic behavior benefits group-level symbiosis of individuals (Wilson, 2015).

Through a literature review, 44 studies were found published between 1997 and 2016 exploring the concept of altruism in tourism. The majority of them, 29 in total, were focused on the motives and behaviors of volunteer tourists (for instance Coghlan & Fennell, 2009; Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2012; Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Weaver, 2015); and none of them has examined altruism in tourism from the viewpoint of members of voluntary tourism associations. Instead, altruism has been examined in host communities and host-tourist encounters (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Fennell, 2006; Uriely, Schwartz, Cohen, & Reichel, 2002).

The literature review reveals that altruism comprises a constant variable in understanding volunteer tourism and more specifically the motive commonly ascribed to volunteer tourists, which diversifies their typical pattern of leisure seeking. However, Holmes and Smith (2009) and Smith and Holmes (2009, 2012), suggest an obvious distinction between volunteer tourists and host volunteers in the tourism sector. While volunteer tourists visit a destination to offer volunteering services, host volunteering mainly “involves residents as volunteers within their own community, and takes place in visitor attractions, at events and in destination service organisations” (Smith & Holmes, 2012, p. 563). Hence, host volunteering seems to have more common elements with host community studies than with volunteer tourism which is often perceived as ‘volunteer vacations’ (Smith & Holmes, 2009). Despite the fact that host volunteers are often lacking professional skills and tourism training (Alonso & Liu, 2013; Smith & Holmes, 2012) they contribute to the social capital of their community motivated by place attachment, civic pride and the emotional ties with their community.

As far it concerns altruism in host volunteering, Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, Smith, and Baum (2010) suggest that local volunteers at events, museums and heritage sites seem to be more self-oriented compared to volunteer tourists, for the reason that the first often consider volunteering as work experience, while the latter as an activity that fulfils their altruistic as well as their self-interest needs. Whereas the altruism vs egoism debate is dominant in volunteer tourism (Coghlan & Fennell, 2009; Wearing & McGehee, 2013), only a few studies examined altruism as a motivational factor influencing host volunteers in tourism (Anderson & Cairncross, 2005; Holmes & Smith, 2009; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2010). Whichever the case, the concept of altruism in tourism studies remains “largely subjective, with no clear, precise criteria” and, therefore, it lacks “clarity and precision” (Wright, 2013, p. 246).

Considering the scarcity of research on this topic, this exploratory study aims at examining altruistic motivations and behaviors of a community segment that plays a voluntary and ancillary role in the development of tourism, namely voluntary tourism associations. In doing so, the authors investigate whether altruistic behavior of host volunteers (members of voluntary tourism associations) is driven by self-interest benefits or by an attempt to improve the welfare of their communities. Due to the controversies of the concept, explained above, this study explores altruism from two different perspectives: true altruism (i.e. a lack of motivation for return favors) vs reciprocal altruism (i.e. the anticipation of intended direct or indirect benefits). Two theoretical constructs are tested, that is, Social Exchange Theory (SET) as opposed to Altruistic Surplus Phenomenon (ASP).

Altruism: reciprocal vs true

Altruism comprises a multifarious and multidimensional concept. Therefore, it is misleading, to talk about a single altruistic motive. Wilson (2015), while conceptualizing altruism, states that when we refer to altruism “we [may] mean a broad family of motives that cause people” (p. 141) to help others. Altruistic behavior in the context of tourism literature pertains mainly to the increase of ‘anonymous’ third party welfare in host societies (Fennell, 2006; Zahra & McGehee, 2013). From a different perspective, Kim, Lee, and Bonn (2016), refer to direct altruism by claiming that altruism occurs also between individuals “who feel [a] common-bond attachment” (p. 98). Altruistic acts between two individuals comprise second party advantages, thus bringing to the forefront the discussion on the concept of reciprocal exchanges.

Reciprocity as a concept has been frequently examined in relation to SET and the structure of social exchanges. According to Molm, Collett, and Schaefer (2007) social exchanges can be either direct or indirect. Direct forms of social exchanges are: a) reciprocal exchanges, when “actors’ contributions are separately performed, non-negotiated and initiated by performing beneficial acts for another” (Coulson, MacLaren, McKenzie, & O’Gorman, 2014, p. 135) and b) negotiated exchanges, when they “focus on the terms two actors negotiate to reach a mutually beneficial agreement” (Andriotis & Agiomirgianakis, 2014, p. 579). Direct exchanges usually refer to the resource exchanges between two actors (the giver and the recipient) in contrast to indirect (or generalized) exchanges, where the recipient does not reciprocate the giver directly but the latter receives “from a different actor” (Molm et al., 2007, p. 208), that is, a third party in the social environment.

In adapting the concept of reciprocal altruism to the forms of reciprocity, altruistic acts can be either direct between two actors or indirect, thus benefiting third-party welfare in the context of the community. However, altruism as a major component of volunteering refers predominantly to “multiparty interactions” (Fennell, 2006, p. 111). Consequently, volunteering is characterized mainly by indirect reciprocity (Mofulu, Pan, & Li, 2016). From a different perspective, Ballinger and Rockmann (2010) refer to altruism as a non-reciprocal form of relationships, whereby the person undertakes an act to the advantage of another person “without regard for his or her own outcomes” (p. 379). This state of “non-reciprocal

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