Research Paper

Linking tourism to social capital in destination communities☆

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ABSTRACT

Tourism researchers have recently begun to examine in detail the connections between tourism development and destination community well-being. To date though there has been only limited research that critically examines the links between different aspects of tourism and the nature of social capital in a destination community. The literature review identified a need to both explore further the linkages between tourism and social capital and to better understand practitioner perspectives on these linkages through the use of Mode 2 research approaches. This paper will report on a qualitative action research project that explored the perspectives of 16 regional tourism officers on how tourism contributes to the social capital, and hence the well-being, of destination communities. The results of a thematic analysis of participant responses to a series of workshop activities identified key factors necessary for enhancing destination community social capital, including effective local resident engagement in tourism planning, the need for strong tourism leadership, and a desire to find different models for local and regional tourism organizations. The research also used Derrida's concept of absence and Foucault's concept of invisibility in social discourse to identify issues that were not immediately or overtly discussed by the participants, such as the need to better manage negative tourism impacts and specific mechanisms for building trust amongst tourism stakeholders. Implications both for further research and practice in this area are provided.

1. Introduction

The majority of regional tourism plans and policies are based on the assumption that tourism is a desirable development option for communities because its potential economic benefits will directly and indirectly contribute to improvements in destination community well-being. Tourism is often described by its proponents as 'a driver of economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability' (UNWTO, 2013, n.p.) and as making a positive contribution to well-being (WTTC, 2013). It is not, however, always clear whose well-being benefits from tourism or how these benefits arise. Concerns over the sustainability of tourism have driven numerous calls for academic researchers to more critically examine tourism development and planning processes and more actively address the need to change practices in order to support sustainability (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011).

This concern with more active academic engagement in changing practice to support sustainability recognizes the ongoing issue of significant gaps between academic research and theory and practitioner action (Weichselgartner & Kasperson, 2010). This academic-practice gap has been a topic of concern in a range of areas, but especially in applied sciences such as business, management and tourism (see Philips & Moutinho, 2014, for a tourism example). In 2001, Anderson, Herriot, and Hodgkinson (2001) outlined the changes in, and political pressures on, academic institutions that were contributing to a move away from pragmatic research, defined as having high rigour and high relevance, to pedantic research, defined as having high rigour but low relevance. These issues have continued to contribute to a widening gap between academic research and practice (Armstrong, 2003; Fox & Groesser, 2016; Romme et al., 2015). While this is complex problem that will need change in many areas, one common recommendation is that academic researchers should engage in more Mode 2 research, including techniques such as action research, that involves collaboration with practitioners and that seeks to incorporate

their practice based knowledge into theories (Coghlan, 2011; Gray, Iles, & Watson, 2011; Romme et al., 2015; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Zuber-Skerritt, 2012).

This paper fits within these traditions. It argues that if tourism is to make a significant positive contribution to sustainability in destination communities and regions, it must be developed in such a way as to minimize its negative impacts on, and maximize its positive contributions to, the wide range of different capitals needed to support community well-being. It seeks to support this argument in the first instance through a critical examination of the mechanisms that connect tourism development and management processes to changes in one aspect of destination community well-being, social capital. Secondly, it seeks to bridge the academic-practitioner gap through the adoption of a Mode 2 approach to research. Therefore, this paper reports on an action research study that explored both existing and potential connections between tourism and social capital identified by Australian regional tourism officers. This qualitative research study used thematic and discourse analyses to examine the outcomes of several workshop activities conducted with the tourism officers. The present paper focuses on the well-being and social capital of members of the community, defined as the people who live and work within a geographical region being promoted as a tourism destination.

1.1. A Capitals approach to sustainability

According to Costanza, Cumberland, Daly, Goodland, and Norgaard (2010) sustainability can be best explained by comparing the 'empty world' and 'full world' models of economies. In the 'empty world' model the only capital that matters is manufactured or financial capital and individual well-being is seen as resulting from the consumption of goods and services. In the 'empty world' model, the goal of economic activity is to convert land and labour into goods and services. Costanza et al. (2010) argue it is this model that has generated the issues that drive the sustainability agenda, and it is this model that has to change if sustainability is to be achieved. An alternative, the 'full world' model, offers multiple forms of capital to be considered including natural capital, social capital and human capital; well-being is expanded to include recognition of the need to balance individual and community well-being; and the goal of economic and government action is to protect and enhance stocks of all forms of capital. Lehtonen (2004) refers to this as a capitals approach to sustainability and defines sustainability as 'the maintenance or increase of the total stock of different types of capital' (p. 200). The concepts of well-being and the capitals said to contribute to well-being have become increasingly common in discussions of sustainability (Bandarage, 2013; Scott, 2012). Adapting this approach to tourism suggests that from the destination perspective, sustainable tourism development can be defined as tourism activities that maintain and enhance destination community well-being through net contributions to all forms of capital, especially natural capital.

1.2. Tourism and community well-being

Recent reviews of the tourism impacts literature consistently identify challenges to developing coherent theoretical frameworks for understanding how different types and processes of tourism development result in specific socio-cultural impacts (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012; Sharpley, 2014). One option for addressing these challenges that has emerged from both the ethnographic approaches and surveys of resident perceptions of tourism impacts is that of examining the ways in which tourism effects the different capitals that have been identified as important for well-being or quality of life. The terms well-being and quality of life are often used interchangeably. The OECD (2005 p. 1) actually uses well-being when it defines quality of life (QoL) as 'the notion of human welfare (well-being) measured by social indicators rather than by "quantitative" measures of income and production'. In this definition QoL is seen as equivalent to subjective well-being

(Shackman, Liu, & Wang, 2005), where subjective well-being refers to an individual's sense that their life overall is going well (Lucas & Diener, 2004; Malkina-Pykh & Pykh, 2008). In the present paper community well-being is seen as compromising of the sum of the subjective well-being of the community members.

Much of the discussion of tourism and well-being has focused on the well-being of tourists with far fewer studies on how tourism affects the well-being of destination communities or residents. Within the papers that have explicitly linked tourism to destination community well-being, the commonly cited theoretical approach is the community well-being framework (Flora, 2004), which expands on the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) to identify and define several different forms of capital. The framework proposes that community well-being is made up of seven overlapping and related forms of capital including financial capital, natural capital, built capital, cultural capital, human capital, political capital, and social capital (Emery & Flora, 2006; Fey, Bregendahl, & Flora, 2006; Flora, 2004).

Two key themes can be used to summarise this research explicitly linking tourism to destination community well-being through different forms of capital. The first and most common are papers that examine how host resident perceptions of different capitals in their community are linked to their attitudes towards tourism development. Papers by Andereck and Nyuapane, 2010, Kim, Uysal, and Sirgy (2013), McGehee, Lee, O'Bannon, and Perdue (2010) and Park, Nunkoo, and Yoon (2015), are all examples of this type of research. A consistent result from this area of research has been that resident beliefs about their subjective well-being are linked to the way they think about and respond to tourism. The second, less common theme focuses more on understanding the processes that link tourism to different impacts on the various capitals that make up destination community well-being. Macbeth, Carson, and Northcote (2004) offer one of the earliest explorations of how tourism can influence social, political and cultural capital in both positive and negative ways. Papers published by McKercher and Ho (2012), Moscardo (2008, 2009, 2012), and Yang and Li (2012) all used case study data to outline some of the ways in which tourism can influence the various capitals and dimensions of well-being. Work by Zahra and McGehee (2013) provides similar information focused on volunteer tourism in the Philippines. After interviews with local residents of several rural regions, Moscardo, Konovalov, Murphy, and McGehee (2013) outlined various relationships and processes linking different types of tourism to different community well-being outcomes. While these studies have identified a number of potential pathways linking tourism to destination community well-being, there have only been a few studies and it is not yet possible to judge whether or not the processes identified to date cover all the possibilities or how common each process may be.

1.3. Social capital

There is considerable debate about the definition and operation of social capital within the substantial literature across multiple disciplines (Moscardo, 2012). Pawar's (2006) review of social capital definitions, which included descriptions from Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Portes (1998) and Woolcock (1998), identified the following as the most common elements: collective action, cooperation, networks, relationships, shared norms and values, social interaction and trust. While these elements could be used in a working definition of social capital, it is important to note two key criticisms of the diverse ways in which researchers have conceptualized and used social capital. Firstly, there is often confusion and ambiguity about what social capital is versus what it can be used for (Portes, 1998). Secondly, there is often confusion between what social capital is and the structures or mechanisms that allow for its development (Woolcock, 1998). Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the structures that allow social capital to be created, the dimensions of social capital itself, and the outcomes that are said to derive from its use.