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The University of Southern Mississippi

Motivations in Volunteer Tourism: The Mini-Mission Concept

by

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A Thesis
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Abstract

In our increasingly globalized world, people have more access to each other than ever before. With the plight of those in faraway places more visible now, people have demonstrated a desire to help. In the last twenty years, the industry known as volunteer tourism has grown exponentially. From its roots as an eco-friendly alternative, this industry has evolved into a multibillion-dollar global phenomenon. As volunteer tourism evolved, many different subsets of this concept emerged. One of which includes the idea of a mini-mission. The mini-mission is traditionally a short, volunteer tourism trip, however, it also includes some religious aspects. Academics who study volunteer tourism have been debating for years what is the primary motivation for volunteer tourists to participate in these programs, with two camps firmly entrenched on both sides: altruistic v. self-interest. In my study, I seek to understand the motivations of those who participate in mini-mission trips.

Keywords: volunteer tourism, motivation, altruism, self-interest, mini-missions, short-term

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family, friends, and Connor for always supporting me
in everything that I do.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The industry of volunteer tourism, or the global phenomenon which involves both volunteer work and leisure time similar to vacation tourism, has expanded exponentially in both size and research. In 2008, it was estimated that 1.6 million people engaged in volunteer tourism per year making it an estimated \$1.7 billion – \$2.6 billion industry. This profitability has brought the industry under attack recently for shifting its focus away from helping host communities and toward maximizing volunteer benefits (ATLAS, 2008; Coghlan & Noakes, 2012). This raises concerns for some that the non-profit sector will become commercialized and lose sight of its original goal of helping communities (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012). While no figures have been released recently, the rapidly growing industry of volunteer tourism calls for more research in all areas, including motivation (Wearing & McGehee 2013).

Continued research in the area of motivation of volunteer tourists is necessary because understanding why volunteers take trips can help place them in projects that will allow for those needs to be met, while providing the most sustainable and meaningful output. For example, those who are unskilled and wish to only spend a short time in a destination would not be assigned a project which involves construction or teaching. This would do more harm than good with lack of training and time necessary to successfully complete these tasks and truly benefit a community. Instead, they may help with tasks around their project site, such as cleaning rooms, serving food, or painting old buildings. Another example would include a volunteer tourist who seeks professional development. This person could possibly be assigned a project which trains local leaders on managing local initiatives or training those within the non-profit they're volunteering for on a type

of data collection or information dissemination. This placement would be reliant on their professional skills and background. Volunteer tourists, like all other people, are diverse and have varying motivations. Understanding their motivations would be the key to continuing the push for sustainable volunteer tourism which benefits both the volunteer and the host community positively.

This project looks to provide an analysis of the motivations of the volunteer tourists in order to more fully meet sustainable needs of both volunteers and the host community. The goal of this would be to help support a broader conversation between the tourism sector and the non-profit sector on how to use motivations to maximize positive contributions and minimize the negative effects of volunteer tourism. This project will focus on understanding motivations and expectations of the volunteer tourists in order to create better placements which benefit both the host community and the volunteers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Volunteer tourism is an industry. Because of its uniquely situated market, non-profit organizations, which have traditionally facilitated volunteer tourism, must compete against other non-profits for funding, as well as the commercial tourism sector which has established its own for-profit volunteer tourism market. This competition leads to the increased commercialization of the volunteer tourism industry as a shift to traditional tourism methods of marketing place more emphasis on customer satisfaction than on the non-profits' original mission of creating positive change (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012). To better understanding this industry, it has to first be defined.

There are many definitions of volunteer tourism within the literature, especially in the beginning when it was still unclear the parameters of this new industry. However, the definition quoted most often by academics who study volunteer tourism is from Stephen Wearing (2001) who defines volunteer tourism as “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment” (1). While this is one of the most widely accepted definitions of volunteer tourism, Coghlan and Noakes use a definition which emphasizes not only volunteer efforts but also minimizing impact both environmentally and culturally, as well as self-development (2012). This is an important distinction as it demonstrates the evolution of the literature to include the complexity of motivations and benefits that volunteer tourism is capable of producing.

Volunteer tourism, as it was emerging, was often combined with other forms of alternative tourism and mislabeled as ecotourism or adventure tourism (Wearing 2001;

Wearing & McGehee 2013; Callanan & Thomas 2005). This confusion lied in the vastness of volunteer tourism which advertises anywhere from 1-2-week trips to 1-year sabbaticals (Callanan & Thomas 2005; Wearing 2001; Wearing & McGehee 2013).

Providing examples of volunteer tourism is important to demonstrate the breadth and variety of this industry. One trip included a 10-day stay, documenting the culture, architecture, and people of a small Chinese village which was to be relocated, while another was a 26-day trip to South Africa which allowed for two weeks of volunteering and two weeks of sight-seeing (Chen & Chen, 2011; Sin 2009). Another trip included one week in Tanzania at an orphanage to help build a library; the following week was spent on a safari (Biddle, 2014). Several trips offer medical brigades which visit Africa for little over a week and bring medical assistance and health care (Kascak, 2014). These trips have both positive and negative impacts to their host communities.

Research into volunteer tourism originally found many positive effects of the industry, particularly in cultural exchange. Common ground was established between volunteers and the community they were benefiting, especially in their combined goal of positive change (Wearing & Wearing, 2006). Many of these trips started off as environmental conservation, including planting trees and volunteering at turtle sanctuaries (Wearing, 2001). Other positive affects included the work being done in ecological conservation, medical assistance, cultural restoration, and educational support (Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

However, negative effects still prevail in these seemingly good-natured trips. Because of the medical trips, people in those countries stopped purchasing health insurance leaving them vulnerable in interim months, as well as dependent on foreign aid

(Kascak, 2014). The library students built in Tanzania was taken down and re-built every night because the high schoolers executing the project had no skills in construction, therefore making the building not structurally sound (Biddle, 2014). The South African trip reported those on the trip viewed poor people as lazy and not wanting to help themselves. Similarly, it perpetuated the idea that poverty is somehow seen as rustic or as part of a people's culture (Sin 2009). This type of tourism is also viewed by some host communities as reminiscent of colonialism and increasing dependency on foreign aid instead of focusing on economic development (Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

Short-Term Mission Trips

Short-term mission trips have grown exponentially as Wuthnow and Offutt's estimated 1.6 million participants a year shows (2008). This increase has corresponded with the increase in volunteer tourism with a jump in participation and senders starting in the early 21st century (Wuthnow & Offutt 2008; Trinitapoli & Vaisey 2009). Similar to volunteer tourism, short-term mission trips usually last less than two weeks with each trip having different goals and experiences, but a project is present in a majority of missions (Wuthnow & Offutt 2008; Trinitapoli & Vaisey 2009; Probasco 2013). Evangelism is cited as the main goal which includes proselytizing, as well as humanitarian aid (Probasco 2013). Like volunteer tourism, short-term missionary trips have been criticized for their missionary-centered approach and increasingly lack of focus on helping the host community (Lupton 2009; Howell 2009; Anderson, Kim, & Larios 2017).

Understanding Volunteer Tourists' Motivations

While a variety of scholars have examined the outcomes of volunteer tourist trips, others look towards the motivation of tourists to understand the phenomenon. The first studies of the motivation of volunteer tourism typically assumed good will on the part of

tourists and suggested that they had inherently altruistic reasons for taking the trips. Altruism is defined by Batson as the ability to make another person's well-being one's main goal without ulterior motives (Batson 1990). According to Wearing (2001), the industry of volunteer tourism is inherently altruistic. Its participants seek, ultimately, to make someone else's life better. This stemmed from a move in the 1990s away from regular packaged vacations (i.e., cruises, beach vacations) to something that would not hurt the environment or would help contribute to its conservation (Wearing, 2001; Callanan & Thomas, 2005). Volunteer tourism was seen as a way for people to personally contribute to solving some of the world's most dynamic problems, such as poverty and hunger (Wearing, 2001). However, the claim of volunteer tourism's inherent altruism has been disputed by scholars (Coghlan & Fennell 2009; Chen and Chen 2011; Sin 2009; Tomazos & Butler 2010).

Coghlan and Fennell (2009) and others frame the motivations of volunteer tourists from an egoistic perspective. Within this model, the tourists' ultimate goal of a volunteer trip is self-development with helping others being an instrumental, or secondary, goal (Batson 1990). Wearing (2001) describes self-development as enrichment of the mind through unfamiliar experiences. This model demonstrates social egoism, or the demonstration of care for others only to the degree that the well-being of that person directly affects the individual (Coghlan and Fennell 2005). Wearing specifically addresses this self-development component of voluntourism which he says is especially impactful in late adolescents who desire to feel independent (2001).

This market of young people, 18-25, are a target for voluntourism through gap years and short-term mission trips (Wearing 2001; Callanan & Thomas 2005; Howell 2009; Wuthnow & Offutt 2008).

While in the past the issue of motivation has been polarized, recently the literature has accepted that people have complex motivations. It has moved from debating a singular motivation to focusing on identifying a primary motivation while acknowledging that multiple motivations are present within volunteer tourists. Even with this view, authors debate whether altruism or self-interest is the primary motivator. Batson advocates strongly that psychology has given up on this idea of altruism as a primary motivator. Taking social egoist critiques into account, he proposed a model that substitutes the social egoist argument for one that advocates altruism with unintended consequences (Batson 1990). This argument rests on the formal structure of the altruism question, which Batson created that looks at motivation and ultimate vs. instrumental goals. From the altruistic perspective, while the ultimate goal of a volunteer trip would be to help others, the unintended consequence of that would be self-benefit (Batson 1990). While there are self-benefits that come with volunteer tourism, Batson (1990), Wearing (2001), and Callanan & Thomas (2005) argue they are secondary to the true altruistic purpose of volunteers. Those who see self-interest as the primary motivator (Coghlan & Fennell, 2009; Chen & Chen, 2011; Knollenberg et al, 2014) argue that while altruism is part of volunteer tourists' motivation, it is not the primary motivator. The debate over the "true" motivations of volunteer tourists can be resolved by thinking of individuals and their motivations as complex and multifaceted (Coghlan & Fennell 2009; Chen & Chen 2011; Sin 2009; Knollenberg et al 2014; Brown 2005; Wearing & McGehee 2013). There

have been several typologies developed to help explain these complex motivations and what has been observed as the primary motivator in volunteer tourists.

Typologies of Volunteer Tourists and Their Motivations

Considering the conflicting assumptions in the field of volunteer tourism regarding the motivations of volunteer tourists, many scholars set out to typologize volunteer tourists (Callanan & Thomas 2005; Wearing 2001; Knollenburg et al 2014). These typologies reflect the fact that people take volunteer tourist trips for different reasons and the activities in the trip tend to match the tourists' motivations.

Knollenburg et al (2014) described three camps: *volunteers*, *voluntourists*, and *tourists*. All of the potential voluntourists who took this survey were grouped intentionally by similarities in motivation based on five motivations identified by Knollenburg et al: culture, altruism, personal development, relationships, and escape. *Volunteers* were shown to have unusually high altruistic motivations and below average in the other four categories. These people displayed that a service-oriented experience was their main goal. The *voluntourists* had high altruistic and cultural motivations with above average personal development demonstrating both a service and traditional tourist view. Finally, *tourists* showed the lowest levels of altruism and highest levels of cultural motivation, as well as scoring relatively high with escape. The authors associate involvement with motivation suggesting different activities suitable for each category and their motivations (Knollenburg et al 2014). There is still a very present altruism vs. self-interest even within this spectrum that combines the two, while other typologies stuck with overtly polarizing typologies.

Chapter 3: Current Study

The typology aids in understanding the motivations of volunteer tourists. Less work has been done to understand the motivations of college students who take trips in the context of short-term mission trips. While other studies have been conducted on volunteer tourism and college age students, this project's interdisciplinary approach seeks to apply a volunteer tourism motivation theory to that of a short-term mission trip in the niche category of south Mississippi college students.

Using Wuthnow and Offutt's, and Probasco's description of short-term mission trips, this project seeks to assess this type of trip against a volunteer tourism trip as described by the literature above (2008; 2013). The purpose of this is to apply a measurement of motivation in volunteer tourism to short-term mission trips. The scale used in this project originated in a 69-item scale used in the mass tourism industry to measure motivation. It was later refined to a 44-item measurement to be used specifically in volunteer tourism, then takes its final form with Knollenberg's modifications (Knollenberg et al. 2014). Knollenberg stresses that these modifications were tested using exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis.

Research Questions

After researching this subject, several questions stuck out to me.

Research Question 1: Is altruism higher in mini-mission participants than regular volunteer tourists?

Research Question 2: Do mini-mission participants fit into one of Knollenberg's typologies?

Research Question 3: How can the information gathered be used to produce more positive outcomes?

Methodology

Participants

For this study surveys were disseminated to the student population at the University of Southern Mississippi. Selected participants were those who have previously been on, at least, one short-term mission trip, as well as those who had not been on a trip, but gave their motivations for if they would go on a mission trip. This study received 32 responses but was unable to use 11 as the participants had not answered all the questions. Of those received, 14 responses were from students who had been on at least one mission trip and 7 responses were from students who had not been on a mission trip. These students were between the ages of 18 and 23 with the average age being 20 years old. Of those who had been on a mission trip, the average age was the same as the overall, 20 years old. Of those who had not been on a mission trip, the average age was slightly higher than the overall at 21 years old.

When asked what religious affiliation the 11 participants who had previously been on mission trips identified with, four participants identified as Christian, three identified as Baptist, two identified as Catholics, and one identified as Episcopalian. Two responded that they had no religious affiliation, one identified as atheist, and one identified as agnostic.

Of the seven participants who had no previous experience with mission trips, two identified as Christian. The five other participants identified individually as Methodist, Catholic, Muslim, atheist, and no religious affiliation.

18 of the respondents were female and three of the respondents were male. Those who had been on mission trips had 13 female respondents and 1 male respondent, while those who had not been on a mission trip had five female respondents and two male respondents.

When asked how many mission trips the participants had been on, eight respondents reported they had been on three or more, three respondents reported they had been on two, and three respondents reported they had been on one.

Measures

The participants were given a definition of short-term mission trips which is a synthesis of Wunthow and Offut (2008) and Probasco's (2013) definitions: "Short-term mission trips usually last less than two weeks and include religious aspects or humanitarian projects. They can be local, national, or international". Following this, participants were asked if their trip had included a religious aspect, then demographic questions. This included age, gender, religious affiliation, and how many short-term mission trips the participants has taken. The options for age were 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and over 23. Gender was divided into female, male, and prefer not to say. Religious affiliation was an open-ended question where participants could type in their answers. The options for mission trips were 1, 2, or 3 or more.

This project used a version of Knollenberg's modified 20 item-scale to measure motivations in volunteer tourists (Knollenburg et al. 2014). This data was measured with a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important. This is in response to the modified prompt which asks how important each aspect is in motivating them to take short-term mission trips (Knollenberg et al. 2014). The scale

measures five separate motivation categories: **culture, altruism, personal development, relationships, and escape**. Table 1 breaks down each motivation statement which appeared on the survey and categorizes them by what they measure (Knollenburg et al. 2014, pg. 933). According to Knollenburg, these explained 68% of the variance (Knollenburg et al. 2014). Each factor loading ranked greater than 0.60 with Cronbach Alpha reliabilities above 0.75 (Knollenburg et al. 2014, pg. 931).

Table 1: Survey Categories

| Culture | Altruism | Personal Development | Relationships | Escape |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Be with people from different cultures | Make a difference | Be independent | Strengthen my family relationship | Be away from everyday stress |
| Meet the Local People | Do something meaningful | Fulfill a dream | Strengthen my relationships with friends | Be away from daily routine |
| Learn about other people | Help others | Do something new and different | Have an opportunity to educate my children | |
| Learn new things | Give something back | Develop my career | | |
| Become immersed in the local culture | | Travel | | |

Chapter 4: Results

The scale is numerically represented in this survey as follows: *not at all important* is represented as 1, *not so important* as 2, *somewhat important* as 3, *very important* as 4, and *extremely important* as 5. Numbers closer to 5 represent categories that are motivationally important to the respondents while numbers closer to 1 represent categories that respondents find not at all important as a motivator.

Of the 14 participants who had previous mission trip experiences, their results by category are not surprising. Altruism ranks highest with a score of 4.696 out of 5. Culture produced a score of 3.929 with Personal Development scoring 3.371. Relationships and Escape coming last with 3.119 and 3.071 respectively.

The 7 participants who had no experience with mission trips ranked their motivations the same as those who did have experience with Altruism and Culture ranking highest. However, there are slight differences in averages. Altruism produced a score of 4.25 lower than participants with mission trip experience. Culture scored 3.828 while Personal Development scored 3.343. Lowest scoring again, Relationship and Escape produced 2.905 and 2.714 respectively. Both groups ranked the categories the same, but with a small increase in importance for the mission trip participants.

Table 2: Average Results

| Category | Mission Trip Respondents | Non-Mission Trip Respondents |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Altruism</i> | 4.696428571 | 4.25 |
| <i>Culture</i> | 3.928571429 | 3.828571429 |
| <i>Personal Development</i> | 3.371428571 | 3.342857143 |
| <i>Relationships</i> | 3.119047619 | 2.904761905 |
| <i>Escape</i> | 3.071428571 | 2.714285714 |

Chapter 5: Discussion

At the beginning, I asked three questions. Is altruism higher in mini-mission participants than regular volunteer tourists? Do mini-mission participants fit into one of Knollenberg's typologies? How can the information gathered be used to produce more positive outcomes?

The first two answers can be seen in the research results above. The altruism in voluntourists in Knollenberg's study was 4.91. That is 0.2 points higher than this group of participants. However, the mini-mission participants aligned closely with the volunteer typology while the non-mini mission trip participants did not align with any of the three typologies. The mini-mission participants matched almost identically with Knollenberg's volunteer typology. The only significant difference was the relationship category where mini-mission participants had 0.3 points higher average than volunteers. Those who had not participated in mission trips did not line up with any of Knollenberg's typologies and had averages which ranged through all three typologies.

The findings from this research are important in understanding what motivates volunteers on mini-mission trips. While altruism is the main motivator, it is also important to note that cultural experiences with host communities also seem to be highly valued by volunteers. Through this, organizations who coordinate these types of trips can better understand how to structure their itineraries to better suit the needs of their volunteers.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. Most notably, the sample size is extremely small with only 21 usable responses. This means my conclusions can only be applied to this specific group of participants and is not generalizable. However, it is very common in volunteer tourism literature to only have small sample sizes. The main research designs are usually qualitative in nature, such as case studies and interviews.

I was also unable to access the program which allows for discriminant analysis of the motivations and demographics. This would have allowed for better understanding on how motivations correlated with demographics and the greater significance of my results.

Chapter 6: Further Study

Mini mission trips and the motivations for their participants are an understudied area of volunteer tourism. More studies on this area are warranted considering much of the literature discusses how religious organizations and churches are big contributors to this industry. Understanding the unique motivations that separate mini mission participants and regular volunteer tourists would provide a more holistic picture of volunteer tourism.

Future research designs would benefit from both qualitative and quantitative methods. These could include case studies, interviews, or journals for volunteers during their experiences in addition to surveys before and after trips. A unique research design from the field of anthropology are ethnographies. It would allow the researcher to experience the mission trip and interact with volunteers to understand their motivations and thoughts as they are forming.

Finally, the biggest hole in volunteer tourism literature currently is host community perspective. While establishing trust may be difficult, this insight is crucial to understanding the future of the industry. As negative effects of voluntourism continue to be discovered, only by understanding the needs and perspectives of community members will positive change begin. As development and altruism were the origins of this industry, learning the best structures to benefit the community itself can inform organizations on how they can improve. While each community is unique, some new research on this area will begin to improve the industry as a whole.

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