Ecotour Guides of the Australian Outback:

The Savannah Guides

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Introduction

Sociology has only recently begun to focus on consumption and leisure. This has come about at the same time as the international rise of travel and tourism. The focus on niche and targeted markets within tourism has given rise to the importance of the travel and tourist experience within the realm of the social sciences. In turn, this has highlighted the rise of the ecotourism market. The role of the ecotour guides who provide the tourist experience within this sphere is currently undergoing a Renaissance. The guides are emerging from the service economy and are endeavouring to embrace the newer experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999), where nature and the environment are a part of the experience product.

This research into interpretive guided tours within the scope of ecotourism is a study of individuals who are members of an ecotourism organisation. The research concentrates upon a group of ecotour guides called 'Savannah Guides'.

The Savannah Guides are a not-for-profit organisation that provide a marker for the expansion and the accomplishment of world's best practice nature based and culture-based outback tourism in the tropical savannas region of northern Australia. The principles, ethos and ongoing participation of this association have provided a 'remote area guiding model' that, as far as is known, is one of the very few of its kind in both the geographical area and, in the area of ecotourism (Hynes 1999: 13).

The occupation of the tour guide is a central issue in the study of tourism and, this study of a group of ecotour guides is significant because they are perceived as key mediators within the tourist industry; as their vocation enhances the tourist or visitor experience. This research explores those issues and seeks to make a modest contribution to an undeveloped area. According to Urry (1995), '… one particular kind of service that has been particularly underexamined by sociologists is that of travel' (Urry 1995: 129), and by extension, tourism.

Theoretical Background

Throughout this research I have used: a critical sociology of tourism influenced by MacCannell, Symbolic Interactionism influenced by Goffman and critical elements of the labour process theory which seeks to give voice to agency – I have also used recent work on emotional labour (Hochschild 1983 and Smith 1992).

Of all methods of travelling, the guided tour lends itself to enquiry as a research subject because the most important parts of tourism are clearly identifiable and readily understood in this form. Among many travel patterns, the guided tour is highlighted as a practical consideration for both the tourist and the environment and as the most symbolically ritualised for the social scientist (Schmidt 1979: 441-442).

Some of the questions arising from this study include, but are not restricted to:

(i)   What do the Savannah Guides do?

(ii)   What is significant about the discourse of the Savannah Guides? How do they acquire their knowledge, and from what source?

(iii)   What is the philosophy of the organisation? What are the inclusive and exclusive practices of the organisation? How do they present themselves to the public? To what extent do their values fit within the wider discourse on environmentalism and ecotourism?

(iv)   Why are they attracted to ecotour guiding as an occupation?

The aim of this study is to investigate the occupation of the ecotour guide, the relationship between ecotour guides, interpretation of guided tours and ecotourism practices and, how they relate to, and are utilised by tourists, as part of an expanding service economy.

Literature from the sociology of tourism, tourism and the environment, tourism and ecotourism have each been considered. Each of these literatures has provided aspects and insights, which contribute to the research. Furthermore, symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1959) and emotional labour theories (Hochschild 1983) highlight the occupation of the tour guide from a position outside the tourist industry, thereby enhancing current approaches to both the service industry and the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999). This provides an informed approach to an

emerging area of focus within the discipline of sociology, that of the sociology of ecotourism.

The character of the contemporary tour guide has its immediate historic beginnings in the Grand Tour of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Dewar 2000; Urry 1990), and in the advent of modern tourism, which inevitably replaced the Grand Tour in the nineteenth century. But, the contemporary guides' predecessors are numerous and varied and can be traced back to parables, legends, antiquity and geographic investigation (Cohen 1985: 6).

The tour guide has a considerable role to perform as a 'culture broker', one who instructs the tourist in the culture of the visited space. If it is factual that 'sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even get in with the natives' (MacCannell 1976: 94), then the guide's purpose is to supply entry, physically or emotionally, to the tourist 'back regions', to use Goffman's expression (1959: 210). The guide can help to accomplish this by supplying tourists with a greater understanding of the attractions they see than could be attained through superficial examination. As interpreters of a specific site, guides sometimes find themselves performing as representatives for their region or country (Holloway 1981: 387).

The guides form an emotional bond both with the tourists and with the people the tour group visit (Cohen 1982). While not perhaps a characteristic representation of the typical individual from the host country or region, the guide may, nevertheless, embody many of the societal characteristics of the host community for tourists, who may have no other interaction with the people of that country or area (Holloway 1981: 388). This provides a comparison with the guides in my study, who often cater for international tourists who fly into a major city, then immediately fly in a small aircraft to the guide's site, or place of business. In many cases, the guides may be one of the few typical Australians the tourist associates with for the duration of the tour.

Methodology and Data Analysis

I have used grounded theory as my approach to theoretical generation of the data. As the theories and concepts emerge from the data, new theories are conceived throughout both the data collection process and the analysis process.

> The source of theory here is the researcher who constructs it from the interview, observation, visual or documentary data collected concerning a target phenomenon; theory is developed in situ, or is *grounded* in the data collected (Sandelowski 1993: 214 italics in original).

According to Patton (1980), the way to discover emergent themes in the data, is by careful and methodical perusal of the topics frequently appearing in the data set itself.

As qualitative methods produce 'richer' and 'thicker' descriptive data than quantitative methodologies, in many cases, they should replace them (Dann and Phillips 2000: 253). Importantly, qualitative research can be perceived as an effort to give meaning and comprehension to various phenomena, as understood by the individuals who experience them. Qualitative investigators understand that the 'truth' cannot be discovered absolutely, but are representing the knowledge they have found as accurately as possible (Riley 1996: 38).

Corbin and Strauss (1998) suggest that researchers who use qualitative methods have questioned the positivist traditions of research with the intention of studying human interaction. Contained within this redefinition of methods is the idea that qualitative methods involve interpretation and, that interpretation includes the worldview and voices of the social groups and individuals under investigation. Interpretations of the social world of groups and individuals are gradually drawn out of the data. Qualitative researchers are in an advantageous position because they can give voice to individuals, collectives and organisations under scrutiny. Further, they interpret what they have observed, been told, or read (Corbin and Strauss 1998: 160). Miles and Huberman (1994) agree with this point of view arguing that

> Qualitative data with their emphasis on people's "lived experience"
> are fundamentally well suited for locating the *meanings* people place

on the events, process and structure of their lives: "their perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions", and for connecting these meanings to the *social world* around them (Miles and Huberman 1994: 10 italics in original).

Increasingly, there has been an acceptance of grounded theory within the qualitative methods approach, '… inductively derived theory is developed from the empirical data, with limited reference to pre-existing theory (Rice and Ezzy 1991: 191). In essence, grounded theory involves inductive theorising. The theory comes from building observations from insights collected as empirical data, throughout the research. On the other hand, a more advanced perception of grounded theory goes beyond basic inductive theory building. Theory building happens in a continuous relationship between theory that already exists and fresh insights generated through the results of empirical investigation (Rice and Ezzy 1991: 194). Data analysis that leads to the formulation of theory is a clear process. The aims and research questions are developed in the research data and from within the fieldwork itself (Rice and Ezzy 1999: 195).

While there are few studies of tour guides, there has not, as yet, been any extensive sociological research into this area of enquiry. Further, even though qualitative research has a tradition within the domain of tourism investigation (Boorstin 1964; MacCannell 1973, 1976; Turner 1973, 1974), very few uses of grounded theory are evident in the tourism literature (Riley 1996: 24).

Findings

• The Savannah Guides provide an informed interpretive guided ecotourism experience in the Australian outback

• Their interpretive 'facts' are acquired from life experience in the bush and from practical sources and less from scientific sources. From my participation in a number of tours, this seems to be what the tourists appreciate

• The Savannah Guides' philosophy is based on a collective sense of identity and recognition as an exclusive ecotourism organisation

• Exclusivity and elitism are practiced by the guides to exclude individuals who do not conform to their standards and codes of conduct

• The guides present themselves as cultural brokers and educative interpreters to the ecotourists

• The guides express a concern for, and have extensive knowledge of the environment.

• Many of the guides saw work in the ecotourism industry as a form of alternative employment, and as an alternative to declining rural employment

• Others saw a niche for this type of tourism and exploited the opportunity

Conclusions

Within the sociology of tourism, this study makes a contribution to two main areas. First, my research provides a comparison and a contrast to previous

work on the vocation of the tour guide, and extends and expands on this within the framework of ecotourism. Second, it describes the model of the guide within an organisational setting and especially, within a selective alliance to a group membership.

In Cohen's (1985) model, the accent is on the individual and group needs of the tourist, rather than on the location or the host population. My study demonstrates that the complexities of the tour guide occupation are apparent no matter where the act of interpretation is performed. The ecotour guides are continually attempting to legitimise themselves through the interpretation and protection of the sites under touristic focus. Compliance with organisational norms target individuals involved in the organisational process (insiders) as well as those on the periphery (outsiders), seeking membership. At the personal level, the organisational values and norms are not simply directed at rule compliance, they also encourage and re-enforce it.

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