

Perceived impacts of volunteer tourism in favelas of Rio de Janeiro (RJ): Through the eyes of the tourists

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to analyze the social aspects of volunteer tourism in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This study is a part of another larger project in which local NGOs, volunteer tourists, and community residents were interviewed about their perspectives on volunteer tourism. This paper reports on the results of interviews with representatives of volunteer tourists. In total, 16 volunteer tourists were interviewed. The aims of this paper are to investigate: 1) what are the effects of volunteer tourism on a community as perceived by the volunteer tourists; 2) what effects do the volunteer tourists have on the community compared to other forms of tourism as perceived by the volunteer tourists; and 3) how do the volunteer tourists perceive the different forms of tourism in communities in which they volunteer? The results show that there are mixed feelings about the impacts of volunteer tourism in *favela* communities. Recommendations to increase the positive benefits of volunteer tourism are discussed.

Key words: Volunteer tourism. Social tourism. Sustainable tourism. *Favelas*.

Introduction

This research is a work in progress and is part of a larger project where the local NGOs, volunteer tourists, and community members were interviewed on their views of the effects of volunteer tourism on a community. The paper describes preliminarily results of the interviews conducted with the volunteer tourists and their perceived impacts in the communities for which they volunteered.

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While the subject of volunteer tourism is somewhat new in the academic literature and tourism industry, the definition of this form of tourism is well established. Volunteer tourists are described by Wearing (2001) as tourists who “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” (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Volunteer tourism, therefore, is a niche market industry that caters to tourists who would like to be both volunteer workers and tourists at the same time while on holidays. Typically these tourists volunteer for as short as one day to up to two years at a given destination in various areas. Most of the volunteer tourists tend to be from the global north traveling to volunteer in communities of the global south.

Volunteer tourism in Brazil is not as well known, or researched, as other parts of Latin America. However, there is emerging research of tourism in *favela* communities of Rio de Janeiro (Freire-Medeiros, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), and a photo-ethnographic study was conducted to understand relationships between the volunteer tourists and *favela* children at a local NGO (Freire-Medeiros, Nunes, & Campello, 2011). Additionally, research describing how volunteer tourism is sustainable is relatively lacking, nevertheless, this form of tourism is usually described as a sustainable way to travel in academic literature. In addition, much of the sociological work in this area has focused on the individual tourist and the part that tourism plays in establishing individual identity and a sense of self (Wearing, Deville, & Lyons, 2008), while research in the area of community perceptions toward volunteer tourism is just beginning to emerge (McGehee & Andereck, 2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2004). Therefore, the aim of this project is to add to the current body of literature in the field of volunteer tourism and to learn of its effects on vulnerable communities in Brazil. It will also describe the perceptions of volunteer tourists on their impacts on a community, which is lacking in the academic literature.

This study in progress has been developed to address a need for further research that critically looks at the social impacts of volunteer tourism in vulnerable communities, similar to the *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This study analyzes the nature of volunteer tourism by reviewing the concepts related to sustainability, sustainable tourism, and social tourism. The overall objectives of this project are to address the following questions: 1) what are the effects of

volunteer tourism on a community as perceived by the volunteer tourists; 2) what effects do the volunteer tourists have on the community compared to other forms of tourism as perceived by the volunteer tourists; and 3) how do the volunteer tourists perceive the different forms of tourism in communities in which they volunteer?

It is hoped that this project will increase the understanding of the lived experience of volunteer tourism in Brazil in particular, and attempts to describe the nuances between the understanding of social tourism between the global north and the global south. Finally, this projects aims to add to the body of literature focusing on volunteer tourism in Brazil where academic research is lacking in Latin America.

Since volunteer tourism has been described as a sustainable way to travel, the literature review will begin with a description of sustainability and sustainable tourism. Next, volunteer tourism and its implications in sustainable tourism and social tourism will be discussed. Furthermore, since this study focuses on the social aspects of volunteer tourism it will be useful to define social tourism and the differences in definition between the global north and the global south. Additionally, social representations theory will be discussed as a theoretical framework for this study.

Theoretical References

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a subset of tourism and sustainable development; however, sustainable tourism is not the same as sustainable development. For example, sustainable tourism works with aspects of a community related to the social/cultural, economic, and environmental tourism related resources, whereas sustainable development deals with a much larger scale looking into all aspects of human interaction and the environment (Hall, 2008). The World Tourism Organization most recently has defined sustainable tourism development as:

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and esthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining

cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (UNWTO, 2012, para.1)

Within this concept are three essential aspects to this definition, which are the economic, social/cultural, and environmental aspects of a destination. Additionally, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* defines sustainable tourism as “a positive approach intended to reduce the tensions and friction created by the complex interactions between the tourism industry, visitors, the environment and the communities which are host to holidaymakers” (Bramwell & Lane, 1993, p. 2). Again, within this definition emerges the economic, social/cultural, and environmental aspects of a destination. However, most of the literature that describes sustainable tourism focuses on environmentalism or an economic development perspective of sustainable tourism (Sharpley, 2000; Southgate & Sharpley, 2002) with less focused on the social aspects of sustainable tourism.

Additionally, Tosun (2001) argues that the “principles of sustainable tourism development appear to have been established by developed countries without taking into account conditions in the developing world” (p. 289). Priority needs to be placed on the wants and needs of a destination with a close evaluation of the social/cultural aspects of the community. The majority of volunteer tourists are people from the global north traveling to the global south in order to aid or alleviate poverty, environmental restoration, or research (Wearing, 2001). Therefore, it is these authors’ belief that volunteer tourism should take into account all aspects of sustainability as defined by the UNWTO (2012), and Bramwell and Lane’s (1993) definition, which includes the economic, environmental, and social/cultural aspects of a destination, but with the priority focused on the social/cultural aspects of the local community especially in vulnerable communities. For example, since tourists are in the position of power when traveling to areas with a history of marginalization, an emphasis on social and cultural aspects should take precedence in order to allow for community empowerment rather than continued marginalization or continued apathy towards tourism development. Therefore, sustainable tourism is seen as an approach with patterns intrinsically related to tourism development rather than a niche segment within the tourism industry. Volunteer tourism presents a unique opportunity to investigate the social aspects of sustainability in tourism development.

Volunteer tourism

Volunteer tourism is seen by researchers as a subset of sustainable tourism which includes ecotourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). Volunteer tourism has been described in the academic literature by Wearing (2001) as workers who are both tourists and volunteers who volunteer and travel in an organized way to help combat the symptoms of poverty and work in environmental restoration or research, along with some research in society. These organized trips could include traveling to an ecological area for restoration or education (http://www.track-of-the-tiger.com/pages/VWB_overview_psl.html), building schools out of plastic bottles (<http://servetheworldtoday.com/>), teaching people how to surf and engaging them in community development projects (<http://www.wavesfordevelopment.org/>), teaching languages to adults and children in *favela* communities (<http://2irmaos.org/>), and many others⁴. There is a view that volunteer tourism provides a mutually beneficial form of travel where both the volunteer and the host communities gain from the experience (Raymond & Hall, 2008). However, other studies have proposed that there is potential for the volunteers to receive more personal benefits to themselves as compared to benefits accruing to the host community (McGehee & Andereck, 2008, 2009), and therefore it is less mutually beneficial.

There are many examples of positive impacts of volunteer tourism, with the majority of the examples addressing the benefits gained by the tourist (Brown, 2005; Sin, 2009; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001; Wearing & Neil, 2000). Much less of the literature has addressed the positive and negative impacts of volunteer tourism on a community. Nevertheless, there is emerging research in the area of resident attitudes toward volunteer tourism (McGehee & Andereck, 2009), the perceptions of residents regarding the community impacts of volunteer tourists (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004), and the NGOs' agenda in tourism development (Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting, 2005). As of yet, there has been little to no research on the perceived effects of volunteer tourism from the point of view of the tourists themselves. Additionally, there

⁴ Websites accessed on May 5, 2012.

has been little research in Brazil on volunteer tourism with the exception of Freire-Medeiros, et al. (2011).

When referring to the three main focus areas of sustainable tourism (economic, environmental, and social cultural) described by the UNWTO (2012) and by Bramwell and Lane (1993); volunteer tourism has focused mainly in the areas of ecotourism (Brightsmith, Stronza, & Holle, 2008; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Ellis, 2003; Lorimer, 2009), whereas the economic and social benefits of volunteer tourism has yet to be explored. However, the part that the NGOs plays in volunteer tourism and community development might also play a part in economic development of a local area. Additionally, emerging in the academic literature is research on the social impacts of volunteer tourism. McGehee and Andereck (2008, 2009) have outlined the positive and negative impacts on community in Tijuana, Mexico and argue that volunteer tourism has the potential to impact the 'day-to-day' lives of a community similar to that of mass tourism. It is also interesting to note that the Freire-Medeiros, et al. (2011) study revealed that when there were volunteer tourists working in the *favela* of Pereira da Silva that children would frequent the Cultural House when the volunteer tourists were there and would not attend the Cultural House when the volunteer tourists were absent. This alludes to both positive and negative aspects of volunteer tourism. The presence of volunteer tourists in an area creates confidence within the children that if they show up to an NGO there will be someone 'interesting' to play with. However, when there were no tourists the Cultural House would remain closed because the children would not attend without the volunteers. This indicates that the presence of volunteer tourists was having an effect on the children's everyday lives.

Social Tourism and Inclusion

In recent decades, government bodies in the global north have addressed the issues of inaccessibility and exclusion of recreation and tourism among the socioeconomic disadvantaged and marginalized groups most often known as social tourism. However, the concept of social tourism varies somewhat between the global north and the global south. For example, Hunzinger defines social tourism as "the relationships and phenomena in the field of tourism resulting from participation in travel by economically weak or otherwise disadvantaged elements of society" (cited in Hall, 2008), while the MTur in Brazil has defined social tourism as "the practice of

conducting tourism and promoting equal opportunities, equity, solidarity and citizenship from the perspective of inclusion⁵.” The differences between these two definitions is that the first has been defined in Europe for the inclusion of the working poor for paid vacation and reduced pricing for travel, while the other aims to develop social inclusion using tourism to develop employment and income, develop infrastructure within communities, job training, and offer price reduction for persons with less options for travel such as the working poor, students, and retirees. For Brazilians, social tourism is both a segment of tourist activity, but also is a way of practice in tourism in order to obtain social benefits for local areas and for inclusion of marginalized groups (Conceituais, n.d.). Therefore, volunteer tourism in *favela* communities offers a unique way towards enhancing social inclusion as defined by MTur (2007). For example, volunteers work in areas that do not typically have many options for volunteers or tourists in general. Also, they work in programs that teach citizenship (social rights), help tutor children, teach skills sets that are needed for job attainment, and play with children.

In addition, because *favelas* suffer from prejudices both nationally and internationally, volunteers have an opportunity to learn about the lived reality of members of these communities and may help dispel some of the prejudices experienced from the community members. Volunteers who work in *favela* communities typically volunteer for longer periods of time when compared to other tourism activities and therefore have a better chance of a cultural exchange between the volunteer tourists and the community members.

Methods

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative methods was used for the overall study design. With a phenomenological approach, the experiences of individuals of a phenomenon are condensed in order to describe the central meaning of experience of a phenomenon for several individuals (Moustakas, 1994).

The theoretical framework was based on social representations theory. It is described as a “cognitive systems with a logic and language of their own and a pattern of implication, relevant to both values and concepts... They do not represent simply ‘opinions about,’ ‘images of’ or

⁵ www.turismo.gov.br. Websites accessed on May 15, 2012

‘attitudes towards,’ but ‘theories’ or ‘branches of knowledge’ in their own right, for the discovery and organization of reality” (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii). The interaction between individuals and their social or cultural world is central to social representations theory, and is useful for researchers who study “what communities think tourism is, what they expect it will bring and how they respond to tourism...” (Pearce, Moscardo, & Ross, 1996, p. 31). It was used for this study in progress because it offers a way to understand the social reality and social life of volunteer tourism by using logic and language in the form of semi-structured interviews as the tool of attaining this information. In addition, interaction between volunteer tourists and the community members was studied through the use of participant observations. This, along with interviews, is a crucial part of social representations theory because it aids in the understanding of the overall social or cultural world of volunteer tourism.

Data collection was conducted from August to October 2011. Information was gathered from three groups; community members (n=23), volunteer tourists (n=16), and NGOs (n=12). This study reports on the findings of the volunteer tourist interviews (n=16) only. Data collection was conducted on site in Rio de Janeiro. A total of 8 *favela* communities were included in this study.

Criterion sampling was used in order to qualify volunteer tourists for the study. For example, volunteer tourists had to have volunteered for at least 2 weeks and less than 2 years at any one location. Additionally, a snowball sample was used to help identify other volunteer tourists who had both an interest in the study and experience with volunteer tourism in *favela* communities in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Appropriate human subjects protocol was followed and participation was voluntary in this study and participants were informed that their responses are not associated with their identities and their names are kept confidential. Data analysis is currently being conducted and the following are a representation of the preliminary results.

Results

Effects of volunteer tourism on a community

The volunteer tourists described both positive and negative impacts of volunteer tourism. For example, several of the volunteers reported that sometimes they were concerned for the children when it became time for them to go back to their country of origin. The tourists explained that the children became close to them very quickly and then if a volunteer missed a

class or went back home to their country that this seemed to impact the children negatively. Some of the children became disappointed or expressed feelings of abandonment, while others stopped coming to the classes offered by the NGOs. As one participant explained:

I did have one student who was very introverted... I realized once that she left my class... and when I went to find her after the class that I realized that she was one of the only children from the institute who didn't live in this area so the problem was that she was feeling very isolated. And then I kind of struck up a relationship with her and kind of brought her out of herself a bit more and got her a bit more engaged with the students in the class. Unfortunately, because I left she doesn't come to the classes anymore.

This was also true with the adults who were taking language or job skill courses at the NGOs. They would express disappointment and frustrations because if the volunteers missed a class or left to go back to their countries before the course had ended they would have to get accustomed to another volunteer and their accents when they spoke Portuguese. Also, it left an impression that the volunteers did not take their work seriously. This was also expressed in another study conducted by Freire-Medeiros et al, (2011) where if there were volunteer tourists at the NGO the children would show up to play, but if there were no volunteers then the children would not arrive.

The volunteers expressed that a language barrier was one of the greatest obstacles that they had to overcome. Many of them come to Brazil and do not speak Portuguese and without understanding the language it is less likely that they understand Brazilian culture. It is argued that it should not be assumed that cross-cultural understandings are automatically constructed from volunteer tourism, but rather it should be an active goal formed by both the NGOs and by the volunteer tourists (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Without understanding the language, it is difficult to understand how much of the prejudices that are placed on community members are instilled or dispelled by the volunteer tourists themselves. For example, Simpson (2004) addresses that in some ways volunteer tourism may lead to 'Othering'.

Social representations theory attempts to understand social reality and social life by using logic and language. However, due to a language barrier between the community members and the volunteer tourists it is less likely that the volunteers have a true understanding of the social reality

and social life lived by community members. Many of the volunteers expressed frustration when they attempted to teach children or adults because they could not communicate what they wanted to their classroom. Because of this language barrier, many of the NGOs or volunteer tourism organizations now offer language courses, which have helped with communication between the volunteer tourists and the community members.

Comparing other forms of tourism and their impacts on the community

Volunteer tourists acknowledge that there is more of a commitment to the community and to the NGOs as a volunteer tourist rather than if they were an ordinary tourist on holiday. For example, as one of the volunteers explained:

You are not just coming to see things. You are coming to be part of the community, and to try to help out in whatever areas that you choose to volunteer. And also, just trying to get to know the locals which, I think, is the opposite or a difficult thing if you come and travel to Brazil for only for two weeks. You are not going to meet that many locals.

About one half of the participants had previously volunteered at another organization. Those that have volunteered before elsewhere expressed a greater commitment to the community than those who were volunteering for the first time and were planning to stay longer in a particular community. In addition, many of the volunteers who have previous experience decided to come to Rio de Janeiro without the use of a sending organization (a tourism agency that sends volunteer tourists to destinations for volunteer work). However, those who are volunteering for the first time wanted to use a sending organization in order to have more security and more options for their trips as a tourist.

Only the Zona Sul *favelas* experience other forms of tourism in addition to volunteer tourism. *Favela* tours are a 2-6 hour guided tour through a *favela* in Zona Sul. Many of the tours are conducted by tourism agencies with guides that are not from the communities while there are a few who use guides from *favelas*. When speaking with the community members from other *favelas* that have both volunteer tourism and *favela* tours they preferred the local tour guides to that of the tourism agencies because it was expressed that the local tour guides understood the realities of living in a *favela*. It is interesting to note that the community members interviewed and who work directly within the tourism industry learned one, but in most cases several, foreign

languages from the NGOs who offered classes taught by the volunteer tourists. This led to better jobs, or they started their own business, or they became a tour guide themselves.

Many of the tourists who were interviewed had mixed feelings about *favela* tours. This was similar to what Freire-Medeiros pointed out regarding the *favela* tours in Rocinha from the community members' point of view (2009b). As one volunteer tourist describes:

I always say to people, it's kind of important to see both sides of Rio. It's fine to go to Ipanema Beach but to also go and see what life is like on the other side of the hill. And of course, in a two and a half hour tour you are not going to fully immerse yourself in the life of someone who lives in Rocinha but at least you kind of get an impression. Sometimes it [*favela* tours] is just voyeurism and I think that for some people they are actually hoping that they might get to see a gun. But for some people it's actually learning.

When compared to the impacts of *favela* tourists to that of volunteer tourism, the volunteers expressed that mostly the tourism companies benefited from *favela* tours whereas with volunteer tourism the community benefited the most.

Well everyone [benefits from volunteer tourism]! I think the children benefit because they are being taught English and Spanish from native speakers... I mean that's just fantastic! [They are] also meeting people from all over the world, which I mean, that's also fantastic. We as volunteers are benefiting because we are getting an amazing experience. We have people who would like to teach in the future this is kind of like our training ground for that. We also get to know the people here in Rocinha, we can establish relationships here, we can establish roots here, if we want to come back. You know, this was my motivation for learning Portuguese... so I think everyone benefits.

However, there were many volunteer tourists that doubted their impact on the community mainly because of the language barrier. As one volunteer tourist explained:

I don't know how I am impacting the community. I don't know if they benefit from me working there. I can't communicate to the kids and it's hard to get their attention while teaching. I am learning Portuguese through them. But I think I am learning more from them than what they are learning from me.

Those who spoke Portuguese enough to communicate to community members and people that they worked with had felt that they had a more positive impact than those volunteer tourists who did not speak Portuguese well enough to communicate. Communication is important in any form of work that you do, whether it is volunteer work or paid work. In addition, communication is

also important to a traveler. For example, many tourists prefer the use of a tour guide when traveling in a country where they do not speak the language. Communication is also critical when trying to learn a new culture and when trying to understand your impacts within the community as a volunteer tourists. Therefore it is suggested that languages classes for the volunteer tourists should be offered in order to create better cross-cultural understandings and to create better benefits for both the volunteer tourist and the community member.

Conclusions

This paper represents a work in progress and has described preliminarily results of the interviews conducted with the volunteer tourists and their perceived impacts in the communities for which they volunteered. The volunteers described both positive and negative impacts of volunteer tourism and expressed that they understood that in order to truly understand the day-to-day life of people who live in a *favela* the tourists needed to volunteer for an extended period of time. The longer they volunteered, the less likely they would leave the experience with a romanticized idea of *favela* life. In fact, all three groups who were interviewed expressed that they would prefer that the volunteers would volunteer for longer periods of time because then they were able to finish teaching a course of a class or could finish a project that they had started. Both the volunteers and community members have an opportunity to exchange cultural knowledge. However, for the volunteer they were able to learn about the lived reality of members of these communities, which may help dispel some of the prejudices experienced from the community members in Brazil. Tourists who work in *favelas* typically volunteer for a longer period of time when compared to other forms of tourism and have a better chance of a cultural exchange than that of the *favela* tourists. Additionally, volunteers acknowledged that volunteer tourism had greater positive impacts on a community when compared to other forms of tourism, and in particular to *favela* tours. It was also expressed that a language barrier was one of the greatest obstacles that the volunteer tourists had to overcome. In relation to cross-cultural understanding communication is critical. Those who could not communicate well with the community doubted their importance within the community. Language classes specifically for the volunteers help add to the experiences for both the tourist and the community.

The volunteers, the NGOs, and members of the community expressed frustrations when classes were canceled because of lack of commitment by the volunteer. Since volunteers are both workers and tourists it is very easy to forget responsibility towards the NGOs and become more of a traveler rather than a worker. If the volunteer had previously volunteered elsewhere they were more likely to volunteer for longer periods of time and show more commitment. However, this study is limited because of a small sample size of 16 volunteers who were interviewed, more research needs to be conducted on volunteer intentions in order to make a final conclusion.

Research in the area of volunteer tourism will help to better understand the benefits of this form of tourism in communities while also investigating the current constraints that volunteer tourism might have in meeting community development goals and its impacts on community residents. Further research that investigates the different types of tourism in vulnerable communities is needed in order to fully address the argument if volunteer tourism can be considered sustainable or a form of social inclusion.

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