Co-construction of knowledge through Participatory Action Research: People-First Tourism methodology and research tools

Duarte B. Morais  
*North Carolina State University*

Bruno S. Ferreira  
*North Carolina State University*

Gijsbert Hoogendoorn  
*University of Johannesburg*

Yasong (Alex) Wang  
*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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Introduction

Tourism is often an important source of income for rural communities with limited economic alternatives but it generally fails to enable equitable prosperity. Tourism is associated with unequal distribution of income, changes in the social fabric, the disruption of cultural politics, and with environmental degradation. Some authors consider that tourism is also a mechanism that objectifies heritage and local identities (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005), and in doing so it transforms host communities into passive tourees (Cohen, 2002). Rather than serving its much proclaimed role of empowering subaltern rural people (Spivak, 1985) tourism often relegates them to the sidelines of the tourism economy, informally gleaning bits of income not worthwhile to the formal tourism sector. Therefore, tourism is generally a mechanism perpetuating the hegemonic exploitation of subaltern rural people by elites (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Davis & Morais, 2004; Nyaupane, Morais & Dowler, 2006; Rolfes, 2010; Wallace & Diamente, 2005).

Conversely, microentrepreneurship is a mechanism that can engage alienated segments of the host community in making income from tourism, because it is under-regulated and outside the influence of the formal sector (Morais, KC, Mao & Mosimane, 2015). Tourism microentrepreneurship, defined as tourism businesses employing five people or less (Ferreira, Morais & Lorscheider, 2015), is not as susceptible to the control of local elite capture because it is unscripted, requires low investment capital, and does not need to be integrated into formal distribution systems (Wang & Morais, 2014).

Morais et al. (2012) advocate that tourism microentrepreneurship is the most impactful way for locals to get involved in the tourism industry. The sense of ownership of the tourism business is seen as a central tenet to self-determined development of the individual and the community, and well as involvement in decisions that affect the industry in the community. Top down benefit-sharing approaches often lead to dependency because most antecedents to entrepreneurial intention and behavior are commonly associated with measures of agency and self-determination.
Microentrepreneurship is a fundamentally under-studied phenomenon. Scholarship on tourism microentrepreneurship suggests that informal tourism businesses may fuel a counter-hegemonic movement that engages local hosts in producing unscripted experiences that escape the control of sanctioning groups (Wang & Morais, 2014). These hosts gradually become able to showcase their self-narratives to tourists, earning income and agency in the process. The study of the role of tourism microentrepreneurship in shaping the lives of people with vulnerable livelihoods is titled People-First Tourism (Morais et al., 2012).

**Background**

People-First Tourism was designed to advance critical social science, examining ways to improve the self-determination of people with vulnerable livelihoods through microentrepreneurial involvement in local tourism economies. All aspects in the structure of the project stem from literature from social-psychology, development studies, postcolonial studies, microfinance, development aid, and liberation pedagogy (Nader, 2008; Moodie, 2013; Smith & Jain, 1999; Mehta, 2013; Burkey, 1993; Freire, 1988).

The project began in 2011 in the Southeastern USA, and is expanding to other regions. In each region, the project is lead and supported by teachers and students of a local academic institution, working in partnership with community agencies and microentrepreneurs that they recruit. These academic/community teams accompany groups of microentrepreneurs (Freire, 1970), register them on the project’s online database (p1tlab.oscar.ncsu.edu) and collect data regularly using an interview protocol.

Our research with more than 150 tourism microentrepreneurs in the Southeastern USA, revealed that the most significant barrier to their involvement in the tourism industry was lack of access to markets. The formal distribution sector commands retail channels and locals are relegated to the fringes of local economic activity. It is under this context that sharing economy websites are now proliferating. However, Morais (2014) contends that the economic power of the emerging sharing economy is largely being tapped by hyperconnected urbanites. Similarly, Baum (2006) posits that social and economic disparities are exacerbated by today’s “digital divide”, the gap observed between individuals with ready access to information and communication technologies and those without such access. Therefore, web marketplaces are largely failing to engage under-
resourced rural tourism-microentrepreneurs who need to supplement their vulnerable livelihoods with alternative income sources.

We felt that there was the need to develop a system connecting buyers and sellers with a broad spectrum of connectivity. We developed a system connecting high-feature web browsing with the ubiquitous connectivity of SMS in simple mobile phones. This invention allows us to sell tourism experiences offered worldwide. People-First Tourism Inc. was formed in parallel to the research project and takes the form of a marketplace for buying and selling genuine tourism experiences. The website links entrepreneurs trying to pursue livelihoods through tourism with tourists interested in unique experiences and in making positive impacts on the communities they visit.

**People-First Tourism Methodology**

Studying the rural poor carries inherent challenges and responsibilities. We believe that the most sophisticated and ethical way to pursue such a research agenda would be to use a participatory action research approach. According to Wadsworth (1998), participatory action research (PAR) occurs when the researchers and participants work together to analyze and resolve a problem or a question. PAR is particularly useful when the goal is to change social structures and practices that perpetuate injustice and compromise people’s dignity (McTaggart, 1997). Furthermore, in this type of research, study participants are treated as competent partners capable of contributing to the research process. PAR acknowledges and integrates indigenous knowledge, and it attempts to generate impacts and advance theory.

In People-First Tourism research, rural tourism microentrepreneurs are integrated in the research process so that they may gain agency through their participation in the project. This premise is grounded on Paulo Freire’s thought (1970) in regards to how a process of conscientization is necessary to engage oppressed people in identifying the forces that undermine their agency and self-determination.

Another parameter guiding People-First Tourism research is to base the research on long-term partnerships with participants to allow access to data longitudinally and yield stronger
inference scholarship on the impact of tourism microentrepreneurship on the participants’ lives, communities and natural environments.

It should also be acknowledged that the long-term involvement of researchers with a community is the best way to gain entry into the backstage. Indeed, one of the hardest tasks in working with under-served and over-studied communities is to build trust and penetrate their social boundaries, beyond social conventions. Culture, race and gender can also be assets when attempting to build rapport with study participants (Hoogendoorn & Visser, 2012). For example, one member of the Lab reported using his experience of cultural isolation as an international student from the Middle East to build initial rapport with members of a Native American community. Male and female members of the Lab also exchange field notes indicating a greater ease in delving into deeper conversations with participants of their sex. The process of gradually earning rapport with microentrepreneurs is particularly critical in the People-First Tourism research context because we are intervening in spaces marred by a long and deep impact of white “malestream” oppression. A review of the tourism research landscape suggests that few teams have the institutional support, methodological freedom and the multidisciplinary and multiethnic team needed to commit to longitudinal action research paradigm in a sustained manner.

PAR projects should leave improvements in livelihoods and infrastructure in their wake; to include the formation of community committees, strategic plans, etc (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). Participatory research efforts aiming to understand community assets, organize local agendas into coherent strategic plans, and develop local hospitality and management capacity may be beneficial in aligning communities with resources provided by government and non-government agencies; However, in the context of tourism, these activities and outputs often yield limited real impact because the industry controls tourist flows. For this reason, tourism researchers concerned with understanding and enabling equitable community development through tourism are at risk of promising more local control than the tourism system will allow. While acknowledging the importance of engaging local communities in tourism planning, People-First Tourism research takes the bold step of engaging directly with disrupting retail systems to create income-generation opportunities for participating tourism microentrepreneurs. This way, independently of the long-term impact of the project on the participants through its effect on rural tourism policy and planning, the participants will also receive short and medium-term tangible benefits.
While the focus of People-First Tourism is to work with the microentrepreneur, the first steps in the development of the project in a new community consist of seeking input and support from local community leaders and from the formal tourism industry. It is the intention of the networks of People-First Tourism microentrepreneurs to add richness and uniqueness to destination tourism offerings, and therefore local microentrepreneurial development stands to benefit the formal sector of local tourism supply.

During the early years of development of the project in rural North Carolina, we noted that unstructured discussions with community stakeholders on the topic of tourism development tended to degenerate into complaints about community problems or ideas on how to grow the formal tourism sector. The aim of our initial meetings in communities is to help stakeholders identify the benefit of developing local tourism microentrepreneurs and to encourage them to nominate suitable local participants; therefore, we created a series of exercises that make these more helpful in accomplishing the project objectives.

**People-First Tourism Field Work Participatory Tools**

The first exercise, titled “A focus on solutions”, has the purpose of engaging a group of stakeholders in a positive discussion to identify ways to make tourism a force for improved well-being in the community. In this exercise, the moderator engages the stakeholders in the generation of a shared future scenario for equitable and sustainable tourism, followed by the identification and celebration of current initiatives that are already working well. Lastly, the moderator elicits ideas for additional new initiatives that might help the community get closer to its ideal future scenario.

The ideal future scenarios constructed by the stakeholders include the need to make tourism benefits more equitably shared across community groups. Therefore, we then revisit this issue and introduce the next group exercise; the “Local business idea incubator.” A premise of People-First Tourism is that there are under-regulated spaces in which microentrepreneurs can operate legally, selling genuine experiences to visitors; earning income and enriching the richness of the community’s tourism product. The purpose of this exercise is to help stakeholders understand the opportunity and need for the development of tourism micro-businesses in the community, as a symbiotic component of their complex local tourism system.
At the beginning of the exercise, the moderator must lead a brief discussion about the market’s demand for local genuine experiences, and about the opportunity to involve microentrepreneurs as suppliers of those experiences. Then, the moderator will use the steps outlined to elicit ideas of microentrepreneurial opportunities for the community. Initially, the stakeholders are asked about types of micro-businesses and services, and then they are asked to nominate people in their community that might have the knowledge and motivation to pursue those opportunities. In our experience, the stakeholders are seldom able to generate a substantial list of suitable microentrepreneurs because their professional obligations generally put them in contact with well-connected and well-served community members. Nevertheless, some are identified and at least, the exercise makes stakeholders feel that they have a stake in the success of the local People-First Tourism network.

It is important to investigate how microentrepreneurs portray themselves, their community and their region. To this end, we developed a tool named Identity Workshop that asks participants to draw symbols of their identity in the number 1, as in “first”, in the project’s logo design. We ask the microentrepreneur to help us draw the logo of the franchise, and in the process we also gain information about their own image. Later, microentrepreneurs will engage in the co-creation of their profile to be uploaded to the website, which makes this exercise an opportunity for microentrepreneurs to think about how they wish to portray themselves and their community to tourists, i.e. their self-representation (Wang & Morais, 2014).

**Monitoring the longitudinal project impact on microentrepreneurs**

Conducting a longitudinal accompaniment of participating microentrepreneurs is central to the People-First Tourism project, and it is difficult to implement at scale. Conducting regular assessments of microentrepreneurs’ progress allows us to monitor project impact, which we then use to report to local community partners and to attract community development funding.

In addition, these repeated interactions with the microentrepreneurs afford increasingly rich data about their livelihoods and about the factors that condition their success. Further, our regular interactions with microentrepreneurs allow them to influence the research process, gradually shaping our research questions.
Longitudinal studies are rarely seen in social science, this is in part due to the time limitations of research grants, and due to challenges with keeping track of study participants overtime. While we have secured research funding to conduct baseline data collection from microentrepreneurs beginning their participation in the project, we now also engage students to carry this effort to scale. In classes, we train undergraduate students in conducting face-to-face structured interviews and we involve them in conducting interviews in pairs as part of their academic work. We also obtained seed funding to support student engagement with participating microentrepreneurs, supporting the costs of fieldtrips to microentrepreneurs located close to campus, and to print and mail postcards handwritten to the entrepreneurs during the academic year (see Figure 3). Over the years, we have documented how students benefit from this hands-on field research experience, the entrepreneurs enjoy being connected with university students each year, and our project generates longitudinal data.

Each year a consortium of faculty involved in People-First Tourism research collaborates in the revision of the following year’s protocol, and we translate the protocol to each language as needed. Approximately 80% of the protocol remains constant, and the rest is modified according to proposed new research topics. The data collected in various countries is compiled at NC State and shared in coded form with the researchers that contributed to the effort (Morais et al., 2014).

**Conducting in-depth reciprocal case studies of microentrepreneurs**

The data collected from participating microentrepreneurs allow us to monitor longitudinal changes in select variables (e.g., self-determination, social capital), and to make comparisons across project areas. In addition to this structured research effort, we also conduct in-depth grounded theory case studies with a number of microentrepreneurs annually as a way to get insight about topics possibly outside the scope of the structured interviews. The researcher generally begins contact with the microentrepreneur by mailing a personal note in a postcard, and following-up with phone and email inquiries. Initially, the researcher administers the structured interview protocol but then seeks to visit more times to follow-up on data issues and to conduct an additional interviews.

In addition, the researcher is encouraged to further develop rapport with the microentrepreneur by offering to make a visit to help them in their home or business. We have
helped microentrepreneurs by conducting farm work, by helping planned visitor events, and by registering them for online payments (i.e., PayPal) or to sell online in other web marketplaces (i.e., Etsy). To capture data from these rich interactions, we jot down field notes in a research diary. Researchers should write in loco, unless deemed counterproductive or undesirable, keywords, catchy phrases or relevant observations. Upon returning to campus, the researcher should elaborate (in writing) on thoughts or ideas and draw interpretations from the visit. The information recorded in the research diary is not only valuable from an academic point of view but also for creating records of fieldwork used in project reporting. We believe that the research diary can be a reliable, naturally chronologically organized source of information on events, dates, visits, locations, number of participants in meetings, among other indicators of process and impact. When the case study is finished, we ask the researchers to write a standardized short report including raw data and interpretations, along with a self-reflection about bias brought to the process.

Conclusion

As universities strive to achieve significant impacts on the regions they are expected to serve, faculty and students have been encouraged to become engaged with local community partners, nationally and internationally. In addition, the awareness of the complexity of todays’ grand challenges has led to the support of multidisciplinary research initiatives. In this presentation, we will engage participants with the methodology and tools used by the P1t Lab in its participatory action research efforts. We will also clarify how People-First Tourism Inc. was formed as a social venture to support the research process longitudinally. The purpose of the company is to leverage critical social science, frugal IT innovation, and the power of business to revolutionize the way people travel. Its vision is to foster a world where travelers develop deep connections with their hosts, they experience genuine local cultures, and improve the lives of the people they visit. The company interacts with P1t Lab by providing access to data, creating economic opportunity to participating microentrepreneurs, and by providing a proportion of profits to fund related research.

Nielsen & Nielsen (2006) posit that action research is part of the hermeneutic tradition of conceptualizing cultural and social phenomena through language. The result of these hermeneutic dialogues is that partners educate and cultivate themselves, by changing pre-understandings of one another. Critics caution that action researchers ‘go native’ and lose objectivity or risk becoming biased towards instrumentalism. Although, we recognize that there is merit behind these criticisms,
we decide that this is a tradeoff we are willing to incorporate. We see the knowledge co-creation process as a joint venture between researchers, local partners and microentrepreneurs developing and pursuing a shared horizon. This common horizon is currently articulated as “local microentrepreneurs meaningfully involved in tourism.” In order to accomplish this we have become invested in the success of participating microentrepreneurs and in the career aspirations of community partners; and in turn, they have helped us hone into an impactful research agenda and have provided us with uncommon access to data.
References


