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Building a Community for All: Evidence of immigrant employee integration in a tourism-dependent community

Introduction

Now more than ever tourism-dependent communities have come to rely upon immigrants to fill the labor needs of the tourism industry. In the United States immigrants comprise 32% of the accommodation sector's workforce, 22% of the workforce in food preparation and serving, and 10% of retail positions (Desilver, 2017). Such figures reveal that the sustainability of the tourism industry is closely tied to immigrant labor (Duncan, Scott, & Baum, 2013). Therefore, the communities who rely upon the positive impacts generated by tourism such as direct and indirect spending, tax revenues, and improved quality of life, are also reliant upon an immigrant labor force. As Joppe (2012) notes, despite their considerable contributions to tourism-dependent communities, immigrants in the tourism workforce are not always well integrated into the communities they support and thus are vulnerable to unsafe conditions, earning lower wages (ILO, 2010), and human trafficking (Polaris, 2017). Despite the important role that immigrants play in sustaining the tourism industry there has been limited examination of strategies for integrating immigrant tourism employees into the communities in which they live and work. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to identify community-wide strategies that focus on facilitating immigrants' integration in tourism-dependent communities.

Literature Review

Research related to the tourism workforce and its effect on the industry's sustainability remains limited (Baum, 2018; Ladkin, 2011). The research that does exist tends to focus on the employer's perspective of workforce challenges (Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016). This has led to some authors' calling for greater integration of multiple perspectives in tourism workforce research including tourism employees, policymakers, and residents of tourism-dependent communities (Ladkin, 2011). Such perspectives may be useful in determining how to help immigrant members of the tourism workforce integrate into the tourism-dependent communities where they live and work. In addition to creating sustainable access to a tourism workforce such integration can facilitate cultural diversity, which in turn generates economic development, creativity, and innovation (Duncan et al., 2013; Maruyama, Woosnam, & Boley, 2016; Thulemark, Lundmark, & Heldt-Cassel, 2014). While integration of immigrant populations is valuable studies exploring strategies to integrate immigrants into host communities mostly address economic approaches rather than addressing socio-cultural barriers felt by immigrant employees (Madut, 2015). These barriers may include host community members' attitudes towards immigrants (Zhao & Lin, 2008) or limited language proficiency (Devine, Baum, Hearn, & Devine, 2007; Janta, Lugosi, Brown, & Ladkin, 2012), among others. To address these challenges De Lima and Wright (2009) emphasize the need to identify community-wide strategies to facilitate immigrant workforce members' integration.

The social exclusion framework provides one lens for conceptualizing these community-wide strategies. While there is not a unifying analytical framework to conceptualize social exclusion; there is consensus about its multidimensional nature (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 1997; Hickey & Du Toit, 2007; Silver, 2015). Dimensions include economic (e.g. financial security), social (e.g. access to public services), political (e.g. political participation), and socio-cultural (e.g. discriminatory

social norms) attributes of exclusion/inclusion (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 1997; Hickey & Du Toit, 2007). These dimensions can be used to conceptualize strategies for integrating immigrant tourism workforce members into tourism-dependent communities. Such integration will reduce the vulnerability of immigrants (Mannarini, Talò, Mezzi, & Procentese, 2018) and improve the sustainability of the tourism industry by securing access to a vital element of the workforce.

Methodology

A multi-method qualitative data collection approach was employed to identify community-wide strategies for facilitating immigrants' integration in tourism-dependent communities. The study was conducted in a tourism-dependent community in North Carolina, USA known to be supportive of its residents and their needs (Child, 2016). This community has a permanent population under 1000 residents, 19% of which are Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Hispanic population has grown from 2% in 2000 as immigrants from Mexico and Honduras arrive to work in the community's tourism industry.

The researchers utilized an interpretivist paradigm in data collection and analysis, which allowed them to acknowledge the value of the researchers' and participants' individual realities in the data and findings. A community partner facilitated purposive and subsequent snowball sampling to include a variety of community stakeholders (e.g., tourism employers, employees, and residents) in interviews and focus groups. Eight interviews and three focus groups were conducted with a total of 27 residents, policymakers, and tourism business owners. This included one focus group, conducted in Spanish, with ten Hispanic immigrants who live and work in the community. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized to generate discussion of participants' experience in the tourism industry, challenges in the tourism industry, beneficial community resources and those that were lacking, and individuals or organizations that helped address the challenges or lacking community resources. The audio recorded data was transcribed and analyzed in NVivo 11. Multiple members of the research team used open coding to reveal themes related to integration of immigrants in the community (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Subsequently the four dimensions of the social exclusion framework were applied to organize the emergent themes. Multiple criteria were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (DeCrop, 2004) including: prolonged engagement at the study site (ensuring credibility), informant triangulation (ensuring transferability), investigator triangulation (ensuring dependability), and creation of an audit trail (ensuring confirmability).

Results

Data from interviews and focus groups provided evidence that immigrants were integrated into this tourism-dependent community. First, it is important to note evidence that community members valued immigrants as demonstrated here by a tourism business owner, "the whole island would shut down if it wasn't for the Hispanic workforce here." Further evidence indicates that residents and business owners wanted the Hispanic migrants to be integrated into the community, for example a resident articulated the value of having migrants' children in the school system, "Everybody is connected. The workforce population have children enrolled in the school system. Now, the kids that are here on the island, from the island are now growing up as absolute equals, side-by-side with the Hispanic population." These examples provide evidence that efforts to integrate the Hispanic immigrant population are underway.

Evidence emerged that all four social exclusion framework dimensions played a role in Hispanic immigrant integration in this community. The economic dimension was represented through evidence that tourism employers sought to provide financial stability to immigrant workforce members, as noted here by a tourism business owner “Nobody as far as I know, pays any of the Hispanics any less than...I mean everybody gets paid appropriately.” This practice was acknowledged by immigrant members of the tourism workforce, as seen here from one Hispanic focus group participant, “The bosses... they have treated us well. I think that's why we've been here for many years.”

Elements of the social dimension, including overcoming language barriers, also played a role in strategies to integrate immigrants into this tourism-dependent community. These strategies included the provision of a Spanish interpreter at the healthcare clinic and a language learning program, where English-speaking residents learned Spanish, and Spanish-speaking residents learned English. Assistance in overcoming language barriers was particularly important for immigrants, as noted here by a Hispanic focus group participant “I never went for a blood check, I never went for a physical check, for years. For nine, ten years...until I learned a bit of English.”

The cultural dimension was clearly important in facilitating integration strategies in this community. Many participants reported how a festival celebrating Hispanic culture was appreciated by all community members, but was well articulated by this tourism business owner “As you saw with our Latino Fest, which is new. They've really become part of our community, have been a huge asset.” Local occupancy tax funds were used to fund this festival, a strategy which indicates the political dimension (e.g. access to resources), also played a role in helping integrate immigrants into this community.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study addresses the call to identify community-wide strategies that facilitate immigrants’ integration into tourism-dependent communities (Agarwal & Brunt, 2006; Hall Matos, Sheehan, & Silvestre, 2012; Janta et al., 2012; Zhao & Lin, 2008). Additionally, this study advances utilizes qualitative methods to gather multiple perspectives on the role of immigrants in the tourism workforce, a notable difference from previous studies which tend to use quantitative methods and focus on a single perspective to explore these issues (Baum, 2007; Baum et al., 2016; Janta et al., 2012; Rydzik et al., 2013). Qualitative data revealed the following strategies to help facilitate immigrant integration into tourism-dependent communities:

- Ensure jobs in the tourism industry provide fair pay for immigrants and open lines of communication with employers;
- Create structured language learning opportunities for immigrants and other community members;
- Provide interpreters to facilitate access to public services;
- Support the establishment of opportunities to celebrate immigrants’ culture; and
- Engage immigrants in discussions about the best use of community resources to support their integration.

Applying these strategies in tourism-dependent communities may help reduce the vulnerability of immigrants working in the tourism industry. This should be seen as an ethical prerogative for community stakeholders who rely upon immigrant labor to operate the tourism industry and generate its many positive community level impacts.

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