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Economic Empowerment in Rural Tourism Development

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Introduction

Rural tourism has gained traction and popularity among tourists since the outbreak of COVID-19 as a viable alternative to urban tourism (Vaishar & Štastná, 2020). The increased demand for rural tourism experience has been mainly due to tourists' safety concerns related to COVID-19 and a shift in destination preference. Many tourists now avoid destinations with high numbers of COVID cases and prefer destinations close to home and local attractions (Li et al., 2021). While this demand shift presents an opportunity for developing and expanding tourism in rural communities, how rural communities approach tourism development is critical to their success in seizing this economic development opportunity and achieving sustainable growth. For instance, problems will arise in the tourism development process when economic benefits or opportunities are not spread equitably among the destination community, resulting in individuals and communities feeling disempowered and reluctant to continue involvement in tourism.

Empowerment plays an essential role in sustainable tourism development (Sofield, 2003). Past studies have shown that empowerment can lead to residents' support for tourism (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017). Tourism scholars recognize that empowerment is a multi-dimensional construct with economic, psychological, social, and political facets (Scheyvens, 1999; Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017). However, most empowerment research in the tourism literature has been focused on the non-economic dimensions, and economic empowerment has not yet been thoroughly researched (Joo et al., 2020). For instance, the reliable and widely used Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) has only been developed for psychological, social, and political empowerment (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017). Moreover, the empowerment literature in tourism has been criticized for understanding empowerment as an outcome rather than a process (Aghzamani & Hunt, 2017). With these gaps in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore and assess economic empowerment in the context of tourism development in rural communities. Specifically, we examined how economic empowerment or disempowerment occurred among individuals and communities using the typology of power developed by Rowlands (1997).

Literature Review

Building upon the critiques that Jamal and Getz's (1995) stakeholder collaborative theory lacks consideration of existing power relations (e.g., Aas et al., 2005; Reed, 1997; Saito & Ruhanen, 2017), this study investigates how stakeholders can gain or lose power in the process of tourism development. We believe this investigation will complement the knowledge for establishing successful collaborative relationships in community-based tourism.

Economic Empowerment

Scholars acknowledge economic empowerment as an essential dimension of empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999; Strzelecka et al., 2017b; Timothy, 2007). Economic empowerment may result from local people's direct monetary benefits from the tourism industry (Boley & Johnson Gaither, 2016; Scheyvens, 1999) through employment opportunities (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Boley & Gither, 2015). However, economic empowerment does not only pertain to jobs but also access to natural and financial resources (e.g., loans, grants) and ownership and management opportunities (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Strzelecka, 2015).

Therefore, additional indicators of economic empowerment involve perceived control and access to productive assets (Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Scheyvens, 1999) that cannot be fully captured by income and employment only. Furthermore, the fair distribution of economic benefits from tourism is as important as the actual amount of benefits a community receives (Wilkinson & Pratiwi, 1995). A community is disempowered when only a few individuals or groups gain direct financial benefits from tourism, and vice versa. In a similar vein, the ability to minimize leakage to retain economic benefits from tourism within the local community (Ramos & Prideaux, 2014) has been used as an indicator of economic empowerment. When most profits go to non-local organizations, it would be difficult to say that the community has been economically empowered.

Economic Empowerment and the Typology of Power

Broad literature on economic empowerment, particularly the gender and development literature, used a typology of power to differentiate four types of power: *power over*, *power to*, *power within*, and *power with* (Gaventa, 2006; Kabeer, 1994; Perezniето & Taylor, 2014; Rowlands, 1997; VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). The literature disaggregated empowerment as a process in which people's lives change in these four areas of power. Based on the typology, Perezniето and Taylor (2014) defined economic empowerment as a process whereby people's lives are "transformed from a situation where they have limited power and access to assets to a situation where they experience economic advancement, and their power and agency is enhanced" (p. 236).

Power over is the most recognized form of power based on the idea that power can be used to dominate and oppose others (Mathie et al., 2017; VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). This type of power is built on a belief that power is a finite and centralized resource held and controlled by some people (Allen, 2003). In the economic sphere, *power over* refers to getting access to and control over financial, physical, and knowledge-based resources/assets, including employment and income-generating activities (Perenzniet & Taylor, 2014).

Power to refers to the "productive or generative potential of power and the new possibilities or actions that can be created without using relationship of domination" (Mathie et al., 2017, p. 57). Gaventa (2006) refers to this as "the capacity to act; to exercise agency, and realize the potential of right, citizenship, or voice" (p. 24). Perenzniet and Taylor (2014) defined the "*power to*" dimension of economic empowerment as economic decision-making power within households, communities, local economy, and markets, areas that are both regarded as women's and men's realms.

Power within is related to a person's "sense of self-worth and self-knowledge" as well as "an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others" (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p. 45). *Power within* involves people having a sense of their own capability and self-worth. This type of power includes learning skills with economic activity to increase the knowledge, capabilities, sense of entitlement, self-esteem, and self-belief to make changes in their lives (Perenzniet & Taylor, 2014).

Lastly, *power with* refers to the relationships and possibilities that emerge when people collaborate (Mathie et al., 2017). According to Allen (1999), *power with* consists of "the ability of a collectivity to act together for the attainment of an agreed-upon end or series of ends" (p. 127). *Power with*, built on respect, mutual support, shared governance, and collaborative decision-making, can help build bridges within groups (e.g., families, organizations) or across different groups (e.g., gender, culture, and class). It leads to collective action and the ability to act together (Mathie et al., 2017; Veneklasen & Miller, 2002). For example, when it comes to

economic empowerment, *power with* leads to an ability to organize with others to enhance economic activity and rights (Perenzniet & Taylor, 2014).

Understanding what constitutes power and using this typology to identify different forms of power open space for various interpretations of economic empowerment and, hence, a range of implications for development policy and practice (Rowlands, 1995). Aghazamani and Hunt (2017) pointed out that existing research has studied empowerment as an outcome rather than a process. Thus, it remains unknown how tourism development facilitates and builds a community's sense of economic empowerment, mainly through processes of "power within" (by reversing internalized powerlessness), "power with" (by strengthening opportunities for collective action), and "power to" (by emphasizing and building local capacity for action).

Methodology

As researchers, we take on a phenomenological approach to research and adhere to a participatory paradigm that ontologically acknowledges the importance of the participants' race, ethnicity, gender, and class in constructing their perception of economic empowerment (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Epistemologically, we view research as a collaborative process between participants and researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We also adhere to the ontological belief that research and participants' values influence the theoretical underpinning of a study, the success of a methodology, and the interpretation of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). We included participants in the design, data collection, and interpretation of the findings. As researchers, we tried to understand the stakeholder and their issues with rural tourism development within their communities. We also self-reflected as a team on the role of our past experiences in our methodological approach and interactions with participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Participants

Participants were destination stakeholders of four rural communities in the Midwest of the United States who recently experienced the development of rural tourism activities in their community. They included tourism business owners, public officials, tourism bureau staff, and destination residents. These four communities were purposefully selected (Creswell & Báez, 2020) because of their similar geographical settings (i.e., rural location and near a main river route) and interest in developing rural tourism. These communities were also selected in partnership with four University Extension collaborators, who are part of a specific branch of our university and are experts on community and economic development. These Extension collaborators live in these communities, are in direct and frequent contact with rural communities to identify their needs, and work in field offices where they offer programs that match these communities' needs. We started by conducting a one-day "meet-and-greet event" in each community to present the research project to destination stakeholders. Next, we combined purposive and snowball sampling to schedule interviews with participants. Extension collaborators suggested an initial list of participants. This list was expanded by asking participants to recommend other individuals to interview who might hold similar or different views about tourism development. We interviewed 51 participants and continued to contact participants until we reached data saturation (Masson et al., 2016). Information about the participants is shared in **Table 1**.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Research Design

We used a qualitative approach and conducted in-depth interviews with tourism stakeholders of four rural communities. Data collection occurred from April to September 2021. We employed in-depth interviews because they provided the richness of context and offered participants the opportunities to share stories and opinions that underscore key processes of economic empowerment through tourism development (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011). We opted for semi-structured interviews so that participants are presented with the same central questions, which create consistency while allowing them to freely expand on what they perceive as more relevant to their lived experience (Creswell, 2016). The interview guide was co-created with our Extension collaborators and fine-tuned based on participants' feedback. Interviews were conducted in-person when we were in the communities and on the phone or via video conference to adapt to the schedule of participants and lasted 1-2 hours. Each participant received a transcript of the interview and was invited to check it for accuracy (Creswell, 2016). All data were analyzed using Nvivo. Our coding approach followed Bailey (2007), which is based on open and axial coding.

Trustworthiness and Validity

We enhanced trustworthiness via the use of Decrop's (2004) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened by using member checks and sending interview transcripts to participants to review (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Transferability was reinforced through prolonged engagement in the communities to understand the specificities of the local context and using thick descriptions (Maxwell, 2012). Dependability was consolidated by keeping a method trail to identify and keep track of the methodological challenges and solutions implemented by our team (Pavesi, Denizci Guillet, & Law, 2017). Confirmability was enhanced by discussing with our research collaborators about our theoretical approach, methodological choice, and data interpretation (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Validity was strengthened using investigator triangulation (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004) which took place as several research and community partners took part in data analysis and reviewed the findings.

Findings

“*Power over*” was represented mainly as disempowering signs across the four communities in three ways: lack of awareness of opportunities, lack of access to opportunities, and lack of knowledge to act on opportunities. First, in the tourism development process, participants did not know about the existing opportunities (e.g., grants, loans) to become involved in the tourism industry. For example, revitalization consultant Preston explained the TIF program, a funding opportunity for business owners, is not accessible to community members who need it the most:

“Too often those programs [TIF] are either not engaged at all or very lightly engaged. The first thing that tells me is that the program isn't drafted in such a way that it's accessible to the common building or business owner. That's one thing I say. The other is, it isn't drafted in a way that it's attractive to a local business or building owner. And then the third thing is it may or may not be undersold, there may not be anybody promoting it. See, too often, municipalities and this is just my opinion, but too often municipalities use their TIF funds for municipal projects that they understand - so sidewalks, sewers, curb, and gutter. What I can say about that is that's a depreciating asset.”

- Preston (M), 40s, Consultant – Downtown revitalization, Community HA

Luna confessed that if she had known about the TIF program, she would have got some financial assistance to make improvements to her attractions:

“I don't know. They told us about there's this TIF program. And I don't know a lot about it. (wind blowing) Kind of ideas of what we were spending money on roads improvements, we guess we did not get any help assistance with all the work we've done. And we've done a lot. And we got no assistance.”

- Luna (F), 60s, Owner – Ice cream shop, Community SA

Second, there were times when participants were aware of the existing opportunities but felt too overwhelmed to successfully obtain those opportunities. For example, Eleanor acknowledged that they could find some grants to make their attraction better. Still, their lack of skills and knowledge to investigate and put together a grant proposal made it difficult for them to receive those financial resources:

“Our new museum is paid for with a grant. So that was a successful grant. Is part of it is just, I blame the resources to go after grants. Um, they're not written. So that's just a quick thing. And so, you know, very often, I worked at the education department State Department in Minnesota, and was at the other end of grant applications. And no, like it or not, people that have good grant writers get money. And so we are interested in grants. Right now, I don't know just how we would put it together. So what our businesses, some of them have both certainly been with the PPP and so on, have been looking at grants. But one thing that that government can do is if they really want small towns to do is they can make a process that that small town, you know what small town resources can do.”

- Eleanor (F), 80s, Alderman and Chair of Tourism Committee for city, Community GT

Lastly, participants were aware and had access to economic opportunities but often did not control those resources due to a lack of knowledge. Despite their willingness, lack of knowledge limited the ability of business owners to improve their businesses. For example, Frederick explained that the grant could be used more effectively if they had more knowledge and information about their target market:

“There’s a lot of different mediums of advertisement that are better than others, some other, ads some that, you know, please spend 150 bucks or \$150,000 a year on the radio. Why in the heck were we ever doing that, but we were doing it to get the masses to promote the [attractions]. And that, but, there’s no analytics behind it, we couldn’t, we couldn’t study who our customer was.”

- Frederick (M), 40s, Owner – Restaurant and attraction, Community GT

As for “*power to*”, participants stated that their economic decision-making power increased after becoming involved in the tourism development process. They could venture outside of their traditional economic realms (e.g., agriculture and/or manufacture) and had more capacity to decide what they wanted to be involved in new economic activities. Anthony testified that:

“The people were farmers, they were involved in agriculture, or they worked in factories. About the closest thing we had to tourism was we had [a museum] across the river. We had the [a wildlife refuge], it wasn't utilized at all. [a local forest] wasn't utilized as tourism at all. Even all the hunting and fishing opportunities weren't utilized at all for tourism. I think people now are beginning to see that where we had no Bed and Breakfast facilities in [Community HA], we're going to have about five of them now, some with multiple rooms in them. So, we're going to have the capacity going from zero really, really nice upper scale rooms to probably having 15 available. So, you can even host small conventions and we have the venues to do that and to show them a really good time in a small, safe environment.”

- Anthony (M), 60s, County Admin, Community HA

This increased decision-making power ranged from decisions about their personal life to decisions impacting their community and local economy. With the increased economic resources that tourism development brought to the communities, participants were trying something new and willing to take risks to obtain economic gains, which was a sign of economic empowerment. Participants talked about experimenting with different ideas within the realm of tourism development. Furthermore, participants were willing to invest in the tourism industry (which could be risky) because they had witnessed it as a source of success. For example, Owen expressed his interest in expanding his business even though the real estate in GA is quite expensive:

“We actually had the Airbnb before we started the store, but I had moved out of [an urban city] and I was struggling to kind of diversify a little bit, and we thought it was a good investment long term. ... [Community GA] [real estate is] not cheap, and they're not exactly new buildings in the historic downtown area. All the tourism's here, so what's here is kind of here. I do have a big investment that's a garage that I'd like to expand into.”

- Owen (M), 30s, Owner – Outdoor outfitters, Community GA

As for the disempowering signs, some business owners from each community felt they were not recognized as essential players within the community. For example, Luna mentioned

that she and her husband put a lot of effort into making “the traffic stop for their business as a tourist draw” and becoming a “repeating attraction”. Although they contributed to tourism development, they felt excluded.

“But I feel very much like an outsider. And I feel like because I'm only open four months out of the year. And I guess I'm gonna say in their defense, if there's a reason why they don't contact me. My [family member] and I have another business on the [neighboring state] side.”

- Luna (F), 60s, Owner ice cream shop, Community SA

Similarly, Karter also pointed out that regardless of their contribution to the tourism industry, not all business owners were entitled to “a seat at the table” to make desirable changes and decisions for the community’s economic benefits.

“The commercial business wise, I think the outside of the downtown district businesses are the ones that are maybe being left and they're probably some of the most vital ones because they're the box stores, the auto parts stores and the grocery store and, and things of that nature. They got a lot to offer. But they're not sitting at the table with us and saying that, or we're not asking what do you got to offer? We're very focused downtown. And I think it's time that downtown's now stood up on its own, let's reach out to these others and say, 'What do we do? What can you do?'”

- Karter (M), 50s, Fire chief, Community HA

The expressions of “*power with*” were observed through group discussions and networking opportunities available to the participants due to tourism development. Participants talked about the importance of building connections and sharing different perspectives, opinions, and ideas in a group setting (e.g., the monthly coffee social in Community HA). This helped the community collectively address needs or shared interests within the economic domain.

Participants described that they could share ideas and learn to be more economically successful through collaborating/interacting with other stakeholders. Four themes emerged between “*power with*” and “*power to*”: businesses/communities complementing (or not complementing) each other; businesses/communities helping each other by cross-promoting; fair competition among businesses; and increasing the tourism “pie” together. The quote from Preston describes the experience of business owners who helped each other and grew the entire industry:

“We helped a girl open a boutique. She was doing online sales, doing pretty good. She wanted bricks and mortar, we helped her open a boutique. And then another boutique wanted to come to town and open and she was frightened to death. She thought how will I ever survive? And we said you'll survive by collaborating. You'll survive by telling everybody that she's in town, and her telling everybody that you're in town. And now we have I think, five boutiques of different sizes and shapes. And they're all doing really well. They cross promote, they promote another boutique down in [a town], so they do these boutique crawls. And every time they collaborate on a project, their numbers are off the charts. So, it's just interesting that, you know, it's interesting to watch somebody transform from that competitive edge of you know, I've got to be the only one in town to, wow, this really does work when there's a town full of vibrant business.”

- Preston (M), 40s, Consultant – Downtown revitalization, Community HA

Finally, regarding “*power within*”, tourism development within the four rural communities contributed to the process of economic empowerment by helping them realize needs, enhance self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-belief, and enabling them to make changes in their economic domain. Through the experiences of getting a job, starting a business, and creating success, participants became aware of their community’s needs and realized that they could achieve something if they tried. Felix gave us a vivid account of his life in which he worked as a stripper in New Orleans, moved to his hometown, and started a glamping business. As a result of the engagement in the tourism industry as a business owner, Felix was able not just to make a living but also to become more confident by viewing himself more positively.

“I always wanted to create a space where people could like be and it grew to something that I ever imagined. I grew up here and I left here and hitchhiked and lived on the streets. I was a stripper in New Orleans, living in my car, and then was able to get this place [in community HA] and start this business and financially, I'm not wealthy, but I never imagined I was gonna be able to do art, and make a living at the same time. It's hard to do, so that's why I'm proud of that.

- Felix (M), 40s, Glamping business owner, Community HA

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the four dimensions of power were presented as a process of change that transformed the lives of rural community members through tourism development (Kabeer, 1999). The findings indicate that tourism development can facilitate the process whereby tourism stakeholders in rural communities are transformed from having limited access and power to experiencing economic advancement and enhancing power. They also demonstrate that empowerment is not only an outcome but a complex process, addressing a hole noted by Aghzamani and Hunt (2017).

The local community’s access to productive resources (*power over*) hints at the economic aspect of empowerment or disempowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). The findings revealed different perspectives to further our understanding of accessibility. It is safe to say that economic resources or opportunities were accessible to community members when they were aware of those opportunities and also understood how to make the best out of them (i.e., appropriate skills

and knowledge). This suggests a multi-faceted approach to increasing accessibility is crucial to economically empower a community through tourism development.

Although the four types of power have been distinctively presented, it is argued that overlaps among each dimension exist (e.g., Knight & Cottrell, 2016). In this study, business owners reported various experiences of collaborating with others, which revealed the link between “*power with*” and “*power to*”. This suggested that enhanced “*power with*” through collaboration within the community can facilitate attaining “*power to*” of community members in the economic domain.

While scholars acknowledge economic empowerment as an essential dimension of empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999; Stzelecka et al., 2017b), it has received little attention within the tourism literature. This study made contributions to the body of literature by expanding the knowledge on the economic aspects of community empowerment through tourism development. Furthermore, by adopting a qualitative approach and the typology of power, this study provided insights for tourism researchers and planners to comprehensively understand economic empowerment and enhance the positive impacts of tourism development across different dimensions of economic empowerment. Future research can utilize the findings from this study as a foundation to develop a scale that measures economic empowerment in tourism development.

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Table 1. Participants' Descriptive Information

Alias	Age	Community	Gender	Occupation
Abby	40s	GA	Female	Co-owner of a Shop
Alexander	70s	SA	Male	Director- Learning Center
Anthony	60s	HA	Male	County Administrator
Benjamin	60s	HA	Male	Owner of a winery
Blaire	40s	GA	Female	Resident
Brody	70s	SA	Male	Owner- Bar
Caleb	30s	HA	Male	Director - Economic Development
Camila	50s	SA	Female	Resident
Charlotte	50s	HA	Female	Business Owner - Chamber President
Connor	40s	GT	Male	Director DMO
Daisy	40s	HA	Female	Elected Official - Economic Development
Dakota	50s	GT	Female	Co-owner, restaurant
Daniel	60s	GA	Male	Director of Sales and Marketing- Resort
Dean	60s	GT	Male	Owner of a Winery
Eleanor	80s	GT	Female	Alderman and Chair of Tourism Committee for City
Emily	30s	GA	Female	Manager- Attraction
Ethan	40s	GT	Male	Former DMO Director
Evan	70s	HA	Male	Resident
Felix	40s	HA	Male	Glamping Business Owner
Fiona	40s	GA	Female	Resident
Frederick	40s	GT	Male	Restaurant and Attraction Owner
Freya	60s	GT	Female	Resident
Gavin and Daniela	30s	GA	Couple	Owners of a Winery
Genevieve	50s	HA	Female	Shop Owner
George	50s	GT	Male	Owner - Waterpark
Harrison	40s	GT	Male	Superintendent - State Park
Helena	70s	GA	Female	Resident
Henry	30s	HA	Male	Natural Resources Coordinator
Ian	30s	HA	Male	Deputy Director - Nature Conservancy
Isla	30s	GA	Female	CEO/President Destination Management Organization
James	70s	GT	Male	Mayor
Jonathan	30s	HA	Female	Boutique Owner
Josephine	40s	HA	Female	Newspaper reporter
Karter	50s	HA	Male	Fire chief
Kevin	70s	GT	Male	Resident
Kylie	30s	SA	Female	Marketing Director for The City
Leo	30s	HA	Female	Resident
Logan	50s	GT	Male	Tourism Council Member
Luna	60s	SA	Female	Owner – Ice Cream Shop
Mason	60s	GA	Male	Manager of Resort and Attractions
Mila	60s	SA	Female	Manager - Museum and Cultural Center

Miles	80s	GT	Male	Owner - Ice Cream Shop
Nathan	50s	GA	Male	City Administrator
Nathan	50s	GA	Male	Owner of a Guest House
Nora	40s	SA	Female	Resident
Owen	30s	GA	Male	Outdoor outfitter
Preston	40s	HA	Male	Consultant - Downtown revitalization
Quintin	40s	SA	Male	Mayor
Reuben	60s	SA	Male	Campground Owner
Scott	50s	SA	Male	IDNR Manager
Tristan	30s	SA	Male	AirBnB and Attraction Owner
