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The value of trust within visitor-host community interactions

The notion of trust has been the subject of limited inquiry within the tourism domain. This paper highlights some of the more prominent dimensions of trust from the organizational behavior field, and seeks to explore their utility in the understanding of the visitor-host community member interaction. This paper suggests approaches by which an application and an enhancement of trust might improve interactional quality. Finally, the paper posits a series of strategies that are likely to facilitate societal trust and shared ethical beliefs among host community members.

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This paper examines the explanatory value of trust within the visitor-host community member interaction, exploring both the dimensionality and antecedents of the notion; it then generates a range of responses by which trust might be enhanced, to the benefit of visitors and members of host communities.

Trust, as a concept, has been the subject of much study and comment within the organizational literature (Kramer 1999, 2002). It has, received relatively little scrutiny in a tourism context. The idea would seem central in an understanding of visitor-host community interaction; it may underpin the very decision to travel, to travel to a particular destination, and to develop associations with members of the host population. The notion of trust is also axiomatic in the understanding of resident responses to tourism and to individual tourists. Trust will in large measure shape both the types and the valence of responses that a host community member directs toward visitors. Relatively little tourism research has involved trust, particularly trust within the visitor-host interaction; we presently know much more about trust within the management domain and within societies generally.

The degree of societal trust is now said to be a diminishing commodity within many nations (Fukuyama, 1995; Kramer, 2002; Putnam 1993, 1996, 2000). Putnam has concluded that trust is an ebbing sentiment for many. Individuals, he suggests, are reporting rising levels of cynicism and suspicion, and a diminishing propensity to trust those about them. Kramer (2002) has even argued that, in dealings with those significant social entities about us, such as organizations or employers, we ought exercise an approach that he terms 'prudent paranoia'; many institutions and their leaders, he concludes, are neither as trusting nor as trustworthy as one might presuppose. In such a climate, trust and its changing levels, may well have implications in

the understanding of visitor-host community interactions, and might usefully be explored along a number of identifiable dimensions.

The first of these might be the dimension of fragile versus resilient trust. Whilst researchers have conceptualized trust in a variety of ways, many would hold that it generally requires a willingness to be vulnerable (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer 1998). Within the visitor-host community interaction, travel requires the tourist to leave the comfort zone of home and of familiar surroundings, and enter the unknown territory of another; for the destination resident, it means receiving strangers into their midst, some of whom may not wish them well or treat them and their environment with respect. An abuse of trust thus always remains a conscious possibility for both host and guest. Maximizing trust in this situation would envisage the host-guest relationship to be one of collaboration, with both predictability and sufficiency important for the fostering of trust. The greater the perceptions of interactional predictability, both of style and outcome, the greater the enhancement of interactional trust. Sufficiency is also important, with higher levels of trust more likely to be sustained when potential rewards are perceived to be sufficient in order to justify any required effort or inconvenience.

The type of trust termed fragile is said to be based upon perceptions of the immediate likelihood of rewards (Ring, 1996). This form of trust is sometimes referred to as instrumental trust (Tyler & DeGoey, 1996), or transactional trust (Rousseau, 1995), wherein exchanges are regarded more as impersonal and non-relational. Transactions between visitors and local residents based on fragile trust would be perceived as being grounded upon formal and contractual terms. The interaction may be brief, singularly commercial and with each adopting a one-dimensional role that reveals little more about the other than physically-identifiable socio-demographics. Both tourists and locals would not likely regard these exchanges as necessary

pleasant or ideally long-lasting. Fragile trust in the visitor-host community arena may not

survive infrequent and unavoidable contact, wherein neither tourists nor residents are certain that

equity, insight or enjoyment may be present. In order to avoid this type of trust, opportunities for

frequent, enjoyable, enduring and mutually beneficial contacts may need to be afforded.

Resilient trust, according to Ring and Van de Ven (1992) is based upon stronger and

more numerous associations among people; it can survive the occasional transaction within

which benefits and costs may not be in some equitable balance. It is moreover held not to be

calculative, but rather involves a longer-term perspective; it is further said to entail perceptions

of interactional satisfaction wherein ethical probity among the parties is believed to be high.

Commentators such as Etzioni (1988), Granovetter (1985) and Sable (1993) suggest that, in any

community context, norms and ethical values comprise the adhesive by which people are held

together within the society. Whilst fragile trust is concerned with the temporary and workable

interactions, resilient trust is more likely to be reflected in long-lasting and durable interactions

characterized by identifiable and shared ethical precepts. A major lesson to be drawn here might

involve the need for *fora* at which a sharing and a mutual acknowledgement of personal values

and ethical beliefs among hosts and guests could occur; such a facility or arena will assist in the

engendering of the type of trust that leads to long-lasting and mutually satisfying associations.

A final issue associated with trust concerns its major antecedents. Host communities in

particular may find themselves more willing to trust if certain conditions preexist or are seen to

be fulfilled. Four basic preconditions are said to energize trust: open communication channels;

feelings of empowerment in dealings with those around us; the open and thorough dissemination

of basic information; the freedom to share attitudes, values and feelings with others. From this

list, it can be seen that relatively unimpeded communication is a central precursor of trust. The

more a host community member believes communication with visitors is possible and enjoyable, the more that they perceive an equality of standing between both host and guest, the more a host community member and a visitor has basic information about each other, and finally the more that there is a mutually acknowledged freedom to share values, beliefs and feelings with the other, then the more that a resilient trust will be fostered. The notion of trust would thus seem to be of some value in the understanding of visitor-host community relationships. It might usefully be explored among tourist communities in a number of contexts, such as disparate visitor-host density ratios, seasonality, host community cohesion and social network characteristics, destination poverty, visitor and host community socio-demographics, nature-based versus mass tourism destinations and financial dependence. An acknowledgement of the importance of resilient trust between hosts and guests ought to motivate more attempts by planners, developers and government regulators to provide various types of *fora* that will enhance this form of trust. The provision of arenas and physical facilities whereat visitors and residents might feel free to meet and interact socially would seem important; these might involve either purpose-built or rebadged facilities and include cultural, sporting, fine arts and educational settings. This may even provide a mechanism whereby the diminution of societal trust and shared ethical beliefs can be reversed within host communities.

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