HOW CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE NEGOTIATE A SENSE OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN A TOURIST DESTINATION: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

A review of both the tourism literature and the childhood literature reveals that there is a lack of research on young people’s perceptions and experiences of tourism, particularly when the tourist destination is also the place where they live. This paper focuses on a study of the lived experiences of young people growing up in the Australian tourist destination of Byron Bay, New South Wales. Taking a critical approach, an important aspect of this research is to hear directly from young people about how they negotiate a sense of identity and belonging in their communities. The study adopts an ethnographic and participatory approach to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of childhood in a tourist destination context. Preliminary findings suggest that children and young people have a strong sense of connection and belonging to their community, including the natural and built environment, which is challenged by the flow of visiting tourists. This paper contributes to the field of Critical Tourism Studies by addressing the lack of research focused on children and young people. In addition, the study brings to the fore the ‘voices’ of this silent population in tourism research with the ultimate purpose of contributing to policy and planning for social sustainability.

Keywords: children, young people, Critical Tourism Studies, identity, belonging, community.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the lack of research specifically focused on young people’s experiences of growing up in a tourist destination by exploring how identities are formed in the socio-cultural environment in which the child develops (Canosa, 2014). The paper aims to bridge the gap between our understanding of the influences of tourism on youth growing up in tourist destinations and young people’s actual lived experiences. In this way, it endeavours to balance the socio-cultural and ecological view of children’s development (Smith & Ballard, 1998) with an understanding of their agentive role in line with the interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies (Morrow, 2011). The Childhood Studies paradigm
recognises the social construction of childhood and views children and young people as competent beings in their own right, capable of expressing their own views, perceptions and attitudes (Morrow, 2011).

Taking this perspective that children have an active role in constructing their childhoods, this paper aims to explore how identity and belonging are actively and reflexively created and conveyed through the stories and narratives shared by young people. The paper contributes to the ‘critical turn’ in tourism research by bringing to the fore the voices of a previously marginalised population (Ateljevic, Morgan & Pritchard, 2007). Children and young people under the age of 18 are often not considered as citizens in their own right and thus their views and perspectives are often neglected (Morrow, 2011). This is especially important to recognise in the context of complex communities such as tourist destinations where there are multiple and often conflicting interests primarily played out in the adult sphere.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalisation and modernity have challenged some of the traditional views of ‘culture’, ‘society’ and ‘identity’. Notions of a ‘fragmented and relative selfhood’ (Lupton, 1996), ‘migrants of identity’ (Schwartz, 1995) and ‘possible selves’ (Giddens, 1991), show how identity comes to be defined as a search or a project which necessitates the active engagement of the individual (Williams, 2002). According to Giddens (1991), as traditions fade individuals are responsible for making, creating and negotiating their own identities. Storytelling and the biographical narrative become important means of achieving a sense of identity.

Like identity, one’s sense of belonging is multiple and often contradictory (Thomson, 2007). In traditional pre-modern society, belonging was a phase which all adolescents experienced. Today, however, ‘the search for belonging becomes a generalised condition’ and more a matter of choice (Thomson, 2007: 152). According to Thomson (2007: 147) young people may understand belonging as either ‘group membership, identity, identification and recognition’ or as ‘dis-identification and exclusion’. Thus identity and belonging are subtly interwoven and define ‘what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others’ (Weeks, 1990: 88).

Sense of belonging is an important goal in the process of identity formation among young people particularly in tourist destinations where spaces and places are shared with a variety of non-residents. Buzinde and Manuel-Navarrete (2013) show how often tourist destinations’ landscapes are marked by ‘socio-spatial polarisation’, whereby exclusive resorts which cater for tourists become both sites of exclusion of young residents and sites of inclusion of
affluent tourists. Ultimately sense of identity and belonging are important factors in the wellbeing of young people (Thomson, 2007).

The following discussion presents preliminary findings from research carried out with young people aged 10 to 24 residing in the Byron Shire on the far north coast of New South Wales in Australia. Byron Shire is an important Australian tourist destination with Byron Bay being the main attraction, popular for its north-facing beaches which provide safe bathing and excellent surfing conditions (Lawrence, 2006). Tourism has been a major catalyst for the region’s economic growth and development since the 1980s. It is estimated that an annual average of 1.4 million tourists visit Byron Shire (DNSW, 2012) compared to the total resident population of Byron Bay which is only 6,487 (ABS, 2011).

METHODS

Critical ethnography and participatory research were employed in this project to explore the lived experiences of young people growing up in a tourist destination. Critical ethnography and participatory approaches to research are uniquely compatible and have been chosen as a methodology as they embody the philosophical values underpinning this study, namely the orientation towards research which ultimately benefits the population under investigation (Berg, 2009).

Fieldwork was carried out over a period of 12 months and included a variety of different methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation and a participatory project. Formal interviews and focus groups were carried out with 11 local youth workers and 58 young people between the ages of 10 and 24. Ethical issues associated with undertaking research with minors were addressed by adhering to the principles and practices set out in the International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson & Fitzgerald, 2013).

This paper focuses on the preliminary analysis and findings from focus groups held with young people. By interpreting the narratives and stories told by these young people a richer and more nuanced understanding is gained about how identity and belonging are created, negotiated and sustained among young people growing up in a tourist destination.

RESULTS: EXPERIENCING CHILDHOOD IN A TOURIST DESTINATION

Growing up in a tourist town where there are often more ‘tourists’ than ‘locals’ has important implications for young people’s development, socialisation and ultimately their sense of identity and belonging. Preliminary findings point to a number of key themes including young people’s connection to nature and their negative attitudes to tourists who show a lack of
respect for the environment and for locals; feelings of alienation and lack of safety during the peak tourist season; and the strategies they use to negotiate and re-affirm a sense of identity and belonging in their community.

Young people in this study experience a strong connection to the natural environments in their community such as the beaches, parklands and ocean. The beauty of the landscape is ingrained in children’s memories and ultimately contributes to their sense of identity and belonging. All young people interviewed, particularly the younger ones (10-15 year olds), talked about their love for the beaches, parks and ocean:

‘It’s a beautiful area with lots of natural places to explore…just going to the beach lots it’s very fun’ (Jim, 11 year old).

As young people reported a strong connection to nature, they also feel strongly about the lack of respect towards the environment that is often displayed by tourists. Young boys in particular have negative attitudes towards tourism as displayed by these statements:

‘They [tourists] do illegal things because they don’t know they’re illegal like spear fishing. There was this guy on the river the other day and he had a spear to go spear fishing and it’s illegal and right near the sting ray nursery…my dad told him to stop but he just didn’t care!’ (Jim, 11 year old).

‘It’s disappointing to see people come to supposed paradise, the place where they’re expecting to be clean and beautiful and pristine, then they leave it in such a state. It’s just disrespectful’ (Jack, 21 year old).

In addition young people’s sense of identity and belonging is challenged at peak tourist times when crowded spaces and unfamiliar faces contribute to feelings of alienation and displacement among youth. Serena, a 17 year old resident of the Byron Shire, explains how in the past ‘you could come into town [Byron Bay] and sort of see some of your friends but now you don’t see any faces you know! The beaches are also heaps crowded’. There are also dangers both in the ocean and on the streets that add to the perceived lack of safety among local youth. Young people have argued that often surfing is dangerous as there are many inexperienced tourists in the ocean. Likewise the ‘party’ image that Byron Bay has and the type of tourists it attracts (young backpackers) contributes to feelings of danger particularly at night. One young girl (15 year old) argues that there are a lot of ‘drunk people…strange people…weirdos’ at night. Another 14 year old girl states: ‘I just don’t feel safe…I think that comes with that touristy feeling’.
In order to preserve a sense of identity and belonging to their community young people often participate in ‘micro-communities’ such as the local surf club or soccer club. In addition they seek out ‘locals-only’ spaces in an attempt to reaffirm their identities as locals. A 13 year old girl chooses a particular time of day to engage in her favourite activity in order to avoid the crowds and meet her friends: ‘I go to Byron really early for a surf that way I can surf with my friends without the crowds and I feel safer’. Growing up in a tourist destination is a uniquely different experience which creates opportunities as well as challenges particularly for young residents who are still in the process of understanding who they are and where they belong in the community.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Young people’s experiences of agency and voice strongly influence the creation of their identities in the socio-cultural context of the community where they grow up (Powell, 2010). These identities are also constructed and negotiated through social interactions (referred to as ‘scaffolding’) with parents, other adults and peers in the community (Smith & Ballard, 1998). Preliminary findings suggest that feelings of alienation and displacement are common among youth particularly in the peak tourist season. Their identity as ‘locals’ has to be continuously re-affirmed in order to preserve and nurture the special feelings of belonging which are so crucial to their health and wellbeing.

The young people in this research have talked about their experiences of growing up in a popular tourist destination from two different viewpoints. Their identities fluctuate between an idyllic childhood in a rural and seaside community (Powell, 2010) and a childhood fraught with the same issues and tensions that urban youth encounter. Valentine (1997) argues that there are two dimensions typical of the ‘rural idyll’, the aesthetic elements of the natural environment and the moral dimension which relates to a harmonious and socially cohesive community free from the dangers and stress of urban life. The strong sense of connection to the natural environments is deeply ingrained in the identities of these young residents; however at times they have to contend with the stress and dangers typically associated with urban spaces. Such is the complexity of tourism communities, that the experiences of childhood are often diverse, hybrid and extremely complex.

Young people feel the need to continuously re-affirm their identities as ‘locals’ by creating and engaging in ‘micro-communities’ (e.g. sports clubs), and cutting out ‘locals-only’ spaces and times when their needs for affiliation and belonging can be fulfilled. Young locals often specifically avoid the crowds of tourists by choosing for example to surf early in the morning when there are no tourists. These ‘locals-only’ spaces become important landscapes of a shared identity for young people who may often feel alienated and displaced by the flow of
visiting tourists. As Williams (2002: 355) argues, ‘globalisation dilutes traditional/local sources of identity and amplifies the quest of modern people to actively construct a sense of identity’. The young people in this research are both influenced by the socio-cultural landscape of the community in which they are raised, and actively engage in the construction of a sense of identity and belonging. Graham (2011) suggests that assisting children and young people to develop a sense of belonging in the community is essential for their social and emotional wellbeing. Ultimately, there is a need to include young residents’ voices both in tourism research and community planning, in order to foster socially sustainable host communities.

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