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Control and Power in Tourism: A Conceptual View of Service Encounter Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that there is an overarching need for the understanding of the interaction that occurs in the service encounter in a tourism setting. In order to develop the knowledge of one aspect of this encounter, bringing together literature from sociology and hospitality and tourism management, this study will conceptually strengthen the view of the service encounter as a discourse formation through which the social reality that is developed is constructed to reveal a power struggle between the actors involved. Utilizing a subjective critical framework, this conceptual study will support the use of discursive formation in the service encounter to expose the power struggle that develops within the interaction.

Keywords: *power, control, tourism discourse, service encounter*

INTRODUCTION

There is a great deal of interest surrounding the service encounter in the tourism setting which is driven by a vast literature promoting its understanding in relation to achieving customer satisfaction (see Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001 for a review). This contributes to the assumption that the worker/customer encounter in the tourism context is inherently an equal environment in which the service provider's actions and language are utilized equally with the customer for the purpose of achieving a pleasant service experience. This concentration on the service experience is reflected through a number of service based organizations in which policy makers, managers, and academics have increasingly emphasized satisfying the customer in order to maintain equality in the interaction by pleasing the customer and decreasing complaints in order to increase the organization's bottom line (Davidow, 2000), maintaining good employee/customer relations (Lewis & Entwistle, 1990), and ensuring employee performance that increases customer approval (Luao & Chuang, 2004).

SUMMARY

Drawing together arguments from the tourism and hospitality literature, the assumption regarding equality in the service encounter is challenged. Rather than existing as a benefit to all parties involved, this conceptual study supports the view that the service encounter is socially

constructed involving a discourse formation through which the power struggle that is the reality of the interaction is developed. Making the distinction between the benefits and downfalls of the service encounter, the heart of this study focuses on the concept of ideological influences within the encounter characterized by the tourism setting that can lead to inequality between the service provider and the tourist. In this context, discourse can be seen as language that is used by actors in the social encounter in order to create the social reality that is developing to reveal inequalities (Putnam, 1983). The service encounter discourse is utilized as a means of limiting the potential of the worker providing the service. Discursive formation is viewed as embedded in the wider social structure in which it is apparent that power and control can be established and maintained.

Within the service encounter in the tourism setting, the service interaction can be understood as a discursive resource that workers can utilize to determine the balance between wants and needs of the consumer in the service provided. Service providers use language to support existing work arrangements that encourage customer satisfaction.

In contrast, customers use discursive action to exert power and control over the worker in order to challenge the social structure and construct a hierarchical chain in which the worker is on the bottom. Thus, structural inequality is dependent on the discourse practices and the roles in which they are utilized. In this way, discourse practices do not continually reproduce an equality between the worker and the customer, but instead, it is argued, the discourse practices of the service encounter have unintended divisional and hierarchical outcomes. The service encounter not only produces and maintains a level of control exerted by the consumer, but also challenges the role of the employee within the social context.

The goal of this study is to further develop current knowledge of one aspect of the tourism encounter. Contributing to this analysis, the “power-knowledge” concept of Michael Foucault (1975) and the social aspects of the role theory as developed by Robert Merton (1957) are intertwined to explain the limiting of the potential of the worker through consumer control. In addition, this literature contributes to the argument that the service encounter discourse reveals the consumer’s power over the worker suggesting the inhibiting control of the service provider. Utilizing a subjective critical framework, this conceptual study suggests that the use of discursive formation in the service encounter will reveal power struggles that are embedded in the reality formation of the service interaction.

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