

**RESEARCH TOURISM: THE ROLE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL  
CONTRACT IN  
MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP**

Dr Angela M Benson

*School of Service Management, University of Brighton, UK*

Email: amb16@brighton.ac.uk

Dr Deborah A Blackman

*Faculty of Business and Government, University of Canberra, Australia*

Email: Deborah.blackman@canberra.edu.au

# RESEARCH TOURISM: THE ROLE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT IN MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the relationships between research (tourists) volunteers who pay to take part in a variety of research projects globally and the research that they volunteer to help. The psychological contract is used to explore the transactional and relational aspects of the connections between the tourists and the research experience. Qualitative data collected from research volunteers in situ is used to demonstrate that the primary relationship is not between the volunteers and the destination, nor the volunteer and the researcher, but between the volunteer and the research outcomes themselves. The paper concludes by considering the implications of, firstly, applying the psychological contract in this way and, secondly, how research tourism should be managed once this relationship is understood.*

Key words: Research Tourism, Psychological Contract, Volunteers, Relationship Marketing

## INTRODUCTION

The Research Tourism sector consists of organisations that coordinate the activities of those wishing to travel to undertake research projects - often in conjunction with a holiday. The founders of these organisations capitalised on the idea of bringing together scientists to lead research projects and volunteers, who would willingly contribute, both financially and practically, to engage in worldwide, scientifically based research projects and, therefore, reputed to offer sustainable development in the longer term. Whilst all the organisations offer a similar service, the range of research projects available to volunteers is both complex and diverse. In terms of defining Research Tourism there is a lack of common language used at the present time by the organisations, the volunteers and in the literature. This being said, a number of defining characteristics have been identified:

- Characteristics of Sustainable Tourism are present
  - Accommodation (albeit basic), food and some travel are components of the experience
  - Scientific teams or individual scientists are engaged in research pursuits
  - The fostering and active promotion of learning and education (volunteers and local communities)
  - The facilities (e.g. Research Centre) support and enhance the opportunities for learning and education (e.g. labs, library, lecture, theatre, computer equipment etc)
  - Participants are volunteers, this may or may not involve payment
  - The activities of the volunteers contribute towards conservation
  - The opportunity for participants to conduct their own research may be available, with support from a scientific team, individual scientists or other volunteers
  - Participants (volunteers) may engage in more traditional holiday type activities during time that is seen as free from research activities
- Source: Adapted from Benson (2004)*

In essence :

*“They give you something and you give them something back. So I have given them money and effort, and they are giving me back diving experience, a safe environment, a social atmosphere, and a sense of accomplishment perhaps”.* (Connie, a volunteer, 2006)

What matters about these definitions is that they demonstrate a difference between research tourism and other forms of tourism. Whilst some aspects of the experience demonstrate the characteristics of a mainstream tourism product (accommodation, travel components and sometimes food - for example, bed and breakfast, all inclusive packages) it deviates from the traditional forms of tourism in terms of firstly, the relationships between the reason for travel and the tourist (volunteer) and secondly, the relationship between the research tourism provider and the volunteer (tourist).

In terms of the first of these, in most tourism relationships the tourist is seen entirely as a customer, and the relationship is seen in terms of ensuring that the tourist enjoys themselves and wishes to return. The tourist is driven by a desire to see a place or experience and in many ways research tourism is the same; however, there is also an expectation that, in some way, there will be an ability to undertake something which they can recognise as adding value to science. Volunteers expect to be useful. This then relates to a second difference; in traditional tourism situations the seller expects to provide a service to the buyer (tourist), this transaction is viewed as ‘process consumption’ by Gronroos (2000:50); whilst this exists within the research tourism relationship an additional aspect is also present in that, the seller expects a service from the buyer (volunteer). To some extent this relationship is more like an employee / employer reciprocal relationship with expectations on both sides. It is for this reason we argue that, for research tourism to be successful, those involved in it should consider the need for relationships to be better understood and posit the psychological contract as a better way to do this. We argue this because the transactional approach by tourism organisations do not reflect reciprocity clearly enough as it is considered a short term approach with an emphasis on getting customers (Sautter and Leisen, 1999). Whereas the goal of relationship marketing is to get and keep customers (Gronroos 1995:253) in that relationships are established between buyers and sellers and the marketing should be about mutual

exchange (Gronroos, 2002). Xiang Li and Petrick (2008) endorse this and believe relationship marketing is based upon developing and solidifying relationships. Whilst parallels can be drawn, we will argue, it is not the same conceptualisation as the psychological contract. According to Day (2000) the marketing exchange is along a continuum with ‘transactional exchanges’ at one end and ‘collaborative exchanges’ at the other. This is similar to the ideas underpinning the psychological contract except that in the latter case it is about understanding all of the relationships that matters.

The research focus was to identify possible relationships and, if they were found, to understand how such relationships worked. Consequently, in this paper it will be argued that, in the same way as individuals have expectations and schemas about their potential employer and the work they will undertake, research volunteers also have expectations and schemas about the research tourism organisations and the contribution that their work (the research they undertake) will have upon the creation of knowledge and understanding in terms of both the local community and the wider research community. Therefore, their perceptions of themselves as ‘doing good’ will need to be supported by the experience that they actually have. Additionally, we argue that relationship marketing should also consider using the psychological contract theory in order to enable better understandings of the reciprocity of any particular context. This will add to the current research in this area as called for by Xiang Li and Petrick (2008).

Initially the concept of the psychological contract is outlined, the paper then continues by demonstrating how research tourism can be better understood theoretically by using such a construct and how research tourism may affect and be affected by specific elements of the psychological contract. What is of interest is whether analysing research tourism relationships in this framework will make managing such relationships clearer. Case data will then be used to support how the relationships are actually occurring and the implications of this for both, managing and marketing research tourism (or any other product/service where there are reciprocal relationships).

## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT**

Broadly, a psychological contract is “*the individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and the organization*” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). There is a range of perspectives on what exactly the contract is, as well as which parties should be included: Cullinane and Dundon argue that “*Some authors emphasize the significance of **implicit obligations** of one or both parties; others stress a need to understand people’s **expectations** from employment; while another school of thought suggests that **reciprocal mutuality** is a core determinant*” (2006, p. 115). In all cases, an employer and / or an employee will develop a mental model or schema of the employment relationship which will affect the way that they frame events within the workplace and, therefore, react to them (Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau, 2001).

According to Maguire (2002) there are three levels identified as needing to be considered: the transactional level, the career level and the relational level. Transactional contracts are usually short-term and performance related, involving set monetary exchanges (Rousseau, 1989; D’Annunzio-Green and Francis, 2005). A good example of such a contract would be hiring a first employee to do administration in an office; commitment and development of skills is negligible and a specific wage rate and period of employment is agreed upon. There can be transactional elements within any psychological contract – there will be aspects of a job which are seen to be straightforward and the assumption about what is needed and expected will be clear. For example, issues to do with a volunteers engaging in research would be transactional – they are expected to be straightforward and have little to do with long term trust. The second level, the career aspect is mediated by what employees believe are appropriate for their mid to long term future with a company (Maguire, 2002). This is likely to have an impact upon employment as there may not be a development of a long-term relationship unless employees can see that they are going to be (a) likely to have the potential for job security and (b) are going to be treated with respect and as an important part of the organisation. In general, recognition of the need for the individual’s career aspects to be considered is a starting point for developing a more relational relationship with employees – if there is no development of role possible within an existing firm, there may need to be a commitment to develop

skills to enable an employee to be mobile. This may seem to be counter intuitive and to encourage employees to leave, but if they are feeling supported they may stay on and be more capable of new knowledge creation for longer. The third tier of the model, relational aspects, are based on emotional involvement as well as financial reward (Rousseau, 1989; D'Annunzio-Green and Francis, 2005). They tend to be far more long-term and involve significant loyalty and discretionary behaviour aspects by both the employer and employee, leading to identification with the organisation in question.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-methods approach was adopted drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The analysis of the organisations used the SPACE (Rowe et al., 1994) model; it was chosen as its theoretically robust but at the same time can be applied to small to medium size enterprises. The SPACE model is based on a likert scale questionnaire, and this therefore dictated the data collection method. An adapted questionnaire was sent to fifteen organisations in the UK research tourism sector of which nine were returned, the key themes explored were finance, environmental stability, competitiveness and strength of the sector as a whole. After analysis of the data, four companies were chosen for their strategic position in the sector to follow up as case studies. This was done by interviewing the owner / managers of the four case study organisations. In addition, secondary data of the companies was also analysed. As research tourism is an emerging niche with little research about the volunteers who take part, the study was exploratory in nature that required a qualitative approach (Creswell, 1994; Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). The method used to collect the data from the volunteers was individual face-to-face interviews that were semi structured, thus allowing flexibility during the actual interview process. In total 76 interviews were conducted. Initially, 21 interviews were undertaken in Indonesia. The interview guide was then refined and a further 55 interviews were undertaken with three different organisations in Indonesia, Malaysia and Madagascar. The data collection took place during the period 2003 – 2006, each data collection phase lasted between 3 and 6 weeks, however, in each phase no interviews took place during the first week, thereby enabling a period of 'settling in' for the volunteers, the researcher and the

project team. The interview guide used for the interviews, consisted of a list of areas (dimensions) to be covered, the five dimensions were: Project/destination orientated dimension; Volunteer role dimension; Organisation dimension; Travel dimension; Interaction between volunteers and organisation. All of the interviews were recorded, with the consent of each respondent, transcribed and imported into the qualitative software package Nvivo 7. Nvivo became the vehicle for working through the transcripts thus allowing unstructured data to be made sense of. Consequently, the data was then coded for themes, content and axial intersections (Panditt, 1996). The classifying and sorting of the data under themes enabled meaning or answers to be extracted. Nvivo allows the generation of free nodes (stand alone themes); tree nodes (enables sub coding under a theme) and case nodes (allows socio-demographic characteristics to be generated). All three types of nodes were used. Nvivo also has a number of other functions e.g. modelling, however, for this research project only the managing and shaping of data functions were used. In particular the data was interrogated for instances of transactional, career and relationship interactions between the researcher and either the tourism research or the tourism research provider.

## **FINDING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT IN RESEARCH TOURISM**

In this section we will demonstrate why there may be a theoretical relationship between the psychological contract and the research tourism sector by linking the responses to the three aspects identified by Maguire (2002) as making up the psychological contract.

### **Transactional Aspects**

Research Tourism organisations coordinate activities/projects that engender the concepts of research, conservation and education for volunteers to take part in. Volunteers would normally pay for this opportunity; the prices for a six week project would range from £1900 to £2500 (this excludes the cost of the flight to a designated destination indicated by the organisation e.g. Kular Lumpur for projects in Malaysia). Within this framework volunteers would be expected to engage in research activities and to

undertake them diligently. Volunteers would expect the infrastructure to be in place for this to happen.

However, this is not always facilitated with ease by the organisation as one volunteer highlights:

*I think there needs to be clearer communication, especially on their expectations of us and maybe, I don't know, every evening over dinner, we could say what is happening the next day, and that would be more helpful (Laura).*

Responses also indicated that the expectations of volunteers were linked to the issue of payment:

*I'm giving lots of money to try and support the causes, like the scientists and all of that, but I did expect to get a lot out of it (Katy).*

These discussions became quite complex and emotive. It was difficult to get an overall sense of whether volunteers believed the overall experience was value for money and consequently, volunteers were asked if the experience over all had been good value. The responses were mixed; volunteers responded positively (for example Jez) but other volunteers who initially responded positively continued with mixed comments (example Sarah). The more positive comments came from volunteers across all three organisations:

*Essentially I am paying to have a great experience, and therefore it does not matter that I am paying for that because I still feel as though I am getting value for money because I am doing diving (Jez)*

*Yeah, I think it is. I've had a really good experience. Um, I think I would be more comfortable if I wasn't paying quite as much, because seeing the cost of how much things cost out it, like it's a lot cheaper. I guess obviously there's like the expense of the UK office or whatever, but I think it's slightly overpriced (Sarah)*

Whilst the volunteers who were more negative in their response came from one organisation.

*No. I think it's really expensive..... I think it's a lot of money for what it is because I'm doing my research, and obviously the translators need to be paid and staff need to be paid but apart from that the only other expenses I can see are travel so I think it is a lot for what it is (Louise)*

*....but it all depends on what you want to get out of your money, and mine was to get some kind of experience out here.....and I could use my money a little bit more wisely, because as I said, £3,500 will get you so far in the country (Neil).*

One volunteer outlined he would not pay the full amount again but that a discounted price (which is available by many of the organisations in the sector) would draw him back as a volunteer for the following year:



*the recruitment presentation at [name of venue] this had if you come as a volunteer then the following year if you act as an advisor at the [name of venue] and recruit eight people then you get a 10% discount on your expedition for your next year, so I think I'd be tempted to do that. I don't think I'd come back sort of fully paid, I'd like to have it a bit cheaper (Alistair).*

Whilst participating in research is a given by both the organisation and the volunteers, the expectation for volunteers goes beyond just participating, they need to believe that what they are doing is useful.

Unfortunately, the discussion focused around a lack of fulfilment in the area by volunteers:

*I think the disappointing thing is that my big assumption was that they needed hands and they needed bodies to help them to get through a certain volume of work, and now I'm here I think it's obvious that if anything we slow the process down (Linda)*

*I wish [name of company] needed us more, but I don't feel it is the case. I realized that most of the volunteers were actually superfluous, most of the time; I kind of adjusted my expectations (Oscar)*

### **Career Aspects**

During the field visits, it was clearly evident that all of the organisations had educational / research facilities, these normally included computers, a library, laboratory equipment and dedicated spaces to engage in learning. The organisations through its staff and field scientists also facilitated the development of skills to enable the volunteers to participate in the research agenda, this could vary from a few days to several weeks (for example, on marine projects volunteers needed to be competent at species identification and maybe even learn to dive) depending on the project. Whilst the provision of these facilities might be a given, the engagement of volunteers varied, some engaged at a surface level (aligned with transactional aspects) and were often distracted by the tropical scene, others took full advantage of all the opportunities available to them in order to self-develop.

The concept of volunteering has a long and established history in many subject areas, a traditional definition of volunteering is offered by Stebbins and Graham (2004:5)

*Volunteering is uncoerced help offered either formally or informally with no or, at most token pay done for the benefit of both other people and the volunteer*

Within traditional definitions the emphasis is on nominal payment or expenses to the volunteer rather than, the volunteer paying to take part, as in research tourism. This element of payment does distort the expectations of volunteers as indicated above. However, the concept of 'giving' and 'taking' is present in

both traditional volunteering and is present in the dialogue from research volunteers. Whilst there was overlap in the narratives regarding ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ when examining the dialogue of volunteers the aspect of giving (this could be in terms of time, money, services, resources, knowledge) had greater prominence than that of taking (in terms of learning, experience, skills). Whilst many volunteers talked about both, there was no single answer that only talked about taking.

*Basically, I am giving my services to an organisation and I am not getting paid for it, but that is fine. Hopefully, I am learning something from them and they are getting a service from me* (Lyndsey)

*...you put something in and get something out, but not in a monetary sense* (Alex).

The aspect of ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ is not a feature of traditional tourism but emerges when the concepts of volunteering and tourism are put together. The learning and educational aspects that are recognised by volunteers and provided by the organisations within ‘taking’ are seen as developmental and are often associated with opportunities to enhance future directions or careers

*Initially I suppose it would be to see if it was something that I would consider as a career, and then if it was then it would lead on to doing a masters or something so that I could steer myself in that direction. But I'm still really unsure of what I want to do when I'm finished so it is just sort of .....* (Debbie)

*I wanted to gain experience, and for my CV to look as though I have done something constructive with my time, rather than sitting on a beach enjoying myself. I wanted to give back something to the community. I enjoy working in the community; I have not done this time – I did more on my fisheries project* (Jenny)

Volunteers also linked a return visit to career considerations:

*Yeah I would because it'd be a great experience, it would give me better, like, for what I want to do, it would be better in my CV, and you know, encourage me more to do what I want to do, so yeah, definitely, I'd love it!* (Elaine)

*Yeah. I would be tempted to come back to do my Masters here* (Louise).

A small number of responses demonstrated an interest in returning as a staff member rather than a volunteer and gaining further experience and skills in a position of authority

*I actually looked at the expedition manager role and considered whether in a couple of years maybe I might want to come out here and do that kind of thing* (Jez)

*I could see myself coming back in a year or two as a field scientist. Why not? once I have my degree, I would maybe consider to come back – apply for a field scientist's job – yeah, why not?* (Monica).

## **Relational Aspects**

Whilst the involvement of volunteers 'being useful' or 'doing good' is considered part of the transactional contract, it also becomes an emotional pull as the respondents wanted that 'feel good factor' from participating in voluntary work and needed to know that the contribution they made was worthwhile in terms of inputs and outputs of the research agenda. From the responses it was clear that the research tourism experience was not always providing this, or only partially providing it. Consequently, whilst the role of research taking place was not disputed, volunteers expressed varying degrees of frustration. They wanted to know that the data they were collecting contributed to the longevity and sustainability of the project and how this happened. Volunteers recognised that often they were a small part of the research agenda but wanted to see how their contribution fitted into the research 'jigsaw puzzle'. In some instances, volunteers wanted to know the overall outcome of the research even if this was after leaving the project.

*I feel I am contributing something. The cool thing too about this is that never before in my life have I ever contributed to raw data collection for pure science. I am finding that actually very interesting, although I have not contributed anything yet! (Connie)*

*I don't know was slightly disappointed as well at the amount of actual input I've had so far. Yes, it would be more tangible if you could see the direct results of, you know, the benefits of being here, I suppose it would be more fulfilling (Alistair).*

It is not clear the extent to which this frustration influences customer loyalty, clearly the experience is not for everyone and a small number of volunteers were not sure or thought they would not return. The responses were not negative about the experience and were in fact quite matter of fact. All of the responses in this theme were from one organisation:

*I don't think so, no. I think the whole organisation is not the sort of thing I would normally get involved in, but it is just not my particular thing. I am not saying it is wrong – it is just not the sort of thing I would do (Graham)*

*....I wouldn't come back as a volunteer again. Because I feel I've done that now already (Sarah).*

Whilst volunteers might not want to take part again, they were happy to recommend the experience to others, these thoughts were echoed across the three organisations

*Yeah, I think I would. I've not done, but I think I would (Bridgette)*

*Yes, very much so. No question. So I am very happy, and I think I would recommend it, gladly (Jez).*

For other volunteers, whilst they were happy to recommend the experience, they indicated the caveat ‘but not to everyone’

*So would I recommend this? Yes, I would. It would require a certain type of person – it is not for everybody, I don’t think (Connie).*

Results from the organisations demonstrated that financial performance of companies was linked to the retention of customers and that successful firms were more likely to retain customers. One case study scored the rate that volunteers return year on year to the project very low. This is not surprising given that the main market is university students. In order to combat this, the company has developed a distinctive business model by building relationships with universities and annually giving presentations in order to attract student’s year on year. Another case study has implemented a number of initiatives to encourage volunteer loyalty: an annual membership scheme by subscription which includes a members journal introductory discovery projects in the UK and Europe which includes subsidised volunteer places for members; free volunteer days, where volunteers give their own personal accounts; a discount programme where volunteers save 5% for participating on between 2 – 9 projects, 10% for 10 – 19 projects and 15% for over 20 projects. The company clearly believes these initiatives have worked as their questionnaire likert score was higher than the average for the sector. Whilst all of the case studies had implemented customer loyalty initiatives, many of them were not linked to volunteer expectations.

One serial volunteer (who had participated in ten projects with one organisation), indicated the lack of engagement after the project by both the organisations and the scientists leading the projects

*Here we are only seeing part of this whole project. I’ve only gotten from one – no, two of the projects that I’ve been on, I’ve gotten the actual papers from the research. So that would be nice to get that, you know, about what actually happened or what they found or did (Erin).*

We have adapted Maguire’s (2002) model to reflect, on one side, the responses from the volunteers and, on the other the expectations of the research tourism organisations taken from the survey data and analysis of the official documentation – see Figure 1. What can be seen here is that there are clear expectations on each side that are not standard tourism provisions or expectations.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

What can be seen here is that there are clear implications for how the research tourism companies should manage the research tourism relationships. On the surface it could be argued that any mismatch between volunteer/research company expectations can be fixed by engaging in “proactively creating, developing and maintaining committed, interactive and profitable exchanges with selected customers (partners) over time” which is Harker’s (1999:18) definition of relationship marketing. However, although it can be argued that all volunteers could be seen to be the partner, the fundamental premise of relationship marketing is that there is time to build relationships. This will not be the case for the actual volunteers; and so there should be a re-assessment of how to develop a management plan that will work across volunteer populations.

Sin et al. (2002) developed a model of relationship orientation which included trust, bonding, communication, shared value, empathy and reciprocity and we would argue that, by focussing on these aspects, based upon an analysis of the likely psychological contracts in place of a certain group of people, a tourism management plan can be developed. This would enhance the model of the future marketing paradigm and described by Gummesson (1994) where he argued that the core of marketing would move away from the 4P’s being central (or however many were currently defined – he quoted Baumgartner as having 15), to having the Relationships, Networks and Interactions as core to all marketing mix decisions. As a result of this research we would argue that the focus upon the relationships would be appropriate in the case of tourism research marketing but that, in order not only to attract, but actually to fulfil the expectations of the research tourist, there needs to be a further analysis done, that of the psychological contracts likely to be in place. Such an analysis will help to focus upon the work aspect of the volunteers, rather than the tourist. For example, from the research it is clear that organisations need to set up the collection and dissemination of data that not only acts as an attractor to future researchers, but also provides some form of closure for the volunteer in terms of their contribution in the actual research process.

This is not the first time that the psychological contract and relationship marketing have been linked together although it is largely an unrelated area of research; Kingshott and Pecotich (2007) argue that the psychological contracts and relational norms emerge from the same socialisation processes and demonstrate that psychological contract breaches, which lead to violations of trust will seriously harm the potential ability to manage the relationship between customers and suppliers. However, they do not clarify how such breaches can be overcome. We argue that using the psychological contract literature to understand the reciprocity could be more useful as it will enable the development of a greater understanding of the common factors in any tourism or marketing relationship that features reciprocity. We call for more research in this area to determine how analysing psychological contracts can enable tourism and relationship marketing strategies.

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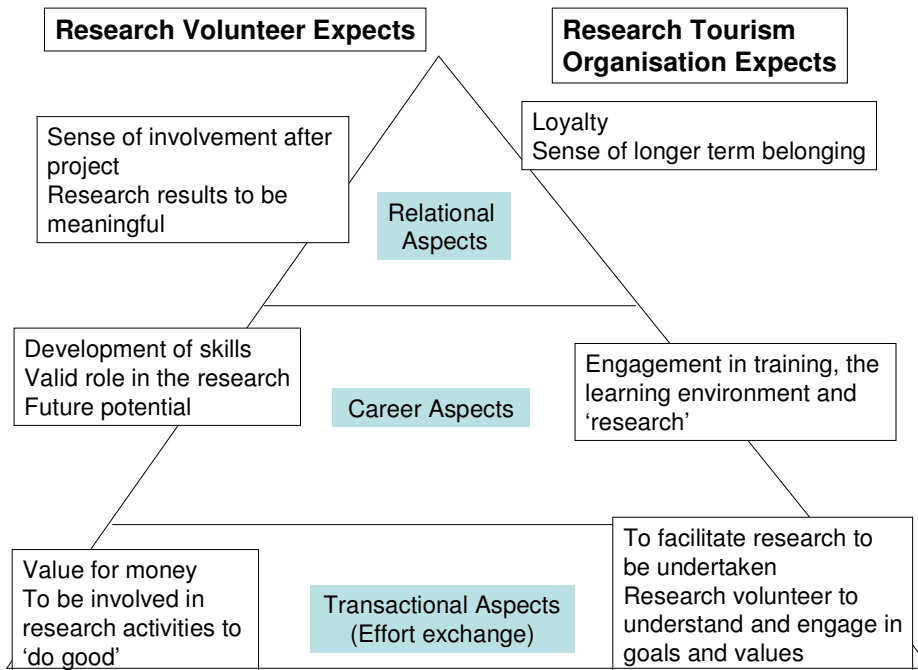
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Figure 1: Research Tourism and Psychological Contract Model



Source: Adapted from Maguire (2002)