Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision

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Tourism research ethics: current considerations and future options

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Introduction

Historically there has been little discussion of research ethics in the published tourism literature. In the early era of tourism studies it is likely that researchers were guided by the codes of ethical research practice of the disciplines in which they were originally trained. If most tourism researchers had higher research degrees in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, economics, psychology, and geography and they conducted research within the ethical frameworks that existed in those disciplines perhaps there was little perceived need to discuss research ethics. But three major recent developments suggest that it may be time to reconsider this situation. First, there is the emergence of new generations of tourism researchers who have focused on tourism as a specialised area of concern in its own right and who do not have the same background in an established discipline. There appear to be no guidelines for these researchers to follow. Second, in all of the established social sciences there are ongoing debates and critical discussions of discipline and topic specific research ethics. It seems unlikely that tourism research as an area of academic concern is immune to these ethical questions and concerns. Third, much attention has been paid to the ethical issues related to the behaviours of tourists and tourism managers. While there are examples of codes of ethical conduct for tourists and tour operators there seem to be no such codes to guide the behaviour of tourism researchers. Given these historical and contemporary situations it seems timely to turn our attention to tourism research ethics.

It is the central argument of this chapter that in a discussion of the current status and future direction of tourism research, it is important to reflect on the ethics of tourism research practice and to ask if a code of tourism research ethics is necessary, and if so, what such a code might look like. The aim of this chapter is to open a discussion on these questions by:

♦ Reviewing basic principles of ethical social science research and considering how these might apply in the tourism context using scenarios to illustrate some of the ethical challenges that tourism researchers may have to address,

♦ Describing some of the ethical issues that have been identified in recent discussions in the social science disciplines that may apply in the tourism research context.

The chapter will seek to ask questions rather than suggest answers with the aim of stimulating greater awareness of research ethics and ethical conduct for tourism researchers.

Tourism research ethics: the past

There exists an ongoing debate over what tourism is and whether or not its study and growth as an identified area of teaching in universities justifies the label of discipline (Tribe, 2006). While this chapter does not seek to extend or comment on this debate, the discussion highlights three critical features of tourism research of relevance to an analysis of research ethics. First, the earliest studies of tourism were conducted within a number of established social science disciplines, especially economics, human geography, sociology, anthropology and psychology (Botterill *et al.*, 2002). But over time there has been an increasing number of researchers who are doctoral graduates from programmes outside these traditional disciplines and based in tourism-focused university units (Butler, 2004). Second, there has been a shift in the sources used in tourism studies from the foundation social science disciplines towards journals and books published solely within tourism (Xiao and Smith, 2005). While for some authors (Xiao and Smith, 2006) this is a sign of maturity for the area, an alternative view is that increasingly tourism research is conducted by individuals guided by second-hand models, concepts and theories who may not always realise the origins and challenges associated with their original development and who may be using concepts from disciplines they have no direct links to (Tribe, 2006). This leads us to the third area to be considered and that is the connections back to the original disciplines. An increasingly inward focus for tourism research may contribute to less attention paid to changes and developments in the original disciplines. It has been noted by several authors that the tourism research literature has not explicitly recognised or engaged in more recent social science debates about epistemology and methodology (Crick, 1989; Tribe, 2006). Clearly this is also the case for the area of research ethics. While earlier work was likely to have been conducted within the ethical codes and frameworks that exist in disciplines like anthropology (AAA, 1998), sociology (ASA, 1999), psychology (APA, 2002), and geography (AAG, 2005), it is not clear what codes or approaches, if any, are currently used by tourism researchers. Debates about ethical research issues are also noticeably absent from the tourism literature.

A search of the three key tourism journals, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research* and *Tourism Management*, using the terms 'ethics', 'ethical' and 'codes of conduct', revealed very little about research ethics. Only a few papers were found that explicitly referred to tourism research ethics and in most the discussion was limited. In some only one aspect of research ethics was considered. For

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