

Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision

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Edited by

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A typology of ‘theory’ in tourism

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

3 A typology of ‘theory’ in tourism

Stephen Smith and Hoffer Lee

Introduction

‘Theory’, a common academic term, comes from the Greek, *theoria* (Oxford English Dictionary, 1991). The term traditionally denotes contemplation, speculation, or a world view. Other definitions include a mental scheme or course of action for doing something, a systematic statement of facts or principle on which a body of knowledge is founded, abstract knowledge, or speculation. A frequent academic connotation of the term is that what is presented as theory reflects intellectual sophistication and is therefore superior to the atheoretical. As a result, supervisors of graduate students often expect their students to position their research in a theoretical context. Many journal editors also expect that submissions to their journals contribute to theory (Perdue *et al.*, 2009). Given both the plasticity and import of the word, the purpose of this chapter is to look at how the word ‘theory’ has been used in tourism, how this use has changed over time, and how it might be expected to be used in the future.

Views on ‘theory’ in tourism

Interest in theory is long-standing within tourism research. One of the first authors to address the topic was Cohen (1972). Drawing from Schuetz (1944), he developed a typology of tourists’ attitudes toward the unknown versus the familiar. He believed these attitudes were reflected in individuals’ travel styles. Cohen also suggested several implications arising from his typology. First, his typology illustrated the potential for a middle ground between a ‘grand theory’ of tourism and idiosyncratic studies. Second, he believed diverse theoretical perspectives should be applied to the study of tourism. Third, Cohen urged that a common approach to investigation be developed to support the development of a detailed, consistent, and theoretically informed understanding of tourism. His urging for ‘theories of the middle ground’ rather than the creation of a single theory would be repeated three decades later by Franklin and Crang (2001: 18) who observed,

it seems to us that tourism studies does not need to try to find some 'north-west passage' or Big Theory to legitimate itself as a school of thought. It seems very unlikely that one size will fit all.

Despite such conclusions, other authors including Jovicic (1988), Meethan (2001), and Noy (2007) have called for a single, integrated theory of tourism. But even a quick reflection of the experiences of researchers in other fields suggests that the dream of creating a 'theory of everything in tourism' is naïve, if not egocentric. Despite decades of efforts, neither physics (which has led the charge) nor any other science has an overarching theory that encompasses all phenomena studied within the context of a body of science. If a grand theory is elusive in the natural sciences, surely the complexity and plasticity of the phenomena known collectively as tourism preclude the creation of any sort of comprehensive theory for that subject.

Dann *et al.* (1988) examined the balance between what they called 'methodological sophistication' and 'theoretical awareness in tourism research'. They developed a framework based on two intersecting continua: the degree of theoretical awareness (high to low) and the degree of methodological sophistication (high to low). These axes formed quadrants into which they classified articles from two journals. The authors suggested the quadrant combining high theoretical awareness and high methodological sophistication represented the correct balance for tourism research, but observed that most tourism researchers had not achieved this.

Of more direct relevance to this study, they defined theory as a 'body of logically interconnected propositions [that] provides an interpretive basis for understanding phenomena' (p 4). Moreover, their framework implies theory can be independent of methodology. However, the authors appeared to hold other views on the nature of theory as well. In one passage, they stated the 'evaluation of tourists' motives may only be *post hoc* theorizing by experts who are simply projecting their own choices' (p 11). This implies they saw theory as synonymous with speculation rather than rigorous development and testing of causal models. Elsewhere, they suggested the degree of theoretical awareness could be judged on the basis of 'understanding, prediction, and falsifiability' (p. 10). In other words, it is not clear whether they meant that theory is a subjective lens through which some phenomenon may be interpreted, or that theory should be grounded on empirical evidence.

In 2000, Dann traced six transitions in the sociology of tourism, such as the shift from typological description to a search for understanding of motivations of tourists' behaviours. As part of his review, Dann acknowledged that their earlier characterization of theory (Dann *et al.*, 1988) would not necessarily be accepted by other sociologists, noting some would limit the connotation of theory to 'understanding' only, excluding any connection with causality.

In 2005, Dann undertook a more thorough examination of the state of tourism theory. He identified a number of social scientists whom he believed had made theoretical contributions to tourism, noting, though, their contributions fell short of being truly new theories. Instead, he characterized the contributions as

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