Tourism research: beyond the imitation game

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius

Introduction

I begin this essay with the above quotation from renowned Chinese philosopher Confucius as I believe it aptly summarises my recent ruminations on the epistemological, ontological and methodological state of tourism research. That is, I have in the past few years become increasingly preoccupied with how knowledge about tourism has been and is being created (by who, for what purposes and can it be justified?); what realities exist about tourism (are there multiple 'truths' about tourism and if there are, which of these have been hidden or silenced and why?); and what techniques and tools are currently being used to garner knowledge about tourism (are there any innovative methods for the collection and analysis of data?). I believe these to be very important considerations if we are to understand the location, effects and affects of power within tourism research and practice. I do not intend to become embroiled in the (obsolescent?) polemic on whether or not tourism is a discipline, as others have argued the case more eloquently than I (see Tribe, 1997). Further, that is not the purpose of this commentary. Rather, my concern is whether as tourism academics we have, in our research and practice, been willing to cross traditional boundaries, to be disruptive, to be self-reflexive and indeed to take the noble and bitter routes to knowledge production (through experience and self-refection) rather than (or in addition to?) the proverbial 'path of least resistance' (through imitation). Of course, I am by no means unique in my preoccupation with these philosophical and methodological concerns (see Phillimore and Goodson, 2004).

Admittedly, pushing beyond the boundaries of existing frontiers to facilitate fundamental change in the way in which tourism knowledge is produced within the context of our increasingly neo-liberal academic institutions, preoccupied with key performance indicators (KPIs), is extremely hard, frustrating, thankless and painstakingly slow (if this can be achieved at all!). Further, we do not exist in vacuums and we all need to be cognisant of the specific cultural, political, economic and personal contexts that might constrain our capacity to cross research frontiers – these 'realities' cannot simply be parenthesised. Sometimes imitation can be justified – why do we need fundamental

change in the way in which tourism knowledge is produced anyway? Why do we need to overcomplicate things?

In the just under 15 years that I have been employed as a tourism academic, I have witnessed a proliferation of tourism research in journals, text books, and increasingly, online forums. If one is to go by the postings on the Tourism Research Information Network (TRINET) there are also many more universities across the world where academics are involved in tourism and related research. The question to my mind is whether within the context of this exponential growth of research activity within tourism there is anything that can be deemed innovative, original or cutting edge. What new knowledges have really emerged in tourism in the last decade or so? Have we as tourism researchers been taking things easy by playing the 'imitation game', trying hard not to 'rock the boat' so much that it actually tips over? It was in the context of these contemplations that I endeavoured to identify recent research in tourism (over the past decade or so) that has, to a greater or lesser extent, dismantled existing knowledge frontiers and has fostered fundamental change in the way we think about, understand, and practice tourism. Towards the end, I would also like to be so bold as to proffer my own opinion as to where I think innovation might emerge in tourism research of the future. This is a rather daunting task as I cannot hope to cover everything – there will be several gaps occasioned by many factors including my inability to access research that has not been written in English, journal and text book publications which I have not been able to retrieve and my own bias towards more qualitative and conceptual approaches. So, what I discuss in the next section is only a very small snapshot which primarily examines those broad 'movements' or 'turns' which have had significant influence on the creation of new tourism knowledges.

The emergence of new knowledges in tourism

It is apposite to start with the birth of what has been deemed the 'critical turn' in tourism studies as it is within this context that I believe, arguably, some of the most innovative research and knowledge production has emerged in tourism in the past just over a decade. The first book length publication in tourism that named this 'critical turn' emerged from the first critical tourism studies conference held in Dubrovnik in 2005 (Ateljevic, Pritchard and Morgan, 2007). Critical tourism is interdisciplinary and drew its inspiration from numerous theories and concepts within the wider social sciences that predated it, including post-structuralism, critical theory, embodiment and gender theories. According to the editors of this first volume, critical tourism studies is 'more than simply ***a way of knowing***, an ontology, it is ***a way of being***, a commitment to tourism enquiry which

is pro social justice and equality and anti-oppression: it is an academy of hope' (ibid p.3) (emphasis in original).

While being underpinned by a range of interpretative/interpretive paradigms, critical tourism claimed to be much broader than these and indeed articulated a desire to resist academic ideologies which were suffocating and oppressive and which forced researchers to as it were to 'pick an ideological side'. The critical tourism studies 'movement' has grown significantly since its birth in 2005 with several subsequent book length publications (Ateljevic, Morgan & Pritchard, 2012), journal articles (Pritchard, Morgan & Ateljevic, 2011) and academic conferences (seven have so far been hosted biennially at the time of writing). Certainly, the emergence of critical tourism studies can be perceived as a seminal moment in our tourism academy and its focus on social justice, hopefulness and emancipation can also be related to subsequent creative discussions, for example, on morality in tourism (Caton 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014); empathy in tourism (Tucker, 2016); tourism and emotions (Pocock, 2015); decolonisation and tourism (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015) and tourism and citizenship (Bianchi and Stephenson, 2014).

It would be disingenuous (and indeed incorrect!) to suggest that researchers within tourism were not engaging in critical and creative debates prior to 2005. For example, I would like to point to Mellinger's (1994) excellent article in which be critically analysed photographic postcards of African Americans in the Southern United States and found that these served to locate 'black subjects within a racist regime of representation' (p. 756). Rather, what I would argue here is that critical tourism studies has been effective in bringing a host of critical voices together under the umbrella of a distinctive 'movement' and has spurned other 'critical turns' in related subject areas such as hospitality and events. This is not to say that the critical tourism movement is beyond criticism. Its philosophical (epistemological and ontological) underpinnings have been questioned (Chambers, 2007, Platenkamp and Botterill, 2013), particularly its 'ideological neutrality' which has perhaps led to political inaction; there have been concerns about its failure to problematise how oppressed and marginalised communities might be researched from a position of (white) privilege (Higgins-Desbiolles and Powys Whyte 2013; Chambers and Buzinde, 2015) and its almost exclusive focus on the discursive and representational has been treated with some disdain (Bianchi, 2009). Despite these (not entirely invalid) criticisms I would argue that the critical tourism studies movement has nevertheless enabled deeper critiques of the epistemological, ontological and methodological bases on which we do research in tourism and has also been instrumental in opening up new and original avenues for tourism knowledge production. In this sense, then I would like to go further to suggest that the critical turn in tourism has also influenced a 'conceptual turn' where top rated, mainstream journals such as *Annals of Tourism Research* are now much more receptive of conceptual

discussions, and where more researchers have been empowered to use reflexive and first-person narrative where this is appropriate and sensible, without attracting opprobrium.

I would suggest too that the critical tourism studies movement has spawned a still nascent 'postdisciplinary turn' which seeks to be more radical and which recognises the limitations placed on knowledge production by disciplinary 'straightjackets'. Arguably, the first published exposition on postdisciplinarity in tourism was undertaken by Coles, Hall & Duval (2005) in a publication in the journal *Tourism Recreation Research* where they argued that postdisciplinarity offered tourism scholars 'more flexible forms of knowledge production' (ibid, p. 31). Indeed, to take this even further, postdisciplinarity argues for a deconstruction of the very notion of disciplinarity. Decolonial scholars such as Walter Mignolo have acknowledged the power inherent in disciplinarity by arguing that it is a Western construct, is inherently imperialistic, and serves as a system of normalisation which colonises our minds and also our imaginary i.e., knowledge and being (Mignolo, 2009). So, to my mind, the question for postdisciplinary scholarship in tourism is not more diverse disciplinarity (*a la* concepts such as multi, trans and interdisciplinarity) ***but a departure from the very language of disciplinarity itself*** if we are to foster fundamental change and innovation in tourism knowledge and practice. Two postdisciplinary tourism conferences have already been convened (in Neuchâtel, Switzerland in 2013 and in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2015). At the time of writing, a third was being planned for 2018 in Auckland, New Zealand. A special 2016 edition of the journal *Tourism Analysis* (Volume 21, Issue 4) was dedicated to papers from the first Neuchâtel conference and included problematisations of 'plural knowability' in tourism studies, the de-disciplining of tourism studies and existential postdisciplinarity.

The final 'movement' which I wish to discuss in this brief overview of emergent research in tourism that has pushed beyond traditional knowledge boundaries over the past decade or so is the 'mobilities turn'. The mobilities paradigm has been successfully applied in the context of tourism (from its origins in the wider social sciences) and has inspired many innovative interpretations of tourism. The key contention of mobiliites is that tourism does not exist in isolation but is one aspect of an immense network of quotidian mobile practices which range from daily commuting to migration. Importantly mobilities scholars argue that we need to understand the range of human and non-human elements that are involved in our mobile world including modes of transport (cars, trains, airplanes, buses) and material objects (tickets, suitcases, goods). They also contend that virtual and 'imaginative' travel (facilitated by technical developments) now sit alongside physical movements (see Sheller & Urry, 2006 for an excellent early exposition of the tenets of the mobilities turn). Many in tourism have embraced the 'mobilities turn' in order to understand for example the experience of being on the move – in this regard Larsen (2001) developed the concept of the 'travel glance' to explain what he deemed the 'visual "cinematic" experience of moving landscape images to the travelling yet corporally

immobile "armchair" spectator' (p. 80). We have also witnessed some innovative work which has been inspired by the opposite concepts of immobilities and moorings (see Hannam, Butler & Paris, 2014 for an overview of research in tourism mobilities).

I have been limited by the strictures of word count in my discussion of what I believe to be those areas in which innovative research has emerged in tourism. As a result, I took the decision to discuss key 'movements' which to my mind have led to new ways of thinking about and doing tourism rather than focusing necessarily on specific topics of research. I have directed the readers' attention to three 'movements' or 'turns' which have initiated and inspired substantive and creative knowledge production in tourism– the 'critical turn', the' postdisciplinary turn' and the 'mobilities turn'. While I have discussed these separately there are many intersections among them and there are also many differences. I indicated from the outset that I would focus on more qualitative and conceptual issues as this is where my personal interest lies. I would also say, rather contentiously, that this is where I believe that the most innovative thinking in tourism has emerged in the past decade. Even so, my discussion has not been exhaustive. I should also state that these 'movements', while they are fairly new to tourism, have existed for some time in the wider social sciences. Tourism, as the relatively 'new kid on the block' has only in the last decade or so woken up to the many possibilities for creative knowledge production offered by these earlier critical movements in the wider social sciences.

Final contemplations

The avid reader will have noticed that I have elided positivist and post positivist approaches although these are still dominant in some parts of the world particularly in non-English speaking societies in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and in Europe (for example Spain and Portugal) and also to a great degree, in the United States. Here research rigour and quantitative approaches are two sides of the same coin and there is perhaps still a denial of the legitimacy of qualitative, conceptual research. Indeed, I recently visited an international conference in one of the Iberian countries in Europe which aimed at highlighting doctoral research and which was attended by students from universities in some of the previously mentioned locales. All of the presentations that I attended (and I attended as many as I could) were dominated by quantitative methodologies. The manipulation of statistics to address aspects of very similar research problems (e.g. in the areas of destination image, tourist attitudes, behaviours, satisfaction, loyalty) in different case study contexts or in relation to a variety of micro niche tourism products, was rampant and at the end of this conference I was left wondering what new or creative knowledges had actually emerged that went beyond the statistics? Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that no new or original knowledges have emerged from positivist, quantitative

approaches– I do not wish to engage in the rather anachronistic pitting of qualitative and quantitative research against each other. Many have engaged in this debate over many years and the only conclusion that has been drawn is that there can be no conclusion. In any case, I must admit to being somewhat challenged by any quantitative, statistical research (my eyes start to glaze over, I become confused and disoriented and then I completely shut down…) so it is perhaps highly unlikely that I would be able to identify any new knowledges that have fundamentally changed our understanding of tourism phenomena that utilise positivist methodologies. I admit that this is a blind spot in my own intellectual development and as such, I will respectfully leave the discussion of emergent research in this genre to others who are much more informed and knowledgeable than I.

I would like to end by returning to the quote from Confucius which I included at the beginning of this essay. Imitation or reproduction is one way in which knowledge can be created in tourism. But we need to ask ourselves what kind of knowledge does this create, for whom, and for what purposes? To what extent does knowledge, which is a product of imitation, lead to any fundamental change to our thinking and to our being in tourism? I would like to encourage readers to avoid always taking the easy path of imitation and to instead embrace the noble, though bitter road to creative tourism knowledge production that is garnered through reflection and through our own lived experiences. This is not a call to self-indulgence or solipsism. Rather, I believe that tourism research which seeks to produce new knowledges and which is not deeply self-reflexive in terms of the researcher's own motivations, experiences and situatedness will have limited value in terms of providing honest solutions for the problems that exist in our increasingly complex world.

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