Noel Scott
Associate Professor, School of Tourism, The University of Queensland

A Polemic on the Value of Academic Writing in Tourism Journals

What is the value of an academic tourism paper? There are clear difficulties in using the term value in connection with an academic paper as no object or academic contribution has an intrinsic value but must be judged as valuable by people. Clearly different groups of people will value a tourism paper differently – sociologists value sociology theory and contributions perhaps more than psychology academics. Increasingly however, governments, who fund much academic research, are putting a value (implicitly or explicitly) on research. Therefore it may be useful for academics to begin to discuss this issue.

One traditional response by academics when discussing the value of an individual contribution is to claim academic freedom or to point to the difficulty in valuation of a theory or idea. In support of these claims, examples are given of theories that were not valued at the time of publication but have subsequently turn out to be important - van Raan (2009) called such papers “sleeping beauties”. In this discussion, I have sought to provide some initial thoughts on the value of an academic tourism paper from my own viewpoint and have derived some suggestions for improvement of the value of papers as a result. The position of open-access journals such as the e-Review of Tourism Research in this debate will also be discussed.

There appear to be at least three types of value from an academic tourism paper. **The first is the value provided to the body of knowledge through a contribution to theory or methodology.** This is the traditional or accepted reason for academic study and is often contrasted with ‘mere problem solving’ where the purpose is to provide an answer to a particular problem in a particular context without necessarily any reference to prior theory or methodology. Interestingly, it is my experience that the value of theory in the social sciences (and tourism) is less valued in China than in Western countries. Instead, a research paper is valued in part based on the reputation of the author for practical problem solving although this is changing.

Of course, the nature and significance (or value) of theory in disciplinary areas varies. In some fields such as physics or other sciences, theory is built to explain "laws of nature" which are taken to be invariant but complex and hard to understand. While our theories of physics may change (i.e.: from classical physics to quantum physics), this is because our knowledge of the phenomenon becomes increasingly detailed, often due to more sophisticated methods of experimentation. Psychological theories seek to explain the behaviour and thinking of individuals where there is a presumption of common mechanisms although these may vary between individuals. Therefore, theories of psychology are valued because they can make general predictions that are widely useful in medicine and academic research. In sociology, theories seek to explain regularities that are contextually (or socially) dependent and therefore must by their nature be less widely useful or predictive. They can predict behaviour or social actions to the extent that the future is similar to the past. This hierarchy of predictability may provide a reason why different theories are valued differently. A theoretical or methodological contribution to the body of knowledge may be seen to have different value depending on its type. For example, Nairn, Berthon and Money (2007) use the concept of a paradigm funnel to distinguish between empirical observations, development of analytical methods, development of specific theory and change in deep assumptions regarding core metaphysical beliefs in a field of study. These authors suggest that in any field of study there are many papers regarding empirical observations, perhaps based on testing prior theory and using existing methodology, many fewer papers that develop new methodology, fewer still that develop new theory and perhaps only one or two challenges a decade to core assumptions that change the disciplinary paradigm. Therefore we may value papers using this approach based on rarity value. An alternative example of this valuation of rarity is the importance placed on the first author to write about a particular idea. As academics we value the ground-breaking author who develops a new theory.

In tourism, it is my opinion that most papers are either empirical observations or involve application of theory from other disciplines. We are working in a new(ish) field of study (Tribe, 1997) that values identification of current issues and trends and which imports theory as the basis for its research (Jafari & Aaser, 1988). A consequence of these observations is that value may be created in tourism research by providing theoretical contributions to the originating discipline rather than developing new or original tourism theory. A related problematic issue is that the transfer of new theoretical ideas from various disciplines has in the past taken a significant length of time. During the time it takes to transfer, the original discipline continues to advance so that tourism scholars may be using is “outdated”. Therefore some tourism academics may be using theory that has been challenged by newer ideas in the original discipline.

An example that illustrates this point is found in the work of one of my doctoral students studying emotion in tourism experiences. In reviewing the tourism and marketing literature, the student found that the theoretical approaches adopted from psychology to study emotions were almost exclusively based on ideas that originated in the 1960s. Further she found that alternative and arguably more useful theories were available in psychological papers written in the 1980s. Use of this later theoretical approach – Cognitive Appraisal Theory – has provided evidence and insight that appears extremely useful in the design of memorable hedonic experiences. Therefore, in this case, tourism and marketing academics appear to be using theoretical approaches such as the categories and dimensions approaches to describing emotions that limit their usefulness in explaining why emotions are elicited.

However, this example also suggests a heuristic for finding newer and possibly better theory from the original discipline for use in tourism research (resulting in more insight for tourism stakeholders) and a means of increasing the value of tourism research for other academic disciplines. The heuristic involves identification of an existing concept or theory being used in tourism. This concept is then traced back to its original discipline. Then, newer theories relating to that concept in the original discipline are found from a literature review and brought back and applied in tourism. If tourism researchers are able to identify new theoretical approaches in other disciplines related to core areas of tourism interest, and test them in a tourism context, then we may increase the value of our papers for both the study of tourism and the original discipline.

A second type of value produced by an academic paper may be value to practitioners. Tourism is not a discipline (although academics studying tourism may aspire to it being one). Tourism is instead a field of research. To me tourism is a multidisciplinary field and concerns a phenomenon that has recently been seen to have a strong economic component. Should tourism academics therefore produce at least some papers that are of value to the tourism industry (or sector)? Clearly there are differences of opinion on this issue. I have been in an academic forum where a tourism professor has stated that they "could not give a rats…. for the industry". Alternatively it is routine for many academic papers to justify the importance of their study in terms of the size or value of the industry and also to provide recommendations for tourism managers. It is also my experience that tourism managers or government officials do not often find value in these same papers. Hopefully this is changing, as more of our research-enriched graduates occupy important posts in the industry and as tourism papers better address core tourism industry issues.

In my opinion the many tourism industry stakeholders are dissatisfied with the vast majority of research papers produced by academics and the vast majority of tourism academics find it difficult to engage with tourism industry stakeholders to determine theoretically meaningful problems to study. The industry would be interested in our findings if we write our "reports" in their business language, avoiding academic jargon (which is even difficult for academics coming from different disciplines to understand). Industry stakeholders are often interested in collection of visitor profile information but are often uninterested in research that may advance an aspect of theory or is "strategic" in nature. Strategic research may challenge the status quo, resulting in winners and losers. In my opinion, due to the lack of advanced management training, poor returns, significant sunk costs and low capital reserves of many tourism businesses, many tourism managers are risk adverse and wary of changing the way they do business.

The best of practitioners do want to deal with issues/problems/challenges that they are facing but these are usually current problems reflecting that the tourism industry is not a "trend setter", but a "trend follower". If practitioners were more strategically driven, then our academic papers could find their way to the field of practice in they were addressing core tourism issues. However, many tourism academics do not have experience in working in tourism, and therefore may make naive recommendations. As a result academics interested in challenging existing practices or contributing to theory may not be able to find industry research partners and may feel marginalised and annoyed. One possible option would be that an academic person is paired with a practitioner to co-author a paper. In the absence of such engagement, it may be that academics feel compelled to conduct research on topics outside the (current) core interests of tourism industry stakeholders or to work on narrow niche topics where they have been able to develop contacts and provide valued research. The result is that the papers produced by many academics are not read by tourism stakeholders.

It would appear to me that providing value to the practitioners or policymakers is one important (but clearly not the only) function of a tourism paper so long as tourism remains a field of study. However for the reasons given in the above admittedly simplistic analysis, research papers are not providing value to these stakeholders. Clearly there are issues in transfer of knowledge to time poor tourism managers in small tourism businesses or even government policy organizations, but this does not excuse an academic from trying, especially since there are also issues in the research topics chosen by academics. The result of this lack of engagement results in a low value placed on academic outputs and many academic papers are seemingly written exclusively for other academics.

I have noted in discussion above that there are few theoretical, methodological or paradigmatic innovations in tourism papers, and that tourism is a field of study where there is a lack of engagement between many academics and industry stakeholders. How then can academic tourism papers create value for tourism industry stakeholders? My suggestion is to better focus on core tourism issues, and to add value through use of more insightful theory that provides new insights. A further consequence of this approach may be that we develop a core area of knowledge enabling tourism to become a discipline!

A third type of value from an academic paper is the value to the academic themselves and to some extent for their university. It would appear to me that this is the way that most academics are able to obtain value from their work. If an academic publishes a paper in a well-known tourism journal, their reputation as a scholar increases. If they produce sufficient papers, they may become well-known and hence able to command the respect of their colleagues. This may in turn lead to invitations to join the board of an academic journal, talk at a conference or write books etc. All these scholarly achievements are also valued by their university employer as the reputation of the academic enhances the reputation of the university and vice versa. (A similar effect is noted in sponsorship of events).

An academic's reputation is also of value to some industry stakeholders. Governments, tourism organizations such as the UNWTO, and others will often invite tourism academics with an international reputation to participate in planning, policy or other projects in order to ensure their reports are considered as reputable and based on the best available knowledge and analysis. Similarly, academics with a series of high status research grants will often then be invited into other similar research projects. Therefore the value of an academic's work lies in part in the value that they themselves, their universities and the industry can derive from their reputation.

This analysis of how academic value is created in academic tourism papers provides some suggestions of how to increase this value and perhaps address some of the long standing concerns of industry stakeholders and academics. Firstly, by reviewing the current literature in disciplines from which tourism academics derive their theory, it may be possible to find new approaches and ideas that are of value to the tourism industry, which improves our theoretical understanding of tourism phenomena, and which may also contribute to the original discipline. This is feasible for someone whose native discipline is not tourism. Those who get their PhDs in tourism may consider that they only need to know the tourism literature. Secondly, by focusing on core industry issues rather than niche or peripheral topics we may be better able to bridge the divide between academics and industry. In turn this will enhance or individual reputations and the reputation of tourism as an important field of study.

These conclusions have implications for individual academics, journal editors and the tourism academy as a whole. For academics I suggest that there is a need for a discussion of what core issues in tourism are. For journal editors, I suggest a focus on encouraging the use of new theory from disciplines such as psychology. One means to do this is the use of systematic literature reviews (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). For the academy, it is important to consider the evidence as to whether tourism is a discipline or a field of study and where research value is created.

And where in the complex system for the creation of value from academic papers do open-access journals such as the e-Review of Tourism Research fit? From the analysis above there may be tension between the free availability of academic outputs in an open-access journal and the creation of value. Open-access (and presumably electronic) journals can add value to a paper by being perceived as having a reputation for scholarly work (and practical insight). However, this is a chicken-and-egg situation where developing the journal's reputation may be expected to take a considerable length of time and involve the collaboration of the (tourism) academic community.

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