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Opinion Piece

Interdisciplinary research in tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how tourism scholars view interdisciplinary research. Data were collected from 356 tourism scholars globally. Results reveal confusion and disagreement among tourism scholars regarding how interdisciplinary research has been defined. Strong attachment to the tourism field and feeling comfortable and familiar with commonly used methodologies provide barriers to interdisciplinary research. Moreover, results suggest that tourism scholars should establish and work in research clusters with scholars from other disciplines to facilitate interdisciplinary research. This is one of the first studies offering research findings and discussion aiming to improve understanding of tourism as an interdisciplinary field of research.

1. Introduction

A discipline refers to a detailed knowledge area with distinct borders, a shared language among scholars, and generally shared views and theories (Alvargonzalez, 2011; Leavy, 2011). Specialization in one discipline may, however, blind scholars to the broader context of an issue, creating tunnel vision. Indeed, this tunnel vision may result in limited appreciation of other perspectives, preventing creative breakthroughs (Leavy, 2011; Repko, 2012). Therefore, there has been an increased emphasis on research involving multiple disciplines (Choi & Pak, 2006).

Interdisciplinary research refers to an active collaboration between two or more disciplines working together on a research project (Repko, 2012). Researchers from various disciplines can go beyond their disciplinary boundaries; question their own methodologies, goals, and assumptions; and, if needed, integrate new epistemologies and methodologies to study a research topic of interest (Choi & Pak, 2006; Repko, 2012). During the interdisciplinary research process, the autonomy of each discipline is not maintained, leaving room for the integration and activate participation of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds (Choi & Pak, 2006; Choi & Pak, 2007; Fawcett, 2013; Leavy, 2011; Millar, 2011, 2013; Repko, 2012). For instance, in an interdisciplinary research project, tourism development at a specific destination might be studied together by economists, planners, historians, and sociologists. During this project, an ongoing interaction and collaboration is expected among the researchers from the different disciplines regarding the research design, data collection, and writing the research findings and recommendations. The benefits of such research projects are well documented. Collaborative research groups endeavor to merge multiple perspectives and viewpoints (Zehrer & Benckendorff, 2013). They have the ability to oppose various perspectives and viewpoints that is unlikely to be found in a single individual (Beaver, 2001) and enable solving complex problems (Bozeman & Corley, 2004). Scientific collaboration triggers atypical thinking and increases the creativity and innovation of research (Laudel, 2001; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005).

Extensive literature focuses on how scientific collaboration patterns have grown and evolved, and what the dynamics of these collaborations are, as collaboration has been an important phenomenon for the productivity of scholars, institutions, and countries in scientific research. Two methods have been used to delve into the nature, dynamics, and structure of collaborative research. First, scholars have utilized bibliometric methods, including co-authorship analysis or equations showing collaboration trends using secondary data extracted from authors' published studies (Koseoglu, Rahimi, Okumus, & Liu, 2016; Zupic & Cater, 2015). These studies address the growth and evolution of a given discipline's social structure or the impact of this social structure on the productivity of authors, institutions, or countries via both co-authorship and citation analysis (Ferligoj, Kronegger, Mali, Snijders, & Doreian, 2015; Hoekman, Frenken, & Tijssen, 2010; Kronegger, Mali, Ferligoj, & Doreian, 2015; Leydesdorff & Vaughan, 2006).

Second, researchers have conducted surveys or interviews to explore the nature or dynamics of interdisciplinary research or collaboration via primary data. These studies have focused on the meaning

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of interdisciplinary research or collaboration; the costs and benefits of this research method; who is collaborating; what boundaries exist; what the collaboration experiences are; and what norms, practices, and ethical issues exist in the collaboration processes (Bozeman & Corley, 2004; Bozeman & Youtie, 2015; Bozeman, Gaughan, Youtie, Slade, & Rimes, 2015; Katz & Martin, 1997; Lewis, Ross, & Holden, 2012; Schummer, 2004; Sonnenwald, 2007; Youtie & Bozeman, 2014). Many studies have examined the disciplinary diversity (interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary) in collaboration research using bibliometric methods (Rafols & Meyer, 2010; Yegros-Yegros, Rafols, & D'Este, 2015). However, there remains a dearth of studies exploring what interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research means, how collaboration takes place, what enablers and barriers exist, and how diversity impacts productivity.

Research in tourism has focused on either a single disciplinary or multidisciplinary approach. It is, therefore, recommended that more interdisciplinary research should take place in the tourism field (Darbellay & Stock, 2012). Nevertheless, tourism scholars may have limited knowledge about interdisciplinary research, or they may have different views on interdisciplinary research. In the tourism literature, several studies have used bibliometric analysis to examine how authorship trends and co-authorship networks have grown and evolved (Hu & Racherla, 2008; Ye, Li, & Law, 2013; Ye, Song, & Li, 2012). However, there is limited research for the tourism academic community questioning the meaning of interdisciplinary research, as well as the enablers of and barriers to interdisciplinary research. Although the focus of Zehrer and Benckendorff's (2013), Benckendorff and Zehrer (2016) studies was not explicitly interdisciplinary research, the concept was identified as a major motive for collaboration between tourism academics. Both papers raise further questions about interdisciplinary research in tourism. Having identified this gap in the field, this study aims to investigate how tourism scholars view interdisciplinary research, identify the enablers of and barriers to interdisciplinary research, and suggest how to facilitate interdisciplinary research in the tourism field. This is one of the first studies in the tourism field on this subject, and the research findings can assist tourism scholars to initiate and manage interdisciplinary research projects.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Tourism as a field of study

Disagreement exists among tourism scholars as to whether tourism is an academic community, academic study, field, or academic discipline (Belhassen & Caton, 2009; Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2013; Xiao & Smith, 2006). Terms such as academic community, field, and discipline have been used loosely and their meaning changes based on the author, source, context, and discipline. For example, according to Tribe (Tribe, 1997, 2006, 2010), tourism as a field of study is a new addition to academia. Until the 1990s, tourism was not an accepted field of research or viewed as a standalone academic discipline (Jansen-Verbeke, 2009). In recent years, those who study tourism have referred to it in multiple ways: an academic discipline, a practice as an economic tool, or a component of a different academic discipline. Some of these academic disciplines include economics, psychology, geography, anthropology, business studies, and marketing (Echtner & Jamal, 1997; Jafari & Aaser, 1988; Jafari & Brent Ritchie, 1981; Sheldon, 1991). Consequently, tourism research needs and lend itself to collaboration from many different areas of study (Tribe, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2010).

2.2. Collaboration in research

Collaboration in research refers to interactions between at least two scientists, institutions, or countries with respect to a mutually shared, super-ordinated goal (Sonnenwald, 2007). Two types of collaborations exist: formal collaboration and informal collaboration (Katz & Martin, 1997). Formal collaboration includes manuscript co-authorships; and joint presentations at conferences, meetings, seminars, and workshops. Informal collaboration includes conversations with and feedback received from colleagues, journal editors, and manuscript referees (Laband & Tollison, 2000). Words like multidisciplinary (multi), interdisciplinary (inter), and transdisciplinary (trans) research have been used to show disciplinary diversity (Alvargonzalez, 2011).

For example, Choi and Pak (2006) defined these three concepts by showing the differences among them:

> Multidisciplinary [research] draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within the boundaries of those fields. Interdisciplinarity analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and in doing so transcends each of their traditional boundaries. (Choi & Pak, 2006, p. 359, p. 359)

> Transdisciplinarity is defined as "research across disciplinary boundaries and in collaboration with stakeholders … [that] orients scientific research towards issues of social concern" (Tötzer, Sedlacek, & Knoflacher, 2011, pp. 840–841). A principal push for transdisciplinary research is the need for timely and innovative responses to complex, real-world issues (Kemp & Nurius, 2015). Common words for multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary are additive, interactive, and holistic, respectively (Choi & Pak, 2007). Viewed broadly, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research represent a continuum of increasing disciplinary integration and interdependence (Kemp & Nurius, 2015). Interdisciplinary collaboration focuses on "integrating, interacting, linking, focusing, [and] blending," whereas multidisciplinary collaboration uses "juxtaposing, sequencing, [and] coordinating," and transdisciplinary collaboration focuses on "transcending, transgressing, and transforming" (Klein, 2010). Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of multi/interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research by considering dimensions like collaboration, style/time, goals, roles, rules, boundaries, methodologies, and outcome.

In this study, interdisciplinary collaboration refers to collaboration between scholars who study different disciplines to analyze, synthesize, and harmonize the links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. Interdisciplinary collaboration helps researchers resolve a real-world or complex problem, provide different perspectives on a problem or a comprehensive service. Additionally, interdisciplinary research helps develop consensus regarding definitions and guidelines for complex issues and conditions (Choi & Pak, 2007; Edler, Fier, & Grimpe, 2011; Millar, 2011; Wagner, 2006, 2008).

The strategic benefits of collaboration can motivate scholars, organizations, institutions, and countries to establish projects and research agendas to solve complex problems (Georghiou, 2001; Hoegl & Proserpio, 2004; Katz & Martin, 1997; Katz, 1994; Lima, Liberman, & Russell, 2005; Martin-Sempere, Rey-Rocha, & Garzon-Garcia, 2002; Smeby & Trondal, 2005; Zitt, Bassecoulard, & Okubo, 2000). Additionally, the impacts of these collaborations (Aksnes, 2003; Bridgstock, 1991; Goldfinch, Dale, & DeRouen, 2003; Katz & Hicks, 1997; Narin, Stevens, & Whitlow, 1991) and the role of these collaborations in the academic community (Barabasi, Jeong, Neda, Ravasz, Schubert, & Vicsek, 2002; Ding, 2011; Fischbach, Putzke, & Schoder, 2011; Han, Zhou, Pei, & Jia, 2009; Lee, Kwon, & Kim, 2011; Ordóñez-Matamoros, Cozzens, & Garcia, 2010) are investigated.

Choi and Pak (2007) identified several enablers of research collaboration. These enablers include having a good selection of team members; having good team leaders; the maturity and flexibility of the team members; the personal commitment of team members; the physical proximity of team members; using the Internet and email as a supporting platform; having incentives, institutional support, and