

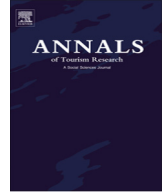


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## Tourism problemology: Reflexivity of knowledge making



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### ABSTRACT

Although problems are a fundamental dynamics of tourism knowledge production, a systematic, exclusive, and in-depth study of tourism problems or tourism problemology has been overlooked. This study, which represents the first time to examine the nature of tourism problemology, aims to fill this gap. A theoretical model is developed and partially tested through a survey of 212 Chinese tourism researchers. Results show that researchers generally consider problems as difficulties or contradictions that require resolution. Moreover, personal/environmental factors influence the researchers' understanding of problems, and such understanding further affects their evaluation and selection of problems at the early stage of research. The study highlights the significance of problems as an important, yet overlooked reflexivity of tourism knowledge production.

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### Introduction

The rapid growth of tourism knowledge in recent decades has brought with it a growing reflexivity concerning such knowledge. A critical form of this reflexivity is expressed in the comment that “for all the evident expansion of journals, books and conferences specifically devoted to tourism, at a general analytical level it remains under-theorized, eclectic and disparate” (Meethan, 2001, p. 2) or “such expansion...resulted in simply a greater volume of research which is mainly confirmatory and

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reproductive" (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007, p. 12). The more common and organized manifestation, however, is reflected by researchers' increasing interest in rethinking tourism knowledge itself (e.g., Xiao, Jafari, Cloke, & Tribe, 2013; Xiao & Smith, 2006), its consumption (e.g., Cooper, 2006; Xiao & Smith, 2007), and its production (e.g., Franklin & Crang, 2001; Hall, 2004; Platenkamp & Botterill, 2013). Such interest echoes a sociological approach to tourism knowledge.

Reflections upon the production of tourism knowledge are particularly significant because knowledge production logically predates the knowledge itself and its subsequent consumption. Many factors have been found to influence the knowledge production process, including, but not limited to, paradigm commitment (e.g., Ateljevic et al., 2007; Hall, 2004; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Platenkamp & Botterill, 2013), research methods (e.g., Ritchie, Burns, & Palmer, 2005), disciplinary background (e.g., Tribe, 2004), scholar networking (e.g., Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2013), and new technology (e.g., Liburd, 2012). The present study continues the pursuit of this particular interest by examining the role of *research problems*—an important yet less examined factor—in tourism knowledge production. Problems have been widely acknowledged as central to research activities. Renowned philosophers of science, such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Larry Laudan have collectively placed considerable emphasis on problems.

The vital role of problems in research has led to the advent of 'problemology', an emerging sub-branch in the philosophy of science (Lin, 1990, 1991, 2005). This term was first noted at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science in 1987 (Lin, 2005). Literally meaning study of problems, problemology can be deemed as a philosophical investigation of problems as a whole. Although first discussed by philosophers, researchers from physics (e.g., Einstein & Infeld, 1961), mathematics (e.g., Hilbert, 2009), artificial intelligence (e.g., Luger, 2009), and psychology (e.g., Davidson & Sternberg, 2003) have shown enthusiasm for this topic. Thus, the connotation of problemology has expanded since the 1990s, and at present, problemology refers to any focused study of problems in general terms (Zhang, 2005).

Despite the momentum that problemology has gained since the 1980s, the tourism research community has been reticent toward it. Tourism researchers seem to be more interested in solving *specific* problems than in knowing the *general* nature of problems. A significant body of tourism literature has documented numerous specific problems, such as host-guest conflicts, gender inequality, second homes, tourism related crimes, and the ambiguity of tourism as a concept, as well as disciplinary debates on tourism. However, no extant work directly questions the nature of these problems and their roles in the tourism knowledge production process. The preference not to focus on the nature of problems is not wrong; solving specific problems is indispensable to the creation of concrete tourism knowledge. However, problems are fundamental to tourism research (as to any other scientific research); thus, knowing more about problems is important. Self-awareness of what needs to be solved can contribute to better solutions.

Thus, this study aims to fill this gap through a systematic, exclusive, and in-depth study of tourism research problems as a whole. In other words, this study attempts to build, for the first time, a tourism problemology (TP) or the application of problemology to tourism through two phases of exploration: model construction based on the problemology literature, and model specification and testing in an empirical context. In particular, three interrelated questions are addressed: (a) What is the nature of tourism problems? (b) What affects tourism problems? and (c) What are the implications of tourism problems? This study may increase current understanding of tourism problems and the dimensions of reflexivity of tourism knowledge production.

## Theorizing tourism problems

Building the TP may either be *inductive* or *deductive*. The former entails summarizing how specific tourism problems have been dealt with toward understanding TP. The latter involves inferring TP from the existing literature on problemology. The deductive approach was chosen for this study because it is logically workable and practically necessary. TP pertains to the reification of problemology in the field of tourism; the basic tenets of problemology, therefore, can be logically applied to TP. Although problemology is an emerging field (Lin, 2005; Zhang, 2005), a concrete body of literature has been cre-

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