Academic myths of tourism

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ABSTRACT

Myths play a critical role in the development of any field of study. They act as the central point for coalition, and differentiate disciplines from each other. The absolute truthfulness of some myths, therefore is less important than their symbolic truth. Other myths, though, can be damaging, promulgating falsehoods and inhibiting the development of a field. This paper examines the roles myths have played in establishing the cult of tourism scholarship. Senior academics were surveyed to identify what they believe to be myths about tourism. Six broad categories of myth emerged: self interest; foundation; reactive stakeholder; convergent; too good not to be true; and myths inherited from other disciplines. Promulgation of these myths has been abetted by methodological inertia.

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Introduction

Tribe (2006) asked whether it is possible to find the truth about tourism. Perhaps a more salient question is whether some tourism academics are even interested in the truth, for a growing quantum of published research seems more intent on creating and/or perpetuating a range of myths that have been repeated so often that their assumed truthfulness has become part of the mantra that has shaped the style and direction of tourism scholarship. Indeed, many tourism myths seem to be so well entrenched that they are presented as polemics, where questioning them opens the individual to personal attack. This paper identifies a range of common academic myths about tourism that were identified by senior academics from around the world. It seeks further to identify their origins,

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understand the role they play and explore why they are so common in academia in general and in tourism studies in particular.

Myth and myth making in academia

Traditionally, mythology and religion provided the reference points for the human experience and in doing so, defined belongingness to a social group, helped socialize the individual to that group (Bowles, 1989) and provided a sense of identity that distanced new groups from their past associations (Light, 2001, 2007). Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest that in a commercial setting organizational myths reflect rationalized and impersonal prescriptions to behaviours. Moreover, since they are highly institutionalized and beyond the discretion of any individual participant or organization, their legitimacy can be taken for granted. Much the same situation occurs in academia, where myth making reflects shared ideas and institutional characteristics that legitimize certain fields of study (Hansen & Williams, 1999), distance emerging fields from their core disciplines, and establish norms about how to conduct research and what results can be expected (Lance, 2011).

The idea of an 'academic myth' has a generally narrow definition. McGee (1985) states they are demonstrably false beliefs that are widely held, long-standing and never subjected to deep inspection, while Frantz (2006) identifies them as wrong ideas widely held by authority figures. Kompier (2006) is much more succinct, classifying them as believed truths. Heydenryck (1993) asserts myths pervade everything, including academia. Indeed, writers from such diverse disciplines as chemistry (Frantz, 2006) biotechnology (Nightingale & Martin, 2004), accounting and finance Alexander and Archer (2000), organizational behavior (Aquinis, Pierce, Bosco, Dalton, & Dalton, 2011; Kompier, 2006), business management (Davis, Haltiwanger, & Schuh, 1996), archaeology (Cederlund, 2006; Mercer, 2006), political science (Hansen & Williams, 1999; Heydenryck, 1993), sociology and family studies (Cuskelly, 2009), corporate social responsibility (Doane, 2005), medicine (Vicker, 2008) and others have written about the challenges wrought by academic myths in their respective disciplines.

What constitutes a demonstrably false belief, though, is a matter of interpretation. Some myths are simply factually incorrect, but as Alexander and Archer (2000) point out others may not be false per se, provided they are presented within their proper context. However, false beliefs emerge over time when beliefs are placed in different contexts without appreciating the moderating effect context may have, when the factual basis on which the belief originated becomes so diluted that only a kernel of truth remains or when the fact has become so exaggerated that it is presented as a self-evident, universal truth that is beyond intellectual refutation (Gaines, 2001). Heydenryck (1993: 27) reminds us, "the kernel is hardly the whole corn, and if it is substituted for the whole corn, it will mislead any attempt to understand that whole." Indeed, Barthes (1984) asserts that myths distort facts rather than make them disappear, and in doing so validate arbitrary assumptions about them. Distortion can be so great that the absolute truthfulness of a myth is often far less important than its symbolic or metaphorical value (Alexander & Archer, 2000).

The origins of academic myths, and the factors that lead to demonstrably false beliefs are diverse. Mercer (2006) argues many myths can be traced to the origins of a discipline, where the work by many early scholars remains dominant, even though their ideas have been confronted by contradictory evidence. Indeed, inertia appears to play a powerful role in entrenching certain ideas as believed truths (Kompier, 2006) to the extent that they become regarded as received doctrines that are taught in undergraduate and postgraduate classes, enforced by gatekeepers, and passed between generations (Lance, 2011). Entrenchment of myths is abetted by the peer review process and doctoral student training (Lance, 2011; Mazanec, 2009; Vandernberg, 2006) where, for example, peer review reinforces certain methodological approaches as the only acceptable way to tackle problems and where doctoral students are often taught there is only one acceptable approach to tackle a problem. The end result is the elimination of originality (Mazanec, 2009).

"Results that are too good not to be true" have also been identified as another source of myths (Davis et al., 1996; Talaulikar & Manyonda, 2011). Flawed methods used to produce the original findings are perpetuated, resulting in further evidence of their truthfulness, or alternately, research that challenges the findings is dismissed. The tendency to believe results that are too good to be true is heightened when the researcher is an advocate of the phenomenon under investigation, resulting in