



The relevance of practice theories for tourism research



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ABSTRACT

Practice theories offer a new perspective on tourism, by not focussing on individual agents or social structures, but on social practices as the starting point for theorising and conducting research. Illustrated by the practice of Arctic expedition cruising, we discuss the basic premises of practice theories and their potential applications to tourism studies, including various ways of conceptualising social practices, the principle idea of a flat ontology, the methodological implications and the relevance for tourism policies. Practice theories could contribute to the agenda of tourism studies in three ways, i.e. by enabling in-depth analysis of performed tourism consumption or production practices, by facilitating analysis of change in tourism over time and by unravelling the embeddedness of tourism practices.

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Introduction

The guide steers the Zodiac with ten tourists dressed in heavy parkas and waterproof gear from the ship to the shore. As the Zodiac reaches the stony beach, several people pick up their bag and attempt to stand up. "Remain seated!" orders the guide. "Remember what I explained several times this morning, you slide to this side and disembark, one by one, by swinging both your legs over the side of the Zodiac. Walk to the guide standing there on the beach and stay together so we can brief you on the particularities of this site. Please do not wander off! There might be polar bears around"

Tourism activities, like traveling, sightseeing, hiking, dining or Arctic expedition cruising can be conceived as concerted, ongoing, situated social practices (Shove & Pantzar, 2005). Landing operations, like the one sketched above, are an integral part of the 'doings and sayings' of expedition cruising. Expedition cruising illustrates a number of characteristics of social practices. First, the sense, meanings and competences of expedition cruising as a social practice have to be learned or acquired. Expedition cruise tourists typically are affluent, experienced, middle-aged travellers (Lamers & Gelter, 2012). However, for most tourists expedition cruising entails a number of new actions and procedures that are acquired through instruction, but particularly by trials and errors during the first days of the trip. Second, expedition cruising as a specific social phenomenon exists as long as it is performed and sustained by people with particular skills and practical concerns. The skills and concerns of expedition cruising focus on the provision of qualitatively rich wilderness experiences in small-scale expedition-style vessels, and environmental and historical education in remote marine environments (Dawson, Johnston, & Stewart, 2014; Lamers, Haase, & Amelung, 2008; Scherrer, Smith, & Dowling, 2011). Third, material entities integrated in social practices typically play an important role in warranting its durability and consistency. The role of the Zodiac, devel-

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oped by French marine explorer Jean-Jacques Cousteau, serves as an example. This inflatable rubber boat forms a crucial element in expedition cruise practices as it enables marine exploration and passenger landing operations in remote and pristine beaches. Fourth and lastly, when analysing social practices there is always the need to include the connections and relationships with other ways of 'doing and saying' (Nicolini, 2012). Due to its exploration-style, the integrated practice of expedition cruising is strongly connected to wildlife photography and outdoor adventure sports, like hiking, mountain climbing, kayaking or scuba-diving (Lamers & Gelter, 2012), Zodiac landing practices, hospitality practices, education, and, as we will see, scientific fieldwork activities.

In this article, we will employ the example of expedition cruising to argue how our understanding of tourism behaviours can be deepened by studying them in terms of social practices, as well as provide a more sophisticated starting point for managing or governing tourism practices. We will make use of a number of scholarly traditions that have collectively contributed to what we will here introduce and discuss as a 'family of practice theories' (Nicolini, 2012). In the last one-and-a-half decade practice theories have gradually entered the social sciences and tourism studies. Practice theorists assert that human activities cannot be properly understood by considering human agency and social structure separately. In analysing practices, agency and social structure are seen as influencing each other in reciprocal ways. In other words, agency 'draws upon' the structures of practices, thereby renewing these structures while participating in, enacting and reproducing, social practices (Giddens, 1984; Schatzki, 2002). Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu are considered the founders of a movement that laid out the conceptualisation of the agency-structure relation as one of the key themes in social theory (King, 2010). Along with Bruno Latour and other protagonists of actor-network theory (ANT) they have inspired contemporary practice theorists, such as Davide Nicolini, Andreas Reckwitz, Theodore Schatzki, Robert Schmidt, Elizabeth Shove, and many others. These contemporary scholars developed and applied their practice theories in a variety of fields, such as food and health, sustainable consumption, sports, work and organisation, and urban provisioning of energy, water and food.

The term practice is widely used by tourism researchers in a more mundane sense (e.g. Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Soica, 2016), without connecting to practice theory as such. Applications of practice theories in tourism studies are relatively rare and recent, but they demonstrate the merits of practice theories for understanding tourism production and consumption challenges (Bargeman, Richards, & Govers, 2016; Rantala, 2010; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008). Initially, most applications focus on performances of single practices (Rantala, 2010; Rantala, Valtonen, & Markuksela, 2011; Valtonen & Veijola, 2011), while recently some studies focus on more extensive, or combined, tourism practices (Lamers & Pashkevich, 2015; Lamers & Van der Duim, 2016; Verbeek, Bargeman, & Mommaas, 2011). For example, Lamers and Pashkevich (2015) analysed how cruise tourism visitation can be regarded as a bundle of various practices, including arriving, being transported and having a meal, that all need to be consistently and regularly connected in order for cruise tourism to be reproduced successfully. Recently, Souza Bispo (2016) introduced the term 'tourism as practice' but in a rather fragmented manner, which calls for a broader and deeper analysis of the relevance of practice theory for tourism studies.

In terms of the tourism knowledge system (Tribe & Liburd, 2016), the family of practice theories are mainly located in the social sciences disciplinary group quartile, but they have branched off into business administration and interdisciplinary studies, as well as having potential to play a greater role in problem-centred knowledge production. Tourism research based on practice theories seeks to find the middle ground between voluntarist and subjectivist accounts of the social on the one hand, and structuralist and objectivist accounts on the other (Spaargaren, Lamers, & Weenink, 2016). Together with other relatively new non-representational forms of theorisation, such as mobilities studies, the performativity approach and ANT, they reflect a broader meta-theoretical re-orientation in the social sciences and consequently in contemporary tourism studies (see Cohen & Cohen, 2012). This article aims to introduce and demonstrate the relevance of the family of practice theories to tourism studies, by discussing some of the key ontological, methodological and epistemological issues involved, and by inviting tourism scholars to follow the path of exploration and detection as suggested by practice theorists.

The case of polar expedition cruising will be used to illustrate the implications of practice theories for the study of tourism practices. The insights are derived from material collected by the first author, assisted by a colleague, during the Netherlands Scientific Expedition Edgeøya Spitsbergen (SEES) in August 2015, as well as through earlier first-hand experiences (Lamers & Gelter, 2012) and literature (e.g. Dawson et al., 2014; Scherrer et al., 2011). The SEES expedition combined the work of around 50 scientists from multiple disciplines, along with 50 tourists, various media representatives and other officials on a 10-day expedition cruise. During this expedition the first author observed the performed tourism practice within the framework of this joint science-tourism expedition cruise, to understand the interactions between these two practices and the governance implications. The illustration of the SEES expedition is particularly useful since it allows for in-depth analysis of distinctive tourism practices, as well as their embeddedness and connection to other practices.

To overcome the relative obscurity of the family of practice theories within tourism studies the next section discusses a selection of useful concepts and guidelines for organising research on tourism. The article closes with a discussion on key similarities and differences with a selection of other relatively novel social theory approaches in tourism studies, and concludes by suggesting ways forward for amalgamating practice theories and tourism studies.

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