

## Part 1 – Setting the Stage

The first three chapters set the stage for the study of how our understanding of tourism has evolved over the past 50 years. Students of tourism need to be aware of how terms are conflated, misused and misunderstood. So, in these first chapters, we start to cut through the mist of what tourism is and how it is structured. Most importantly, it is essential to be able to appreciate how each discipline defines tourism and uses it for its own narrow needs.

No text examining tourism theories, concepts and models would be complete without first defining its terms and conditions. Chapter 1 sets the stage by exploring the issues of what is a theory, concept and model. Special reference is made to work by Stephen Smith and his colleagues about how the term theory is used in seven different ways to explore this phenomenon we call tourism. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of the differences between theory, concept and models.

Chapter 2 begins the exploration of tourism by examining the contribution that different disciplines and fields of study have made to the development of this field (or is it a discipline?). The chapter then enters into the almost impossible debate about trying to define tourism and concludes that any comprehensive definition must include both heuristic and technical definitions, which in many ways are mutually exclusive.

Chapter 3 looks at the structure of tourism and reviews the major models that have been used to identify the component parts of this activity. In particular, it examines the idea of a destination and examines how it is comprised of three types of space.

# 1

# Theory, Concepts and Models

## By the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Know what theory is and distinguish between good and bad theory
- Be able to identify and analyse seven types of theory used in tourism
- Define the differences between theory, concepts and models

## Introduction

Recently, a number of academics have begun to think about theory in tourism in much more detail. As a relatively young field, there have been many complaints that tourism lacks distinct theory that has held back its development. However, Stergiou and Airey (2018:165) note tourism theory does not exist independently of reality; rather it has pragmatic relevance, facilitating researchers and others to make sense of and explain the so-called real world in the form of data or other phenomena.

We as academics seem focussed on producing theory and developing new ideas as 'theory'. Yet, most of us know very little about what theory is and what constitutes good theory. A key challenge, and one that must be addressed right from the outset, is the meaning of theory, in general terms and specifically how it applies to tourism. 'Theory' is one of most misused terms today, for it is often construed as an expression of an unproven and often unprovable opinion. In reality, fact and theory go hand in hand for each is necessary for the other to be true (Cooper and Schindler. 2014).

The terms 'theory', 'concept' and 'model' are often used interchangeably in tourism, when in fact they mean quite different things (Sarokin, 2017). While interrelated, they are also quite different. This chapter discusses each idea.

## Theory

Theory in a social science context is an ill-defined notion, meaning different things to different disciplines and discourses (Stergiou and Airey, 2018). In fact, there are almost as many (mis)definitions of theory as there are users. Part of the problem is that theory means something very different in lay language than it does in science (Ghose, 2013). To most people, theory is just an idea, when in fact it is much more. As Feldman (2004:565) notes when talking about the management discipline, "theory is often in the eye of the beholder. What is theory to one reader may not be theory to another" Abend (2008) says sociologists use theory in seven different ways, while information systems researchers also struggle with the term (Lee, 2014). It is not surprising that such a diverse field of study as tourism has even more challenges in describing theory, leading Smith and Lee (2010) to conclude there is demonstrated substantially and increasingly inconsistent use of the word.

So, let's start at the beginning. What is theory? Cooper and Shindler (2014) define theory as the systematically interrelated concepts, definition and propositions that are advanced to define and predict phenomena. Within a tourism context, Dann, Nash and Pearce (1988: 4) defined theory as the body of logically interconnected propositions that provide an interpretive basis for understanding phenomena. It is a well-defined scientific principal that is supported by convincing experimental and observational evidence that has strong explanatory power and helps scientists understand a phenomena and make predictions about future events (Sarokin, 2017). Sutton and Staw (1995) add it must answer the question "why?", while Gorelick (2011) feels theory involves the formation of hypotheses that can be tested empirically and rejected or not rejected. Perhaps Stewart, Harte and Sambrook (2011) summarise it best when they feel theory is an explanation that offers accounts of how and why things are as they are.

Clearly, theory involves more than just unproven ideas or suppositions. Summarizing the literature, Bricker, Donohoe, Becerra and Nickerson (2015: 3) see theory as serving as a tool which guides inquiry and analysis. It guides inquiry in the form of shaping the development of hypotheses and it shapes research analysis by aiming to explain observations through concepts. It is accepted that theories must be refutable, testable or falsifiable. They should also be verifiable through observation.