

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

Academics have begun to think about theory in tourism in much more detail than ever before. 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'. Indeed, many journals now insist on 'theory' development as a core contribution before a paper can be accepted. This situation is a shame, for the risk is increased that solid, empirical and topical papers that explain how tourism works will not see the light of day because they lack '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 is specifically how it applies to tourism. In fact, '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).

Theory

Theory in a social science context is an ill-defined notion, meaning different things to different disciplines and discourses (Stergiou & 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 faces even greater challenges, leading Smith and Lee (2010) to conclude there is an increasingly inconsistent use of the word.

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. Yeoman and Currie (2019) say it is a body of logically interconnected propositions that provides an interpretive basis for understanding phenomena. Lee and Lu (2023) state theories provide well-reasoned and logical arguments concerning the nature of causal relationships between causes and outcomes. 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. Others add theory is an abstract description of the relationships between concepts that helps us to understand the world (Varpio et al., 2020). It has four basic purposes:

- To describe or answer questions, such as what is happening
- To explain or answer questions as to how and why something happens
- To predict or answer questions as to what will happen
- To control or answer questions as to how something should happen (Infante et al. 1997).

Theory then, should be a well-defined scientific principal that is supported by convincing experimental and observational evidence that has strong explanatory power, helps understand a phenomenon and makes 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 et al. (2011)