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The Epistemic Authority of Tourism Academics

The recent impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry has led to a varied academic research agenda (see Yang, Zhang, & Rickly, 2021). Regardless of our paradigmatic persuasion there is an implicit belief in all academic work that through our 'expert' knowledge we have something to offer society. However, academic arguments around issues like COVID-19, climate change and de-growth can be viewed positively and/or negatively by different tourism stakeholder groups on account of their perceived impact on an individual or group's particular circumstance. Going forwards, what right do academics have to articulate desired futures for the global tourism industry? And related to this, do other tourism stakeholders perceive academics as having epistemic authority over their future?

Epistemic authority is bestowed on an individual we "judge to be our epistemic superiors, that is, [on] people who tend to perform epistemically better than we do in a given domain" (Jäger, 2016, p. 167). Such authority is implicit in the practice of tourism; from the epistemic authority of tour guides to describe the features of a destination to the epistemic authority of travel agents to articulate the construction of itineraries in unfamiliar localities. The epistemic authority of the scientific community is based on society's perspective of the integrity of individual scientists and the institutions they represent (Brown, 2009). Tourism academic institutions have a responsibility to "promote a knowledge dissemination approach, where knowledge is possessed by scientific experts and can (and should, according to dominant belief) be communicated and passed along to the lay person, the non-expert" (Chernouski, 2017, p. 2). However, while the Academy has provided tourism stakeholders with relevant and actionable knowledge (e.g. Dwyer, Forsyth, & Spurr, 2016); Esguerra and van der Hel (2021) have argued that "expert organisations are increasingly criticized for failing to deal effectively with the urgent, complex, and contested challenges of global change and for neglecting to include knowledge sources from outside of elite science".

The presence of conflicting internal perspectives within the Academy over the future of the industry has recently been observed in the literature (Schweinsberg, Fennell, & Hassanli, 2021). It is therefore necessary to consider whether there is a correlation between the presence of an increasing diversity of scholarly perspectives on the management of tourism and the Academy's collective ability to gain epistemic authority and societal trust. We must recognise that the futures we propose can have positive and/or negative consequences for people throughout the global tourism system. This should lead us to consider whether there is an intellectual virtue in epistemic humility, as much as in epistemic authority? Mazzocchi (2021) suggest that epistemic humility comes from recognition of the boundaries of our own cognitive understanding and a willingness to exercise authority in a way that is inclusive of expertise from other knowledge domains.

Epistemic humility is important because tourism academics are often viewed as having marginal impact on society. While on the one hand this may imply a lack of academic epistemic authority, we must remember that expertise manifests itself in both closed and open systems. Pierson (1994) has argued that when an academic "is primarily concerned with controlling and manipulating a discipline's defining set of variables as a closed or relatively closed system ... then there is no rationale room for lay evaluation of those claims" (pp. 403-404). However, when experts "extrapolate from their closed systems to produce programmes for personal or lay action ... then the layperson is rationally obliged to think for [him or] herself, which amounts to nothing more than determining whether the benefit of following the expert's advice is worth the cost of doing so" (Pierson, 1994, p. 404).

It is society that will determine whether tourism academics have epistemic authority. Academics have the ability to construct possible futures, however, it is society that will determine whether an academic construction is acceptable. Particularly when engaging on socially constructed issues for

which there is no one correct answer academics therefore have a responsibility to lead in a way that is inclusive, empowering and democratic (Schweinsberg, Heizmann, Darcy, Wearing, & Djolic, 2018). Academics must strive to avoid the “ontological paradox ... where [their] research is outside of the reality that it describes and simultaneously participates in the construction of that reality as an object by acting on it” (Callon, 2006, p. 7 in Tribe & Liburd, 2016, p. 56). Rather, academics should position themselves as public intellectuals, challenging society to decide what the future of tourism should be.

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