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THEORY IN HOSPITALITY, TOURISM AND LEISURE STUDIES

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Abstract: The term “theory” is used with diverse meanings, resulting in miscommunication and misunderstanding. This article examines how “theory”, as a word, is used in three leading journals in each of hospitality, tourism, and leisure studies fields over a 20-year period. Utilizing an iterative and comparative hierarchical coding, seven different forms of theory and trends in their usage by scholars over the 20 years are identified. Among the notable trends are: 1) A marked increase in the appearance of “theory” (as a word) and its variants over the years; 2) the virtual disappearance of natural science-type theory in the three fields; and 3) a dramatic rise in the use of “theory” as an analogy rather than as a substantive term. Implications and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: theory, tourism research, hospitality research, leisure studies, taxonomy

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality, tourism and leisure scholars often use words that mean different things to different people in different contexts. Examples of this include “sustainability”, “authenticity”, and “planning”. Theory is also such a word. In standard English, that word connotes anything from idle speculation to intellectual sophistication (Oxford English Dictionary, 1991). The plasticity, import, and ambiguity of the term in the context of tourism research were explored by Smith and Lee (2010). Based on their review of articles appearing in the three leading tourism journals, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Tourism Management* from 1989 through 2008, Smith and Lee identified both a growing frequency of the use of the term, “theory”, in tourism research as well as seven distinct applications of the word.

The purpose of this paper is to extend their analysis through an examination of the use of the term, “theory”, in three leading journals in each of hospitality, tourism and leisure studies fields over the same period (1989 through 2008). These three fields were selected because they are interrelated and, arguably, the primary sources of knowledge for problems or phenomena relating to these relatively new domains. Researchers in traditional social sciences such as anthropology, economics, geography, or sociology also do research on hospitality, tourism and leisure; however, the three fields covered in this study are important sources of research publications on these interrelated knowledge domains. To cast a clear focus, it should be emphasized that the purpose of this study is not to evaluate theories or assess theoretical advancements in these fields (although findings of the analysis may lend to such discussions and critiques), but to examine how scholars in the selected fields have used the term in recent years, and to comment on how the uses of the term have evolved over 20 years in terms of implications and frequency of its usages.

Theory is fundamental in most forms of scholarship, particularly the social and

natural sciences. At its core, most knowledge is based on some form of implicit or explicit theory about the nature of a phenomenon (Dann, Nash & Pearce, 1988; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Theory often forms the foundation of methods used in scholarly or scientific enquiries (Kuhn, 1962). Indeed, Nash (1979) asserts that any data-based enquiry, even if it is based on sophisticated statistics, is not sufficient to provide a coherent understanding of tourism unless the enquiry is informed by a theory.

Indeed, Palmer, Sesé and Montaña (2005) argue that the use of statistics in tourism should be based on theoretical models or insights to provide conceptual depth and understanding of fundamental forces behind observed phenomena rather than simple descriptions. Charmaz (2004), in the context of subjective research such as case studies or interpretive studies, asserts that the best qualitative studies are those that are theoretically informed. The use of theory permits the formation of testable hypotheses as well as provides a basis for recognizing potentially meaningful patterns and testing those hypotheses.

Theories can also provide a basis for developing alternative explanations for some phenomena observed in the real world (Decrop, 1999). Theory provides a basis for generalizing patterns or relationships that then shape conclusions that can be applied to problem-solving, forecasting, planning, or management (Wacker, 1998). As Lewin (1952) succinctly observes, “[t]here is nothing more practical than a good theory”(p.169).

Recognizing the importance of theory, scholars working in the three fields examined in this paper have begun to pay more attention to the nature and application of theory over the last couple of decades. For example, the Tourism Research Information Network, TRINET, had an extended discussion among its members about the nature of theory. Postings presented a wide diversity of viewpoints about the definition and utility of theory (TRINET, 2010). In contrast, in an editorial in the

Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly, Tracey (2006) observed that “theory” in the hospitality literature appears to be “under assault” (p.6) by a number of practitioners as well as academics who treat “theory” as synonymous with “impractical”. In response, Tracey wrote a defense of the nature and importance of theory for advancing both knowledge and practice in the hospitality industry. The nature and evolution of theory in leisure studies were explored by Henderson, Presley, and Bialeschki (2004). They wrote a reflective article on the contributions of theory to leisure, recreation, and tourism by drawing on journal articles published during the 1990s. The authors examined the meanings of theory as used in the examined articles and offered predictions about trends in theory in leisure, recreation, parks, tourism, and sport research.

A slightly dated but broader examination of definitions and guidelines of theory in operations management, a field that has potential applications in all three fields, was developed by Wacker (1998). Wacker suggested that any theory must meet four criteria: First, it must be based on thoughtful, conceptual definitions and not on just simplistic descriptive statements; second, the theory must be explicit about the domain in which it applies (there are no “theories of everything”); third, the theory must explicitly describe logical relationships among relevant phenomena – how the object/subject of interest relates to other topics; and fourth, it must specify how observations based on the theory are to be measured as well as produce testable predictions.

Beyond these, Wacker suggests “good theory” (his wording) must have the following qualities. A theory should be unique in that it is clearly differentiated from other theories. A good theory is conservative in that it cannot be replaced until a new, competing theory that is superior in explanatory and predictive performance is developed. Theory should also be generalizable; it should be applicable to a relatively

broad range of related but independent observations or applications. The ability of a theory to produce original, significant hypotheses is another important quality. The more original hypotheses a theory can generate, the better the theory.

Theory also should be parsimonious. If two theories are similar in most respects, the one making fewer assumptions and requiring fewer definitions probably is better. This is a version of the principle known as “Occam’s Razor”. Or as Einstein once noted, “everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler” (Harris, 1995, no page). A good theory should identify all essential relationships and a description of how the relevant entities and forces in the theory fit together – in other words, it should be internally consistent. Theory should also make risky predictions – risky in the sense that there is a real chance that the predictions will be refuted. Trivial or obvious predictions are not marks of a good theory. Finally, a good theory should be abstract in the sense that the theory is independent of time and place. A theory that is valid only in very narrow circumstances is not a particularly useful theory.

Notably, the focus of this study is on how theory as a term is used in hospitality, tourism and leisure research. As noted above, though, different authors use the word “theory” in very different contexts. An examination of the diverse connotations of the word may therefore help elucidate how the word is understood and used by scholars working in different fields, from different perspectives, and how usages of the term change over time. This explicit examination of how “theory” (as a word) is used may reduce misunderstanding among scholars. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine how the word, “theory”, has been used by researchers in hospitality, tourism and leisure, through a content analysis of three leading refereed journals in each of the three fields. To do this, the paper builds on and extends the analysis of Smith and Lee (2010) who identified and documented seven distinct types of theory in tourism research, and examined trends of change over the years.

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The Original Smith-Lee Taxonomy

Table 1 identifies the uses of “theory” (as a word) documented by Smith and Lee (2010). These uses were classified into seven types that were developed through a reflective, iterative, comparative, and hierarchical process of coding and interpretation that might be termed (although the authors did not use the term) “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Theory of the first type is the form of theory normally associated with the natural sciences, and is the form of theory highlighted by Wacker (1998). Theories of the first type produce falsifiable hypotheses that have been tested multiple times with positive results. Theory of the second type is similar to theory of the first type, but because theories of the second type are usually associated with complex social science phenomena, testing hypotheses arising from Type 2 theory may result in equivocal conclusions. Thus, Wacker’s criterion that “good theory” does not exist if two or more competing theories are in play regarding a single phenomenon, does not apply to Type 2 (formal, tested social science theories). In other words, multiple theories may exist with equal validity within the scope of available evidence. Theory of the third type refers to statistical models that are formulated and presented as theory but without a tested *a priori* conceptual model. Theory of the fourth type is similar in logic to theory of the third type in that it, too, involves the use of an *ad hoc* model to describe some phenomena. However, the essential difference between these two types is that Type 4 theories are not falsifiable by an independent observer.

Theory of the fifth type is epistemology presented as theory. This type of theory both presents a world view and identifies which questions and data are appropriate for scholarly enquiry and which are not. Theory of the sixth type is so-called “grounded theory”. In this case, “theory” refers to an inductive approach of data collection, analysis, and interpretation utilizing a systematic process of iteration and constant comparison for coding transcripts and other data from which theories emerge. Thus, grounded theory is more of an inductive methodological process than an outcome in the form of a testable, predictive theory. Theory of the seventh type refers to all other uses of the term, primarily the use of the word in a casual sense such as speculation. In this group of “theories”, findings may be described as offering theoretical insights but these insights are not based on either a falsifiable hypothesis or an *a priori* model. Another usage classified under Type 7 is the borrowing of an existing theory from one field to be an analogy in tourism. Chaos theory is an example. The following section is an expansion of the original taxonomy into the fields of hospitality and leisure research.

Toward an Extended Analysis

The original Smith-Lee taxonomy was retained as the starting point for an extended analysis. For tourism research, the top three journals identified by McKercher, Law, and Lam (2006)—*Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Tourism Management*—were selected; Ryan (2005) identified these same journals as the leading ones in tourism.

For hospitality research, articles were drawn from *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management* (formerly known as the *Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing*), *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, and *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* as the leading hospitality research journals (Pechlaner, Zehrer, Matzler & Abfalter, 2004). These selections are in accordance with

the Australian Business Dean's Council journal list (ABDC, 2010), which ranks all of the above as "A" journals (with no "A+" journals) in the field of hospitality. Community perceptions of these three outlets as leading hospitality journals are also confirmed by institutional rankings of academic journals for research assessment (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2013). Notably, while *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* has a relatively long history of publication and is rated as a top journal, it is not included for this content analysis because it is more often perceived as a medium of practical relevance than of theoretical contributions, particularly for the two periods selected for this scrutiny. According to Cornell School of Hotel Administration (2013) online statistics, subscriber demographics of the journal are characteristic of 25% from academic versus 75% from industry and practitioner readership. Judging from the format of its published articles, it is not until very recently that the newly renamed *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* is continuing as a more explicitly academic publication.

For leisure studies, *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Leisure Sciences*, and *Leisure Studies* were selected as the top three journals in this domain (*scimago*, 2009). The selection of these journals is confirmed by community perceptions of refereed publications in leisure research (Jackson, 2004). Park and recreation journals are excluded due to their content overlap with publications in tourism journals.

Articles were taken from two lustra: 1989 – 1993 and 2004 – 2008. The first lustrum represents the first five years of the existence of the International Academy for the Study of Tourism (Smith and Lee's paper was prepared for the 20th anniversary collection of articles for the Academy); the latter lustrum represents the last five years included in the 2009 research. To remain consistent with the original time frame, the more recent issues and publications from the selected journals were not included in this analysis, which the authors believe will not undermine the purpose of this undertaking

to examine the trends in the usage of theory in hospitality, tourism and leisure research over the last 20 years. As in the original article, the search was limited to individual papers that could reasonably be judged to have research content such as full-length articles and research notes. Book reviews, conference reports, editorials, and other non-research pieces were excluded.

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that this update of the original paper is still limited to Anglophone journals and two time periods, reflecting a pragmatic need to limit the scope of data collection. The use of additional journals, other time periods, and, especially, other languages might have resulted in different conclusions. However, the limitations in coverage used in this paper were necessary for practical reasons. For example, tourism, as a field, has an estimated 150 Anglophone journals. Hospitality studies and leisure studies also have numerous journals.

Methods and Analysis

Each paper's title, abstract, and key words were used as search fields with "theor*" as the search term to identify papers for examination. Arguably, authors who position their work as contributing to theory will normally use that word (or its variant such as "theoretical") in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. If the word or its derived forms do not appear in one of these locations, we submit that the author does not view her contribution as explicitly involving theory.

Analytically, each article captured by the search was reviewed to ascertain if a specific theory was named; whether the theory was explicitly grounded in a discipline or cited other studies using that theory; if the theory was mathematical/statistical, verbal, graphic, or of some other forms; whether the article presented hypotheses or research propositions; if any hypotheses or research propositions were empirically tested; and whether conclusions relevant to the development or testing of theory were

explicitly identified. Notably, there was a high degree of consistence amongst these readings and critical assessments. For the few where there was a divergent view, the differences were resolved by discussion and a consensus was achieved.

The Extended Taxonomy

A review of the uses of “theory” in the three sets of journals resulted in the conclusion that the original seven-part taxonomy was applicable to all three fields. Theories of the first type are based on the belief that there is a knowable, objective reality that transcends the researcher’s own opinions or biases. In other words, there is a reality outside an individual’s mind that is accessible to other individuals and that is testable by other researchers. Such research is, in that sense, considered to be “empirical” (Smith, 2010; Taleb, 2007) because it can be independently tested by other researchers. Theories of the first type are attempts to better comprehend this reality, although there is no guarantee that any given theory will remain as the accepted explanation of any given phenomenon. This is an inherent characteristic of “positivism”. Positivists understand their theories may ultimately be proven to be incomplete or incorrect. As Meyer (1986) noted in his essay on the nature of the naturalistic scientific method, “more importantly, humility is essential to discussions about the methodological and presuppositional roots of science itself” (p.44).

This type of theory is limited to explanatory and predictive models of some phenomena supported by repeated tests, logically linked to other concepts and theories that provide an integrated and coherent understanding of some aspects of reality, and produces significant falsifiable predictions. “Falsifiable” is used here in the sense proposed by Popper (2002); the term is more appropriate than the more familiar “verifiable” because tests of empirical hypotheses can demonstrate if a hypothesis is false but cannot prove it is valid. Any result that appears to support a hypothesis may

prove, upon further testing to be demonstrated to have been an anomalous result. The distinction is illustrated in Taleb's (2007) *Black Swan* in which he recalls how the implicit hypothesis that all swans are white (because Europe has only white swans) was disproved by the discovery of black swans in Australia. This story also demonstrates the asymmetry of empirical science: Repeated tests with positive results cannot conclusively prove a belief is correct. One contrary result can prove an assumption, model, or theory is wrong – or at least, something unusual is happening with respect to either the theory or the observations.

Further, in the natural sciences, normally only one theory can exist to explain a given phenomenon; the “surviving” theory is the one that has not yet been falsified. If two or competing theories exist, one (or both) will eventually be proven wrong. This perspective is discussed at length in Kuhn (1962). An important characteristic of Type 1 theory is that its use is based on or is an extension of other applications of theory. In recreation and leisure studies, for example, Heywood (1993) drew on game theory to develop new approaches for understanding forms of outdoor recreation behavior from a social norms perspective. He observed that game theory offers a perspective for viewing a range of leisure behaviors from games of pure conflict to games of pure co-operation. His analysis demonstrated how game theory could be applied to better understand leisure behavior in an outdoor setting.

Type 2 theories are similar to theories of the first type in that the models are a concise and coherent statement of relationships about some phenomena; many formally-named social science theories such as the theory of reasoned action are Type 2 theories. They generate original and significant hypotheses that can be tested, but the results of any test of a hypothesis may show only equivocal support for the theory. Because such theories address complicated phenomena for which data and understanding of the phenomena may be incomplete, multiple theories can exist

simultaneously in a social science. The failure of a Type 2 theory to support a hypothesis is, by itself not usually seen as a sufficient reason to reject the theory, at least not until after repeated failures. Theories of the second type thus are supported by some degree of empirical evidence tied to the testing of hypotheses.

An example of Type 2 theory can be seen in Walker (2008). He used what he called “self-determination theory” based on Walker, Deng, and Dieser’s (2005) proposition that ethnicity affects the variables that influence individual’s feelings of intrinsic motivation. His sample was composed of a group of British-Canadians and a group of Chinese-Canadians, further divided into males and females. Walker (2008) found partial support for the theory, and concluded that the theory “does not help predict the facilitation of intrinsic motivation for British/Canadians during leisure with a close friend” (p.305).

Theory of the third type refers to statistical models that are formulated and presented as theory but without a tested *a priori* conceptual model. Theories of the third type are falsifiable in that an independent researcher can check the results or even replicate the study to determine whether the results are reliable using the data in question. For example, results of structural equation modeling (SEM) are sometimes presented as offering theoretical insights even though the model itself may be only *ad hoc*. It should be emphasized that Type 3 theory is applied only to statistical models such as SEM that are not used to test *a priori* theory but, rather, is positioned as “theory”. As Reisinger and Turner (1999) argue, SEM should be directed by theory and a clear misuse of the technique may occur if the researcher fails to develop an *a priori* conceptualization and simply fits the data to SEM to generate “theory” from it. As Walle (1997) asserts, in such cases the significance of scientific research is destroyed.

As an example in hospitality research, Back and Lee (2009) used SEM to test an *a priori* model of image congruence in the context of country club membership loyalty,

with mixed results. Likewise, Lennon and Weber (2003) developed, on the basis of information search literature, and tested an *a priori* model to help explain tourists' behavioral intentions. Such a test of an existing theory with SEM is not, as noted, an example of Type 3 theory. Rather, the testing of any *a priori* theory is an example of a Type 1 or Type 2 theory. In contrast, Tsaur, Chi-Yeh, and Lin (2006) proposed a set of eight hypotheses describing relationships between tour wholesalers and retailers utilizing SEM, which suggested *ad hoc* relationships between certain wholesalers' behaviors regarding their dealing with retailers and the resulting retailers' loyalty and wholesalers' market share. They concluded by describing their findings as offering theoretical insights into the interactions between tour wholesalers and retailers, but any insights were inferred after the statistical analysis and were not presented for testing prior to the analysis.

Type 4 theory involves the use of verbal or graphic models that are expressed in such a form that independent, objective testing is not done or may not even be feasible. An example of this use of theory is found in Davidson (2008). Davidson examined newspaper coverage of a mountain-climbing accident in New Zealand in 2003 that resulted in the deaths of three guides and one of their clients. She explored newspaper coverage of the accident and of mountaineering generally, assessing how the media reported the risks and responsibilities associated with mountain-climbing. This particular accident raised public debate about the safety of participants in risk recreation, the responsibilities of the guides, as well as the media's role in shaping public perceptions of the safety of mountaineering in New Zealand. Davidson (2008) framed her study with reference to generalizations based on "theories about the socio-cultural construction of risk and contemporary approaches to the problem of mortality" (p.3) but without offering any empirical, testable hypotheses.

Theory of the fifth type is epistemology presented as theory. Epistemologies *cum* theory specify what questions are legitimate to ask, what data may be collected, how data may be collected, and how data are to be analyzed and interpreted. In this sense, theory of the fifth type is similar to conventional natural science paradigms that pose similar guidelines for natural science disciplines. The difference is that theory of the fifth type is expressed explicitly as essentially a broad world view. As a result, this approach does not produce objectively testable hypotheses; rather, it produces interpretations that are based on the assumptions of the epistemology. Different researchers could look at the same data and come to different interpretations. Moreover, domains addressed by theories of the fifth type tend to be relatively open-ended, permitting the researcher to interpret a wide range of phenomena as supportive of – or as relevant applications of – the theory.

The boundary between theories of the fourth type (untested models) and the fifth type (epistemology) can blur in casual reading. The distinction is that theories of the fourth type are expressed in terms of a specific model or concept, whereas theories of the fifth type are formally articulated epistemologies described as theories. Post-colonial theory, conflict theory, or feminist theory are examples of Type 5 theories. In this context, an explicit epistemology is a formal, prescriptive way of collecting and interpreting the data and, as a result, can be useful for providing insights into how a researcher seeks information or interprets some aspects of the perceived world.

Type 5 theories tend to be self-perpetuating in that those who hold a particular epistemological perspective tend to view all the evidence they collect in terms of their chosen intellectual filter rather than allowing for the possibility of contrary findings (Taleb, 2007, calls this “confirmatory bias” – the tendency to interpret any results as confirming one’s predetermined conclusions). For example, one who works from a post-colonial perspective will observe evidence of colonialism in contemporary,

post-colonial societies. By making this evidence explicit, post-colonial theorists may hope to draw attention to some of what they see as racist or imperialist attitudes in the relationships between nations, and thus help former colonies become free of their oppressive past. However, it does not prove the theory is valid – the fact of oppression is accepted as a starting point for such an analysis.

Glover and Hemingway (2005) provide an example of Type 5 theory (epistemology as theory) in their review of “social capital theory”. Drawing on essays by some writers on social capital, Glover and Hemingway describe what they see as the “theoretical relationship between leisure and social capital”. The goal of their article, as the authors state, “is [to] help readers appreciate not only the relevance of social capital to leisure research but also the potential contributions of leisure research to the continued development of social capital theory” (p.387).

Grounded theory, Type 6 theory, is a method used more in tourism and leisure than in hospitality. Grounded theory concerns not just data collection, but also the inductive analysis and interpretation of data collected that is then presented as “theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). One of the few examples from the hospitality literature is Mehmetoglu and Altinay (2006). These authors explored the use of grounded theory in their investigation of the factors that shaped the international expansion of a European hotel group. Mehmetoglu and Altinay (2006) not only articulated a number of conclusions about the forces shaping hotel expansion, they also identified several challenges with respect to the use of grounded theory methodology:

Some drawbacks related to the use of grounded theory in the current study can also be mentioned. For instance, in the later stages of the research process, it was realized that employment of this approach involves a great deal of complexity and ambiguity, which is difficult for an inexperienced researcher to handle. More specifically, since an enormous amount of data was [*sic*] collected from both primary and secondary sources and they needed to be interpreted in a limited period of time, they might

introduce bias. Moreover, such an unstructured approach, to a certain extent, contradicted the personality of the researcher, who aspired to instigate [sic] a more structured way of conducting research. The grounded theory approach could be better employed by a team of researchers or by a more experienced researcher who could deal with the complexities and contradictions of this approach (p.32).

Theory of the seventh type refers to uses of the word “theory” not classified elsewhere in the taxonomy. A common example of this type of usage can be found in articles that describe their findings as offering theoretical insights, but that do not offer a conceptual model nor provide any explanatory or predictive power, such as producing testable hypotheses. Instead, this type of theory may be best described as analogy, such as the extension of the concept of “brand community” from relationship marketing to “visitor community” in the hospitality context (Levy & Hassay, 2005). A relatively well-known example is chaos theory, a branch of mathematics.

Chaos theory has been applied as an empirical tool in contexts from entrepreneurship to development, as well as invoked in popular culture. The theory arguably first came to the attention of the public when it was referred to in the movie, *Jurassic Park*, and has subsequently been featured in plots in a number of television shows and movies. A key concept in chaos theory is that some systems can be highly dependent on initial conditions. Just a small change in the initial conditions can dramatically change the long-term behavior of a system. These changes, while complex, are not random in the strict mathematical sense of random. The analogical power of chaos theory for the description of complex indeterminate systems has led to the use of chaos theory in a variety of scientific applications, from weather forecasting to understanding the structure of human lungs.

Chaos theory has received only limited attention in tourism. Faulkner and Russell (1997) were arguably the first to introduce chaos theory to the study of tourism, but

limited their discussion to drawing parallels between the complexity of tourism systems and chaotic systems. McKercher (1999) extended these ideas by developing a conceptual model of the structure and organization of tourism systems with particular emphasis on the impossibility of totally controlling tourism development through rational public policy. Given the challenges of empirically implementing chaos theory, its applications in tourism have remained largely in the realm of analogy and qualitative description.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 summarize the frequencies of the appearance of each type of theory for the two time periods and three sets of journals examined.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

As can be gleaned from these tables, not only has the number of published articles dramatically increased, the use of “theory” (and its variants) as a term has also increased. However, the prevalence of explicit references to theory varies substantially among the three fields. In absolute numbers, the occurrence of these terms rose from 21 to 180 articles (between the two five-year periods) in tourism, 7 to 23 in hospitality, and 21 to 93 in leisure studies.

This pattern might reflect increased theoretical depth and methodological sophistication in the papers published in academic journals (Xiao & Smith, 2006) although the trend may also reflect researchers increasingly positioning their research as theoretical without being rigorous in their use of the term. The growth of Type 7 theory suggests that this latter explanation is at least partially valid. Still, in the larger context, “theor*” remains a relatively infrequent term. In tourism, it rose from 2.0% in the first lustrum to 12.8% in the second. In hospitality, it rose from only 0.6% to 3.1%; for leisure, it rose from 6.5% to 15.4%.

Overall, “theory” was explicitly mentioned in just over 2% of all articles published in all three fields in the first lustrum, rising to just over 11% in the second. In other words, no more than about one out of ten articles in the total sample claimed a theoretical contribution. In the three tourism journals examined (Table 2), no article using Type 6 (grounded theory) or Type 7 (theory as an analogy) appeared in the first lustrum. Fifteen years later, over 10% of articles used Type 6 (grounded theory) and over 20% used Type 7 (the analogical use of “theory”). In fact, Type 7 has become the second most common application of the term among the three tourism journals. In leisure (Table 4), Type 6 theory does not appear in either lustrum. There are two occurrences of Type 7 theory in the first lustrum and one in the second lustrum. Hospitality journals (Table 3) are devoid of Type 6 theory in the first lustrum; only one example of grounded theory was observed in the second lustrum. No examples of Type 7 theory were observed in hospitality journals in the first lustrum, but two were observed in the second lustrum.

Type 4 theory (an untested model) was the predominant use of “theory” in tourism journals in the first lustrum. It should be noted, though, that all but one of the occurrences of Type 4 theory was in one journal, *Annals of Tourism Research*. The rank of Type 4 theory dropped to fourth in the second lustrum. In leisure, Type 4 theory tied for second (with Type 7) in 1989 – 1993 and dropped to third in 2004 – 2008. In hospitality, Type 4 was tied for first (with Type 5) in the first lustrum, and had no occurrences in the second. Type 2 theory (associated with tested empirical models) dominated the use of the term in the most recent five-year period for all the three sets of journals. Leisure journals rarely publish articles that utilize Type 3 theory (statistical models). Fewer than 1% of theories of Type 3 were observed in leisure journals in the most recent lustrum, whereas that type of theory is the third most common form of theory in tourism journals and is almost tied as the leading form in hospitality journals.

Type 1 theory (natural science-type theory) occurred in about one in five tourism articles in the first lustrum, and virtually not at all in leisure or hospitality (there was one leisure article that used theory in the Type 1 sense). Type 1 dropped to one in fifty-three articles in the second lustrum for tourism and disappeared entirely from hospitality and leisure journals. The rise in Type 7 (analogical models) compared to the decline in Type 1 is striking. To put the point somewhat provocatively, it appears that “theory” is increasingly used in ways in which the term has no scientific meaning.

CONCLUSION

Judæo-Christian tradition speaks of the construction of “Tower of Babel” under the direction of Nimrod, a Babylonian king. As the Bible and Torah relate, “[a]nd they said, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top [may reach] unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). However, God became concerned about the rising hubris of the human race and, to prevent humanity from becoming too powerful, divided it into mutually incomprehensible linguistic groups.

There is no mention in the Qur’an of the Tower of Babel, *per se*, although Suras 28:38 and 40:36-37 contain an account of how the pharaoh at the time of Moses and the Jewish Exile in Egypt asked his vizier, Haman, to build a tower to challenge “the God of Moses”. The 9th century Muslim, al-Tabari, in his *History of the Prophets and Kings*, relates the story of Nimrod building a tower in “Babil”. Allah eventually destroys it, and the language of mankind, allegedly Syriac at that time, is then divided into 72 languages to punish humanity.

Such, too, seems to be the fate of social scientists attempting to build and articulate theory. In effect, researchers have succeeded only in developing mutually incomprehensible languages and world views. This review of the use of “theory”

demonstrates growing diversity in the connotations of the word. Such varied uses of the term were clearly evident in the extensive discussion on “theory in tourism” on the Tourism Research Information Network (TRINET, 2010), in which the e-mail exchanges, diverging from their usual rhetorical and argumentative themes, were more expository or explanatory discourses on *what theory is* and *what it is good for*. The interchangeable use of “models”, “concepts”, “constructs”, “frameworks” and “hypotheses” with “theories” was frequently noted as was the repeated observation that there is no consensus on a standard definition of theory in the TRINET community.

A similar observation about a lack of consensus of the meaning and use of theory can be found in the hospitality and leisure research fields. Tracey (2006) observed inconsistency – and, he argues, misunderstanding – of the meaning of “theory” in the hospitality literature as he argued for greater respect for the concepts of theory referred to in this paper as Types 1 and 2 theory. Henderson, et al. (2004) noted how the term, theory, evolved in the leisure literature over the 1990s. As the authors put it, “[d]efining theory results in some of the same difficulties found in defining leisure. Like leisure, ‘finding’ theory may be more important than ‘defining’ it” (p.412).

Inconsistencies in the use of “theory” as a term are a result of the contrasting and, at times, conflicting paradigmatic positions from which one conducts her research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). While there are nuanced differences among epistemologies in tourism, the two poles may be argued to be a scientific/positivistic position that holds there is a knowable, objective reality independent of the researcher and a constructivist/interpretive one that asserts that knowledge and conceptual explanations are relative to a particular group of people and a particular period of time or place (*e.g.*, Doxey’s Irritation Index, 1975). In addition, as mentioned by one TRINET discussant and reiterated in the conclusions of a recently edited book by IAST members (Pearce & Butler, 2010), the impoverished states-of-the-arts are inseparable from the changing

focus, context, and relevance of tourism as it evolves. While this reflects the complexity of tourism phenomena, it also raises the barriers to the emergence of a cohesive theory of tourism (TRINET, 2010).

In conclusion, seven different uses of “theory” have been identified ranging from traditional scientific theory to the analogical use of the term. While there are variations among the use and frequency of “theory” in the three tourism-related fields examined, some general patterns can be observed. Theory in the traditional scientific sense (Type 1) has never been common in tourism, hospitality, and leisure journals, and is becoming less so. About one in five tourism articles examined in the first lustrum were deemed to be of Type 1. In the second lustrum, fewer than one in 50 tourism articles used Type 1 theory, and the form is basically nonexistent in the selected hospitality and leisure journals. Type 2 theories (tested social science theories) doubled their rate of appearance in the tourism journals examined, and more than doubled the frequency of their appearance in leisure studies. There was also an increase in hospitality journals; in fact, this type of theory dominates the second lustrum.

Types 6 (grounded theory) and 7 (analogical theory) did not appear in any articles in the first lustrum, but had become common in tourism journals in the most recent five-year period. However, Type 6 theory was still absent from hospitality (except for one article) and leisure journals in the most recent five-year period examined. Type 7, the casual use of “theory”, appears in nearly one in four tourism articles in the most recent study period but is generally absent from hospitality and leisure journals in either lustrum.

So, what is to be done about such diversity in the use of the word, “theory”? The instinct of Anglophones to create new meanings for words is well-known and unstoppable (Hitchings, 2008). Still, in the context of scholarship, some consistency in the use of terms that are as meaning-laden as “theory” is desirable. As Smith and Lee

(2010) argued in their original paper, divergent meanings of words can impede communication and become a source of debate and misunderstanding. Greater precision, consistency, and clarity in language can facilitate understanding and communication or, at least make explicit sources of divergence in viewpoints.

Lacking the equivalent of the *L'Académie française* to protect the integrity of English, and given the growing pressure on scholars to explicitly label their work as “theoretical”, connotation-creep in the meaning of “theory” is likely. Still, it seems reasonable to suggest that such an intellectually potent word should be used sparingly and cautiously. For example, “theory”, in published research, might be limited to Type 1 and 2 theory (Hallin & Marnburg, 2007; Tracey, 2006). In other words, “theory” might usefully be limited to the use of models based on substantial empirical evidence, provide a coherent and integrated view of some phenomena, and produce falsifiable predictions. This is not meant to suggest researchers should ignore the other types of phenomena currently labelled “theory” – only that the use of words such as “model”, “construct”, “hypothesis”, or “epistemology” would provide clearer and more precise understanding of the authors’ meanings. While the methodological design and inductive logic of grounded theory can be useful, the name itself is misleading in that grounded theory is more a methodology than a theory (especially a testable theory). It is a method that involves careful, systematic coding that leads to the induction of themes out of interview transcripts and other data sources. Thus, it might be more accurately called inductive, sequential, or hierarchical coding and interpretation.

The growing use of “theory” as a word is not limited to tourism, hospitality, and leisure research. An examination of the trend in the appearance of the word “theory” in Anglophone books over the last 200 years (Google, 2011) documented a rise in the frequency of “theory” in the five million Anglophone books currently included in the Google book data base from about 0.004% in 1800 to 0.200% in 2000 – a 5,000%

increase. Authors are increasingly invoking the word, but at the same time are increasingly using it in diverse and inconsistent ways.

The diverse uses of “theory” lead not only to miscommunication but misrepresentation of how a model or findings are positioned in the episteme of tourism, hospitality, and leisure research. There are important distinctions that would helpfully be maintained between an author’s speculations and subjective musings, and empirically supported results (*e.g.*, hypotheses that have been subjected to falsifiable testing). Blurring this distinction through the increasingly indiscriminate use of “theory” does all three fields a disservice. Attempting to rebuild the Tower of Babel (in the sense of creating one common language) is impractical and undesirable. However, a little less linguistic inflation and a bit more precision (and humility) in vocabulary would facilitate understanding and communication. It would also support progress in the social scientific understanding of the nature, structure, and dynamics of tourism, hospitality, and leisure.

By implications, this paper brings a much-needed clarity and depth of understanding to the discussion of the nature and uses of theory—a topic of growing interest and debate in tourism, hospitality and leisure studies. The analysis not only documents examples of the diverse and ambiguous uses of the term, it also illuminates understanding by developing a relatively simple, original, evidence-based taxonomy of the various uses of “theory”. The paper can thus help inform future discussion about the nature and uses of theories by scholars working in these fields. While the purpose of the study was not to develop managerial or practitioner guidelines, the analysis can help managers and practitioners better understand and appreciate the myriad uses of “theory” by scholars.

In closing, some of the limitations of this study should be repeated. Data collection was limited to nine Anglophone journals over two five-year periods. The inclusion of

more journals as well as journals from other languages and time periods may have yielded different results. And, as with all subjective research, other scholars may arrive at different conclusions. A broader, critical examination of the uses of the word, “theory”, could yield valuable insights into the nature of epistemology in tourism, hospitality and leisure studies.

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Table 1. Taxonomy of “Theory”

Category	Brief description
Theory of the first type	Theory of the form used in natural sciences
Theory of the second type	Theory of the form often used in social sciences
Theory of the third type	Theory is equated with statistical analysis
Theory of the fourth type	Theory is an untested/untestable verbal or graphic model
Theory of the fifth type	Epistemology or a research design presented as theory
Theory of the sixth type	Grounded theory
Theory of the seventh type	Theory as a casual term or used as an analogy

Table 2. Frequency of Types of “Theory” in Tourism

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6	Type 7	Total Theory	Total Articles
1989 – 1993									
ATR^a	3 (17.6%) ^b	2 (11.8%)	2 (11.8%)	6 (35.3%)	4 (23.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	17 (2.6%) ^c	645
JTR	1 (25.0%)	1 (25.0%)	1 (25.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (2.4%)	165
TM	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	219
Sub-Total	4 (19.0%)	3 (14.3%)	3 (14.3%)	7 (33.3%)	4 (19.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	21 (2.0%)	1,029
2004 – 2008									
ATR	1 (2.9%)	7 (20.0%)	4 (11.4%)	5 (14.3%)	3 (8.6%)	4 (11.4%)	11 (31.4%)	35 (6.8%) ^j	510
JTR	0 (0.0%)	13 (22.0%)	16 (27.1%)	9 (15.3%)	1 (1.7%)	12 (20.3%)	8 (13.6%)	59 (21.9%)	270
TM	2 (3.0%)	26 (40.0%)	5 (7.7%)	6 (9.2%)	3 (4.6%)	3 (4.6%)	20 (30.8%)	65 (14.0%)	465
Sub-total	3 (1.9%)	46 (28.9%)	25 (15.7%)	20 (12.6%)	7 (4.4%)	19 (11.9%)	39 (24.5%)	159 (12.8%)	1,245
Total	7 (3.9%)	49 (27.2%)	28 (15.6%)	27 (15.0%)	11 (6.1%)	19 (10.6%)	39 (21.7%)	180 (7.9%) ^j	2,274

^a ATR = *Annals of Tourism Research*; JTR = *Journal of Tourism Research*; TM = *Tourism Management*

^b % of total theory articles

^c % of total articles

Table 3. Frequency of Types of “Theory” in Hospitality

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6	Type 7	Total Theory	Total Articles
1989 – 1993									
JHLM^a	0 (0.0%) ^b	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%) ^c	18
IJHM	0 (0.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (75.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (0.2%)	264
JHTR	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.2%)	248
Sub-Total	0 (0.0%)	1 (14.3%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (0.6%)	1,080
2004 – 2008									
JHLM	0 (0.0%)	6 (85.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (14.3%)	7 (2.8%)	247
IJHM	0 (0.0%)	2 (50.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (25.0%)	1 (25.0%)	4 (1.3%)	285
JHTR	0 (0.0%)	5 (45.5%)	6 (54.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (6.5%)	168
Sub-total	0 (0.0%)	13 (59.1%)	7 (31.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.2%)	22 (3.1%)	699
Total	0 (0.0%)	14 (0.8%)	7 (0.4%)	3 (0.2%)	3 (0.2%)	1 (<0.1%)	2 (0.1%)	23 (1.3%)	1,780

^a JHLM = *Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing* (began publishing in 1992), name changed to *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management* in 2008/09; IJHM = *International Journal of Hospitality Management*; JHTR = *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*

^b % of total theory articles

^c % of total articles

Table 4. Frequency of Types of “Theory” in Leisure

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6	Type 7	Total Theory	Total Articles
1989 – 1993									
LSt^a	0 (0.0%) ^b	1 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.8%) ^c	107
LSc	1 (12.5%)	2 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (25.0%)	8 (8.8%)	91
JLR	0 (0.0%)	5 (45.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (9.1%)	5 (45.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (8.0%)	125
Sub-Total	1 (4.8%)	8 (38.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (9.5%)	8 (38.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (9.5%)	21 (6.5%)	323
2004 – 2008									
LSt	0 (0.0%)	4 (12.9%)	0 (0.0%)	9 (29.0%)	17 (54.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.2%)	31 (19.1%)	162
LSc	0 (0.0%)	16 (59.3%)	1 (3.7%)	3 (11.1%)	7 (25.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	27 (17.6%)	153
JLR	0 (0.0%)	9 (64.3%)	3 (21.4%)	2 (14.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (9.2%)	152
Sub-total	0 (0.0%)	29 (40.3%)	4 (5.6%)	16 (22.2%)	24 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.4%)	72 (15.4%)	467
Total	1 (1.0%)	36 (38.7%)	4 (4.3%)	18 (19.4%)	32 (34.4%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.0%)	93 (11.8%)	790

^a JLR = *Journal of Leisure Research*; LSc = *Leisure Sciences*; LSt = *Leisure Studies*

^b % of total theory articles

^c % of total articles