Researching Hospitality Management: It’s OK to use the ‘m’ word

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In recent years there has emerged an alternative view of hospitality education and research, which has been termed ‘hospitality studies’. Indeed, The Hospitality Review appears to be a major means of proselytising this viewpoint – see for instance Conrad Lashley’s editorial in January 2008 and Paul Lynch’s in April 2008. This school of thought proposes that hospitality as a concept is worthy of study in its own right and there is no doubt that this is the case. Of concern however, is the contention that this should be instead of studying hospitality management – for instance it has been suggested that there is a ‘tyranny of relevance’ within the discipline.

Why hospitality studies? Why now?

Given that hospitality management education in the UK has had a long and successful record over at least forty years – since the start of undergraduate degrees at Surrey, Strathclyde, Wales, and Ulster – why is it that hospitality management education and research is under attack? It seems there are a number of reasons for this:

- the development of tourism education and research and its juxtaposition with hospitality in many institutions;
- the merger or subsuming of hospitality management departments or schools into business schools;
- a paucity of funding for hospitality research from government, funding agencies and industry;
- the relatively limited scale of doctoral studies in the field;
- negative feedback on hospitality management research from the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), both within institutions who choose not to submit hospitality researchers and from the RAE itself;
- the relatively low ranking of hospitality research journals in league tables of academic journals;
- the push by academic managers to have hospitality researchers publish in generic management journals;
- the overall low perception of hospitality management as an academic discipline (the so-called ‘Lawrie Taylor effect’).

The combination of these factors has lead potentially to a spiral of decline in the field. The benchmarking of hospitality management with business studies has highlighted a significant difference in the academic qualifications of students studying on these programmes.

The comparison of hospitality management research, through the RAE and journal rankings, with both tourism and business has also highlighted hospitality’s relative position. At the same time there seem to be insurmountable barriers to improving hospitality management’s relative status – such as the lack of funding, difficulty with being published in the generic journals, and low perceived status within HE in general.

Meanwhile, the growth and success of tourism as an academic discipline appears to offer a
A model that addresses the hospitality management malaise. Tourism is an interdisciplinary subject that can be studied not just from a management perspective, but also from perspectives that have considerable academic status – social anthropology, economics, and psychology to name but a few.

As a result the field has well-developed theory, academic journals of repute, access to a wide source of funds from a variety of sources, and a gravitas that hospitality simply fails to achieve. The importance of tourism as a phenomenon is even recognised by the United Nations, through the World Tourism Organisation (WTO).

Hence over the last decade we have seen the emergence of the hospitality studies school of thought. Brotherton and Wood (2000) rehearse the arguments for this by suggesting that hospitality management is a flawed concept. They argue that for those that who make claims to scholarly seriousness in the field, a proper understanding of the concept of hospitality will be central to prescriptive pronouncements on strategy and technique in the management of the hospitality industry.

Likewise Lashley (2000) writes with one notable exception (Roy Wood’s The Sociology of Food 1995) hospitality academics have not engaged with sociological and cultural dimensions of human food and drink systems, nor with the role that consumption of food and drink plays in communicating the consumers’ position in the social world.

This has led to, and been encapsulated in, two books – In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical Perspectives and Debates (edited by Lashley and Morrison 2000) and Hospitality: A Social Lens (edited by Lashley, Lynch and Morrison 2006) – as well as a plethora of conference papers and articles, not least in The Hospitality Review.

**Why not management?**

We would accept that the hospitality studies perspective most certainly provides insights into the phenomenon of hospitality and may even provide relevant insights for managers in the industry. What we do not agree with is the advocacy of this approach at the expense of management-based research. Indeed, we would argue that you do not tackle the issues identified above by giving up management research. You do so by doing it better.

Management has some big ideas, sound theories and challenging concepts. In operations management, which is the field of management we know best, there are a number of theories related to production efficiency in manufacturing settings, configuring the flow of goods and infrastructure in a supply chain, and related to the performance of service operations. So management research is not solely commercial, and most certainly not “wedded to the practical and relevant” – to quote Lashley.

But even if it were, there is nothing wrong with that. In most professions there is a very thin line between theory and practice – for instance, between physics and engineering, biology and medicine, and chemistry and pharmacy. Our impression is that engineering, medical and pharmaceutical research are viewed as perfectly legitimate. And management research should be so viewed. Besides which, most people (especially students, sometimes) do not really understand what ‘theory’ is. They see it as somehow divorced from the real world, when instead nothing is further from the truth. Theory is embedded in reality because a theory is simply a generic explanation for specific real-world phenomena – at least if you are a positivist.
## Hospitality management research at Surrey

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### Figure 1
Service profit chain research at Surrey

In order to illustrate the range, nature and impact that hospitality management research can have, we would like to outline the current programme of such research being undertaken at Surrey. There are 25 full-time students registered for PhDs. They come from 15 different countries and over half are on scholarships from their respective governments, often because they lecture in hospitality management in universities in their home country. With so many students, we run a specific Hospitality Management Research Seminar every two weeks during the academic year, in addition to the University and Faculty classes and seminars designed to help doctoral students.

There are three broad streams of research, each of which overlap with each other. One stream is focused on consumer behaviour. The second is concerned with understanding the performance of hospitality firms, most especially in relation to aspects of the ‘service-profit chain’. And the third stream is concerned with internationalisation in the hospitality industry. Examples of the research being undertaken are now discussed.

Within the consumer-behaviour stream, we are interested in the consumer decision-making
process. Tatiya Jarumaneerat is researching how delegates select conferences to attend and has sought to identify the key factors that influence this choice. Meng-Mei Chen is researching how customers select hotels based on set formulation theory. She has created a simulation of an internet site and recorded on a second-by-second basis the behaviour of people as they select a hotel to stay at for a given scenario. Rania El-Haddad is also concerned with the hotel reservation process, but in terms of how the practice of revenue management may affect consumer attitudes and behaviour in the long term. Kyung Hee Pyun is researching the ‘servicescape’ of hotels – that is to say how the interior design of hotels may influence consumer attitudes and behaviours.

Within the service profit-chain stream, a number of studies have been concerned with different links in that chain, as illustrated in Figure 1. Edem Amenumey has researched how employees may be empowered so that they are better able to deliver quality service. Khaled Odeh is looking into the relationship between empowered employees and levels of service quality. Mohamed Afify is looking into the introduction of continuous improvement (CI) in a chain of foodservice outlets by conducting action research. He has begun by developing statistical process control (SPC) charts of key processes. Eventually he will explore the extent to which SPC and CI can be used in this setting to replace existing approaches to quality management, such as mystery shopping. Siti Jafaar is also concerned with researching customer satisfaction in restaurants, whereas Noor Zainol is investigating what happens when processes break down and service failure occurs. Finally, Dia Zeglat’s research focused on demonstrating the link between quality and profitability, and the nature of that link.

Finally, some examples from the internationalisation stream. Mohammed Saud is from the Maldives and he is interested in how management careers are influenced by a range of factors, most notably a person’s culture. Ibrahim Alsini is researching human-resource practices in his home country of Saudi Arabia and again is concerned with the issue of a diverse workforce. Nu Promsivapallop has researched the outsourcing policies and practices of hotels in Thailand and is interested in how this varies between international chains and Indigenous operators. Finally Joon-Hyeon Kim is researching the international supply chain of airlines and flight caterers in order to identify the factors that influence the adoption of sustainability within that chain.

Theory or practice?

As this review of Surrey research illustrates, hospitality management research is very diverse. Moreover it is not just applied and industry-related. Most of these studies will make a contribution to a better understanding of theory and/or methodology. For instance, Meng-Mei’s research will help managers understand better how consumers go about the hotel selection process. Theory suggests that this may be a two-step process through the formulation of a ‘consideration set’ (preliminary list of possible choices) and then a ‘choice set’ (a short list) from which a selection is finally made. Often, between these two stages, the consumer engages in a more detailed information search, since a key aspect of this theory is that the factors that influence the creation of the consideration set are not the same ones that influence the choice set. From an operator’s perspective it is therefore essential to advertise those features of the product that cause it to be considered, otherwise it has no chance of being chosen. The research challenge in investigating this decision-making process is that it all takes place inside the consumer’s head. Therefore there is limited evidence as to the validity of this theory. Meng-Mei’s approach of using a simulation on a laptop helps to overcome the methodological challenge and could make a major contribution to verifying or refuting this theory of consumer decision-making.
Other examples abound. Nu’s research into outsourcing explores two alternative theories: transaction cost analysis (TCA) and the resource-based view (RBV). His findings demonstrate that one of these – TCA - does not explain the outsourcing process in hotels. Dia’s research clearly demonstrates that the hypothesised link between consumer satisfaction and profit, first proposed in the service profit chain, clearly exists, but that this is not just because satisfaction increases revenues (and hence profits) but because it also lowers costs.

Certainly, in terms of dissemination of our research, we think in terms of both academe and practitioners. For the academic community our PhD students routinely present at conferences around the world and publish in refereed journals - both general management and hospitality-specific ones. But as regular readers of The Hospitality Review will recognise, we also write for the non-academic audience and publish articles in practitioner-oriented publications and present at industry conferences. And we do not regard this as a ‘tyranny of relevance’ – any more than an engineer, doctor or pharmacist would.

Where do we go from here?

In conclusion, at Surrey we research management in the context of the hospitality industry and we are proud to do so. This research informs the teaching that we do, so that our students understand why managers should, or should not, do certain things. Our research engages our students in critical thinking. They come to understand that real-world phenomena can be explained in different ways – through alternative theoretical perspectives; and be better understood through effective research designs. Hence they do not emerge as managerial clones but as thinking people.

Sometimes this is a problem for them and a challenge for industry. Senior managers in industry do not always want young managers to think for themselves and question the way things are done. Fortunately, there are enough forward-thinking firms out there where this is not the case, so all our graduates can get challenging and worthwhile jobs. And considering the debt burden carried by most graduates these days, having a job is very important – even if Lashley thinks this instrumental perspective is ‘superficial claptrap’.

References


2. It should be noted that this is a particularly British phenomenon. In the United States, where a significant proportion of hospitality management research is conducted, there is an authority and confidence about this not seen in the UK.


4. Lashley in Lashley and Morrison op. cit.