

Small Tourism Business: see research change and evolution

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to critically reflect on key knowledge contributions made to understanding the phenomenon of small tourism businesses. The purpose is to scrutinise change and evolution in perspectives and how this impacts on what is disclosed and what is not. Thus, conventionally accepted wisdom is challenged, indoctrinated presuppositions questioned, and research methodological advancements offered. This is achieved through a comprehensive review and critical-reflective analysis of key academic contributions spanning a period of approximately thirty-five years. Conclusions are drawn regarding future research directions focusing on four key themes: mythology v. reality; context myopia; disciplinary lenses; and research dimensions. Furthermore, informed by thorough analysis of the content of the paper, five guiding research principles provide an appropriate conclusion.

1. Introduction

When key contributions to small tourism business research are traced, it is possible to see change and evolution in approaches, perspectives and thought spanning approximately a period of thirty-five years. Thus, this paper takes time to reflect on the nature of that change and evolution and where the process may take researchers in the future. The tone of the paper is deliberate in being 'edgy', hoping to cultivate constructive dissent. To this end, research reviewed associated publications in an attempt to deconstruct the Olympic quality verbal gymnastics that aim to demonstrate theoretical discipline, discipline unity, and discipline application. In the process, care was taken to be on 'alert mode' in terms of listening for both the 'loudest voices' of those prolific in terms of publications, and picking up the subtle nuances of more 'whispering' contributions. Within a four point framework that emerges from Section 2 of the paper the significance of small tourism business, research methodology challenges and contradictions are explored. Issues and implications are discussed in Section 3. Thus, the ultimate objective of the paper is to interrogate past and present change and evolution relative to small tourism business research, and to map out future directions as a consequence. This is presented in Section 4. The importance of such a critical-reflective approach is emphasised by Page et al. (1999: 436) who state that: 'without an accurate knowledge base in this area, both the development of tourism businesses and the contribution that research can make to policy-making, planning and the future prosperity of tourism will be impeded through inadequate information and analysis of the needs of the small business sector'. Nearly a decade on from Page et al., it is proposed that this statement holds true and central in the contemporary endeavours of today's researchers, as supported by O'Gorman (2008) relative to the need to challenge personal and community presuppositions and pre-understandings of phenomena.

2. Small Tourism Business Significance

Any discussion relating to the significance of a phenomenon requires delineation to focus minds, clarify dimensions, and to be precise about what is included and what excluded. Consequently, small tourism business is delineated as confined within the sub-sectors of accommodation, hospitality and related services, and travel distribution systems (Rogerson, 2005). Therein, Morrison and Conway (2007) build on the comprehensive definitional analysis of Thomas (2000). They present a persuasive logic supporting fluidity, recognising the multiple realities of the milieu of small tourism business. Hence, a grounded definitional approach that draws on the various economic, social and tourism industry worlds in which owner-operators dwell is proposed. It employs what can be somewhat simplistically labelled as quantifiable and qualifiable 'anchors' respectively as summarised in Table 1. They can be assembled, as appropriate for any given context to reflect the most accurate combination of essential features that define an individual small tourism business. Furthermore, it is recognised that both sets of anchors can be explored and investigated by application of quantitative and/or qualitative research techniques as may be

necessary to satisfy particular research objectives.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Moving on from delineation, it is informative to note that small tourism businesses have a research history. For example, relevant contributions can be identified from: Pickering et al. (1971) reporting the findings of a Committee of Inquiry on the small firm in the hotel and catering industry; Kibedi's 1979 study of the development of tourism entrepreneurs in Canada; Stallibras (1980) investigating the profile of the small tourism business migrant to the coastal resort of Scarborough in the United Kingdom; Williams et al. (1989) exploring small firm formation and operating characteristics in the Cornish tourism industry; and Cohen (1989) who focused on the entrepreneurial behaviours of self-employed jungle guides involved in trekking tourism in Thailand. Indeed, as early as 1980, within the context of developing countries, Rodenberg was arguing confidentially that the common economic objectives of increased earnings, foreign exchange, investment, job opportunities and minimisation of adverse social and cultural effects might be best achieved through the promotion of small tourism businesses rather than large enterprises in the industry sector. This rhetoric should be 'date stamped' recognising that the industrial evolution of the sector configures a changing structure, conduct and performance profile in the 21st century.

The foregoing historical caveat is important, as, it can be said that these early authors contributed to shaping the small tourism business discourse(s) of today. They provided the architecture of widely accepted conventional wisdom that commonly informs contemporary research. The extent to which this may constrict knowledge development must be critically analysed. For example, their research combines to contribute to a dominant depiction of these enterprises as follows: potential source of economic and social benefits, the vast majority globally belong to the indigenous population, are family run, and the smallness of physical, employee and market size is consciously preserved by owner-managers (Page et al., 1999; Getz and Carlsen, 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Morrison, 2006; Hwang and Lockwood, 2006). In addition, Rogerson (2005: 628) states that: 'as an economic sector, one of the most distinguishing features of tourism is the overwhelming pre-eminence of small-scale entrepreneurship'. This positive spirit is countered by identification of generally bounded economic performance, weak business models (Zhang and Morrison, 2007), the 'fragility of smallness' (Morrison and Conway, 2007), that much of this activity exists within informal markets, and they represent a reservoir of hidden unemployment and/or under employment (Dahles, 2002). Despite this, Thomas (2000) asserts that while the relative importance of small tourism businesses in terms of employment capacity may be declining, they continue to endure and remain a significant and buoyant component of the industry sector. This is confirmed through a brief international review of statistics. Although different Standard Industry Classification (SIC) approaches contribute a degree of confusion, the following was found. Under the SIC of 'Accommodation and Food' Canada shows 69% of businesses have less than 100 employees in 2007 (Industry Canada, 2008). In the USA, using a 'Leisure and Hospitality' SIC the corresponding statistic is 61%, and shows a 2.14% growth in employment over the period 1999-2007 (SBA, 2008). In Australia, under SIC 'Accommodation, Cafes and Restaurants' it was identified that 98.5% of cafes and restaurants have less than 50 employees but generate only 80% of total income (ABS, 2007). Finally, the profile change over ten years in the UK indicates a movement towards higher numbers of employing enterprises under the 'Hotels and Restaurants' SIC showing 36.3% reducing to 22.4% for 0 employment between 1997 to 2007, and a shift from 62.6% in the 1-49 employee bracket to 76% in the same period (BERR, 2008). Various, these examples suggest that numeric dominance endures, there is evidence of capacity to generate employment, albeit modest, economic sub-optimality is generalised, and industry structure shifts are evident.

Furthermore, the significance placed on small tourism businesses perpetuates across developed, developing, and transition economies internationally. Such as evidenced within literature emanating from within the varied contexts of: indigenous houseboat tourism in the State of Kerala in India (Kokkranikal and Morrison, 2002); industry structure-agency tourism dynamic within the village of Murter in Croatia

(Ateljevic and Doorne, 2003); the Chinese travel agents sector following China's entry to the World Trade Organisation in 2005 (Zhang and Morrison, 2007); post-apartheid South African policy prioritisation of small, medium and micro enterprise development towards transforming the ownership structure from white domination and poverty effect reduction (Rogerson, 2005); and farm tourism operators in Australia (Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007). Thus, it would appear that a vibrant small tourism business population is seen as a useful agent, particularly by political stakeholders, in effecting a range of transformation processes aimed at various political, economic, social, and industry transition requirements. For example, Vyakarnam (2003) summarises associated aims as including: tackle poverty and social inclusion; involve people in developing their communities; build a strong and competitive economy with a balanced mix of businesses and jobs; develop satisfaction with a specific geographic location as a place to live, work and visit; protect and improve a distinct natural environment; and support and encourage young people in the community.

Furthermore, following close analysis of associated literature, four points and key questions of significance to the aims of this paper emerge:

1. *Mythology v. Reality*: The academic rationale for focus on the small tourism business phenomenon is based on its supposed power as an agent to positively achieve objectives of an economic, social, and cultural nature. To what extent has this established a small tourism business 'mythology' rather than a contemporary 'reality'?
2. *Context Myopia*: The academic rationale supporting Point 1 is promoted as holding true within the diverse contexts presented in developed, developing and transition economies. Is research guilty of myopia as regards revealing the differences, as well as the similarities, that interplay in different economic, social and cultural contexts relative to small tourism business activity?
3. *Disciplinary Lenses*: The small tourism business sector holds a significant attraction in terms of drawing the attention of a growing community of academics, applying various disciplinary references points. What different perspectives are revealed through the various lenses and how can they be captured to inform a more holistic understanding of the 'reality' of the phenomenon?
4. *Research Dimensions*: Profiles of small tourism businesses are complex and multi-faceted. Multiple research dimensions remain camouflaged under a convenient but superficial, generalised label. What research dimensions are of significance towards making a contribution to a deeper and more holistic multi-dimensional understanding of the small tourism business sector?

The purpose of isolating these four points is to provide an illustrative justification to support a call for a timely pause and reflection upon the current state of small tourism business research; to stimulate questioning regarding how knowledge is constructed, who is involved in its creation, what is accepted and what is not, and why this may be the case. The aim of this process is to contemplate more deeply associated issues, challenges and contradictions, and to map out future research directions. Good examples of the beneficial outcomes of such a process relative to family businesses in tourism can be found in the works of Getz and Carlsen (2005), Getz et al. (2004) and Lynch et al (2009). Thus, the purpose is not to infer that previous research contributions do not hold academic integrity. It is considered as a commentary on the stage in the life-cycle of small tourism business research whereby it has reached a commendable level of maturity in terms of surface understanding and knowledge, and is positioned now to make further advances.

3. Research Issues

Within the contextualisation presented in the previous two sections, Section 3 continues exploration and debate framed within the construct of the four points and questions delineated above.

3.1 Mythology v. Reality

A growing volume of oft aired, generalised assertions that can find their match in a contradiction have emerged from associated research activity. In their various ways, they have become embedded as accepted wisdom, constituting and informing small tourism business knowledge, a selection of such are illustrated in Table 2. They provide examples of conflicting 'knowledge' relative to characteristics and performance dimensions said to be associated with economic, indigenous sustainability, entrepreneurship, decision making and world context. This alerts researchers to the need to critically analyse and validate research findings that have, over time, become embedded, configuring, constituting and informing small tourism business knowledge (Zhang and Morrison, 2007). If knowledge is the never-ending pursuit of 'truth' then, based on the material presented in Table 2 there appear to be various truths at work. The challenge is to undertake research activity that serves to distinguish mythology from reality.

(Insert Table 2 here)

2. Context Myopia:

The academic rationale supporting section 3.1 is promoted as holding true within the diverse contexts presented in developed, developing and transition economies. However, Siu (2000) notes that there have been few empirical studies concerned with small businesses in general in developing and transition economies. Tsiu-Auch (2003) supports this by emphasising that while numerous ideas, theories and perspectives pertaining to understanding and knowledge of small businesses have been developed over the previous three decades they reflect developed economic contexts, and contain predominately Western and North American bias. There has been a range of tourism related literature contributing to diminishing this bias. For example based on research in, Thailand (Cohen, 1989), Indonesia (Dahles and Bras, 1999; Dahles, 2002; Hampton, 2003), Croatia (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2002), India (Kokkranikal and Morrison, 2002), South Africa (Rogerson, 2004; 2005); and China (Zhang and Morrison, 2007). As worthy as these contributions are, it is argued that researchers need to guard against context myopia for... 'If the world is to survive and flourish, we all need to know more about the differences rather than concentrating on the similarities' (Joynt and Warner, 1996:3). One illustration of finding differences is that of Zhang and Morrison (2007) investigating small travel agents in China. They found openness to business networking, collaboration and cooperation to be one of the most significant findings and may be taken to reflect a central concept in Chinese society and norms of business systems which are based on social organisation and preference of *guanxi*. This refers to the use of personalised networks of influence.

3.3 Disciplinary Lenses

In part, the issues raised in sections 3.1 and 3.2 can be explained with recourse to the range of disciplinary lenses and associated research methodologies applied by academics to provide focus and structure to their research endeavours. For example, from analysis of the literature reviewed these were found to include sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics and geography, alongside related fields of study, such as, rural sociology, entrepreneurship, tourism, gender and family studies, small, micro and medium-size enterprises, regional development and sustainability. It is therefore not necessarily an issue of academics generating the 'wrong truth', biased world views, or that one research methodological approach is less scientifically rigorous than another. What is important is to be explicit about which lens is used to reveal which version of the truth, applying what research methodologies. Thus, in communicating findings researchers require to be scrupulous in declaring their disciplinary lens, context focus, and methodology. It therefore follows that those involved in the critical analysis of said literature should be meticulous in ensuring context and disciplinary 'bias' leading to the version of the truth are not lost. The

challenge is to apply precision in order to contribute to dispelling confusion, to reveal the multiple 'truths', and critical debunking of myths, embodied in the various 'realities' of the small tourism business milieu.

3.4 *Research Dimensions*

It became apparent in Section 2 of this paper that the more knowledge that is constructed concerned with small tourism business the more is revealed about what remains unknown, and that a move to research below the surface level is recommended. This stance is supported by many respected within the tourism academic community (for example, Page et al., 1999; Thomas, 2000; Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Hampton, 2003; Getz and Petersen, 2004; Morrison, 2006; Morrison and Conway, 2007). Russell and Faulkner (2001: 557) add weight to this discussion in arguing that: 'simplifying assumptions needs to be cast aside and the reductionist model should be replaced by more holistic approaches'. A literature review and analysis has yielded key research dimensions (see Table 3) that provide examples of focus needed to penetrate more comprehensively the social, economic and cultural worlds of small tourism businesses through the eyes and voices of the operators as conveyed in their life narratives (Hampton, 2003; Rae, 2004). The research challenge in this respect is in terms of geographically, physically and psychologically accessing these worlds, resourcing time and cost heavy research methodologies, and sustaining research for durations longer than a 'snap-shot' (Weber, 2006).

(Insert Table 3 here)

4. **Conclusions and Future Research**

Through the adoption of a critical-reflective approach, this paper has consolidated and scrutinised a comprehensive range of key academic contributions to the body of knowledge that informs understanding of small tourism businesses, revealing the nature and extent of change, evolution, agreement and dissent. Where this leads future research/researchers is now explored and conclusions presented.

Clarification and delineation of the phenomenon that forms the focus of the paper was guided by a grounded definitional approach in recognition of the multiplicity of small business 'worlds' that exist under the banner of the 'tourism industry'. The idea of assembling a customised definition as appropriate to the specifics of a particular research agenda, from the range of definitional anchors presented in Table 1, may be contrary and somewhat irritating to the disciplined academic psyche. However, rejection of this approach for that of a more universal, tidy definition would be akin to 'googling' using an inaccurate search query. Thousands of findings are generated but none make any significant contribution to knowledge.

Also evolving from the literature review were four points and key questions which framed and focused further exploration and debate progressing understanding of research implications. Conclusions to inform future research directions can be drawn from these as follows:

- *Mythology v. Reality*: Table 2 presents assertions and contradictions as to the social, political and economic contributions associated with small tourism businesses. Clearly, the dichotomous nature of the literature has been purposefully selected for impact. However, what it does demonstrate is the academic duty of critical analysis and never-ending curiosity, in the pursuit of 'truth', or at least towards understanding why various versions of knowledge associated with small tourism business exist. For example, reasons may be linked to a researcher's disciplinary stance, research project objectives, research methodology employed, research 'paymaster' remit, etc.
- *Context Myopia*: Researchers need to guard against the danger of becoming myopic in terms of viewing the world through Western and North American derived versions of 'truth'. It is important

to regularly interrogate world views held and rigorously challenge basis for interpretation and knowing. It is important not to be guilty of academic laziness that is content with the identification of surface similarities, and to retain intellectual energy that endlessly pursues and opens eyes to the differences of economic, social and political context.

- *Disciplinary Lenses*: That researchers arrive at different versions of the ‘truth’ is not to imply that one is right and one wrong. Indeed to explain it in such a way is unhelpful and deflects from the core issue. Critical analysis of literature from an academic perspective is about more than the words on the page. At the core is for the researcher to understand how a version of the ‘truth’ has been reached, what disciplinary and research methodology journey has been embarked upon, and within what context. The disciplinary and research methodology circumstance, values and beliefs of the originator can be then taken into account to provide a more balance and rounded understanding of findings.
- *Research Dimensions*: Those presented in Table 3 are clearly not exhaustive and should be taken as illustration of the richness of small tourism business as a research focus. They begin to map out a multi-dimensional ‘jigsaw’ puzzle that is waiting to be completed by future researchers to delve below the surface and piece together a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. In considering appropriate research methodologies, it is apparent from the nature of the dimensions that quantitative, reductionist types of approaches do not obviously lend themselves to revealing aspects, such as, values, meanings, attitudes that condition behaviours, for example, associated with lifestyle, migration, gender and family. This moves attention to qualitative methodologies incumbent as they are with human, financial and expertise resourcing. Furthermore, within the current ‘politics’ of various Research Assessment Exercises internationally the aspect of productivity has relevance as qualitative methodologies tend to take more time to apply, analyse and convert to quality peer-reviewed journal papers.

In conclusions, this paper has reviewed and analysed past and present research issues and methods as regards the significance of small tourism businesses. This reveals that they endure, are numerically dominant, and represent a key distinguishing feature of the industry sector. Furthermore, regardless of the fragility and unorthodox nature of their associated business models, individually and collectively they are overwhelmingly perceived as powerful agents of social, economic and political transformation, within multiple contexts internationally. Indeed, the field has been confirmed as a rich and fertile site for research activity. As per the aim of the paper, it has provided a pause to reflect on the current state of small tourism business research, and to contemplate associated issues, challenges and contradictions. The objective is to contribute to advancement and enrichment of the value of research activity and outputs. Thus, this paper concludes by mapping out five guiding research principles that are drawn from the foregoing as presented in Table 4.

(Insert Table 4 here)

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|Table 1: Small Tourism Business Definitional Anchors

Quantifiable	Qualifiable	
Number of employees & family members	Business orientation & motivation	
Physical facilities & services provided	Management style & structure	
Financial investment & statistics	Ownership configuration	
Market share & level of operation	Service orientation & commitment	
Economic rewards	Social rewards	
Source: Morrison and Conway (2007: 49)		

Table 2: Small Tourism Business Assertions and Contradictions		
	Assertion	Contradiction
Economic	Benefits include satisfaction of economic objectives, such as, increased earnings, foreign exchange, investment, and job opportunities (Rodenburg, 1980; Wanhill, 2000)	The dominance of life-style owners, generally motivated by non-economic goals will not produce many jobs, nor necessarily lead to industrial competitiveness and community stability (Shaw and Williams, 1997, 1998, 2004; Getz and Petersen, 2005; Morrison et al, 2008; Carlsen and Morrison, 2008)
Indigenous sustainability	Potential to benefit indigenous communities, channel economic benefits and represent one strategy for sustainability-oriented tourism development (Kokkranikal and Morrison, 2002, Irvine and Anderson, 2004)	Attract migrant investors who have different characteristics to those in the local population and may impact stressfully on communities in terms of problems arising from the likes of land prices, social organisation and cultural values (Kamsma and Bras, 2002)
Entrepreneurship	Not renowned for exhibiting high degrees of entrepreneurial behaviour with many remaining micro in size (Lynch, 1998)	Provide a valuable contribution in embodying an entrepreneurial spirit and innovation that has the potential to significantly contribute to the vitality of place and experience within tourism destinations (Morrison, 2006; Carlsen et al, 2008)
Decision-making	Economic performance is constrained by decision making based on highly personalised criteria, such as, chosen lifestyles, work-life values, attachment to property and/or place (Dewhurst and Horobin, 1998; Morrison et al., 1999; Hall and Rusher, 2004)	Conscious rejection of decision-making informed by economic, corporate frames of references enables innovative flair to create niche market-oriented products (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Russell and Faulkner, 2001)
'World' context	Industry accessibility allows for labour displaced from declining industries, with accumulated human capital to choose how they wish to fit into the labour market (Vaugeois and Rollins,	Locals become involved in tourism out of economic necessity, selling what ever the tourist wants, an attitude likened to what sociologists define in terms of prostitution (Dahles and Bras, 1999;

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|2007)

|Dahles, 2002)

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Table 3: Small Tourism Business Worlds: Research Dimensions	
Dimension	Authors
Value positions: with respect to culture, organisation of the enterprises, market orientation and industry organisation	Dahles (2002), Atlejevic & Doorne (2003), Getz et al. (2004), Mottiar (2007)
Meanings: ascribe by operators revealed through narrative of individual life stories/ social histories	Dahles & Bras (1999), Page, Forer & Lawton (1999), Getz & Carlsen (2000), Hampton (2003), Atlejevic & Doorne (2003), Wilson (2006), Mottiar (2007),
Gender & Family: issues and features, incorporating cultural factors that may modify behaviours	Atlejevic & Doorne (2003), Getz & Petersen (2004), Getz & Carlsen (2005)
Spatial Contingencies: as affecting the development of entrepreneurial activity	Shaw & Williams (1998), Russell & Faulkner (2001), Ioannides & Petersen (2003), Mottiar (2007)
Multiple Contexts: the phenomenon in developed, developing and transition economies and societies	Dahles & Bras (1999), Page, Forer & Lawton (1999), Morrison et al. (2001), Kokkranikal & Morrison (2002), Rogerson (2004)
Lifestyle Construct: multiple supply and demand meanings and contexts	Morrison, Baum & Andrew (2001), Ateljevic & Doorne (2000), Hampton (2003), Getz & Petersen (2004), Wilson (2006), Morrison et al (2008), Carlsen & Morrison (2008)
Networks: of a kinship nature within economically and socially marginalised groups	Cohen (1989), Dahles & Bras (1999), Kokkranikal & Morrison (2002), Dahles (2002), Ateljevic & Doorne (2003), Getz & Carlsen (2005), Wilson (2006), Zhang & Morrison (2007), Mottiar (2007)
'Alternative': conscious and deliberate rejection of economically orthodox and conventional business models	Ateljevic & Doorne (2001), Morrison & Teixeira (2004), Wilson (2006),
Pro-poor Tourism: addressed through small-scale entrepreneurship	Cohen (1989); Dahles & Bras (1999), Wanhill (2000), Sharpley (2001), Dahles (2002), Hampton (2003), Rogerson (2004; 2005)
Peripherality: place, economy, society, race, career, markets, masses etc.	Stallibrass (1980), Cohen (1989), Dahles & Bras (1999), Morrison et al. (2001), Sharpley (2001), Kokkranikal & Morrison (2002), Dahles (2002), Irvine & Anderson (2004), Getz & Petersen (2004), Rogerson (2004; 2005), Wilson (2006), Morrison (2006), Vaugeois & Rollins (2007), Morrison & Conway (2007)
Migrant Entrepreneurs: demographic profiles, and relationship within and to their host environment	Getz & Carlsen (2000), Richards & Hall (2002), Kamsma & Bras (2002), Vaugeois & Rollins (2007), Nuntsu et al. (2003), McGehee & Kim (2004), Weber, 2006, Ollenburg & Buckley (2007)

Table 4: Future Research Directions: small tourism businesses	
1	Adopt grounded definitional approaches in recognition of the multiplicity of small business 'worlds' that exist under the banner of the 'tourism industry'
2	Critically analyse literature to include understanding of disciplinary and research methodology travelled to arrive at the particular version of the 'truth' presented
3	Respect that different disciplinary lenses will generate different versions of the 'truth' and find ways to capture these complimentary world views to enhance knowledge
4	Resist the attraction of accepting homogenised similarities and retain a curiosity as to differences within national and international social, political and economic contexts
5	Pursue research dimensions that reflect the reality as defined by small tourism businesses themselves, applying research methodologies that are attuned to a humanistic approach