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## Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Tourism Research : Scientific Identity of Polish Scholars of Tourism

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**ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS  
OF TOURISM RESEARCH.  
SCIENTIFIC IDENTITY OF POLISH SCHOLARS OF TOURISM**

**Abstract**

The aim of this article is to present ontological and epistemological foundations of tourism research based on the international literature and in the light of the results of a survey on the scientific identity of Polish scholars of tourism. An appropriate empirical research project was based on ontological and epistemological assumptions concerning: 1) the object of tourism study; 2) specific research problems related to it; 3) possibilities of solving them by different scientific disciplines; 4) the methodological position of tourism research within the system of sciences. The article consists of: 1) a theoretical discussion and an overview of previous research and selected literary sources; 2) a presentation of the results of author's empirical studies on scientific identity carried out among Polish researchers of tourism; 3) conclusions related to the issues addressed in the paper.

The main findings are based on the academia's views (discussed example of the Polish scholars and the experience of the international debate from the 1990s–2000s). They are divided and, so far, it has not been able to come up with a common, coherent answer to the question concerning the cognitive and formal status of the contemporary studies on tourism. According significant part of representatives of Polish scholars, they declare support for the idea of the autonomization of Tourism Sciences. On the other hand they still consider themselves representatives of the 'traditional' scientific disciplines and they mainly base on the paradigms developed within them.

**Keywords:** ontological and epistemological aspects of tourism research; scientific identity, Polish scholars of tourism

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to present ontological and epistemological foundations of tourism research in the light of the results of a survey on scientific identity of Polish scholars of tourism. An appropriate empirical research project was based on certain ontological and epistemological assumptions concerning: 1) the object of tourism study; 2) its specific research problems; 3) possibilities of solving them by different scientific disciplines; 4) the methodological position of tourism research within the system of sciences. The article consists of: 1) a theoretical discussion and an overview of previous research and selected literary sources; 2) a presentation of the results of author's empirical studies on scientific identity carried out among Polish researchers of tourism; 3) conclusions related to the issues addressed in the paper.

The exchange of different views on the ontological and epistemological aspects of tourism research has been going on for many decades now. One could therefore ask: Is it necessary to start a new discussion? Or should we rather focus on the present ideas connected with contemporary tourism problems? The answer to the second question could be yes, provided that previous and already existing theoretical bases for research proved to be sufficient for present needs. The scientific and methodological reality, however, shows that we are still far from a compromise in the discussion of tourism basic notions, concepts and paradigms. This situation, it seems, results in a stagnation in the field of tourism research methodology and the lack of a mature paradigm that is necessary for this research. Tourism is rarely recognised as an autonomus scientific discipline, even among scholars who specialize in these issues (Hoerner, Sicart, 2003; Leiper, 2000; Tribe, 1997). A wider discussion on this subject was presented by Butowski (2011) and Sutheeshna Babu (retrived 15.01.2014). On the other hand, most scholars acknowledge the fact that tourism as a kind of contemporary human activity develops very quickly (both in quantitative and qualitative aspects). New associated phenomena and problems arise constantly. It is quite evident that the theoretical foundations, methodological approaches and applied tools that we have at our disposal are insufficient to cope with these challenges (Ritchie, Sheenan & Timur, 2008; Farrel, Twinning-Ward, 2004; Shuang, Tribe & Chambers, 2013).

## **1. Ontological and epistemological foundations of the studies on tourism**

Undoubtedly, every field of research, the studies on tourism included, is characterised in terms of methodology by, among others, its ontological and epistemological conditionings (Chojnicki, 2005; Lipiec, 2008; Maciołek, 2002). At the same time, these conditionings constitute a necessary basis for empirical research, which is especially popular in studying tourism. Unfortunately, an analysis of the output of the studies on tourism suggests that recent years faced a quite considerable regress in this regard. Lists of scientific publications or an overview of the topics of conferences testify to this state of affairs. It is quite apparent that the issues related to the methodology are in minority and most of the publications present results of empirical research projects that are usually not concerned with theoretical deliberations. The peak of the academia's interest in the theoretical and methodological aspects of the studies of tourism was the 1990s and the 2000s. At that time, scholars quite vividly exchanged opposing views on these issues, i.a. on the pages of *Annals of Tourism Research* (Botterill, 2001; Butler, 1989; Comic, 1989; Dann, Nash and Pearce, 1988; Echtner and Jamal, 1997; 2004; Graburn and Jafari, 1991; Jafari, 1989; Jafari and Aaser, 1988; Jovicic, 1988; Leiper, 1990; Leiper, 2000; Pearce, 1993; Pearce and Butler, 1993). It seems, however, that this discussion has recently faded out. It is alarming as it suggests that the current scientific interest of the studies on tourism is rather in the practical aspects of the phenomenon. Simultaneously, the scarcity of the in-depth discussions on theoretical foundations of the studies on tourism becomes increasingly visible. It is but these theoretical discussions which should be laying the cognitive and methodological foundations for the empirical analyses.

Treating these premises as the vantage point, the author of this article would like to propose a theoretically ordered program of basic research (meta-research) on tourism. The starting point of the article is the ontological approach, which postulates searching for answers to basic questions, such as: what is tourism? what is the essence of tourism? which of its traits are constitutive, which are consecutive, and which are accidental? what should constitute the object of the studies on tourism? what should be the scope and the ways of doing research? In the second stage of the article, the author would like to adopt an epistemological perspective, thus paying more attention to the opportunities and directions of scientific cognition of tourism – within the scope previously defined on the ontological level. To this end, the author suggests (as a starting point) a creative application of methodo-

logical outputs of various scientific disciplines, for which tourism constitutes a diverse object of research.

Such a research approach will be possible and will give expected results only if it manages to integrate various traditions for the needs of the study on tourism. By such an integration of methodological outputs, the studies on tourism should arrive at a new level of methodological maturity and acquire their own scientific identity. Chojnicki (2005), using Bunge's (1983) division of sciences according to the functional criterion, places the studies on tourism in the category of the empirical sciences of descriptive character. Further, he classifies them in the subcategory of social sciences realised in the moderately empirical model. At the same time, Chojnicki admits that the studies on tourism are very complex. This complexity occurs on the two levels: a) empirical – natural and social; b) social, including i.a. economic, geographical and sociological, etc. Finally, the studies on tourism were also classified within another category – of applied sciences which rely on the basic knowledge of social and natural sciences considered in the practical aspect.

It seems, however, that one drawback of the classification suggested by Chojnicki is the level of analysis, which is too high to define the place of the studies on tourism (taking into consideration their diversity) in the system of sciences. This fact prompted the author to try to define the epistemological situation of the studies on tourism on a more detailed level, i.e. that of particular sub-disciplines which deal with the issues of tourism. To this end, the author formulated several basic questions, which should constitute framework for further deliberation (based on: Kuciński, 2010): how can and how should tourism be studied? what are researchers' interests? what research problems do they see and how do they verbalize them? how do they verbalize research theses and how do they shape hypotheses? how do they interpret results that they get? It seems that the major epistemological problem in the studies on tourism is the complexity and diversity of answers that researchers from different fields would give to the above-mentioned questions. This results i.a. from the diversity of theories and research concepts, both original and adopted, that are applied in studying tourism (Bogucki, Woźniak, 1997; Jójczyk, 2009; Kowalczyk, 2001; Kurek, 2008; Przeclawski, 1997), (Table 1). In this context, one needs to ask once again the epistemologically fundamental question about the possibilities of integration of these outputs, even at a high level of generalisation. It seems that a positive answer to this question is a necessary condition for further methodological progress in the study of tourism.

Table 1

## Selected theories and research conceptions employed in tourism research

Economic sciences and related	Economic base theory (staple theory) and tourist functions conceptions
	Theory of tourism development (based on dependence theory)
	Formal and informal sector concept
	Theory of endogenous development (especially on regional level)
	Cascading flow theory
	Theory of network development (based on cluster theory)
	Theory of polarisation in regional development
Geographical sciences with particular emphasis on tourism geography	Central place theory and Periphery theory
	Tourist area life cycle (TALC)
	Theory of tourist space
	Concept of tourism business district
	Concept of tourism urbanization
	Concept of territorial recreation systems
	Concept of integrated tourist resort
	Concept of tourism region
	Concept of tourist landscape
Sociology, cultural anthropology	Theory of fun
	Theory of compensation
	Theory of conflict and social communication
	Concept of tourism as an encounter of culture
	Concept of self-destructive tourism
Environmental science	Concept of carrying capacity
	Concept of limits of acceptable change (LAC)
	Concept of spatial zoning
	Concept of limited availability
Others including interdisciplinary approaches	Concept of sustainable tourism

Source: personal findings.

## 2. In search of the scientific identity of tourism research

When we speak of a scientific identity (both in the ontological and in the epistemological context) of the studies on tourism, we should search for answers to the following research questions: 1) what should constitute the research object of the studies on tourism (ontological perspective)? 2) in what wider context and aspect is this research object located? 3) in what way is research conducted and what do we want to learn? (epistemological perspective) 4) with which scientific tradition do we identify ourselves? 5) within what wider paradigms do we conduct our research? 6) the output of which scientific discipline enriches the results of our research?

A discussion on these issues can begin with a review of a representative diagnostic survey conducted within Polish academia. The group of the interviewers consisted of 85 tourism scholars of various age, profile, experience and academic degree. They were representatives of the main scientific disciplines which deal with the issues connected with tourism in Poland (Table 2).

Table 2

Structure of respondents by academic specialisations, by academic degree and by age (%)

Respondents by academic specialisations	Economics	Geographic sciences	Physical Culture & Sport	Other disciplines
Part of the sample	32	28	21	19

Respondents by academic degree	MA	Ph.D.	Associate Professor	Full Professor
Part of the sample	12	54	25	9

Respondents by age	<35 years of age	ages 36–50	ages 50+
Part of the sample	11	26	63

Source: personal findings.

The survey was intended to answer questions concerning: 1) the settlement of the studies on tourism within various scientific paradigms; 2) relationships of tourism scholars with various scientific traditions (scientific fields and disciplines); 3) the status and the methodological maturity of the studies on tourism. The author assumed that the answers given by the respondents should help to

define the scientific identity of tourism scholars. The results of the survey allowed the author to make certain significant observations:

1. Scientific paradigms in the studies on tourism
  - a) the majority of respondents (62%) claimed that they conducted their research projects within paradigms of traditional scientific disciplines; however, 24% of the respondents stated that they used specific paradigms of the studies on tourism (14% did not express an opinion on this matter);
  - b) it seems, also, that the bigger the theoretical output of a given discipline, the bigger its attachment to its paradigms (Economics – 84%, Geography – 63%) – Table 3;

Table 3

Scientific paradigms in studies on tourism by disciplines (%)

Disciplines	Traditional paradigms	Specific tourism studies paradigms	Uncertain
Economics	84	13	3
Geography	63	27	10
Physical Culture & Sport	36	41	23
Other disciplines	47	23	30

Source: personal findings.

- c) the group of full professors (40%) and Ph.D. (29%) holders was relatively the most eager to recognise a new paradigm of the studies on tourism; the representatives of associate professors claimed in majority (66%) that their research projects on tourism were conducted within paradigms of the traditional disciplines, the representatives of master's degree declared the highest number of the "uncertain" responses (Table 4).

Table 4

Scientific paradigms in studies on tourism by scientific degrees (%)

Scientific degree	Traditional Paradigms	Specific tourism studies paradigms	Uncertain
Master's	58	8	34
Ph.D.	60	29	11
Associate Professor	66	19	15
Full Professor	60	40	0

Source: personal findings.



2. Tourism scholars and their relationships with various scientific traditions
  - a) a slight majority of the respondents claimed that when doing research on tourism they felt representatives of their mother disciplines (51%), but 40% of the respondents stated that they represented Tourism Sciences, 10% declared the “uncertain” responses;
  - b) it seems that the scholars who originate from the disciplines which have been dealing with tourism research for a longer period of time (i.a. Economics, Geography, Physical Culture & Sport) are relatively more eager to name themselves representatives of Tourism Sciences than scholars from other disciplines (Table 5);

Table 5

Researchers of tourism as representatives of traditional disciplines  
or Tourism Sciences by represented discipline (%)

Scientific disciplines	Traditional disciplines	Tourism Sciences	Uncertain
Economics	53	47	0
Geography	39	43	18
Physical Culture & Sport	48	48	4
Other disciplines	67	11	22

Source: personal findings.

- c) it also seems that there is a certain correlation between the academic degree and the eagerness to call oneself a representative of Tourism Sciences; the higher the academic degree of a person (full professors, associate professors), the more eager the person to call himself or herself a representative of Tourism Sciences (Table 6);

Table 6

Researchers of tourism as representatives of traditional disciplines  
or Tourism Sciences by scientific degrees (%)

Scientific degree	Traditional disciplines	Tourism Sciences	Uncertain
Master's	50	33	17
Ph.D.	54	35	11
Associate Professor	48	48	4
Full Professor	40	60	0

Source: personal findings.

3. The status of Tourism Sciences as an autonomous scientific discipline (the term 'Tourism Sciences' is used in this article in the broad sense, i.e. encompassing both the theoretical and the applied research on tourism (Ritchie, Sheehan and Timur, 2008).
- a) quite apparent majority (49%) of the respondents stated that the Tourism Sciences deserved the status of an autonomous scientific discipline; 33% of the respondents held the opposing view, remaining 18% had not a clear opinion on this matter;
  - b) the relatively bigger number (40%) of opponents of the autonomy of Tourism Sciences were the respondents who held a Full Professor's degree (but it is worth mentioning that almost half of them declared "yes" for tourism as an autonomous discipline), the proponents were representatives of holders of the remaining degrees (Table 7);

Table 7

Tourism Sciences as an autonomous discipline by scientific degrees (%)

Scientific degree	Yes	No	Uncertain
Master's	92	6	2
Ph.D.	48	35	17
Associate Professor	52	28	20
Full Professor	40	40	20

Source: personal findings.

- c) the majority of the scholars who had shorter experience with research on tourism were in favour of the separation of Tourism Sciences as an autonomous discipline; the scholars with longer experience were equally divided between the two options (Table 8);

Table 8

Tourism Sciences as an autonomous discipline by years of experience in researching tourism (%)

Experience in tourism research	Yes	No	Uncertain
<10 years	65	16	19
>10 years	41	41	18

Source: personal findings.

The higher the age, the higher the percentage of those who oppose the autonomization of Tourism Sciences (Table 9).

Table 9

Tourism Sciences as an autonomous scientific discipline by age of researcher (%)

Age of researcher	Yes	No	Uncertain
<35 years of age	45	18	36
ages 36–50	44	37	19
ages 50+	51	33	16

Source: personal findings.

The results of the survey project concerning the scientific identity of the Polish tourism scholars allow for a formulation of more general conclusions:

1. A quite significant majority of the respondents (62%) claimed that they conducted their research projects on tourism within various paradigms of the 'traditional' scientific disciplines. Only  $\frac{1}{4}$  expressed the opinion that they based on specific paradigms which belong to the studies on tourism, thus acknowledging the existence of an autonomous discipline called Tourism Sciences. Such results may suggest that this new discipline called Tourism Sciences is at the so called pre-paradigm stage, which is characteristic of new emerging scientific disciplines (see next chapter).
2. At the same time, a slight majority of the respondents (51%) considered themselves representatives of the traditional scientific disciplines, however as much as 40% of the respondents were ready to call themselves representatives of the Tourism Sciences. It is worth noticing that the percentage of those ready to call themselves representatives of the Tourism Sciences was much higher than the percentage of those who were ready to acknowledge the existence of specific paradigms of the studies on tourism.
3. Finally, almost half of the respondents were ready to formally recognise Tourism Sciences as an autonomous scientific discipline (Tourism Sciences do not have that status in the Polish system of sciences); nearly  $\frac{1}{3}$  held the opposing view.
4. The analysis reveals a certain inconsistency in the responses of the informants regarding the scientific (and methodological) identity and the formal status of Tourism Sciences. On the one hand, they quite clearly advocate the autonomy of Tourism Sciences, on the other hand, they seem to be

attached to the paradigms of other disciplines of which they themselves feel representatives (Figure 1).

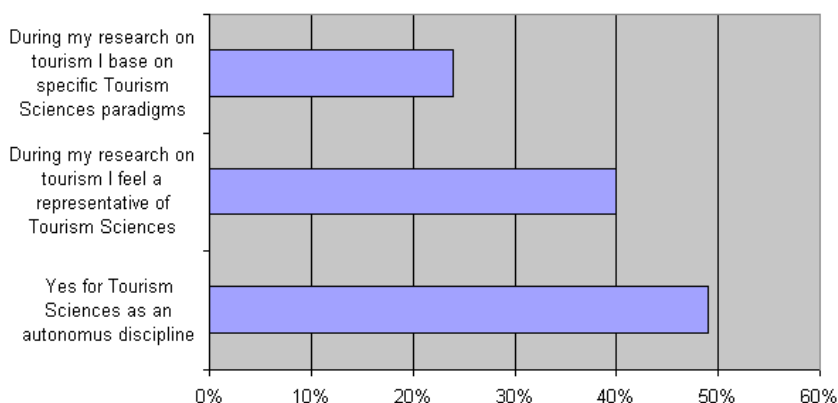


Fig. 1. Controversies on scientific identity and formal status of Tourism Sciences  
Source: personal findings.

### 3. In search of a new scientific paradigm for the studies on tourism

In the literature of the studies on tourism the term “scientific paradigm” is used in a wide variety of contexts, which hampers understanding of it and allows for a free interpretation (Alejziak, 2008). Therefore, throughout this article, the term ‘scientific paradigm’ will be used according to the view of T. Kuhn (1996), who introduced it to the international literature. The creator of the paradigm model of the development of science defined “scienfitic paradigm” as: 1) a set of theories acknowledged by most scholars of a given scientific field; and 2) a set of research problems which are sufficiently attractive for scholars and which can be investigated in the light of the acknowledged theories. In this way, Kuhn assigned to a scientific theory two functions: 1) of a tool used to solve research problems; and 2) of a source which generates significant (and attractive from the point of view of science) research problems. It resulted from Kuhn’s firm belief about close relatedness between the development of science and the social, economic and political environment in which it takes place (in particular histori-

cal periods), (Okasha, 2002). According to the Kuhn's concept, the functioning of paradigms within a given scientific discipline testifies to its methodological maturity and may constitute grounds for its formal autonomization. The formation of a given paradigm is preceded by the so called "pre-paradigm period", in which various conflicting views exist and none of the options dominates.

In this context, one could ask about the place of the studies on tourism in the Kuhn's model. Pearce (1993) claims that the studies on tourism are at the pre-paradigm stage. This claim is essentially true, but it should also be added that in the case of the studies on tourism the so called local paradigms function within scientific disciplines for which tourism is an object of interest (Szubert-Zarzeczny, 2001). It is the case in particular with such subdisciplines as the tourism geographies, the economics of tourism, the sociology of tourism. In this context, a crucial question emerges: is it possible for one new paradigm to dominate the whole field of the studies on tourism (or at least a significant majority of it) and to integrate various previous approaches and research traditions? When seeking an answer to this question, one should once again refer to the Kuhn's view about the influence of the external environment on the development of science. In the case of the studies on tourism, one can easily notice the strict correlation with the functions that tourism was assigned in different periods (Butowski, 2012; Hall, Page, 2006). Perceiving tourism as a tool of economic policies of a country (which dominated in the years 1918–1939 and after 1945) had a very strong influence on the economic and geographical aspects of the studies on tourism. The same type of correlation can be noticed in the following period. At least to the end of the 1980s tourism was perceived as an important instrument of regional and local development (primarily in the aspect of the economic growth). In that period, first numerous interdisciplinary research projects on local and regional scale were carried out. Also in that period, first voices which advocated an integration of the scientific output of studies on tourism (both in the theoretical and in the empirical aspect) were heard (Woźniak 1995, 2005). Since the middle of the 1980s, more and more scholars have been adhering to the ideas of the sustainable tourism, which is undoubtedly a result of the growing popularity of the concept of sustainable development.

## **Conclusion**

The article presents the issues connected with the theoretical, methodological and formal foundations of the studies on tourism, seen from three different perspectives: 1) ontological and epistemological, which involves questions about the object of research and the scope and possibilities of the cognition of this object; 2) scientific identity and traditions of tourism scholars (based on the example of the Polish academic environment); 3) scientific paradigms which constitute the basis for the studies on tourism, in the context of the studies' theoretical and empirical maturity. The aim of this analysis was to search for answers to the questions about: 1) the cognitive and formal status of the studies on tourism in the context of the essence of the phenomenon of contemporary tourism; and 2) the possibilities of the cognition of the phenomenon on the theoretical and empirical ground. A huge part of the conclusions was formulated based on the results of a diagnostic survey conducted within the Polish academic environment, among tourism scholars. It seems, however, that in order to increase the reliability and universality of the results one should conduct such surveys also in different countries.

To sum up the particular observations and results of the analysis, one could state that it is very difficult to precisely define the cognitive status of the contemporary studies on tourism. Undoubtedly, they are methodologically rooted in the "older" scientific disciplines which traditionally dealt with phenomena connected with tourism. Tourism scholars still use their methodological outputs. Unfortunately, the genuine output that could be credited to Tourism Sciences seems to be still rather scarce. Also, the academia (based on the discussed example of the Polish scholars and the experience of the international debate from the 1990s–2000s) is divided and, so far, it has not been able to come up with a common, coherent answer to this question. Despite the fact that a significant part of the scholars declare their support for the idea of the autonomization of Tourism Sciences, on the other hand they still consider themselves representatives of the "traditional" scientific disciplines and they base on the paradigms developed within them.

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**ONTOLOGICZNE I EPISTEMOLOGICZNE  
PODSTAWY BADAŃ NAD TURYSTYKĄ.  
TOŻSAMOŚĆ NAUKOWA POLSKICH BADACZY TURYSTYKI**

**Streszczenie**

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie ontologicznych i epistemologicznych podstaw studiów nad turystyką w kontekście współczesnej literatury przedmiotu oraz wyników badań empirycznych dotyczących tożsamości naukowej polskiej kadry naukowej. Zostały one przeprowadzone przy uwzględnieniu ontologicznych i epistemologicznych założeń odnoszących się do: 1) przedmiotu badań nad turystyką; 2) związanych z nim specyficznych problemów badawczych; 3) możliwości ich rozwiązania w ramach różnych dyscyplin naukowych; 4) miejsca badań nad turystyką w systemie nauk. Artykuł składa się z kilku części obejmujących: 1) teoretyczną dyskusję oraz przegląd literatury poświęconej omawianemu zagadnieniu; 2) omówienie wyników badań empirycznych odnoszących się do tożsamości naukowej polskich badaczy turystyki; 3) podsumowania wraz z rekomendacją dalszych badań.

Podstawowe wnioski oparte na przeglądzie literatury przedmiotu oraz na wynikach badań empirycznych są niejednoznaczne. Nie dają one podstaw do określenia statusu poznawczego i formalnego współczesnych badań nad turystyką. Przejawia się to m.in. w deklaratywnym poparciu przez polskich badaczy autonomizacji badań nad turystyką w kierunku ich „naukowego” usamodzielnienia, przy jednoczesnym mocnym przywiązaniu do tradycyjnych dyscyplin i panujących tam paradygmatów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ontologiczne i epistemologiczne aspekty badań nad turystyką, tożsamość naukowa, polscy badacze turystyki