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Urban Rhythms and Travel Behaviour: Spatial and Temporal Phenomena of Daily Travel

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Literature Review

Urban Rythms and Travel Behaviour: Spatial and Temporal Phenomena of Daily Travel
Stefan Schönhfelder & Kay W. Axhausen

This text is by economists and for an audience of economists but it tackles numerous issues that are of interest to researchers in tourism since travel is an integral part of the topic. Urban tourism is an important sub-area in our discipline and many visitors find themselves sharing transport means and routes with locals. Both are on daily trips even if their purposes are very different. It is thus interesting to explore the temporal and geographical mobilities of those who live in or visit urban destinations, especially since this work uses a very large database. The research by the authors of this text sought to answer four main questions about daily travel in urban areas and the fourth one is most applicable to tourism even if one would not then be looking at daily decisions: how is innovation in spatial choice mixed with well-known routines. Tourists certainly do make choices about travel to destinations on the basis of novelty versus familiarity. Daily movement within cities is more constrained as it depends on existing transport infrastructure and socio-capital structures of the local society but these also govern less frequent movements. In either case, mobility management by individuals determines the itineraries and their frequency.

The book is organized into four parts and the first one is probably the more arduous if one has no training in economics, geography and mathematics. However, two of the chapters are worth perusing: chapter 4 presents a comprehensive but short review of the determinants of travel behaviour, which one could take up further, depending on the purpose of one’s study. Chapter 5 discusses issues concerning incomplete surveys or data and underlines the lack of literature in dealing with such issues. Questions of methodology often get short shrift as they tend to be considered a necessary evil rather than essential to the best possible results. The authors also underline the importance of including relevant questions in surveys (which is often forgotten) to make them more valuable.

The second part describes day-to-day travel patterns, with each chapter dedicated to a particular aspect. The overarching idea is to uncover the dynamics and rhythms involved as it has long been assumed that people follow the same routines day
after day. These are notions that could be adapted to travel for tourism so models
would be less static by reflecting traveller behaviour more accurately. As the authors
insist ‘activity formulation and generation do not follow simple averages even in
many agent-based models’ (p. 92). Part III discusses human spatial behaviour and
activity spaces, true geographical notions and chapter 10 (the first of this section)
reviews models developed over time which can guide any study about these notions
and destination choice. The next chapter is for statistically sophisticate readers . . .
which, obviously, I am not.

The most interesting section is Part IV, the conclusions the authors draw from
their studies on travel based on extremely large and varied travel samples, taken from
from the United States, Europe and Japan. Their results suggest that daily travel is
partly routinized (risk-adverse) and seeks to minimize costs but the traveller’s context
(including access to ‘mobility tools’ or modes of transport) and a desire for variety
also influence mobility patterns. Their major finding is an ‘ambiguity between strong
habits and variety seeking’ which tourism researchers are familiar with. The chapter,
like most in this publication, is short; the only longer one is chapter 11, which de-
scribes the actual research and how the data were used statistically (50 pages versus
only 9 for the conclusion and an average of 11 pages for the other chapters). The bib-
liography lists many sources in support of the ideas the authors scrutinize or advance.

The authors indicate various areas that would benefit from further research which
is resonant for tourist studies such as the interaction between the search for variety
(difference) in destination choice and the dynamics of the travel environment or
the ‘effect of individually perceived and/or actually existing accessibility of places’
(p. 186). Biased or restricted perception is a well-recognized concept in tourism
research but, even there, full knowledge of travel options or of finding all options is
assumed by researchers as well as by tourism operators and entrepreneurs. These do
really depend on individuals’ preferences, as well as on decisions to make the effort
of searching for the available transport options and their cost as well as the types
of destinations that can fulfil expectations. The authors also raise a more socially
sensitive question about the sustainable use of transport modes and their equitable
availability to avoid social exclusion. Equity and exclusion are issues that need to be
considered in tourism too.

This text is not one that I would assign to undergraduate students of tourism but it is
sometimes interesting and fruitful to wander from our more routine reading sessions
and grab other writings on areas that remain relatively close to our favourite topic in
order to explore other dynamics and rhythms of research. I have certainly benefited
from revisiting more positivist and quantitative approaches to important issues in the
urban context and from having to consider other less familiar forms of research.

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