

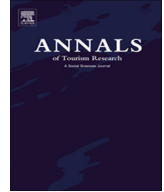


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Mess and method: Using ANT in tourism research



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ABSTRACT

The use of actor-network thinking is increasingly evident in tourism research. ANT offers the researcher a practical, fieldwork-based orientation, emphasising detailed description of relationships between actors in practice. However, questions which arise for the researcher in using ANT are seldom confronted in the literature. This paper contributes to the growing ANT literature in tourism by identifying five 'character traits' relating to selection and use of method in ANT research. It uses an empirical case study to show how these traits are performative in the researcher's 'hinterland' of methodological choices, providing theoretical and practical reflections for future researchers. It ends by considering how acknowledging these traits in the account can demonstrate adherence to accepted criteria for research quality.

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Introduction

The publication of *Actor Network Theory and Tourism* (Van der Duim, Ren, & Jóhannesson, 2012) assembled a range of examples of the use of ANT in tourism research for the first time, a collection which has recently been augmented by the same editors (Jóhannesson, Ren, & van der Duim, 2015) with a focus on the ontological politics of tourism development. Together, these collections provide a comprehensive overview of the contribution actor-network thinking can make to the understanding of tourism, and the growing number of papers reporting ANT-based tourism research appearing during the same period indicates that it has achieved considerable traction within the tourism academy.

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These ideas have recently been applied in a range of tourism contexts, focusing on the contribution ANT can make to our understanding of the complexities of tourism networks (Dredge, 2015; Jóhannesson, 2005; Ren, 2010b). Within this it has been used to explore relational concepts, such as destination (Bærenholdt, 2012; Farias, 2012), entrepreneurship and innovation (Arnaboldi & Spiller, 2011; Jóhannesson, 2007, 2012; Jóhannesson & Bærenholdt, 2008; Paget, Dimanche, & Mounet, 2010) and academic research (Ren, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010; Tribe, 2010), the role of non-human actors, such as wildlife (Rodger, Moore, & Newsome, 2009); photographs (Larsen, 2005) and backpacks (Walsh & Tucker, 2009) in tourist practices, and in the making of destination images (Franklin, 2014; Povilanskas & Armaitiene, 2011; Ren, 2011; Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). It has also been used in various studies which reassess the relationship between tourism and development (Hummel & van der Duim, 2012; Van der Duim, 2007b; Van der Duim & Caalders, 2008; Wearing & McDonald, 2002; Wearing, Wearing, & McDonald, 2010).

Paralleling developments in social science disciplines related to tourism e.g. geography (Murdoch, 1994, 1998; Pryke, Rose, & Whatmore, 2003); sociology (Law & Urry, 2004); social anthropology (De Laet, 2000; Ingold, 2010; Strathern, 1996), and organisational studies (e.g. Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005), ANT offers the tourism researcher a practical, fieldwork-based orientation (Jóhannesson, 2005), with its emphasis on detailed examination and description of relationships between actors in practice, offering 'examples, cases, and stories of how things work, of how relations and practices are ordered' (Van der Duim, Ampumuza, & Ahebwa, 2014: 590). It therefore aligns with a body of work which characterises tourism as a process through which places are ordered, performed and produced (Franklin, 2004; Van der Duim, 2007a), and offers an opportunity to extend our understanding of the social relations of tourism, challenging our ontological stance by admitting non-human actors, and breaking down preconceptions about the social nature of tourism and its organisation (Ren, 2010a). This focus highlights the processes that work continuously to produce and maintain assemblages of human and non-human actors, characterised in a tourism context as 'tourismscapes', defined as the 'complex relationships across space and through time between networked people and things, offering alternative structures of power and relationships' (Van der Duim, Peters, & Wearing, 2005: 293).

ANT has been variously described as a method (Gad & Jensen, 2010), a methodological toolkit (Van der Duim et al., 2012), and an analytical framework (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010; Farias, 2012). Law characterises it as 'a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis' (Law, 2009: 141), while Mol (2010: 261) sees it as a repertoire of 'sensitising terms, ways of asking questions and techniques for turning issues inside out or upside down'. In terms of tourism research, therefore, it is better seen as a translation device—an 'architecture' of concepts through which a story is constructed (Oppenheim, 2007), rather than a philosophical and epistemological 'force-field' (Tribe, 2004).

In the contested methodological context outlined above, research design is itself characterised as an actor-network in which a 'method assemblage' is enrolled, bringing with it a 'hinterland' of 'pre-existing social and material realities' which inevitably determine, at least to some extent, the way such research is produced. (Law, 2004: 34) Within this assemblage, method choice is itself an inherently political act (Gad & Jensen, 2010; Jóhannesson et al., 2015; Law, 2004; Law & Urry, 2004; Mol, 1999) producing 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988) which are framed both by the methods used in their elicitation, and by the researcher's own background knowledge and experience of the field of study.

Research based on ANT thinking is 'grounded in empirical case studies' (Law, 2009: 141). However, the issues which arise for the researcher in designing and executing ANT research have not, until recently (Jóhannesson, Ren, van der Duim, & Munk, 2014; Ren, 2010a) been confronted in ANT accounts in the tourism literature. As a result, several key practical and theoretical issues relating to ANT-based fieldwork remain under-explored. This paper contributes to the growing ANT literature in tourism by identifying five key dimensions, which it represents as character 'traits', of the researcher role, highlighting the way these relate to selection and use of method in the design and execution of ANT-oriented fieldwork, and arguing that the recognition of these traits in the narrative account is an important determinant of quality by demonstrating the trustworthiness of the study.

This paper adopts an auto-ethnographic approach (Scarles, 2010; Sparkes, 2000) in analysing reflections on some issues arising from research design, method choice and data collection using per-

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