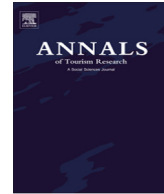




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Qualitative tourism research: Opportunities in the emergent soft sciences



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ABSTRACT

A liberation in 'soft science' inquiry over recent decades has opened up ontological, epistemological and methodological opportunities, but this empowerment is often under-recognised in investigations of tourism. While qualitative inquiry has made significant advances within tourism studies, scholars can gain richly by continuing to cultivate forms of critical multilogicality, and by embracing some of the methods and approaches on offer elsewhere across the broader (soft) social sciences. This paper thereby advances a set of key conceptual principles which guide emergent soft science thinking; it reviews their applicability within tourism studies through a probative 'tableau' of qualitative approach exemplars.

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Introduction

Qualitative inquiry approaches have made a significant contribution to tourism studies. The use and acceptance of qualitative research has helped the field towards a deeper understanding of the social, cultural and political connectivities within and for tourism (Jennings, 2009; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Riley & Love, 2000). Indeed, Botterill (2001) has demonstrated how qualitative inquiry has generated richness for tourism research, embodying the researcher, humanising the research process and inviting more critical 'playfulness'. At the same time, qualitative research, rooted in the interpretive and critical movements—and also referred to as the 'soft sciences' (Denzin & Lincoln,

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2005)—has exposed the all-knowing and universalising truths of ‘orthodox’ tourism research(ers) in the construction of tourism ‘knowledge’ (Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005; Botterill, 2001; Tribe, 2007).

Qualitative research has now earned acceptability in tourism studies. This is evidenced, for example, in the emergence of collegial networks promoting qualitative/critical inquiry, such as the Critical Approaches in Tourism and Hospitality special interest group within the Australasian CAUTHE association (Wilson, Harris, & Small, 2008) and the biennial, international Critical Tourism Studies conferences (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007). This encouragement of qualitative and soft-science approaches is also evident in the greater number of tourism studies journals publishing papers utilizing these methodologies. For instance, the relatively recent *Hospitality and Society* journal emphasizes hospitality as a predominantly social phenomenon. Further, the *Annals of Tourism Research* claims that 60% of its papers embrace a qualitative or interpretive design (Tribe & Xiao, 2011). Within the last decade, the *Annals* made a decision to allow use of the first person, if “the method deployed by the research [pointedly] justifies and explains its use” (Tribe & Xiao, 2011, p. 9). While this may seem a rather small matter, it is significant, since many scholars still struggle with the perceived acceptability of qualitative approaches in tourism (Pritchard & Morgan, 2007) and the embodied complexities of reflexivity (Ateljevic et al., 2005; Hall, 2004; Hollinshead & Jamal, 2007).

Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005, 2011) proverbial qualitative ‘moments’ are one possible way in which to view the paradigmatic developments that have emerged in the soft sciences, which include the social sciences and also more broadly, the humanities (i.e., from the traditional, positivist *first moment* through to the hybridity, transdisciplinarity and criticality of the *seventh, eighth, ninth* moments, and the blurred boundaries beyond). The tourism field has itself also witnessed a move from the early, positivist ‘moments’ of qualitative research, to gradually embrace the creativity, hybridity and messiness of later moments (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). There is significant focus within the field now upon the trinity of ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns. Indeed, it has been posited that tourism studies is making a continued retreat from logical empiricism, and that a noted critical or moral ‘turn’ is underway (Ateljevic et al., 2007; Caton, 2012; Hollinshead, 1993, 2006). Critical studies of gender, colour, race, ethnicity, hybridity and the Other have become more commonplace, and the use of narratives of self and reflexive writing are more acceptable, and indeed even expected nowadays in some quarters within the field. It could even be said that in tourism studies we have moved on appreciably from a state where qualitative tourism inquiry was ‘underserved’, as poignantly lamented by Jamal and Hollinshead (1999), and from commonplace scenarios where epistemological matters lie ‘unspeaken’, as registered by Botterill (2001). Thus, reflecting the wider qualitative social sciences, tourism studies now has a much expanded complement of paradigms, methods and strategies to deploy.

Yet the retreat from logical empiricism in tourism research is still hampered by the ‘hard science’ tenets of positivism, postpositivism, and neopositivism. These resolute constraints remain evident to some degree within seats of schooling in tourism studies, within grant-funding institutions for advanced research, on doctoral examination panels, and in lead peer review publications (Ateljevic et al., 2007; Hollinshead, 2004a, 2004b; Tribe, 2005). As Caton (2012) muses in her analysis of whether or not tourism studies has effectively made a ‘moral turn’: “although there has been a tremendous proliferation of alternative paradigms, it is probably fair to say that most of us working from non-positivistic stances still feel the [confining] hegemonic pinch” (p. 1914). Many tourism scholars continue to wrestle with the rupture of traditional paradigmatic and methodological assumptions (Hollinshead & Jamal, 2007), and in turn are drawn to seek out newly-energised approaches such as critical theory, feminism, postcolonialism, and epistemologies of colour. Indeed, the soft sciences are now not only a site of identified philosophical and methodological revolt, they are an important milieu for the rise of many new breeds of catalysing counter-enlightenment thinking (Ellingson, 2009), and this extends also to tourism studies.

This conceptual paper reviews the emanative opportunities occasioned via some of these emergent and/or freshly energised approaches within the broader social sciences. We seek to demonstrate how such approaches have been (or can be) adopted, massaged and reconceptualised by tourism researchers who work in the qualitative arena.

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