

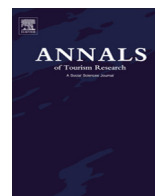


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Theoretical activity in sustainable tourism research



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ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition in tourism and sustainable tourism research of the need for a fuller engagement in theoretical activity. The paper examines how different research strategies in recent articles on sustainable tourism have advanced theoretical understanding in this research field. The articles advance thinking through ideas and concepts connected with political ecology, mobilities, transition pathways, and behavioural and systems change. They are evaluated using a typology of research strategies associated with theoretical work, using a broad perspective on this work. The research strategy typology was developed for the paper, and it is explained and illustrated. While the papers on sustainable tourism use a range of strategies associated with theoretical activity, there is only limited engagement with “big” social theories.

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Introduction

The paper evaluates how sustainable tourism research engages with theoretical activity, and how that activity helps in advancing the subject’s research frontiers. In particular, it considers how sustainable tourism research is advancing ideas and debates associated with political ecology, mobilities, transition pathways, and behavioural and systems change. The research field’s subject matter concerns the application of sustainable development ideas to the tourism sector (Bramwell & Lane, 2014). Sustainable tourism is regularly linked with the preservation of ecosystems, the promotion of human welfare, inter- and intra-generational equity, and public participation in decision-making.

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Interest in this topic has undoubtedly grown over the past thirty years. Nowadays, sustainability can be a policy goal for almost all kinds and scales of tourism activities and environments (Lane, 2009; Moscardo, 2008; Weaver, 2006). Indeed, Sharpley (2009, p. xiii) asserts that “sustainable tourism development has, since the early 1990s, represented the dominant tourism development discourse in academic, policy/planning and, to an extent, political circles”. Yet, criticisms have also been directed at sustainable tourism, including in relation to its practicality, its practices, the extent of its application, and its effectiveness (Liu, 2003; Saarinen, 2006; Weaver, 2009). The growth of sustainable tourism rhetoric, debate, applications and evaluation means that we need more critical understandings of this phenomenon, which entails engaging with theoretical ideas.

The notion of theoretical activity in a subject area has many layers and differing potential interpretations. It is a contested notion, with different ways of thinking about what it entails and its role in intellectual inquiry (Graham, 2005). In this paper theoretical activity is interpreted broadly to include any level of explanatory approach that works with relatively abstract notions or ideas to explain the world. It includes conceptualisations about “what matters and what does not, behind which lie ideas about how things work” (Harding & Blokland, 2014, p. 13). The broad perspective on theoretical activity adopted in this paper embraces such research strategies as working with typologies and conceptual frameworks, conceptualising processes and relationships, looking at issues or concepts in new ways, and developing and evaluating concepts. Theoretical activity often involves empirical work, but also with a focus on evaluating the value of ideas. The discussion is not limited to the use of specific theories, with theories being a high level of theoretical activity or abstraction as they are usually considered to have causal implications, or even to concepts, which are often seen as somewhat lower-level abstractions that provide analytical ideas rather than causal predictions (Peet, 1998; Smith, Xiao, Nunkoo, & Tukamushaba, 2013; Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013). Instead, the broad conception of theoretical activity adopted here includes varied research strategies that entail some level of abstraction, even if modest, to assist with interpretation.

Academic fields advance their understanding through engagement with theoretical activity. Such activity may draw on ideas, interpretations, concepts and frameworks within their own particular field of study, but often such notions are drawn from other subject areas (Tribe, 2010). Thus, sustainable tourism research increasingly uses social science’s ideas and concepts, including those developed in such critical perspectives as political economy, post-structuralism and post-colonialism (Bramwell & Lane, 2005, 2014). It also concerns issues around the physical and natural environment, such as related to tourism’s responses to climate change, so it can engage with concepts and ideas in science fields, such as climatology and oceanography (Miller & Twining-Ward, 2005).

The analysis here is of how selected recent articles on sustainable tourism advance this academic field. Each article is evaluated using a typology of strategies associated with theoretical activity, based on a broad understanding of such activity. The typology was developed for the paper. It is used to assess the specific research strategies behind each paper’s theoretical work, including how it might draw from theoretical ideas and debates in other subjects, and how the theoretical activity might provide new understandings about sustainable tourism.

The study is organised into three sections. The first explores the growing recognition in tourism and sustainable tourism research of the need for theoretical activity and debate. The next section presents a typology of strategies – or objectives and approaches – associated with theoretical work in a research field. The final section uses the typology to assess selected exemplar papers about sustainable tourism in relation to how they conduct tasks connected with theoretical work and also how they advance the frontiers of understanding. These papers concern advances in sustainable tourism research connected with ideas and debates around political ecology, mobilities, transition pathways, and behavioural and systems change.

Theoretical activity in tourism research

The character of theoretical activity

Theoretical activity seeks to find general accounts or explanations of the world, including of social relations, practices and human–environment interactions. It involves relatively abstract ideas or

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