



ADVANCING UNDERSTANDINGS A Linguistic Approach to Tourism Epistemology

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Abstract: Arguing that considerations of knowledge development should reflect a conversational, human-based view of knowledge production, this paper proposes a linguistic approach to understanding tourism epistemology. It then introduces a framework for exploring knowledge progression that includes the components of tourism morphology, or the creation and adjustment of concepts and models; the production and promotion of new interpretations and understandings; and the employment of such interpretations for the purpose of problem solving oriented to the needs of practitioners and policymakers. The paper concludes that scholars should analyze epistemological progress not only to comprehend the development of ideas and interpretations, but also as an exercise in reflectivity regarding the influence of academic forces and trends that govern the process of knowledge production. **Keywords:** sociology of knowledge, epistemology, language. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism studies is coming of age at a time when dramatic change is afoot in the broader domain of social research philosophy. Traditionally, social research existed largely under the sway of postpositivist philosophy, which holds the goal of research to be a systematic search for scientific truth. Thus, at one time it appeared easy to answer the question “How do we understand knowledge progression in social research?” Clearly, research was advancing if it was bringing us closer to truth, and clearly it was bringing us closer to truth if it met agreed upon standards of validity, reliability, generalizability, and so forth—standards which were, for the most part, borrowed wholesale from the “hard” sciences. The sweep of philosophical changes brought on by the resurgence of hermeneutics and critical theory-based approaches to knowledge production and by the development of

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postmodern and poststructural philosophies about the social world, however, has eroded the secure foundations of truth once taken for granted by “social scientists.” Echoing strains of reasoning about the subject in science that can be traced to early luminaries like Weber, Durkheim, and Marx, such “alternative paradigms”—which include interpretivism/constructivism (Gergen and Gergen 2003; Schwandt 2000; Bochner 2005), pragmatism (Noddings 2005), feminism (Oleson 2005), critical theory (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; Kincheloe and McLaren 2002; Ladson-Billings and Donnor 2005), poststructuralism (Peters and Burbules 2004), and deliberative democratic theory (Howe 2003), among others—have argued forcefully that knowledge is a social product, created by communities of scholars that are governed by particular norms and traditions, and that notions of truth can not be disentangled from the broader realm of human interactions and power. In the study of tourism, Tribe (2006) captures this situation with his notion of the “knowledge force-field,” through which he argues that the path from tourism (the phenomenon under study) to tourism knowledge (the output of intellectual activities regarding the phenomenon of tourism) is mediated by factors traditionally considered to be “external” to science, such as researcher personhood and positionality, disciplinary norms, and broader societal ideologies. This conceptualization represents a break from traditional notions of scientific output as a neutral mirror of reality and exemplifies the way that social research disciplines and fields including tourism studies—albeit somewhat belatedly in comparison with other academic domains—are having to come to terms with the realities of knowledge production in a postfoundational world.

In light of this emerging intellectual milieu, in which—despite the continued presence of traditional postpositivist hegemonies—alternative and diverse understandings are increasingly finding voice, a fresh discussion on the issue of knowledge production in tourism studies seems warranted. After all, if scholars of the same field, who exist side by side in the same departments, can not agree on foundations for truth—if indeed they can not necessarily even agree on what it is they are doing, or what they should be doing, when they engage in the study of tourism—then how can they hope to understand the way knowledge unfolds in their field? Given the fragmented roots of tourism studies and the difficulty of gauging the impact of tourism scholarship on other scholarly literatures (Graburn and Jafari 1991; Harrison 2007; Jafari 2001; Leiper 2000; Tribe 1997; Xiao and Smith 2006), it is perhaps not possible to determine a single answer to the question of what constitutes knowledge progression in tourism. Nevertheless, as this paper suggests, it is worth pursuing understandings of how knowledge unfolds because doing so can contribute to scholars’ reflective capacity regarding the intellectual and educational products of the field. Epistemic inquiries about tourism studies also have important political implications, which stand as an additional valuable reason to pursue them.

Following in the discursive, relational, power-referenced philosophical traditions to knowledge production of scholars such as Nietzsche, Durkheim, Habermas, Mannheim, Bourdieu, Marx, Gramsci, Foucault,

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