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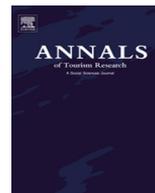
Theoretical activity in sustainable tourism research

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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

interpretations that might be used to develop reasonably coherent explanations that can be evaluated empirically. Theoretical activity can increase understanding through a systematised structure to thinking that involves the use of relatively abstract ideas, categories, groupings or interpretations, which can then be filled with the more concrete or tangible. This work is required because often the world is complex, and thus researchers tend to be "unable to reveal its fundamental character without a major effort of intellectual labour" (Castree, 2006, p. 256). It can extend our knowledge by simplifying complex processes so that they are more understandable and manageable, by suggesting key things or processes that are important, and by indicating underlying causes or relationships that affect how things work (Williams, 2009, p. 9). The highest level of theoretical activity involves theory which indicates fundamental causal processes, but it is suggested that there are varied levels and kinds of theoretical work.

Empirical investigation and real phenomenon are bypassed to a degree in theoretical work, so that attention can be focused on the mental processes of simplification, generalisation and explanation (Harvey, 1996; Peet, 1998). Yet, there are inevitable tensions between the requirement for abstraction and the need to ground those abstractions in the empirical. Relatively abstract ideas inevitably must be constructed through a dialectic between the particularism of the concrete and the need for critical distance and detachment in order initially to formulate and then evaluate interpretive ideas. Harding and Blokland (2014, p. 12) suggest, for example, that theoretical activity in the social sciences would "stop being social science the moment it lost all connection to the empirical, that is, to the realm of experienced reality (in contrast to metaphysics)".

Ideas, concepts and frameworks developed in individual subject fields can act as a combination of storage and bridging devices (Graham, 2005). That is, they have the potential function of storing the summarised results of work in one research area in the form of theoretical notions which can be transferred to others, thus acting as bridges between research areas. Thus, while scholars in different study fields enhance understanding in their own subject, they can also contribute to developing ideas, concepts and frameworks in other fields, including in general social theory. Ideas from several fields can also be brought together to advance understanding across the social sciences, and sometimes between the social sciences and the sciences (Benton & Redclift, 1994). More specifically, Liu (2003, p. 472) calls for an approach to "researching sustainable tourism where synergies between different disciplines are developed to produce a more holistic synthesis".

Theoretical activity is tied up with philosophical issues of ontology and epistemology. The different ontological and epistemological positions of researchers mean they have varying and often opposing views about the nature of the basic building blocks from which an understanding of our world is constructed (about what is "real"), and about how we gain an understanding of our world, including of human–nature relationships. Harding and Blokland (2014) argue that the key social science perspectives are associated with three general approaches – positivism, hermeneutics and realism – and that each offers a different position about what is "real" and about how we comprehend our world. These different research approaches contribute to the complexity of theoretical activity, including in tourism research. Much has been written about the three general approaches, and it is clear that there are fundamental differences in social science standpoints when it comes to explaining what theory and concepts are and how they should be constructed and used (Graham, 2005; Platenkamp & Botterill, 2013).

Application in tourism research

Tourism research has been criticised in the past for being insufficiently concerned with theoretical ideas (Franklin & Crang, 2001; Mowforth & Munt, 2009). Pearce commented on "the poverty of tourism studies in terms of conceptual and theoretical approaches" (2004, p. 59). Within the sustainable tourism field, Hunter (2002, p. 4) asserted that: "tourism researchers have, in general, not discussed theoretical aspects of sustainable tourism enough". This suggested relative neglect in past tourism research has been attributed to several causes.

First, some considered it was affected by tourism emerging only fairly recently as a "more established field of investigations" (Jafari, 2001, p. 32). For Jafari (2001, p. 31), it was only in the 1990s that tourism had attained a full "knowledge-based platform" that focused on "underlying

structures and functions" and "further development of theoretical constructs". Second, some indicated that a possible lack of focus on more abstract ideas reflected an over-reliance on descriptive case studies. Limited concern with theoretical notions was seen by Ashworth and Page (2011, p. 2) as "a persistent weakness in many forms of tourism research that remain case study driven and implicitly descriptive in manner" (Butler, 1997; Dann, 1999). Mowforth and Munt (2009, p. 2) also identified a proliferation of case studies as having "led to an absence of an adequate theoretical critique for understanding the dynamics of tourism and the social activities it involves". Third, it has been suggested that some tourism researchers were "wrapped up in the technicalities" of research methods, so they may have lost sight of the importance of contributing to the subject's theoretical advance (Ryan, 2005, p. 8).

Fourth, others have attributed the suggested past neglect of more abstract ideas to tourism looking inward to its own subject field, thereby tending to neglect wider social science debates. Holden (2005, p. 1) asserts, for example, that "perhaps with the exception of economics, the application of the social sciences to the investigation of tourism is relatively weak compared to other areas of social enquiry". According to Dann (1999), in the past tourism was not always grounded in broad social science perspectives or widely occurring societal processes, and its ideas could be quite specific in ambition and somewhat disconnected and fragmentary. Yet, both general tourism and sustainable tourism research would benefit from engaging with the ideas, concepts, frameworks and theoretical debates in the wider social sciences. Thus, Bramwell (2007, p. 1) argues that studies of sustainable tourism, with its varied environmental, socio-economic, cultural and governance relationships, would "be strengthened if they engaged more fully in wider debates and contestations around social theory" (Faulkner & Ryan, 1999; Holden, 2005). Sustainable tourism also focuses on tourism's nature–society interactions, which Miller and Twining-Ward (2005, p. 17) suggest should encourage the "merging of...biological, social, geophysical and technological systems research" (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004).

Yet, past tourism research probably involved more theoretical activity, and greater engagement with ideas and debates from other fields, than some acknowledge (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Hall, 2005; Holden, 2005). For example, bridging across disciplines to explore their ideas, concepts and frameworks applies for some early tourism researchers from the 1960s to the 1980s, such as Stephen Britton, Erik Cohen, Peter Murphy and Dennison Nash, among others. These authors pursued deep levels of analysis using theoretical notions from anthropology, community planning, political economy or sociology (Bramwell & Lane, 2014). Indeed, there is a continuing tradition for tourism as a research field to attract researchers from varied disciplinary fields, and they have brought ideas, concepts and approaches from those fields to tourism (Echtner & Jamal, 1997; Xiao & Smith, 2006). Hall (2013, p. 606) also suggests that claims that tourism is poorly theorised may sometimes have been made as a means to devalue research not adopting a favoured research perspective (Franklin & Crang, 2001). Further, sustainable tourism research might also have been relatively receptive to new theoretical ideas because of its concern to shake up and reshape conventional tourism practices.

Strategies for theoretical activity in sustainable tourism research

It is useful to consider how sustainable tourism research engages in research strategies associated with relatively abstract ideas, concepts and theoretical frameworks which can enhance theoretical understanding. As discussed earlier, theoretical activity is interpreted broadly here, and it includes any level of explanatory work that is comparatively abstract, even if that is modest. It can involve empirical features as long as there is also a focus on developing ideas or concepts. Thus, the paper now identifies a typology of eleven strategies or approaches associated with theoretical activity in sustainable tourism research. Each strategy is illustrated by an example from the literature, and subsequently the typology is used to examine research strategies in four exemplar articles based on their emphasis on theoretical advances in sustainable tourism.

The typology of strategies was developed through considering three sources of material and ideas. First, there was evaluation of a sample of sustainable tourism articles published in 2012, 2013 and 2014 in three tourism journals with the highest Social Sciences Citation Index Impact Factors in 2013 (*Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* and *Tourism Management*). For the

general tourism journals, *Annals of Tourism Research* and *Tourism Management*, the titles of research and review articles (excluding case studies and research notes), together with their Abstracts, Highlights, and Key Words, were searched for the three-year period to identify sustainable tourism articles. The selected parts of papers were searched for such terms as "sustainable tourism", "sustainable development", "sustainability", "responsible tourism", "climate change", "green behaviour" and "environmental concern". Seemingly relevant articles were excluded, however, if the full article emerged as irrelevant to sustainable tourism. Of the 67 resulting papers, 20 were evaluated for their research strategies. The *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* only publishes papers on sustainable tourism, and based on Titles and Abstracts a sample of 25 main papers from 2012, 2013 and 2014 was selected. This latter sample was based on papers specifically selected as having a strong focus on theoretical engagement, and their research strategies were examined.

Second, the development of the typology of strategies was assisted by ideas in a framework of "the main elements of conceptual research" in tourism, a framework developed by Xin et al. (2013, p. 78) (subsequently called the Xin typology). Their framework is based on an assessment of conceptual work in 46 tourism papers published between 1981 and 2010 which they identified as "pure conceptual research" (p. 77) that is "without recourse to empirical data collection" (p. 73), and their assessment produced twelve themes. Unlike the Xin typology of themes, however, the present broader typology considers all levels and types of strategy associated with theoretical activity, including engagement with empirical evidence, and not just the refining of concepts in "pure conceptual research" (p. 77). Third, in developing the typology consideration was also given to literature on theoretical work in tourism (Ruhanen, Weiler, Moyle, & McLennan, 2015) and in other subject fields familiar to the author, notably political science (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987; Hay, 2002), geography (Cox, 2014; Peet, 1998), development studies (Peet, 1999) and urban studies (Harding & Blokland, 2014).

Thematic analysis was used in reading the sample of papers from the three journals, with notes made on the research strategies associated with theoretical work. Categories were developed by sifting and sorting, and also by reflecting on ideas in the Xin framework and in relevant texts in other subject fields. Emerging categories were continually reviewed, altered or refined.

The analysis resulted in a typology of eleven strategies associated with theoretical work, conceived broadly, with papers usually relating to more than one category. A strong theoretical research paper is more likely to exhibit several of the strategies, although this is not necessarily the case. The list of strategies is not comprehensive and, as boundaries between categories can be unclear, it should be considered a "fuzzy typology" (Xin et al., 2013, p. 78). For example, *strategy two*, *Developing Ideas at the Level of Theories, Conceptual Frameworks or Concepts*, can overlap with *strategy four*, *Reframing an Issue or Concept so it is Looked at Differently*. Each strategy in the list is described next, illustrated by one sustainable tourism article, and related categories in the Xin typology are indicated, where relevant. The last strategy, strategy eleven, is somewhat different as it is associated with the specific "critical turn" in the social sciences (Bianchi, 2009; Tribe, 2008).

Strategy one concerns *Exchanging Conceptual Ideas across Disciplinary or Subject Fields*. As discussed, theories, concepts and frameworks can store the summarised thinking in one research field in a form which enables them to be transferred to others, facilitating the importing and exporting of theoretical ideas to and from tourism studies. Exchanges of ideas can be among the social sciences or between social science and science subjects. Gill (2012, p. 5) notes a continuum in knowledge creation in tourism research from multidisciplinary to post-disciplinary working, based on increasing levels of disciplinary exchange and integration. Transdisciplinary study moves significantly toward the integration of disciplinary perspectives, based on the argument that research focused on the complex and "vexing social problems of the day" requires the merging of heterogeneous research domains (Jacobs, 2013, p. 5). It is closely aligned with a proposed post-disciplinary approach, although the latter also "entails a further step that calls for the end of disciplines" (Gill, 2012, p. 5). Strategy one has similarities with "translating concepts to new contexts" in Xin et al.'s typology of conceptual research. A paper by Pacifico and Vogel (2012), for example, looks at ethnographic approaches to anthropological research, notably a focus on indigenous voices and on researcher reflexivity, and their relevance to studies in tourism research of relationships between tourism, communities and archaeological sites.

Strategy two, *Developing Ideas at the Level of Theories, Conceptual Frameworks or Concepts*, concerns the ambition of intellectual work. Theories have been suggested to represent higher level intellectual

work, being relatively more concerned with fundamental causal processes and their effects – processes that help with predicting society's continuities and changes. Theories can also involve systematically related set of statements, including generalizations and propositions, which may be evaluated empirically. Concepts also help us to understand complex relationships, but they tend to occupy a lower level of generalisation and be less focused on fundamental causal explanations. Conceptual frameworks may involve a middle order of generalisation as they link individual concepts and inter-relationships, but they tend not to focus on primary causality. Thus, both theories and conceptual frameworks can provide organising frameworks for specific concepts (Pearce, 2004, 2012). While researchers may draw boundaries between theories, conceptual frameworks and concepts based on their level of generalisation, in practice these boundaries are often fluid and imprecise (Smith et al., 2013; Pearce, 2012). This strategy includes such activities in the Xin typology as "defining concepts", "comparing concepts" and "historical analysis of concepts". Thus, it includes critical reviews of past literature related to a concept. These activities also apply to theories and conceptual frameworks. An example of this second strategy is a paper by Ramkissoon, Weiler, and Smith (2012) that develops a conceptual framework which integrates different constructs of place attraction for use in research on place attachment and pro-environmental behaviour in protected areas.

Strategy three involves *Conceptualising New Connections between Previously Separate Issues or Processes.* There are often ties that bind the apparently dissociated, such as potential inter-connections between social entities. This should not entail neglecting possible "boundaries" to tourism's "units of analysis", rather it can concern, for example, thinking about how the "inside" is produced through interaction with the "outside" (Harding & Blokland, 2014). New connections can arise from integrating concepts in a conceptual framework, or from linking them in ways not considered previously (Xin et al., 2013). Dann (1999, pp. 24–25) also advocates "establishing new linkages" through connecting different approaches to tourism, identifying such connections in Bramwell and Rawding's (1996) study of tourism promotion and urban development, which Dann suggests makes new "linkages through multidisciplinary treatment" based on "simultaneous insights from geography, marketing and critical sociology". This strategy can include such tasks as "synthesising concepts" and "translating concepts to new contexts" in the Xin typology. An example of the strategy is a paper by Canavan (2014) showing the relevance of sustainable tourism notions for understanding the theme of resort decline, two issues or topics that are not usually examined together.

Strategy four involves *Reframing an Issue or Concept so it is Looked at Differently*, and thus new questions are asked about it. This could, for example, involve embedding issues holistically into the wider situation, rather than abstracting them from their context, or using an alternative epistemological or theoretical perspective. Part of this strategy might also entail what is called "deconstructing concepts" in the Xin typology. This strategy is illustrated by Novelli, Morgan and Nibigira's (2012) paper which assesses tourism in a post-conflict situation in Africa from a "hopeful tourism" perspective. From that perspective, it considers reconciliation, transitional justice and institution building, and it regards the process of knowledge creation as co-created between an African "insider" and European "outsiders". *Strategy five* is *Conceptualising the Operation or Importance of Processes or Relationships, Including by Developing Categories or Types.* The abstractions of theoretical activity often involve conceptualising what matters and what does not in processes and relationships, behind which there are notions about how things work. These conceptualisations can involve developing categories or typologies. This strategy can concern such activities in the Xin typology of "constructing conceptual typologies", "mapping the scope of concepts" and "exploring the purposes of concepts". An example of the strategy is Mensah and Blankson's (2013) paper which uses factor analysis to assist in identifying a typology of six key elements accounting for the environmental performance of hotels in Accra, Ghana.

Strategy six concerns *Adding Temporal or Spatial Dimensions to Analysis to Provide New Conceptual Understanding.* Tourism depends on spatial movement and it evolves over time, and one or both of these dimensions can be a specific analytical focus so as to provide new conceptual insights (Cox, 2014). While some social theories focus more on generalization and less on the particularities and contingencies of space and time, there are exceptions, such as the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens which explicitly focuses on spatial and temporal aspects of social processes (Benton & Redclift, 1994). There are some similarities between this strategy and the activity of "translating concepts to new contexts" in the Xin typology. An example is Weaver's (2012) paper on potential

temporal evolutionary paths to sustainable mass tourism for destinations. He identifies a typology of three temporal trajectories: a market-driven "organic" path, a regulation-driven "incremental" path and a hybrid "induced" path based on planned mega-resorts.

Strategy seven is *Confirming or Refining Existing or Developing New or Reconceptualised Theory, Conceptual Frameworks or Concepts*. New or reconceptualised ideas in particular can prompt further work within specific subject areas or across the social sciences. In the Xin typology this strategy relates most directly to the task of "proposing a new concept/reconceptualisation". An illustration of this strategy is Xu, Cui, Ballantyne and Packer's (2013) assessment of the theoretical basis behind interpretive strategies in Chinese natural areas. In these contexts they critically question the value for tourists of "scientific" interpretative approaches when landscape memories and intangible cultural heritage mediate landscape appreciation for Chinese tourists and require "aesthetic" conceptual notions. *Strategy eight* is *Identifying Theoretical or Conceptual Gaps*. Conceptual work and related empirical assessments can reveal gaps in prior theoretical work which require further research. Xin et al. (2013, p. 79) suggest that such gaps are also often "found through a creative review of relevant literatures". In their typology this category is called "finding conceptual gaps". An example of this strategy is the paper by Chou (2014, pp. 436 and 442) on the environmental beliefs of hotel employees, which "fills the gap in existing research" by adopting "a new concept" of the "green organisational climate". This concept, together with personal belief variables, are used to explore the contextual and individual variation in hotel employees' environmental behaviour.

Strategy nine concerns *Empirically Assessing the Value of Conceptual Ideas*. It is usually considered important to evaluate and possibly refute the propositions associated with conceptual work "through careful methodological design and good, forensic empirical" work in relation to practice (Harding & Blokland, 2014, p. 232). This concerns the task of "applying concepts to practice" in the Xin typology. One example is the paper by Imran, Alam, and Beaumont (2014) which uses the New Ecological Paradigm scale in an empirical assessment of the orientations of different protected area stakeholder groups toward engaging in environmental conservation and sustainable tourism, and of the influences on those orientations. *Strategy ten* involves *Applying Conceptual Ideas in a New Context*. Xin et al. (2013, p. 79) suggest this can involve bringing "existing knowledge to a new context that might be a new realm, a new industry, a new cultural society or a new field or discipline". Dann (1999, p. 21) advocates more "concept stretching", noting the example of the extension of sustainable tourism ideas to reveal new dimensions of urban contexts. In the Xin typology this strategy equates with "translating concepts in new contexts". This strategy is seen in Wijesinghe's (2014) paper on the potential contribution of a virtue ethics approach in promoting sustainability in the hospitality industry, and notably of the "virtues-goods-practice-institution" analytical framework developed by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.

The last strategy, *strategy eleven*, involves *Conceptualising Political or Ethical Issues or Processes, Such as Power, Alienation or Inequality*. It differs from the others as it arises specifically from the new theoretical perspectives advocated by exponents of the "critical turn" in the social sciences. Those perspectives often focus on understanding society's oppressive and alienating features, such as those arising from power relations and inequality. Such issues relate to politics and to ethical issues, and they are sometimes the research focus based on intentions to promote progressive change (Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011; Wilson, Harris, & Small, 2008). Thus, Cohen and Cohen (2012, p. 218) assert that the "field of tourism should be pushed towards a political agenda". An example of this strategy is the paper by Jamal and Camargo (2014) which evaluates ethical and justice issues experienced by disadvantaged local residents in Quintana Roo, Mexico, associated with tourism's procedural and distributive processes. The paper also uses Rawls' concept of justice, and ideas developed by Fainstein, to devise a normative framework for tourism development in a "just destination".

Theoretical activity in four sustainable tourism articles

More detailed evaluations are now made of four of the earlier sample of sustainable tourism articles. This provides in-depth reviews of research strategies associated with theoretical activity used to advance understanding in this academic field. The papers were chosen using three criteria. First,

they had to be strongly focused on theoretical activity and be exemplars in making new contributions to theoretical understanding of sustainable tourism. A shortlist of papers was made after considering the article Abstracts in the original sample of articles. This was then reduced to four papers through the second and third criteria of achieving a spread of sustainable tourism subject matter, and of being related to significant conceptual debates in sustainable tourism research. The debates concern political ecology, mobilities, transition pathways, and behavioural and systems change. Limiting this in-depth analysis to just four papers meant that, unfortunately, there are no papers on such themes as green business strategies or managing tourism for cultural sustainability. The evaluations use the study's typology of eleven strategies.

Political ecology and sustainable tourism

The first paper by Cole (2012) uses theoretical ideas from political ecology to evaluate tourism development's consequences for water inequality among residents of the Indonesian island of Bali. Peet and Watts (1996, p. 6) describe political ecology as "a confluence between ecologically rooted social science and the principles of political economy". It emphasises contextualising local ecological issues and their unequal distributional outcomes within the context of political economy (Robbins, 2004). Cole (2012, p. 1222) uses political ecology in order to develop "a deep, nuanced and productive understanding of water inequity in Bali", with tourism being important for water inequity because the industry is estimated to use 65% of the island's water resources.

The paper illustrates the research strategies of *Exchanging Conceptual Ideas across Disciplinary or Subject Fields (strategy one)*, and *Applying Conceptual Ideas in a New Context (strategy ten)*. Cole (2012, p. 1225) considers that the approach "provides trans-disciplinary frameworks that apply methods of political economy to ecological contexts". She argues that sustainable tourism research has only very occasionally embraced political ecology theoretical ideas (Bramwell, 2007). Studies by Stonich (1998, 2000) and Gössling (2003) are rare examples of in-depth applications of political ecology to tourism. Thus, Cole asserts that "it is surprising how little it [political ecology] has been used to examine tourism's relationship with environmental and social change", and she notes that "it is over 10 years since Stonich's paper" (Cole, 2012, p. 1226). The approach also relates social science concerns to ecological and natural science issues. Thus, Cole (2012, p. 1222) explores the importance of tourism development for Bali's "hydro-ecology". She relates predictions of a serious water crisis on Bali to a falling water table, salt water intrusion, and such pressures as migration, tourist arrivals and tourism development.

In terms of *Developing Ideas at the Level of Theories, Conceptual Frameworks or Concepts (strategy two)*, the use of political ecology helps to establish causal processes behind Bali's tourism, water and inequality relationships. This is because political ecology focuses on understanding nature–society relations through analysis of the social forms of access and control of natural resources. It contextualises local environmental issues and their unequal distributional outcomes within broad political economy and political processes. Thus, it focuses on fundamental, underlying causal processes, and therefore it has the characteristics of a theory (Robbins, 2004; Watts & Peet, 2004).

Yet, political ecology has never been a single theoretical position, in some measure because there are multiform interpretations of ecology, politics and political economy. Notwithstanding the diversity of opinions and emphasis, there are some common elements in political ecology, which are evident in Cole's study. Thus, relevant analyses generally consist of explanations of how society's interactions with local environments involve power relations among different actors (Robbins, 2004). Conflict is also seen as inherent in most types of development involving environmental resources. This is because the varying state agents, private businesses and social movements have differing interests and levels of resources and influence. This approach also tends to explore how relevant actors and economic and political processes are found at differing geographical scales, so that local studies need to undertake analysis of interactions between local, regional, national and international scales. These relationships are specific to each context and evolve temporally. Cole's use of political ecology illustrates the application of this holistic, integrative, relational and also context-specific theoretical perspective, and it also indicates its considerable merits for further use in sustainable tourism research.

Cole is also concerned with *Conceptualising Political or Ethical Issues or Processes, Such as Power, Alienation or Inequality (strategy eleven)*, examining the relationships among different actors around the politics of tourism and water, including the associated power relations and mismanagement that led to unequal distributive outcomes. According to Cole (2012, p. 1238), political ecology helped her to show "how once again power relations provide a key to understanding tourism's environmental impacts". It "allowed for the multi-layered factors to be unpicked to reveal the social, political and environmental factors which together are leading to the mismanagement of water in Bali" (p. 1237). The political ecology approach allows Cole to reveal the levels of understanding and the attitudes and action that are necessary for more equitable access to water, and it leads her to argue for "a re-orientation towards…rights based approaches to water management on Bali" (p. 1222; Cole, 2014).

Mobilities and sustainable tourism

The next article by Dredge and Jamal (2013) advances understanding of sustainable tourism by relating it to social science notions connected with "mobilities". The article explores relationships between mobility, governance and sustainable tourism for Australia's Gold Coast. In relation to *Developing Ideas at the Level of Theories, Conceptual Frameworks or Concepts (strategy two)*, the ideas about "mobilities" perhaps represent a mid-range conceptual framework that connects specific concepts. This notion does not seem to provide a theory as it lacks the identification of causal mechanisms, and it does not "offer a set of basic (predictive) propositions, which could be evaluated in empirical research" (Cohen & Cohen, 2012, p. 2185). The article also engages in *Exchanging Conceptual Ideas Across Disciplinary or Subject Fields (strategy one)* by drawing on social science literature emphasising mobility's importance due to expanding movement and flows in late modernity. This literature indicates that increasing flows of people, objects, capital, and ideas can result in social relations becoming more global and transient, in societal and spatial boundaries being redrawn, and in traditional patterns of social relations potentially dissolving (Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2004; Urry, 2007).

Dredge and Jamal explore "mobilities" in the context of governance and sustainable tourism in Australia's Gold Coast. This breaks new ground in sustainable tourism research by *Conceptualising New Connections between Previously Separate Issues or Processes (strategy three)*. The authors explain, for example, that "the nexus between destination governance and mobilities has been acknowledged but little studied" (Dredge & Jamal, 2013, p. 558). In making this connection, they depict the Gold Coast as an increasingly fluid production and consumption system that spans different spatial scales, with complex flows of residents, tourists, second-home owners, labour, capital, and ideas. They argue that these trends create significant challenges for sustainable tourism. In particular, this fluidity makes it less easy for local communities to engage with destination governance, despite community engagement being widely considered important for sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 2000). Thus, they explore "the tensions between mobilities and established sustainable tourism principles that suggest governance should be grounded in local community dialogue and values" (Dredge & Jamal, 2013, p. 557).

Through making these new connections the article engages in *Reframing an Issue or Concept so it is Looked at Differently (strategy four)*. The article argues, for example, that one reason why local Gold Coast communities are losing influence is because of the increasing power accumulated by external global corporations and transnational networks. These external corporations and networks intersect with fluid populations of tourists, residents, second home owners and workers, leading to the Gold Coast's spatial restructuring as a tourist destination and place to live. Further, the destination's restructuring has been reinforced by international discourses of neo-liberalism, which have prompted private enterprises to undertake more functions previously considered government responsibilities. The promotion of markets, privatisation and deregulation have led to a pluralisation of destination governance. Thus, there are multiple agencies operating at different spatial scales with responsibilities for tourist destination development and planning, and they argue that this restricts attempts "to develop and implement a coordinated approach to sustainable tourism management" (Dredge & Jamal, 2013, p. 561; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

The study is also based on *Conceptualising the Operation or Importance of Processes or Relationships, Including by Developing Categories or Types (strategy five)*. The authors, for example, expose how destinations are substantially transformed and restructured as a result of the processes of increasing mobility of people and capital, and of the processes of erosion of traditional distinctions between tourists and residents, as more tourists buy second properties in the destination but demonstrate less attachment than permanent (less mobile) residents. Further, the study contributes by *Adding Temporal or Spatial Dimensions to Analysis to Provide New Conceptual Understanding (strategy six)*. Here it considers spatial relations as relational networks that are affected by increasing mobility and space-time distanciation (Harvey, 1996). According to Cox, there is increasing recognition in the social sciences of a

"conception of space as relational...[and which] recognises that the objects with respect to which relative space is defined have relations one with another that are of a necessary sort; that they are what they are in virtue of their relations with other objects and conditions. Space relations are seen as a necessary aspect of the social process" (2014, p. 148).

Transition pathways for sustainable travel

The next article by Williams (2013) engages with conceptual ideas concerning transition pathways. It discusses whether the trajectory of tourist travel is path-dependent and locked into a sub-optimal model of sustainability, or else potentially path creating. Path dependency indicates that outcomes can be significantly shaped by past trajectories or trends. And path creation suggests that there can be breaks or discontinuities from past paths, but usually within limits. Social scientists have used these concepts to explore historical continuities and changes, including how society might secure the changes, or transition pathways, required to combat climate change. Williams uses the ideas of path dependence and path creation to explore obstacles, and potential transition pathways, to making progress toward sustainable travel.

In relation to *Developing Ideas at the Level of Theories, Conceptual Frameworks or Concepts (strategy two)*, the paper's notions of transition pathways, path dependence and path creation provide linked concepts to understand continuity and change. These concepts help to track causality and the course of change, but they do not explain the fundamental, underlying causality, suggesting that they do not represent a theory. While path dependence and creation concepts are beginning to be applied in research on tourist destination development (Ma & Hassink, 2013) and on tourism governance trends (Bramwell & Cox, 2009; Pastras & Bramwell, 2013), the article innovates by applying these notions to sustainable tourist travel (*Exchanging Conceptual Ideas across Disciplinary or Subject Fields – strategy one*). The analysis also spans many subjects through considering the influences of tourist travel technology – including the effects of possible high oil prices and transport technologies – and of markets, culture, and state intervention.

The Williams article also illustrates the strategies of *Reframing an Issue or Concept so it is Looked at Differently (strategy four)*, and *Conceptualising the Operation or Importance of Processes or Relationships, Including by Developing Categories and Types (strategy five)*. Thus, the article stresses the value of historical analyses of continuity and change in order to understand the travel sector's responses to climate change and sustainability. It also contends that travel mobility trajectories may be best understood in terms of processes associated with "path-dependent path-creation", "whereby individual actors have potential to create new pathways, but these are significantly shaped by previous pathways" (Williams, 2013, p. 526).

The article's emphasis on path dependence and creation reflects research *strategy six*, of *Adding Temporal or Spatial Dimensions to Analysis to Provide New Conceptual Understanding*, and also interest in the social sciences in temporal emergence. Temporal emergence concerns "how objects come together and in their interaction acquire new causal powers", and how "different relations get changed in their relation to one another" (Cox, 2014, p. 194-5). The path dependence perspective suggests that feedback mechanisms in society are often cumulative. Thus, Williams discusses how established social and consumption routines mean that contemporary tourists are often wedded to the consumption preferences of car travel and low-cost airlines. Williams also highlights how tourism

industry decisions about sustainable travel are constrained by the need for continuing financial returns in such previous investments as tourist accommodation and airports. Yet studies of temporal emergence also indicate that social systems are often non-linear and also disproportionately sensitive to small changes in internal and external conditions. Thus, in relation to path creation, Williams argues that this unpredictability means that it may be possible to shift the rules of the game. Some potential paths might involve technological change, such as through expanding high-speed rail, and cultural changes which promote alternative visions of tourism and lifestyles.

Behavioural and systems change for sustainable tourist travel

The article by Higham, Cohen, Peeters, and Gössling (2013) considers the relative importance of behavioural change by individual tourists, compared with change in societal systems, for securing more sustainable tourist travel patterns. In relation to *Exchanging Conceptual Ideas across Disciplinary or Subject Fields (strategy one)* and *Conceptualising New Connections between Previously Separate Issues or Processes (strategy three)*, the authors explore insights offered by two social science approaches, one based more on psychology and the other more on sociology. These perspectives help to advance new understandings about behavioural change for more sustainable tourist travel. The authors also explain the context of tourist travel's relationships with climate issues, arguing, for example, that tourism is likely to have a rising share of greenhouse gas emissions. They also assert there is little prospect of innovations in transport being "game changing" and thus adequately addressing the problem.

In that context the authors compare different approaches to the choices individuals exercise in their consumption practices. Here some approaches focus on processes of individual consumer choice, based more on psychology perspectives. By contrast, other approaches focus more on how the consumption of individuals is influenced by processes associated with broad systems of consumption and provision (Bramwell & Lane, 2013; Urry, 2011). The systems of consumption are socially produced, reflecting our norms and fashions, and they become embedded in our social practices. And the systems of provision concern the technologies, infrastructures and political decisions affecting the consumption patterns of individuals (Giddens, 2009; Williams, 2013). This approach, therefore, tends to consider choice within the context of systems of constraints (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010).

Based on the insights of these two broad approaches, Higham et al. explore what contributes to, and what inhibits, behaviour change for more sustainable tourist travel. They conclude that to promote sustainability we require an improved understanding of tourist psychology and its influence on choices and behaviour. But they also contend that this alone is insufficient because radical changes are also required in our systems of consumption and provision. They argue that with our present systems of consumption, individual tourist travel habits become locked into practices that reflect our societal systems and social norms. These habits become hard to change as they express our identities and give us status. Similarly, in terms of systems of provision, our travel activities become embedded with technologies and institutions that are difficult to alter. As a consequence, there may be limited scope for voluntary behaviour change in order to reduce consumption.

From their evaluation of the two approaches the authors draw conclusions which involve *Conceptualizing Political or Ethical Issues or Processes, such as Power, Alienation or Inequality (strategy eleven)*. They argue that positioning sustainable tourism consumption as a problem of personal choice ignores the socially situated and structured nature of consumption. Instead, they assert that individual tourists should not be held responsible for the tourism industry's environmental failures. They conclude that "The efficacy of individual consumers bearing the costs (social, economic) and responsibilities (psychological, behavioural) of profoundly unsustainable consumer societies is clearly open to question" (Higham et al., 2013, p. 962). They also examine how the two approaches, and their different disciplinary bases, potentially suggest contrasting policy prescriptions to policy makers, which are likely to have different political implications. An emphasis on tourists' individual behavioural choices, for example, can have significant political advantages for industry and government interests. This illustrates how the narratives within theoretical work are not neutral "facts", rather they are instruments of power and persuasion and any associated policies can profoundly affect who wins and who loses (Peet, 1998).

The article also advances understanding by *Identifying Theoretical or Conceptual Gaps (strategy eight)* which require further work, notably by pointing to the significance of agency–structure relationships for an appreciation of the issues of behavioural and systems change for sustainable tourist travel. Agency–structure relationships have been explored in relation to sustainable destination policies (Bramwell, 2006) and tourism and poverty reduction (Erskine & Meyer, 2012), but there is scope for more use of this conceptual framework in research on behavioural responses to sustainable tourist travel (Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008).

Conclusion

The analysis here acknowledged growing recognition in tourism and sustainable tourism research of the need for theoretical activity, including engagement with conceptual ideas in other subjects. It assessed recent articles on sustainable tourism, including in-depth assessment of four articles considered exemplars for their theoretical activity. The four articles addressed theoretical notions and debates associated with political ecology, mobilities, transition pathways, and behavioural and systems change. The analysis of the articles used a typology of research strategies associated with theoretical activity. Theoretical activity is interpreted broadly to include any level of explanation that works with relatively abstract notions or ideas, even if modest. The typology embraces theories, conceptual frameworks, concepts, exchanges of theoretical notions through cross-disciplinary working, as well as more modest research strategies which can help to support theoretical activity.

The typology of research strategies can be helpful for future assessments of research in sustainable tourism. While much of the analysis focused on papers selected for their emphasis on theoretical activity, it can be contended that some sustainable tourism research does not reflect past criticisms of a lack of focus on theoretical activity in tourism research. The four exemplar articles examined here were strong at engaging with social science abstractions and debates. They also include some helpful assessment of sustainable tourism's temporal dimensions. The application in the articles of theoretical ideas associated with, for example, political ecology, mobilities and path dependence also suggests that sustainable tourism research has much to gain through further engaging with these broad social science notions.

In the articles considered for this paper, however, there is more work at the level of conceptual frameworks and concepts rather than of theories based on underlying and really fundamental causal processes. In other words, there is only a limited engagement with "big" social theories – the theories that "identify, or articulate, the basic components of the social world and the mechanisms that drive social change" (Graham, 2005, p. 264). There are exceptions, however, such as the use of political ecology in the Cole (2012) paper because of its basis in political economy and its materialist but indeterminate view of basic causal processes (Bramwell, 2007; Pastras & Bramwell, 2013). It was also evident that in the articles considered here, the theoretical ideas in science, associated with nature and the environment, tended only to provide a background context to research on social science ideas rather than being a substantial focus of detailed attention.

The assessment included consideration of how tourism and sustainable tourism research can benefit by importing theoretical ideas and debates from other subjects. Yet Mowforth and Munt (2009, p. 3) suggest that tourism research can also benefit other subjects: "At the same time as using the concepts of a range of academic and intellectual fields in order better to understand tourism, the study of tourism helps us to illuminate more general economic, political, social, geographical and environmental processes". It has also been argued that "sustainable tourism's wider engagement in the social sciences could...allow it to contribute more to general social theory" (Bramwell, 2007, p. 1). Further, Jafari (2001, p. 38) identifies an emerging reciprocal process, whereby tourism will continue to draw theoretical ideas from the social sciences, but increasingly tourism's "own emerging theories and methods will be borrowed by the same [social science] disciplines".

The last argument, however, raises questions about whether tourism research has developed, or potentially could develop, its own distinctive theories. Could tourism theories be distinguished from theoretical ideas in other disciplinary fields, or are they simply the applications of general theories to tourism phenomena? The answer to that question, however, depends on whether tourism is

considered by its very nature to be a distinctive "theoretical object" and focus of study. This question has a different focus to the question of whether tourism has developed the institutional apparatus of a discipline in the academy. There is a need for more consideration of the important but complex issue as to whether it is possible to distinguish "tourism" from "non-tourism" processes, and thus whether we can demonstrate the distinctiveness of "tourism theory" from "theory" in a more general sense (Darbellay & Stock, 2012; Hall, 2005; Pearce & Butler, 2010). It should be noted that tourism is not so different here from some other academic fields, with similar issues being debated, for example, in urban and rural studies (Harding & Blokland, 2014; Woods, 2005).

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