

## **Beyond Positivism: Studying the Experience of Family Farms Engaged in Agritourism**

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Ainley, Suzanne PhD Candidate; Phelan, Chris PhD Candidate; and Kline, Carol PhD, "Beyond Positivism: Studying the Experience of Family Farms Engaged in Agritourism" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 46.  
<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/ttra/2011/Oral/46>

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# **Beyond Positivism: Studying the Experience of Family Farms Engaged in Agritourism**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Studies into agritourism have predominately privileged positivistic methodologies and quantitative approaches. As such extant studies have highlighted the economic importance of adding tourism enterprises on farms, while not adequately uncovering or probing deep enough into the complex web of factors influencing the start-up and operating of tourism enterprises on family farms. Further the need to explore, describe and better understand the complexity of how tourism is impacting the farm, the families and rural areas continues to grow. This paper captured and documents the experience taken by three researchers while conducting independent agritourism studies following an interpretative research approach, specifically Q-Methodology, Appreciative Inquiry, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

**Keywords:** agritourism, interpretivism, Q-Methodology, Appreciative Inquiry, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, reflexivity

## **INTRODUCTION**

Family farms becoming involved in the provision of tourism is not a new phenomenon. However, commercially staged forms of tourism activities, such as pick-your-owns, corn or straw mazes, ranches, and on-farm accommodations, being run simultaneously on working family farms is becoming more popular. Indeed, the range of non-agricultural enterprises now being offered on farms is incredibly diverse and growing.

Studies carried out by tourism researchers focused on agritourism have privileged positivistic methodologies and quantitative approaches. This is not surprising based on strong evidence that tourism in general has been largely dominated by quantitative research designs and methods, in particular a fondness for surveys (Ballentyne, Packer & Axelsen, 2009; Dann, Nash & Pearce, 1988). It is also further suggested that in the early stages of development of a topic area that tourism researchers prefer quantitative approaches and agritourism is definitely a new topic having only been taken up within the past decade by tourism researchers. Although some

studies (for instance, Barbieri, 2010; Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007) do allude to a variety of reasons and a complex web of factors influencing the start-up and operation of agritourism beyond those simply motivated by economics, findings from large quantitative agritourism studies carried out by tourism researchers continue to focus on the economic motives.

Other social sciences have accepted that exploratory studies, often employing qualitative methods, are particularly beneficial during the early stages of a topics' development (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2009). Further, in cases where interpretivism is the research design of choice, the goal becomes relying as much as possible on the participants' views or their vantage point of the topic being studied while subjective meanings of their experiences are developed (Ayikoru, 2009; Creswell, 2003). Each one of the authors believe they could probe deeper and discovering more about the complexity of factors involved as family farms embraced agritourism through following an interpretative research approach. This is not to diminished the use of quantitative research approaches in studying agritourism as these have illuminated key motivations; but reductionist approaches do not obviously lend themselves to revealing aspects, such as values, meanings, and attitudes, that condition behaviour, for example, associated with lifestyle, migration, gender or family (Morrison, Carlsen & Weber, 2010). To this end, the purpose of this collaborative paper was for the authors to share their experiences of following an interpretative research approach while investigating agritourism in England, the USA and Canada. This paper starts by providing insight into the history of agritourism research by tourism researchers, and then it briefly outlines each of the independent projects carried out by the authors. In essence, this collaborative paper heeds the challenge put forward by Feighery (2006) "for us to tell another story – the story of ourselves" (p. 279) and takes a reflexive stance on our research and how we produce tourism knowledge.

## **ARGITOURISM RESEARCH**

Within the literature devoted to agritourism there remains considerable debate on the fundamental characteristics defining this phenomenon (Barbieri, 2010; Phillip, Hunter & Blackstock, 2010). What is not debated, in contrast, is its growing popularity. In fact, the OECD (2009) singled out agritourism as a special non-agricultural activity occurring on family farms requiring special attention. What makes agritourism distinct from other types of rural tourism, with which it has, unfortunately, often been equated as synonymous, is it having to occur on a working farm and not just in a rural locale (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee & Kim, 2004).

Agritourism has become important for farm families because it adds new revenue to the farm household (Barbieri, 2010; Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee & Kim, 2004). With the rising popularity to take up agritourism on farms it is no wonder studies examining agritourism operations, farms, and visitors going to agritourism enterprises are becoming increasingly prevalent (e.g. Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007; Phillip *et al.*, 2010; Sznajder, Przezborska & Scrimgeour, 2009). However, the majority of agritourism studies carried out by tourism researchers thus far have privileged positivistic methodologies, quantitative approaches, and surveys. Other factors have been alluded to; however, the reductionist and narrow categorizing of the real-life factors influencing the start-up of agritourism beyond those simply motivated by economics, have not yet been fully explored (Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007).

## **The Move Beyond Positivism**

As researchers have become more aware of the complexity of issues and factors at the root of the farm family's decision to diversify into agritourism, they have begun to recognize too, the limitations of traditional survey methodologies in delving more deeply into this complex web. Hence, to better understand all of the factors changing farming as well as the farm family, more interpretative approaches are required. The time is now right to explore the complexity of factors changing farming as well as farm families as both these icons of rural living are being threatened by obsolescence at precisely the exact time rural areas are emerging as important places for recreation, leisure and tourism. The authors argue that, instead of adopting positivist, variable-centered approaches as the norm or ideal scientific method, more attention should be given to exploratory mechanisms best suited to understanding underlying social and economic phenomena. Elsewhere, the drift towards 'scientism' and prediction in the social sciences has received widespread criticism for its misapplication of methods and techniques (Blackburn & Kovalainen, 2009).

It is the opinion of the authors that the positivistic approaches being taken when studying agritourism have contributed to the predominate motive being found for engaging in agritourism being economic at the expense of delving into the real-life experience and more complex web of factors involved. However, in considering appropriate research methodologies, it is apparent from the nature of the dimensions that quantitative, reductionist types of approaches do not obviously lend themselves to reveal the complex attitudes, values and behaviours of those farm families who elect to diversify. Indeed, this call is made in full acknowledgement that the authors have themselves previously engaged in studies which embrace quantitative techniques, and at times positivistic bias, in order to facilitate their own enquiries of agritourism, from: attempting to understand and manage the environmental impact of farm visits (Kline, Cardenas, Leung, & Sanders, 2007); determining the profile of agritourism visitors (Ainley & Smale, 2010); and evaluating the skills and competencies of farm tourism entrepreneurs (Phelan & Sharpley, In Press).

Phillimore and Goodson (2004) opened the dialogue in tourism studies to "explore the potential of qualitative research to aid in the construction of tourism knowledge," (p. 21). Moreover, the ontological and epistemological issues raised in their original collection have been further echoed by others (for instance, Ateljevic, Pritchard & Morgan, 2007; Tribe, 2009). As a contribution to this healthy debate and productive discussion on the production of tourism knowledge, the authors of this paper wish to add their thoughts specifically related to the study of agritourism by tourism researchers.

## **COMING TOGETHER TO COLLABORATE**

The authors first met in the spring of 2010 at a conference where during an informal conversation they discovered each one of them was considering a more interpretative approach for conducting agritourism research. Shared between them were feelings of frustration that the positivistic approaches taken thus far into studying agritourism were inadequate for capturing the complexity or holistic view of the phenomenon and these continued to take an objectivist perspective. Independently all were wondering if interpretative research approaches would be better suited to capture the real-life experiences and complexity of factors considered to be at

play when agritourism was considered. After the conference, their discussion continued via emails in part as a newly formed collegial friendship, but also a ‘*support group*’ encouraging each other to move beyond positivism. Since that initial conversation, each of the authors has designed and undertaken their own study following an interpretative research paradigm. Q-Methodology, Appreciative Inquiry, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis were the actual individual approaches used theoretically by each of the authors in their own independent projects conducted in England, the USA and Canada.

## **THE INDEPENDENT STUDIES**

### **Q-Methodology and Farm Tourism in the UK**

The first study was conducted by Phelan in the United Kingdom (UK), and is derived from his ongoing PhD research which seeks to understand the entrepreneurial personality of farmers who have diversified into tourism enterprises. Often, farms diversify as a result of the ongoing structural changes to farming and reform of the European ‘Common Agricultural Policy’ which in turn encourages farm households to be more market oriented and to identify new sources of farm income. Moreover, whilst the North American farm tourism literature has long identified the farmer as an entrepreneurial individual (for instance, Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee & Kim, 2004), the same has not always been true of the European literature. Thus the intention of the UK project was to explore the entrepreneurial skills and competencies that farmers identify as critical for success. In achieving this end, it became clear from the results of the initial survey that farmers lacked many of the fundamental business competencies required for success, with respondents rating managerial skills more highly than those entrepreneurial competencies which the literature identifies as essential, as in for instance: the ‘discovery, evaluation and exploitation of opportunities’ (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000, p. 218); or those Morgan *et al.*, (2010) describe as higher order skills, namely networking and utilizing contacts, as well as creating and evaluating a business strategy.

In drawing these preliminary conclusions, it became apparent to Phelan that the emphasis of his project would need to move from what had originally been a competency based study, toward one which questioned the entrepreneurial identity, subjectivities and perceptual frameworks of agritourism operators. A change which necessitated more reflexive and critical forms of inquiry and which has ultimately led him to adopt a technique known as Q-methodology; which proponents argue ‘overcomes many of the shortcomings of positivistic research by providing a technique for the objective study of human subjectivity’ (Brown, Durning & Selden, 1998, p.606). Indeed, ‘Q’ is said to provide a foundation for the systematic study of subjectivity, therein a person’s viewpoint, opinion, beliefs and attitudes are incorporated/considered (Brown, 1980). Thus within ‘Q’, interest centers upon, ‘how actors come to know and make meaning and sense of their worlds from their own perspectives and experiences,’ (Previte, Pini & Haslam-McKenzie, 2007, p.141).

Q-Methodology originated in the discipline of psychology (Stephenson, 1953), and remains a relatively unknown and underutilized technique across other disciplines and where it does occur, is frequently described as an innovative research approach (Eden, Donaldson, & Walker, 2005). However, of late, ‘Q’ has increasingly found a home for itself within the social sciences and is advocated by Stergiou and Airey (In Press) as a ‘new research technique’, to aid the ‘critical turn’ away from traditional positivist approaches that dominate tourism research.

Whilst space here does not allow for a full discussion of its research design (see instead, McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2005) it is useful to note that 'Q' is comprised of five stages. The first stage starts with developing the 'concourse' or identifying the range of issues that exist on a subject. Then the process progresses through various steps involving a series of dialogues with respondents where they ultimately sort and rank statements across a 9 to 11 point scale according to their views on the range of issues in question. The resulting Q-sorts are then subject to an inverted factor analysis at stage five, using specialist software applications designed specifically for Q-Methodology. More specifically, in Phelan's work, a Q-sample was developed that reflected the wide body of knowledge on the topic, with for instance themes identified as the 'foci- for entrepreneurship research in cross-disciplinary studies' such as the individual-opportunity nexus, entrepreneurial risk and identity construction (Duane & Webb, 2007, p.916), through to those associated with farming styles and sub-cultures (Nuthall, 2010).

Here, tourism researchers seeking alternatives to the positivistic tradition may be surprised to note the element of quantification and statistical analysis that 'Q' embraces. At its core, Q-Methodology assumes that subjectivity has a measurable structure and central to 'Q' is the notion that the respondent gives meaning to the statements by sorting them and thus the technique can be used to describe a population of viewpoints, and not – as is the case with more traditional methodologies – a population of people (Brown, 1993). It is essentially the individuals in a Q-study who do the measuring rather than being measured themselves. With the insights from 'Q', allowing us to see if there are shared patterns across individuals, whilst the factors (or discourses), provide order in a way that is both structured and interpretable by the researcher. This, proponents of 'Q' argue, makes the technique particularly suited to situations where there is 'much debate, conflict and contestation' and where the 'express aim is to elicit a range of voices, accounts and understandings' (Barry & Proops, 1999, p.339). Interestingly, the fact that 'Q' extracts subjective opinion using factor analytical techniques has allowed some scholars to emphasize the 'scientific' basis of the approach (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Whilst those in the domain of psychology - where 'Q' has its origins - propose that in spite of its attempts at quantification, the technique is in fact a 'qualitative method', which one must acknowledge would seem to be at odds with the discussion herein and lead to understandable confusion in the mind of the reader. What is clear however is that at its core is its rejection of 'quantitative logic' and the 'hypothetico-deductive' methods that have more traditionally been viewed as science. With those championing 'Q' reminding us that it was designed for the very purpose of challenging the Newtonian logic of 'testing' that dominated psychology at the time (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

In Phelan's mind, the decision to adopt Q-Methodology was one which allowed him to integrate both qualitative and quantitative techniques in his project. The decision to reject positivism as an epistemic orientation was an attempt to find additional meaning in the role of farmers as rural entrepreneurs where his earlier quantitative phase had generated additional and more complex research questions. For Phelan the potential of 'Q' to offer participant-led subjective expressions and viewpoints and in particular the potential for qualitative analysis of his results in the form of factors (or discourses) lent itself to providing a much needed 'voice' to the farmer on issues that are widely debated but unlikely to be easily resolved in the academic and policy debates surrounding European agriculture.

## **Appreciative Inquiry in the USA**

The second study, conducted in the USA, combined an appreciative inquiry approach with a framework of entrepreneurial climate. A focus group of ten farmers affiliated with the North Carolina Agritourism Networking Association (NCANA) was conducted with the purpose of assessing a) the progress of the association since its inception and b) the state of agritourism within North Carolina, and c) how NCANA and other conditions, initiatives, or regulations in the state support agritourism entrepreneurship.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) guided the tone and purpose of the interviews. AI is the idea that organizations identify and converge on what works, rather than on problems to be resolved (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI consists of a four-stage system of inquiry, discovery, dream, design and destiny that helps participants envision their collective positive potential (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Raymond & Hall, 2008b). The focus group questions in this study were structured so that respondents would focus on the beneficial aspects of the organization that governed the programs, the positive outcomes that resulted from the programs, and the reasons behind their success. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on the entrepreneurial climate, specifically the elements in place in their local area or at the state level. Appreciative Inquiry has been increasingly and globally employed in community-based development practice (Chapagain, 2004; Odell, 2002), conservation projects (Bennett, Lemelin, Johnston, & Lutsël K'e Dene First Nation, 2010; Jackson & Wangchuk, 2001), and tourism research (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Lama, 2000; Raymond & Hall, 2008a).

The focus group participants were told about the research framework of AI and that the discussion would accentuate the positive things about NCANA and North Carolina, and “what is working” in agritourism in the current structure/ climate. Participants were expressly told that the session is “*not about problem solving, venting or thinking about ‘what if’ or ‘if only’ scenarios. It is about looking at previous positive impacts, current positive programs, and analyzing what works and why.*” Four discussion topics were used to guide the focus group. So that focus group participants began with a common bank of knowledge regarding entrepreneurial climate, a short introduction was given by the facilitator and participants were provided a list of key elements needed for rural tourism development (Kline & Milburn, 2010).

The results of the focus group identified a common identity and issues that farmers from disparate areas and backgrounds yield in being agritourism entrepreneurs. Through the NCANA, members feel unity in a higher educational purpose, believe that they benefit from a collective voice, and cited several tangible benefits such as access to liability signage for their farm, greater understanding about liability on the farm, connections to insurance providers for agritourism operators, and knowledge of local and state level legislation that can affect an agritourism farm.

Focus group participants strongly voiced appreciation to NCANA for advancement of their business goals, and strengthening a statewide community of agritourism farmers. The role of NCANA was critical to entrepreneur support, particularly in providing networking opportunities, encouraging pride in farming as a career and lifestyle, increasing self-confidence of agritourism operators, and instilling an air of credibility to agritourism as a “real” part of farming. In terms of entrepreneurial climate, the group agreed that by affecting the individual and collective self-efficacy of agritourism operators, the operators felt empowered to affect many

of the elements of entrepreneurial climate in their community and listed on the focus group prompt.

Themes organically emerged from the conversation. Over-riding concepts of empowerment, individual and collective self-efficacy, increased awareness, knowledge, and skills surfaced through consensus of the participants. Through the networking function of the association, members felt empowered 1) to interact with leaders in their local community on matters of business and community planning, 2) as if they were part of something larger than themselves – a collective mission to educate about food sources and farming, and 3) that they had a collective voice in legislative or commerce decisions that affected the state. They also felt a sense of comfort and camaraderie when faced with obstacles, however, because of the positive bend to the focus group through AI, current and past problematic issues in agritourism were not explored. According to this group of thirteen, the NCANA has clearly affected the human, social and political capital of its members (Flora & Flora, 2004).

### **IPA in Canada**

The final study was conducted in Ontario, Canada, and similar to Phelan, it was conducted as part of a PhD dissertation. It was while working in community economic development (CED) in rural Ontario that Suzanne became fascinated and perplexed by farmers choosing to diversify into agritourism. Her first impression was similar to those reflected by many others that simply adding tourism enterprises to the farm generated much needed revenue. In reality; however, a more complex web of reasons, many of them altruistic or pragmatic, seemed to be involved as farm families decided to diversify. Even though some agritourism studies do allude to multiple reasons being involved as a farm diversifies (e.g., external factors and social motives – farming as a way of life & farm legacy, sharing rural experience & educate visitors, civic mindedness, to help the local community, pursuing a hobby, observing others success, urban encroachment, loss of government agriculture subsidy programs, to meet a need in the recreation/tourism market), the focus of most studies remains grounded in economics. The families we study in agritourism remain largely ignorant of the lived experiences of farm families who choose to engage in agritourism. Furthermore, how can we provide advice to agritourism operators or family farms wishing to make the transition if we've never bothered to understand it from their perspective? Therefore, the purpose of the study carried out in Ontario, Canada, was to explore the experiences of farm families as they started and operated agritourism enterprises on their farms. In particular this study probed in-depth into the family dimension, the dynamics and relationships as these farm families diversified and operated agritourism on the family farm.

The decision taken by Ainley to follow a phenomenological approach rather than simply sending out a self-administered survey was a difficult one. However, the power of using a phenomenological approach lies in exploring in-depth what meaningful experiences and essential structures are associated with a phenomenon. As a bottom-up or inductive approach for understanding reality which emphasizes the role of the “things themselves”, phenomenology presents what is meaningful to individuals in everyday experience (Berglund, 2007; Jordan & Gibson, 2004; Szarycz, 2009). Van Manen (1997) argues that phenomenology contributes to the discursive tradition by providing detailed illustrations of how prevailing discourses are interpreted and made sense of, or by constructing novel narratives based on how individuals



think about and deal with specific issues. It is especially well suited for investigating the gaps between real-life occurrences and theoretical concepts on the one hand and individual's interpretations of these occurrences on the other.

For the Canadian study, three multi-generational family farms actively engaged in agritourism within Ontario participated. Unlike many of the previous studies into agritourism which just involved one member of the family, usually the farmer, this study in contrast interviewed as many members of each farm family as possible. Data were collected through a combination of observations and 17 face-to-face active interviews. In addition, the researcher kept a reflective research journal. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim to be used for analysis. An approach pioneered in psychology, called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009) guided the actual analysis. It was hoped by following IPA's steps and procedures that Suzanne might address some of the shortcomings being raised about the use of phenomenological approaches in tourism research, in particular the philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology not being embraced when its' methods are used (Szarycz, 2009).

The results revealed in the Canadian study further described the underlying motives for starting agritourism enterprises on family farms. Getting into agritourism was time and time again articulated as occurring through a series of smaller, incremental decisions usually over several years as the farm evolved into agritourism. By looking at a phenomenon from a new perspective our understanding of what that phenomenon is and how it occurs is expanded, also clarity may be found about our taken-for-granted beliefs or assumptions of it (Smith *et al.*, 2009). It must be kept in mind that "phenomenological research aims not to statistically generalize but to understand experience" (Valle & Halling, 1989 cited in Szarycz, 2009). Within this study, the narratives shed light on and also heightened how different members of the families have been involved, as well as themes about agritourism reclaiming the family farm, re-integrating farming with the community, fostering an entrepreneurial spirit, and the continuous adaption of the farm for future generations.

## **DISCUSSION**

In putting this paper together, it was interesting to find that each of the authors borrowed methods used, proven and accepted in other fields or disciplines. This perhaps speaks to a shared background in community development amongst the authors where not only are qualitative approaches often used but there is a comfort with being inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary. Alternatively, the authors may feel they are theoretically obliged when bringing interpretative research approaches into a positivistic dominated field, such as tourism, to demonstrate and prove it is acceptable. Doing this may address the need for methodologically sophistication in tourism. Tourism as a field should celebrate its rich methodological variation and embrace the methodological pluralism brought to it by its inter- and multi-disciplinary researchers. The study of agritourism, where research has already been conducted into the topic from rural sociology, business, entrepreneurship, economics, geography, community development, not to mention tourism, may be a fertile topic where tourism researchers are encouraged to celebrate methodological diversity and pluralism.

Although looking at a phenomenon from a new perspective is important, it is equally important to develop a broader awareness and familiarity with existing methods and combinations thereof. The reason for using interpretative methods in each of these independent studies was to add greater depth and value to existing knowledge about agritourism on family farms. The qualitative methods were not perceived as superior or alternative to quantitative methods, but rather they were obvious choices dictated by the nature of the research, its research questions, and the background knowledge each one of the researchers brought to their respective studies. Such endeavors do not render research results incommensurable, but rather they may facilitate a greater methodological pluralism and more holistic understanding of agritourism diversification on the family farm. The fleshing out of possible motivations through the voice and vantage point of farmers or family members actively engaging in agritourism has been very beneficial. With a deeper and more holistic understanding on the phenomenon of agritourism farmers, family farms, as well as policy makers and government official may be able to act in the best interest of rural families and rural communities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Within the social sciences researchers often need to have a clear sense of the real-life settings of the topic they are studying. Some degree of direct experience is necessary to understand the practical, technical, social and psychological dimensions. As Neergaard and Ulhoi (2007) suggested for entrepreneurship, “the full scope and dynamics of entrepreneurship may possibly only be fully understood if the researcher has been actively involved in entrepreneurial activities” (p. 478), and indeed the same may hold for agritourism. What would be discovered or revealed if an agritourism study were actually carried out by an agritourism operator within the phenomenon itself rather than externally by academic researchers?

Nonetheless, the benefits derived of being directly involved and not at arm’s length when each of the authors carried out their data collection and analysis have been insightful. It is in and through a close interaction with the topic that we become familiar and gain insight into the phenomenon. This closeness to the ‘things themselves’ is essential to advance the level of understanding about agritourism, the decisions being made within family farms to diversify into agritourism, the process taken by these families, and the consequences. Qualitative methods invite the researcher to observe, talk, listen and interact with real-life people involved in the topic being studied, in our case, this being agritourism. The active interaction occurring between those immersed in the topic and the researcher helps capture the ‘intangibles’, the tacit and not immediately observable knowledge, those events and occurrences taken for granted and insignificant to those immersed in the phenomenon.

Although differences in opinion about interpretivism ‘*giving voice*’ it does help improve what is understood if the experiences of others become embodied. The contributions made by each one of the author’s own studies have been to embody the experiences, and give voice and life to otherwise faceless statistical findings. Finally in taking a reflexive turn, the authors have contributed to the promotion of “us telling the story of ourselves rather than just speaking for others as a useful and enlightening process that de-shrouds the often hidden process of knowledge construction within our own epistemological journey” (Everett, 2010, p. 162). The exercise of documenting and sharing our experience through this paper and subsequent

presentation at TTRA International this coming June is just one more conversation in the ongoing conversation about moving beyond positivism in (agri)tourism studies.

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