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# Using the CMM Theoretical Lens to Deconstruct Problematic Discourse Regarding Quality and Rigor in Tourism Research: Can Transparency Bridge the Metatheoretical Divide?

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# **Using the CMM Theoretical Lens to Deconstruct Problematic Discourse Regarding Quality and Rigor in Tourism Research: Can Transparency Bridge the Metatheoretical Divide?**

## **Introduction**

While reviewers aim to ensure that published research is both rigorous and of high quality, what counts as rigor and quality is inherently embedded in the reviewer's own premise of how we come to know the things we know (i.e., ontological and epistemological assumptions or world view). Becoming a gatekeeper of knowledge creation and dissemination is a serious responsibility and is neither value-neutral (Lugosi, 2009; Lugosi, Lynch, & Morrison, 2009; Tribe, 2006, 2010; Tribe, Xiao, & Chambers, 2012; Westwood, Morgan, & Pritchard, 2006) nor should it privilege one world view over others thus empowering some researchers and silencing others.

On the one hand, we find evidence that scholarship in hospitality and tourism is becoming more diverse. For example, recent scholarly articles assessing the types of papers that are published in hospitality (Lugosi et al., 2009) and tourism (Tribe et al, 2012) journals report that articles situated in the critical, interpretive paradigm are becoming more prevalent. At the same time, these articles also suggest that more transparency and critical reflection by gatekeepers is needed in order to give voice to those still silenced by the academy.

On the other, we find evidence that, for the most part, hospitality and tourism scholars use traditional methods of analysis. For example, Tribe et al. (2012, pp. 22-23) say that quantitatively oriented papers employ factor and regression analysis, forecasting, as well as econometric and structural equation modeling; qualitatively oriented papers employ content and thematic analysis, narrative and critical discourse analysis, and grounded theory methodology.

We laude critical reflexive articles, such as the ones mentioned above, about the state of our knowledge production and the beginning discussions on the difference between methodology and method (Tribe et al., 2012), evaluative criteria for conceptual research (Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013), or the evaluation of quality in interdisciplinary research (Oviedo-García, 2016). However, we remain concerned about the lack of serious discussion in our journals about the metatheoretical underpinnings of our individual world view as scholars and how these assumptions impact our research, or how the personal and collective metatheoretical assumptions of the gatekeepers of knowledge inhibit or enable the production and dissemination of new knowledge. That is not to say that individual researchers who locate themselves in non-positivist paradigms fail to reflexively acknowledge their positionality in their research. On the contrary, positionality and context are integral to their scholarly work. The lack of disclosure or reflexivity on the part of positivist and post-positivist scholars and gatekeepers is, to borrow from Denzin (2009), the elephant in the room. Or said another way, those members of the academy who know or care little about the nuances of their own metatheoretical assumptions, let alone the metatheoretical assumptions of those who hold competing or different assumptions keep our discipline from developing new theory instead of borrowing or adapting theories from other disciplines. We agree with Pearce (1977, p. 3) who says that productive discussions about metatheoretical assumptions can only occur when scholars have the ability to articulate their own assumptions as well as the assumptions of other scholars who do not share the same assumptions and that this ability is not common.

The purpose of this paper is to begin the examination of differing metatheoretical assumptions that underpin academic research and the assessment of quality and rigor by gatekeepers in the academy and to suggest the utility of using the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) – a communication theory and analytical tool - for deconstructing and making transparent the problematic discourse about quality and rigor that continues to occur in the academy.

We begin the paper with a hierarchical depiction of the metatheoretical assumptions that underpin the research process and a brief comparison of the differing metatheoretical assumptions in the four most prevalent research paradigms in the social sciences – positivism, post-positivism, interpretive/constructivist, and interpretive/critical. We then provide a brief overview of CMM. We conclude with an example of how CMM facilitates transparency in discourse that is contentious and problematic and suggest ways in which the academy may potentially move beyond incommensurate views on quality and rigor.

### **Metatheoretical Assumptions Underpinning Academic Research**

Although few tourism-related academic papers, particularly those adopting a quantitative approach, engage in dialogues about ontology and epistemology (Tribe et al., 2012, p. 20), discussions about metatheoretical assumptions underpinning academic research and the importance of having these discussions is not new to the research academy at large. For example; Denzin (2009), Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2011), Guba, and Lincoln, (1994), Goodman and Phillimore (2004), Miller (2000), Morrow (2005), Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2008), and Pearce (1977) provide both cogent overviews of these assumptions and their importance. One of the key threads that runs either implicitly or explicitly through these examples is transparency.

In order to make the transparency issues more visible, we provide a hierarchical diagram (see Figure 1) of the metatheoretical assumptions underpinning research and their relationship to the production and assessment of knowledge. Research paradigms (i.e., world views) reside at the top of the hierarchy and embody the belief systems and positionality of the researcher and the knowledge they produce. Ontological and epistemological assumptions are part and partial of these research paradigms and place boundaries on the nature of reality and what can be known as well as the relationship of the researcher to what can be known. These, in turn, place boundaries on the framework of the inquiry (sometimes called methodological framework) which includes teleological, methodological, and axiological assumptions which operate in tandem.

Theological assumptions contain the purpose and goals of the inquiry and are tied to the relationship of how the inquirer can seek knowledge. Methodological assumptions contain the relationship of how the inquirer can seek knowledge to what can be known. Axiological assumptions delimit the role and influence of values and ethics in the inquiry and are also tied to the way in which the inquirer can seek knowledge. Methods (i.e., the techniques used for inquiry) are bound by the methodological framework of the inquiry which is bound by the ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in the research paradigm. Specific methods or techniques of inquiry should be selected on the basis of their utility in the inquiry process.

The nature of knowledge produced (i.e., its truth, rigor, goodness, or quality criteria) is deeply embedded in the entire metatheoretical assumptions underpinning the research process from the choices made by the inquirer to those made by the gatekeepers of the academy. Instead of operating transparently in the foreground, it is too often relegated to the background or even to the closet as an open and inclusive dialogue about quality and rigor and the criteria one uses to ascertain the goodness of knowledge produced is steeped in the incommensurate nature of competing world views.

**Figure 1. Hierarchical Depiction of the Metatheoretical Assumptions that Underpin the Research Process**

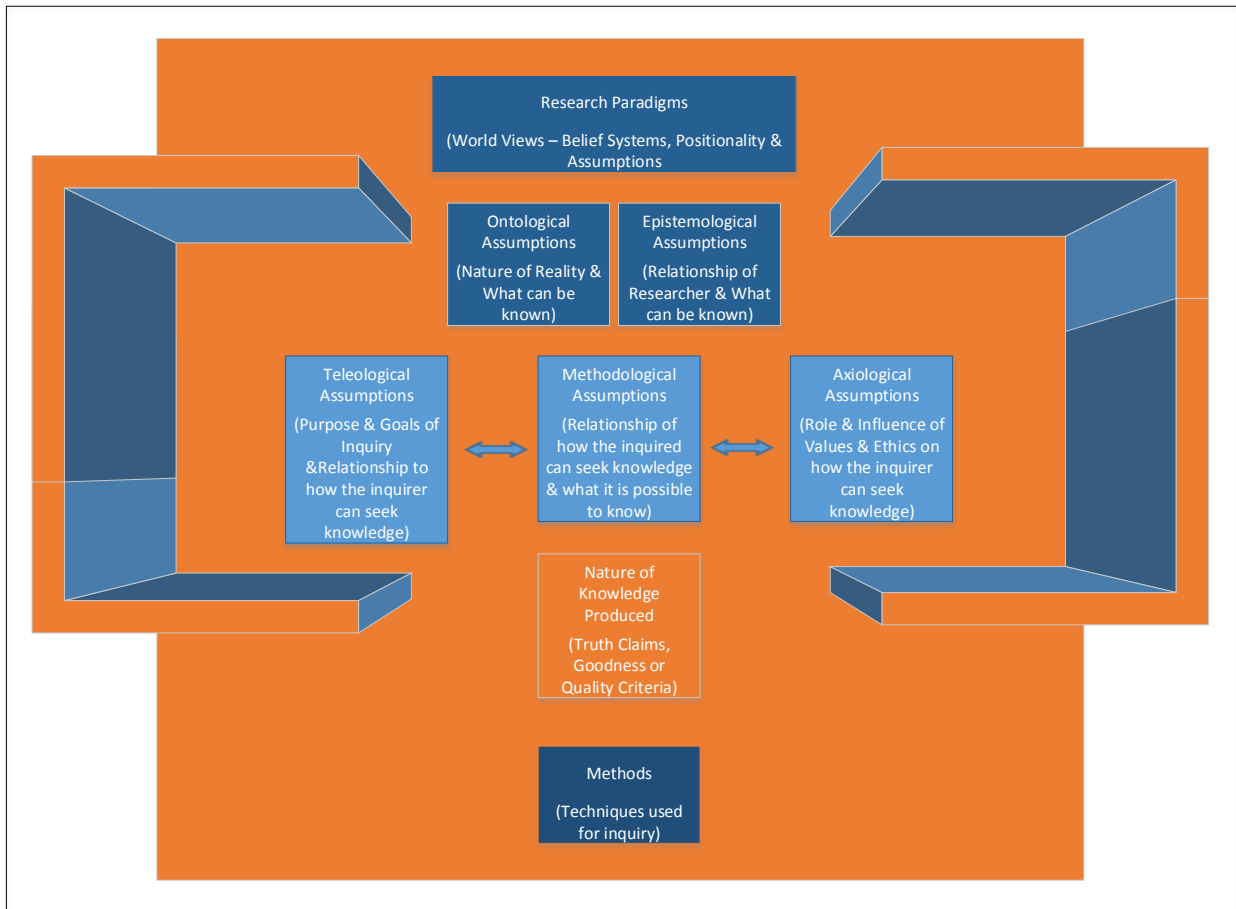


Table 1 provides a brief comparison of the differing metatheoretical assumptions in the four most prevalent research paradigms in the social sciences – positivism, post-positivism, interpretive/constructivist, and interpretive/critical. This composite view is adapted from Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2011), Guba and Lincoln (1994), Miller (2000), Morrow (2005), Morse et al. (2008) and Pearce (1977) and is presented here without discussion expect to say that it is a snapshot taken by the authors of this paper and that it is comprehensive yet inexhaustive in scope.

**Table 1: Comparison of Metatheoretical Assumptions in Four Most Prevalent Research Paradigms in the Social Sciences**

Research Paradigms	Ontological Assumptions	Epistemological Assumptions	Methodological Assumptions	Axiological Assumptions	Teleological Assumptions	Nature of Knowledge Produced	Methods
<i>(World Views – Belief Systems, Positionality &amp; Assumptions)</i>	<i>(Nature of Reality &amp; What can be known)</i>	<i>(Relationship of Researcher &amp; What can be known)</i>	<i>(Relationship of how the inquirer can seek knowledge &amp; What it is possible to know)</i>	<i>(Role &amp; Influence of Values &amp; Ethics on how the inquirer can seek knowledge)</i>	<i>(Purpose &amp; Goals of Inquiry &amp; Relationship to how the inquirer can seek knowledge)</i>	<i>(Truth Claims, Goodness or Quality Criteria)</i>	<i>(Techniques used for inquiry)</i>
<b>Positivist</b>	One truth or reality out there to be discovered; Naïve Realism	Dualist, Objectivist- Discover the truth	Deduce, Explain, Laws (Quantitative) – Emphasis causal relationships variables	Value Neutral, Detached, Tilt toward deception	Predict, Control, Explain – Universal Laws	One Criteria for Quality; Internal/External Validity, Reliability, Objectivity	Limited traditional techniques used for collection and analysis of data
<b>Post-Positivist</b>	One truth or reality out there to be imperfectly, probabilistically known; Critical Realism	Modified Dualist, Objectivist – Approximate truth	Deduce, Replicate, Generalize (Quantitative) – Emphasis causal relationships variables	Value Neutral, Detached, Tilt toward deception	Predict, Control, Explain - Generalizable	One Criteria for Quality; Internal/External Validity, Reliability, Objectivity	Limited traditional techniques used for collection and analysis of data
<b>Interpretive (Constructivist)</b>	Multiple Realities, Truths Socially Co-constructed; Relativism Apprehendable realities	Subjectivist; Transactional; Co-created truths	Induce, Co-create, Hermeneutic, Dialectic, (Qualitative) – Emphasis processes and meanings	Value Laden, Enmeshed in co-creation, Tilt toward revelation	Understanding, Reconstruction	Multiple Criteria for Quality; Example - Trustworthiness, Credibility, Transferability, Confirmability	Multiple varied techniques used for collection and analysis of empirical materials (i.e., data)
<b>Interpretive (Critical)</b>	Multiple Realities, Socially Constructed; Historical realism; Apprehendable realities	Subjectivist; Transactional; Value-mediated truths	Dialogic, Dialectical (Qualitative) – Emphasis processes and meanings	Value Laden, Enmeshed in Structures of Power & Control, Tilt toward revelation	Critique, Transformation, Restitution, Emancipation, Empowerment	Multiple Criteria for Quality; Example - Historical Situatedness, Erosion of Ignorance, Action Stimulus	Multiple varied techniques used for collection and analysis of empirical materials (i.e., data)

## **The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) and its Location within the Discourse of Communication and Communication Theory**

Just as the definition of tourism has evolved from being a service industry to becoming a significant social institution (Smith & Eadington, 1992, xiii.), so too has the definition of communication. The Shannon and Weaver (1949) sender/receiver, linear model of communication defines communication as the transmission of messages. And, from this perspective, if we are able to accurately, effectively convey these messages using the appropriate channel(s), then successful communication occurs; unsuccessful communication is characterized as a breakdown. While this transmission definition of communication is still widely used, it is as limited and shallow as defining tourism as merely a service industry. Evolving definitions of communication discuss "how messages, or texts, interact with people in order to produce meanings" (Fiske, 1982, p.2). Of the many evolving definitions, the following one illuminates the nature of the process of communication that is embraced by the authors of this paper and forms the basis of the meaning of communication practices in CMM: Communication is a form of action [interpreted here to mean both verbal and non-verbal] that is contextually situated, has meaning and intentionally, and creates as well as reflects perceptions of reality(ies) (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, pp. 75-89). Or stated in a more general way, communication is "the process by which persons collectively create and manage social reality" (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, p. 7).

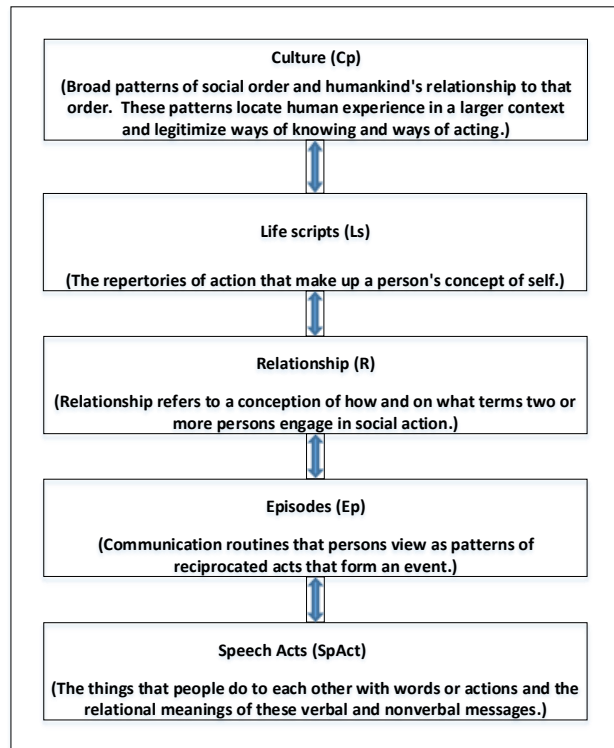
As a theoretical perspective, CMM initially emerged in the 1970s as a rules-based interpersonal communication theory (Pearce, 1976) within the interpretive social sciences and solidified in the seminal work of Pearce and Cronen (1980). In the 1980s it progressed into the critical realm (Chen, 2004; Cronen, Chen, & Pearce, 1988). From there, it transitioned into a practical theory (Barge, 2004; Cronen, 1994, 2001) all the while gaining acceptance into the academy as both a communication theory and analytical lens (Philipsen, 1995; Salmo & Faris, 2006). For an overview of its development see Barge and Pearce (2004) and Littlejohn and McNamee (2014).

A critique of this body of work is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, CMM has evolved over the past 40+ years by and through the scholarship of W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon E. Cronen and their colleagues.

So if CMM is both an interpretive-constructivist/critical/practical communication theory as well as an analytical device, how does it work and what utility does it bring to the research process?

Pearce and Cronen (1980) say that social meaning is hierarchically organized in such a way that one level of hierarchy is the context for the interpretation of the content of the other levels. Figure 2, adapted from Cronen, Pearce, and Harris (1979, pp. 22-28) and Pearce and Cronen (1980, pp. 130-138), makes explicit the level of context in the CMM hierarchical model.

**Figure 2. Levels of Context in the CMM Hierarchical Model of Organized Meanings**



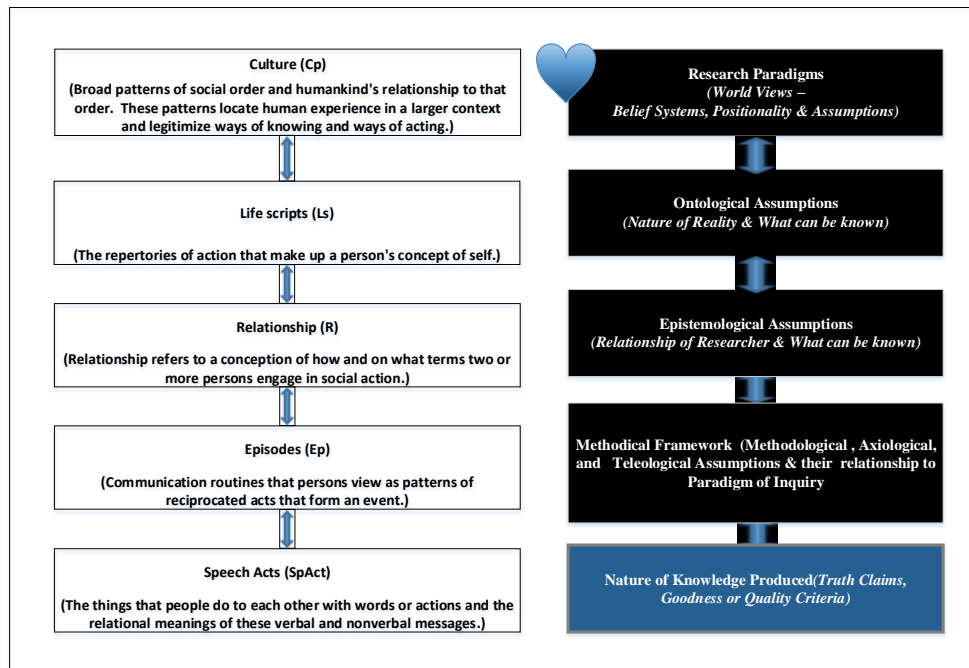
As a theory, CMM explores the nature of the relationship between structure (i.e., "the organizations of meaning and repertoires of acts that persons possess") and action (i.e., "the conjointly produced sequences of behaviors") (Cronen, Pearce, & Tomm, 1985, P. 205). Cronen et al. (1985) claim that this relationship between structure and action is reflexive in that structure evolves within coordinated patterns of action. And, as it becomes a recognizable structure, it guides further action. In order to identify the structures held by two or more people and the particular patterns of action they collectively engage in, CMM locates structure and action within a system of rules which are defined as accounts of how persons assimilate information (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, p. 139).

While including both conscious and unconscious deontic operators that indicate the moral/social force perceived to operate on one's choice of action, regulative rules are also subject to "prefigurative force" and "practical force" (Cronen & Pearce, 1985, pp. 73-74). "Prefigurative force" refers to pre-existing circumstances (such as life script, relationship, the episode in process, or some antecedent act) that control or determine a person's choice of action. In every-day language use it is associated with the notion of "I did that because of..." "Practical force," on the other hand, refers to a person's conscious decision to make one choice of action as opposed to some other possible choice of action. In every-day language use it is associated with the notions of "I did that in order to..." and "I had to do that no matter what" [some other person would say or do] (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, pp. 164-165).

The levels of context in the CMM Hierarchical Model of Organized Meanings, as shown in Figure 2, are also subject to rules of relationship. Cronen, Johnson, and Lannamann (1982) describe these rules of relationship in terms of "contextual force," "implicative force," and "reflexive loops." "Contextual force" refers to meanings that are shaped at the higher level of the hierarchical model and that move in a down-ward direction to define meanings at the lower level of the hierarchical model. Weaker than the "contextual force," the "implicative force" refers to meanings that are shaped at the lower level of the hierarchical model and that move in an upward direction to impact meanings at the higher level of the hierarchical model. "Reflexive loops" occur when two levels of meaning are organized in such a way that each is simultaneously the content for and within the context of the other. In CMM logic, reflexive loops may be divided into two distinguishable and mutually exclusive types: "strange" loops (↻) and "charmed" loops (♥). "Strange" loops occur when "two levels of meaning cannot exchange hierarchical position without changing the meaning of one of them" (Cronen et al., 1982, p. 101). "Charmed" loops, on the other hand, occur when two levels of meaning can exchange hierarchical positions without any change in meaning.

Figure 3 shows how CMM might be able to facilitate transparency in discourse about metatheoretical assumptions that are hierarchical in nature. The example given, locates the episode of the research process (i.e., the production of knowledge) and requisite hierarchies in a "charmed" relationship with each other. This would suggest that activities at the Speech Acts level – in this example, the assessment of the rigor and quality of knowledge produced by an academic paper – are commensurate. In this instance, the reviewer would most likely subscribe to or at least value the world view that is implicitly or explicitly conveyed in the paper. Very different, repetitive and problematic "strange" loops would indicate incommensurability.

**Figure 3. Facilitating Transparency in Discourse about Metatheoretical Assumption and the Assessment of Rigor and Quality – A CMM Example**





## Conclusions and Recommendations

We contend that as long as the metatheoretical assumptions of producers and gatekeepers of knowledge remain hidden or misunderstood, problematic discourse regarding the assessment of quality and rigor will have little chance of improving.

In addition, we argue that the development of these assumptions is situated in communication practices and that the problematic discourse that continues to occur in the academy is more than irreconcilable differences. Instead, we suggest that it exemplifies entrenchment and the politics and perceived ownership of rigor. For example, if we adopt the assumptions of rigor posed by Murphy, Olaru, and Hofacker (2009), then all forms of qualitative research would not exhibit rigor.

This calls again into question the composition of editorial boards. Other than country of origin and academic institution, little is said about the gender of members of the review boards of academic journals, let alone the world view that these members privilege. Of the top three tourism journals (i.e., *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Tourism Management*), only *JTR* lists the first names of Board Members on its website; thus further obscuring the gender of members. We believe that a more systemic and transparent assessment of the world views of these gatekeepers is needed.

Moreover, we contend that the very nature of tourism (i.e., the phenomena we examine and write papers about) is experiential human interaction and thus situated in communication. Shames and Glover (1989) capture this experiential experience by positing the notion that the "service experience" of tourism is a "social experience" comprised of "human interaction" whose "nature or form is determined by the culture or cultures of the interacting individuals" (p. 2).

If the phenomena we study and the ontological and epistemological assumptions we develop as members of the academe are inherently situated in communication practices, then why have we, as scholars, not utilized more complex communication theories or methods to help us better understand our phenomena of study or address incommensurate views regarding the assessment of rigor and quality in tourism research? To this end, we suggest that a theoretical and analytical lens such as CMM might help our discipline examine in social interaction, particularly problematic discourse.

Lastly, we believe that we have contributed to the knowledge about the metatheoretical assumptions inherent in the research process and offered a communication-based theoretical lens for examining social interaction.

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