

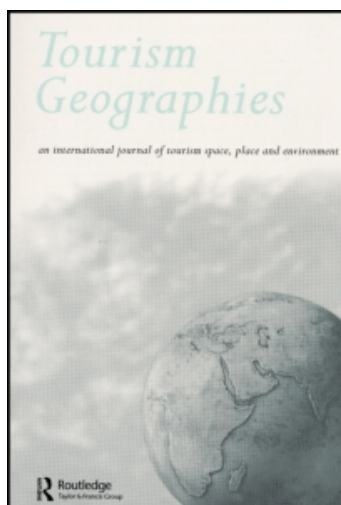
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Appreciative Inquiry and Rural Tourism: A Case Study from Canada

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ABSTRACT *Many Canadian, resource-based communities are facing an economic crisis and often turn to tourism for economic diversification and some recent trends in the growth of tourism employment in Canada's rural areas suggest that such choices are well founded. Despite positive growth indicators, rural tourism is criticized for several reasons, including issues with employment, ownership and lack of understanding of the industry. Although much has been written on the development of community-based tourism and its potential to address such concerns, much of the discussion remains at theoretical levels, with few examinations of practical frameworks for rural communities in crisis, such as the current experience in North-western Ontario, Canada. Enquiries into tourism's contribution to rural community economic development identified two gaps concerning how rural tourism can be a viable industry in resource-dependent communities and how to embed the industry within a community seeking alternatives from a deficit/crisis context. Interviews with a tourism operator in rural Manitoba, Canada seemed to provide an answer to both of these questions, through the application of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to rural tourism development. Such an examination indicates that although such an approach does not solve the issues, it does provide a new lens through which to understand the potential for tourism in rural communities.*

KEY WORDS: Appreciative inquiry, economic development, rural tourism development

Résumé: 'Recherche Appréciative' et le tourisme rural: un cas d'étude canadien

De nombreuses communautés canadiennes qui vivaient de leurs ressources naturelles se trouvent face à une crise économique et se tournent souvent vers le tourisme pour diversifier leurs économies. La croissance récente de l'emploi dans le domaine du tourisme en zones rurales au Canada suggère que c'est un choix approprié. Toutefois, malgré des indices de développement positifs, le tourisme rural est critiqué pour plusieurs raisons: problèmes de l'emploi, de propriété et manque de compréhension de cette activité. Bien qu'on ait beaucoup écrit au sujet du développement d'un tourisme implanté dans la communauté locale à cause de son potentiel pour résoudre de telles préoccupations, la discussion demeure à un niveau théorique. On voit peu de propositions de cadres pratiques pour les communautés rurales en crise, comme celles du nord ouest de l'Ontario au Canada. Les études sur la contribution du tourisme au développement économique des communautés rurales a identifié deux lacunes relatives au tourisme rural comme activité économique viable dans des communautés qui dépendent de leurs ressources naturelles et à la façon d'incorporer cette activité dans une

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communauté qui cherche des alternatives dans un contexte de crise. Des interviews avec un opérateur de tourisme dans le Manitoba rural au Canada semblent procurer une réponse à ces deux questions grâce à l'application d'une 'Recherche Appréciative' (AI dans le texte) au développement du tourisme rural. Cet examen indique que, bien qu'une telle approche ne résolve pas toutes les difficultés, elle offre une nouvelle façon de comprendre le potentiel du tourisme dans les communautés rurales.

Mots-clés: 'Recherche Appréciative', développement économique, développement du tourisme rural

Zusammenfassung: Wertschaetzende Befragung und laendlicher Tourismus: Eine Fallstudie aus Kanada

Viele Ressourcen abhaengige kanadische Gemeinden befinden sich in einer wirtschaftlichen Krise und sehen im Tourismus eine Moeglichkeit der wirtschaftlichen Diversifizierung. Einige neuere Trends lassen darauf schliessen, dass solche eine Wahl durchaus sinnvoll sein kann. Trotz positiver Wachstumsindikatoren fuehren jedoch verschiedene Gruende auch zur Kritik am laendlichen Tourismus. Dazu zaehlen Beschaeftigungsfaktoren, Eigentumsrechte, und ein Mangel an Verstaendnis dieses Wirtschaftszweiges. Obwohl viel ueber die Entwicklung von Gemeinde orientiertem Tourismus, und seiner Moeglichkeiten solche Einwande anzusprechen, geschrieben worden ist, verbleibt die Diskussion oft auf einem theoretischen Niveau. Es gibt nur wenige Untersuchungen von praktischen Ansuetzen fuer laendliche Gemeinden in der Krise, wie etwa die derzeitige Erfahrung im nordwestlichen Ontario, Kanada. Untersuchungen des Tourismusbeitrags fuer die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung laendlicher Gemeinden hat zwei Luecken aufgezeigt; zum einen hinsichtlich der Frage, wie laendlicher Tourismus ein entwicklungsfaehiger Sektor fuer Ressourcen abhaengige Gemeinden sein kann, und zum anderen, wie dieser Wirtschaftszweig in eine Gemeinde integriert werden kann, die nach Alternativen in einem von Defizit und Krisen geschuettelten wirtschaftlichen Umfeld sucht. Interviews mit einem Tourismusunternehmer im laendlichen Manitoba, Kanada, scheinen Antworten auf beide dieser Fragen durch die Anwendung der wertschaetzenden Befragung in der laendlichen Tourismusentwicklung zu liefern. Solch eine Untersuchung zeigt, dass auch wenn ein solcher Ansatz nicht die Probleme loesen kann, er doch zumindest eine neue Perspektive darstellt, die ein Verstaendnis des Potenzials fuer Tourismus in laendlichen Gemeinden ermoeglicht.

Stichwörter: Wertschaetzende Befragung (oder Erkundung), wirtschaftliche Entwicklung, laendliche Tourismusentwicklung

Introduction

Within a Canadian context, resource-based communities are facing an economic crisis (Southcott 2000; 2001; Teitelbaum *et al.* 2003) and are increasingly turning to tourism for stability; recent trends in the growth of tourism employment in Canada's rural areas suggest that such choices are well founded (Payne *et al.* 2001). Despite positive growth indicators, rural tourism is criticized for several reasons, including providing only seasonal, low paying jobs that do not offer sustainable employment (Troughton 1990; Reed 1997; Jamal and Getz 1999); for entrenching power structures and hierarchies within communities through exclusionary practices in planning and non-local development and ownership (Belsky 2000; Gunn 2002; Reid 2003) and; is often considered within a reactionary framework without understanding what tourism is or how it can and should be managed (Joppe 1996). Although a large amount has been written on the development of community-based tourism and its potential to

address such concerns (e.g. Joppe 1996; Reed 1997; Koster and Randall 2005), much of the discussion remains at a theoretical or empirical level. With the exception of Reid (2003), few practical frameworks for rural communities in crisis have been developed (Blackstock 2005), especially a rural economy in crisis (i.e. the current economic status of many communities in North-western Ontario, Canada).

Enquiries into tourism's contribution to rural community economic development identified two gaps: how to make rural tourism a viable industry in resource-dependent communities and how to embed the industry within a community seeking alternatives from a deficit/crisis context. Interviews with a tourism operator in rural Manitoba, Canada seemed to provide an answer to both of these questions, through the application of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to rural tourism development. The purpose of this article then is to examine the application of AI as a method of undertaking rural tourism development. It begins with an overview of what AI is, how it has been utilized and a review of its criticisms. We then provide an analysis of its use in a rural tourism enterprise in Manitoba and assess AI's potential contributions to addressing some of the key issues in rural tourism.

Appreciative Inquiry

Inspired from Lewin's (1959) and Gergen's (1985) research on human perceptions and social constructionism, and Vickers' (1980) notion of 'appreciative systems', Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has evolved primarily in the field of organizational management, as a result of Cooperrider's (1986) doctoral dissertation. AI calls for a shift in organizational management from its deficit-based theory of change to a positive, life-centric theory of what is possible (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999; Finegold *et al.* 2002; van der Haar and Hosking 2004; Carter 2006). With strong foundations in the conceptual/ontological positions of social constructionists and critical theorists working from the premise that language, knowledge and action are inextricably linked (Grant and Humphries 2006), AI encourages researcher and participant reflexivity, where all individuals look beyond and challenge accepted 'norms' to encourage and facilitate human flourishing (Reason and Bradbury 2001). From a community perspective, AI is empowering because only members can judge its contribution and effectiveness (Bushe 2007a).

As the previous paragraph indicates, AI developed as a tool for organizational change, development and enquiry, providing a positive rather than a problem-orientated lens on the organization. By focusing members' attention on what is possible rather than what is wrong, AI avoids the 'degenerative spiral' of deficit discourse of traditional problem-solving approaches (Grant and Humphries 2006). Organizations and community interactions are considered the outcomes of their members' interactions with historical, cultural, social, economic and political occurrences. From an AI approach, research participants are encouraged to tell stories that help identify what is good in the organization or community, thereby providing a platform

not only for deeper understanding, but also to aid in the mobilization of emancipatory action (Grant and Humphries 2006). In order to achieve these goals, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) developed the following principles:

1. The Constructionist Principle (words create worlds);
2. The Simultaneity Principle (enquiry creates change);
3. The Poetic Principle (we can choose what we study);
4. The Anticipatory Principle (image inspires action);
5. The Positive Principle (positive questions lead to positive change);
6. The Wholeness Principle (wholeness brings out the best);
7. The Enactment Principle (acting 'as if' is self-fulfilling);
8. The Free Choice Principle (free choice liberates power) (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003).

These principles are incorporated into various typologies of the AI process. For example, Cooperrider and Whitney (2000) provided the 4D cycle: discovery, dream, design and destiny, while Watkins and Mohr (2001) provided the 4I model: initiate, inquire, imagine and innovate. Both typologies follow the basic premise of action research where the unknown is to be embraced, and organizations and communities are locations of infinite human capacity (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987).

It is difficult to provide a single definition of AI because it has been approached in a multitude of different ways and can be understood as process and a research method (Bushe and Coetzer 1995; Cowling 2001; 2004), as a theory, a field of knowledge and a philosophy (Grant and Humphries 2006; van der Haar 2002; van der Haar and Hosking 2004). However, Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005: 8) description of AI provides a basic practice-orientated definition:

Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.

AI has gained much recognition and has been used within public and private sector organizations, as well as in international development efforts (Egan and Lancaster 2005). While it has been most commonly used as an evaluation tool (Quintanilla and Packard 2002; Coghlan *et al.* 2003; Reed *et al.* 2005; Preskill and Catsambas 2006), it has also been applied as a methodology for change in organizational management (e.g. Peelle III 2006), changes in the military (e.g. the US Navy, Powley *et al.* 2004) and community planning (ISSD 2001; Jain and Triraganon 2003). Recent studies have highlighted its potential in nursing (Carter 2006), community environmental partnerships (Carnegie *et al.* 2000), as well as an interview tool for field research (Michael 2005). AI has also gained popularity with

action researchers (Ludema *et al.* 2001; Grant and Humphries 2006) and qualitative approaches (see Yoder's (2005) content analysis; Schall *et al.* (2004) for narrative analysis). Additional AI-inspired approaches include Grant and Humphries's (2006), 'Critical Appreciative Processes', combining critical theory, action research and AI; Mathie and Cunningham's (2003) 'Asset Based Community Development'; 'Positive Organizational Scholarship' by Cameron *et al.* (2003); and Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA), combining AI and community-based approaches to development by Jain and Triraganon (2003). It has also been applied in community-based tourism initiatives in developing countries (Ashford and Patkar 2001; Jain and Triraganon 2003). Despite its *use* in rural Canada (International Institute for Sustainable Development 2001), no *research* to our knowledge has been conducted on its application to this particular context. However, before examining the use of AI in rural tourism, acknowledgement must be made of the critiques of AI.

Critique of AI

Some critiques have labelled the AI approach as a 'management fad' (Collins 2000, 2003); 'Pollyanna-ish' or excessively focused on 'warm, fuzzy group hugs' (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2001); a method for opportunistic consultants (Reed 2007); and repressing or oppressing the negative or putting it into the shadow (Reason and Bradbury 2001). In a comprehensive overview of action research, Dick (2004; 2006) noted that while AI researchers espouse its 'affirmative approach', many of these researchers fail to recognize alternative 'affirmative approaches' in other action research processes (Dick 2004).

In their review of the AI literature, van der Haar and Hosking (2004) identified only three quantitative empirical studies of AI: those by Bushe and Coetzer (1995), Head (2000) and Jones (1998). A fourth study by Bushe and Kassam (2005) found that of the twenty AI cases, 'only seven achieved transformational change' (Dick 2004: 427). Bushe (2007b) has also criticized AI researchers for being too focused on axiological concerns, while omitting, or worse not understanding, epistemological and ontological issues associated with AI. This review of AI illustrates that there is still a tendency for the focus of such evaluations to be on outputs, rather the appreciative inquiry process itself (Grant and Humphries 2006: 404–405).

In an attempt to address some of these shortcomings, van der Haar (2002) and van der Haar and Hosking (2004) suggested that AI should be a responsive, simultaneous, interwoven process. In their article, Grant and Humphries (2006) also discussed their limited 'success' with AI, suggesting the following improvements: 'paying closer attention to language, even when questions are worded "positively"' (Grant and Humphries 2006: 414); understanding and acknowledging researcher and participant bias (familiarity with a certain approach), and; providing a greater understanding of

the wider social context, where

reaching beyond the functional, into the social, economic and political context of organizational situations, would be one way to demonstrate a willingness to hear about external stressors and thus prepare for a conversation of resistance or transformation that may be difficult or even painful (Grant and Humphries 2006: 414).

Bush (2007b) also warned that a focus on the positive, without a focus on the generative, that is the creation of new ideas or 'generative metaphors' provoking new actions, will likely not produce much change at all. Rogers and Fraser (2003, cited in Grant and Humphries 2006: 404–405) are more pragmatic in their conclusion, acknowledging that the AI approach 'may be better suited to certain situations, such as long standing programmes which may require an infusion of positive energy, or when the purpose of the evaluation is not to identify unknown problems but to identify strengths and build courage'.

Context

A conference in November 2004 introduced us to Mr Celes Davar, owner and operator of *Earth Rhythms*, a company based in Onanole, Manitoba, a small rural community located adjacent to Riding Mountain National Park. The company specializes in outdoor adventure and education tourism through customized itineraries (www.earthrhythms.ca). The aim of his business is to integrate locally available expertise to provide authentic rich experiences for groups of tourists. As described in his presentation at the conference, Mr Davar had a unique approach to engaging rural residents directly as providers of services and products within his business (described below), which seemed to address many of the criticisms and challenges of rural tourism. Along with community partners, we (the authors) were seeking a way to address some of these challenges in our region of north-western Ontario, Canada.

In early 2005 we contacted Mr Davar and requested an opportunity to visit his operation and investigate his business practices and impact on the surrounding community. In June of 2005 we conducted several interviews and field observations over the course of a week with Mr Davar. In addition, we had a number of informal discussions with his associates and community members to ascertain the level of integration in the region. During this process we discovered that Mr Davar uses AI both as a business operating philosophy and life practice. This led us to question how AI might be used as part of a community-based approach to tourism development.

This article provides us with an opportunity to provide a case study examination of one business owner's AI-based approach to tourism development. It is not intended as a representative case study of similar tourism businesses largely because we (and Mr Davar) are not aware of any other rural tourism business in Canada that uses this approach. Rather, this article is intended as an exploratory study to determine

AI's potential contribution to community-based tourism development and as a way of addressing some of the criticisms of rural tourism.

Application

As stated earlier, a common framework for using AI to implement action is the '4D Cycle' of discovery, dream, design and delivery. This reciprocal model of positive-generative-feedback is founded upon the premise that human systems are influenced by particular sentiments and attitudes; therefore, it is crucial, especially when pertaining to community planning and action, that we search for the good, and promote respect, equity and empowerment (Jain and Triraganon 2003). These four stages and their relevance to our regional tourism initiative are described next.

In the *discovery* phase, also known as appreciation, participants outline what are the strengths and the positive outcomes of past decisions. In this phase, past successes may be used to remind the present generations that attractions, in this case tourism attractions, did exist, and these attractions could be re-invigorated. *Dreaming*, involves asking positive questions about what was and is still working. These ideas are bundled within a positive framework to assist with envisioning how these aspects might influence a preferred future. How this desired future is to be constructed is part of the *design* phase. When respect, equity and empowerment are initiated and sustained, then *delivery* (or the destiny phase) of AI have been enacted and realized (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999).

The 4D process is clearly visible within the operational practice and development of Earth Rhythms. Initially Mr Davar intended to develop a wildlife adventure company, but quickly realized that this market was made up of independent travellers providing little to no economic benefit as they did not yield a high return due to their limited requirements for services with associated guide fees attached. As an alternative, Mr Davar began to examine how he could become an 'experiential broker' catering to a new more affluent type of traveller interested in learning, culinary delights and comfort. From an AI process, Mr Davar began to 'dream' and envision what these unique travel experiences might entail within his region, and began to explore the relationships he could develop with local residents to deliver such tourism opportunities. What he discovered was that the region was replete with, 'all these wonderful people . . . musicians, aboriginal teachers, astronomers, chefs, dressage horse breeders and trainers, cattle producers, antler carvers, researchers' and, because of their presence, he was able to 'respond to a fundamental motivation in experiential travel' (Celes Davar, personal communication, June 2005).

In the process of creating these experiential opportunities, also known as the 'design phase' of AI, Mr Davar became an 'experiential broker'. As an experiential broker, Mr Davar realized that if he was to deliver a high quality experiential tourism opportunity he would also need to generate capacity, equity and empowerment in a respectful fashion. He needed to, in a positive way, ask potential partners in the

community if they would like to be part of the programme, educate them about what the company tries to do, engage their expertise as service and product providers and help them to see that their expertise has value.

At this juncture it is appropriate to provide an explanation and example of what a typical experience with Earth Rhythms may be like. Mr Davar does not own any of the usual infrastructure (office, accommodation, food and beverage services) typically associated with tourism businesses. Instead, he has partnered with a local four-star resort to provide necessary accommodations for his guests, and he employs the services of local Red Seal chefs to provide his food services. He caters exclusively to groups and works with his clients to create an exceptional, authentic and individualized itinerary for the number of days requested. Sustainable practices that reduce waste, limit the use of fossil fuels and ensure the use of locally available and produced goods are at the core of his business practice. A typical experience therefore may include the following elements:

- A group may begin their day with a wolf biologist working in the National Park, collecting scat and learning about wolf genetics.
- They may then undertake a geo-quest adventure (a form of outdoor treasure-hunting in which participants use a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver to seek locations) to find their way to a picnic lunch. They will enter the luncheon area to find a harpist from the symphony orchestra playing music, with tables laid with linens, china, crystal and silverware and a three-course meal comprised of locally available ingredients, and cooked by a local chef.
- Following lunch they may visit a local artist, where they learn how to incorporate the natural environment into the creation of their own take-away art piece.

Each experience is unique, but always based on what is available locally. In addition, the experience centres on learning and interaction, so participants are not simply 'watching' but are actively participating in the activities and learning as a result.

Mr Davar uses AI in a variety of formal and non-formal applications. He sees it as a way of organizing and understanding how different community and business processes can occur. Traditionally, travel agents or wholesalers request tour operators to provide the lowest cost for their product in return for taking that product to the market place. Mr Davar acknowledges that this is the usual method, the lowest cost for the highest return, but believes another model is possible. As a result, he has become a champion for local community partners who may not necessarily perceive themselves as part of the travel industry. He works through a negotiation process to determine a fair price for their product and service, and provides training to help local residents understand how to engage clients in the experience they are providing. In addition, he has formed strategic alliances with other tourism partners (e.g. the Elkhorn Resort, a four-star hotel) who already have a reach into the market place and

adds his company's programmes as value to theirs. In a similar fashion he also works with agencies (such as Parks Canada) to provide value-added tourism opportunities.

From his perspective, he achieved the delivery phase when Earth Rhythms was operating at a financial level to provide for his own existence (i.e. became viable) and when it simultaneously provided additional income opportunities, created awareness and generated equity for residents participating in providing experiences through his brokering. According to Mr Davar, it is fundamental to have an individual who becomes the experiential broker from the region or community and co-ordinates these types of tourism experiences. He views this as a critical obstacle to community tourism development: although individual lodge operators or outfitters exist, there is no training or support for 'rural experiential brokers' in Canada. In the absence of infrastructure, the role of becoming the inbound packager in rural communities is critical.

Discussion

The experience of Mr Davar illustrated a number of important themes. First, there is an expanding niche market for experiential learning, authentic tourism experiences, and rural areas may be well positioned to fill this niche (especially when the product capitalizes on local knowledge, which could be cultural, ecological or both).

Secondly, his experience demonstrates how a niche market can be accessed and developed. This is especially important in the absence of infrastructure so common to rural areas. This is not to suggest that tourism is an economic panacea. In this context, by showcasing local expertise and traditional practices, tourism can become a viable economic option and actually complement existing industries, while providing opportunities to attract a different clientele in a sustainable manner (Reid 2003).

Thirdly, by providing a wide variety of experiences, products and opportunities to tourists, it appears that in applying AI, utilizing positive language, sharing information, engaging people from the place they have the most to offer, the potential for rural tourism development is strengthened. Such an approach, where the focus is on what can be done, is an important element for rural communities facing an economic transition, as it can help to embed the industry within the community.

Mr Davar's business illustrates that there are opportunities for individuals in rural communities to become involved in tourism as a way of augmenting and diversifying their income. As this case study indicates, an experiential broker can engage some regional residents in the provision of tourism services and, in so doing, begin to provide rural communities with opportunities for community economic development, the diversity, the sustainability, the control they need to become or remain vibrant healthy economies. As Raymond and Hall (2009) suggest, business practices, such as those carried out by Earth Rhythms,

highlight the potential of using AI to facilitate positive developments within organizations and communities in a manner which is extremely sympathetic to the goals of community and regionally-based tourism planning, . . . and sustainable development particularly with respect to desires for participation and equity across all members of the community.

Mr Davar's AI-based approach to rural tourism has led us to understand AI as encompassing a number of methodological strengths that may aid in community-based tourism development and planning within a rural Canadian context and may go some way in addressing the challenges of rural tourism more generally. Indeed, the AI process addresses the issue of community involvement, which is a key criticism of community-based tourism planning (Blackstock 2005). Much like the objectives of AI, we also believe that it is therefore not necessary to directly and structurally *change* an organization or community, but rather to uncover and amplify existing strengths, hopes and dreams as a means of inspiring change from within (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003). It can also build on recent leisure and tourism movements, such as slow food and slow tourism (Honore 2004). These approaches are often quite compatible with the pace of life in rural Canada.

Although Mr Davar's approach to tourism development does not completely eradicate the issues surrounding seasonal, low paying jobs (Troughton 1995; Reed 1997; Jamal and Getz 1999), it does address the challenges of sustaining employment in rural areas, where under-employment is often a greater issue than unemployment. Earth Rhythms provides additional income opportunities for people who supply services or products they are already engaged in; as such they do not become dependent or reliant on tourism, but it becomes an opportunity to increase their total income.

This style of tourism development, based on the principles of change and improvement, provides a way to avoid the challenges of power structures and hierarchies within communities (Belsky 2000; Gunn 2002; Reid 2003). Mr Davar has engaged a variety of residents within a 100 km radius of the village of Onanole, and he is continually seeking out or working with new individuals to provide authentic, unique and exciting tourism opportunities. As such, there are no intended exclusionary practices associated with his business; however, as one would expect, the quality of service and product is critical in tourism and, as such, some partnerships have not continued. Because Mr Davar's focus is to highlight, engage and utilize locally available products and services, the benefits are accrued to local residents.

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of an AI-based approach to tourism planning is that it addresses the issues associated with the reactionary framework in which many communities begin to explore tourism (Joppe 1996). It is this element that had the most appeal to us and our community partners, when considering how this regional tourism approach for an agriculturally based rural community could be

applied in north-western Ontario, where the economy is currently in crisis and the communities are marred or plagued by the 'degenerative socio-economic spiral'. Our current approach to the dream phase does not preclude discussions regarding 'negative experiences'; however, what we have attempted to do is provide new ways of generating alternative perceptions, metaphors, images and theories that will furnish better alternatives for community action (Bushe 2007a). From this perspective, our selection of AI as a methodology and epistemology is only one very useful 'addition to a number of change options' (Dick 2004: 427). Inspired by Bushe (2007a, 2007b), Grant and Humphries (2006) and Raymond and Hall (2009), our aim is to add to the literature on AI, through this simultaneous reflection on the application of AI principles in rural tourism-based business and on the AI process itself. However, in order to acquire a greater understanding of the potential for AI and tourism, further research in other international contexts and settings is required.

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