

# Constructing tourism realities through LEGO Serious Play



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The study of social interactions is fundamental to the understanding of tourism in the social sciences. Foundational studies have yielded important insights into the nature of host-guest relations (Smith, 1989); tourist experiences (Cohen, 1979); tourism as a social world (MacCannell, 1976); critical perspectives (Ateljevic, Morgan, & Pritchard, 2007), among others. The constructivist paradigm is often applied to uncover meanings which participants create in their reality based on their subjective, individual worldview and their shared exchange in social contexts (e.g. Small (2008)). The goal of social constructivism is to identify how individuals and groups of people understand their co-created perceptions of social reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), which is fluid and constantly changing through the interactions. Such social interactions are dynamic, complex and arguably demand a multidimensional approach to achieve deep understanding.

Social constructivist researchers have argued that social relations, which could be driven by beliefs, attitudes and experiences, cannot be adequately explained by quantitative methods (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1999). Qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, focus groups and observation), and alternative creative and visual methods (e.g. photography, drawing, self-portrait, collage, digital and graphic elicitation), may not adequately capture the co-construction of realities or address the impact of wider social dynamics (Liamputtong, 2007). As an alternative holistic method, this paper proposes LEGO Serious Play (LSP) ([www.seriousplaypro.com](http://www.seriousplaypro.com)) as an effective methodology for exploring the social dimensions of tourism that encourages participants to metaphorically explore their socially constructed realities and their relationships.

LSP is a facilitated communication technique initially designed for the corporate sector (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). The method aims to help teams use their imagination to solve a problem or reach a common goal. The LSP method is applied as a facilitated workshop based on one of seven application techniques and typically lasts two to eight hours. A facilitator guides the process, asks a series of structured questions, encourages depth to the discussion by asking follow-up and probing questions, and observes the interactions. Participants build a model from an LSP kit that includes bricks, minifigures and other elements, and are asked to share and reflect upon their models (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). The bricks are the tool to get the participants' ideas; the focus of the workshop is not on the bricks and the models, but on the story around them and its metaphorical description given by participants.

Drawing on the work of Gauntlett (2007), the methodology rests on four pillars: use of *metaphors* underpinned by the concept of *play*, theory of *flow* and *constructivism*. Unlike other methods, LSP effectively applies these concepts to facilitate learning through exploration and metaphorical explanations of tourism realities. LSP is built upon Piaget's (1955) constructivism and Papert's constructionism (Papert & Harel, 1991). These two theories support a core idea of the LSP method that "learning happens especially when we actively construct something physical/concrete that is external to us" (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). Also underpinning LSP is the concept of 'play'. Play is an essential part of our daily life from birth it plays an important role in how we learn and obtain knowledge about the outside world. The concept of play assumes that innovative and creative ideas are most likely to come through playful processes (Kane, 2004; Terr, 2000). Play is linked to our identities and our

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imaginations, which is seen as a central part of the playing process (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). Also based on 'flow' theory, LSP matches participant's levels of skills, enjoyment and concentration to the task at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The method ensures learning through construction, exploration and metaphorical storytelling. A research method based on metaphorical creative exploration, such as LSP, can reveal underlying thinking, understanding and meanings of experiences (Carpenter, 2008, p. 274; Gauntlett, 2007; Kangas, Warren, & Byrne, 1998). According to Schön (1983), metaphors play an active, constructive and creative role in human cognition and can create completely new ways of understanding realities. Thus, LSP can facilitate a depth of new understandings of realities not captured by alternative methods.

There are very few academic studies describing the application of LSP in research, and certainly none in tourism research that we are aware of. This may be because it has only recently been introduced as an open source product, and has been more commonly used in corporate contexts (Oliver & Roos, 2007; Peter, Jacobs, & Roos, 2005). In our farm tourism research, LSP has proven an effective method in revealing the social non-commercial interactions between hosts and volunteers' on organic farms in New Zealand. Fig. 1 shows one model of the 'ideal farm tourism experience' co-produced by the hosts and volunteers at one farm sampled. The model depicts the 'ideal' interaction as based on working outdoors (e.g. flowerbed), having social time together while sharing and learning about different cultures (e.g. five minifigures cooking together), acquiring new skills (e.g. minifigure pruning a tree), and experiencing an alternative farming lifestyle (e.g. caring for animals).

A key benefit of LSP is that the use of metaphors captured through the building of LEGO models reveals *multiple realities* of the phenomenon and gives nuanced insight into participants' experiences. LSP moves the researcher towards an innovative participatory methodology that embeds the participant's voice in the co-created data and promotes critical, reflective dialogue around the topic. Like all methods, LSP also has its challenges. Participants more familiar with LEGO bricks tend to build more complicated models which may unbalance the workshop flow. Additionally, the method requires specific resources such as the LSP kit, a skilled facilitator, appropriate space, and dedication of time. Thus, this method has limited application for research conducted in the field.

As a collaborative technique, this paper argues that the LSP method offers an effective methodology for exploring the depth of socially constructed realities that are complex, dynamic and therefore demand a multidimensional approach. We argue that there are increased opportunities in which theories of play, flow and metaphorical explanations, applied through the use of the LSP method,



Fig. 1. LEGO model of an 'ideal' experience co-created between hosts and guests.

could significantly benefit our understandings of the social interactions which take place through tourism. For instance, examinations of tourism stakeholder collaboration; tourism employee training; host-guest relations in different tourism contexts, and the nature of significant others and/or dependent care relationships in travel, are other possible avenues for future application of the LEGO Serious Play method in tourism studies.

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