Introduction

This paper uses conversation about a study of copreneurship within rural tourism to lead a wider discussion of the competing paradigms which exist in fieldwork in tourism and entrepreneurship. Many tourism businesses are built around lifestyle and integration of life stakeholders such as family and partners, yet to date there has been no published discussion of copreneurship within tourism businesses specifically. The study used to bring about this discussion investigated copreneurship in rural tourism businesses. It explored the experiences of owners of rural tourism accommodation businesses in New Zealand within the framework of copreneurship. It examined roles within coprenuerial rural tourism businesses and studied women’s experiences of entrepreneurship within the copreneurial environment. To do this, the study used a mixed method approach (a survey and in-depth interviews) to elicit information about copreneurs operating rural tourism businesses, and about how women experience copreneurship within rural tourism. Copreneurs are couples who share ownership, commitment and responsibility for a business together (Barnett and Barnett, 1989), or as Marshack (1994) put it, copreneurship represents the dynamic interaction of the systems of love and work.

This paper explores some of the philosophical and methodological foundations of fieldwork in entrepreneurship, using a study of copreneurship study as a basis for discussion. The paper begins with a brief overview of the wider philosophy of social science research and this leads into the acceptance of the interpretivist approach and discussion of its validity for this type of research. The importance of reflexivity is raised and the relevant significance of situating myself as researcher is presented because critical reflexivity or consideration of the researcher as a research instrument is an important principle of fieldwork in entrepreneurship, which inevitably involves talking with real people. Contextualising the research within a feminist approach is also discussed, along with feminism providing a pathway to understanding the lived experiences of others. The second part of this paper describes the research design of the copreneurship study and proposes that triangulating methods and data sources within an interpretive approach was essential for gaining a fuller understanding of the experiences of copreneurs. The research design enabled the methodological importance of reflexivity where the researcher is an insider to the study to be stressed.

Research paradigms and philosophy in social science research

Paradigms provide the framework within which research is carried out. They reflect fundamental beliefs or metaphysics and are concerned with the essential and underlying principles that shape and define perceptions of the world, its nature, and the place of people within it. There are four major paradigms which structure research: positivist, post-positivist, critical and interpretive. Each provides flexible guidelines that connect theory and method and help to determine the structure and shape of any enquiry (Goodson and Phillimore, 2004). The suitability of these paradigms (in terms of research activity) can be assessed by exploring their ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions (for further discussion see for example Denzin and Lincoln, 1994 and Goodson and Phillimore, 2004 for a tourism perspective).
Positivist researchers often claim the advantage of being more objective and value-free, producing ‘hygienic’ research in which the researcher is absent (Marsh, Keating, Eyre, Campbell and McKenzie, 1996). In refutation of this, Clark, Riley, Wilkie and Wood (1999, p. 15) explain that scientific research in the positivist tradition is not objective, “…as any human observer of natural, as well as social phenomena, brings to their observation values and beliefs that impinge upon their interpretation of those phenomena”.

Many of the assumptions and characteristics of positivism are perhaps appropriate in a natural science; however in social science they negate room for participants’ experiences, and involvement by the researcher. Many social science fields however (entrepreneurship included), still show a strong bias towards positivist approaches, advocating the rigid separation between researcher and subject.

**Crisis of representation and reflexivity**

The fact that women often become the object rather than the subject of research is a major feminist critique of the positivist research paradigm. Postmodernism served as a corrective to these criticisms, stressing that researchers need to cite their authority and construct research that allows women’s realities and voices to be heard (Lunn, 1997). The inclusion of a feminine viewpoint to extend what may be seen as the prevailing masculine ideology supporting research and theorisation has been recommended (Aitchison, 2001). According to Ateljevic (2000, p. 371): “the ‘crisis of representation’ encapsulated many of the concerns encountered in the feminist critique of the all pervasive hegemonic dominance of masculinist Western academic approaches”. The epistemological bases of mainstream science’s claims to objectivity are the starting points for feminist critiques of objectivity (Lunn, 1997). This is relevant for the copreneurship study being used here as an example because one of the aims of the study was to allow women’s voices to describe their own experiences of copreneurship.

Issues raised by the crisis of representation in wider social sciences have slowly emerged for consideration in tourism research. One issue highlighted as crucial is the investigator(s)-as-instrument. As only the human instrument can grasp the interactions in context, and the multiple realities known through implied understanding (see Dana and Dana, 2005; Patton, 1982; Riley and Love, 2000). In response to the ‘crisis of representation’ new strategies have been developed in a bid to find a way which satisfies an individual researcher’s desire to reconcile concepts of structure and agency, difference and multiplicity without excluding our ability to say something (Ateljevic, 2000). Consideration needs to be given to the subject (in this case, the copreneur), to avoid assigning them a passive role in research concerned with the value of their experience.

One of the issues of representation is that of the researcher (there are also issues of representation of the research itself, and of the researched, see Lunn, 1997) and relates to practices of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Reflexivity is a process whereby “researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge” (McGraw, Zvonkovic and Walker, 2000, p. 68). Reflexivity calls for consideration of issues such as the role, bias and gaze of the investigator. In the tourism context, Goodson and Phillimore (2004, p. 36) assert that “the critical roles of both values and context in knowledge production mean that these two aspects of the research process have to be explored in some depth”. This means undertaking research in a reflexive way, whereby ethical, political and epistemological dimensions of research are explored as an integral part of producing knowledge (Marcus, 1998, cited by Goodson and Phillimore, 2004). From this perspective then, only through openly reflexive interpretation can validity be claimed for any research, regardless of whether it is quantitative or qualitative (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994, cited in Goodson and Phillimore, 2004).
Critical reflexivity or consideration of the researcher as a research instrument is an important principle of feminist practice. Marsh et al. (1996) affirm that feminist practice calls for the researcher to be located in the same plane as the researched. They call for reflexivity, saying that researchers’ beliefs, motives and social position must be scrutinised if it is accepted that they cannot be detached from the process but rather are a part of it. Clark et al. (1999) argue similarly that social researchers can never divorce themselves entirely from the subjectively constructed social contexts of which they are a part. As the researcher responds as a whole person, he/she serves as an instrument in the collection and interpretation of the data.

**The interpretive approach**

The interpretive approach emerged as an encapsulating philosophy addressing concerns raised by the crisis of representation. Increasingly, the tenets of positivism and foundationalist precepts in modernity are being challenged by “critical and interpretive scholars seeking a more meaningful experience and understanding of the text and context of their study” (Jamal and Hollinshead, 2001, p. 78). Jamal and Hollinshead have argued that in order to move towards more interpretive, qualitative tourism research, it is necessary to depart from more static, quantitative and positivist knowledge bases to more dynamic, experiential and reflexive approaches. Here, there is recognition that social agents are central to the construction of knowledge and that the researcher’s voice is one among many that influence the research process (2001, p. 67).

Tribe (2004) asserts that tourism knowledge is generated using a variety of research methods and offers “deeper insight” using Habermas’s (1978) theory of knowledge-contuitive interests, demonstrating that the pursuit of knowledge is never interest free but rather that human inquiry is motivated by one of three interests. First, the technical interest seeks control and management; second, the practical interest seeks understanding; and third, the emancipatory interest seeks freedom from falsehood and emancipation from oppression (cited in Tribe, 2004, p. 55). Each of these interests is served by a different methodological paradigm. Scientific positivism serves the technical; interpretive methods seek understanding; and critical theory seeks emancipation (Tribe, 2004).

Interpretive methods seek understanding by researchers entering a research setting with some pre-understanding and a general plan; the study is allowed to unfold with the assistance of informants. Emphasis is placed on investigating phenomena in their naturally occurring states, requiring the researcher to get close to the data, acknowledging interaction between data and data collection methods (Connell and Lowe, 1997). Cooperation between the researcher and the researched reduces researcher bias and encourages women’s voices. The importance of getting close to the participants in research is noted by Patton (1982), when he notes that:

> The methodological mandate to be contextually sensitive, inductive, and naturalistic means that researchers must get close to the phenomenon under study. The institutional researcher who uses qualitative methods attempts to understand that setting under study through direct personal contact...through physical proximity for a period of time and through the development of closeness.” (Patton, 1982, p. 10).

According to Crotty (1998), the theoretical perspective of interpretivism emerged in contradiction to positivism in the attempt to understand and explain human and social reality. For the interpretivist, the primary goal of research is to understand. Emphasis is placed on meanings and understanding, rather than just facts and generalisations. However, researchers cannot achieve the understanding; but rather an understanding of phenomenon at a point in time (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).
Interpretivists take a more holistic, particularistic approach to research; studying a specific phenomenon in a particular place and time. Geertz (1973) labelled this context-dependent form of explanation as thick description, a focus which enables the development of theory that makes sense out of a local situation. This is because the interpretive approach facilitates generalisation within the context or case. It is suited to studying women as feminists acknowledge that their perspective is not universal or unpremised, recognising that women’s perspectives might in fact be different if the world were different (Sherwin, 1988).

Quantitative data-gathering techniques are often aligned exclusively to a positivist approach and qualitative techniques to the interpretivist approach. Eyles and Smith (1988) argue that few researchers end their endeavours with revealing the meanings of those they observe, as often scientific constructs are used to give shape to the meanings observed from everyday experience. Lee (1991) advocates for both positivist and interpretive approaches in strengthening collaborative research efforts, instead of approaches that maintain a separate co-existence.

Related to this, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue that many researchers operate in the moment that best fits the researcher’s needs in relation to the research problem and the research setting. Riley and Love’s (2000) review of tourism journals from their launch in the 1970s to 1996 showed that some scholars dipped into and out of Denzin and Lincoln’s different moments depending on the research task at hand and Beeton (2004) argues that for a broad-ranging, psychologically complex field such as tourism “there is no singular pertinent research modality. In order to achieve the desired outcomes of tourism research, alternative methods must be considered and used conjointly” (2004, p. 37). Phillimore and Goodson (2004) argue that a selective approach to deciding to adopt a particular approach shown by established and experienced tourism researchers should be applauded, as it encourages experimentation and sets a precedent for less experienced academics. The hermeneutic, interpretive approach used, particularly in relation to the interview part of this research, is discussed subsequently later in this paper.

**Conceptual coordinates of a study into copreneurship**

Discussion continues among tourism scholars concerning methodological issues, research orientations, and the most appropriate approaches to tourism study (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004; Tribe, 2004). However, from their analysis of quantitative versus qualitative articles in the tourism field, Riley and Love (2000) argue that the dominant paradigm remains positivism, which is “not surprising when considered chronologically, as interpretive paradigms have lagged behind their positivist predecessor” (p. 180).

Given that tourism is a relatively new area of study, there should be greater tolerance for eclectic and diverse approaches to investigation (Echtner and Jamal, 1997). The interpretive approach places more reliance on the people being studied, as the researcher tries to “get inside the minds of subjects and see the world from their point of view” (Veal, 1997, p. 31). This model leads to a more flexible and inductive approach to data collection. While it primarily involves qualitative methods, it can also incorporate quantitative methods.

Echtner and Jamal (1997) call for tolerance of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies due to the high behavioural content and diverse nature of tourism. These methods can be used in union within an interpretive approach. As Veal (1997, p. 35) states: “while the debate between protagonists of qualitative and quantitative research can become somewhat partisan, it is now widely accepted that the two approaches complement one another”. The strengths of each can result in greater understanding of a phenomenon. Bridging the divide to thwart such polarisation will be beneficial in tourism research.
Authors in tourism such as Oppermann (2000) and Decrop (1999) advocated for approaches such as triangulation to bridge the divide between positivist and interpretivist tourism researchers. Decrop proposes triangulation as a way to make qualitative findings more robust, to gain increased acceptance of qualitative tourism studies. He cites support (e.g. Jick, 1979; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest, 1996) for the use of qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary, instead of rival camps. Combining data sources, methods, investigators, and theories, triangulation opens the way for richer interpretations (Decrop, 1999). Oppermann (2000, p. 141) explains that triangulation is used as “a crossing bridge between the pre-eminent quantitative studies and the growth in number of qualitative studies”.

The choice of an appropriate research strategy should not depend on the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy, but rather on the study’s goals and related research questions (Decrop, 1999) and issues of access (Faulkner, 2001). The copreneurship study discussed here used both quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve its goal of exploring experiences of copreneurship in rural tourism.

**Women’s voices**

Inclusion of the feminine perspective in research, as the researcher or the researched is vital in tourism where women participate as employers, employees, business owners, researchers, and/or consumers. Women differ in their personal experiences, and individual perceptions shaped by social influences. The use of a feminist perspective paradigm will challenge the dominant patriarchal hegemony that pervades tourism research. According to Jennings (2001, p. 47) until recently, “most studies have been androcentric in nature and have not taken into account the gender bias prevalent in most tourism research”.

In her audit of leisure and tourism journals, Aitchison (2001) found that little attention is given to the role of gender-power relations in the production, legitimation and reproduction of knowledge. She found the ratio of male to female authors of refereed articles is four to one. By quantifying the dominance of the male gaze and voice and research, she reveals the codification of knowledge in these fields “as a product of both structural and cultural power” (p. 1). This power contributes to a lack of feminist perspectives in tourism literature, especially through the voices of women and other marginalized groups.

This paper thus far has shown that the purpose of research, particularly its aims and objectives, dictates to a large extent the appropriate research approach. The study used as an example here was complex, requiring investigation of copreneurship within the rural tourism sector. According to Walle (1997), an eclectic approach of determining research methods is recommended because tourism researchers and practitioners deal with complex phenomena. In the context of this study the researcher came to know that she could not rigidly separate herself outside of the research due to roles as a management and tourism researcher and as a past and current business owner, specifically in a copreneurial role. This acknowledgement became important in terms of reflexivity.

**An insider’s view**

As noted previously, accounts of any discipline and of research within that field of study are situated. That is they depend on the point of view of the author, which in turn reflects how he/she is positioned intellectually, politically and socially (Barnes and Sheppard, 2000). Hall proposes that “In terms of
why we research what we do, one cannot ignore the personal, yet this is almost completely ignored in discussions of tourism research (Hall, 2004, p. 148). The things we research flow from the personal, as “the personal subjectivities of our experiences are vital to our choice of research paths, yet typically go unacknowledged (Hall, 2004, p. 149).

I consider myself an insider in the study being discussed here; with the ability to empathise with and get close to participants. My professional roles have required me to travel for business purposes and I enjoy travel for personal recreation. Travel for both work and pleasure then, along with strong interest in rural tourism and small business ownership provided one of the foundations of my personal leanings toward the particular study topic.

I consider my experiences, with the combination of methods and data sources, to be a strength of the research design of the copreneurship study discussed here. As Bates (1999, p. 17) states: “We all have some form of built-in gender bias and that presents a Catch 22. Even though we may feel we are being objective and looking only at the facts, the very facts we see may be influenced…”.

This detail that the very facts we see may be influenced raises the notion and acknowledgement that we may not be objective at all. It is possible that researchers (including this one) may have preconceived notions of what the research will reveal. Built in gender bias and my experiences as a woman are acknowledged and recognised as a potential disadvantage, as well as a strength.

Lunn (1997) asserts “that research tends to reflect what is important to the researchers rather than the priorities of those being studied is hardly surprising if little is known of the realities of the lives of a group of people being studied” (p. 79). Being an insider rather than a distant authority has advantages in understanding. Having the insider perspective into the meanings of women’s experiences has helped in the identification of issues and interpretation of themes. As an ‘insider’, the “researcher will acquire an in-depth knowledge of the tourism phenomena or experience that is grounded in the empirical world – a world where there are multiple realities rather than one ‘truth’ to explain tourism phenomena” (Jennings, 2001, p. 40).

There are of course, positive and negative aspects to being an insider to the research. A few hours inside a woman’s home talking about her business and role within the business and also in the family situation may mean that personal details about themselves and about others are revealed for example. It is possible that personal involvement encouraged this revelation of details that might not otherwise have been shared. There is also implied professional danger as work may be devalued if objectivity, rationality and value-freedom, rather than involvement and subjectivity are given academic status. It is possible that being an insider to the study and getting close to the phenomenon under study may be considered a bit self-indulgent and intellectually sloppy, but biographical narratives (revealed during the interview part of this research) are fascinating and many truths are revealed.

During my research I found myself analysing stories told to me in relation to my own experiences. The participants provided me with opportunities to empathise with them, as well as opening my eyes to new issues for consideration and representation. The research design enabled participants to reveal true stories and attitudes and reflexivity calls for building trust. I can identify with many of the realities that copreneurs face and I have also had firsthand experience of many of the stressors that participants associate with rural tourism and copreneurship. The experiences of long days worked, blurring of the work/leisure dichotomy, competing demands of family and work, resulting in increased feelings of fatigue resonate. The challenges of balancing personal and professional life with the need to consider one’s own and also others’ wellbeing are also something that I have encountered.
Benefits and tensions aside, an advantage of conducting research of this type is the further opportunity available to experience rural tourism first hand. A study such as this requires trips to conduct interviews with copreneurs and gaining further experience as an ethnographer and a tourist in the field is always enjoyable. Being in the research provided a heightened awareness of my own experiences and of the portrayals and realities of copreneurship within rural tourism in New Zealand.

The role of feminism in this research

Each researcher has a unique understanding of and relationship to ‘feminism’ that has to do with our experiences, who we are and what social space(s) we occupy, or into which we are interpellated (Eriksen et al, 2007). Eriksen et al (2007) also note that there are material, cognitive and emotional consequences, both positive and negative for engaging in ‘feminist’ scholarship and being labelled a [pro-] feminist.

Understanding the personal, subjective, narrative nature of this type of research (particularly the interviews) is perhaps more meaningful in understanding a position with respect to feminism and of feminism than to simply categorizing within a particular feminist camp, because there are many ‘feminist perspectives’. This research, and exploration of women’s experiences of copreneurship may also serve to advance understanding of the researcher with respect to the topic of feminism, so that she can grapple with how she is part of the scholarship, not something separated of it. The world being researched is not separate of one’s experience of that world.

Accordingly, whilst the implication of possessing certain epistemological and ontological assumptions has been addressed earlier in this paper, it may be more relevant to focus on “the complex, interactional and emergent nature of our social experience” (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 984). In other words, a researcher is more complex than the ontological and epistemological assumptions, and these other parts are worthy of and essential to exploration and becoming a more critically reflexive scholar. Therefore, feminism, to this study, is not something that exists ‘out there’ separate of the researcher and the study, but rather it is an idea that is created and sustained through the research and all its interactions and affects understandings, processes and conclusions.

What was actually done?

To date researchers have primarily used quantitative research methods to focus on characteristics of ownership and motivations of farm stay hosts (e.g. Carlsen and Getz, 1998; Getz and Carlsen, 2000; Hall and Rusher, 2004). This study investigated experiences of copreneurship in rural tourism and triangulation of various data sources enables study of the composite copreneurship experience. The design also limits personal and methodological biases (Decrop, 1999). The next section of this paper briefly describes the method of the copreneurship study and presents some reflections after the fact.

Informal Interviews

Informal interviews conducted before questionnaire development informed this research, and development of the questionnaire and interview questions throughout the research process. Informal interviews (conversations) took place with rural tourism operators and organisations. Conversations
took place in a number of settings within the study area; for example when the researcher was at leisure or partaking in a rural tourism experience or was attending a conference of rural tourism operators. Conversations also took place in a number of social settings as rural tourism business owners were encountered. Owners of these businesses were without exception keen to introduce their business and chat generally about running the businesses, the rewards and the challenges particularly.

**Questionnaires**

For this study, a questionnaire was used to elicit descriptive information from a larger number of rural tourism businesses. The information was not as ‘rich’ as the themes established in the subsequent interviews, but it did permit initial identification of which small business owners were in copreneurial relationships, and would therefore be invited to participate in the interviews. Information collected from the questionnaires also enabled data to be gained on a broader spectrum of issues. This was important given the scarcity of scholarly research on copreneurship in tourism, in both the New Zealand and worldwide contexts. Questionnaire data was also comparable with studies into farm tourism, for example: Carlsen and Getz, (1998); Getz and Carlsen, (2000), and Hall and Rusher (2004).

The aim of the questionnaire was to help to gain an understanding of respondents’ characteristics, opinions and their business’s characteristics, not to collect representative data to make mass generalisations (Chia and Yeo, 1999) about rural tourism or about copreneurs.

The questionnaire was designed to be easily answered in the hope of eliciting a favourable response rate. The majority of the questions required either a tick-the-box answer, or a circle to be drawn on a seven point likert scale. Ryan and Garland (1999, p. 107) point out that the use of likert-type scales is “a common research method for eliciting opinions and attitudes in the social and business sciences”. The remaining questions required responses to open ended questions, for example “What, for you, has been the most rewarding thing about owning and operating an accommodation business?”.

Owners of rural accommodation businesses were sought as questionnaire participants, within the survey region of the River Region (Manawatu, Tararua, Rangitikei, Wangamui and Ruapehu), Nature Coast (Horowhenua), Wairarapa and Hawkes Bay. The survey reason was chosen because the researcher had experience with researching within this area, meaning that relationships existed which helped with access to participants. The survey area also remains an under researched part of New Zealand, with respect to tourism, and rural tourism particularly (Hall and Rusher, 2002; 2004, Ryan, 1997). The questionnaire and sampling method enabled farmstay and B&B owners/operators to participate. The instrument and method also provided participant convenience and anonymity when reporting results.

**Interviews**

In this research I was concerned with theorising experiences of copreneurship in tourism and, in doing so, endeavouring to get inside the heads of the copreneurs to ask the questions of most relevance. I believed that the research designed within the interpretive paradigm would enable me to do this effectively. I thus chose, after collecting data quantitatively through the questionnaire, to gather data using in-depth, face-to-face interviews in which I encouraged copreneurs to tell me about their experiences within a semi-structured framework. In doing so, I explored topics that might not have been thought about when designing the research project, but which the copreneurs themselves identified as being significant. Thus, instead of imposing my preconceived notions of copreneurship on the participants, I used the semi-structured questions as a guide to stimulate discussion about their actual experiences while operating rural tourism businesses.
The interview part of the copreneurship study had three broad objectives. First, to further explore women’s experiences of copreneurship by eliciting narratives from the female copreneurs themselves. Second, to build on knowledge gained from the survey instrument, particularly information about copreneurship from a women’s perspective. This extended the existing discussion of copreneurship and rural tourism by eliciting women’s experiences of copreneurship. Third, to explore existing gendered roles within the copreneurial venture.

The hermeneutic interpretive approach was used throughout reporting of interview findings and this allowed exploration of the personalised meanings by which the copreneurs understood their experiences of starting and operating a rural tourism business and the ways in which these experiences were manifested in their roles and activities. By analysing an interview text’s salient metaphors, common expressions, and categorical distinctions in light of the background information from literature and from survey data, insights could be gained into the copreneurs’ experiences. The research aimed to give voice to women’s experiences of copreneurship within rural tourism and the type of research reported here (using the hermeneutic interpretive approach) provided the opportunity for respondents to talk about themselves at length. It is by listening and learning from other people’s experiences that the researcher can learn that the ‘truth’ is not the same for everybody. Like Stanley (1995) and Letherby (2000), I believe that my involvement in sharing the women’s voices did not disempower me intellectually; I could still be critical and analytical, both about the women’s stories and about my involvement and this resulted in a fuller picture of the research area.

The women interviewed not only answered my biographical questions (for example “How did you come to be operating this business?”) frankly, but they also often introduced biographical flashbacks spontaneously when telling their stories. Their biographical digressions were not only of systematic value for evaluation, but also showed that the biographical approach was an important form of everyday hermeneutics too.

From a hermeneutic perspective, the stories that the copreneurs told about their experiences were a prime locus of discovery. The insights offered by this hermeneutic mode of interpretation was particularly useful in bridging the gap between the copreneurs’ overt awareness and stories of their life circumstances and the less overtly stated factors that shape their experiences and decisions about their businesses. The hermeneutic caveat however, is that the voice of the given subject will often express a nexus of personal meanings that are formed in a complex field of social and historical relationships. As such, a subject’s self perceptions can exhibit a considerable degree of situational variability depending on which personal meanings are salient in a given context (Thompson, 1997, see also Belk, 1975; Stayman and Deshpande, 1989). This is particularly so in the case of exploring women’s roles in their business and family situations. Hermeneutic scholars emphasise that the process of textual interpretation cannot be reduced to the application of a “method” (Gadamer, 1993; Thompson, 1997). Rather, the techniques used to formulate an interpretation are embedded within a framework of core assumptions and investigations, informed in this case, by literature and background research and also by the data gathered in the survey part of this study.

The role of the researcher is again important in this interpretive approach (also discussed earlier in this paper) because it is the researcher interpreting the textual data. Hermeneutic research emphasises that an understanding of a text always reflects a fusion of horizons between the interpreter’s frame of reference and the texts being interpreted (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). The acknowledged implication is that the researcher’s interpretive orientation (i.e. background knowledge, underlying assumptions, and questions of interest) enabled her to become attuned to specific characteristics and patterns afforded by the textual data. Thus, again, the hermeneutic approach selected sought to be open to possibilities afforded by the texts of the interviews, rather than projecting a predetermined system of meanings on to the textual data.
The interviews, which became biographic in many cases, portrayed life stories in relation to the women’s experiences of operating a rural tourism business. This biographic approach, which was largely unintended, served to “work outwards from the domestic instead of from the public inwards” (Edwards and Ribbens, 1991, p. 487). The result is that “the woman and not existing theory is considered the expert on her experience” (Anderson and Jack, 1998, p. 166). This revelation made this study one of a small general movement towards this approach in the studying of rural lives, in particular the lives of women (e.g. Inhetveen, 1990). As noted by Letherby (2000), with specific reference to auto/biography, it is relevant to refer to Stanley (1995), who argues that by ‘becoming academics’ as women and as feminists, we position ourselves both as insiders and outsiders (see also previous discussion in this paper). Writing biographically also brings the danger that the writer may be accused of being non-academic (Letherby, 2000) and many feminist writers have written of how and why women’s work is devalued and the ways in which women have been excluded from the making of knowledge and culture (see Smith, 1988; Stanley and Wise, 1993). The study discussed here aimed to give voice to women’s experiences of copreneurship within rural tourism, and acknowledged the involvement of the researcher in this process.

The researcher noted her insider status and research perspectives (see earlier discussion in this paper) and feminist writers have previously exposed the hollowness of claims to objectivity (also see earlier discussion in this paper). The researcher has in this case however, had access to details of the contextually related reasoning process (see Stanley, 1995) which then gave rise to the research findings. Triangulation of data sources, through literature and the survey component of this research helped to inform analysis of the women’s stories. However, it is still acknowledged that as a feminist researcher studying aspects of these women’s lives, I report their biographies, whilst recognising that the biographies that I am given are influenced by the research relationship. In other words, the respondents may have had their own view of what the researcher wanted to hear, and I used my own experiences to help to understand those of the respondents. Thus, their experiences are filtered through me in reporting these experiences (see also Letherby, 2000).

It has become clear through this copreneurship study also, that the ‘truth’ is not the same for everyone and one objective truth does not exist. Different experiences of the research issue (copreneurship) exist and it was not always possible to categorise and fit the women’s experiences into existing, or new theory. The quantitative research presented an aggregate of ‘truths’ but the narratives reported in the interview part of the research expressed different experiences of copreneurship. There may be a systematic process which would allow certain experiences of reality to be certified as objectively accurate- tying narratives back to survey findings for example, but in actuality there may be several ‘truths’, each of which appears to be different from and just as true as the others.

Experienced realities of the women interviewed are realities which have been perceived by the senses, filtered by interests and interpreted according to reconstructed criteria. Analysing the interviews, I found that the biological narratives of the women coincided in essence with the quantitative findings. This fact legitimised the narrative approach and rendered the various truths and experiences all useful. For some respondents in the interview part of the research, involvement in the research also provided an opportunity to “put the record straight” and to consider their own involvement in their business. Rosabel (30s), soon after her interview had taken place, sent a note to me:

“...it was good for me to recall just how far I have come with it [the business] and I felt quite inspired after our talk, so thank you for that”.

Reflection on the women’s stories, along with self-reflexivity about my position in the research, enabled me to be both critical and analytical about my involvement, as well as the themes identified in
the research, which resulted in a ‘fuller’ picture of copreneurship in rural tourism and also resulted in a greater appreciation of a mixed method approach to collecting data. Research in copreneurship, to date, has been epitomised by stories published in the popular press about partnership and success strategies, and has been further characterised by small empirical studies, none of which have taken a tourism or a rural focus. The mixed method approach taken in the copreneurship study discussed here meant that insights were raised by a review of the relevant literature fields and these insights contributed to the study method and directions. There has been some question about whether current research approaches and methodologies have adequately incorporated the reality of women’s entrepreneurship (de Bruin et al., 2007). The reality of the experience of women starting rural tourism businesses (with their partners) is not a reality which has been widely explored in the rural literature and often, rural research appeared to choose to privilege particular conceptions of reality over others.

It has become clear, however, to this researcher that the claim that “there is some doubt as to whether current research approaches adequately incorporate the “reality” of women’s entrepreneurship” (de Bruin et al, 2007, p. 329) may even understate the case. It became clear during the research for the study discussed here, through the triangulation of literature and the use of both quantitative and qualitative techniques, that there are actually at least two “realities” to capture:

1. The reality of what it is like – who does what? And
2. The reality of how women experience this.

The quantitative research reported in this study provided information about descriptions of the owners and the businesses, and what happens within the business (the reality of who does what?), but the qualitative part of this research offered insights into women’s experiences of this – not what happens, but how it is experienced. The interview part of this research meant that the gendered nature of work in and on the business became real and expressed. Exploring both “realities” of copreneurship within rural tourism ended up showing that any perception of copreneurship as a tool for enabling women to become freed from traditional gender roles may not equal the reality.

In summary then, the study discussed here used an interpretive approach and triangulation of methods in a field where the dominant paradigm remains positivism (Riley and Love, 2000). This interpretive approach enabled the researcher to “get inside the minds of the subjects and see the world from their point of view” (Veal, 1997, p. 31) and enabled a more flexible and inductive approach to the data collection. The two data collection methods (survey and interviews) complemented each other and lead to greater understanding of experiences of copreneurship within rural tourism. As argued by Oppermann (2000) and Decrop (1999), triangulation in this instance helped to bridge the divide between positivist and interpretivist research. Combining the methods within this one study has helped overcome deficiencies of a singular method.

References


Marshack, K. J. (1994). Copreneurs and dual-career couples: Are they different? *Entrepreneurship:


reactive research in the social sciences. Chicago: Rand McNally.