

## Changing Issues in Leisure-Family Research—Again

John R. Kelly  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

At the 1982 International Sociological Association congress in Mexico City, I first presented an analysis of the changing issues in leisure-family research. This year I collaborated with Deb Bialeschki and Lisa Raymond on a chapter titled a "critical review" of research on "Women, Leisure, and the Family." The changes speak for themselves. In 1982 I proposed that we needed to refocus our research on the dialectic between agency and structure, expression and roles, and even freedom and obligation. Further, the emerging diversity of family forms and life course disruptions would call for greater attention to transitions rather than family life cycle stages, intimacy rather than traditional marriage, sexuality in its various forms, the "identity ambivalence" of young mothers and others caught in social change, and a fuller set of relational forms than the traditional family. Thirteen years later, we have not resolved any of these issues, but we have added several more.

Now it seems to me that we can look back to three periods of leisure-family research with different agendas and even different units of analysis. This history suggests as well some further agendas for the future:

### I. The Period of Neglect—the 60s and 70s

Very briefly, the family received little attention in this early developing period of leisure research. Surveys, often of occupational groups and using demographic independent variables made population aggregates the common unit of analysis. The accepted wisdom was that leisure was best explained from its relation to work. Late in the period, however, there was the beginning of a return to the household-based research of the community study tradition that placed leisure in a fuller social context.

### II. The Affirming Period of Consensus—the early 80s

With the incursion of attributional social psychological models, the usual unit of analysis became the individual. Previously ignored but evident facts became accepted: most leisure is at home and with other household members. Attention to the meanings as well as locales and forms of activity had to include social elements of expressing and developing relationships. The leisure-family connection in time became almost taken-for-granted, a new consensus.

The premise was primarily positive; leisure and family are good for each other. Functional approaches led to attention to "bonding" in leisure, "affection and intimacy" as a form of leisure, developmental play, and the con-

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tribution of leisure to family "solidarity." There were even a few suggestions of a dialectic between the presumed expressive freedom of classic leisure and the reality of role-based expectations and requirements, with most of the examples given being female. Yet, the focus was still on the nuclear family with the premise that playing together was a good thing. Family was the focal example of social meanings and satisfactions of leisure for the individual, as yet undifferentiated by gender or social class. A few cracks in the consensus did appear, however, with suggestions that women's family roles mixed relatively intrinsically satisfying activity with role obligations.

### III. The Critical Period—the late 80s and 90s

Of course, the periods overlap here. Nevertheless, some signs of significant change emerged. The first was giving serious attention to gender. Less dramatically, the unit of analysis has more and more come to be the individual in a defined social context. There was a new consensus that family leisure was more than developmental freedom and bonding; it was also, as I said using Marcuse's expression in the 1982 paper, a domain of "surplus repression." It may be useful to subdivide the analysis into three issues:

1. Fuller attention was given to family variations and disruptions, even in the early 80s. Divorce, the interlocked impacts of poverty and ethnicity, and varied sexual orientations made the preoccupation with the traditional nuclear family untenable. We had to take the unpredictable zigzag life course seriously.

2. Notice began to be given to the "lived conditions" of life in real and varied social contexts. Real life consists of sequential and cumulative disruptions, traumas, tragedies, and projects of putting things back together. Leisure and family are thoroughly contextual, "social" as well as individual. Research could no longer assume that the "middle mass" consisted mostly of straight, white, middle-income families.

3. Focus, then, began to be given to differentiating factors. The first and foremost was, of course, to look at and listen to women. The leisure of adult women could no longer be encompassed in neat categories of activity and meaning, of lists and scales. Rather, there is a dialectic of meaning and constraint shaped by ideologies more than slightly patriarchal in origin and repressive in intent. The central fact of change is the involvement of most women in the paid labor force with consequent role conflicts. The "stalled revolution" is more than a time allocation crunch; it highlights fundamental cultural/political value systems. Simply identifying women's "constraints" moved to finding signs and strains of resistance in the midst of repression. The taken-for-granted functional model has been broken beyond repair.

Partly stimulated by the gender revolution, other elements of awareness developed. One is the reality of gay and lesbian family forms that require redefinition of the family itself. There is also the heterosexual couple in a committed relationship without marriage or children. This, then, opens all

the issues of sexual expression unrelated to marriage and family at all. Another is the growth of the single-adult household, with and without children. These are social facts that have stimulated new ways of looking at both processes and structures. There is new theory—feminist, queer, and ethnic—that challenges the old disciplinary domain assumptions. At the same time, the field is again becoming aware of the significance of social class, multiple cultures, and even of age. Critical approaches now place such differentiation into social changes reconstituting the work force, family composition, and even the marketplace of leisure consumption. To the economists, the family is a unit of consumption more than production.

#### IV. Hints for the Future

The family, it seems, is again a “hot topic” in the national forum, but with little notice of leisure from either functional or critical perspectives. Nevertheless, we may want to exercise some care to avoid being trapped in the political agendas of the new and old, left or right, ideologues who suppress dialogue. In any case, a few general hints for the future may be in order:

First, we should avoid single-issue approaches. Nothing—not even sexuality, gender, class, or ethnicity—accounts for everything significant. Nor is any element of life without a dark side. Rather, dialectical models probably explain more and provide a better basis for research strategies. In family there is both community and alienation. In relationships there is both bonding and violence. In nurture there is both love and exploitation. Of course there is the fundamental dialectic between action and social roles. Consequently we should avoid any simple models or assumptions. In real life there is both conflict and consensus.

Second, we should try to call up our own “domain assumptions” as we design our research and develop explanatory theory. This is not easy. It is difficult enough to keep touch with explicit theory without probing what underlies the choice of theory. Nevertheless, we all have our own implicit ideologies, our “standpoints” from which we approach our study of the family or anything else. If I believe that we are profoundly social beings, incomplete without committed, sharing, giving relationships, then that domain assumption directs my choices of what I study as well as how I go about my research. Sometimes even our joy and anger may underly research designs.

Third, we should not neglect the commonplace in our research. I am not sure that what people mean by “leisure” or “family” is very important. I am sure, however, that what people do together is central to life. Life is not composed of theme parks and cruises. It is composed of dinnertable talk, vacations together, getting the home and yard in shape, kidding around, caring for each other, goofing off, dreaming, and all the minutiae of the day and the hour. That is the real life in real conditions that is important to us all.