

A Critique of Constraints Theory: A Response

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Someone once told me that if I give a speech with 100 people in an audience, I will give 100 different speeches. I'm not sure if the same is true when you write an article for publication but I suspect each of us will glean and react to different aspects of what we read based on our interpretations of the world. I agree with the conclusions that Diane Samdahl and Nancy Jekubovich reached in their article, "A Critique of Constraints Theory: Comparative Analyses and Understandings," but I don't agree with all the assumptions they used in coming to those conclusions. I am appreciative of this opportunity to offer my thoughts about constraints research as a response to this paper. I also will present some opinions about how I feel existing constraints constructs are necessary, but not sufficient wholly, in helping us understand leisure behavior and meanings.

I agree with Samdahl and Jekubovich's conclusions that good applications for constraints theory exist. I also agree with the limitations of the theory and how it is most useful in understanding participation or non-participation in a specific activity. Further I believe that if we want to understand the meanings of leisure we must step outside any one limited perspective. Finally, I believe that doing this type of critique is essential if theory is to be advanced in our field. I would like to comment on some of the major and minor aspects of the evidence for the conclusions the authors gave and provide some discussion about the arguments they present.

Major Comments

My biggest concern relates to the authors' suggestion that constraints theory was meant to be or has become a "meta-theory" (my words, not theirs) for understanding leisure meanings. I believe more accurately that the body of knowledge is about constraints *constructs* rather than theory and that constraints models have guided the research more than one articulated theory. This concern is more than just semantics. I believe the study of constraints has been an important step in understanding more about leisure behavior, but I do not think most of us who have done this research believe it is THE answer to understanding leisure meanings. Leisure researchers have used a number of constructs to understand leisure over the past 25 years such as motivations, satisfactions, and benefits to name a few. All these "theories" are pieces to consider if we are to understand leisure behavior. Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey (1993) discussed the linkages needed between constraints and other aspects of behavior such as motivations, values, and satisfactions. In the introduction to the *Journal of Leisure Research* special issue on "Women, Gender, and Leisure" (Henderson, 1994), I offered a formula for understanding the gendered meanings of leisure. I proposed

values/entitlement, benefits/outcomes, containers/opportunities, negotiated constraints, and life situation all must be added together to understand the gendered meanings of leisure. I was suggesting that constraints were only one dimension in understanding leisure meanings. Although this model aimed at explaining more about women's leisure, the identified components may have a broader application to research on men since their leisure is also gendered. In summary, if constraints theory alone is the means for ascertaining leisure meanings, then I think the theory has been misrepresented, or perhaps, oversold.

Further, the continuing hierarchical assumptions about the nature of leisure constraints trouble me. My colleague and I (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993) have argued that it is difficult to put constraints into a hierarchy as Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991) did but later clarified in their proposed negotiation model (Jackson et al., 1993). Crawford et al.'s choice of the word hierarchy was confusing. In Jackson et al.'s later work I sensed a softening of the notion of an absolute hierarchy. Samdahl and Jekubovich did not interpret their work the same way that I did. Bialeschki and I concluded that an expanded model of leisure constraints showed how constraints influenced leisure preferences as well as participation, and how preferences and participation linked in the negotiation process. Earlier I had proposed, without empirical evidence, that the dynamic and cumulative effects of constraints may be more important than any one constraint (Henderson, 1991). Samdahl and Jekubovich's study adds further critique to the "hierarchical model" but I believe that others have also noted the limitations of hierarchy.

I believe the authors have defined constraints too narrowly. In 1988, Jackson proposed that a constraint to leisure is anything that inhibits people's ability to participate in leisure activities, to spend more time doing so, to take advantage of leisure services, or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction. Many researchers, as did Samdahl and Jekubovich, stop short of analyzing all the potential aspects of this definition. Some of the constraints people feel are not because they don't participate but because they don't participate enough. This broad definition requires more complexity than most constraints questionnaires are able to encompass. The value of qualitative data lies in being able to use the expanded definition as Samdahl and Jekubovich suggest is necessary. I think it's a mistake, however, to assume that the constraints construct relates only to whether one participates or not, rather than allowing for this expanded view.

Finally, in addition to critiquing constraints theory, this study showed a great example of the difference between the positivist and interpretive paradigms. Although qualitative data were used in both parts of the study, the use of an imposed model of constraints in the first study reflected positivism and the constant comparison used in the second analysis reflected an interpretive paradigm. Obviously, the results are different depending upon the *a priori* assumptions made. Of course I have a bias, but I believe the interpretive approach allowed for the emergence of "much more dynamic factors"

that currently move thinking about constraints to another level. This article is a great example of how data end up looking different based upon whether one goes into analysis with a pre-determined framework or whether one lets the results emerge as grounded theory. Their analyses also represent aspects of structural and functional interpretation of data. This variety of interpretation makes their paper, particularly in Part II, compelling and interesting.

Minor Comments

Researchers have to have some structure in asking interview questions but the interpretation of the responses is what is important. We must take care, however, in asking questions that will enable people to talk about their experiences. For example, in several studies I have asked, "what prevents you from doing the leisure activity you'd like to do?". People answer with a range of responses. Some people say that nothing prevents them from leisure but then describe constraints in other explicit and implicit ways at other points during the interview. Part II of Samdahl and Jekubovich's study is interesting precisely because they "did not impose leisure constraints as a filter for understanding what was in the interviews; instead we tried to let the data drive the interpretation."

I have always had a problem with time and money as common responses when people talk about constraints. Those responses are too cliché and easy to articulate. It seems to me that other meanings always lie behind those responses. I don't consider "time" a constraint because it isn't descriptive. Time isn't the problem as much as priorities underlying circumstances such as family and work. The real constraint isn't time but something else that is taking the time. I really liked the way Samdahl and Jekubovich asked what participants would do if they were "magically given" a three day week and why those experiences were not commonly available to them in normal routine. I think that question is an excellent way to find out what's really important. This question enabled the interesting analysis that occurred in Part II. My colleagues and I also found that type of questioning allows expanded variations on the meanings of "typical" constraints such as time. For example we found that the magnification of leisure constraints was greater for women with physical disabilities because of aspects like energy deficiency and time shrinkage (Henderson, Bedini, Hecht, & Shuler, 1995). These ideas were more descriptive than just "time." Samdahl and Jekubovich did a good job in their analysis of how "lack of money" is problematic as a conclusion about constraints.

Samdahl and Jekubovich note the secondary role of activity relative to what some people value in social relationships. That analysis makes sense and I believe it parallels the assumptions of some of the work currently underway that examines benefits and benefits based management (e.g., Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). The orientation of recreation professionals has been toward activity provision for so long that it is difficult to get out of that mode, but the question of activity for activity sake is certainly being ques-

tioned. Aspects of activity are always going to be inherent in leisure studies because activity is our traditional currency for examining behavior. I agree that activity may be most useful when constraints theory is applied to programming and management. On the other hand, maybe leisure researchers' definition of activity is too narrow. Being with a partner or others is activity but we haven't defined it in the same way as organized sport or cultural activities. Perhaps we need to expand that definition of activity, as well, and then we will be able to understand better what people do and what's important to them.

I have no argument that a great deal of leisure revolves around social interaction as Samdahl and Jekubovich propose. As my colleagues and I discussed in *Both Gains and Gaps* (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996) women often experience leisure as connections (affiliative leisure) or autonomy (self-determined leisure). Most people need both types of leisure and they compliment each other in a yin-yang way. Samdahl and Jekubovich underline conceptually what other feminist leisure researchers have been saying for some time about the value of social relationships and leisure.

I agree that some researchers have been quick to impose a constraints framework and suggest that it applies to everyone. The constraints construct is commonsensical and appears to be relatively easy to measure. With the limitations of instruments and growing body of knowledge, however, researchers must be careful not to force people to fit theory that may not be appropriate for them. My frustration with constraints instruments that didn't address the potential uniqueness of some women was what led us to design a new instrument to study women's leisure constraints ten years ago (Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988). All leisure theory and the quantitative instruments used to measure it must continue in a process of evolution if we are to build on the knowledge base that we are creating. For example, my colleagues and I are currently working on a quantitative questionnaire to measure constraints negotiation although it has not come together satisfactorily yet (Henderson, Ainsworth, Bialeschki, & Hardy, 1995).

My Soapbox

Although Samdahl and Jekubovich do not bring up this topic, I want to interject what I see as an issue and infrequently discussed aspect of constraints negotiation theory. My colleagues and I (Henderson et al., 1988) argued ten years ago that there were societal (antecedent) factors affecting people's involvement in recreation and leisure activity. Jackson and Rucks (1995) suggested that the negotiation strategies that people use depend on the kinds of constraints they face and on the activities in which they wish to participate. The problem with constraints negotiation is that the onus is almost always on individuals. Societal issues ought to be addressed as well (Henderson et al., 1996). In North American society, we are socialized to "pull ourselves up by the bootstraps" and to be personally responsible for our fate. Antecedent constraints, however, such as gender expectations, fa-

miliar support, job segregation for women, media messages, and body image are examples of social constraints that are difficult for an individual by oneself to overcome.

To eliminate leisure constraints requires more than just what any one individual can do. For example, an individual who can't participate in a leisure activity because he or she lacks child or elder care must also consider what role society has in making child care or elder care opportunities available. To consider constraints negotiation as only an individual's problem is to miss an important aspect of social responsibility. Many people are not aware of the macro aspects of constraints constructs. Perhaps they have never thought about it or perhaps they feel helpless in addressing concerns outside their personal sphere. Social issues ought to be examined more carefully if we really want to understand the micro and macro impact of constraints and the meanings of leisure in people's lives.

In summary, I believe that Samdahl and Jekubovich raise important questions and begin to bring together the strengths and weaknesses of constraints theory. I believe they have opened the door wider to ask other research questions about constraints. New questions can only move us forward as we seek to uncover "meta-theories" (if that's possible in this postmodern age) to understand leisure behavior.

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