

## **In the Eye of the Beholder:<sup>1</sup> A Comment on Samdahl & Jekubovich (1997), "A Critique of Leisure Constraints: Comparative Analyses and Understandings"**

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The purpose of this article is to address some of the issues raised by Samdahl and Jekubovich (1997) in their critique of leisure constraints research. I suggest that the authors have based their criticism on a rather narrow and outdated conception of leisure constraints, that the concept of constraints is not an artificial construct, and that the new data and interpretations put forward by Samdahl and Jekubovich are better viewed as potentially important refinements to thinking about constraints to leisure rather than as grounds for abandoning constraints research.

KEYWORDS: *Leisure constraints.*

### **Introduction**

As a long-time participant in and proponent of research on constraints to leisure, I welcome the publication of Diane Samdahl and Nancy Jekubovich's paper, "A critique of leisure constraints: Comparative analyses and understandings," both for the substantive data and interpretations the authors offer, as well as for the criticisms of the field that they raise. I am also grateful to have been invited to join Karla Henderson in writing a comment on the article: I view it as an opportunity to engage in public discussion about the value of what many would agree is an important component of contemporary North American leisure studies. A field of research will likely stagnate unless its basic assumptions are subjected to scrutiny and debated constructively in an open forum such as the current exchange.

Samdahl and Jekubovich's article represents an important step in the evolution of leisure constraints research (Goodale & Witt, 1989; Jackson, 1988, 1991; Jackson & Scott, forthcoming; Wade, 1985). A scattering of pa-

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<sup>1</sup>I deliberately chose this title to reflect two themes. First is the importance that researchers should attach to recognizing the subjective nature of leisure. Indeed, "Leisure in the eye of the beholder" is the title of a sub-section used in a forthcoming chapter on the leisure experience by Roger Mannell (forthcoming) to encapsulate what he calls the "key premise of much of the social psychological research on leisure," namely that "leisure must be understood from the subjective perspective of the participant—a perspective that is based on the belief that researchers and practitioners not only need to examine what people do in their leisure but how they construe, experience and appraise what they do." Secondly, I wanted to convey one of the key themes of this "comment": that interpretations of leisure, like leisure itself, are also "in the eye of the beholder."

pers appeared in the early 1980s (Boothby, Tungatt, & Townsend, 1981; Francken & van Raij, 1981; Romsa & Hoffman, 1980; Witt & Goodale, 1981), followed by a virtual explosion in empirical studies in the decade that followed: this literature was summarized and reviewed by Jackson (1988, 1991) and exemplified by the simultaneous publication of special issues of the *Journal of Leisure Research* and *Leisure Sciences* in 1991. From the mid- to late-1980s, empirical research was accompanied by a modest amount of theoretical development, coupled with the publication of models designed to understand the operation of constraints within people's leisure decision making processes (e.g., Chick, Roberts, & Romney, 1991; Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Godbey, 1985; Henderson, 1991; Jackson & Searle, 1985; Searle, 1991; Shaw, 1994).

Then, in the 1990s, re-evaluations of early assumptions began to appear (Jackson, 1990; Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993; Kay & Jackson, 1991; Mannell & Zuzanek, 1991; Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). It was also in the 1990s that concerns about and criticisms of leisure constraints research started to emerge, usually expressed relatively informally in face-to-face conversations and on Internet mailing lists (notably Leisurenets) and only occasionally and not very systematically or comprehensively in conference papers (e.g., Goodale, 1992; Leith & Shaw, 1996) and journal articles (e.g., Hemingway, 1995). Thus, Samdahl and Jekubovich have brought together for the first time in a single refereed article in a scholarly journal most of the criticisms that have been leveled at leisure constraints research in recent years.

The essential question of Samdahl and Jekubovich's paper has to do with the effectiveness of constraints as a framework for understanding the factors that shape people's everyday leisure choices. They ask this question because, while the results of the empirical, qualitative study that they conducted seemed to offer examples that could be interpreted *ex post facto* as the experience of leisure constraints and the adoption of constraint negotiation strategies, the analysis also raised doubts about this effectiveness. Thus, the strategy of the analysis was to offer two competing interpretations of a single set of data, one from a "constraints perspective," the other from a "non-constraints perspective," contrasting the two sets of understandings, and concluding with "critical reflections on inherent assumptions and limitations of leisure constraints as a framework for understanding people's everyday leisure choices and behavior."

Samdahl and Jekubovich have raised several important questions about leisure constraints research. For example, they are correct in their challenge of the early assumption that constraints are insurmountable obstacles to leisure. I agree, too, with their comment that much of what we know about constraints has come from purpose-driven research (beginning and ending with questions about constraints), usually of a quantitative survey nature, which may therefore have produced distorted findings and faulty interpretations. Samdahl and Jekubovich also make a number of potentially very important contributions to the constraints literature, not the least of which is the way in which they place the leisure experiences and decisions of the

people whom they interviewed in the broader context of their everyday lives. They are rightly concerned that focussing on constraints may artificially serve to fragment our view of people's lives, separating out only one component to the neglect of the rest, and perhaps even trivializing people's everyday experiences.

Having said this, it is important not to take all of Samdahl and Jekubovich's interpretations and arguments at face value, for there is much to challenge and criticize in what they say. For example, the leisure constraints literature could have been reviewed more completely and accurately. As a case in point, Samdahl and Jekubovich fail to attribute the identification of three types of constraints (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural) to Crawford and Godbey (1987). Instead, they associate this typology with an article by Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991), which could not have been written were it not for Crawford and Godbey's (1987) pioneering conceptualization. Also, although some reference is made to subsequent literature that has postulated and investigated the concept of constraints as negotiable, most of what Samdahl and Jekubovich have to say about constraints in general and about negotiation in particular arises directly from their interpretation of Crawford et al. (1991)—and a narrow interpretation at that! Nor do they acknowledge the depth and richness of the material that has followed the Crawford et al. (1991) article. This literature includes a theoretical paper by Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey (1993) and a criticism of the hierarchical model by Henderson and Bialechski (1993), which raised several of the same points as Samdahl and Jekubovich, but preceded them by some time. There has also been some empirical investigation of the constraints negotiation hypothesis (Henderson, Bedini, Hecht, & Schuler, 1995; Jackson & Rucks, 1995; McQuarrie & Jackson, 1996; Scott, 1991; Whyte & Shaw, 1994). Samdahl and Jekubovich cite some of this literature but, in my view, make inadequate use of it.

In the remainder of this comment I want to address three criticisms arising from my reading of Samdahl and Jekubovich's article. First, I will elaborate on the preceding point about the narrowness of their interpretation of the constraints concept. Next, I will address what I consider to be one of Samdahl and Jekubovich's key points, namely the arguably artificial nature of the constraints construct. Third, I will ask whether Samdahl and Jekubovich's alternative, "non constraints" interpretation of their data is indeed at odds with leisure constraints research or whether, instead, it is better viewed as consistent with and an extension of it.

### Main Criticisms of the Paper

#### *Interpretation of Constraints Concepts*

If a critique of a field of academic research is to be persuasive, then it is vital that the central concepts and assumptions of that field be interpreted correctly and that it draws upon the most recent literature. How well do Samdahl and Jekubovich's concerns measure up in this regard? In my judg-

ment the answer is, "Not very well." I reach this conclusion for two reasons. First, their interpretation appears to rest on a narrow conception of constraints derived largely if not entirely from their reading of a single paper (Crawford et al., 1991). Secondly, several of the supposed limitations they pinpoint have in fact been addressed and rectified in some of the more recent literature (to which they pay only passing attention).

Samdahl and Jekubovich are essentially correct in their assertion that leisure constraints research has placed undue emphasis on "leisure as activity" to the neglect of other conceptualizations. Closely interwoven with this concern is the charge that, by focussing largely on activity participation, constraints researchers have fostered the view that the only significant outcome of the experience of constraints is nonparticipation. Thus, in the paragraph that introduces the sub-section "Revisiting leisure constraints research," Samdahl and Jekubovich comment that Crawford et al.'s (1991) hierarchical model "disguises the significantly diverse effects that constraints can have, extending well beyond simply blocking leisure participation." Put bluntly, this interpretation is wrong: Crawford et al. never intended to imply that nonparticipation in an activity is the only outcome of constraint. We explicitly included in our paper a model to illustrate that other outcomes are possible, namely limitations to the degree of specialization that might be achieved, and used this possibility to exemplify how constraints might impact leisure decisions in a variety of ways. We simply chose participation as the outcome in the main hierarchical model because (1) participation and nonparticipation were the main focus of constraints research at the time the paper was drafted (the late 1980s) and thus the model was consistent with then-current thinking, and because (2) the key concepts we wished to convey were easier to illustrate with reference to participation than any other possible outcome.

Thus, it can reasonably be argued that much of Samdahl and Jekubovich's critique is shaped by their own narrow interpretation of how constraints researchers define constraints, i.e., as inhibiting or blocking barriers that intervene between preferences and participation and thus are relevant only to explaining nonparticipation and nothing else. This view is embodied in a commonly used but now outdated definition, namely, "A constraint may be defined as any factor which intervenes between the preference for an activity and participation in it" (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1989, p. 117). A more recent and preferable definition of constraints is "factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure" (modified and expanded from Jackson, 1991, p. 279). This definition is an important advancement over the one quoted above for three reasons: (1) it recognizes that there are other types of constraints besides intervening constraints, and therefore that other outcomes besides nonparticipation are possible; (2) it proposes that there is a difference between perception and reality, i.e., an individual may be affected by a constraint even if he or she does not perceive it or articulate it;

and (3) it acknowledges that there is a distinction between an individual's experience, perception, and articulation of constraint on the one hand, and, on the other hand, researchers' construction and use of the constraints concept (see below).

A distinct but associated source of criticism for Samdahl and Jekubovich is the presumed linear, unidirectional nature of the hierarchical model. This model implies, they argue, a view of constraints which "operate in a unidirectional sequence" and thus fails to allow for what they refer to as a "backwards influence." In the strictest terms, this is a valid criticism of the hierarchical model as it was laid out in the 1991 paper by Crawford et al., a point that was also argued, for somewhat different reasons, by Henderson and Bialeschki (1993). What Samdahl and Jekubovich do not acknowledge, however, is a later modification to the hierarchical model (Jackson et al., 1993), which allowed for precisely the process and interpretation that they themselves advocate, namely the "interaction proposition." This proposition, which stated that "Anticipation of one or more insurmountable interpersonal or structural constraints may suppress the desire for participation" (Jackson et al., 1993, p. 7), was elaborated as follows: "... another possible way in which antecedent constraints may be manifested is through feedback loops ... whereby the expectation of encountering an interpersonal or structural constraint to participating in an activity that is assessed as being difficult or impossible to negotiate may suppress the desire to participate in that activity" (Jackson et al., 1993, p. 7). Presumably, the term "feedback loops" is what Samdahl and Jekubovich meant by a "backwards influence." If so, then their argument does not refute one of the tenets of recent constraints theory—it supports it!

In summary, Samdahl and Jekubovich appear to hold a conception of leisure constraints research as a monolithic, unchanging structure of assumptions, findings, and interpretations, frozen in time with the publication of Crawford et al. (1991), failing to recognize that it is continually evolving. The basic premises of leisure constraints research that Samdahl and Jekubovich criticize are based on a narrow reading of that single paper, do not take into account some of its wider implications, and conveniently overlook important subsequent modifications and extensions that in fact permit the very sorts of interpretations that they themselves offer in the latter ("alternative interpretation") part of their paper.

To overstate the case, perhaps, one could argue that Samdahl and Jekubovich's article represents a supportive empirical test of propositions derived from re-casting the hierarchical model in the form of the negotiation concept (Jackson et al., 1993), rather than a refutation of the earlier, limited framework provided by Crawford et al. (1991). From this standpoint, then, it is disappointing that Samdahl and Jekubovich have chosen to use their study to attack the field of leisure constraints research instead of offering positive modifications and extensions that could in the long run have been far more productive contributions to knowledge.

*Constraint as an Artificial Construct*

Samdahl and Jekubovich correctly note the recent shift among leisure researchers away from time, activity, and participation conceptualizations, toward defining leisure "as it is integrated into our everyday lives"—not surprisingly, since Samdahl herself has been one of the leaders in this regard (Samdahl, 1988, 1991, 1992). They argue that recent constructs, such as enjoyment, freedom, perceived freedom, and self-expression "parallel people's common experiencing of leisure." This is important, they suggest, because such an approach offers "validation of some basic premises of contemporary leisure research."

It is in this context that Samdahl and Jekubovich articulate one of their most serious challenges to assumptions underlying leisure constraints research: they contend that individuals rarely, if ever, think explicitly in terms of constraints. Thus, given the premise that researchers ought to conceptualize leisure in ways that are more meaningful to the subjects of research than to those who conduct it, the concept of constraints has little if any relevance. Stated another way, "constraint" is dismissed as an artificial construct that scholars impose when conceptualizing, conducting, and interpreting their research; the concept has only limited value for understanding leisure from the perspective of the individual.

There is something to be said for this view, not least because it draws attention to the temptation to which researchers often succumb, namely to artificially abstract, and perhaps over-emphasize, aspects of people's lives—such as constraints—that do not receive much overt thought by individuals on a day-to-day basis. On the other hand, as the revised definition of constraint presented above recognizes, the fact that a constraint may not be articulated, let alone perceived, does not necessarily deny its importance as an influence on leisure. Nor does it negate the value of the constraints construct as a theoretical or empirical explanation of leisure decisions.

The key question is, it seems to me, do people think in terms of constraints, or is this in reality just an artificial construct invented by researchers? If the former is correct—and there is ample evidence to suggest that people *do* think in terms of constraints, not least in Samdahl and Jekubovich's own quotations—then virtually the entire structure of their argument collapses. If the latter is true, does it really matter? Social scientists, indeed academics in general, are forced to use concepts and constructs in order to describe, interpret, and understand phenomena, but congruency between people's articulation of a phenomenon and theoretical constructs to understand that phenomenon cannot be the only yardstick to judge the validity and usefulness of theory. As an example, when I walk to the corner store instead of driving across the city to pick up a carton of milk, I rarely think *overtly* of the influence of distance and the retail hierarchy of the urban landscape on how far I am willing to travel for a certain kind of product and how I choose to get there. But this does not make any less influential the effects that

distance and urban structure exert, or any less useful the concepts of friction of distance and distance decay in research on travel behavior. At a further theoretical remove, it does not (at least on these grounds) invalidate the insights that can be derived from reducing countless individual travel decisions to theoretical frameworks such as the gravity model (Smith, 1989).

In parallel, but closer to the subject-matter at hand, one might ask if leisure really is defined by individuals in terms of freedom, real or perceived. Do people actually use these words when asked to think and talk about their leisure? If not, does this not mean that "perceived freedom" is just as artificial a construct as constraint? And even if perceived freedom is an artificial construct, surely this does not invalidate its usefulness in describing and understanding leisure.

Part of Samdahl and Jekubovich's concern about the artificiality of the constraints construct is that reducing the richness and variety of incidents and circumstances in people's lives to the common denominator of "constraint" somehow "mixes stories." It is true that generalizing different specific experiences and circumstances ("stories") may force the researcher to sacrifice much of the detail and richness of people's lives, but to argue that this is "mixing stories" is to overlook the important opportunities that social scientists gain in searching for patterns that exist in human behavior and principles that explain it. Indeed, I would argue that this search is one of the obligations that social scientists take on, and that the compromise involved in terms of sacrificing detail to gain generality provides theoretical benefits that far outweigh the descriptive costs. To forego this obligation and opportunity degenerates social science into mere story-telling.

### *Consistency or Contradiction?*

The final main issue on which I should like to comment has to do with whether the alternative analysis offered by Samdahl and Jekubovich contradicts or is consistent with a constraints-related perspective—a matter about which Samdahl and Jekubovich themselves appear to be somewhat ambivalent, at least to begin with. At many points in their paper, the authors concede that the constraints framework seemed to offer potential for interpreting leisure-related behavior, and that their data contained many apparent examples of the occurrence and experience of constraints. They also speculate initially that the ways in which people modify their leisure are evidence of the negotiation of constraints, and I would interpret—broadly, at any rate—the four themes that emerged in the second analysis as strategies of constraint negotiation.

Why, then, do Samdahl and Jekubovich reject the constraints framework and opt for a competing explanation? There appear to be two main reasons, which are best summarized in the authors' own words. First is the reason discussed in the previous sub-section of this "comment": "People seldom used a term comparable to 'constraints' when speaking about the factors that influenced their leisure choices.... To label these situations as constraint

negotiation imposes a term that did not seem to fit the reality that these people shared in discussing their own lives." Further, constraint negotiation "does not effectively capture the spirit in which people arranged their lives or the way they sought out favored leisure opportunities." Thus, the interpretation of specific behaviours as constraint negotiation "does little more than to affirm an external model." Second, with regard to the findings that they initially interpret as evidence of structural constraints, Samdahl and Jekubovich comment that, "as we reflected on these examples ... it seemed as if they affected the *type* of activity that people did but they did not preclude people from engaging in leisure altogether."

What are we to make of these criticisms and interpretations? As far as the first objection is concerned, I have already dealt with it in the preceding sub-section. Regarding the second objection, and as implied above, current thinking in the constraints field does *not* imply that any outcome of constraints other than precluding engaging in leisure altogether is impossible. The notion that other outcomes are possible, including modifications to the type of activity chosen (the very example pinpointed by Samdahl and Jekubovich), is *entirely* consistent with recent thinking about constraints. In fact, it is the essence of the first and most basic of six propositions related to the process of negotiating leisure constraints, viz "Participation is dependent not on the absence of constraints ... but on negotiation through them. Such negotiation may *modify rather than foreclose* participation" (Jackson et al., 1993, p. 4, emphasis added). Thus, the implicit accusation leveled by Samdahl and Jekubovich, that constraints models cannot encompass their observations of leisure behavior, is unfounded.

More generally, Samdahl and Jekubovich seem to see the second and alternative explanation of their data as being at odds with constraints assumptions and models. Would it not be preferable to view it, instead, as complementary to current knowledge and thinking about leisure constraints, and therefore potentially a very powerful refinement? It seems to me that much of what Samdahl and Jekubovich argue offers a set of important new insights about how constraints to leisure are experienced and how people adapt to them. Thus, rather than dismissing constraints research because it (arguably) does not provide the framework for interpreting their data, I believe it would have been far more productive if Samdahl and Jekubovich had presented their new data and interpretations as a vehicle for enhancing that framework.

### The "Pacman Problem"

In making all of the preceding comments, the last in particular, I am fully aware of the danger that may exist in over-extending the constraints "paradigm" and co-opting new findings and interpretations within that paradigm. Indeed, this seems to be one of the underlying concerns that pervades Samdahl and Jekubovich's article, namely that the field has become all-encompassing in North American leisure studies, and that by attempting



to explain everything, it explains almost nothing. As Samdahl and Jekubovich eloquently remind us, proponents of leisure constraints research need to be wary of making unwarranted claims about the breadth and depth of the insights that can be gleaned from any single "paradigm" within leisure studies, constraints research included. Yet, I would still argue that where the framework is clearly appropriate—and I believe that it is with regard to much of Samdahl and Jekubovich's data—then it should not be rejected as inadequate but modified and refined.

The "breadth issue" is not a new concern. Goodale (1992), for example, has commented that "Virtually all studies of women and leisure are studies of constraints.... Studies of the elderly, of those who have disabilities [and] of various races and ethnic groups are mainly studies of constraints.... Constraints research, titles aside, encompasses a very large portion of psychological/social psychological research on leisure behavior." And, as David Scott and I observe elsewhere (Jackson & Scott, forthcoming), it is hard to resist an image of leisure constraints research as a sort of gigantic conceptual Pacman, swallowing up everything in leisure studies in its path!

The "Pacman" view of the field, however, is probably less legitimate as a characterization of constraints research now than it was five or ten years ago, when empirical, theory-poor research explicitly devoted to constraints was at its zenith. Today, a more realistic sketch of the field would suggest that constraints research, while continuing as the focus of investigation for many researchers, has been far more influential in the way that it has become "internalized" in many studies: my experience in listening to papers presented at conferences and in reading the literature leaves me with the impression that questions about constraints are now routinely included in more broadly-based studies of leisure and recreation rather than being the only or primary goal of investigation. From this perspective, then, perhaps the most important legacy of the 1980s' and 1990s' flurry of research on leisure constraints will be the way in which it has informed and enhanced our understanding of leisure in general by being assimilated within the broader field of leisure studies, rather than continuing to exist as a distinct entity.

### Conclusions

In this comment, I have attempted to focus on several concerns that occurred to me as I read and thought about Samdahl and Jekubovich's provocative and stimulating article. I have suggested that the authors have based their criticism on a rather narrow and outdated conception of leisure constraints, that the concept of constraints is not an artificial construct (and even if it were, this would not invalidate the insights that accrue from its application), and that the new data and interpretations put forward by Samdahl and Jekubovich are better viewed as potentially important refinements to thinking about constraints rather than as grounds for abandoning constraints research except in the narrowest of circumstances.

Ultimately, of course, there is no absolute answer. The existence, experience, perception, and response to constraints are indeed "in the eye of the

beholder." And there are many "beholders"—the individuals whom we study, ourselves as researchers, and critics such as Samdahl and Jekubovich. Thus, there are many who will no doubt agree with most of what Samdahl and Jekubovich have to say about leisure constraints research, while other will continue to work in the area. Let me conclude, then, by reiterating what I said at the outset—that, notwithstanding my criticisms of Samdahl and Jekubovich's article, I do believe that they have made an important contribution to the literature. But, if research is like a journey, then their article is a rest stop, not the terminus.

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