

A Commentary On The Perils Of Intellectual Isolation

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According to a study recently conducted by Samdahl and Kelly (1999), leisure research is intellectually isolated, not only from what they call "important and relevant bodies of literature" (p. 10), but scholars in this area are also isolated from each other and each other's work. This troubling finding about our intellectual isolation conjures up the image that we are an isolate on a sociometric map that is comprised of important and relevant bodies of literature and fields of study. The problem with our position on this map, our isolation, is self evident—by being isolated we are out of the intellectual mainstream where ideas are exchanged, research agendas are set, and theories are tested. From our position at the margins of intellectual life, we have limited visibility and little to no ability to exert influence on the agenda that is set, the ideas that are exchanged, or the theories being tested. We lack important linkages to other areas of knowledge such as the social or behavioral sciences or management sciences and we are neither informed by, nor do we inform those relevant bodies of literature and fields of study. Lacking these linkages, we initiate few conversations beyond and among ourselves and when we do engage in conversations, our audience is very small, indeed.

If Samdahl and Kelly's findings accurately capture our position, then one of our most important challenges is to change our position on this map; to become more centrally located, and presumably then, more connected with important bodies of knowledge and other scholars who examine leisure. The authors offer us a glimpse at an important reason why we are intellectually isolated. When they discuss "outside" research on leisure (research conducted by non-leisure scholars), they state that this research "addresses leisure and recreation within the context the family, health, urban planning, culture, and the economy O but most [articles] have little relevance to leisure practitioners" (p. 10). This statement infers two crucial indictments of leisure researchers and practitioners; first, that leisure researchers do not examine leisure as a part of those important contexts, and that perhaps, as a result, we examine leisure from a non-holistic, compartmentalized perspective. To understand leisure better, we take it out of its context and hold it up to the light to examine its parts and systems and possible meanings. In doing so, all of the relationships and intricacies between leisure and its context are torn or altered. What we end up with, then, is an understanding of leisure in isolation of context and meaning; stripped bare of the family, of health, urban planning, culture, and the economy. The second indictment inferred in Samdahl and Kelly's statement is that practitioners also view lei-

sure in that same mechanistic, discrete way. When societal factors such as family, health, and environments in which people live have little relevance to a practitioner, is not the practitioner viewing leisure as separate from other pertinent community and societal factors? While I do not believe that this second inference is true, perhaps what Samdahl and Kelly mean is that practitioners are looking for "technical" assistance when they read journals. The study conducted by Jordan and Roland (1999) offers some insight to this question and is discussed in the next section.

Jordan and Roland (1999) report equally troubling findings from their study of differences that exist between academics and practitioners on the frequency of reading research and attitudes toward research. Their findings show that between 61% to 86% of all respondents in their study, both academics and practitioners, rarely or never read a research journal. While this finding may be influenced by a small sample that does not represent the population from which it was drawn, it tells us that leisure research exerts little to no impact on advancing the profession or influencing professional practice, at least via research journals. What can explain this lack of impact of research journals on both academics and practitioners? While the study did not examine why respondents rarely read research journals, I offer several possible explanations.

First, there is a general societal perception of research's lack of relevance to anything other than the most esoteric pursuits. We hear this belief voiced in the well-worn statement comparing the university (where most research occurs) to the "real world," where professionals practice their trade. This perception can be interpreted as anti-intellectual or it can be viewed as the practitioner's desire for focused, specialized responses to day-to-day challenges. It is also likely, as Jordan and Roland posit, that we have yet to bridge the gap—to develop formalized, systematic ways for theory and research to inform practice in meaningful ways, and practice to inform theory and research. I believe that our profession reflects this societal propensity to think of research, and indeed, the generation of knowledge, as not practical or relevant, unless it has immediate, practical application.

Second, the profession is multi-disciplinary and has many areas of specialization, hence, leisure service professionals draw from many domains of knowledge to inform their practice—tourism, marketing, commercial recreation, outdoor and environmental education, therapeutic recreation, and so on. Rather than reading the *Journal of Leisure Research*, a generalist journal (except for special issues) covering a broad spectrum of leisure topics, practitioners may choose, instead, to read journals directly aligned with their specialty areas, or journals that emphasize implications for practice.

This multi-disciplinary field may provide another explanation why leisure research journals are not widely read. Referring back to an idea posed earlier, that leisure research and practice occur out of context, it might be that practitioners find leisure research less than useful because practice takes place within the context of complex societal settings when leisure research does not. For example, many leisure service agencies and professionals are

engaged in multi-disciplinary, multi-agency endeavors such as healthy start programs, school age homework center programs, and other collaborations with school district, foundations, state and county agencies. These projects do not just emphasize recreation. They deliver services for the whole person and the family—health care, tutoring, community schools, youth employment programs, financial planning, and recreation. Leisure research and the boundaries we have set for ourselves, may not be relevant to practitioners who are engaged in community building, asset mapping, and entrepreneurial ventures. This is the knowledge that practitioners want and need if they are to take a leadership role (much less stay relevant) in their community of service providers—a community that increasingly includes not just other recreation professionals, but teachers, principals, social workers, and health care workers as well. This knowledge must be quickly and easily accessible to the practitioner. The lengthy review and publication process used by research journals does not meet these criteria. Rigorously designed research can be disseminated quickly via web sites, research update mailings, or conference proceedings.

Both the Samdahl and Kelly (1999) and Jordan and Roland (1999) studies provide us with an important opportunity to reassess how we study leisure. Whether or not the reader has concerns about the design, methodology, or findings of either study, we must ponder the questions about our relevance and impact on both knowledge generation and practice, our lack of connection to other fields of study and to each other. One way to reposition ourselves on the sociometric map is to weave leisure back into community life rather separating it from that context. Then both the practitioner and the researcher can also be seen in that context working along side practitioners and researchers from other fields of study. When we are more visible, our chances of being seen as contributors to knowledge bases and to professional practice will increase. There are other ways to reposition ourselves; let's take the time to explore them.