

Reflections on the Future of Leisure Studies

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I am troubled by the future of leisure studies. Some days it bothers me less than other days, but I remain generally disturbed. I see things happening in the academic environment, in the social science disciplines, and in the broader social world that are not reflected in our field. My training and the traditional tools of analysis are no longer adequate, and the leisure journals provide little guidance for the work I want to do. I approached this special issue of *JLR* with hopes that other people's reflections would answer my own questions about leisure studies in the 21st century. Instead, they mirror my concern.

Many of the essays in this issue advocate new topics or new methods that build upon existing traditions. Other essays begin to rattle the cage by critiquing the paradigms that have shaped our research. And a few others look outside of leisure studies and challenge us to maintain relevance to broader social theory and social issues. Reading through these essays with my own biases, I know I had hoped for more of the latter and less of the former. My own view is that the traditions of leisure studies are not adequate for survival in the coming century.

Survival, I know, has many different meanings, the least of which comes by attaining tenure and then publishing your way towards retirement. The necessity to publish generates many articles for our journals, most of which accomplish the "mopping up" functions of normal science (Kuhn, 1970). Kuhn made it clear that normal science can confirm and expand existing understandings but it does not produce new knowledge; instead, it reaffirms the status quo. This troubles me, for like most social researchers I want to believe that my work does make a difference.

When I received my doctorate fourteen years ago I thought I had the tools to last a lifetime. I had extensive training in survey research, I was well grounded in social psychological theory, and I was on the forefront of the LISREFL revolution. My confidence left little room for doubt. Yet only a short time later I found myself struggling to keep up with my doctoral students who wanted to use postmodern theory, feminist critique, and qualitative research methodology. I could not deny that these new tools provided more interesting understandings about leisure than the traditional perspectives I had been taught, and that forced a realization that I had spent my early career mopping up.

Kuhn argued that mopping up is an important function that defines and secures an emergent body of knowledge. It is a respectable activity in its time and place. However, allegiance to traditional paradigms creates tension during times of revolution. I believe a revolution is underway—in fact, it is almost resolved—in many of our parent disciplines, while leisure studies clings tenaciously to its past.

My concern is that North American leisure studies has structural and historical factors that keep it tied to the status quo. Much of this conservatism stems from our association with NRPA. The uneasy merger between leisure studies and leisure services, challenged 15 years ago by Burdge (1985), was never openly examined in our field. Yet, by accepting accreditation standards and maintaining an ongoing commitment to “the practitioners,” we have implicitly chosen leisure services over leisure studies. Today more than 90% of the research on leisure and recreation is published outside our field by authors who fail to cite any articles from our journals (Samdahl & Kelly, 1999). Likewise, we cite little of their work either.

This intellectual isolation is frightening, particularly for those who profess an interest in the academic study of leisure. Slogans like “the benefits are endless” and devotion to traditional leisure services demonstrate the narrow, value-laden premise of our field. This is the framework that separates us from the broader study of leisure and moves us away from the disciplinary roots that framed our earlier research. Unfortunately, appropriation of commercial recreation and tourism will only compound this isolation.

In some ways the applied nature of leisure studies portends the future of academic research. According to Readings (1996), theoretical scholarship is declining as universities move away from liberal arts to embrace the research and training needs of corporate America. As this occurs, business managers are replacing scholars in the leadership roles at universities. Within this new academic environment, departments of recreation and tourism may be tempted to drop their reliance on the social sciences and realign themselves with the business school, thereby protecting faculty lines and academic programs. I view this as a dangerous trend. Movement towards a business orientation not only abandons the theoretical study of leisure, it undermines important features that distinguish leisure service administration from business administration. This is not a pathway for survival for leisure studies.

Like the university, NRPA also is functioning like a corporation, evident through its increased concern about the inability of SPRE to generate revenue. With vested interest in its commercial alliances, NRPA forbid the leisure research symposium from scheduling research presentations that would conflict with the afternoon opening of the trade fair at last year’s national conference. By comparison, just a few years ago we were refused entrance into that same event. This effort to force full attendance at the trade fair clearly demonstrates NRPA’s priorities at this conference. With allegiance to corporate profits, NRPA hardly seems in a position to facilitate a critique of the patriarchal, classist, and commercial nature of established leisure services, yet many leisure researchers identify NRPA as their primary professional association. There truly is something wrong in this arrangement.

The danger of our alliance with leisure services is that it obstructs an effective examination of the status quo. Established leisure agencies and interventions have evolved in conjunction with hegemonic systems of power and control. They are, in effect, part of "the System" and should be approached with critical reflection rather than simple acceptance. The majority of research in our journals works within the ideology of traditional leisure services the same way that normal science works within the traditions of an established theoretical paradigm. The result is a body of knowledge that validates and affirms the status quo without truly challenging an existing way of thinking. How might we serve diverse populations and enhance people's lives if we thought outside the box? Is it possible that leisure services are part of the problem rather than part of the solution? Our traditional approach to research will keep us from seeing or answering these questions.

The epistemological revolution that has taken place in the social sciences is a movement away from positivism and the social psychological framework that shaped research through the past several decades. Newer theory draws from a broader sociological perspective, acknowledging the influence of politics and power and critically examining cultural phenomena such as the wide-ranging impact of consumerism. One advantage of this work is its potential to counterbalance the increasing conservatism of "bottom line" academics. Thus, while universities seek external funding to serve corporate goals through applied research, critical theorists expose the power structures that benefit from this parasitical arrangement.

In North American leisure studies this new perspective is most evident in research that draws upon feminist theory, though cultural studies and critical theory provide alternative theoretical frameworks. It is reflected in Hunter and Whitson's (1991) study of a community's decision to build a hockey rink instead of sidewalks, thereby supporting men's recreational activity while deferring women's access to informal leisure interaction within their neighborhoods. We see it as well in discussions of leisure and resistance (cf. Green, 1998; Wearing, 1995) which highlight the ways that ideology is confronted and contested in common leisure settings. These studies illustrate how leisure reflects and extends hegemonic power inequities in our society. They represent a new direction for leisure research that promises to rebuild an alliance with social theory.

Returning to my initial concern about the survival of leisure studies in the 21st century, I realize I am attempting to protect my own view of what leisure studies should be. It may be hard to argue "survival" of a position that has had a minor presence in our journals and is ignored by outside scientists. However, what I am arguing for is a perspective that maintains the ideological goal of enhancing people's lives through a better understanding of leisure.

The social science disciplines will not do this. Though social scientists have a growing interest in recreation and leisure, these factors are typically secondary to other topics of more central concern. Their lack of commitment to leisure as an inherently important cultural institution prevents social scientists from assuming the role of advocacy that drives leisure research.

Likewise, the business disciplines will not do this. By viewing leisure as something that is managed within the framework of a corporate economy, a business orientation obscures the most intriguing and powerful aspects of leisure and hides its hegemonic functions. Leisure studies is unique in its belief that leisure is an inherently important cultural phenomenon that is worthy of study. In my view, this is what will be lost if the present trends continue.

When I hope for survival of leisure studies in the 21st century, it is a hope that the mission of leisure studies will remain alive through efforts to promote equitable and effective leisure opportunities for all. To do this, we must move away from the structural and historical factors that conservatively tie us to existing leisure traditions and be willing to promote a radically different form of leisure studies. We must realign ourselves with contemporary social disciplines by discarding positivist and functional theories and replacing them with critical theory and postmodern perspectives. We must stop advocating for traditional leisure services and open our eyes to their powerful hegemonic potential. It is my hope that these changes will reestablish the integrity of leisure studies as a solid, scholarly field of inquiry, for only that will guarantee our survival.

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