

Revisiting and Revising Recreation Conflict Research

Ingrid E. Schneider
Department of Recreation Management and Tourism
Arizona State University

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Since conflict emerged as a recognizable outdoor recreation problem in the 1960s, some argue that its conceptualization, modeling and management have been sufficiently addressed such that a viable construct and management issue exists. Others are uncertain and offer ideas for potential improvement. A member of the latter group, I see several critical opportunities to advance conflict research, conceptually and methodologically. Therefore, a call for improved recreation conflict research and management is issued with the intent to enhance both visitor experiences and management ability.

Conceptually, recreation conflict is constrained because it remains uncertain and insufficiently modeled. This construct called conflict remains relatively unknown, a hybrid of other varieties of recreation challenges such as crowding and norm violations (Owens, 1985). Conflict, like the majority of our constructs, has been researcher defined. The most commonly used definition, presented by Jacob and Schreyer in 1980, is "goal interference attributed to another's behavior" (p. 369). Still, with little regard to this definition, many researchers investigate 'conflict' and, depending on their results, declare it flourishing or in decline. Oftentimes, however, rather than defining conflict as goal interference, researchers inquire about visitors' perceived 'problems' without considering if and how 'problems' and 'conflicts' differ and, subsequently, how their management might also differ. Such misnomers cannot be ignored if conflict research and management are to advance.

The conditions necessary for conflict perception have been modeled, but significant strides to synthesize its development remain absent. Conflict was both formally introduced and modeled in 1980 by Jacob and Schreyer and others (Lindsay, 1980; Bury, Holland & McEwen, 1980). Jacob and Schreyer's model remains dominant despite minimal comprehensive testing and validation. Is it a wonder that conflict is not consistently and significantly predicted?

Methodologically, a quantitative bias, lack of emic knowledge and outdoor focus further impede the advance of recreation conflict research and its subsequent management. The initial quantitative bias in recreation research may have limited explicit investigations of conflict's connotation to visitors; but what is preventing such inquiries in 2000 and beyond? Before

Dr. Schneider can be reached at Arizona State University, PO Box 874905, Tempe AZ 85287-4905 or by email at ingrid.schneider@asu.edu.

we can understand how to mitigate and manage conflict, we need to understand its content. Existent inconsistencies in meaning and measurement impede advancement. Efforts to better understand conflict will maximize continuity in its meaning among visitors, managers and researchers and enable accurate assessments of its prevalence among recreation areas and visitors.

Beyond semantics, the effects of recreation conflict are too often slated as negative when, conflict can symbiotically exist among other conditions and highlight opportunities. How conflict is managed determines its toxicity; thus, the conflict management process is of imminent importance (Dustin & Schneider, 1998). Further, although a variety of conflict types exist, there seems to be a myopic focus on outdoor recreation conflict. Granted, group level conflict and resolution has been addressed in natural resource management (cf. Wondolleck, 1988), but most certainly recreation conflict exists in other recreation environments and levels. Why do outdoor recreation researchers study recreation conflict while others concern themselves with benefits? Does conflict occur so infrequently that leisure researchers have dismissed it or, conversely, does conflict occur so frequently that it is presumed managers already adeptly contend with it? Whatever the case, it is time to re-examine the conflict construct and recognize its occurrence indoors.

Beyond conceptual and methodological areas for conflict research improvement, expanding the content foci of conflict is suggested. Perhaps the greatest opportunities for research and management lie in the inherent conflict that emerges from the diversity of both our customers and service providers. These conflicts can be considered at personal, interpersonal and organizational levels.

At a personal level, the intrapersonal conflicts people of difference perceive and their subsequent influence on recreation participation still remain uncertain. Certainly great progress has been made in understanding the influence of race, gender, class and, to a lesser degree, ability on leisure participation. Sexual orientation is finally receiving some attention, still limited, in the leisure literature (Grossman, 1993; Kivel, 1994). The constraints literature indirectly addresses these personal factors (Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991), but the conflict literature seems directly and appropriately related, and therefore worth expanding our horizons (Samdahl & Kelly, 1999).

Interpersonal conflicts, such as those between visitors, are perhaps the best understood, at least for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Although not exhaustively tested, the current models from outdoor recreation conflict do explain some portion of conflict's perception (cf. Watson, Niccolucci, & Williams 1993). Fortunately, future advances in understanding conflict's development are promising as Jacob and Schreyer's concepts are expanded (Ramthun, 1995; Vaske, Donnelly, Wittmann, & Laidlaw, 1995), a more comprehensive and process-oriented approach to conflict emerges (Schneider & Hammitt, 1995) and is applied (Miller & McCool, 1998). Perhaps visitor connotations of conflict during indoor activities can be determined through interviewing or open ended questions and then, based on knowledge gained, the models can be adapted to explain indoor leisure conflicts.

Organizational diversity encompasses at least three possible conflict areas: 1) among organizations, 2) between the organization and its customers, and 3) among organizational employees. Conflict among organizations may be related to competition for users, diverse approaches and missions. McAvoy, Gramann, Burdge, and Absher (1986) investigated commercial and non-commercial river users; similar and more group/organization level focused studies are of great interest to enlighten researchers and managers about the spectrum of conflict. Organizations and their diverse workforce are also at risk for conflict when serving a diverse constituency. If people of difference do not feel sufficiently provided for or, worse, blatantly disregarded in terms of their recreation needs, certainly conflict exists. Organizations may naively or fastidiously engage in such exclusion (Allison, 1999). Whatever the case, acknowledgment and reparation of exclusive practices is necessary from both legal and moral standpoints. Internally, organizations are likely to struggle with the transition of their workforce from the dominant Anglo-males of the 1950s and beyond to the employee potpourri of the new millennium. Fortunately, a variety of training programs and other opportunities are available for organizations that wish to recognize and celebrate the differences that accompany a diverse workforce. However, management must be willing to make that wish a reality before organizational success ensues.

Before embarking on additional research endeavors and management approaches to conflict, its essence deserves additional attention. For, once it's revealed, we can better understand the conditions in which conflict flourishes and the processes that contribute to its either invigorating or invasive effects. Thus, recreation researchers are encouraged to systematically study conflict and its various manifestations for the benefit of leisure customers, organizations, and science.

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