Tic, Toc, the Game is Locked and Nobody Else Can Play!

David Scott
Department of Recreation,
Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University

It is hard to imagine any leisure researcher who is not aware of the vast number of studies published or presented in recent years that pertain to leisure in the lives of disenfranchised groups in our society. These studies have made us aware of the constraints and factors that make leisure problematic for racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, women, older adults, people living in poverty, and gays and lesbians. Presumably, some of this research is published and reported with the intent of breaking down barriers and getting natural resource and park and recreation agencies (henceforth called leisure service agencies) to diversify program offerings. Indeed, many leisure service agencies are not effectively meeting the leisure and recreation needs of disenfranchised groups.

In the face of this research, many practitioners are hamstrung to diversify their programs or feel that non-participation among these groups is not as big an issue as some researchers make it out to be. If our research has not made a difference, it may stem from the fact that it fails to effectively frame barriers and constraints in terms of everyday practices of how leisure service agencies do business and practitioners' beliefs about constituents. These practices and beliefs may actually discriminate. My purpose in writing this paper is to provide insight into the institutional barriers that constrain leisure opportunities for specific segments of the population. Allison (1999) has helped us focus our attention on institutional barriers as they relate to employment opportunities. In this paper, I extend these ideas to constituents. I have no doubt that most practitioners would be unsettled with the charge that they are prejudiced, insensitive to the needs of disenfranchised populations, and engage in discriminatory behaviors. From what I have seen, most practitioners intend to treat all people fairly but, despite their best intentions, in some cases inequality is perpetuated.

I have benefited a great deal from Feagin and Feagin (1986) and Williams' (1985) ideas about institutional discrimination. This framework encourages us, first, to examine how inequities in one institutional sphere (e.g., the economy, schools, housing) impact access to goods and services in other spheres (e.g., access to park and recreation resources). The perspective suggests that inequalities are cumulative in nature as institutional practices are

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Dr. Scott can be reached at 358 Francis Hall, College Station, TX 77840-2261, (979) 845-5334.

interrelated. Second, the framework advises us to examine how "seemingly neutral organizational and institutional practices in the present systematically reflect or perpetuate the effects of preferential treatment or intentional dis- crimination in the past" (Jackson & Scott, 1999, p. 314). Here we need to examine the historical development of inequality and oppression. Institu- tional discrimination is insidious because inequality stems from everyday practices that are deeply embedded within organizations and are perceived by organizational members and non-members as being legitimate. Moreover, as noted by Feagin and Feagin, these actions have a "negative and differential impact on . . . [oppressed groups] even though the organizationally pre- scribed or community-prescribed norms or regulations guiding those actions were established, and are carried out, with no prejudice or no intent to harm lying immediately behind them" (p. 31).

Let's now look more closely at how "business as usual" within leisure service organizations perpetuate inequality. First, leisure service agencies have adopted an entrepreneurial approach to service delivery that includes revenue production through the use of fees and charges, privatization, and efficiency. In some communities and agencies where these practices are used, social equity appears to be becoming less important in decisions concerning resources and services (Foley & Pirk, 1990). Consequently, many people liv- ing in poorer communities are finding that the quantity and quality of avail- able park and recreation services have worsened. These practices have been pretty well documented and criticized by others (e.g., Goodale, 1991).

A less obvious agency practice is promoting customer loyalty. As tax dol- lars become more scarce, practitioners will probably become increasingly driven to promote customer loyalty. Loyal patrons are desired because they are believed to provide leisure service agencies long-term sources of income and support for bond measures that potentially expand recreational services (Selin, Howard, Udd, & Cable, 1988). To maximize customer loyalty, prac- titioners are increasingly adopting a service quality perspective.

Emphasizing customer loyalty and service quality are laudable, if not necessary, goals, but these practices may result in agencies de-emphasizing concern over social equity and inclusion. The reason for this is that it gives primacy to the interests and needs of individuals and groups who have his- torically used an agency's facilities and services. I have observed community nature centers be determined in their attempts to develop a loyal clientele. Many of the programs are entertaining and well attended. However, the pro- grams attract the same people again and again. Some interpreters have de- veloped cult-like followings. These nature centers have loyal customers who like and support what they are doing. Why should they change? This is not an isolated incident. In this volume, Taylor (2000) points out that the vast majority of interpretive exhibits in wild land areas celebrate "European American experiences, conquests, [and] exploration and heritage." A few years ago, I had a chance to hear the director of a non-profit organization, called Inner City Fishing Institute, make a presentation about his efforts to

teach minority and low income youth how to fish. The speaker, a middle-aged African-American male, discussed his struggles to secure funding for the organization. He angrily stated, "We're not in the loop!" His comment was an indictment of what he saw as the entrenched policies of natural resource agencies and park and recreation agencies to serve existing and powerful constituents. I am reminded of a little ditty my friends and I used to chant when we were kids: "Tic, toc, the game is locked and nobody else can play!" We used to say this after picking sides for whatever game was in season. If you were late to the game that was just your bad luck! Many disenfranchised groups have similar bad luck. Their leisure needs have been subordinated as many leisure service organizations find themselves busily providing popular and established programs and services to traditional clientele.

Another factor that keeps many leisure service agencies from better serving disenfranchised groups is that employees fail to resemble the population at large. Allison (1999) has done an outstanding job of documenting how park and recreation agencies deal with workplace diversity. Her recent work shows that diversity policies and practices tended to be more symbolic than substantive and agencies engage in selective and exclusionary hiring of women and people of color. These policies keep agencies from developing an organizational culture where ideas about diversity and inclusion are fundamental to the agency's mission.

Consequently, many practitioners lack the skills to appreciate the needs of disenfranchised groups. Certainly, diversity training sessions have been conducted and academicians have written helpful articles or books that seek to sensitize practitioners to group differences. However, these efforts, particularly diversity training sessions, are often done piecemeal and, from what I have observed, have changed few attitudes. Thus, many practitioners regard Hispanic-Americans who play loud music and engage in boisterous behavior in public parks as "a problem." Another "problem" for practitioners is public areas used by gay men as meeting places. These behaviors, of course, are only problems because they conflict with non-minority and heterosexual visitors' ideas about appropriate behavior.

Without a multicultural and diverse staff, leisure service agencies ultimately fall prey to what Allison (2000) describes as "cultural imperialism." This is the tendency to normalize dominant groups' perspectives and experiences and make invisible the viewpoints of subordinate groups. Agency efforts to give voice to oppressed groups may result in backlash from traditional clientele. A few years ago, an article appeared in the magazine, National Parks, about the National Park Service's efforts at promoting diversity. In letters to the editor, many readers blasted the Park Service for what they felt was a misguided policy. This letter is revealing:

> Your recent article . . . was way off target. To modify the National Park System to lure ethnic minorities would be a disaster and one more facet of our country that would be changed to please a few, ignoring the desires of the majority. Bringing more minorities into the parks would probably raise the crime rate

when the rangers are being forced to spend more of their time in law enforce-
ment than ever before. If minorities do not like going to the parks, it is their
loss. But, please don't let us be duped into thinking it is our loss. Many of us
look to the parks as an escape from the problems ethnic minorities create.
Please don't modify our parks to destroy our oasis. (Lucier, 1994, p. 6)

Finally, most practitioners that I know appear to believe that people are
able to act freely on the basis of their leisure preferences. This belief narrows
practitioners' conception of recreation need and may very well be the glue
that keeps in place all the other agency practices that I have described. In
effect, practitioners assume that their constituents are fully capable of self-
determination, have equal means and access to leisure resources, and there
is relatively just distribution of recreation resources (Godbey, 1994). History
has seemingly proved them right many practitioners have told me their
facilities, programs, and campgrounds are already at or near capacity. Many,
consequently, are able to downplay or ignore, with little dissonance, those
factors that make visitation problematic for disenfranchised groups, includ-
ing a low income, lack of access, living in isolation, fear of discrimination
and harassment, lack of knowledge and skills, and so on.

I have sought to identify four categories of agency practices and prac-
titioner beliefs that I believe keeps many leisure agencies from better serving
disenfranchised groups in the population. These include an entrepreneurial
approach to service delivery, maintaining a loyal customer base, agencies'
failure to develop a workforce that resembles the population and a concom-
itant inability to relate to diverse constituents, and a narrow conception of
recreation need. These practices are deeply embedded in the normal eve-
ryday functioning of leisure service agencies and perpetuate, I believe, ine-
quality in terms of access to leisure services and resources. In the future, I
would hope that leisure researchers would frame their thinking and research
about leisure barriers in terms of institutional settings rather than simply
focusing on individual constraints. By shifting our lens to institutional dis-
crimination, we will also be in a better position to discuss policy implications
with practitioners and others who are involved with leisure delivery.

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