

Is Leisure Theory Needed For Leisure Studies?

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Studying leisure has been the subject of interest by a wide range of scholars representing a wide range of disciplines. In so doing, these scholars have largely used leisure instrumentally as means to test some aspect of their own discipline such as psychological, sociological, or economic concepts. Over the last couple of decades there has been a sustained number (and occasional decline) in university departments dedicated to the study of leisure and to various applications in leisure services. There has been a corresponding number of researchers who have, as their primary interest, the study of leisure and leisure services. While this is a relatively short period of time in the context of knowledge development, it is nonetheless interesting that as a field of study that asserts through accreditation and professional certification processes to have its own body of knowledge, there has been a paucity of theory development. For those of us whose principal identity is with leisure research, we cannot point to many theories that seek to explain leisure behavior, leisure services management, or various other dimensions of leisure services. We do not have a many theories that address the various dimensions of leisure including motivations, satisfactions, constraints, etc. What we do have is a large body of literature that has borrowed theories from other, more established disciplines, to test them and then apply them to understanding leisure phenomena.

While this is not intended as a diatribe about the lack of theory, it is intended to raise the question about what the field of study seeks to become in the next century. This effort is directed at outlining the importance of theory development for the health of the field, for the enrichment of our professionals who serve the public, and for strengthening our place among the larger academic community. To do so, I must borrow a theory from social psychology and sociology. Using Social Exchange Theory (c.f., Homans, 1950; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1972a, 197b; Cook, 1987), I hope to present an argument that will have us address the question of our role in theory development in a more meaningful and systematic fashion. This is an important issue for the field to address as we enter the new millennium and prepare

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for changes in lifestyles that will have dramatic and important implications for the field of leisure.

Briefly stated, Exchange Theory posits that (a) individuals enter into relationships seeking some reward; (b) relationships are sustained over time if the rewards are valued and continue to evolve; (c) individuals will continue in the relationship if the other party reciprocates and provides rewards that are deemed fair in relation to others; (d) the costs of the relationship do not exceed the benefits; and (e) the probability of receiving desired rewards is high. In addition, there is a tenet of social exchange theory that states the relationship does not sustain when one party to the relationship is in a power dependent position.

In a recent article, Samdahl and Kelly (1999) reported low rates of leisure research (from leisure research journals) being cited in non-leisure related journals despite the large number of articles dealing with leisure in those journals. They also note that they perceive an increasing isolation of leisure research from the broader body of literature in other disciplines that study aspects of leisure. One explanation may be that other scholars do not perceive the value of our work to offer them. It could also suggest we do a poor job of ensuring our journals are included in important humanities, social and behavioral science databases. It may, however, speak to the need for leisure researchers to develop something to test, to help understand, to contribute to the meaning of leisure phenomena. Indeed it may be some of all of these things.

However, even if we are included in data bases (and I believe we frequently are) it leaves only the possibility that our work is not substantively important in the broader context or because we have conducted our work only in the context of others theories, we are at best, just another empirical piece to cite for someone doing work in a particular area. Moreover, if the scholar is from another discipline, they may find that they simply do not need to cite our work to make their own point in their own discipline. Thus, it seems that if we are to create rewards for researchers in the broader scientific community to engage in and use leisure research, to value it, and to use it to advance their own study, we need to develop theories that help us understand why leisure choices are made and how they relate to other life circumstances, among the many other issues embedded in the leisure experience.

There is, in essence, a lack of reciprocity. That is, we draw theories from other fields but they can only use specific empirical studies from our literature, which serve to enhance their review of the literature. Samdahl and Kelly (1999) point out the assertion by Kuhn that “. . . research journals solidify a field and secure its unique position in academic scholarship” (p. 178). From an exchange theory perspective, the only way to secure one's position is to have valued products that others seek and who in return provide you with something of value—reciprocity. There is little question that psychology and sociology have provided our field with many valued insights. However, what have we contributed to the body of knowledge that advances their schol-

arship? While individual articles have been cited in the body of literature outside of our field, it is our lack of theory that results in the devaluation of the field more than any other single matter. Such a statement appears to be a reasonable conclusion based on the outcomes of the Samdahl and Kelly study.

It can be further argued that the potential for the field of leisure studies (inclusive of leisure services, recreation, leisure sciences, etc.) to be a valued member of the academic community depends upon the subsequent use of the theories developed. However, given the paucity of attempts to develop theory in leisure, this remains an unknown. A prelude to theory development is the intense development of knowledge surrounding certain topics. There are several such topics which have received considerable attention in leisure (most recently constraints may be the best example). Yet we have had few attempts as yet to synthesize any area or several areas of study into a cogent statement of theory. Unless and until this is addressed, it is unlikely that we shall achieve the level of maturation needed to have a valued set of ideas and knowledge to enhance the work of those in other disciplines as well as our own. The absence of rewards to offer that are perceived as valuable typically results in a lack of reciprocity.

Some might suggest that the lack of theory development is an artifact of our roots associated with the practice of recreation, parks and tourism. However, such an argument seems flawed. If we are to educate students in the practice of our field, then it stands to reason that we need some theories that serve to predict and explain leisure behavior. How else do we argue for the efficacy of what we do?

Perhaps a parallel to our own field may be drawn from Gerontology. It may be argued that Gerontology is really the aggregation of disciplines that study the process and outcomes of aging. There are leading psychologists and sociologists among many other disciplines represented in the body of work that comprises Gerontology. From this initial group has developed a field of study and practice. Yet over the relatively short life of the field of Gerontology (not dissimilar to leisure having developed over the past 40 or so years) there have been numerous efforts at the development of theory to explain aspects of aging. Some have been more successful than others yet all have in common the power to attract scholars from many disciplines including our own to begin to test those theories and subsequently add to the body of knowledge in Gerontology. This is also a field with great practical concerns about the delivery of services to the elderly and yet it finds room within it to encourage, support, and sustain theory development activities and to subsequently examine the connections between those theories and the challenges of providing services to older adults. If Gerontology can establish such an exchange environment where scholars from many disciplines seek to not only use theories developed but also seek to publish in gerontological journals, then why can't leisure researchers establish the same exchange environment?

One conclusion that can be derived from this analysis is the need for leisure researchers to develop theory. The results of such activity could

broaden the base of engagement with researchers in other disciplines, encourage more of them to publish in our journals, increase both groups attendance at each others conferences and intellectual exchanges, and, perhaps, most importantly, provide leisure service professionals a foundation for their actions. We need to create an environment where, in the language of Social Exchange, rewards are offered (in the form of theory and prospective theory such as models), that these rewards are valued in that they have something to contribute to our understanding of leisure phenomena, that our work continues to evolve over time. We cannot afford to develop a theory and leave it or publish one or two empirical studies of the theory and claim we have answered that question. We should seek to share this knowledge in other settings and outlets, especially initially, to reduce the cost in terms of time and effort needed for others to discover the work we are doing. Moreover, the development of theory may offer leisure professionals the exchange relationship they have been seeking with researchers and close the often-mentioned gap between the respective groups. The development of theory would help professionals, as they would be able to examine their actions in the context of a connected set of statements that form theory and is derived from research. Asking professionals to only rely on individual pieces of research with little or no attempts to build theory may be among the key elements that inhibit that relationship from flourishing. If we pursue this path, then we will develop an exchange relationship with allied disciplines and contribute substantially to both the body of knowledge surrounding leisure and practice of providing leisure services.

Two questions (at least) arise from that which I have argued. What happens if we do not choose to pursue theory development and why is it that we have so little theory development occurring? The answer to the former is that there will likely be no marked change, at least in the foreseeable future but there will also be little gain. That is, our field will exist, the close colleagues some of us have in other disciplines will appreciate that which we bring to knowledge development but few others will see the field as a substantive element even in the quest to understand leisure. Ultimately, I believe this defeats our intent to ensure that leisure is examined and understood, and that services are created contextual to that knowledge. The efforts in the last year and one-half to develop and publish practice models in therapeutic recreation represent an important step forward in understanding how those services are rooted in theory. It provides a substantial basis for the subsequent testing of the models and building of theory surrounding therapeutic recreation.

The second question is more difficult to answer. Why is there not more theory development taking place? First, it needs to be included in the doctoral programs as something for examination and discussion among students to set the stage for them to consider this area of inquiry. Second, senior scholars in the field need to begin to spend time on the synthesis of work done and to encourage students to develop dissertations that begin this process. Third, there are so few examples within the field, that perhaps it is simply not on the "radar screen". Last, it may be the pressure to address

current problems and provide more immediate answers to questions than theory development provides.

The argument set forth is not that theory development is better than other scholarship conducted in our field. It is not that theory development is a panacea. It is rather, a progressive step in the development of a field dedicated to improving the quality of life. It is a means to attract more scholars to study leisure and to do so contextual to the research done within our field. It is controlling our own field and ensuring it remains vital. It serves as a gateway for leisure researchers to engage with other disciplines and the field of practice in a reciprocal environment. The process of theory development is difficult and challenging, yet has the potential to provide enormous benefits to those who study leisure and those who provide leisure services in the next century.

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