If Our Research is Relevant, Why is Nobody Listening?

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The Problem

In 1994 the American Leisure Research Symposium held a forum on the relevance of leisure research. All three speakers at the forum strongly defended the notion that relevance is, or should be, a central tenet of our research endeavors, although they suggested different pathways for ensuring adherence to this goal. For Sylvester (1995), relevance was seen as a question of values and morality. He highlighted the dangers inherent in an empirical science based solely on instrumental rationality and emphasized the need for "moral relevance". Pedlar (1995) focused on the potential for action research to facilitate social change, to enhance the quality of community and individual life, and thus to ensure the relevance of research on leisure. For Weissinger (1995), the central issue was that of theoretically based deductive research. She argued that the application and practicality of research is dependent, first and foremost, on solid theoretical development and refinement. The enthusiastic reception that the audience gave to these presentations, and the lively debate and discussion that followed, made it evident that leisure researchers (at least those present at the forum) do take the issue of relevance seriously, and do want to be involved in research that is applicable and useful, and that addresses issues that really matter (Allison, 1995).

Several years after the forum on relevance, Samdahl and Kelly (1999) conducted a citation analysis of two key North American leisure research journals (*Leisure Sciences* and the *Journal of Leisure Research*). Looking at both the distribution of sources cited in these journals, and the extent to which articles in these journals were cited in publications outside the leisure field, the authors concluded that leisure research remains intellectually isolated from other important and related bodies of research, such as social psychology, sociology and environmental studies. Moreover, when leisure researchers do cite outside sources, as well as when leisure research is cited in non-leisure journals, such citations are frequently ten years old or more (Samdahl & Kelly, 1999). While the problem of the isolation of North American leisure research was noted over 15 years ago (Burdge & Beckers, 1984), it is disturbing to see that this gap has continued, and may even have widened in recent years. Moreover, it is not just leisure researchers on this side of the Atlantic who experience this isolation. Addressing a recent Leisure

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Studies Association conference in the UK, Deem (1999) talked about the ghettoization, not only of gender research within the field, but also of the leisure studies field as a whole. She noted the problems of marginalization, of lack of recognition, and of difficulties associated with funding.

Linking together the discussion of relevance with evidence of the lack of intellectual dialogue between leisure studies and other fields, leads to the question of why so little attention is paid to our research. If indeed we are seeking to conduct relevant and meaningful research, why is nobody listening? There are, of course, two ways to answer to this question. First, perhaps researchers in other fields are simply not aware of, or knowledgeable about the research we do, or its application or relevance to a range of different issues. Alternatively, perhaps our research is not as relevant as we like to believe, and so is of little value or importance to researchers in other areas of social science. These two explanations for our isolated status will be explored further in the following sections.

Lack of Awareness

There are a number of reasons why researchers in other fields might have overlooked leisure research, despite its relevance. For example, there may be ongoing bias in some sections of academia where research on leisure is perceived to be non-serious, or frivolous, compared to the more "weighty" issues addressed in other areas of research such as economic development, medical advance, or political conflict. Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of leisure research can be disadvantageous as well. Despite expressed support for inter- and multi-disciplinary initiatives by various research bodies (for example, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), the applied nature of many interdisciplinary fields is sometimes seen as inferior by those in traditional disciplines who are dealing with "pure" research and who focus on abstract theory (Deem, 1999). These attitudes, which many leisure researchers have faced on their own campuses, clearly put leisure researchers at a disadvantage in seeking to make visible the relevance of their research.

Apart from the difficulties associated with biased attitudes, the lack of awareness and understanding of our field may also reflect the lack of time that most academics have to read outside their own narrow area of research interest. Workload studies show that university faculty have long work weeks (averaging 52 to 57 hours), take relatively little vacation time, and still express dissatisfaction with their time for research (Jordan, 1994; Seaberg, 1998). On average, only about 16% of total work time for faculty is devoted to research (Seaberg, 1998), a figure which is probably decreasing rather than increasing, given recent cutbacks in higher education. It is hardly surprising, then, if university researchers are unable to find the time to read outside their field, and that academics in related fields remain relatively unaware of research on leisure.

Lack of Relevance

Despite these explanations for the intellectual isolation of leisure research, we should not overlook the issue of relevancy. If our research were more relevant, and consistently addressed pressing social needs, would more researchers from other fields find the time to read and become familiar with what we have to say? Would they cite current rather than past research? Would we then be able to have a greater impact, collectively, outside the narrow confines of our field? While we may value and desire relevancy, can we really claim that we have achieved this rather grand objective?

A brief overview of topics covered in recently published leisure research reveals a number of areas of research that would probably be seen by most of us as being socially relevant. For example, over the past few years there have been special issues of leisure journals (as well as individual articles) on such topics as leisure and health (*Loisir et Société*, 18(1), 1995), leisure and community development (*Journal of Applied Recreation Research*, 21(1-2), 1996), leisure and the family (*Journal of Leisure Research*, 29(1), 1997), and leisure and time stress (*Loisir et Société*, 21(2), 1998). However, looking at the published research on these topics, it is evident that the starting point of the analyses used is almost always leisure: that is, the focus in on leisure meanings, activities, constraints, satisfactions, or benefits. This attention to leisure first, and other issues second, may be limiting our vision and the potential application, breath and social relevance of our research. It may be that if our starting point for research were to shift from leisure and leisure participation to particular pressing social needs, the list of issues that we might address would be different, more extensive, and, I would suggest, more relevant. For example, the list might include such public concerns as crime and violence, poverty, homelessness, child abuse, cuts to social services, consumerism, the destruction of our environment, the loss of community, and the extensiveness of racism, homophobia and misogyny in our society. This does not imply that we should reject the notion of leisure, but rather that we might conceptualize leisure as one life component, among many, that might affect, alleviate or exacerbate or in some way be connected to these pressing social problems. Leisure, for example, might be one component of social practice that contributes to (or sometimes challenges) growing environmental pollution or sexist or racist ideology. Or commercial leisure consumption might be one aspect of our individualistic society that functions to blind us to issues of poverty and exclusion. This kind of approach recognizes that leisure cannot be easily or meaningfully separated from other aspects of social life, and that leisure is not the sole cause or the sole solution to any one problem.

The idea of widening the possibilities and options for the starting point of our research is consistent with Rojek's (1995) theme of "decentring leisure": it suggests that we can retain an interest in the significance of leisure in social life without being "leisure-centric". A different starting point does not necessarily mean, though, (as Rojek seems to suggest) that the focus of

our research should be exclusively on cultural studies or cultural consumption. Shifting our focus may well imply directing greater attention to the mass media and the cultural symbols and images associated with violence, hatred, fantasy, meaning or ideology. However, attention should also be directed towards other approaches as well, such as: economic analysis of the widening gap between the rich and poor; sociological analysis of exclusion and disadvantage associated with social categories such as age, sexual orientation or disability; and psychological analysis of meanings, beliefs, interpretations, and actions. A focus on issues of major concern in our society suggests a broadening of our perspective, a willingness to accept and adopt a range of critical issues and approaches, and an avoidance of simplistic assumptions about the value or centrality of leisure. Relevance means addressing difficult and controversial but important issues, rather than worrying about whether our research promotes or defends the value of leisure.

Moving Forward

The intellectual isolation of leisure research should alert us to the need for change and for a re-evaluation of the relevance of our research. It is not necessarily the isolation per se that is a problem, but the implications and consequences of being isolated. We may have built up our field of study over the years, through rigorous research, theoretical development and consolidation, but if we remain isolated, the potential value and impact that we can have will be diminished. We will have less opportunities to effect change either directly through our research endeavors or indirectly through incorporation of our ideas, theories and suggestions into the work of other researchers. It is not sufficient to be talking only to ourselves.

To the extent that intellectual isolation is due to lack of awareness or appreciation of our research, we need to improve communication and the flow of ideas with other researchers. Possible directions for action include publishing our research in non-leisure journals, and seeking out collaborative research with academics in other fields as well as with community-based individuals and groups. We will also need to protect faculty research time so that these suggestions can become realistic options.

But awareness of our research by others may not be sufficient. We need, at the same time, to pay attention to the question of relevance. I would suggest that relevance means directing our attention outwards—towards pressing social needs, issues and concerns—rather than always looking inwards with a narrow focus on leisure. A broader view, a critical perspective, and incorporation of cultural as well as other forms of analysis are needed. Hopefully these changes will help us to become more widely recognized, and will help to reduce any lingering bias against leisure research. Perhaps more importantly, such changes will also help leisure researchers to have an impact not only on the academic world, but also on the "real world" in terms of the promotion of progressive social policy initiatives and positive social change.

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