

Looking Beyond the Invisible: Can Research on Leisure of Ethnic and Racial Minorities Contribute to Leisure Theory?

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Jupiter's moons are invisible to the naked eye and therefore can have no influence on the earth, and therefore would be useless, and therefore do not exist.

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During the last decade, work on the leisure of ethnic and racial minorities has attracted renewed interest and has gained a certain degree of recognition as a legitimate area of research in our field. Besides the sheer number of new studies devoted to the subject, the literature has significantly expanded its scope both by turning to previously overlooked ethnic and racial groups and by shifting its general focus toward aspects of the leisure experience other than mere participation. Readers may refer to the excellent reviews of research on the leisure of minorities by Floyd (1998) and by Gramann and Allison (1999) for in-depth information about recent trends in the area. On a somewhat more symbolic side, the recent publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Leisure Research* devoted to research on ethnicity and race as well as the incorporation of chapters on the subject into mainstream leisure studies textbooks (e.g. Jackson & Burton, 1999) may be interpreted as signs of a growing recognition of this strand of research.

While many have recognized research on ethnic and racial minorities as significant and useful, some still question the rationale behind studying groups whose very name seems to imply obscurity and marginal social standing. One may argue that these sentiments within the field are merely a reflection of the feelings toward minority groups that persevere in the society at large. After all, some members of the white Anglo-Saxon mainstream do not perceive minorities to play any significant role in shaping the "American" way of life or in defining the social and cultural norms by which they live, work and play. We still appear to live in an era of de facto segregation, maybe in a more subtle form than institutional segregation of the pre Civil Rights Movement period, but perhaps just as effective. The white Anglo-Saxon mainstream continues to enjoy its privileged position in terms of wealth, political

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power and education. Particularly in leisure, mainstream whites are still relatively free to limit their interactions to those of their own kind. Thus, it might in fact be quite natural to question the rationale behind research whose significance is limited to those who are few, inconspicuous and perhaps ultimately unimportant.

A common response to such criticism is based on the notion that the popular understanding of the term "minority" is based on misunderstanding of the actual status of ethnic and racial groups in contemporary American society. Currently more than a quarter of the population of the United States is accounted for by racial minorities and by Hispanics and approximately 10 per cent of the population is foreign born (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). In Canada, almost half of the population growth is due to immigration (Statistics Canada, 1997). Given the spatial concentration of some minorities combined with their relatively high population growth rates, it is projected that in as little as two decades Caucasians will be forced to concede minority status in certain American states (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). However, it is not only the sheer numbers of ethnic and racial minorities that should attract attention. Demographic changes occur simultaneously with a certain degree of political and economic emancipation of these marginalized groups, which in turn creates a pressure for action (Gramann and Allison, 1999). Consequently, provision of leisure-related services tailored to the needs of minorities is likely to become one of the more evident reactions to the changing role of racial and ethnic groups in the North American society in decades to come.

Even though it is appropriate to acknowledge the potential for practical applicability of work on leisure behavior of ethnic and racial minorities by pointing out current demographic and economic trends, we should be cautious not to overemphasize the utilitarian aspect of this research. As suggested by recent findings on the reading habits of leisure services practitioners (Jordan & Roland, 1999), the actual benefits that practitioners derive from academic literature might in fact be more limited than what we would like to think. While these findings apply to the field of leisure studies in general, it is difficult to argue that this problem does not affect the literature on minorities. Thus far, there has been little consensus about effective ways to improve communication between academics and practitioners. One can expect that a likely reaction to this issue would be to stress the practical implications of academic research even more and to strive to make it more "practitioner friendly". Certainly, the potential benefits to be realized by adopting this approach should not be overlooked. However, one also needs to consider the impact it might have on academic work that does not have clear and direct practical implications. Given that the literature on the leisure of ethnic and racial minorities is still relatively immature, this strand of research may be particularly prone to seek legitimacy and recognition by sacrificing the search for understanding in favor of practical applicability.

Stewart (1998) has pointed out that the overemphasis on managerial applications in leisure studies has often resulted in research problems so narrowly defined they cannot reflect the entirety of leisure experience. While

this argument was made in the context of multiphase leisure research, the notion that practical applicability is not the only legitimate motivation for leisure research has universal relevance. I believe that the potential of research on leisure of ethnic and racial minorities goes far beyond its direct usefulness for leisure services practitioners facing the necessity to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diversified population. In particular, studying minority groups provides a rare opportunity for expanding theory applicable to human leisure experience in general. Given the fact that minorities, by their very nature, differ at least in some aspects of their leisure from what we observe on an everyday basis among Anglo-Saxon whites, studying these groups not only enables us to investigate the validity of mainstream theories, but also provides the opportunity to detect relationships that could otherwise escape our attention. One can find numerous examples of widely accepted theories in both physical and social sciences that have faltered because of their inability to explain superficially inconsequential special cases. Similarly, many new ideas have been conceived as a byproduct of attempts to explain the rare and the unusual. I do not believe that the field of leisure studies is in any way immune to the dangers associated with ignoring whatever falls outside the realm of common experience.

The potential for theoretical contribution offered by studying the leisure behavior of ethnic and racial minorities remains largely unexplored. While the literature on the subject has drawn on theoretical developments from other strands of literature, these attempts have mostly amounted to direct applications of mainstream models to minority populations without much emphasis on extending the underlying theoretical constructs. Rather than aim at integrating research on minorities into the broader field of leisure studies and building a coherent theoretical framework that could be consistently applied to study the leisure experience of both minorities and the mainstream, we focus on narrowly defined problems whose applicability is limited to specific groups and specific situations. It would be unfair to question the fact that such efforts have significantly enhanced our understanding of leisure of minorities. However, one can hardly be satisfied with a body of research consisting of isolated empirical studies often based on anecdotal mini-theories with scarcely anything to tie them together.

It appears that the only theoretical foundation that defines research on the leisure of ethnic and racial minorities is the marginality-ethnicity framework developed by Washburne in 1978. Readers may refer to Floyd (1998) for an overview of work aimed at extending Washburne's original theory and for an in-depth discussion of the framework's limitations. While Floyd's critique focused on the shortcomings of the marginality-ethnicity theory for explaining the leisure experience of minorities, I would like to go a step further and argue that the major weakness of this framework lies in the fact that it was originally developed to account for differences in leisure behavior between minorities and the mainstream. While such differences are clearly present, it is difficult to argue that the basic mechanisms that govern human leisure experience vary from group to group. After all, as humans we share

certain fundamental characteristics that are independent of race, ethnic origin or culture. From this perspective, the development of autonomous theoretical frameworks tailored to fit the reality of ethnic and racial groups appears to be a disadvantage. First, we do not need separate frameworks to explain universal phenomena simply because the populations that we study differ from the usual. Even if the phenomena of interest appear to be uniquely applicable to minority groups, they usually have close enough equivalents elsewhere to allow for adaptation of mainstream theories. Second, by insisting on separate theoretical frameworks we tend to foster the isolation of research on racial and ethnic minorities from the rest of the field. While some may perceive a certain degree of intellectual isolation to be a natural byproduct of specialization (e.g. Pedlar, 1999), in the context of a relatively immature body of research, reducing the exposure of our work is likely to delay its general recognition. More importantly, however, isolation diminishes the role of research on ethnic and racial minorities as a testing ground of mainstream theories and an inspiration for new theoretical developments.

One could argue that most of the deficiencies of the literature on the leisure of minority groups are merely a reflection of the status quo in the field. Judging by a recently published citation analysis (Samdahl and Kelly, 1999), isolation and fragmentation are problems likely to affect many areas of leisure research. Furthermore, concerns about the absence of broad theoretical frameworks capable of defining leisure studies as a science have been voiced quite frequently (e.g. Coalter, 1997; Mommaas, 1997) which suggest that the problem might be quite universal. Thus, it may in fact be true that the position of the literature on the leisure of ethnic and racial minorities is largely comparable to that of many other strands of leisure research. The question remains, however, whether the status quo should define the course of our development during the decades to come.

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