

The “Real World” and the Irrelevance of Theory-Based Research

John R. Kelly
Professor Emeritus
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Selecting one issue as crucial to leisure research at the millennium is somewhat like playing tennis with only a serve. We need a full-court game in research as well as in the sport. Nevertheless, since I have been working on my serve, here is the one shot.

To cheat a little at the beginning, however, I would like to suggest two books that take a more complete and complex view of leisure at the beginning of a century. The first is the best leisure theory book of the decade, Betsy Wearing's *Leisure and Feminist Theory* (1998) that delivers far more than it promises. The other is the new critical intro text that Val Freysinger and I are introducing this Fall, *21st Century Leisure: Current Issues* (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000) that features debates on over thirty issues.. Both take much more comprehensive approaches to the changing social world and emerging conflicts and challenges.

“Theory-based” Research

Since 1972, I have been more or less associated with theory-building and theory-based research. At this time, however, I am concerned that a limited approach to theory and a narrow view of “science” may have led the field into research agendas that are largely irrelevant to what is going on in contemporary leisure and its social/political/economic contexts. Without becoming specific or naming names, I would suggest that a review of the past decade of *Leisure Sciences* or the *Journal of Leisure Research* will identify a high percentage of articles in the following mode:

1. A problem is stated from *within* the field.
2. A literature review consists almost entirely of references to studies published in leisure-oriented journals.
3. A model, usually referring to individual behavior, is selected that purports to exemplify “theory” by offering an abstract and acontextual explanation of some aspect of behavior.
4. The study appropriates that model and claims to be theory-based.
5. The implications are totally directed toward the parochial interests of conventional leisure studies.

Note that in this bounded world there are no emotions, no bodies, no structural discrimination, no inequities, no social and economic forces, no conflict, and no change.

Then we complain when those outside the leisure studies corral ignore our work when they begin to investigate and analyze what they see as the leisure-related issues of contemporary society. Sometimes our relevant work is just not noticed because it is published in our parochial journals and in books by our "niche" publishers. More likely, however, is that most of what we publish just doesn't connect to the issues being raised in other disciplines or in the media. Our abstract models and centripetal focus have no clear relationship with the exploding world of leisure in a global market economy and mass culture. They seem especially unrelated to environmental conflict, political power, diverse cultures and life styles, exploitation of the relatively powerless, the investment biases of market capitalism, religious and ethnic conflict, or most issues of gender, class, and race.

Issue-based Research

What I am proposing is that at least a major segment of leisure research be directed toward larger issues than those currently funded by resource management agencies or shaped by the now-traditional methods and agendas taught in our graduate programs in the past decade or two. We need to break outside our little enclave of what Kuhn called "normal science" to address what the rest of the world sees as significant and problematic. To begin with, let's remember that an estimated 97 percent of direct spending on recreation in the United States is in the market, not public, sector. Also, the Office of Management and Budget estimated that in 1994, .17 of 1 percent of federal government spending was on recreation. Clearly, much of our focus has not been on "where it's at." Even the most cursory analysis reveals that the market is providing much more than just nice "healthy" activities or that opportunities and resources are generally available throughout even the wealthiest societies. In fact, what is spent on one new Las Vegas hotel casino would fund the National Park Service for years and the local sex industry in most communities employs far more adults than the park and recreation district.

Of course, there are a few exceptions to the general irrelevance of leisure research. One exception in the past decade has been the debate between Juliet Schor (1992) and John Robinson and Geof Godbey (1997) over the availability and allocation of free time. Schor, from outside leisure studies, and Robinson/Godbey, half and half, captured wide media attention because they addressed at least parts of a widely-perceived issue and problem. That segments of the working population, gendered and classed, experience an acute "time crunch" in the changing conditions of work is accepted as a significant issue. Of course, neither study addressed a specification of the actual life conditions of those segments, their strategies of coping, and the place of leisure in their ordinary lives.

A second issue that is widely recognized and relevant to leisure is that of cultural diversity. The society is cross-cut by multiple factors—race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, region, religion, age-based subcultures, education, and so on and on—that yield many styles and even sited enclaves of leisure. Yet, we usually address diversity in terms of pitiful little abstracted “theories” that fail to connect with the rich complexity of values, resources, constraints, and symbols of interpretation and presentation. Here the fullness of case studies could at least begin to identify the real issues. Further, such studies need to begin to incorporate the dimensions of power and discrimination rather than tacitly assume that leisure is a matter of simple choice and preference.

Underlying this common failure to connect with current issues is the assumption that people are essentially free to choose what they want to do and become. While we certainly do not want to return to any simplistic models of social determination, we do need a more sophisticated view of the social contexts of leisure—and everything else—in which the power of self-determination is unequally distributed. (The day I am writing, NPR reported on a nationwide business operated from the fair city of Minneapolis, not Bangkok, of the sexual prostitution of young teen girls coerced by threats of beatings and death. Earlier reports have connected such recreation enterprises with the celebration of closing business deals such as corporate mergers.) What are the entertainment offerings that command the greatest investments of time and money? How are resources distributed when forests are leased and stripped for ski resorts and beaches closed by upscale resort development? What is the content of mass entertainment such as video rentals and cable television? Who decides? Who profits? Who is exploited?

New Approaches and Old “Science”

In another and longer paper, I tried to illustrate some possibilities of research from a “post-structuralist” perspective (Kelly, 1997). In brief, the social system is seen as more of a conflicting and clashing mix of dynamic forces than an organic and functional system. The centrality of varied and often conflicting symbol systems provide a quite different basis for formulating research than old functional model of an “OK” world in which change is seen as evolutionary adjustment. Such seemingly simple census categories as gender and race are understood as contested social constructions.

Further, the previous consensus (“common sense”) approach supported a quasi-positivist kind of “science” that also assumed an integrated world of reasoning actors without deeply divided interests and power to define conditions. Such implicit positivism also was attractive to a new and insecure field such as leisure studies because it covered its partial little projects with the mantle of being “scientific” just like the big boys. This was enhanced by narrowing the focus to “leisure” and recreation and accepting literature reviews that ignored almost everything outside the accepted field. This narrow-

ing also made life much easier for faculty and students who had not studied outside their own relatively new field.

Issue-based research strategies can no longer afford this convenient luxury. If leisure studies is to gain any relevance and attention in the larger world, it must break down the fences we have built and become inclusive. For example, attention to race would explore the vast realm of research in other disciplines rather than continue to play with naïve essentialist definitions of race and the trivial “ethnicity/marginality” model. Elijah Anderson, not ancient *JLR* references, would be recognized as the starting point for research on African-American urban leisure. The power of generations of cumulative discrimination as well as the subtleties of current fears and stereotypes would be included in the stories and analyses of current practices. Research would begin to be more thoroughly contextual. Leisure would not be segmented and segregated from the rest of life, but would be approached as a dimension of “ordinary life.”

New Research Strategies

How can this be done? First, of course, the selection of research questions would begin with issues. It would no longer be acceptable to introduce a study with no more than a reference to another similar study. The prior question would always be, “Why is this important?” While issues can always be based on questions of human development as well as social change, there should be more than previous study to justify research. There is just too much going on in the world of leisure to expend resources on slight improvements that are largely more of the same.

Second, the methods would be chosen to address the issue, not simply to repeat nostrums learned in graduate school or to emulate current fads. There is nothing sacred about either complex statistical analysis of multivariate data sets or the narratives of case-study ethnographies. There are issues of political processes and outcomes in resource distribution that call for lots of numbers. There are issues of coping with immediate symbolic constructions of masculinity and femininity that are best addressed by careful analysis of the narratives of those enmeshed in the practices. There is no privileged place for either “quantitative” or “qualitative” approaches (at least now that the legitimacy of qualitative research is established). One is not more “scientific” and the other more “feminist,” for example. Research may also be documentary as well as immediate, historical as well as current, institutional as well as personal.

Third, the context of any research should be “ordinary life.” The practices of Little League baseball or of casino gambling are part of the ongoing construction of day-to-day life. They are not segregated from all the processes that make up how we go about making it through the day. Nor are they separated from the power-ridden contexts of resource distribution, access, exclusion, and reward.

Fourth, the basis for funding might become general significance as much as scientific viability. There just are not adequate resources for precious little studies with tiny implications. At every level, from the dissertation to the funded project, the first question should be that of significance. Does it really make any difference would be the first, not the last, question.

Fifth, theory would be developed, not as some micro-formulas, but as a systematic, reflexive, continual process of explanation that reveals its own premises and limitations. Such theory attempts to make sense of a dynamic process of countless forces and factors, not complete an abstracted set of theorems. Such theory would actually be useful in ordinary discourse.

Is all this unrealistic? If it is, then we will have to resign ourselves to the margins of attention and relevance while the subject of our research, contemporary leisure, moves onto the center stage of social change.

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