

## **Leisure Experience and Identity: What Difference Does Difference Make?**

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The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of explaining how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world (Scott, 1993, p. 399-400).

Historian Joan Scott's quote provides us with insight for how we might think "differently" about leisure, identity and difference. For the past 30 years, leisure researchers have engaged in a process that gathers evidence in an attempt to identify "common" leisure experiences. Realizing that "common" leisure experiences are mediated by many different factors, researchers began to broaden their thinking to examine leisure across various markers of identity—race, disability, gender, sexual identity, age and class. These categories of identity are organizing principles of social life in our society and, as such, they contribute to the idea that "real" differences exist between people based on these markers of identity. By examining leisure experiences across these markers of identity, we have empirically verified that "differences" in leisure experiences among and between people do exist. Yet, ironically, when we use these markers uncritically in ways that suggest these social categories are "real," we may, in fact, reinforce these markers of difference. In the process of identifying and confirming that differences do exist, I think we have not attended to examining leisure's role in the construction of these social categories as markers of difference. The purpose of this essay is to examine where the field has been and to suggest where it can go relative to future research on leisure experience, identity and difference.

Since the 1960s, the field of recreation and leisure has examined leisure experience, identity and difference in three distinct ways. First, leisure researchers shifted from quantifying what people did, to qualifying what people did and what it meant to them—they began to explore leisure behavior by uncovering the meaning of individual leisure "experiences." Second, researchers sought to understand collective leisure experiences and behaviors relative to various markers of identity to understand leisure among and between different groups of people. Third, researchers have examined the in-

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tersection of leisure and identity in an attempt to understand leisure's role in the process of identity formation.

These perspectives reflect a social psychological paradigm that focuses on understanding the individual and her/his experience of leisure. Such a paradigm puts the individual and her/his interpretation of leisure experiences unproblematically at the center of any discussion of leisure experience and identity. Yet as individuals, our identities and experiences are not, essentially, our own. Recognizing that our identities may not be our own, we need to consider two additional questions about leisure experience, identity and difference: What constitutes the "individual"? and What counts as the evidence of an individual's experience (Scott, 1993)?

As women, men, people of color, people with disabilities, people who identify as lesbian and gay, we live and move in a world that is created by *a priori* categories of identity that reflect cultural ideologies and discourses about gender, race, sexual identity, etc. So, to ask individuals to reflect upon their experiences of leisure without understanding how various ideologies have contributed to the construction of their identities and, subsequently, their experiences, fails to recognize the discursive power of language to produce and reproduce differences in identity. As critical theorist Henry Giroux (1997) noted, "how we understand and come to know ourselves and others cannot be separated from how we are represented and imagine ourselves" (p. 14).

Rarely do we ask one another in our journals to define the social categories that we use to describe our research subjects. We use these markers of identity with a hegemonic certainty because, of course, everyone "knows" what it means to be a woman, a man, a person who is gay, a person who has a disability because we do not question the social category itself. It is precisely the "common sense" usage of these social categories—these markers of identity—that may, ironically, reinforce the construction of hegemonic identities within leisure contexts. To what extent does our research with typically marginalized populations ironically and paradoxically reinforce and perpetuate hegemonies of difference? To not apply a critical analysis or to not examine the politics of identity that underlie these markers of difference is to be complicit in the continued oppression of marginalized groups.

The other question of what counts as the evidence of individual experience is tied to the sticky issue of what constitutes the individual subject. Scott (1993) argued that:

Talking about experience . . . leads us to take the existence of individuals for granted (experience is something people have) rather than to ask how conceptions of selves (of subjects and their identities) are produced. It operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual and homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals—(p. 402).

Theresa Ebert (1993), too, identified theoretical problems with "experience." She argued that theorists often use individual "experience" to de-

scribe and reinforce the fact that differences exist rather than examine how differences are constructed within cultural ideologies and institutionalized oppressions. In the process of using the evidence of experience to discuss individuals, their leisure experiences and their identities, we seem satisfied with the fact that we have identified "differences" instead of examining why "difference" matters in the first place.

If we really want to understand leisure experience, identity and difference, we need to understand how discourses about race, gender, sexual identity, disability, class and age operate within leisure. Perhaps now we should shift our thinking away from the margins and look squarely at the center to understand how certain groups, by virtue of their markers of identity, are and continue to remain at the center while others remain at the edges of society. Such a shift means that we need to explicitly examine the construction of dominant discourses around race (e.g., whiteness); gender (masculinity); sexual identity (heterosexism); disability (hegemony of ability); class (economic privilege) in order to understand leisure's role in constructing and maintaining dominant identities of privilege. In short, "What particular forms of identity, agency, and subjectivity are privileged and how do they help to reinforce dominant reactions, messages, and meanings?" (Giroux, 1997, p. 27).

Ultimately, the problem of leisure experience, identity and difference is one of identity politics and the politics of identity. Rather than simply making visible the leisure experiences of individuals using various markers of identity, we need to ask how individual identities and experiences are produced through oppressive social structures (i.e., institutionalized racism, sexism, heterosexism). As Calhoun (1994) suggested, "We cannot really stop thinking at least partially in categories [so] our task must be to remain seriously self-critical about our invocations of essence and identity" (p. 19). Employing analyses of identity that are based in critical theories can assist us with the project of being "seriously self-critical." We do not need to naturalize identity by continuing to conduct research that reinforces the idea that social categories are "real." Rather, we need to begin to understand how all markers of identity are discursively and ideologically produced in and through leisure contexts. In making this shift, we can move from merely reinscribing differences based in "identity politics to [critically examining] a politics of difference" (Calhoun, p. 21). Such a shift might help us understand the difference that difference makes.

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