

What Do We Know? Not much: The State of Leisure and Aging Research

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KEYWORDS: *Aging, gerontology, research, collaboration*

The conclusion was clear and without equivocation: "Cardiac rehabilitation exercise training consistently improves objective measures of exercise tolerance, without significant cardiovascular complications or other adverse outcomes." That statement, part of a report on cardiac rehabilitation (Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, 1995), was followed by support from 114 scientific reports. Such certainty in a research based manuscript is rare. Most researchers hesitate to present their findings in such clear, comprehensible terms. Caveats and caution typically preclude certainty and clarity.

The somewhat surprising invitation to contribute an essay to this special issue coincided with the reading of the cardiac rehabilitation report. The definitude of its conclusions raised a question I have been struggling with and one that forms the basis of this essay: what do we know in the area of leisure with a similar degree of certainty and support? Rather than look at that question for all leisure research I decided to focus on the area with which I am most familiar: leisure research related to aging and older people.

Since Robert Kleemeier's groundbreaking book entitled *Aging and Leisure* (1961) what body of research has developed allowing us to make bold statements supported by compelling evidence? The answer is as disappointing as it is simple: not as much as one would hope! We probably "know" that activity is in some sense good for people by contributing to the quality of life. However, for every article concluding one thing there seems to be a contradictory piece concluding something else. Our collection of bits and pieces of information still fails to give even a hint of a mosaic.

Why is this the case? Why are we not able to provide conclusive answers? Is it because 39 years is simply too little time to address the complex questions? Well maybe, but there may be other reasons.

1. We are not asking the right questions. A friend recently told me a story about visiting a small restaurant in Texas and asking his waitress what the soup du jour was. She left to find out and returned several minutes later with the answer: "it is the soup of the day." The questions we ask dictate the answers we get and the questions we are asking today are not that different from those we were asking a decade ago.
2. We don't put the best team together. When I was a growing up in New Jersey the mantra "break up the Yankees" was common and

ardent. The Yankees won then, and now, because they had the best players and remained focused on winning. We have not yet created winning research teams. Rather than cultivating a team, with a shared agenda, chipping away at questions in a consistent and systematic way, we tend to change directions and affiliations as opportunities arise. Constraints due to space and time also limit opportunities for collaboration. To paraphrase Thoreau: the person who goes alone can start today but the person who travels with another must wait until the other is ready.

3. The funding to conduct significant research is not present. Examination of any issue of *The Gerontologist* or the *Journal of Gerontology* yields a rich array of manuscripts, most sharing at least one characteristic: they are the result of funded research. Funding comes from a variety of sources, including: The National Institute of Aging, the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, the Health Care Financing Administration, the National Institute of Nursing Research, and the Administration on Aging. In contrast, aging research by leisure researchers is often unfunded, unless it is part of a larger project. While funding will not necessarily drive research questions, the availability of dollars based on foundation and agency priorities does provide an umbrella for a continuing line of research.
4. We are borrowers rather than owners. Leisure research has always used concepts developed in other fields and shaped them to embrace leisure questions. Disengagement, continuity, selective optimization with compensation, environmental press, and self-efficacy appear in the leisure and aging literature. That is not a bad thing. However, borrowing from others may make it more difficult to form unique contributions built around understanding leisure and aging. The uniqueness of leisure may require development of our own questions and models.
5. We don't have the time. I have spent the last three years as either the president of my university's faculty senate or as the faculty representative to the university Board of Trustees. During that time the most common complaint I heard was that the push to teach more was detracting from the ability to do meaningful research. Significant, long-term research takes time and for many in parks and recreation departments that time has not been available.
6. Meeting the needs of students in the comprehensive curricula we have spawned makes it difficult for a university to develop a "critical mass" of scholars in any one area. I have served on several search committees and frequently heard the comment when writing a job announcement or hiring that "we already have someone covering that area." We need diversity in faculty to mirror the emphasis areas in our departments. That may be an effective model for undergraduate education but it does not engender the collegial give and take required to build a body of research. Individual researchers working

in isolation, or at best with a few like-minded graduate students, will not facilitate the intense exchanges needed to cross thresholds.

7. We lack a centralized, coordinating body helping direct research. It seems that the area coming closest to being able to identify specific, meaningful outcomes from their research has been resource management. This is not surprising since federal agencies, such as the Forest Service and National Park Service, providing dollars and setting priorities serve as a unifying force. The leisure and aging area would benefit from similar largess and guidance.
8. We continue to struggle with the tie between research and practice. The on-going discussion about translating research into applications useful to practitioners does not seem any closer to solutions than it was twenty years ago. Rather than interpreting findings after a project has been completed it may be more effective to directly involve practitioners in the research process. Many of the individuals writing for the *Gerontologist* and the *Journal of Gerontology* are either working for agencies such as the Veteran's Administration or have an affiliation with an agency directly involved in services to older people. These direct ties avoid the need to create links to agencies since the researcher is the link.
9. Our numbers are small and the task is large. There are not that many people examining the leisure and aging area. As a result, opportunities for collaboration are limited and the body of literature is slow to develop.
10. We need to research "through" ideas and not "about" ideas. Driver (1999) indicated "we have probably solved the easy problems" (p. 532) It may be that the easy work in leisure and aging focused on understanding ideas, such as activity change and continuity, but now is the time for deeper thought.
11. We are a social science and therefore may not be able to reduce findings to bullets. People are complex, leisure is complex, environments are complex and the complexity may be as irreducible as a prime number. Maybe we should not be expected to make definitive statements. When I shared the basic idea for this paper with a colleague he expressed the concern that the question of "knowing" is itself a problem in the post-modern world of social science. That may be but I am not prepared to give up the search.
So what can be done? There have been agenda setting research conferences, edited books bringing together leisure and aging research, and some inter-university collaboration. Sporadic funding for aging related research has been available. However, more needs to be done. The following suggestions are offered as starting points to at least begin a dialogue on coming together to identify and attack meaningful research questions.
 1. A national organization such as the Society of Park and Recreation Educators should convene a meeting to identify what is

known at this point in time about leisure and aging. A working group should be formed to identify significant research questions. The group should also examine methods, measurement tools and designs to address those questions in a collaborative and cumulative way. The development of valid and relevant tools for data gathering is particularly crucial. As an additional part of the consensus seeking process the Journal of Leisure Research should seek review articles synthesizing and analyzing what we know as a result of our research.

2. Researchers should form alliances with state and local agencies engaged in services to the elderly. Rather than periodic contact when research assistance is needed, the affiliation would be ongoing and interactive.
3. National recreation organizations should help researchers seek significant and on-going funding for research from agencies and foundations. Caution is necessary, however. External funding is a two-edged sword, it can help carve out an agenda but it can also excise controversial ideas.
4. Broader use should be made of existing data bases to examine the leisure-aging link. The existing data are a rich and relatively untapped resource for leisure and aging research.
5. Opportunities for sustained cooperation among those individuals working in leisure and aging should be fostered. Regular, and intense, "think tank" sessions should be part of conference agendas. Summer workshops allowing collaboration with colleagues from many fields should be initiated. Faculty working in the area may seek synchronous sabbaticals and gather for a semester in a common location. This cadre could then focus on setting a national leisure and aging agenda.

As the graying of America continues, efforts to understand the physical, social, and psychological consequences of increased life expectancy will assume a central role in the national psyche. Leisure researchers must come together and develop a clear and significant agenda if we want to be more than marginal contributors to those efforts.

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