

Solitudes in Leisure Research: Just the Tip of the Iceberg?

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Jackson's study, comparing Canadian and American leisure research, shows some interesting differences between the two communities of researchers. While these differences do not represent completely separate "solitudes," they do show that Americans are more likely to share their research (through publications and conference presentations) with other Americans and that Canadians are more likely to share their research with other Canadians.

As Jackson points out, there are explanations for these tendencies towards parochialism, including differences in the relative sizes of the two communities, the relative number of outlets for research dissemination, and perceptions of the relative quality of journals. An additional set of factors, not mentioned by Jackson, is that there may be a natural tendency to publish "close to home." This may be either because of familiarity with local academic and research organizations, and/or because research generated in one culture is believed to be (and indeed may be) of particular interest to others in that same culture.

Despite these explanations for the preponderance of home-based research dissemination, the findings from Jackson's study do raise some concerns. In particular, they are an indication of a level of academic parochialism, which could have some negative consequences for the leisure research community as a whole. For example, they suggest that perhaps research findings may not be widely shared, that new knowledge and insights may not be effectively communicated, and that research may have a tendency to look "inward" towards their own local research communities for understandings and explanations of leisure phenomena. Thus breadth of understanding and vision within leisure studies may be somewhat limited.

Of course Jackson's research, which looks only at numbers of publications and outlets for research dissemination, does not directly address these issues, nor the question of an inward orientation or narrow vision. Nevertheless, one of the intriguing aspects of his study is whether, and to what extent, his data are indicative of some significant problems in the leisure research field, which may be largely "hidden." In other words, the findings of his study may be only the "tip of the iceberg." Other issues that may constitute the hidden portion of the iceberg include the isolation of North American research from research in other parts of the world, intellectual or theoretical isolation, and isolation from other disciplines.

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The Isolation of North American Research?

The fact that Jackson's research shows some significant differences between Canadians and Americans is particularly disturbing because of the relatively high level of interaction among North American leisure research scholars. Although many of us (perhaps especially Canadians) do perceive some fundamental differences between American and Canadian societies, there are also many similarities and avenues of connection, due, if nothing else, to geographic proximity. For example, although American are more likely to attend American rather than Canadian conferences, Americans certainly make up the largest contingent of foreigners at the tri-annual Canadian Congress on Leisure Research. This is also true of Canadians' attendance at American conferences such as the Symposium on Leisure Research. In addition, both Americans and Canadians are found on the editorial boards of North American journals located in both countries. Thus, if Canadian research and American research can be seen as two "solitudes," the separation between North American researchers and those in other parts of the world can be expected to be much greater: solitudes within North America likely translate into considerably greater degrees of isolation worldwide.

This is an issue that deserves further research as a follow up to Jackson's study. For example:

- To what extent do North Americans publish in British, Australian or other non-North American journals?
- To what extent do they attend conferences outside North America?
- If North American researchers are isolated, what are the causes and explanations for this phenomenon?

Moreover, these same questions can be asked about people from other parts of the world as well with regard to publishing and attending conferences in North America and elsewhere.

Intellectual Solitudes?

Another way in which Jackson's research may represent only the tip of the iceberg is that the focus of this research is limited to an examination of locations or avenues for research dissemination. Thus it does not address the perhaps more significant issue of paradigmatic, theoretical, methodological, or other forms of academic isolation. If Americans or Canadians publish primarily in their own home journals, do they read only their own journals as well? If so, does this mean that they are unaware of theoretical or methodological developments by researchers in other parts of the world? Moreover, is this type of isolationism also true of researchers in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America or Australasia?

In 1997, Coalter published an analysis of North American versus British leisure research, and his analysis points to some fundamental differences between these two bodies of scholarship. Coalter argued that these differences reflected different theoretical, epistemological, and methodological

perspectives, which in turn led to differences in research agendas and the types of questions and issues deemed to be important. Such differences in intellectual traditions make communication across geographically based research communities all the more important. Clearly considerable learning can occur through familiarity with leisure research from different parts of the world. And this type of learning has the potential to lead to broader understandings and theoretical underpinnings for our research as well as to diversity in approaches and methodologies.

For Americans and Canadians, greater inter-continental communication also helps to avoid "made-in-North-America" approaches, frameworks, and methods to "made-in-North-America" research issues and questions. In some cases it may be appropriate and expected to have issues, approaches and solutions developing within a particular geographic location or country because of cultural uniqueness. However, the long term health or strength of leisure studies as a field depends, I believe, on developing broad understandings of leisure, leisure behavior, culture, and society, and this will take collective wisdom and an extensive sharing of ideas to achieve. While it is clearly not possible to examine this issue with Jackson's data set, it would seem to be important to further explore the extent to which intellectual solitudes exist within the leisure studies field, and to find ways to reduce the isolationism.

Disciplinary Solitudes?

A third type of solitude is isolation from other disciplines. This type of solitude may represent yet another part of the hidden portion of the iceberg. While Jackson's data do not address this issue either, an earlier study of citation analysis by Samdahl and Kelly (1999) provided some powerful data that indicated that we as leisure researchers speak "only to ourselves." Not only do we seldom cite relevant research from other cognate disciplines, but it is also clear that researchers in other disciplines have little or no familiarity with our field.

Again, as others have commented, this type of isolationism is also problematic. It suggests that the scope of our field is limited (Samdahl & Kelly, 1999), that we are not benefiting from important and relevant research in other fields (Pedlar, 1999), and that our field can be seen as an "isolate" on the sociometric map of related fields of study (Dahl, 1999).

Conclusion

My purpose in this commentary has been to suggest that the importance of Jackson's research lies less in the data and analysis that he has produced, and more in the implications his findings have for our field. Differences between Americans and Canadians on their choice of publication outlet or presentation location may well be symptomatic of a broader academic isolation within leisure studies as a whole. Jackson's research, therefore, opens

up important issues and suggests the need for more research and discussion, and the need to search for possible solutions.

Some of the explanations that Jackson puts forward for the relative insularity of Canadian and (even more so) of American leisure research communities are "practical" explanations, such as differences in the numbers of outlets for the publication of research papers. There are also some very practical reasons why leisure studies may suffer from other forms of isolationism as well, including intellectual and disciplinary insularity. The most obvious explanation relates to the time pressure and stress experienced by academics. It is probably easier (or perceived to be easier) to publish in "home" journals, in part because researchers are more likely to have contacts in their own research communities and are more aware of the process and expectations they need to meet. In addition, it takes time to seek out journals in other countries for the submission of manuscripts, and considerably more time still to keep abreast of all the leisure studies research being produced throughout the world. When consideration of the explosion of research and knowledge being generated in other disciplines as well is added into the equation, the time problem is exacerbated even more.

The time crunch that academics face, along with the pressure to maintain a high level of research output (as measured by the number of journal article publications and conference presentations) in order to satisfy the requirements for tenure, promotion, and recognition can be discouraging. In particular, these pressures may well discourage faculty members from reading and thinking broadly and from being adventurous in their own research and their chosen pathways for the dissemination of their research. Perhaps, like Stokowski (1999), we need to question the value and structure of this system. Not only does the system reward publications rather than reading, it also has a tendency to encourage isolationism within our field.

It is somewhat encouraging to learn from Jackson's data that there seems to be a greater tendency for researchers who have higher levels of productivity to be more likely to publish and present conference papers internationally. However, I suggest that even for these researchers, time pressures have a negative impact on their desire and intention to read, or on their actual success in managing to read broadly, keep up with the literature from other parts of the world, and/or communicate through international research outlets.

Apart from the practical issues that discourage international communication among leisure scholars, there are also attitudinal or perceptual issues. These include the devaluing of some journals, especially those published outside one's own community of scholars. In addition, there is the problem of assuming that research published in one of the "super-power" communities, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, are somehow superior or of better quality. Perhaps most importantly, what is needed is an outlook in which cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary interactions and sharing of knowledge are valued and respected. If this could be linked with greater recognition of the value of reading and exploring new ideas, rather

than simply measuring the research output of academics, we might be able to start to counteract some of the isolationism we currently experience.

As a final thought, I should add that leisure studies is probably not the only field for which academic isolationism may be a problem. It might be considered a more serious problem for our field both because we are interdisciplinary and because we are still struggling with recognition in the broader academic community. However, whether other disciplines are or remain academically isolated or not, Jackson's study, and the implications for our field arising out of his study, suggest to me at least that we should pay more attention to this issue. A useful start has been made, but progress will depend on developing a better understanding of the issues and causes of academic solitudes, more discussion of possible solutions, and then action to try to rectify the problem.

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