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## Articles

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### **“Being a ‘Doer’ Instead of a ‘Viewer’”: The Role of Inclusive Leisure Contexts in Determining Social Acceptance for People with Disabilities**

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The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth examination of the perceptions of people with disabilities on social acceptance and inclusive leisure contexts. Specifically, this study explored the role of leisure contexts in determining social acceptance for individuals with disabilities participating in inclusive recreation programs. Individuals with disabilities ( $n = 14$ ) who were enrolled in inclusive leisure programs were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. Using constant comparative methods to analyze data, three categories identified, (a) connector (bridging barriers), (b) distancer (emphasizing differences), and (c) neutralizer (ambivalence toward inclusion). These findings are important as they appear to reflect a microcosm of society relative to inclusion values, norms, and practices.

**KEYWORDS:** *Social construction theory, disability, context, inclusion.*

#### Introduction and Literature Review

Context has been found to be an important factor in the meaning people assign to leisure, role of leisure in maintaining relationships, and how decisions are made in relation to leisure (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000; Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997; Shaw, 1997). Context is characterized as a social situation that includes (a) physical space and aspects of place, (b) tone or atmosphere, (c) meanings people assign to behaviors, objects, and language, and (d) the actors or interactants themselves (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995). In other words, context is viewed as a social situation that influences an individual's behavior at a specific moment in time. Leisure contexts tend to reflect social status, beliefs, privilege, and collective attitudes (Bedini, 2000; Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002; Mannel & Kleiber, 1997). To understand the leisure context is to understand social structure and social behaviors. Thus, leisure contexts may provide a “window” for understanding

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social structure and much about society's norms, attitudes, beliefs, and values (Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine & Wilhite, 2000). Understanding leisure contexts or situations is important as leisure contributes significantly to people's quality of life (Kelly, 1996). This is particularly true for individuals with disabilities (Bedini, 2000; Devine & Lashua, 2002).

While leisure experiences for individuals with disabilities have ranged from constraining to freeing, researchers tend to ignore the social contexts and complexities of situations (Bedini & Henderson, 1994; Devine & Dattilo, 2000; West, 1984). One leisure situation needing further examination is the inclusive leisure context (Bedini, 2000; DePauw & Doll-Tepper, 2000). Inclusive leisure is defined as individuals with and without disabilities engaging in recreation pursuits together (Dattilo, 2002). It is important to examine these contexts because they are a forum that may reveal privilege, status, social values, and beliefs toward individuals with and without disabilities (Bedini, 2000; Bedini & Henderson, 1994; Shank, Coyle, Boyd, and Kinney, 1996; West, 1984). One indicator of privilege, status, and values within an inclusive leisure context is social acceptance (Devine & Dattilo, 2000; Fine & Asch, 1988). Schwartz (1988) described social acceptance as equal status or social position between individuals with and without disabilities. Within a leisure context, social acceptance has been found to be a reflection of equal status, reciprocity, and social inclusion (Devine & Dattilo; Schleiens & Heyne, 1997; Schwartz). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine individuals with disabilities perceptions of inclusive leisure contexts as an environment for gaining social acceptance.

### *Context and Leisure*

The meaning people attach to language, objects, and behavior arise and are reproduced within social situations (Danforth & Navarro, 2001). Sharing of social meaning occurs and is reproduced through social interaction. The meaning of behavior, objects, and language may change as social situations, societal attitudes, and norms change. Berger and Luckmann (1966) noted the relationship between the individual and his or her social world is an ongoing process of determining and transmitting meaning. This means people interpret and understand other's actions within specific social situations (Goffman, 1959). To better understand leisure, it is important to understand the perspectives and attitudes that people bring with them to leisure contexts. Given what leisure reveals about an individual and its foundations of choice and freedom, leisure is a particularly salient context from which to understand social structures (Mannel & Kleiber, 1997). For instance, the common experience of leisure may disclose a persons attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and preferences. Studies of various marginalized groups show leisure as an arena where identities are challenged, and privilege and social structures are played out.

Leisure aids in understanding social structures related to women in particular by examining the role leisure plays in their lives, the roles they play

relative to leisure, and the meanings they assign to leisure. A great deal of exploration has been conducted on gender and leisure. Some studies have demonstrated leisure is a space in which women create, perpetuate, and challenge traditional gender roles (Henderson, 1996; Henderson & King, 1998; James 2000; Parry & Shaw, 1999; Philipp, 1998). In contrast with work and home environments, women's leisure has been found to be a context for providing continuity in the face of change, a constraint to change over the lifespan, and a catalyst for change (Anderton, Fitzgerald, & Laidler, 1995; Bedini & Guinan, 1996; Freysinger, 1999).

Recently, studies have explored the role of the leisure in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Caldwell, Kivel, Smith, and Hayes (1998) found that leisure played a somewhat negative and unhealthy role in the lives of lesbian and gay adolescents in that leisure was a context for rebellion and engaging in unhealthy practices (e.g., binge drinking). Jacobson and Samdahl (1998) found that older lesbian women regarded leisure both as a context for experiencing stigma and discrimination and a context for countering these negative images. Kivel (2000) found leisure to be a context for identity formation for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth by being a forum for experimentation and risk-taking and as a forum for the perpetuation of cultural ideologies and discourses. According to these investigations, leisure situations highlighted existing privileges, beliefs, and attitudes. Leisure situations were also important for identity formation as well as countering stigma.

Studies focusing on people of color have shown that leisure contexts tend to be more racially segregated than work or educational environments. Philipp (2000) contended that African Americans and European Americans make leisure decisions based on the racial make-up of a group. Hibbler and Shinew (2002) reported that interracial couples carefully made leisure choices to avoid racism and discrimination. These findings support the notion that leisure contexts expose wider social structures at play (e.g., social values, beliefs, attitudes). This body of knowledge provides a basis for understanding leisure decisions, patterns, meanings, and experiences among women, people who identify as gay and lesbian, and people of color. As people with disabilities become more included in everyday life, their involvement in leisure situations is inevitable. Research is necessary to understand how such contexts are regarded by these individuals.

### *Leisure Context and Disability*

Albrecht (1976) observed that disability occurs within social contexts. Because context establishes meaning (Douglas, 1970; Ritzer, 1992), some disability scholars have posited that it is not the limitations of the individual, but the context, that handicaps a person with a disability (Higgins, 1992; Goffman, 1963; Roth, 1983). In particular, some have speculated that disability is most likely to take on negative meanings in informal, more socially intimate contexts (Allen & Allen, 1995; Barnes, 1990; Bedini & Henderson,

1994; Devine & Dattilo, 2000). Leisure environments are among those contexts considered to be informal and socially intimate (Barnes; Reynolds, 1993). In addition, because leisure contexts reveal privilege, status, and value they offer insight into the social construction of disability.

Leisure and disability literature provides insight into the dynamic and multiple realities surrounding the intersection of these two experiences, specifically the inclusive leisure experience. Early works on inclusive leisure contexts and individuals with disabilities tended to examine the impact of inclusion on people without disabilities. Schleien, Hornfeldt, and McAvoy (1994) assessed the amount of information children without disabilities acquired while participating in an environmental education program with children who had severe disabilities. They found that the inclusive context did not impede the acquisition of knowledge of children without disabilities. Sable (1995) examined the effects of three different disability awareness programs on the level of acceptance adolescents without disabilities had toward their peers with disabilities. Adolescents without disabilities participated in three different awareness programs at a residential summer camp for children with and without disabilities. Adolescents who had personal contact with peers with disabilities and participated in awareness education had the most positive change in the level of acceptance of persons with disabilities. These findings examined only the perspectives of individuals without disabilities. This is problematic because it ignores the perspectives of individuals without disabilities and provides a one dimensional view of the inclusive leisure situation.

A few studies have recently examined the role of the inclusive leisure environment from the perspective of individuals with and without disabilities. Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, and Seligmann (1997) studied the efficacy of an integrated outdoor adventure program on attitudes, interactions, leisure skill development, and lifestyle changes for individuals with and without disabilities. No significant changes in attitude toward individuals with disabilities were found, to which the authors attributed an initially positive attitude from the beginning of the program. Efficacy changes were found in interactions in that both groups chose to include each other in their lives as friends. Wilhite, Devine, and Goldenberg (1999) also examined perceptions of youth with and without disabilities on inclusive contexts. Results indicated degrees of social acceptance, perceptions of disability, and self-image occurred under specific conditions. Inclusive contexts where rights were respected, reciprocity occurred, and mutual leisure interests were strongest yielded the highest degrees of social acceptance and positive perceptions of disability and self-images. Findings from these studies support the relevance of the leisure situation as an important context for bringing people together in a shared experience.

Other studies have also been helpful in providing insight on the role of the leisure context and individuals with disabilities. Devine and Dattilo (2000) found that, compared to those who perceived they were not socially

accepted, individuals with disabilities who perceived they were socially accepted by their peers without disabilities had a greater frequency of leisure participation and degree leisure satisfaction in inclusive leisure environments. Place and Hodge (2001) reported that youth with and without disabilities interacted infrequently with each other in a competitive sport skill acquisition context, with the youth with disabilities interacting to a greater degree with each other than the youth without disabilities. Herbert (2000) uncovered that staff working in outdoor adventure recreation programs who had knowledge of program modification and training competence regarding disability issues tended to have positive attitudes toward providing services for either individuals with and without disabilities. Shared components in these studies were examinations of factors relating to social inclusion (e.g., acceptance, behavior, attitude) and perceptions about status and acceptance of individuals with disabilities as peers or equals. These findings have contributed to better understanding the social structures at play in leisure contexts. However, there has been a lack of focus on specific conditions within the leisure context that extend our understanding of the dynamic of context. This lack of attention to conditions within the inclusive leisure context is problematic because it is crucial when examining social phenomena such as social inclusion or acceptance.

#### *Role of Leisure Context and Social Acceptance*

Social acceptance is characterized by an ease and enjoyment of social interaction between people, a sense of belonging to a group, and the opportunity to create relationships of equal status (Hewitt, 1991). According to McKittrick (1980), social acceptance is the "tendency of people to attach positive value to others in their environment and to make contact with them." (p. 18). Social acceptance has been identified as the basis for friendship development (Schleien & Heyne, 1997), social inclusion (Devine & Dattilo, 2000), and reversing negative stereotypes (Harlan-Simmons, Holtz, Todd, & Mooney, 2001). Schwartz (1988) discussed the importance of social acceptance of people with disabilities as a necessary ingredient to create a climate of inclusion that goes beyond simply providing physical accessibility. Goffman (1963) suggested it is the context that dictates when social acceptance occurs. He noted that in certain situations people who are stigmatized (i.e., people with disabilities) will be accepted as equals, while in others they will be viewed as inferior. This raises the question, Why do some situations promote social acceptance while others impede it?

Studies have demonstrated that individuals with disabilities are less likely to be socially accepted by their peers without disabilities in socially intimate situations than they are in more formal situations (Makas, 1988). In work situations, McKittrick (1980) found that workers without disabilities were far more likely to rate fellow employees with disabilities as co-workers than friends. Findings from this study suggests that leisure situations reflect the

larger social structure as it relates to disability in that disability appears to have a more negative meaning in less structured (i.e., leisure) contexts than in more structured (i.e., work, academia) contexts.

Leisure as a context for decreasing barriers between individuals with and without disabilities has received significant examination over the past decade. However, the importance of the leisure context for promoting equal social status has had inconsistent attention (Bedini, 2000; Shank, Coyle, Boyd, & Kinney, 1996). This is problematic because social acceptance is an issue associated with social limitations (i.e., social isolation) experienced by individuals with disabilities, a type of barrier that has been found to be more limiting than physical or programmatic barriers (Bedini & Henderson, 1994; Devine & Dattilo, 2000; West, 1984). According to Shank, et al., social acceptance can mitigate stigma and social rejection, furthering the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in leisure programs.

One of the first studies examining community recreation contexts, social acceptance, and stigma was conducted by West (1984). He found that people with disabilities, particularly those with visibly obvious impairments and who felt stigmatized and perceived a lack of social acceptance, tended to avoid inclusive leisure services. Bedini and Henderson (1994) studied the meaning of leisure for women with physical disabilities. They found that the women perceived that others had decreased expectations of their abilities, a clear barrier to social acceptance, and as a result were treated in a less equal manner than those without disabilities. Bedini and Henderson concluded that the women indicated stigmas and a culture of segregation which negatively influenced their satisfaction in inclusive leisure contexts. Bedini (2000) examined perceived stigma and community recreation pursuits of individuals with disabilities. The results of this study reinforced the importance of social acceptance in the inclusive leisure experience and the role of the leisure context in coping with stigma. Examining the social interactions of youth with and without disabilities in a physical education context, Place and Hodge (2001) speculated that the infrequent social interaction between the youths was more reflective of a sense of moral obligation than a desire to be friends or evidence of social acceptance. These inquiries reflect an evolution of examining the role of context relative to determining social acceptance and the overall leisure experience. It is the leisure situation that brings people together in a shared experience, with the notions of choice and freedom being at the heart of that mutual experience.

While much is known about the implications of social acceptance on the leisure experiences of individuals with disabilities, the role leisure contexts play in determining social acceptance remains unknown. Given that perceived freedom, enjoyment, and other aspects of leisure are context driven (Goffman, 1963) it is important to understand the conditions of the leisure situation to better understand how social acceptance is facilitated. In addition, several of the previously reviewed studies omitted perspectives of individuals with disabilities. Including the voice of people with disabilities will broaden the understanding of living with a disability and the role of

leisure contexts (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). This analysis is a component of a larger study which examined multiple aspects of the relationship between social acceptance and the inclusive leisure experiences of people with disabilities. The present analysis addressed the research question: What role do inclusive leisure contexts play in facilitating or hindering social acceptance among people with disabilities? Two additional research questions were explored to gain a greater understanding of the role of the inclusive leisure context on social acceptance: (a) How is social acceptance revealed in inclusive leisure contexts? (b) What factors in the inclusive leisure context promote or hinder social acceptance?

### Method

Qualitative methods were selected to collect and analyze data as it met the purpose of the study, to focus on the role of the leisure context. Focusing on context as a situation where meaning is created was especially important in designing this study so as to encourage individuals with disabilities to talk about the meaning of social acceptance, their experiences, and the role of the inclusive leisure context. Social construction theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995) was used as the framework to guide this investigation.

Social construction theory seeks to explain the process by which knowledge is created and assumed as reality. Specifically, social construction theory asserts if people construct meaning through social interactions, then their behaviors, objects, and language will reflect that meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999). According to Shotter (1993), these meanings articulate the nature of everyday life. Meanings are transmitted and maintained in social situations and, given the context (e.g., place, people, atmosphere), reality is constructed through meanings of behaviors, objects, and language that people bring to the situation (Berger & Luckmann; Douglas; Gergen, 1999; Ritzer, 1992).

The application of social construction theory to the construct of disability results in concern for the meaning ascribed by society to physical, cognitive, mental, and emotional impairments (Oliver, 1990). Historically, a negative meaning has primarily been ascribed to behaviors, objects, and language related to people who have behavioral differences resulting from a limited ability to see, hear, ambulate, communicate, think, or socialize (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Hahn, 1987; Roth, 1983). As contexts change, so does meaning. Thus, a wheelchair may mean "independence" in a home environment, but in a leisure environment it may mean "obstacle." The social construction of disability has been noted as the basis of a lack of social acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities in society (Olkin & Howson, 1994). According to Hahn (1987), the negative responses to and meanings associated with disability create the greatest barriers to social acceptance and inclusion. Leisure involvement is one context in which people with disabilities have experienced a lack of social acceptance and inclusion (Devine,

1997; Sable, 1995; West, 1984). A lack of social acceptance and inclusion in leisure involvement is problematic in that it negatively influences the leisure lifestyle of people with disabilities (Barnes, 1990; Shank, Coyle, Boyd, & Kinney, 1996).

Social construction theory guided this study in several ways. First, the primary interest of this study was to better understand the leisure context as a determinant of social acceptance. Because social construction assumes there are no pre-determined facts, it is conceivable that an individual with a disability may feel accepted in one leisure context, while another could feel excluded in the same context. It is also possible that an individual could feel both included and excluded within the same situation. Thus, applying social construction theory aided in understanding the continuous construction and determinants of meaning in inclusive leisure contexts. It is through relationships that meaning is created, according to social construction theory (Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1993), and the theory was useful in guiding an understanding of how meaning is generated through relationships within the inclusive context. Burr (1995) contends that language is the key factor in constructing relationships in that it allows meanings to be expressed; we come to understand ourselves and a context through the framework of language. The social construction framework was useful in exploring the language of "inclusion" and understanding how the research participants understood the situation as one of acceptance or not. This theory was also useful as the framework from which the interview guide was designed in particular to explore not only ways in which meaning is constructed, but the consequences of meanings. Lastly, social construction theory was used to best represent the voice of the research participant, minimizing the researcher's perspectives. The challenge to each qualitative researcher is to best represent the perspective of the research participant, although it is nearly impossible to eliminate our own interpretations (Hutchinson & Samdahl, 2000). Social construction theory was applied as an acknowledgment of mutually constructed meaning in the research process, lending support to the notion that there is no absolute truth, but an ongoing negotiation of reality.

### *Study Participants and Setting*

Individuals with disabilities were selected using purposive sampling. In this sense, individuals who exhibited characteristics of central importance to the purpose of the investigation were deliberately selected. This type of sampling resulted in "information rich cases" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Characteristics of central importance to the purpose of this investigation included individuals who had a visibly obvious disability and were enrolled and participating in inclusive leisure programs. Inclusive leisure programs were defined as leisure programs in which participation is open to and accommodations may be made for all members of society, including individuals with disabilities (Dattilo, 2002; Kaufman Broida, 1995). Leisure programs designed primarily for people with disabilities or those programs that did not



have an individual with an obvious disability participating, were not included in this study. In all cases, the individual with the disability was the only participant in the recreation program with a visibly obvious disability. Data were collected with 14 individuals who were participating in different leisure programs (i.e., drama, visual arts, tennis, pottery, sport leagues), conducted at 14 different locations including recreation centers, pools, schools and a theater. The nature of these programs ranged from structured instructional programs, to organized competitive sports, as well as independently initiated recreation engagement. Registration for the leisure programs ranged between 10 to 35 participants and in all cases participants in this study were the only individuals with visibly obvious disabilities. Programs were offered weekly, lasting between one to two hours in length with the nature of the context and interactions of the programs consisting of a mix of formal instructional time and informal/social time. For example, during a 60 minute drama program there was formal instruction and practice time interspersed with time for informal socializing. Singleton and Asher (1977) recommended that when examining social acceptance, individuals have a minimum of eight hours of contact with each other prior to examination. At the time of the interviews, respondents and their peers had a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 13 hours of contact.

Of primary importance to this study was the participant with the disability and his or her participation in the recreation program with peers who did not have visibly obvious disabilities. Thus, study participant selection was based on the person and their engagement in the inclusive recreation program. The type or recreation activity upon which the program was based was not of primary concern in the selection of research participants. Selection was operationalized by identifying individuals who requested accommodations based on disability. If they met the purposive sampling criteria, they were invited to participate in the study. Eighteen individuals met this criteria and fourteen agreed to be interviewed. As reported in Table 1, there were four male and ten female research participants ranging in age from 11-35. Eleven of them were European Americans and three were African Americans. Individuals' disabilities included two with spina bifida, five with cerebral palsy, one with an orthopaedic disability, one with a spinal cord injury, one with muscular dystrophy, and four with downs syndrome. Research participants lived in either a medium size Midwestern city or a suburb of a large Midwestern city. In all parts of this paper, pseudonyms are used instead of the research participants actual names to protect their identity.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

One face to face interview was conducted with a sample of people with visibly obvious disabilities who were currently enrolled and participating in inclusive leisure programs. The interview lasted from 45 to 70 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured guide including primary and sub-questions, as well as probes (see Table 2). Interviews were tape recorded and

*TABLE 1*  
*Research Participants*

Pseudonyms	Age	Race	Disability
Jan	35	European American	Cerebral Palsy
Sarah	12	European American	Cerebral Palsy
Elvis	12	African American	Cerebral Palsy
Andrew	33	European American	Mental Retardation
Polly	28	European American	Mental Retardation
Lizzy	15	European American	Spina Bifida
Judy	17	African American	Spina Bifida
Heather	14	European American	Orthopedic Disability
Kat	23	European American	Mental Retardation
Jordan	29	African American	Mental Retardation
Jenna	15	European American	Cerebral Palsy
Aaron	33	European American	Spinal Cord Injury
Emily	26	European American	Muscular Dystrophy
Dayna	20	European American	Cerebral Palsy

transcribed verbatim. Overall, each interview was conducted and completed without significant obstacles or challenges. Field notes were composed based on reflections following each interview. Reflections included mood or demeanor of research participants, researcher perceptions of the overall interview, and any questions that may be asked in the follow-up process.

Constant comparison method was used to analyze the data. According to Preissle Goetz and LeCompte (1981), the purpose of constant comparison is to generate statements of relationships between social behaviors. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend using this procedure to clarify relationships within and between categories. In applying this method of analysis, inductive

*TABLE 2*  
*Sample Interview Questions*

1. What are the things in this program that makes you want to come here?
2. What are the things about the staff makes you want to come here?
3. What are the things about your peers that make you want to come here?
4. What goes on in this program that makes you perceive you are liked?
5. What does the staff do that makes you perceive you are liked?
6. What do your peers do that makes you perceive you are liked?
7. How do you know you are welcomed or valued in this program? What goes on to make you think the way that you do?
8. If you think about how valued or liked you feel in other places, is there a difference in how liked you feel between school/home/work and here? What are those differences?
9. What does it mean to you to feel/not feel liked, valued, welcomed, or a part of this program?

or general category coding was combined with a simultaneous comparison of social incidents (Preissle Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). Phenomena under study were recorded, classified, and compared across categories. First, ideas about categories and themes were generated by the researcher as transcripts were read, re-read, and analyzed. Next, developing data which were similar in nature and informed the research questions were grouped into general categories titled, connector, distancer, and neutralizer. Properties and dimensions of the general categories, identified through analysis of the transcripts, were interpreted to increase the understanding of the variability, depth, and breadth of the categories. It should be noted that the analyses in this paper were neither conducted nor reported with the intention of offering generalizations. The intent was to describe the conditions and the variations of inclusive leisure environments associated with determining social acceptance. However, analytical and theoretical generalizability may be gleaned from this study.

*Data Representation.* The issue of representing data from naturalistic inquiries has to do with trustworthiness or how well the results of the study capture reality as it is constructed between the researcher and the study participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Social construction theory contends that reality is formed and reformed according to the context (Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1993). The challenge to qualitative researchers is how study participants and constructed reality are represented in writings. It is difficult to filter out our own interpretations and meanings of the data and, inevitably, the researcher's voice becomes the privileged voice<sup>1</sup>. According to Hutchinson and Samdahl (2000), all "analyses are limited and filtered through the lens of the researcher" (p. 245) and limitations are an inherent part of all research. Thus, limitations of the findings of this analysis lie in the lens of this researcher from which data were filtered. Typical techniques were undertaken to best construct interpretations (e.g., member checks, field notes, use of two data analyzers) and information discovered was used as additional data instead of verifications of reality.

### Findings

Following conceptualization of categories, an additional review of the literature was conducted to provide theoretical confirmation of concepts being examined. Data will be discussed in terms of categories that were identified in relation to the primary and secondary research questions. Within each category, data were identified by examining the role of inclusive leisure contexts in determining social acceptance from a social construction framework. Specifically, data were examined relative to the role of inclusive leisure contexts and the meaning of that role in determining social acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> Author has chosen to use third person writing style.

Overall, findings indicated that inclusive leisure contexts can serve as a determinant of degrees of social acceptance and three conceptual categories were identified in relation to this role: Connector, distancer, and neutralizer.

### *Connector*

Study participants described inclusive leisure contexts as having a role of connecting people to people, people to their communities, and bridging barriers between people with and without disabilities. In serving the role of *connector*, abilities were emphasized, stereotypes were challenged, and commonalities were a focus. Additionally, an overall culture of social acceptance was present in these contexts. Study participants described shared values, traditions, language, and behaviors reflecting social acceptance among all involved. The type of activity (e.g., physically active, social) appeared to be an indicator of the connector role, a finding that is consistent with findings in other studies on inclusive leisure environments (see Bedini & Henderson, 1994; Devine & Dattilo, 2000; Wilhite, Devine, Goldenberg, 1999).

When informants indicated that inclusive leisure contexts served as a connector, they described social acceptance by their peers in terms of specific behaviors, language, and objects, such as being included in informal activities within the context of the leisure program, talking about adaptive equipment in terms of promoting independence, being encouraged by peers to take risks, and being included in social gatherings outside the program. Judy, a 17-year-old female with spinal bifida, stated that “they [peers without disabilities] will come up to me and ask me if I want to play cards or a game with them, or they’ll ask me for my phone number.” According to Emily, a 26-year-old female with muscular dystrophy, the instructor and her peers would refer to the adaptive recreation equipment she used as her “mover and shaker vehicles.” She explained, “um, using this stuff is how I’m able to participate. Without it I’d be pretty lost, and really not able to do it. They [peers without disabilities] are really cool about it and all. They even named the stuff ya know and all.” In these contexts adaptive equipment were perceived to promote independence rather than be restrictive. Participants without disabilities treated the equipment with respect, playfulness, and a necessary part of the leisure experience.

A recurring theme among study participants was the notion of the inclusive leisure context as a means of *bridging barriers*. Social barriers to inclusion have been identified as a significant obstacle to not only inclusion, but to social acceptance of participants with disabilities (Bedini, 2000; Shank, et al., 1996; West, 1984). One way barriers were bridged was by connecting people to people. Social relationships were related to the overall culture of social acceptance and the recreation staff appeared to play a pivotal role in establishing a context for interpersonal connections. For example, inclusion companions (staff members whose specific role was to assist participants with disabilities) assisted not only the participant with the disability, but those without disabilities. This promoted a culture of mutual goals as well as facil-

itating equal status. Sarah, a 12-year-old female with cerebral palsy, stated "(companion) helps all of us, not just me. That helps me not stick-out so much and the other kids want to be around both of us. It is easier to make friends cause it's like she's not just there for me." Aaron noted that the recreation staff treated him like everyone else, "they didn't treat me like I was fragile or something, like I was going to break." He went on to explain his perception of the impact of the staff's treatment of him on his fellow participants:

I think they really picked-up on how he [recreation staff] treated me. They all seemed willing to play [sport] with me and joke with me. I think he really set the tone, if ya know what I mean. I mean when I first started [in the recreation program] I gave [staff] a heads-up to not be soft on me or anything and I'm here to tell ya he wasn't and I think it really made difference on the others.

Indeed, staff members were observed assisting all participants with tasks, not just the participant with the disability. When they assisted the individuals with disabilities, they only provided the necessary aid. They would then step away from the situation and let the person participate independently.

Establishing and promoting interdependence between peers was an important component of social acceptance played out through inclusive leisure contexts. Interdependence included encouragement from staff and peers, an understanding of varying abilities by staff and peers and ways in which abilities could be supported. These behaviors also serve as examples of the culture of social acceptance, expected behaviors, values, and norms in these connector contexts. Elvis, a twelve-year-old male with cerebral palsy, discussed the role of inclusive leisure contexts as connectors when the attitude of others was supportive. He described being "cheered on" by his peers when he participated in various physical activities. He went on to say that "they [peers without disabilities] seem to realize that sometimes things are harder for me, so they cheer me on, give me encouragement to keep doing it and trying. It really makes me feel a part of the group." Polly, a 28-year-old female with mental retardation stated, "It is important for me to have the support from people to do it [recreation activities]. People need to help me when I need help and I can help them when they need help."

Connecting people to their communities was another component of how inclusive leisure contexts facilitated social acceptance and bridged barriers. In this regard, individuals with disabilities felt they were integral to community life and not just spectators. Aaron described it as "being a doer rather than a viewer." He went on to say that the program provided the opportunity for "me to get to know my community better and the community to get to know me." For Aaron, reciprocity in community awareness appeared to create a sense of belonging. For some study participants the leisure contexts played a role in social acceptance by being an accessibility advocate. When facilities, parks, areas were not optimally accessible, the staff, individual with the disability, or peer would point out problem areas to a responsible party. Sarah shared an instance where the accessible entrance to a building

was on the opposite side from the accessible parking area. Not wanting her to feel excluded, the entire group entered the building through the accessible entrance, and followed up their visit with a letter to the responsible party about the hardship and inconvenience of that design.

Inclusive leisure contexts facilitated connections when individuals with disabilities were able to use abilities or skills. Showcasing abilities or talents appeared to be a shared cultural value in connector contexts. Wilhite, Devine, and Goldenberg (1999) found that being able to demonstrate abilities was one way youth with disabilities countered stereotypes. Countering stereotypes can promote positive meanings of disability (Devine & Dattilo, 2000; Goffman, 1963). In this study, equal status and social acceptance were enhanced when informants were able to demonstrate their leisure abilities or skills regardless of the nature of the activity. Lizzy, a 15-year-old female with spina bifida, stated "when they let me get on stage and use my acting [skills] I can show them what I can do, but if I'm just sitting around, not getting on stage no one knows how good I am [at acting]." Emily described her perception that her peers appreciated her abilities, "I do have to do things differently and here I feel free to experiment and do it differently. No one seems to care that my moves don't look like everyone's so I have to say it [context] means freedom." Others indicated that determinants of social acceptance were not only a function of using their abilities, but the type of activities in which they were involved. For instance, having a variety of leisure options to choose from for participation was especially important to determining social acceptance for those individuals who had significant physical limitations. Dayna, a 20-year-old female with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, expressed her need to demonstrate her mental abilities as her "physical limitations are great." She stated "If all I have to choose from is sports or physically active stuff, then people will not get to know the real me. My physical part is only one small part of me." Contexts that showcased the varied abilities of all individuals and fostered the use of abilities, no matter the activity, were favorable to social acceptance.

### *Distancer*

While inclusive leisure contexts facilitated social acceptance by connecting people, they could also undermine social acceptance by distancing participants with and without disabilities. As a *distancer*, leisure contexts appeared to emphasize differences rather than similarities. They did not promote social acceptance or active participation and had an atmosphere of a disability hierarchy. Overall, a culture of a lack of social acceptance was present when inclusive leisure contexts served as a *distancer* and study participants described a lack of valorization, negative attitudes and behaviors as reflections of a lack of social acceptance. Consistent with findings from other studies, study participants with more severe disabilities were more likely to perceive these inclusive contexts as distancing than those with less severe disabilities.

Participants recounted instances when inclusive leisure contexts distanced them from their peers by not promoting active participation, possibly as a result of experiencing a devalued role. Jan, a 35-year-old woman with cerebral palsy, explained a situation in which she felt “invisible”:

We had to pair-up to ready the materials for the [activity]. Everyone around me seemed to look over, past, and through me, like I was not even there; I was the incredible invisible woman. Nobody seemed to realize that I was not being included. What is even more incredible to me is that, when I asked the instructor for a job, she said “don’t worry about it; I think everything is being taken care of.” She put a big wedge between me and the others by not giving me at least a little job.

Andrew, a 33-year-old male with mental retardation, indicated a lack of inclusion when it came to choices:

Sometimes we get to pick what we want to take pictures of. But they don’t ask me and um . . . , when I try to say “well I’d like to go to the park and take pictures of the ducks.” they [staff and peers without disabilities] don’t want to do that. But they never ask me [his preferences].

Status appeared to be at issue here as individuals with disabilities felt they were devalued.

Some participants experienced what they described as a “pecking order” or hierarchy of disability by those without disabilities. A hierarchy of disability was perceived as some disabilities were more accepted or having higher status than others, thus creating a distance or barrier for individuals who had the lower status disability. While the type of activity did not appear to influence perceptions of a disability hierarchy, study participants with more physically limiting disabilities expressed these perceptions most. Jenna, a thirteen-year-old female with severe cerebral palsy, felt that she would have been better accepted by her peers without disabilities if she could walk or use a manual chair instead of using a motorized wheelchair. She went on to explain,

If I was in a program or class with someone else in a wheelchair and they were less disabled than me, they would get all the attention [from peers without disabilities]. It was like, because I needed more help or couldn’t do things as well as the other person in the chair, I shouldn’t be there. I needed to either keep-up or not come to the program.

While Elvis felt some inclusive leisure contexts were connectors, he also found these contexts could be distancers. He described one instance that illustrates the hierarchy of disability in which the leisure context distanced him from being socially accepted. He stated that his peers without disabilities mocked his style of talk by:

stuffing marshmallows or hunks of bread in their mouths and then trying to talk. A lot of times I didn’t talk cause I didn’t want to be mocked. But if I could talk better it [recreation activity] would be better; if I could talk better they probably wouldn’t make fun of me.

In these examples, the leisure context may have emphasized differences and created more significant barriers, rather than a context that showcased abilities.

For study participants who described the role of inclusive leisure contexts as distancer, poor attitudes were seen as a primary determinant of a lack of social acceptance. In some cases, recreation staff and peers without disabilities were perceived as having negative attitudes. Being stared or laughed at, being ignored by peers or staff, or a lack of reciprocity in friendship development all provided evidence of a lack of social acceptance. Heather, a 14-year-old female with an orthopedic disability, recalled having to work hard at making friends during one particular inclusive recreation experience. She described several encounters with her peers without disabilities when she tried different tactics to create friendships including:

Just talking with them, asking them for their phone numbers, trying to find something we had in common, asking the [recreation] leaders if I could be one of the small group leaders. They deemed like they didn't want to be bothered. I felt like I was doing all the work and nothing was happening. And the [recreation] leaders didn't help; they just ignored me too.

Some informants felt the way the leisure environment was designed distanced them from their peers. Jordan, a 29-year-old male with mental retardation, described how the recreation staff over protected him by "not letting them pitch the ball to me the right way. They'd say 'ease up on the pitch' whenever I was up to bat. They didn't say that to anyone else and I knew what they meant." Jordan went on to say "I felt like everyone treated me like a baby then, like they had to take care of me and I was already 21 years old." While early adulthood is a difficult life stage for gaining acceptance from peers, experiences of young adults with disabilities appear to be compounded by their disability.

As a distancer, inclusive leisure contexts appeared to accentuate differences. The study participants who described these contexts as a distancer discussed a culture of a lack of social acceptance where differences were viewed as problematic and equipment (e.g., wheelchair) was perceived as a sign of dependence. In addition they described feeling as if they were either very obvious or invisible. Aaron described how he felt being the one who is always different, "I'm always shorter, in need of ramps, wider bathrooms, more time to do things; I never blend in, I'm always the one who sticks out and at times people treat me different." Some interviewees stated when recreation staff requested them to perform tasks that they do very differently from their able-bodied peers it brought unwanted attention to them. Lizzy, expressed that "they [peers without disabilities] are doing all the leg movements and I have to adapt it to my wheelchair and it makes me feel so awkward and like everyone is gawking at me and I stick out." Judy, a 17-year-old female with spina bifida, stated,

My teachers and all, um they always tell me that I'm just like everyone else. Some times I feel like everyone else, but then some times I don't. Like some-



times here I'm so different and stuff. I can't do what the other kids can, and um. . . .sometimes I feel like I'm a bother to them cause I have to do things differently, like it's a chore for them.

A common theme among study participants was the feeling of being very different from their peers without disabilities. It is important to note that perceptions of the leisure context as a distancer was more prevalent with the African American than the European American study participants.

### *Neutralizer*

For a minority of participants, inclusive leisure contexts took a neutral role in determining social acceptance. A *neutral* role was described as "tolerating presence" and "same but different." These contexts failed to establish a culture of acceptance, but they also did not isolate, ignore, or degrade the individuals. Interestingly, the individuals who described the role of inclusive leisure contexts in these terms all had Downs Syndrome.

Overall, sentiment expressed was a lack of interest or ambivalence toward the presence of the person with the disability. In these contexts participants felt they were initially forgotten; with time, they felt they were treated kindly, although they never felt totally embraced by others. In describing how she felt, Kat, a 23-year-old female with Downs Syndrome said her peers and the recreation leader would "forget about" her. In discussing the craft class in which she was participating, Kat described her experience in terms of feeling like an after-thought:

There were some directions and stuff and everyone would be off doing their thing and it would be like "oh yeah Kat needs help," or no one would ask me what I wanted to do first until I spoke-up. Then it would be like "oh yeah, I wonder what she wants to do." It was like I wasn't there until I spoke-up, but then they were all real nice and stuff.

Andrew, a 33-year-old male with Downs Syndrome recalled his experiences at a public fitness facility, "They [individuals without disabilities] will just walk by and not say hi. Now, if I say 'hi' then they'll say hi back. Sometimes people seem afraid to talk to me, but usually they are nice." He answered a probe about whether that made him feel accepted: "Sometimes, but I really don't know. I don't know if they like me or want me here or not. I can't tell." The perceived ambivalence toward their inclusion seemed to limit their ability to establish meaningful social ties.

### Discussion and Implications

Samdahl and Jekubovich (1997) reported that "people do not just want leisure; they want to share their leisure with someone" (p. 445). It was compelling in this study how inclusive leisure contexts played a significant role in promoting a shared leisure experience with others and determining social acceptance. These contexts facilitated the shared leisure experience by connecting participants to each other through the development of meaningful

relationships with each other. Inclusive leisure contexts in which study participants were encouraged to take risks and demonstrate their abilities provided a forum for building relationships. Having the opportunity to build relationships, based on a shared experience, occurs often in leisure as it is in the leisure context where individuals can discover common bonds (Mannel & Kleiber, 1997). This was evidenced by inclusion companions (staff members whose specific role was to assist participants with disabilities) who assisted not only the participant with the disability, but those without disabilities. These behaviors promoted a culture of mutual goals as well as facilitating equal status.

A culture of social acceptance was evident in that participants with disabilities were expected to be fully included in all aspects of the leisure program. For instance, study participants described situations where the group banded together to advocate for accessible environments. Relationships with one's community is one way in which people can acquire a sense of belonging and social identity (Hewitt, 1991). A strong social identity, according to Garfinkle (1956), is equated with group membership and having the status of belonging to a particular group. Brown and Smith (1989), argued the success of creating inclusive contexts hinges on social acceptance within the collective (i.e., community) and a collective social acceptance is dependent on creating social identity. Leisure is one context in which social acceptance and social identity are linked.

According to social role valorization theory, each person has the right and responsibility to assume a valued social role in society and society has an obligation to allow individuals to pursue such roles (Bullock & Mahon, 1997). The potential for social acceptance occurs through the dynamic asserted by social role valorization (Wolfensberger, 1992). Some study participants expressed a devalued role in the inclusive leisure context resulting in an emphasis on difference rather than similarities between them and their peers without disabilities. When a culture of a lack of social acceptance is present in inclusive leisure contexts, it is unlikely that people with disabilities are able to assume a valued role. Additionally, it has been speculated that devalued roles may lead to decreased active participation (Wilhite, Devine, & Goldenberg, 1999). Previous studies have found that leisure contexts are forums in which differences rather than similarities are emphasized. In work environments where individuals have specific roles they play, differences may not be so evident. However, in leisure contexts where roles may not be as evident or be blurred, differences between those with and without disabilities may be more glaring and create a barrier to social acceptance.

A hierarchy of disability was described by several study participants in a context of perceiving themselves as "less than." This diminished sense of self precluded them from not only taking risks, but from fully participating in the leisure environment. This finding is consistent with reports from other studies acknowledging disability-type preferences, resulting in further marginalization of individuals with specific types of disabilities (Fine & Asch, 1988; West, 1984). Becker (1960) acknowledge "outsiders" are people who

are marginalized and unable to become legitimate group members. By marginalizing some individuals, the legitimate members may well maintain their superior positions within the group. The creation of a disability hierarchy within the inclusive leisure context may be a way of keeping some individuals with disabilities as perennial outsiders. Given their informal nature, leisure contexts may well be a context in which marginalization is far more evident than it is in work or education settings.

The language used in this inclusion context was consistent with social construction theory and the contextualization of disability. According to the social constructionist view, language provides a way of structuring experiences (Burr, 1995). Language also conveys power, status, and values. Embedded in the inclusive leisure experiences of the study participants is the language of inclusion. Specifically, the words they used conveyed not only the meaning of the experience, but the power structure within the context. It was through their words that they conveyed the situation of acceptance or lack of acceptance. For instance, their language portrayed feeling like "a bother," feeling like they "stuck-out," or feeling like "a part of the group," being "treated like the others." This provides evidence of how acceptance is contextualized within the leisure situation by language.

Contexts where there was ambivalence toward inclusion revealed perceptions of being forgotten at first, then being treated kindly, but not with equal status. Interestingly, other studies have reported mostly dichotomous results, not a blend of ambivalence and kindness (Bedini, 2000; Bedini & Henderson, 1994; Wilhite, Devine, & Goldenberg, 1999). It could be the same individuals in this study, at least partially, "won" others over. Several studies found that when confronted with constraints, people negotiated them effectively to meet their leisure needs (Bedini, 2000; Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). Given the dynamic nature of inclusive leisure environments, determination of social acceptance may not always be readily apparent, but could be a construct open for negotiation. One theory that informs this finding is contact theory (Allport, 1954). The premise of contact theory is the quality of contact between people who have ascribed status differences lays the foundation for how each will perceive, view, treat, and accept each other. Favorable conditions (e.g., equal status, mutually rewarding, personal) tend to foster positive attitudes toward people with different characteristics, whereas unfavorable conditions tend to lead to stereotyping, stigmatizing, and discrimination. Contact theory has been applied to inclusive leisure contexts and may be a framework from which to implement services to counter ambivalence toward individuals with disabilities (Devine & Wilhite, 1998).

This study was limited by the homogeneity of the study participants. The majority were European Americans and only two had acquired rather than congenital disabilities, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation of this study was that data were primarily gathered through face-to-face interviews. Given the dynamic nature of context, observing participants with and without disabilities in various leisure environments may be useful to more fully understand the role of the inclusive leisure context.

Lastly, all study participants had disabilities, thus findings reflect only the perspectives of those with impairments. Future studies may consider interviewing and observing individuals with and without disabilities to provide further insight into the social acceptance.

### Conclusions

Leisure situations tend to be a microcosm of society, reflecting dominant values, norms, and standards. On the one hand, they provide opportunities for self-expression, freedom, and enjoyment (Mannel & Kleiber, 1997). They can also play a role in challenging norms and standards, particularly as they relate to individuals with disabilities. Further reflection is necessary to fully understand leisure situations as a reflection of society and forum for social change.

Findings from this study suggest the meanings ascribed to ability, equal status, difference, and belonging may have been created within leisure situations as well as brought from other environments and applied in leisure. For instance, some felt inclusive leisure activities facilitated social acceptance and definitions of disability were given new meaning; adaptive equipment meant independence, executing recreation skills in a nontraditional way meant uniqueness, and encouragement meant acceptance. Others felt traditional definitions of disability were revealed during leisure. In these cases, a disability was a devalued role; a hierarchy of disability meant some disabilities were more acceptable than others; and inclusive participation meant overprotection. Leisure contexts, thus, can challenge traditional meanings of disability, skill, and ability as well as perpetuate negative meanings. Future research is necessary to determine, under what conditions, inclusive leisure contexts can challenge traditional definitions of disability and foster social acceptance.

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