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# *Comments on the Paper by Chieh-Lu Li and Others*

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## **Comment on “Ethnicity as a Variable in Leisure Research” by Li et al.**

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### Introduction

Li, Chick, Zinn, Absher, and Graefe present a provocative argument questioning the usefulness of ethnicity as a construct in leisure research. I think the paper makes some important points that should be added to the ongoing discussion about research on leisure and ethnicity. Yet I also found much to disagree with in the paper, and I suspect others who have done work in the field will as well. I particularly question the researchers' main measure of cultural values as appropriate to understanding racial and ethnic variations in outdoor leisure patterns and preferences, as well as the conclusions they draw from their findings. In this commentary I outline what I see as the strengths and weaknesses of their paper, and suggest some directions for future research on leisure and ethnicity.

The authors' central thesis is that the concept of ethnicity as it is typically used in leisure research is “fundamentally flawed” and that as a measure of cultural values fails to differentiate between groups identified and labeled white, Hispanic, and Asian. They then go on to test for these differences with an on-site purposive sample of recreationists at selected Southern California forest sites using Hofstede's (1980) four dimensions of cultural value and Handwerker's (2001) procedures for determining cultural consensus. They find little evidence of consensus among individuals within the three main ethnic divisions they tested, even when these groups are further subdivided by age, gender, and generation in the U.S. They conclude that the assumption of cultural homogeneity in ethnic groups underlying some leisure research is erroneous and that further use of race/ethnicity as a variable

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in studies “will perpetuate research of questionable validity” unless within-group homogeneity can be empirically demonstrated.

### Ethnicity as a Variable

I agree that racial and ethnic variables as measured by leisure researchers are imperfect if not deeply flawed as ways for understanding variations in people’s leisure, especially when individuals with nationalities such as Vietnamese, Pakistani, and Filipino are lumped together to form a larger “ethnic group” such as Asian. The authors rightly note that the differences found between ethnic groups often tend to be small, unstable across studies, and subject to statistical “type” errors. I further agree that such differences are often highlighted over the substantial commonalities that also occur, and that within-group differences often exist and in some cases exceed between-group differences.

But I also think there are some good reasons why leisure researchers should continue to measure race and ethnicity, even if they have to resort to a broad-brush approach. The first reason is one of equal justice. From time immemorial, individuals have been discriminated against because of their differences from the dominant culture. Outward appearance of racial differences such as skin color has been a primary symbol and identifier, but ethnicity as manifested by nationality, language, religion, and other factors has also played an important role. In the U.S., the first English settlers displaced and often killed American Indians for their land and enslaved Africans to labor on their plantations, and substantial rights and privileges were also denied to subsequent waves of Caucasian immigrant groups such as Germans, Irish, Italians, Jews, and Catholics. Denial of equal access to recreation settings such as private movie theaters and golf courses and public parks and beaches is still within many adults’ memories, and discrimination in these and other settings continues to be reported in newspapers and in studies by leisure researchers (e.g., Brune, 1978; Philipp, 1998; Stodolska, 2005; West, 1989). So even if no differences in cultural values are found between individuals as measured by scales of race and ethnicity, it is something that we should continue to monitor to ensure that equal justice is maintained and enhanced in recreation settings. For example, there is a fairly recent area of research outside the mainstream leisure field that addresses this issue in terms of spatial equity in the distribution of open space and related amenities (e.g., Heynen, 2003; Lindsey, Maraj, & Kuan, 2001; Nicholls, 2001; Talen, 1998). As a means of ensuring equal justice, broad racial and ethnic categories not only make sense, but also seem to work effectively in addressing critical leisure issues such as open space equity.

Second and often linked with the discrimination issue raised above, society continues to think in terms of commonly used racial and ethnic labels because they are, for better or worse, fundamental parts of our human cognition of others. Genetics research has shown that within-race genetic vari-

ation is on the average ten times greater than between-race variation (Comides, Tooby, & Kurzban, 2003), yet psychologists and anthropologists consistently find that race and ethnicity is a primary and pervasive way humans categorize individuals (e.g., Gil-White, 2001; Hewstone, Hantzi, & Johnston, 1991). That race and ethnicity can color how we "see" others is perhaps most powerfully illustrated in Paul Haggis's 2004 film, *Crash*, where a diverse group of Los Angelinos are thrust together in crisis situations with those of other races and ethnicities. As the characters unabashedly express their prejudices, the film forces us to confront our own. *Crash* also highlights how race and ethnicity can form an important part of a person's self-image and belongingness to a broader social group, and in the context of leisure research racial and ethnic identity has been found to be a contributing factor in leisure preferences and behavior (e.g., Gómez, 2002; Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002; Taylor, 1992). For these reasons, race/ethnicity should be included in leisure studies as a necessary measure, even if it might not predict or differentiate very well. So even if, as the authors note, racial and ethnic categories may serve to reinforce stereotypes, if others commonly perceive a group in a certain way, if individuals perceive themselves within a particular group, or if individuals perceive that others perceive them in certain way, then these factors in themselves may affect leisure behavior. This is not to say that leisure researchers should be complacent pawns in perpetuating stereotypes. Racial and ethnic labels may be necessary but they are not sufficient in measuring variations in leisure preferences and behavior within a sample, and we should continue to identify ways in which socio-cultural, demographic, attitudinal, past experiences, and other variables can improve our descriptive and predictive capabilities.

Third, growth in the size of ethnic groups in the U.S. is a major force for change in the population and is having a significant effect on the customer base for leisure and recreation activities. Cohort-component projection models that include ethnic groups can provide estimates of the potential changes that may be experienced in recreation participation in the years ahead (e.g., Dwyer, 1994; Murdock, Backman, & Horque, 1991). Differences between groups that might appear small in past studies may be enlarged as the dynamics of the population shift, thus providing an early indication of the changes in store. Providing such an outlook is an important role for leisure researchers, who are responsible for assisting managers in anticipating and responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

Finally, like it or not we operate in an imperfect world where our research is often constrained by budgets and time schedules that limit our sampling designs. Just as the authors deleted African Americans and American Indians from their study due to small sample sizes, other researchers often necessarily collapse groups or recode individuals to form a larger ethnic category against which comparisons can be made. This is less than ideal, but like collapsing age into a smaller number of categories this can increase statistical power and make inter-group comparisons less conceptually complex to understand. I think the important message here is for researchers to

recognize and explain to their readers the limitations in such simplifications of reality. Along with this I think we also need to balance quantitative comparative studies with in-depth qualitative case studies of individual cultural units to understand leisure behaviors, experiences, and constraints of groups in their own terms. I would hazard to say that many leisure researchers studying race and ethnicity are well on their way to adopting such strategies, and if they have not yet done so, then Li and his colleagues provide an unambiguous message that they should start.

### Operationalizing Cultural Value

The authors' paper is billed as a critique of the use of ethnicity as a variable in leisure research. But it really does not address any of the historical/equity, perceptual/identity, or methodological/pragmatic issues raised above for which race-ethnicity as a category can serve an important function. Instead, they limit the concept of ethnicity to that of culture and cultural value. This is not what most leisure researchers have purposed their work on, and even if elements of cultural value are embedded within leisure research studies, their take on what this means is often quite different from Li et al.

The authors begin by mentioning Washburne's (1978) seminal paper on racial differences in participation among African Americans and whites in wildland recreation settings. This is an appropriate reference point for the discussion because many studies on leisure and ethnicity are expansions and extensions of this work. But the topic of race is dropped in the first paragraph, and the focus becomes one solely of ethnicity. This is at first given a broad definition and thorough discussion but then it, too, is narrowed in scope to focus only on culture. Culture is similarly discussed in an erudite fashion but then it is also delimited to issues of cultural value and defined in terms of abstract value orientations. The authors then go one step further by adopting Hofstede's (1980) four dimensions of national cultural value that were developed in the context of a business setting, using IBM employees of presumably upper middle class socioeconomic status. The four dimensions include power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.

Now I might be able to conceive how these cultural value orientations relate to participation in wildland outdoor recreation in Southern California, but if one were really interested in understanding racial → ethnic → cultural similarities and differences in this context, why would one want to choose such an abstract way in going about it? Because the scales have been validated in a cross-cultural context? The fact that this measure does not help differentiate between broad ethnic categories doesn't explain much to me about leisure and ethnicity. What, in fact, does this study have to do at all with leisure? Very little that I can see from the data they report for this paper, other than the fact that the participants happened to have filled out the survey while they were in a recreation setting.

In his recent book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah (2006) examines why cultures that often share the same moral values can differ so vociferously over particular customs and practices. This disconnect can come into play both between cultures, such as between Christian and Muslim nations in women's roles in society, as well as within cultures such as Americans' split on gay marriage. From a philosopher's viewpoint, Appiah explains how the ambiguity of language about centrally held values can lead to conflicts and disagreement when these values are brought down to the level of everyday action. In a similar way, I think Li et al.'s use of a broad-based measure of national cultural values is at a level of abstraction above the attitudes, preferences, perceptions, and behaviors that most often constitute questions of leisure and ethnicity.

It seems that if one really wanted to tap into the aspects of race → ethnicity → culture that are relevant to wildland outdoor recreation, one might begin by looking at picnic foods, group sizes and compositions, activities, areas where the individuals were raised, and other aspects that have been shown to be important to different groups' leisure activities (e.g., Carr and Williams, 1993; Hutchison, 1993; Woodard, 1988). Higher level values are also important, but here, too, I would start with dimensions developed within the context of recreation settings, such as the Recreation Experience Preference Scales developed by Driver and colleagues (e.g., Driver, Tinsley, and Manfredo, 1991) designed to measure the psychological benefits of leisure. In addressing a similar population to that of Li and his colleagues, Tierney, Dahl, and Chavez (1998) used a subset of Driver's scales to examine ethnic variations in wildland leisure participation among Los Angeles basin residents. In their study, Tierney and colleagues found that several of these motivations were rated significantly differently across African-American, Latino, Asian, and White sub-samples. For example, Latino respondents rated "being with my family," "being with friends," "learning about new culture or area," and "maintain ties with cultural roots" higher than other respondent groups. These may not technically be conceived as cultural values in the context of Hofstede's dimensions of national cultural value, but to me they have a much higher degree of salience in understanding ethnicity and leisure than do power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.

### Cultural Consensus

I appreciate the authors' quest to provide a definitive, empirical test of the validity of ethnicity as a variable in leisure research by applying Handwerker's (2001) procedures for determining cultural consensus. But just as I am uneasy about adopting Hofstede's measure of national cultural values to inform our understanding of leisure and ethnicity, I am also leery about placing too much faith in a single procedure of consensus in a single site-specific study in declaring whether or not a concept such as ethnicity is useful and valid in leisure research. As the authors point out, there have been many

studies and applications of cultural consensus analysis since Romney and his colleagues first laid out their theory (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986). But the authors also mention that adoption of the theory by scholars in anthropology and other fields is far from universal. In a *Current Anthropology* forum on "Theory in Anthropology—Culture as Consensus," Auger (1999) critiques Romney's (1999) cultural consensus methodology as promoting an idealistic portrayal of cultural knowledge as normative, shared, coherent, and stable, and argues for a realist approach that is explanatory and accounts for variability, change, and individual differences.

Although Li et al. seem to share the underlying tenets of cultural consensus upon which Romney et al.'s (1986) theory and Handwerker's (2001) procedures are built, their results align more closely with the poststructuralist "contra consensus" view that ethnicity is not a relevant variable for leisure research because their analysis shows a prodigious amount of within-group variation. But isn't this also the case with a lot of other variables we commonly deal with in leisure research? Gender is one such example where there is often as much within-group diversity as between-group diversity. Does that mean we should stop asking people their gender in surveys? The increased interest in gender-based studies in the leisure research literature seems to suggest otherwise.

Writing about the culture debate, Brumann's (1999) advice to anthropologists is to hang onto the concept of culture despite its inherent problems: "Confronted with this dilemma, I propose that we go on using the concept of culture, including the plural form, because of its practical advantages. We should do so in a responsible way, attentive to the specific audience and also to the problem of communicative economy" (p. S7). I suggest leisure researchers adopt the same qualified endorsement of ethnicity and other variables whose data don't always fit within received theoretical models and statistical cut-points. I don't see a problem with this as long as one understands and communicates the complexity of the concept and its limitations. I once again stress that there are other important historical, identity, and pragmatic reasons for using race/ethnicity as a variable in leisure research, and just because it fails to meet the single criterion of within-group homogeneity doesn't mean it can't provide useful information in other ways.

### Conclusion

A colleague of mine often used to lament that while socio-demographic data rarely accounted for more than 10% of the variation in recreation participation in his regression models, it was always the information that practitioners asked him about during his presentations. Speculating on why this was so, he felt that we as leisure researchers had told practitioners so many times that these data were important that we got them to believe it was so. I'm not so sure about his conclusion, nor am I sure about Li and his colleagues' conclusion with respect to ethnicity. As humans, I think it is our tendency to look for ourselves in the data and how we are similar to and

different from others. If we are aware of both the hazards and benefits of such a tendency, ethnicity and other demographic variables can be helpful, and taking the work of Li et al. as a cautionary reminder, can lead to a better understanding of leisure for all population groups of interest.

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