

Researcher and Advocate: Using Research to Promote Social Justice Change

Leisure Research Symposium

Jason Bocarro
Monika Stodolska
Co-Chairs

*“Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility
for each other’s welfare, social justice can never be attained.”*

—Helen Keller

The “so what” research question is sometimes the most difficult to answer. At a time of increasing academic pressures associated with the need to publish and generate external research funding we rarely step back and ponder what effect our work will have beyond the realm of an academic environment. How many lives will be affected and hopefully changed for the better based on what we do? Although the concept of translational research is becoming more valued in academic circles, many leisure and recreation departments struggle with how to recognize and incentivize this type of scholarship. Moreover, research that promotes social justice is often produced and disseminated in ways that are less than optimal to the goal of making a difference in the lives of individuals and communities we study (Moodie, 2009; Witt 2000). Despite these challenges, we argue that leisure scholars are in a unique position to generate new knowledge that can be used for advocacy and to promote social change.

Based on his extensive experience with the City Project, a nonprofit legal and policy advocacy organization, we chose Robert García to deliver the 2012 Butler Lecture. García has a strong track record of helping minority communities create urban parks and preserve public access to beaches and trails in Southern California. He has also helped diversify support for and access to state resource bonds, with unprecedented levels of support among minority and low-income communities and billions of dollars for urban parks. Throughout much of this work, García has relied extensively on research to help advocate for change. García’s talk, published in this special issue, describes ways in which research can be most useful

Jason Bocarro is an associate professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at North Carolina State University.

Monika Stodolska is a professor in the Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism at the University of Illinois.

Please address correspondence to Jason Bocarro, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, North Carolina State University, Box 8004 4012 D Biltmore Hall, Raleigh, NC, 919-513-8025, jnbocarro@ncsu.edu

for those working to promote social justice. The topic seemed particularly relevant this year as issues of social justice seemed to permeate the 2012 Leisure Research Symposium on many levels. From Robert García's Butler Lecture titled *Social justice and leisure: The usefulness and uselessness of research* to the special panel session on *Leisure research for social justice*, the growing emphasis on this concept in our field has been highlighted.

Stewart (2012) claimed that social justice research describes injustice and marginalization, explains dominance and oppression, and transforms participants and communities. In his call for a social justice agenda, Dustin (2011) argued:

We should neither shy away from speaking up and speaking out for people at the margins who are oppressed by social, cultural, political, and other injustices, nor should we shy away from speaking up and speaking out for the environment that is the ground of our being (...) It is time we adopt a more caring and connected attitude toward the world around us. It is time to replace our hubris with the humility that comes with acknowledging multiple ways of making sense out of life and multiple ways of believing, behaving, and being. (p. v)

The distinct but interrelated lines of inquiry that bring attention to the issues of power, inequality and privilege, and espouse social change for marginalized populations have been developing in the field of leisure research and allied disciplines. Such research has mainly focused on health disparities, growing minority populations, access to quality parks and other recreation environments, and quality of life among people of various age groups, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and ability levels (e.g., Allison, 2000; Arai & Kivel, 2009; Floyd & Johnson, 2002; Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997; Johnson & Delgado-Romero, 2012; Parry, 2012; Taylor, Floyd, Whitt-Glover, & Brooks, 2007; Trussell & Mair, 2010). These lines of inquiry are beginning to find a common voice under the umbrella of the social justice movement which has asserted a strong voice in the field of leisure research. The growing visibility of the social justice agenda has been exemplified through paradigmatic debates (Henderson, 2011; Parry, Johnson, & Stewart, in press), conference panel presentations (Stewart et al., 2012), special issues of journals (e.g., special issue of *Journal of Leisure Research* on Social and Environmental Justice to be published in 2014), edited volumes (Paisley & Dustin, 2011), and special symposia (e.g., 2012 International Symposium on *Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Working for Social and Environmental Justice through Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Leisure*). As our field enters into the second decade of the new millennium, issues that will need to be addressed by our research and practice appear to be mounting. The recent economic crisis that has affected many, but in particular those of marginalized status (Murdock, in press), the aging population, environmental concerns, and increasing minority groups, call for new methods of inquiry and repositioning of leisure research to make it best suited to address broader societal problems, eliminate injustices, and to work toward improvement of life for individuals and communities.

The issue of the relevancy of leisure research and its ability to make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable members of society are not new. Eighteen

years ago, Pedler (1995) argued for more action research focused on facilitating social change, thus ensuring the relevancy of leisure research. Witt (2000) and Shaw (2000), in a commentary on the relevancy of leisure research, argued that researchers' questions were of little consequence to most practitioners and had limited value and importance to both practitioners and academics from other disciplines. To overcome the issue of relevancy a number of strategies have been suggested (see Shaw, 2000; Witt, 2000; Moodie, 2009). The two strategies we would like to examine here are: (1) making research relevant to policy; and (2) engaging communities where the research is taking place.

Research is one of the classic policy change tools in that it can provide evidence of the impact of those changes (Schilling, Giles-Corti, & Sallis, 2009). However, researchers and policy makers tend to live in "different worlds" and often have few incentives for crossing boundaries. Goldstein (2009) provided an excellent template for researchers motivated by a desire to make their work more translatable. First, he argued, research questions should be developed locally and have policy relevance. Second, researchers need to recognize that policy makers want a reasonable policy solution that does not necessarily have to be predicated on a double-blind intervention study. As Moodie (2009) pointed out, "there is nothing more frustrating for policy makers to spend time reading through an article to find they are unable to understand it or that the only conclusion of a piece of research is that "we need more research"" (p. S34). Third, researchers need to learn how to develop a clear and concise message to tell their story. This could mean working with public relations firms or using alternate outlets to disseminate their results in combination with traditional academic journals. It would be erroneous to assume that just because research is published means it will be read and acted upon (Insall, 2009). Finally, Goldstein proposed being more strategic when disseminating research results. This involves disseminating results through a variety of channels in a timely manner. Moodie (2009) cautioned researchers to recognize that rigorous research may be ignored because it may not be of interest in the current political climate or it may be impractical politically or financially. He suggested researchers may have to extend their skills to include the art of diplomacy and the tactics of influence.

Researchers, particularly those interested in social justice/disparities research, also need to recognize that they have a moral obligation to engage the communities they are working with as part of the research process. Communities have become more wary of "helicopter research" where academics fly in, administer surveys or conduct interviews and leave never to be heard from again (Ferreira & Gendron, 2011). This has resulted in a proliferation over the past two decades in community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects where research questions are developed collaboratively with the community, and researchers serve as both "objective investigators" and active learners. CBPR's growing popularity and use is due to its potential to make meaningful contributions particularly in disenfranchised communities and population groups (O'Toole, Aaron, Chin, Horowitz, & Tyson, 2003). Furthermore, CBPR's potential has been recognized by federal funding agencies such as National Institutes of Health who have developed calls for projects utilizing this methodological approach. A number of other strategies that

can be used to make our research relevant have been described in Robert García's paper.

In his paper, García reminds us that although good research is usually necessary, it is seldom if ever sufficient, to achieve systemic change. He proposes six strategies that can make our research more relevant, particularly in addressing the challenge of people of color having unequal access to parks and recreation opportunities. Finally, García illustrates how The City Project, a nonprofit policy and legal advocacy organization, has used these strategies to seek equal access to parks, physical activity, and better health for all.

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