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Introduction to Papers from the Leisure Research Symposium

Leisure Research and the Legacy of George Daniel Butler

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In 2004, at the first George Butler Lecture, Dan Dustin (2004) provided a glimpse into the life of one of the field's pioneers, George Daniel Butler. For many of us who entered the field of parks and recreation over the last several decades, Butler's work, writing, and research remain less familiar. However, in a similar vein to Dustin, we wondered what George Butler would make of the current research presented at the Leisure Research Symposium. While our own experiences with the Leisure Research Symposium support the premise that it is inclusive, diverse, and rigorous, some of the research seems incongruent with NRPA's mission and mandate. How should the Leisure Research Symposium welcome speculative and cutting-edge research while embracing the reality that for research to be relevant to NRPA, it needs to inform practice and policy? This is a tired and in some ways, unproductive debate. However, it remains central as we continue to wrestle with the Leisure Research Symposium's fit and function within NRPA.

To this end, the 2012 Butler Lecture, given by Robert Garcia (2013), began a dialogue that was continued by this year's speaker, Dr. Vivian Tseng. Dr. Tseng, a vice president of the William T. Grant Foundation, specializes in the translation, application, and use of research evidence in policy and practice. This approach to research aligns well with Butler's vision, when he served as the Research Director at the National Recreation Association (the forerunner of NRPA). Much of Butler's research involved tackling applied problems and creating evidence-informed solutions to advocate for the structure, utility, and design of public parks and recreation programs. While Butler embodied a service ethic, he was also passionate about the role of public parks and recreation in addressing health and wellness. Ultimately, he worked to inform and improve the profession through research and evidence.

In her article, Tseng (2014) reminds us of three key avenues to better unite research, policy, and practice. To help readers connect these concepts to the field of Parks and Recreation, we have provided examples which further illustrate the usefulness and application of these approaches.

Creating Conditions for Integration of Evidence

Tseng (2014) described how researchers need to recognize that policymakers and practitioners do not use "research in isolation." Thus, however important we think research evidence and data are

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in guiding practice and policy, there are other types of evidence—political and financial realities and local data—that remain critical for policy and practice decisions. Putty and Wilkins (2011) refer to evidence as coming from three interrelated sources: research, experience, and context. In other words, the learned experience of practitioners in a specific context constitutes valued evidence that can be supported or refuted by research. Likewise, problems that research might inform can evolve from practical experience and contextual differences, not solely from past research.

Bridging between practice, policy, and research is not easy, but some have found a way. Consider some of our academic compatriots who smoothly transitioned to work in governmental agencies or nonprofits who now have direct expectations of translation and application of research. Having representatives in practice and policy settings who are intelligent consumers and internal advocates of research certainly facilitates integration.

Changing the ways we communicate our research findings to wider audiences remains crucial. However, the work involved in alternate forms of dissemination remains undervalued in most academic settings where impact factors and citation counts are commonly discussed in tenure and promotion decisions. Impact on policy or practice, while valued, remains more difficult to quantify–especially as promotion materials are reviewed by scholars from a diverse array of academic disciplines.

How can we increase the probability that research will be used? By creating palatable research summaries that are tailored for either practitioners, policy makers, or both. Consider Active Living Research's efforts to provide policy maker with research sound bites supporting the role of parks and recreation in promoting physical activity (Figure 1). Messaging, such as this example, creates a condition where research evidence can be more easily integrated with political and financial realities and local data to inform policy decisions.

Two-Way Streets for Learning

Policy and practice can and should inform research. One common way this manifests in our field is through prolific scholars who remain centrally connected to the applied roots of

Figure 1. **An Alternate Model of Translating Research**

parks and recreation. In many cases, they are able to morph applied grants and contracts into top caliber scholarship by artfully adjusting the study design so that it can both inform the specific problem of interest but also can be situated in a wider theoretical frame. Many successful park and recreation researchers, including most of the NRPA Roosevelt Excellence in Research awardees, have spent a notable amount of their careers leveraging modestly funded projects into applied technical reports as well as respected journal publications.

Another mechanism to facilitate two-way streets for learning is through Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR has gained increasing traction in social science research (e.g., NIH is currently funding CBPR initiatives) as it is seen as a conduit to new ways of approaching epistemology to increase knowledge of complex community issues while contributing to social change (Hutchinson & Lord, 2012. CBPR has several essential components that facilitate the two way street for learning. These include being community situated, of practical relevance, collaborative (with community members partners in the research process), and with the results being useful to and shared with the community (Hutchinson & Lord). Research questions originate from genuine problems of practice. To address the issue of "helicopter researchers" where academics fly in, administer surveys or conduct interviews and leave never to be heard from, a proliferation of community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects has emerged (Bocarro & Stoldolska, 2013). There are numerous notable examples within leisure studies (e.g., Arai & Pedlar, 1997; Glover & Bates, 2006; Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013; Parry & Glover, 2010; Shinew, Mowatt, & Glover, 2007).

Build Relationships and Trust

To achieve the first two goals, Tseng (2014) emphasized the importance of developing relationships and trust. Trust is not built quickly. Trial projects and relationship building are often necessary for all parties. However, these relationships allow research to be both better and more applicable. Much has been written about issues of collaboration and trust with agencies and communities (see Garcia, 2013); Henderson, 2000; Hutchinson & Lord, 2012).

Recognizing that relationships are made up at an individual level, Witt (2003) described strategies that led to a successful long term relationship with the Dallas/Fort Worth School District that lasted for over a decade. He later described how his success lay in understanding that the community and agency partners have many different needs, some of which will emerge after a project begins. For example, in one case he was charged with doing an evaluation of afterschool programs when one of the school's principals asked him to do an impromptu presentation to the school district's superintendent. They consistently adjusted the project's timeline and he accommodated these requests (Witt, 2013, personal communication). While these expectations exceeded the agreed contract, the goodwill that this flexibility generated facilitated this long term relationship and forged a foundation of trust.

Long-term collaborative partnerships break down the dichotomy between research and practice. Practitioners and policy makers trust the researchers and view them as internal rather than external assets. Researchers are typically aware of a study's major weaknesses and limitations and are well positioned to help in the interpretation, translation, and use of the findings. Likewise, through true joint commitment, researchers can count on their partners to be accommodating with the inevitable research hassles and to accept that findings sometimes lead to more questions rather than straightforward answers.

Acquiring, Interpreting, and Using Research Differently

Ultimately, the crux of the problem lies with the poorly aligned needs of practitioners, policy makers, and academic scholars. Practitioners value research and data that informs decisions and answers questions. They do not usually want more questions, convoluted answers, data that is several years (or decades) old, or conclusions with innumerable caveats of "it depends." Policy makers likewise use research and data to inform their decisions. However, they sometimes want research sound bites that fit into a rhetorical argument that allows them to advocate for a position that is mostly supported by other forms of evidence. In contrast, academic researchers need to publish to gain tenure, promotion, and to succeed in an academic environment. Academic researchers enjoy discoveries that lead to new questions and ways of thinking about a topic. They are typically comfortable with the ill-structured conclusions a study may produce. Science is viewed as a process rather than a product. In short, research has many purposes, forms, and products; only some of these directly align with application. These are different views of research and also result in different dissemination options.

Academic publishing is likely to change in both form and function over the next few decades (cf., Eisen, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2011). Our current model is seriously outdated and remains largely unchanged despite upheaval and overhaul of most nonacademic media. Academic researchers have historically written primarily for other academic researchers. Slicing and dicing a study into 15 different journal articles may help one get tenured and promoted but it won't improve practice.

Given the proliferation of dissemination options, it is curious that academic models still prioritize peer reviewed publications in cloistered academic journals. While it is currently unclear how this change will unfold, it is likely that the current model will have to change if academic research is to be more easily accessed and used by practitioners and policy makers. This will necessitate continued dialog at major research institutions regarding how to best assess the intellectual contributions of their scholars. While it is easy for lay users to assess movies, restaurants, and hotels, most research is too complex to be adequately vetted by the masses. Nonetheless, the current review and publication process is lengthy and does not help users and consumers of research to locate and use research studies, many of which are "locked away" via paid access.

These realities of academic research make it difficult for access, understanding, and use. Technical reports, association white papers, popular press books and magazines, ted.com videos, conference speakers, and even blogs are increasingly expected to interpret and distill disparate research into a palatable package. In fact, finding and interpreting relevant research is currently so challenging that it remains a focus of most graduate programs. If only graduate students in parks, recreation, or leisure studies are adequately prepared to consume and use our research, we cannot expect widespread interest.

While many academic scholars philosophically agree with the idea of publishing for multiple audiences (other researchers, policy makers, practitioners), the inherent academic bias toward peer reviewed publications creates an operational and philosophical divide. Likewise, practitioners who are conducting high quality research have little incentive to publish in academic journals or to subject their scholarship to the scrutiny of a formal peer review. Hopefully, as media changes, these dual publishing tracks will converge.

Conclusion

To do George Butler justice, we need to value a diversity of research but also understand how research will be used (or not used)—how it will be useful or useless—to the field. Applied

publications and technical reports that actually inform problems are too specific for academic tastes and this specificity make their application beyond the original context (i.e., the generalizability) questionable. Today's scholars often produce scholarship because it is expected of them by virtue of their academic position and not because it is necessary for the field. Scholars are often more concerned with following passions, interests, and money than actually making a difference. More concerned with output (quantity) than quality and more concerned with impact factor and recognition by other academics than by actual impact, utility, and necessity of the research. The insistence on publication in top-tiered academic journals makes the research inaccessible (hard to access, read, and understand) and not very timely (years after the actual data were collected). Would George Butler be granted tenure at a research extensive university today? Or, would his promotion and tenure review committees deride his research and publications as too atheoretical and practical?

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