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Just Spaces

Urban Recreation Centers as Sites for Social Justice Youth Development

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Abstract

Using a social justice youth development (SJYD) framework, this paper explored how urban recreation centers function as "just spaces" for youth and their communities. Utilizing evidence from a photovoice project, a method in which photographs were taken to visually depict the performance of *hope*, this article examined the experiences of a single case, Sara. Drawing upon Sara's experiences, we examined the importance of recreational spaces in facilitating critical components of SJYD. Findings suggest centers, such as the YMCA, become important islands of hope for marginalized youth and it is imperative leisure scholars and policymakers recognize this critical link. Additional research is needed to understand how these spaces assist youth in responding to larger political and economic forces in their communities.

Keywords: *social justice; youth development; photovoice*

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Adorned in mesh shorts and a camp t-shirt, Sara,[1] *as if entering her own personal living room, offered me*[2] *a seat in the foyer of the YMCA. Affectionately referred to as her home, Sara grew up in this YMCA. Now, this urban-based recreation center was where she worked as a pre-school teacher and a camp counselor.*

It was Sara's lunch break, and the foyer was the most comfortable and convenient space to conduct the interview I requested a few weeks earlier. As she sat, slight familiarity and a smile crossed Sara's face as she remembered her first interview with me, five years before. At our first meeting, Sara was a senior in high school in an urban community in the south central United States. Now, Sara was a 22-year-old student in college, majoring in Education and striving to make a positive impact on the life of her family and the economically oppressed community she grew up in.

Sara's aspirations of teaching in this urban community in the South were inspired by her own experiences in this community recreational space. Teaching children in her community, at her "Y," was not merely a job, but was Sara's complex response to social injustices around her. The YMCA had given her hope for the future, amidst challenges and abandonment in her childhood; now Sara was a part of responding to the needs of the community by providing that same sense of dignity and value for others that she was provided.

With population numbers in urban areas steadily rising and a widening income achievement gap (Reardon, 2013), Clark's (1989) notion that social scientists "must confront and seek to understand the dynamics of social action and social change" is critical to explore within urban milieus (p. xxxv). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 250 million or more than 80% of the U.S. population lived in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In addition, nearly 33% of households in urban areas had one or more children under the age of 18 years, and 24% were below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). Furthermore, the percentage of non-Hispanic White children has decreased steadily since 1994, and Census figures predict that by 2019 the majority of children will be children of color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). In light of these figures, leisure scholars need to examine why access matters in urban areas, as well as the importance of young people's affordable and sustained access to leisure experiences in socioeconomically oppressed environments.

In urban areas, access to community structures that provide community cohesion and places for recreation is a social justice issue (Arai & Pedlar, 2003). As Parry, Johnson, and Stewart (2013) suggested, "leisure is a context where people can create changes that may bring about a more socially just world, and the research we conduct brings visibility to these efforts" (p. 83). Over the past two decades, leisure scholars have taken a keen interest in social justice (Allison, 2000; Crompton & Wicks, 1988; Henderson, 1996, 1997, 2008; Mowatt, Arai, & Kivel 2009; Parry et al., 2013; Roberts, 2009; Yuen, Pedlar, Arai, & Kivel 2009). In addition, leisure scholars have a history of recognizing the need for diverse methodologies (Bowling 2002; Henderson, 1988) and varied epistemological and theoretical frameworks (Floyd, 1998; Mowatt, French, Malebranche, 2013; Shinew, Floyd, McGuire, & Noe, 1995) in exploring the meaning of leisure in marginalized groups. Nevertheless, despite more than 50 years of research, in a multitude of disciplines, the impact and the devastation associated with lack of *access to* and *equity in* leisure spaces continues to be an issue (Cohen et al., 2013; Vaughan et al., 2013).

[1]Attempting to keep as closely aligned with the participatory aspects of this research study, the pseudonym was chosen by the participant referred to as a "co-constructor" in this study.

[2]First-person singular references refer to accounts made by Kelly Pryor, the primary author.

In response to the call for this special issue of the *Journal of Leisure Research* on social justice, this paper explored the role of social justice youth development (SJYD) as a framework. Through the story of one young woman's access to and experiences in her local YMCA, we discuss how accessing functional and funded recreational facilities, which provide safe nurturing environments, can promote two critical components of SJYD, *self-awareness* and *critical consciousness.*[3] By asking critical questions about the leisure experiences of marginalized populations within urban communities in the U.S., this study begins to tackle the importance of identity, access to spaces, and social justice—critical junctures to developing hope.

Through Sara's eyes, we examined the relationship between recreational spaces and the powerful development of hope in marginalized youth in urban areas. *What makes access to these sites/spaces critical to the social justice movement? How is critical consciousness developed among young people who access and participate in programs at urban recreation centers? What are the personal and social consequences for youth when urban communities lack these critical "just spaces?"*

Although Sara's story is not generalizable to an entire population of urban youth, this single case, as McCormick (1996) described, enhances our ability to render an intimate emic understanding of the phenomenon under study. Moving beyond a simple understanding of places is important for youth identity development. As Henderson and King (1999) suggested, we must have a greater understanding of why and how these spaces are important. Furthermore, our methodological and epistemological stance of focusing on the individual voice is reflected in this article by the use of first person voice and narrative. The "I" denotes the thoughts or data collection conducted by the primary author, while "we" indicates the participation of the second author.

We begin this paper with a discussion of SJYD as a framework for studying leisure experiences and the impact of recreational spaces on youth in an increasingly changing, challenging, and complex global society. In reviewing literature on material space of leisure and social life exchanged through symbolic forms, we discuss the importance of spaces as symbolic resistance at the individual and community level. We then present an overview of a participatory methodology, *photovoice*, as a way to assist in understanding complex facets of oppression in a participant's experience. Next, we present a profile of Sara and three key findings from the data she presented that were instrumental in examining the SJYD framework. Finally, we conclude our manuscript by unpacking the implied ways that recreational centers can be critical sites and spaces for social justice awareness and development in youth.

Background

Power relationships exist over and within spaces. For many, power relationships are not just global or national political boundaries, but function as economic and social boundaries that ensure daily practices are understood and linked to greater levels of injustice and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1977). Grounding our study in a SJYD framework, we begin with a discussion of the utility of this frame for studying urban youth in leisure research and their experiences in spaces that might have power over them.

[3]This concept of critical consciousness is referred to by education philosopher Paulo Freire and is premised on authentic reflection transformed into action. For more detailed analysis of critical consciousness see (Freire, 1973).

SJYD: A Theoretical Framework for Deconstructing Power

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) asserted that SJYD views young people as critical agents of their individual and community transformation. Utilizing concepts of critical consciousness proposed by Freire (1973), the SJYD model is focused on the interplay between critical consciousness and action. In the SJYD model, individuals have the ability to reflect and act upon the world in order to transform it. In particular, this model is focused on youth developing a critical consciousness regarding the foundation of social injustices in their community. As Ginwright and Cammarota suggested:

> The lives of urban youth are conceptualized within the terrain of the changing political, economic, and social landscape where they and their families struggle for economic survival, sustainability, and mobility. A recognition of how urban youth define, negotiate, and struggle for their identities in oppressive environments. An exploration of how they, with an awareness of social justice respond to forces that deem them powerless, develop a sophisticated knowledge of the root causes of social problems, and generate unique ways to contend with the larger political forces. (p. 83)

Rhetorical myths of individual delinquencies and pathologies of urban communities impact the everyday lives of urban youth of color. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) suggested that SJYD is more suitable for examining the "complex social, economic, and political forces" that impact urban youth than other frameworks (p. 82). Promoting the ability to deconstruct and disentangle political and social forces of oppression, this framework goes beyond the often accepted youth development approaches that have largely ignored urban youth of color (Ginwright & James, 2002).

The three-pronged SJYD model described by Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) emphasizes critical consciousness and spatiality as pertinent to SJYD. The first level, *awareness of self,* provides the foundation for a critical understanding of how social forces shape multiple identities in the realm of race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, self-awareness is not just focused on oneself but the understanding and acknowledgement of its connection to power relationships. The second level focuses on the awareness of the *community* and the economic and social conditions that shape inequality within the community. This level promotes the analysis of critical issues in the community and how it may impede healthy youth development. This critical awareness provides youth with the empowerment to pursue just causes for themselves and others in their community. The final level, *awareness of others,* in the global as well as local struggle, enables youth to critically understand and connect with the struggle that those around them encounter against power. In addition, this level encourages collective action and involving oneself in strategies that challenge and change inequities due to power relationships on the individual and community level.

Social justice and hope become inextricably linked in the SJYD framework (Ginwright, 2010). Kelly (2013) found that for some young women the definition of hope was the ability to recognize and respond to social justice issues. The ability of practitioners and youth to conceptualize, recognize and explore the multifaceted challenges urban youth negotiate and challenge, promote the development of hope (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). In turn, understanding the complexity of the challenges leads to joining others in social action and change. Likewise, Ginwright and James (2002) suggested SJYD is "a model for building not only strong democratic processes, but also healthier communities and supportive environments for youth" (p. 28). Asserting that daily life is rooted in space and place, Akom, Cammarota and Ginwright (2008) built on SJYD to emphasize that recreational spaces, along with neighborhood

organizations and churches, often "serve as vital sources for the production of social capital for Black and Latina/o youth and their communities" (p. 10). In addition, these neighborhood-based organizations, particularly in Black communities provide pathways to hope, which are significant indicators of civic engagement and social change (Ginwright, 2011).

Literature Review

Material Spaces of Place and Power

Foucault (1975) asserted that space is "fundamental in any exercise of power" (p. 252). The perception of control is so ingrained that it becomes a living embodiment where struggles for control are waged. These power struggles may take the form of negative construction, but also has the ability to produce possibilities for agency through the production of power. As Foucault explained, power permeates the spatial boundaries to produce and embed institutional patterns and social practices and yet still allows for moments of resistance.

Social life of marginalized voices provide an example of the material space of place and power (Massey, 1996). Marginal voices matter when we examine how the discourses surrounding place and justice are developed. Discourses are developed and taken up by individuals that make meaning of them in varying contexts in which they operate. Discourses can take on material and symbolic meanings by illustrating what is knowledge and what is not knowledge and who has and does not have power. In a space such as a community center, this can take the form of rules and practices that dictate what can be said and done within the boundaries of the space. The boundaries surrounding conduct is further shown in discourses around participation (Cornwall, 2002). Cornwall emphasized that those in power also have the ability to define spatial boundaries around participation by the positions that are ascribed to participants (i.e., clients and users).

Discourse limits the level of engagement and shapes the activities associated with the space (Cornwall, 2002). The production of space by the powerful are discursively bound to allow limited influence outside of the power group, regulates relations, and curtails opposition. Despite the fact that space may be produced and bounded by those in power, spaces also can be utilized as possibilities for subversion, appropriation and reconstitution due to perceived power inequities (Cornwall, 2002). The ability of spaces to be transformed from their original purpose is a constant change that moves between dominance and resistance and can be seen in the history of recreation centers in the U.S.

Social Life Exchanged Through Material Space of Recreation Centers

Community centers were originally created to provide services to their community residents in order to enhance public good. Witt and Caldwell (2010) suggested that the primary focus of many urban areas was to provide recreation access to the massive immigration influx and the high number of children who were left to play in the streets while parents worked in the factories. These public service institutions, originally created by social activists (i.e., Jane Addams and Jacob Riis) during the Industrial Era, were developed to shape civic involvement, moral development, and general community cohesion. Leisure and recreation activities served as a viable path to not only improve the social conditions of the community, but also to uplift its residents.

For marginalized populations in the U.S., recreation centers have also historically served as spaces to enhance cultural identity and awareness. Gouveia's (1994) historical account of American Indian women's role in World War II detailed how "Indian organizations and recreation centers in urban areas aided the retention of Indian identity" (p. 154). In his 1965 study of pre-

dominantly African American urban neighborhoods, Clark (1989) discussed the importance of recreational facilities for black neighborhoods' economic and social renewal. Clark also insisted on a critical analysis of the social control and power inherent in the lack of providing adequate facilities, such as recreation centers, in marginalized communities. Nevertheless, we also recognize that despite the virtuous beginnings of recreation centers and their ability to celebrate cultural identity and awareness, community centers were also used to promote social compliance and undermine the cultural perspectives of participants (Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2009; Glover, 2003; Katz & Kirby, 1991; Taylor, 1999).

Spaces and Places as Symbolic Resistance to Power

The role of power to be productive or enabling has important implications for understanding resistance. Resistance is often viewed as a "struggle" against power structures, but it can also provide creative expression in the production of that resistance. As a result, places that are utilized as sites of resistance become spaces for individuals and communities to develop agency and expression. This allows marginalized voices a location in which everyday experiences and practices are visible and serve as sites of resistance to the power structures and discourse processes in place. This view also enables resistance discourse to expand by representing the creative and nuanced ways in which marginalized voices engage in power and resistance.

Using a critical youth studies approach, some leisure scholars and cultural geographers have explored the idea of spatiality as both abstract and concrete within the youth context (Lashua & Kelly, 2008; Valentine, Skelton, & Chambers, 1998). Recognizing the unique experiences of young people and the spaces they carve out for themselves, Valentine et al. (1998) bridged over four decades of work from scholars focusing on the spatiality of youth culture and findings suggested the spaces and places young people interact with everyday impact their socio-cultural and cognitive well-being. As Breitbart (1998) noted, spaces and sites of resistance are beneficial to developing one's personal identity as well as social transformation. Skelton and Valentine (1998) further asserted that these places are "sites of resistance" because they allow young people to assert meaningful identities.

Local environments exert power and influence over youth. As Breitbart (1998) claimed, the power the built environment has on "young people's expressions of hope or frustration" should not be underestimated (p. 308). Youth are aware of the dangers of neighborhoods that have inadequate provisions and appreciate the "opportunities that safe spaces, with ample resources, provide" (p. 308). Nevertheless, youth draw upon local and international signs, symbols, and motifs to connect with peers, adults, ideas, experiences, and activities that address pressing social and community problems ignored by social scientists and mainstream media outlets (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Nayak, 2003).

Youth agencies and urban recreation centers are often at the helm of providing such spaces for youth to create landscapes or spaces of their own for community change (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008). According to Akom et al., these recreation spaces, along with neighborhoods and churches, often "serve as vital sources for the production of social capital for Black and Latina/o youth and their communities" (p. 10). In addition, Akom et al. stated that relying on individual and organizational processes these spaces provide, help young people engage in "real world issues that shape their daily lives such as environmental racism, police brutality, school safety, school closure, tracking, and racial profiling" (p. 10). The importance of space within a local milieu for youth to find nurturing environments that allow them to tackle social issues is a critical element to SJYD and their development of hope.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of social justice youth development (SJYD) through the journey of one young woman's relationship with her local YMCA. Through using visual and narrative methodologies, we provide more insight into the literature of marginalized youth and the use of recreational spaces. We present two critical components of SJYD, self-awareness and critical consciousness in order to tackle the interrelationships between and the importance of racial/ethnic identity, access to recreational centers as a leisure space, and social justice in the development of marginalized youth.

Methodology

Kelly (1981) noted that "there is no single method that can begin to encompass, much less exhaust, a complex phenomenon as leisure" (p. 312). Leisure research, engaged in exploring the phenomenon of social justice, must continue to explore emergent and arts-based methods for individuals to discuss complex topics and provide greater understanding about social justice leisure research. This study utilized photovoice, an arts-based method that relies on individuals documenting their lives through the use of cameras (Mitchell & Allnut, 2008), as an attempt to capture the complexity in socio-emotional identity and subsequently leisure practices. Photovoice is a critical consciousness raising participatory action research method that engages participants, often marginalized, in the research process. By entrusting cameras to participants, researchers further engage participants in the process by enabling them to act as recorders of their experiences and provide discussion about the pictures as potential catalysts for change, in their own communities (Wang & Burris, 1997).

In addition to utilizing photovoice, a method advancing the way in which we carry out social justice leisure research, this study also presents the experiences of a single case, Sara, the co-constructor of our knowledge on this topic. As McCormick (1996) stated, "by examining the individual, we are able to see the social networks in which the case is embedded and how these complex ties may facilitate or hinder social action" (p. 367). Using information from one case, that was a part of a larger study, also helps to demonstrate how the intersection of multiple identity categories may contribute to systematic injustice and social inequality.[4] For this paper we primarily focus on the larger study's photovoice interviewing protocol, Sara's key findings, and our analysis and implications of those photographs and accompanying stories.

Selecting Sara

In 2007, I conducted an independent project on the ethnic and gender identity development of nearly 200 young women of African descent throughout the U.S. entitled the HerDentity Project (HerDentity). Consistent throughout multiple narratives of the young women who participated in HerDentity were themes of *hope*—for themselves, their communities, and the world at large. As a youth development scholar, I was interested in where did this hope come from for young women of color? What were the perception, performance, and portrayal of hope in the lives of these young women five years later?

In 2012, as a result of the aforementioned questions and starting my doctoral research, I decided to explore those questions by gathering definitions and photographs of *hope* for the larger study from which this paper derives. Twelve young women between 21 to 25 years old, ethnically self-identified as Black or African-American, born in the U.S., and participated in the HerDentity Project in 2007–2008, participated in co-constructing a definition of hope. Sara was one of the 12 co-constructors from the larger study from which this data derives.

[4]A more comprehensive discussion of intersectionality and the matrix of domination can be found in the work of Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins.

Sara was chosen as the single case for this article because her photographic data provided a richness and depth to the social structure of community recreation centers that should be fully explored. This data provided complex information on Sara's life over time; narrative and photographic analysis could possibly reveal further themes that were not teased out for the larger study. As McCormick (1996) indicated, Sara's information could permit the illustration of confirming or disconfirming the SJYD framework in a recreational center.

Data Collection

During May 2012 to October 2012, I conducted two semistructured interviews with Sara that I recorded, transcribed and labeled as Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the interview data. These interviews were conducted at a place of Sara's choosing. For each interview, the local YMCA where Sara was employed at the time of the interviews was chosen as the interview site.

During Phase 1 the semistructured interview protocol asked Sara about the performance, perception and portrayal of hope in her home, her community, even in her culture. In this interview I asked Sara to not only define what *hope* was for her, but what it looked like, and how her definition of hope impacted her personal story.

Between Phase1 and Phase 2 Sara had the opportunity to use a digital camera to take pictures of where she saw hope. During the Phase 2 interview Sara was asked to share photos she had taken between Phase 1 and 2 and to share stories and interpret the meaning of the photo in terms of why it represented *hope*. Sara was then invited to give each photo a title and provide any further information about why that particular name was chosen. Finally, Sara had the opportunity to submit photographs for inclusion and reproduction in the project but was also provided the option of withholding any or all of the photos. Through written consent, Sara willingly provided a complete set of her five photos shared during Phase 2.

Data Analysis

Four steps of analysis, using the narrative and performance approach, were useful for the analysis of the interviews and Sara's photographic data. In keeping with the performance and narrative aspects of this study we analyzed pictures not only for their individual aspects but as a part of the narrative whole in which they were presented so we could develop a more emic intimate understanding of Sara's lived experience in her community and in this space that represented her community. In the first step, photos from Phase 2 were numbered in the order they were presented in the narrative. In keeping with the performance and narrative analysis, Madison (2008) employed the use of the *narrated* event and the *narrative* event. To clarify and honor the significance of the story, this analysis followed Madison's method and examined the telling and told. Second, photos were bracketed with their accompanying stories, individually analyzed and given a theme based on the narrative analysis. Third, once each photo received a theme, the entire photovoice narrative was assigned a theme that describes the content of the entire data set. Finally, narrative data and themes from Phase 1 were extracted to provide a final layer of contextual analysis for how the data related to the phenomenon under study.

Sara's Findings

Raised by a paternal grandmother in one of the most populous southern metropolitan areas, Sara was a 22-year-old first-generation college student. Describing a tumultuous relationship with her mother, Sara indicated that because her mother was in and out of her life, her brother and herself were "taken in" by her grandmother. Although her father dropped out of middle school and most family members had not graduated high school or had barely graduated, she was happy to say that she graduated in the top 10% of her class and was now majoring in Education while teaching pre-school at the YMCA.

"Never pregnant and still in college," Sara said with strong conviction and vigor during Phase 1. Although frustrated by mounting tuition and school fees and the inability to get the proper financial aid, Sara lamented that school had taken her a lot longer than "normal," but she refused to give up. With a strong belief that if she gave up, the family watching her would also give up, Sara was determined to continue to break what she referred to as "generational curses," where all the children "get pregnant at 13 or 14" and drop out of high school.

In Sara's predominately African American and Hispanic community, the median household income was $20,892 (U.S. Census, 2011a). Experiencing some of the most extreme rates of poverty in the country, some reports revealed one of every two residents were living in poverty. The highest rates of poverty, nearly 90%, were among married couples with children under 5 years. When nearly 30% of the population had less than a high school diploma and only about 15% had an associates, bachelor's or professional degree, graduating from high school and attending college was a staggering accomplishment (U.S. Census Data, 2011a). Nevertheless, despite negative press and bleak statistics, this was the community that Sara was from, and it was in the community-based YMCA that Sara found hope and a way to respond to the injustices around her.

Presenting a stirring narrative of where the home, work, recreational, and educational spaces in her life overlap, Sara discussed a series of five pictures, four of which were taken at the place that she referred to as her "second home," the local YMCA. In the following narrative, Sara expressed how her interaction with the recreational facility persisted from the time when she was a child into her early adulthood.

> When I was a little, I always decided that I would be a counselor. When I was little, I always loved my counselors. I always liked the positive attitudes and how they impacted my life when I was a child because my mother wasn't always there for me so I was either up here or at my grandmother's house, so just being up here and having someone to communicate with and help you with stuff and homework and stuff that your mother can't help you with because she's out and about you know. I love it because it's family oriented and it's like your second family, and I feel the same way right now. That's why I love working at this job. So that's what made me want to come back and I saw how it impacted my life so I wanted to do the same for others. (Sara, 22)

In addition to the narrative of family and home through the YMCA, the four pictures Sara presented provided a visual glimpse into her narrative of justice. The order of which the photographs were presented was a performance and created meaning and implications for this study. The key theme of Sara's critical consciousness and deepening awareness to her community and cultural identity was perseverance and faith, in spite of economic, racial, and gender marginalization that deemed her powerless.

Demonstrating through her photovoice narrative how recreational facilities function as a "just space," Sara presents three key themes regarding the importance of youth access and participation in urban recreation centers. First, Sara at many times entering her adult years felt overwhelmed and challenged by external forces, but learned agency and transformation in the YMCA. Second, Sara was desperately and unapologetically committed to achieving her dreams and was aware of the path that it would take for her to accomplish the goals. Third, Sara revealed the key theme of social action and was committed to transforming the powerlessness and hopelessness in her family and community that persisted for generations. We explored each of these three themes below.

Theme 1: Agency and Transformation

As anticipated, the YMCA was a place in which Sara was able to become self-aware and learn positive skills that would give her a sense of self-efficacy and agency. What was not expected was how Sara visually depicted and discussed the self-efficacy and the will power she gained from this space. In Figure 1, entitled **"A Leap of Faith,"** Sara clearly represents the space of her own agency and transformation through the story about the first time she learned to swim:

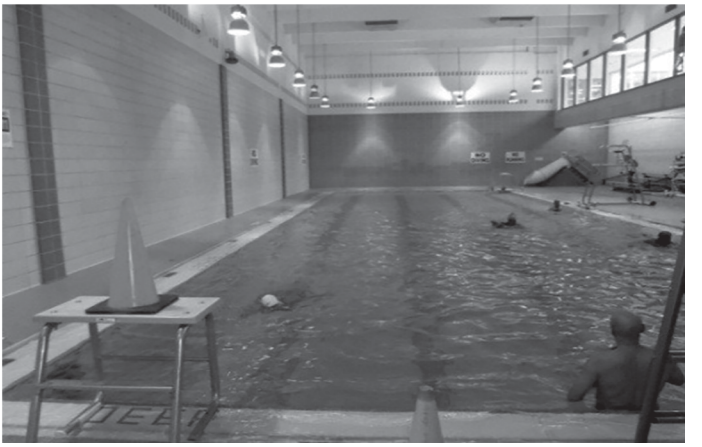

Figure 1. Sara's "A Leap of Faith" illustrating her development of agency and transformation the first time she learned to swim.

This is taken here.
I grew up at the Y when I was little.
This is where I used to come after school and in the summer
And throughout the summers when I was little I never did learn how to swim
But when I started working up here my friend, he taught me how to swim And he taught me how to swim by pushing me in off the diving board
Yes!
And he was like "I want to see if you can make it back up to the top on your own"
And to me I feel that is hope
Because hope is like believing and a positive outlook on what you think a positive outcome and the positive outcome was that I made it back up.
And to me that symbolizes a leap of faith and making my way back up to the top even though I may go under.

Not only is the pool a literal representation of Sara's *hope* in being able to make it to the top, but it also figuratively situates her space of *hope* in the present time. Sara works through obstacles that confront her in the present moment with school, finances, and family, and the pool becomes a constant reminder that she can make it up to the top of her difficult situations. Individual agency and the belief that she can transform challenges into triumphs is a key theme of importance in understanding Sara's experiences at the YMCA.

In this first theme Sara is aware of her individual and familial struggle for economic survival, sustainability, and mobility. It is through this awareness that she leans on the social support network found in the Y and the personal agency she has been able to create there. Although the YMCA is a recreational space, it also becomes a place of *hope* that has taught Sara how to build confidence for resistance. The pool provides a strong link between how Sara represents *hope* and leisure. Sara's leisure space becomes not merely a space for recreation but beneficial for building social supports and networks (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Sara associated this agency with the belief that she could do the impossible and transform negative situations within her own life and her community.

Theme 2: Commitment to the Transformation

In theme 1, Sara was able to take a leap of faith with a firm social support network found in her "Y family." In pictures presented in theme 2, Sara depicts having a critical awareness of her commitment to taking action to improve her individual situation. In theme 2, Sara depicted a commitment to transformational change and discussed how she learned those lessons at her local YMCA. Highlighting her individual act of agency, Sara discussed strong commitments to move forward in her life and strive towards her goals throughout her pictures. Although she faced constraints beyond her control, the YMCA was a place that encouraged her to maintain self-esteem, confidence, and her faith despite obstacles. From engaging in physical activities that gave her a sense of "passion," to developing a critical awareness of the oppression facing her community, Sara indicated a strong desire to commit to her community and its transformation.

In this theme Sara describe two photos she entitled, "Dance to My Dream," and "Life is an Open Gym." In Figure 2, two spaces within the YMCA were critical to the development of her physical and emotional health.

Figure 2. "Dance to My Dream" and "Life is an Open Gym" represent Sara's commitment to her physical and emotional health.

In the first picture of the dance room Sara describes:

I was shy,
I was overweight,
and I was insecure about myself,
and that [learning dance] gave me a sense of want.
It helped me to learn that it doesn't matter about your size,
it's about the dream and passion that you have.
And now I'm teaching dance

In the second theme, Sara depicts how she had to define and negotiate her identity for herself, despite growing up in an oppressive environment. Developing the skills necessary in physical and mental health through participation in the urban recreation center, Sara has begun to define herself for herself, despite how others judged her due to outward appearances in the past. Reiterating her low self-esteem as a child in the picture of the gym, Sara recalls the boost she received when she was able to learn sports and compete with other children in other YMCAs around the city. For Sara, her insecurity was turned into a space to be "silly" and "creative," developing a "passion" for health and wellness that now extends beyond the YMCA of her childhood. In the development of these skills at the YMCA, Sara has learned to let go of her frustrations, let go of outward appearances and let go of what others think about her. As Sara says you have to "get out there and play the games of life and do your best, you have to hope for the best." What is important to underscore is that Sara's path to her goals and dreams is not easy, but serves as the critical element in defining her hope and overcoming a sense of powerlessness.

Theme 3: Action toward Others

Faith and spirituality play a large role in Sara's narrative as depicted in her final picture in Figure 3, entitled "Open the Doors to Faith," Sara hones in on her exploration of how she can contribute to a community that has to respond to socio-political and economic forces that deem the community powerless and inadequate.

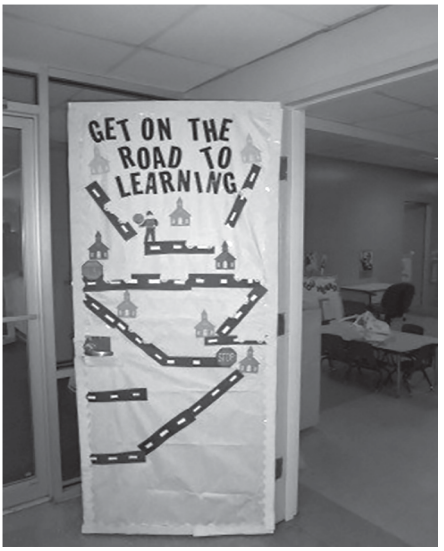

Figure 3. "Open the Door to Faith" illustrates Sara's pre-school classroom door and the hope for social action.

Figure 3 is a picture Sara shows of her classroom door that her pre-school students enter every day of the school year. When asked why that represented hope, Sara responds:

I could have been where I was at the other center, making more money working with children that were Caucasian, Arabian, Hispanic, and all that kind of stuff, but I decided to come here because I felt there was a need here and who better to help than someone who is from here.

Entitling Figure 3 "Open the Doors to Faith," Sara continues to reflect on how she is able to turn her disappointments of not being able to attend college for the semester into action towardher community.

I am not able to go to school this semester
but the positive thing is that I have mo re time to create curriculum and come up with better ideas to enhance the programs here at the Y and to get it back, not back to what it was but,
I guess to push forward to make it better.
It is always good to make things better than they were.
I guess I have a relaxed time, but I have time to work on making my Y…
because this is my Y. . .
better!

Discussion

In the current research, Sara was the single case revealing her perspective on hope, which is a dynamic aspect of social justice, through her photographic stories (Ginwright, 2011). For many people, being pushed into a swimming pool and a door to a pre-school classroom are not places that represent *hope*, but for Sara, emerging into adulthood in an inner-city area, these spaces represent the hardship, the possibility and most of all the creation of a more just world rooted in a cultural and communal space for recreation.

In general, what these photographs and accompanying stories suggested is that the YMCA provided the social support Sara needed to feel empowered in her experiences into adulthood, but it also allowed Sara to challenge the powerlessness and oppression in her community by attending to the needs of the community as an employee. As Glover (2003) suggested, the empowerment process created a supportive environment for Sara and allowed her to pursue the collective goals of the broader community. Additionally, in giving back to the community Sara was also able to invest in herself and achieve her goals while taking action to disentangle structural constraints.

In addition to the themes discovered about the use of the recreation center in her neighborhood, what the data also revealed was that Sara was able to depict a richer and more comprehensive story about her lived experiences and her sense of place through the use of this photovoice methodology. Although not a finding that was anticipated this finding could be utilized in leisure field to bring more consciousness and awareness to the importance of recreational and leisure spaces.

Examining urban areas in the U.S. during the height of the tumultuous 1960s, Clark (1989) proposed that urban centers—largely inhabited by African Americans—functioned as the U.S.'s colonial apparatus. Appealing to a social justice conscious, Clark asserted that the need for recreational and leisure services for youth cannot be denied, but without changed realities for youth, the provision of recreation centers are not enough. In this study we sought to explore and examine the challenge of recreational spaces challenging complex forces in individual youths' lives, particularly through the story of Sara.

Although difficult to generalize Sara's reasons for seeking out the recreational facility in her community as similar to other urban youth, what we broadly recognize is that people gravitate toward spaces in their communities that provide a sense of support and belonging (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). In three key themes, Sara explains how the YMCA develops her self—agency, commitment to transform for her community, and social action she takes within her community.

The YMCA was a space for growth, exploration of identity, and where imagination and motivation were possible. Finding a system of social support in her "Y family" Sara conveyed a narrative of motivation, confidence, and faith as a tangible outcome from her experiences at the YMCA. Despite being demeaned and confronting feelings of powerlessness outside the walls of the YMCA, Sara found her voice and sense of hope and power through her access to and subsequent experiences she had in the YMCA. Demonstrating commitment to behaviors counter to the negative youth stereotypes promoted by the mainstream media of youth in her neighborhood, Sara's demeanor, resilience, and hope turned into a desire to return to the neighborhood to work. Taking social action within her community by finding employment in the YMCA became Sara's defiant act of resistance. For Sara, the YMCA was what Breitbart (1998) noted as a site of resistance that not only encouraged Sara's participation in social transformation, but allowed her to develop her personal identity and critical life skills.

Building on a history of leisure scholars that have taken an interest in social justice, in this study we continue that legacy by recognizing the need for enhanced methodologies (Bowling 2002; Henderson, 1988) and diverse frameworks (Mowatt, French, Malebranche, 2013; Shinew, Floyd, McGuire, & Noe, 1995). Exploring a new framework to the leisure field, we discuss SJYD as paramount to discussing youth access to and experiences in recreational spaces. In this study we focused on the photographs and experiences of one co-constructor, Sara, to gain an intimate understanding of the consciousness of her lived experiences a particular place (Basso, 1996). Utilizing photovoice, an arts-based participatory research method, Sara was able to consciously assert the meaning of her experiences in the YMCA.

Over the past 15 years, studies examining urban youth and their lived experiences have increased (see Booth & Crouter, 2001; Morrell, 2004; Warner & Weist, 1996). Our research aligned with these studies and other critical youth scholars (Breitbart, 1998; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, Ginwright & James, 2002; Nayak, 2003) who insist youth need safe spaces to recognize, negotiate, and explore the complex challenges they face on a daily basis. Furthermore, urban youth have the ability to understand the political structure of an unequal society that impedes their success and calls attention to how they respond to the inequalities they perceive. This awareness creates a capacity for resistance and social justice (Ginwright, 2010; Willis, 1977).

Leisure professionals must understand the lived experiences and narratives of urban youth living in communities that warrant social, economic, political, and environmental changes (Tzou, Scalone, & Bell, 2010). Resultantly, leisure professionals can begin to empower urban youth to see the spaces where they live and recreate as places in which they can make positive social change. In some cases these spaces of recreation can provide a sense of "home" and renewal of hope. Sara's reference to the "home" and detailed pictures reiterates what scholars have suggested in reference to how urban youth see their recreation centers as a home (Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002; Hirsch et al., 2000). Additionally, these spaces might be the very sites that are needed to resist and challenge forces of oppression that impact marginalized youth and their communities.

An important finding of this study is that access to free or affordable recreational spaces matter for youth. The data suggests the YMCA provided a space in which individuals are nurtured and encouraged to develop unique goals and aspirations. Nevertheless, from this study

we were not able to specifically link the YMCA's program goals and objectives to Sara's final phase of collective action towards her community. In this regard, future studies need to examine the distinct elements of the SJYD in relationship to the intentional programming offered in recreational spaces. Seminal questions still must be answered about spaces, such as does the YMCA aid and encourage youth to speak truth to power? How does recreation in these spaces encourage collective action? How do recreational organizations distinctly involve youth in strategies that challenge and change inequities due to power relationships on the individual and community level? How does cultural agency in spaces enhance *hope* and social justice advocacy in individuals? Additionally, developing a study examining the three-pronged model of SJYD (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) in various marginalized youth populations is needed. Future studies should also include more participants in similar urban spaces, to determine if these photovoice results are a unique characteristic of Sara or representative of other urban youth seeking a safe haven.

Finally, one of the greatest strengths of the study, our methodological employment of photovoice, also provides a limitation for this article. Photovoice is "rooted in the belief that people ought to participate in creating and defining those very images that shape the public discourse" (Wang, 1999, p. 191). In addition to the element of shaping the public discourse, photovoice is employed so that individuals can participate in policy changes. These final elements of photovoice were not conducted for this study. To my knowledge, Sara was not engaged in presenting these findings to the local government or the administration of the YMCA to advocate for policy changes. Although findings from this photovoice project are presented here, and it is our hope that these findings will impact policymakers in recognizing the importance of funding these critical spaces, at this time we do not have data to indicate such action. Follow up studies are needed to examine how photographs taken from the youths' perspectives about their recreational spaces impact policy discourse both internally to the program and program planners, to the impact on public discourse regarding funding.

Conclusion

Clark (1989) made a clear call to social scientists to go beyond the status quo and "dare to study" real problems and real communities. Addressing issues of social power and control, Clark's view of the 1960 urban cities is not dissimilar from the social power that impacts urban communities in contemporary society. Responding to Clark's call to research social control in urban areas, this study sought to understand the importance of urban recreation centers as critical spaces for urban youth. Although these findings are drawn from one case study, and difficult to extrapolate to an entire population, this analysis does provide further insight for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners, by illustrating the critical consciousness developed in the life of one urban youth through her participation in her local YMCA.

Scholars must continue to explore the importance of identity, space, and social justice. In this study, complex phenomenon, such as hope and social justice, become more than cliché rhetorical terms. Through the use of photovoice, hope and social justice are tangible, visual topics, defined and reframed to reveal the everyday life and activities of one young woman as she emerges into adulthood in the urban South. Unique in their specific locations and their impact on individuals, what these study findings suggest is that these sites have the capacity to be spaces in which having access to and nurturing experiences in make them critical for SJYD, thus "just spaces." Providing access to these spaces is the first step in engaging youth and communities in

the critical reflection of self and a consciousness of the world around them. It will take youth, scholars, practitioners and policymakers working together to take the next step of confronting and understanding the dynamics of social action and social change.

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