Myths of Leisure Research: An Uneasy Alliance

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The value-orientation of the two notes by Jordan and Roland, and Samdahl and Kelly, assert two myths of the field of leisure research. Jordan and Roland address the "widely-held and long-existent" discussion about a researcher-practitioner gap, and in doing so, put a collective anxiety of leisure academics on the table. Our needs for social relevance, often fueled by beliefs in research-informed decision-making, draw us to this gap. Whereas, Samdahl and Kelly provide evidence of external validation of the intellectual rigor of our field, and in doing so, address our insecurities in being a scholarly community. By appealing to our anxieties regarding the intellectual backbone of leisure research, they point us to disciplinary discourse. Application vs. theory, the problem vs. the understanding, the practical vs. the academic; leisure research is framed by a dialectical tension between these myths. Neither is sufficient to define ourselves; it is the uneasy alliance of the two that makes us who we are. Each of us negotiates this alliance in search of imperatives for our work and criteria to evaluate others.

The separate claims of each of these papers effectively "pulls the rug out from under" this uneasy alliance by positing the sufficiency of a single myth to critique research. Jordan and Roland focus on a wide gap between researchers and practitioners, and ask what to do with "the existence of a non-influential body of research literature?" Samdahl and Kelly focus on leisure research as potentially isolated, inbred, and in need of intellectual oxygenation. Each paper appeals to a core value, but neither is complete in its depiction of core values that shape leisure research. This response questions the separate claims of each paper, and reaffirms the positioning of our field as an uneasy alliance between these two myths.

How wide is the gap? It is not clear that the gap between researchers and practitioners is as wide as that concluded by Jordan and Roland. They reason that leisure practitioners and academics work in relative independence of one another due to a literature base that is not widely shared. The literature does not influence practitioners because it is not read; practitioners do not influence research because they do not contribute. In short, they argue that practitioners do not read, or contribute to, academic literature and thus, there is a wide gap between practitioners and researchers. However, sharing a literature base serves as one indicator of cross-fertilization; alternate indicators may be more insightful to the assessment of a gap. Other evidence suggests leisure academia is not completely detached from leisure practice.

American academic programs linked to leisure research have a long-standing history of chamaeleon-like behavior linked to socially relevant labels

of the day. As a brief account: Many leisure academic programs were established during the 1950s and 60s in response to a perceived crisis in outdoor recreation. In the late-1960s and 70s, therapeutic recreation grew in visibility due to its relevance in assisting the many Vietnam war veterans in their return to civilian life. In the 1980s, leisure research embraced tourism due to community-based needs linked to economic diversification and development. During the past decade, sports management has been a charismatic label that resonates well with dominant societal values and dovetails with some of the academic lineage of leisure research. Although these assertions about the academic framing of leisure programs are cryptic, incomplete, and have many exceptions, they are illustrative of a winding path that we, as applied academics, have purposely framed for ourselves. My interpretation of such a winding path is that leisure academics are both anxious and motivated to be close to the pulse of societal, community, and/or practitioner needs.

Academics and practitioners communicate with one another in several forums other than peer-reviewed literature. Researchers find themselves on park boards, special working committees, speakers at continuing education sessions, conducting research initiated and funded by agency concerns, to name a few roles played by academics which bridge gaps between researchers and practitioners. Likewise, practitioners find themselves on academic advisory panels, guest speakers in university classes, being temporary members of faculties, and conversing with researchers at various conferences and community meetings. In addition, faculty and graduate students often have served as practitioners prior to their academic career. It is difficult to imagine a leisure researcher whose social and professional networks lack practitioners. If there is a gap, its primary cause is not due to academics being unaware of practitioners' problems.

If a gap exists, it may be due to differing perspectives about the correct way to address applied problems. There are at least two perspectives whose extremes are depicted here: The *naive view,* which could be referred to as the "spoon fed" view, is when practitioners' frame for their own problem is adopted as the primary frame for research. The words and analysis of the research are immediately and obviously linked to the practitioner's frame of the problem. This naive view expects research results to be unqualified, imperative in tone, and seamlessly applicable to the managerial crisis *du jour.* As another perspective, the *long-term view* considers current managerial crises as symptoms of larger problems. Rather than addressing the symptom, the research targets the problem. Abstraction from a practitioner frame is necessary to fully develop the research problem. Hence, practitioner problems are distinct from researcher problems. In short, this latter view is focused on long-term resolution strategies related to current practitioner problems. With differing perspectives to evaluate managerial relevance of research, the existence of a gap may be less of an empirical question than a philosophical one.

In consideration of the above, assessing a bridge between researchers and practitioners by popularity and/or contents of literature is problematic.

The absence of a bridge "found" by Jordan and Roland may have more to do with where they were looking than with the absence of a bridge. Although their sensitivity to the needs of practitioners exemplifies a powerful force that has shaped leisure academic programs, their depiction of the width of researcher-practitioner gap may be distorted.

How full is the intellectual cup? It is not clear that leisure research is as intellectually isolated as that concluded by Samdahl and Kelly. From an impressive and comprehensive analysis of various citation indices, they reason that the contents of *Journal of Leisure Research* and *Leisure Sciences* are insulated from a larger leisure-related academic base due to an increasingly smaller proportion of leisure research that appears in them, and arguably, to which the leisure research community is not fully aware. They conclude that leisure research is relatively detached from other literature besides our own. In essence, they raise a provocative question, to what extent do we need to participate and learn from outside dialogue?

A recent issue of *LS* contained several commentaries which called for further development of social theory related to leisure. Lynch distinguished *leisure studies from leisure studies as a social science* (1997, p. 269). The purpose of the former is to understand leisure in various contexts whereas the purpose of the latter is to understand the social context of leisure. Lynch characterized *leisure studies as a social science* as having more interest in theory development and less interest in the application. From a different approach, Tinsley advocates *leisure studies as a social science* and expresses frustration with the lack of theoretical development within leisure research:

The work of most leisure scientists consists almost exclusively of ad hoc (survey) research designed to look at atheoretical issues thought to have implications for practice.

These investigations are pursued willy-nilly without any consideration of an over-arching theoretical model, and they provide isolated factoids that have little discernible relation to other bits of information. (1997, p. 294) There are several other leisure scholars, from various perspectives, who have lamented the lack of theoretical direction and/or intellectual discourse within leisure research (e.g., Coalter, 1997; Mommaas, 1997). To the extent that outside sources of leisure research discuss theoretical issues, Samdahl and Kelly align with several scholars who challenge us to focus on theoretical contexts of leisure rather than to focus on leisure.

Samdahl and Kelly should be admired for their high standards related to integrating leisure research with outside sources. Although the anxieties for leisure research expressed by Samdahl and Kelly are widely shared, there may be different interpretations for the evidence exhibited. In contrast, my expectations for the degree to which leisure research integrated ideas from outside sources were comparatively low. I was pleasantly surprised that in 1996-97 *JLR* and *LS* "two thirds of all references were to outside sources." Even if half of the outside sources were more than 10 years old, I smiled when discovering that one-fifth of outside sources were less than five years old (see Samdahl and Kelly's Table 3). In addition, I was positively impressed that "outside sources accounted for about one third of the references to

both *JLR* and *LS*" within the 1992-96 Social Science Citation Index. Although there are still many strides to be made in de-isolating American leisure research, my interpretation of the evidence is optimistic that we are moving in directions that integrate.

An uneasy alliance. Each of these papers concludes by tightening their embrace of the myth they espouse. In combination, the reader is caught in a "tug of war" between the dialectical tension of the goals of leisure research. Together, these two goals provide the underlying value statements of leisure academic programs and serve as core beliefs that motivate and reinforce our behavior. It is an alliance between practitioner-relevance and intellectual-rigor that we each navigate in search of a level of comfort.

Neither myth by itself makes sense. If our struggle entails satisficing only the needs of practitioners, why bother to distinguish a researcher from a practitioner? They should be one-in-the-same. If our struggle entails only a search for intellectual rigor, why maintain a distinct group of scholars labeled "leisure researchers"? The rigor is not in the application, but in the discipline. By maintaining an alliance, each myth acts as a frame for the other. We require rigor only as it facilitates the application; we define the application only to the extent that our theoretical or methodological tools allow. Progress is hampered not by failure to grasp each myth individually, but by failure to address both together.

In summary, both the width of the researcher-practitioner gap and the degree of intellectual isolation are quibbling points to which there is no final word. The "low marks" received by leisure research from each of these assessments may be reflective of a group of scholars charting an alliance between two myths, rather than fully embracing either one.

References

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