Race and the Pursuit of Happiness

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Race still matters in the United States of America. Yet, too many people would like to believe that race no longer separates this nation in any meaningful way. Hence, the real public "shock" during the recent O. J. Simpson trial when race was shown to be an extremely important factor in people's opinions of his guilt or innocence (Elias & Schatzman, 1996). Even more difficult for most Americans to face was the realization that these important racial differences were present across gender, education, and social class boundaries (Elias & Schatzman, 1996). Similarly, it appears to be "shocking" for many leisure researchers to even consider race in their understanding of leisure behavior. Yet, perhaps no where else does race matter as much as during leisure. While schools and work places have been integrated over the last three decades by force of law, no similar laws have been enacted to secure the racial integration of leisure spaces. Indeed, since leisure is something that is usually "freely chosen" by most participants, it would be difficult for governments to write laws which mandated leisure participation based on race. Consider the political difficulties of closing a beach, park, playground, or activity center if it did not meet established racial integration goals. In addition, since most lawmakers, and the general public, tend to discount the value of leisure, it is easy to suggest that economic concerns, most closely associated with education and work, should be the real test of racial integration. For example, if an African American was prevented from playing golf at a country club, the media would probably run the story as a "loss of economic networking opportunities," and not a story about the lost joy of playing golf.

From the standpoint of personal economics, most leisure activities do not merit much public attention. So the public and media might easily ask, is it really a big problem if African Americans don't go camping in the National Parks, or should we actually be concerned if Whites don't play basketball in the inner city? Unfortunately, this kind of apathy can usually be associated with two common public attitudes about leisure: a) who really cares what most people do during their leisure time, and b) most people like to feel "comfortable" or "welcome" during their leisure. The outcome of these common attitudes is readily apparent to any observer; some public and private leisure places (e.g., beaches, churches, clubs, playgrounds, bars,

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nightclubs, and parks) can easily be the most racially segregated places currently found in the United States. In addition, even when different racial groups "share" an urban park, for example, it is still likely to have some kinds of "understood" racial boundaries (West, 1989).

Like the villagers who refused to see that their emperor was wearing no clothes, many leisure researchers consciously refuse to see what exists right before their eyes. West (1989, p. 12) refers to this situation as the "cognitive tyranny of the dominant paradigms in leisure research on minorities," and states that the separation of the races in leisure places is staring many investigators in the face, and "yet, due in part perhaps to the dominance of the 'subcultural' paradigm . . . this stark fact goes unnoticed (or at least without comment)." When some leisure researchers do finally "see" race in leisure places, they are likely to discuss any racial differences they find using "ethnicity" theories. Ethnicity, as usually presented in the leisure literature, refers to subcultural values, language, and traditions. Unfortunately, ethnicity theories usually function to remove race, and more importantly racial discrimination, from the discussion. Instead, racial differences become social class, gender, language, or value differences, and race quietly disappears from sight. This situation seems convenient for many because it also removes the difficult topic of racial discrimination from the discussion.

It is very disturbing that many leisure researchers seem to have decided that race, reflected in skin color, is no longer important to the analysis of leisure in the United States of America; a quite amazing intellectual feat. Consider an African American executive diving an expensive automobile who has been "profiled" as a likely drug dealer by police and is stopped for questioning; do the police ponder his ethnicity or is he simply stopped for having a Black face in the "wrong" part of town? Or consider the upper-class African American adolescent followed through a store in the mall as a likely shoplifter by security personnel and asked to show a receipt for the shirt he is wearing; does the security guard speculate on social class standing or is being Black enough to convict this young man in his eyes? When Whites cross the street as a group of African Americans approach, did they try to determine subcultural values and language differences, or was skin color enough information for them?

What intellectual magic causes race problems to instantly vanish the moment a person enters a leisure place? It seems quite reasonable to believe that racial discrimination, institutionalized in U. S. society, is also very prevalent in leisure places, and affects the leisure decisions of millions of Americans on a daily basis. Many questions come to mind from this perspective: a) how many Whites avoid leisure places and activities because there are too many Blacks present? b) how many Blacks must be present in a leisure space before Whites begin avoiding it? c) how many Blacks avoid leisure places and activities because there are too many Whites present? d) how many Blacks must be present in a leisure space before Blacks begin using it? and e) what leisure activities and places seem most racially integrated, and which seem most segregated? Why aren't leisure researchers investigating these

kinds of race questions? One quick answer might be that these kinds of questions are very difficult to empirically investigate. Another answer might be that most leisure researchers, and professionals in the field, want to believe that leisure is always beneficial; they really do not want to think that leisure spaces might contribute to, or actually be, a large part of the problem.

Hale (1998) argued that the institutionalized racial separation of the "Jim Crow" south, with its visible racialized spaces, was necessary to reduce cross-racial contact between Whites and a rapidly increasing well-dressed, well-spoken Black middle-class. "The individual's appearance then little mattered . . . systemized spatial relations replaced the need to know others personally in order to categorize them" (Hale, 1998, p. 130). Unfortunately, even though signs marked "Whites Only" and "Colored" have been removed from leisure places, racialized spatial relations continue to exist in many leisure places across the United States, and function to reduce cross-racial contact. Massey and Denton (1993) suggested that Whites and Blacks could only avoid social contact if mechanisms existed to separate them. Leisure spaces may function as important "mechanisms" to limit racial contact in the United States. For example, if Whites are looking for a picnic table in a park and drive past empty picnic tables because the other tables in that area are occupied by Blacks, then this leisure space is an important mechanism for racial separation. Similarly, if Whites and Blacks meet in different churches, then these churches, as leisure spaces, function as mechanisms for racial separation.

Why hasn't the leisure literature adequately addressed these race problems? One highly likely answer is associated with the limited contact most leisure researchers appear to have with the writings of Black "public intellectuals" (e.g., Bell, 1992; Cose, 1993; West, 1993). The important perspectives offered by these writers are only rarely mentioned in the leisure literature. How can researchers write intelligently about race without an understanding of this important African American literature?

Some will likely suggest that the present discussion is "much ado about nothing," and that everyone should just settle down, appreciate the major *economic* gains which are being made by middle-class African Americans, and then celebrate "ethnic" differences with increased awareness and perhaps festivals. Unfortunately, such a racially blindfolded attitude will never directly address the problems associated with race, racial discrimination, and racialized leisure spaces in the United States.

Leisure spaces should reflect the racial and cultural diversity found in the United States. The nation that works together must be merged with the nation that plays together. Research combined with public policy initiatives and education must strive to realize this goal. Leisure spaces must not serve as societal mechanisms to minimize racial or cultural social interaction. As Hooks (1995, p. 182-183) forcefully declared, "those of us who speak, write, and act in other ways from privileged-class locations must self-interrogate constantly so that we do not unwittingly become complicit in maintaining existing exploitative and oppressive structures."

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