

Will Research on Leisure Constraints Still Be Relevant in the Twenty-first Century?

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The origins of research on leisure constraints can be traced back for at least a century, but it is only in the last two to three decades that social scientists in North America have conducted systematic research that has explicitly investigated the constraints which people encounter in fulfilling their leisure goals. The quantity of empirical research on constraints to leisure increased enormously in the 1980s, followed by efforts to consolidate what had been learned, by assessing the theoretical contributions and practical implications of this body of knowledge (Goodale & Witt, 1989; Jackson, 1988, 1991; Jackson & Scott, 1999; McGuire & O'Leary, 1992; Searle & Jackson, 1985) and developing theoretical propositions and conceptual models about the impact of constraints in people's lives (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993; Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993).

Recently, criticisms of this sub-field of leisure studies have been raised and serious concerns expressed about the validity and value of the "constraints paradigm" (e.g., Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). Thus, this collection of essays about leisure studies, and more generally, the approach of the new millennium, provide an opportune moment to ask, "Will research on leisure constraints still be relevant in the twenty-first century?" I will address the following questions: (1) What insights into leisure behavior has constraints research provided, and what are its benefits to scholars and practitioners? (2) What do we know about the operation of leisure constraints in people's lives? (3) What are the limitations and criticisms of constraints research, and what can be done to address them? (4) Should research on leisure constraints continue in the future, or has it "had its day"?

Leisure Constraints Research: Objectives and Benefits

Leisure constraints research aims to investigate "factors that are assumed by researchers and/or perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and/or to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure" (modified from Jackson, 1991, 1997). On this basis, research can and should provide two direct sets of benefits, to research and to practice, and an indirect one in the form of education.

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As far as benefits to scholars are concerned, there are essentially three. First, the topic is of value and interest *per se*. In this regard, understanding individuals' leisure choices and behavior requires investigation of *all* the factors, both positive (e.g., motivations, anticipated benefits) and negative (barriers) that influence those choices. Moreover, if leisure is conceptualized as "perceived freedom," yet—as constraints research has consistently shown—most people are constrained at least to some extent in their leisure, then understanding constraints and their impacts should help scholars to sharpen their thinking about leisure. Also, investigation of constraints can help to explain why observed relationships among values and attitudes, leisure preferences, and overt leisure behavior are frequently tenuous. Too, constraints research provides a way to bridge the traditionally dichotomized agency and structure frameworks of analysis and explanation (see Rojek, 1989), because external (e.g., social, political) forces can be conceived of and investigated as antecedent constraints for the individual, thus internalizing externalities and permitting them to be investigated using conventional social psychological research methods.

Second, constraints research has assisted in generating new insights into aspects of leisure previously thought to be well understood, such as leisure participation, motivations, satisfaction, and conflict. Third, the field has provided a useful device for communication among researchers with diverse topical interests and methodological orientations.

On the applied side, two questions raised by the organizers of the aborted 1999 conference, *Rethinking Leisure in American Life*, illustrate the potential practical value of leisure constraints research: "What can be done about the increasingly apparent problems of the organization of daily life, including the timing and tempo of school, work, free time and travel?" and "What can be done to reduce the extraordinary extent to which [North] Americans feel rushed?" In attempting to answer these questions, I had planned to observe that first we need to understand why these trends are occurring, and to investigate them from two perspectives: (1) To what extent are they an aggregate manifestation of free (and constrained) choices which individuals make to plan and allocate their time? and (2) To what extent do they represent the playing out in people's lives of social, economic, political, environmental, and other conditions over which they have little or no control, or which they might wish to change?

We cannot, however, simply *assume* that we know the answers to questions like these; original research is needed, in which the following assumptions are reasonable:

1. Barriers or obstacles exist to achieving a meaningful quality of life on both an individual and a societal basis.
2. Access to and enjoyment of leisure are central to a high quality of life for individuals, and indirectly to the quality of the society as a whole; therefore, leisure can play an important part in removing or alleviating these barriers.

3. There is also a wide range of barriers that may preclude people from achieving their leisure goals and realizing the full benefits of a high quality of leisure.
4. Understanding the distribution of constraints in society, how they affect people's lives and leisure, and how people adapt to these constraints, is a crucial task for leisure researchers.

What Do We Know About Constraints to Leisure?

Although it is now commonly acknowledged that there are essentially three types of constraints to leisure, viz intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural (sometimes called "intervening") (Crawford & Godbey, 1987), most of the empirical work to date has focussed, with some exceptions (see, for example, Raymore, Godbey, Crawford, & von Eye, 1993) on the last category—an emphasis which has caused concern among some critics of the field. Nonetheless, we have learned a great deal about the role of leisure constraints in people's lives. Space does not permit a thorough review, but we can say with some confidence that the following patterns apply widely across North American society:

- Allowing for variations in the number, range, and content of the items included in a given study, a reasonably stable and replicable set of constraints "dimensions" has consistently emerged from a variety of studies. These dimensions typically include constraints related to the costs of participating, time commitments, the availability and quality of facilities, isolation (sometimes sub-divided into social isolation and geographical isolation), and personal skills and abilities.
- No constraint is experienced with equal intensity by everyone, although time- and cost-related constraints rank among the most widely and intensely experienced inhibitors of the achievement of leisure goals and a balanced lifestyle.
- The experience of constraints varies among individuals and groups: no sub-group of the population is entirely free from constraints, and each group is characterized not only by varying intensities of the experience of each type of constraint, but also by a unique combination of constraints. Thus, relatively less constrained by time, young people's leisure is typically affected by a lack of partners, opportunities, and costs. The transition to middle adulthood sees a decline in these types of constraints but a marked increase in time commitments, largely due to family and employment circumstances. Time- and cost-related constraints may decline in older adulthood, but problems of skills and isolation may become increasingly important.
- In addition to age, the effects of constraints are modified by other personal and social factors, such as family size and structure, gender, income, and ethnicity/race (Jackson & Henderson, 1995; Phillip, 1995; Scott & Munson, 1994; Stodolska, 1998).

Contrary to implicit assumptions in the early stages of research, leisure constraints are no longer viewed as insurmountable obstacles, but are now conceived of as "negotiable" (Jackson et al., 1993). This means that many people adopt frequently innovative strategies to alleviate the effects of constraints, either by modifying their leisure or altering other aspects of their lives (Henderson, Bedini, Hecht, & Shuler, 1993; Jackson & Rucks, 1995). In short, people participate in leisure "despite constraint" (Kay & Jackson, 1991): constraints may shape the realization of leisure goals and benefits, but they do not necessarily preclude it. Although relatively little is known empirically about constraints negotiation, recent evidence suggests that the strength of motivations for leisure and the perceived importance of anticipated benefits encourage people to attempt and to be successful in the negotiation of constraints, and that, in turn, successful negotiation is positively related to enhanced leisure (Nadirova & Jackson, 1999).

Criticisms of Leisure Constraints Research, and Some Needed Changes

Despite the accomplishments enumerated above, several distinct but interrelated criticisms have been levelled at research on leisure constraints. As discussed by Jackson and Scott (1999), these include: (1) a narrow choice of criterion variables, with an over-emphasis on participation vs nonparticipation in leisure and recreation activities; (2) over-emphasis on investigations of structural/intervening constraints to the neglect of intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints; (3) over-emphasis on constraints as obstacles, coupled with neglect of adaptive strategies (negotiation); (4) over-reliance on quantitative methods of data collection and analysis; and (5) a fundamental questioning of the premises, objectives, and insights of leisure constraints research (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). To a large extent, all of these criticisms reflect concern about the dominance of social-psychological approaches and the neglect of contextual issues in North American leisure studies in general, and should not be construed as being unique to leisure constraints research (see, for example, Coalter, 1999; Hemingway, 1995; Samdahl, 1999; Shaw, 1999).

Not all of these concerns can be addressed without a fundamental re-evaluation of and shift in the essential research paradigm characteristic of North American leisure studies (see Coalter, 1999; Samdahl, 1999). However, I suggest that much can be gained from making the following changes:

- Broaden the range of criterion variables related to structural constraints.
- Investigate antecedent constraints and simultaneously adopt a more socio-logically informed perspective. For example, it may be more productive to think of time and costs as antecedent constraints than as intervening barriers. Also, it is important to recognize broader contextual issues for leisure, such as value systems (including but not confined to: material acquisitiveness; economic restructuring and downsizing; centralized entertainment systems; and the physical structure and infrastructure of North American cities and towns).

- Investigate processes of leisure constraints negotiation and circumstances which enhance success in achieving leisure goals, including both immediate/short-term strategies, and long-term strategies (e.g., lifestyle changes, early retirement).
- Incorporate qualitative methods into research.

Relevant, But . . .

Research on leisure constraints over the last two to three decades has proven to be fruitful with respect to the three criteria of relevancy—contributions to knowledge, practice, and education (Driver, 1999)—enumerated at the outset of this article. However, given the criticisms listed above and the obvious need to address them in the near future if the field is to continue as a productive branch of North American leisure studies, the answer to the question, “Will research on leisure constraints still be relevant in the twenty-first century?” can only be a *guarded* “yes.”

Besides addressing the criticisms, new substantive directions are also required, because the field cannot continue with “business as usual” without becoming repetitive and redundant. Because I believe they have the best chance of enhancing the theoretical richness of leisure constraints research and its connections with other issues within leisure studies, I suggest the following topics for investigation:

- The process of leisure constraints negotiation and the individual and contextual circumstances that enhance or detract from people’s ability to achieve their leisure goals.
- Constraints and transitions: Are constraints particularly pertinent at transitional points in people’s lives (e.g., entering high school, marriage, birth of the first child, divorce, death of a spouse, emigration)? Do transitions provide new opportunities for leisure constraints negotiation?
- Turning constraints into opportunities: Why are some people particularly successful in their leisure lives, not only negotiating constraints but also viewing constraining factors more positively as opportunities to develop new leisure interests and pursuits?
- Constraints and benefits: Empirical investigation coupled with theoretical exploration is needed to enhance the integration of these two recent dominant themes in North American leisure studies.

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