

The Flagship Journal and its Role in Advancing New Knowledge and the Field of Inquiry

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Why do we need journals? What purpose do they serve? A standard answer to these questions is that journals provide reports of the latest research and in doing so become the main vehicles for advancing new knowledge in a given field. Another common answer is that if a journal adheres to rigorous scientific standards in the selection and publication of articles, it helps legitimate the academic field being served. Thus, adherence to meticulous theoretical and methodological standards by a leisure journal makes leisure a legitimate focus of scientific inquiry and allows us to move beyond armchair speculation and mere conjecture about leisure.

Following rigorous scientific standards for the acceptance of papers also suggests a third answer to the question about the potential value of a journal, namely that a flagship journal may serve an important political function. In the case of leisure, it can legitimize the analysis of leisure and enhance the field's respectability in the larger academic community. After all, the journal model for reporting new information is the model that most academic fields follow. Of course, cynics might say that we are selling out and merely playing the academic game of publish-or-perish.

Finally, some advocates argue that a journal has a larger mission than simply reporting the latest theoretical and empirical research. They contend that a flagship journal must be an agent of change, proactive and give direction to research so that big socially relevant issues, such as dealing with a society's "leisure problems", will be systematically addressed by scholars, researchers and ultimately policy-makers. I'll explore these issues on the basis of the long and distinguished record of our flagship journal, the *Journal of Leisure Research* (JLR).

Reporting New Research and Knowledge

For being the first and lone journal of leisure research for some years, JLR, by its mere existence has made a major contribution to the development of new knowledge in the field by giving voice to leisure researchers. JLR created a demand for research outlets that triggered the birth of a host of other leisure journals. Together with JLR, these other journals are important outlets for the reporting of cutting-edge research and knowledge on leisure behavior. Having a half a dozen and more journals devoted to leisure is also encouraging because it reflects the need for more outlets among researchers and scholars who are interested in studying the leisure phenomenon in its various forms.

What, then, is the best model for a journal, especially a flagship journal? Is the

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New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) the model that JLR should follow? While NEJM publishes mainly research on physiological and biological processes, its scope is very broad. For example, it has also published research on the relationship between dementia and leisure behavior. On the whole, it reports empirical studies on a wide variety of phenomena related to human health. Is this what JLR as the leading journal should do with respect to leisure? That is, should the journal publish anything on leisure as long as the papers meet stringent scientific standards? Taking this approach, JLR might appear to be a rather passive outlet, basically reporting what researchers have to offer. While it is true that any journal is somewhat at the mercy of researchers, a question could be asked: "Is it appropriate for a journal to take a more proactive role in directing research to some areas deemed generally important or perhaps underrepresented?"

Compared to leading journals in other fields, it appears that JLR has been much more proactive than many. Numerous special issues have been published over the years on specific topics, and in so doing the result has been to encourage more research in these areas. However, there are limits to how often such special issues can be published because of the quarterly publication of JLR. Too frequent (and even controversial) special issues may not be in the best interests of a flagship journal as such issues and lack of space for regular research could drive researchers to other outlets.

What about the big leisure-related social issues that Western societies have had to deal with during the last century, and still do? Has JLR been a forum (or should it) that has encouraged researchers and social analysts to address these issues? Issues related to the idea that society, especially American society, has not come to grips with its "leisure problems"? Studies suggest that nothing has changed over the years in the American society. America remains a "burnout" society where stress dominates, and about 50% of people do work that they do not like and do it only for financial reasons, with this percentage likely to grow because of the current economic problems. Should the leading journal promote and direct its limited resources to helping us better understand the roots of these issues – at individual, social and cultural levels? Perhaps, it is a situation where leisure scholars understand the problem, but it has not been communicated successfully to a national audience or has not been taken seriously at the national level. Many would argue that all that can be done with a flagship journal like JLR is to report relevant research on the topic and that it is beyond the role of a scientific journal to influence the way in which knowledge is communicated to a national audience and used to change people's perceptions and ideas about leisure and work.

Leisure: A Legitimate Target of Research

Announcing the decision to begin publishing research exclusively on leisure 40 years ago was a bold move. At that time, the number of academics identifying themselves as leisure researchers was very small. But the announcement was important because it was an invitation to more researchers to become interested in leisure as a focus of their research and the new journal was a venue for the publication of their work. The creation of JLR was also an invitation to "outsiders," social scientists from other fields, who had had an interest in leisure but did not have publication outlets. Of course, the journal was also a call for university departments of recreation (and later leisure studies) to start training a new generation of leisure researchers. Unquestionably, this

call has been answered as evidenced not only by the need for new leisure journals but by the diversity of interests and approaches among leisure researchers. Compared to other related fields, leisure researchers seem to be unusually competent in theory development and empirical work, including statistical data analysis. The leisure constraints literature is a good example of advanced theoretical work and development. In contrast, consider exercise psychologists who have tried to understand why people do not exercise; they have not advanced theoretically any farther than the listing of barriers to exercise.

What remains to be seen is the role this flagship journal will play in the future if the inevitable march to ever-smaller and more specialized areas of leisure research continues. This splintering into smaller areas (and even sub-disciplines) will give an impetus to more specialized journals. Much, of course, depends on political realities in the academia. This march will come to a screeching halt with the elimination of leisure studies departments or their amalgamation with other departments and colleges. Normally, scientific pursuit of more specific questions would lead leisure researchers to focus on specialized areas of inquiry, and as a result they would feel that their work requires specialized journals; JLR could come to be seen as being too global and general. This trend is the way science in general seems to advance. On the one hand, one could argue that with this kind of a future, JLR, as a flagship journal, will lose its role because it is too general to serve these specialized fields. On the other hand, it could be argued that JLR will help hold the field together. If academic and political realities will not allow leisure studies to continue its specializing, then the JLR will play an even more important role by remaining its leading journal and serving a wider spectrum of leisure researchers.

Above all, the birth of JLR made it possible to focus one's research program on the study of leisure. Many of us have argued over the years that studying leisure is as legitimate and important as studying work, sports and related areas of human behavior. Although initially many questioned the wisdom of studying leisure in a culture that is built on the Protestant work ethic and pursuit of money, scientists were not interested in such value questions but instead, viewed leisure as a phenomenon that merited its own study. If sport deserves scientific inquiry, leisure should have been the target of research well before sport; after all, sport is a subset of leisure. As for work, even non-researchers and non-academics understand the need to study it to discover its determinants, worker productivity, etc. However, these same people seem to find it difficult to understand the need to study leisure as an independent sphere of life, as a complement to work, and the ways in which work and leisure contribute to life satisfaction and quality. For many, leisure has the stigma of being associated with laziness. Why study it? But to scientists, leisure is an interesting phenomenon that can and should be studied in and of itself and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. JLR not only encouraged but called for a systematic study of leisure-related phenomena. By being a peer-reviewed journal and maintaining high scientific standards for accepted papers, JLR has kept its academic integrity in the eyes of outsiders who could see that publication in JLR is significant and valued.

Methodologies

Doing research to create new knowledge is inextricably bound to ideas about the methodologies to be used in this process. In general, research methodologies are divided into two major types: positivist (more recently post-positivist) vs. antipositivist or quantitative vs. qualitative (Glassford, 1987). Over most of the history of the social and behavioral sciences, the former have dominated research. The same trend is also apparent in research in exercise sciences and health. At the same time, the use of qualitative methods has increased considerably in recent years. An interesting question to be asked is, "What is the role of a flagship journal like JLR in this process?" Should it reflect the methodological realities of the time? Should the journal assume a more proactive role and promote a more balanced view of the use of these major methodologies? Answers to these questions are not simple because the two major methodologies are philosophically very different and in the more extreme versions of each strive for different goals. While quantitative methods are often employed to create knowledge that allows one to think in terms of causal relationships among a set of variables, qualitative methods are often described as providing more descriptive accounts of episodes, events and conditions associated with leisure behaviors without attempts to achieve generalizeable knowledge. This difference, of course, is something of an oversimplification as the difference between the two methodological approaches is not categorical and because there are many brands of antipositivism. Many scholars (e.g., Stebbins) have used qualitative methods exclusively and yet have developed theories that are powerful in their explanation.

Where does JLR stand in terms of these two types of methodologies? Looking at the published papers during the last 20 years or so makes it clear that there appears to have been no discrimination against papers using qualitative methods. Certainly, one could not argue that JLR is too heavily tilted towards quantitative methods. Does this mean that there is a new methodological reality in leisure studies or is this parity a reflection of deliberate attempts to balance the two methodological approaches in the leading journal? The fact that qualitative researchers have served as editors of the journal would seem to speak to the latter point. However, it is more likely that there has been a realization that use of different methodologies is needed to better understand leisure phenomenon. Of course, a division into quantitative and qualitative methods is somewhat arbitrary in the first place as practitioners of both can benefit from the other; qualitative methods can be used to supplement quantitative and vice versa. But the question still goes back to what kind of knowledge we seek and desire. My perspective is that ultimately we need to develop generalizeable knowledge, that is, useful theory whether it is developed by deductive quantitative approaches or inductive grounded theory approaches.

Above all, trustworthiness of the reported findings is critical. Those who use quantitative methods have clear rules for reporting the reliability and validity of their methods. But the standards of scientific rigor are not limited to just quantitative methods, they apply equally well to qualitative methods when establishing the trustworthiness of the findings even if different criteria are used. In either case, if these standards of rigor are not followed closely, the JLR's image and reputation will deteriorate in the larger research community. It should not be forgotten that JLR belongs to all leisure scholars no matter where they are housed in academia.

An Agent of Change

As we think about the future of JLR, to what extent should we be concerned with preserving and continuing those traditions that have made it so successful in the past versus seeing it become more of an agent of change? Given the tendency of most of us in the field of recreation and leisure studies to contribute to the improvement of the conditions of human life and living, why would JLR not be part of this process, in its own small way? Of course, it should be, but to be successful, we need to know (and honor) our past, our history, and our traditions. Thus, JLR has a dual role: to serve both its past and its future. By celebrating the journal's past we are doing the right thing as it encourages us to look back and acknowledge the importance of the journal's previous contributions to scholarship and the development of leisure studies as a field. This celebration is also important as it can then be used as a springboard for the journal's future, for reporting better, more dependable knowledge on this complex phenomenon known as leisure, as well as knowledge that makes a difference.

References

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