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### Race and Ethnicity in Leisure Behavior: Where Have We Been and Where Do We Need to Go?

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## Research Reflection

# Race and Ethnicity in Leisure Behavior: Where Have We Been and Where Do We Need to Go?

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The ethnic and racial profile of the U.S. is undergoing a major shift such that in the decades ahead people of color will constitute a majority of the population. This demographic condition already exists in many cities. With the massive migration and mobility of groups throughout the country, what had previously been ethnically and racially homogenous communities and neighborhoods are becoming progressively diverse. Increasingly “new” minorities are less likely to blend into the “American mainstream” than their predecessors

Note: These ideas were discussed at a symposium titled “Looking Beyond Traditional Models: Racial and Ethnic Issues in Leisure Research” that was sponsored by the Diversity Research Laboratory in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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from the turn of the 20th century and are more likely to preserve their original cultures and ties to their countries of origin. Thus, it is noteworthy that research on the leisure behavior of ethnic and racial minorities has become an important sub-field of leisure studies.

The publication of special issues of *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Leisure Sciences*, and *Leisure/Loisir* devoted to ethnicity and race seem to exemplify not only a sustained interest among leisure researchers in the subject but also a significant maturation of this subfield. The last 40 years of research in this area has taken us far from the early works of the ORRRC commission that focused on identifying and cataloging differences in recreation participation between White Americans and racial minority members. A critical question then becomes, what does the future hold for this subfield?

How might we forge new research questions that combine the reality of today's world into a series of expansive and creative questions about the complex nature of the relationships between and among racial and ethnic populations and their leisure? The future research questions are endless, and the challenge is to ensure that they are embedded within the complex environments in which we live. Although a substantial body of research exists that has identified ethnic/racial differences in recreation preferences and participation patterns, new directions must be taken in this research if researchers are to address the range of questions that loom on the horizon. The purpose of this essay is to propose new areas of research that we feel are going to be increasingly relevant to the subfield of ethnic and racial leisure. More specifically, we propose that two societal trends need to be taken into account when assessing the long term prospects of research on leisure behavior of ethnic and racial minority groups: (1) the emergence of a new racial and social structure and (2) the increasing complexity in measuring and articulating ethnic identity.

### **A New Racial and Social Structure**

We are already witnessing the restructuring of the American society along racial and ethnic lines. Before the 2000 Census, the black-white "color" line was the primary cleavage in American society. The recent emergence of Hispanics as the largest "minority" subpopulation, supplanting African Americans, has led to theorizing on this new racial and social structure. Recently, Bonilla-Silva (2002) proposed a provocative theory about the emerging racial structure. He theorizes that the U.S. is moving toward a three-tier racial structure: whites maintaining their supremacy along with white Hispanics, select multi-racial groups, and a few select Asian-origin members; a middle stratum consisting of light skinned Hispanics, Asian Americans, middle easterners, and most people of mixed racial origin; and "at the bottom of the well" (Bell, 1992), "collective blacks" (e.g., Southeast Asians, dark skinned Hispanics, blacks from all sources, and reservation-bound Native Americans). In this theory, inequality will continue to turn on phenotype and skin tone across all groups (i.e., a more fluid dynamic) rather than a rigid "black-white" color line. Instead of a diffusion of power and breakdown of a rigid racial structure, a new racial hierarchy with whites continuing to sit atop the hierarchy is predicted to come about.

Other researchers have argued that racial divisions, altogether, will lose their significance in the "new America" and will be replaced by the legality of residence as the marker of social status (Hiemstra, 2005). Citizens and permanent residents will occupy the top of the new social hierarchy, while illegal immigrants will constitute the "bottom of the well." Given the growing number of undocumented immigrants whose opportunity to move up in the social hierarchy is constrained by their inability to obtain better employment, education, medical care, or even a driver's license, this scenario is also plausible. To the extent that such

new structures are emerging, how will they impact leisure opportunities and constraints? Though still low in number, studies have been conducted on the impact of immigration on leisure experiences (e.g., Carr & Williams, 1993; Stodolska & Yi, 2003; Yu & Berryman, 1996). We speculate that considering the growing influence of immigrant groups on American society, documenting the effects of immigration (and legality) on leisure experiences and understanding the role of leisure in adjustment to American society will continue to be important areas of inquiry.

Leisure scholars have recognized the limits of "single variable" analyses in this complex society and have begun to examine the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and social class in relation to leisure behavior and related outcomes. Race, gender, and class remain the major sources of inequality in American society. Accordingly, multiple sources of stratification are being examined more frequently. These multi-perspective analyses will need to continue. For example, Lee, Scott, and Floyd (2001) demonstrated the existence of a "hierarchy of participation" with young white men with high education levels and high incomes having the greatest probability of participation in leisure experiences, while elderly minority women with low education levels and low incomes showing the lowest probability of participation. As noted by Bonilla-Silva (2002), on many indicators of social well-being, people of color (i.e., Hispanics and African Americans particularly) rank below white non-Hispanics. As people of color grow in number and without a reverse in current trends, significant inequality gaps will remain in terms of access to leisure opportunities and resources.

Researchers have demonstrated an interest in the leisure constraints of specific minority subpopulations. This interest is not surprising given Jackson and Scott's (1999) characterization of constraints as a "sort of giant conceptual Pac-man, swallowing up everything in its path" (p. 301). The constraints literature and the ethnicity and race literature both focus on ways intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors constrain leisure. In the past, these two streams of research existed in separate spheres. However, recently there has been evidence of integration of theory and methodological perspectives between these two areas of inquiry. This cross-fertilization has been beneficial to leisure researchers. For example, constraints research related to ethnicity and race has shed light on unique constraints associated with social and cultural experiences of minorities (e.g., constraints associated with language, discrimination, prejudice) that was neglected in earlier work. Floyd and Johnson (2002) noted that many minority neighborhoods do not have equal access to natural environments nor to the associated benefits that accompany this access. Rather, they acknowledged the growing recognition that minority groups and low-income communities often suffer disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, health risks, and locally undesirable land uses. The parks that are located in minority neighborhoods often times cannot be fully utilized due to poor maintenance, high crime rates, and gang activity (Gobster, 1998). Underutilization of parks and forests may also stem from their undesirable or unsuitable design that does not take into account the specific environmental preferences of minority users (Dwyer & Hutchison, 1990; Floyd et al., 1995).

Due to the restructuring of society along racial and ethnic lines, research that examines the factors that facilitate and constrain the leisure experiences of various groups will be needed. Further, the nature of how different groups interact in public leisure space and how they negotiate limited leisure resources will be important areas of inquiry. Given that communities and neighborhoods are becoming progressively diverse, leisure opportunities and events that help foster a sense of community and build social capital among residents will be important. In particular, a need exists to understand how leisure contributes to a sense of place and community in diverse neighborhoods including those communities that are forming and restructuring due to the changing social structure.

## The Complexity of Measuring Racial/Multi-Ethnic Identity

Another factor that needs to be taken into account in future research on leisure behavior of ethnic and racial minority groups is the complexity of measuring and negotiating multi-racial/multi-ethnic identity. In recent years the research on race and ethnicity has expanded to include more diverse population groups and has applied a broader set of methodologies. Moving beyond atheoretical treatment of “black-white” comparisons of activity participation characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s, leisure research began to increasingly conduct multi-ethnic comparisons and focus attention on a greater number of diverse groups including Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians. Studies have also directed attention to “white ethnic” groups (e.g., Stodolska & Jackson, 1998). Despite this progress, leisure research efforts fall short of what is needed. Because of the way race and ethnicity were measured in the 2000 Census, sixty-three unique combinations resulted from the race question. Combined with the Hispanic identifier, 126 unique categories were generated. As a result, many more individuals identified with more than one race (6.8 million or 2.4% of the total). Most were Hispanic, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders. Blacks and whites were less likely to report or identify with more than one race (i.e., more likely to indicate “white” or “black” alone). However, rates of intermarriage tend to be high among blacks and whites, and thus the percentage of people from these two groups who identify with more than one race is likely to increase in the future. How will leisure scholars (and the public) come to terms with this increasing complexity? To date, we have limited knowledge of how multi-racial/multi-ethnic identification influences the way people experience leisure. Hibbler and Shinew (2002) reported on the social isolation experienced by interracial couples and the discomfort they felt in public. As they suggested, interracial relationships are expected to continue to increase, leading to intermarriage and multi-racial families who will face unique sets of social issues, including issues related to leisure choices.

Methodological issues related to the measurement of race and ethnicity that are likely to affect leisure research are not only related to changes brought about by the new census measures. For years, leisure researchers have relied on people’s self identification into one of the limited number of rigid racial categories such as “White,” “Black,” “Hispanic,” or “Asian.” Not only were these categories ill-fitted to capture the effect of “racial” background on leisure behavior, but they were often used as a proxy for cultural background. We are yet to witness in-depth investigations by leisure researchers on how racial categories are created, re-created, and maintained in contemporary society. Issues related specifically to the measurement of ethnicity also have challenged this area of research and will need to be addressed. At a time when disciplines such as sociology or ethnic and migration studies have emphasized the development of elaborate measures of these concepts (see Breton et al., 1990), leisure researchers have typically relied on language proficiency as a convenient proxy for one’s culture. Underdevelopment and underutilization of current and tested scales have not only hindered the development of research but also precluded effective and bi-directional communication between our field and other social science disciplines.

Key questions about relationships between race and leisure will need to be addressed. For example, “How do people, and especially immigrants or those who identify with more than one racial or ethnic group, come to identify with some ‘established’ racial groups and not others?” “What is the role of leisure in this process?” and “What are the dynamics of interaction between various racial minorities (beyond whites and blacks), and through which channels does one’s race affect his or her leisure behavior?”

Discrimination has been suggested as one of the avenues linking race and leisure behavior (West, 1989; Woodard, 1998). Other possible explanations also exist. For example,

when considering leisure patterns it is important to look not just at contemporary issues but at historical factors as well. Johnson, Bowker, and Cordell (2001) argued that African Americans have developed an aversion for wildlands because of past associations with slavery, plantation agriculture, lynching, and compulsive work in the forest industry. This aversion is rooted in the black "collective memory" of exploitative work relationships involving agricultural lands and wildlands.

Other racial/ethnic minorities have also experienced difficult land issues. For instance, Schelhaus (2002) described discrimination and denial of land rights to Hispanics, Asians, and ethnic whites in various parts of the country, and McAvoy (2002) noted differences between American Indians' and white Americans' interpretations of the history and symbolism of national parks and forests. Thus, the pervasiveness of denial, exploitation, and terror has resulted in a uniquely negative interpretation of wildlands and natural spaces among certain minority groups. In the future, the complexity of measuring and understanding people's multi-racial/multi-ethnic identity and the impact it has on their leisure behavior will be increasingly difficult.

### Final Thoughts

Understanding the leisure behavior of ethnic and racial minorities is an important area of inquiry that has evolved over time. Progress has been made, but we have far to go. The research questions have become more complex and the theoretical frameworks more sophisticated with the result being a need to use different methodologies. The emergence of a new racial and social structure and the increasing complexity of measuring racial and ethnic identity will force us to explore additional issues and topics and apply creative and multi-level analyses. There is no doubt that we live in an extraordinarily complex society where cultural, religious, political, social, and economic forces are constantly at play. It is our responsibility to identify, understand, and appreciate these forces and incorporate them into our research. We also need to understand the role that racial and ethnic identification plays in the leisure lives of individuals and their families. Understanding leisure as it relates to the richness that racial and ethnic diversity brings to community life as well as the marginalization and exploitation of particular subgroups of our population is an exciting and worthwhile endeavor that deserves further investigation.

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