Research Reflections

Leisure Studies in the 21st Century: The Sky is Falling?

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Leisure studies as a discipline is perceived to be in crisis. This perception is not new and is not necessarily negative, as all disciplines go through periods of crises. This crisis is identified as both intellectual and institutional. This essay provides an historical context for identifying the current intellectual issues and the description of two primary concerns facing the field today: the collective identity and the connection between leisure and society. Four approaches for addressing the perceived crisis are offered: embrace change, articulate the collective identity, celebrate the contributions of leisure studies, and identify current and future collaborators.

Keywords social change, collaboration, collective identity, crisis, leisure behavior, leisure research

A fairy tale provides a metaphor for my reflections. The story of Chicken Little has many variations, but generally the story goes that a chicken is eating lunch one day, and believes the sky is falling because an acorn falls on her head. She becomes quite concerned and decides to tell the King about the predicament. On her journey she meets other animals who join her in the quest. In most stories, the animals have rhyming names such as Henny Penny, Cocky Lockey, and Goosey Loosey. They come across Foxy Loxy who offers the chicken and friends help. Numerous endings to this story have been proposed. Sometimes Foxy Loxy eats the chicken’s friends. One of the friends, usually Cocky Lockey, survives long enough to warn the chicken and she escapes. Other endings include Foxy eating them all. In other versions the characters are saved by a squirrel, an owl, or the King’s hunting dogs and actually get to speak to the King. Another telling suggests that the sky actually falls and kills Foxy Loxy.

The moral changes depending on the ending. A happy ending suggests that one should not to be a “chicken” but have courage to take a stand. In other versions the moral could be
interpreted to mean you should not believe everything you hear. In that case, the political tale suggests that the Chicken jumped to a conclusion, whipped her friends into a frenzy, and the unscrupulous fox manipulated them all for his benefit.

So, what does this tale have to do with leisure research and the field of leisure studies? For years the field has been perceived to be in crisis (Jackson & Burton, 1999). Is the sky falling around leisure studies or is it another “acorn?” What are the intellectual and institutional (Rowe, 2002) “falling sky” issues that confront the leisure studies field in the 21st century? Do researchers, educators, and practitioners have the courage to do something about them? Who are our friends? Who is the King? The purpose of this research reflection is to explore the current perceived crisis in the broad field of what I term, leisure studies, and to offer suggestions for how researchers and educators might move forward in the near future.

**Underlying Assumptions**

Pronovost and D’Amours (1990) suggested, regardless of whether leisure studies is considered a still-developing field or an established discipline, pondering foundations is critical. The difference between a crisis and a mind set of critical reflection may be a fine line (Rowe, 2002). Further, Stebbins (1997) and Chick (1997) suggested that a crisis can be productive and/or destructive. Pronovost and D’Amours (1990) and Cushman (1995) argued that all fundamental disciplines continually question their underlying base and it would be worrying if that was not found in leisure studies. Concerns about the falling sky have been articulated for almost 25 years as evident by some of the work cited in this essay. However, few researchers have provided prescriptions to address the crisis and visioning new perspectives is likely needed. Thus, I make the assumption that a perception of an underlying crisis is important and necessary to discuss for now and for the future.

Jackson and Burton surveyed leisure researchers in 1989 to determine if the leisure field had been characterized by unity, coherence, or fragmentation during the previous two decades. They defined fragmentation as consisting of “disparate, and even conflicting, conceptual and methodological development, inconsistent terminology, disconnected themes, and intellectual disharmony” (p. 19). More than 60% of active researchers said the field was characterized by fragmentation. Burton and Jackson (1989) interpreted the results to mean that fragmentation might be beneficial because of its pluralistic nature. Fragmentation suggests little commonality such as no common language or conflicting concepts at the most fundamental level. Pluralism, on the other hand, indicates more than one principle, concept, or theory capable of explaining something like leisure. They favored the latter.

Further, Kuhn (1970) emphasized that scientific fields change and fragment. A crisis in science is normative and a predictable part of the cycle of paradigms. Paradigm shifts occur. Every discipline faces major transitions when a perception of crisis is reached because of the inability of a bounded existing paradigm to understand social reality in its boundless form. Scientific revolutions are a result.

Driver (1999) observed that perhaps the easy problems have been addressed in leisure research and moving on to the more difficult issues may be what is creating a crisis. In addition, Kuhn (1970) suggested that normal or current (and I would insert leisure) science may only confirm and reaffirm the status quo. Samdahl (2000) stated that “allegiance to traditional paradigms creates tension during times of revolution” (p. 126). Understanding a paradigm shift is difficult if researchers cling to past illusions. Shaw (1997) also noted that the discomfort with the scientific revolution occurring may be because leisure is “multiparadigmatic rather than uniparadigmatic” (p. 278). The road ahead for leisure studies is certainly unclear. Thus, another assumption I make is that the sense of crisis may be due to an inability to vision the future largely because many issues have changed.
Is the Sky Falling? What are the Issues?

Rowe (2002) observed that the concerns surrounding leisure studies may be more “institutionally rather than intellectually founded” (p. 6). These aspects are not mutually exclusive but may suggest different targets for concern. Intellectual content regarding leisure may have a greater international appeal and may relate more to leisure research, whereas the institutional issues may be more nationally, university, or association based. The issues of the field, however, cannot be dichotomized cleanly into two areas because overlap exists. If the intellectual basis is in crisis, then most assuredly it will impact institutional approaches.

A Future of Leisure Studies Seminar was held in Sydney, Australia, in 2009 sponsored by Australia New Zealand Association for Leisure Studies (ANZALS). Major concern surrounded the apparent fragmentation of the field with a central question about whether the center or identity of leisure studies was (and would continue to hold) the field together. Issues were also raised about disconnect between research and practice. An underlying current also questioned how the changes occurring institutionally such as the proliferations of subspecialties specifically, might impact the intellectual underpinnings of leisure studies (and vice versa).

Based on the historical and contemporary concerns, including my own, two primary intellectual areas appear to significantly influence the institutional study and practice of leisure. These two areas include the collective identity of the field and leisure’s connection to society.

Collective Identity

Despite a misunderstanding of what leisure is, the value or importance of leisure has defined the field from most perspectives. No other discipline focuses specifically on the human behavior of leisure. I argue that leisure behavior is what makes leisure studies and related recreation specialties different from business management or public health or social work, even though many of the ways leisure practice and research are embodied use the same approaches as these fields. However, leisure does not resonate intellectually or institutionally with everyone.

In the United States, a singular focus on the institution of parks and/or recreation defined the field initially (Sessoms & Henderson, 2009). Leisure studies became connected as a means to establish the underlying academic and social legitimacy. Chick (1997) concluded that in the United States, however, issues of political economy have had more influence on the field than philosophical issues. Along with the initial focus on parks and recreation as a social service in communities came the recognition of the market potential related to fields such as sports, tourism, event management, and commercial recreation. Dustin and Goodale (1999) described how the profession has lost its mission and become a highly segmented and disjointed collection of curricula driven by the political economy. Rose and Dustin (2009) also lamented the “sell out” of leisure researchers and universities to neo-liberal issues reflecting this political economy.

The compatibility of leisure studies and fields of practice have been debated. In the United States, the National Park and Recreation Association (NRPA) has dominated higher education and presumably has been the keeper of the mission and the collective identity. Many researchers, educators, and practitioners have taken this relationship for granted. Burdge (1985), Chick (1997), and Samdahl (2000), however, have suggested this relationship has been detrimental to leisure studies for several reasons.

In 1985 Burdge presented a compelling argument for the separation of leisure from parks and recreation from the standpoint of intellectual perspectives within higher education. He suggested that different preparation is needed for undergraduates (i.e., a focus on...
training) than graduate students (i.e., focus on theory), that faculty in the two areas (i.e., leisure studies verses parks and recreation) had different orientations, and that no linkage exists between leisure research and needs of park and recreation education. He stated, “The question is whether scholarly research can be conducted within a setting that has the dual objectives of training managers and pursuing an unbiased research program” (p. 139). Burdge proposed that the United States needed separate departments in universities, an American Leisure Studies Association in addition to NRPA, and institutes for leisure studies that were interdisciplinary.

The respondents to Burdge (1985) were unanimously in disagreement. Godbey (1985), for example, argued for cross-pollination between leisure studies and parks and recreation. He suggested that an intellectualizing process within parks and recreation would minimize the differences. He also questioned whether an individual could be a successful practitioner in the field without understanding the role of leisure in society, leisure behavior, motivations, and satisfactions. Godbey emphasized that common values were more important than talking about differences. Smith’s (1985) response noted how normal these conflicts are in fields that have strong academic and strong professional communities.

Samdahl (2000) similarly argued 15 years later that as the field moves closer to business management as evidenced by the emerging specialties, it moves away from theoretical foundations. She noted that traditional leisure journals validate the status quo and practitioners are taught to uphold unwaveringly the importance and value of leisure, and not to be self-critical. She argued for a common perspective that maintains the goal of enhancing people’s lives through a better understanding of leisure. However, Samdahl advocated for reaching this goal by discarding most positivist and functional theories and replacing them with critical and postmodern perspectives.

Coalter (1997) noted that postmodernism, particularly in the United Kingdom, is a contributor to the intellectual crisis if professionals believe the illusion of collective identities and common interests is even possible. I believe carrying postmodernism to its final conclusion, however, will most assuredly result in the falling sky. Acknowledging the postmodern condition need not mean conceding that theory or commonality is impossible. Having a collective identity is important as Stewart, Parry, and Glover (2008) suggested regarding the need for an idealized vision of the end states of society as well as the roles for leisure research that move society closer to this idealized vision.

Another specific aspect of the collective identity is the relationship between theory and practice. The potential of enhancing the leisure lives of people can occur both through theory and practice. However, as Hemingway and Parr (2000) contended, leisure research and leisure practice are two independent professional paradigms just as Burdge (1985) noted earlier.

I prefer to think of theory and practice as overlapping paradigms. Hemingway and Parr (2000) defined a paradigm as a coherent set of assumptions broadly recognized and agreed on by those working within the paradigm. They suggested that leisure studies and professional practices operate from two different paradigms. They also suggested, however, that mitigating the distinction requires a process of social construction—it does not just happen. They suggested that to have a unified profession, academics and practitioners should be able to identify keywords that are anchor points, which has not happened. Their analysis also pointed to the lack of identity that practitioners have with leisure studies. This concern has become further exacerbated by the diversity of specializations within the leisure field. Perhaps a disconnect lies with educators and researchers who have become so specialized that they do not see a common identity and mission related to leisure studies. This lack of intellectual agreement has resulted in a new perceived crisis of fragmentation.
The situation has changed, but the perception of intellectual fragmentation is not new. I propose the field is currently a three generational family who are all trying to survive together. Therein lays the challenge. The grandparents might be the disciplines such as sociology or geography (Aitchison, 2006). However, Coalter (1999) noted that UK leisure researchers have only one foot in leisure and one foot in a discipline, whereas in the United States, leisure researchers have both feet in leisure. Thus, the intellectual connections of leisure studies to its parents are less strong in the United States than the connection to recreation-related practice.

The children of this analogy (i.e., the third generation) are the specialties (e.g., tourism, therapeutic recreation, commercial recreation, sport management) that have emerged in the past decades. Godbey (2000) argued that specialization has been detrimental resulting in separate organizations and journals as well as divisions within academic units. Chick (1997) noted, however, that the institutional discourses of sport and tourism have created a reality more alluring than the idea of leisure for researchers, and I would add students. Rowe (2002) indicated that perceptions by students may be that leisure is not employable, but sport or tourism is.

The implications of specializations have not always been tied to collective identity for higher education research and professional preparation or to practice. The academic home of a specialty should reflect the intellectual orientation of the phenomenon. For example, if the leisure field is to contribute to practice, sports management that is housed in a traditional parks and recreation department ought to have a philosophy different than what might be found if that major was in a business or management school. Research conducted would also be different. If a leisure analysis is not part of education or research, then perhaps there is no need for leisure studies units (e.g., university programs or journals) to exist.

The challenge for any academic unit within the 21st century is to determine its mission, niche, and values. That unit, however, must have an intellectual identity with a broader social phenomenon. Perhaps the fragmentation of leisure studies is in not knowing what “holds us together.” Focusing on enhancing the leisure lives of individuals can be done regardless of whether focused on sports, arts, special events, or the outdoors. However, the children (i.e., specializations) have not always perceived themselves as containers for leisure behavior. This lack of connections among the three generations has changed the collective identity. Just as leisure studies segmented itself from a particular discipline, specialties are now establishing their own identities not necessarily related to the intellectual roots of leisure.

**Leisure and Society**

A deeper intellectual analysis of the perceived crisis and fragmentation pertains to defining and redefining the role of leisure in society. As noted above, perhaps the lack of collective identity is reflective of the misunderstood meanings of leisure in society. Pronovost and D’Amours (1990) said that “the main problems and the players change, perspectives are modified, and the focuses of attention shift; what we call ‘society’ changes in turn; and thus research into leisure changes” (p. 45). Rojek (1995) argued for decentering leisure and fully acknowledging that leisure only exists in society and not apart from it. Similarly, Burton and Jackson (1989) warned that if the field is guided only by changes in recreation and leisure practice and self-generated change from leisure scholars without looking at broader social issues and trends, the field will languish, be dismissed, and seen as tangential and irrelevant. I would argue, however, that if leisure professionals do not continually articulate how leisure fits in historical and cultural contexts, leisure studies will definitely fade away. This thought was echoed by Coalter (1997, 1999), who emphasized that the crisis of leisure
research is because of not having addressed satisfactorily the meanings of leisure globally regardless of the perspectives taken or the geographic situation of researchers.

Williams (1997) attempted to address the perceived problem of the “isolation” of North American leisure studies by editing a special issue of Leisure Sciences to create what he hoped would be an ongoing international intellectual dialogue about leisure research. My perusal of the subsequent issues of the journal did not indicate that a widespread dialogue was begun, but the authors of the articles raised several issues that remain relevant today. Mommaas (1997) argued that European leisure research dominated by sociology lost its momentum after the 1970s, and related concepts such as time, consumption, globalization, commodification, play, and pleasure were researched but not in the context of leisure. He argued leisure should be the unifying concept because the historical homogeneity or unity regarding the project of leisure had been fragmented. Mommaas asked whether leisure should be revisioned, or whether leisure researchers should accept it as part of the “flimsiness and lightness of the present postmodern’ existence?” (p. 242). These issues have resulted in further pluralizing the field of leisure research, which unlike Burton and Jackson (1989), Mommaas did not consider positive.

Respondents to the Leisure Sciences special issue addressed the propositions put forward by Mommaas (1997) as well as Coalter (1997) from additional perspectives. Lynch (1997) astutely observed that the crisis in leisure studies in the United Kingdom may be due to postmodernism, but the crisis in the United States may be linked to practice. Stebbins (1997) argued that fragmentation is more friend than foe. He suggested that the perceived fragmentation steers researchers toward particular forms of leisure (e.g., sport, tourism), which ultimately have the potential to impact more people than when leisure is broadly considered. Chick (1997) noted similar to Shaw (2000) and Samdahl (2000), that questioning leisure as unmitigated good must also be examined relative to leisure as an instrument for social control. Shaw (1997) was critical of both Mommaas and Coalter for failing to offer a detailed solution or a vision for the future. She advocated for directing leisure research towards pressing social needs, issues and concerns, rather than looking more narrowly at leisure studies related to professionalism.

I suggest that most researchers, educators, and practitioners acknowledge the value of free time, enjoyment, and leisure. However, sometimes that importance has been lost in the everyday focus of research and practice. The failure to see how leisure fits into a broader society, regardless of whether the actual term is used, has created a crisis. Chick (1997) suggested that perhaps professionals should be less restrictive in defining leisure and be more open to how the conditions in which it is practiced and the way it is studied have changed. Ultimately, leisure cannot be divorced from society, and the efforts of researchers and practitioners are needed, regardless of the area of specialty within the field. If agreement exists, then moving forward is possible through an articulation of the value of leisure.

**Who Should We Tell?**

Whether leisure studies is undergoing a period of critical self-reflection (Rowe, 2002), attempting to be proactive, or simply (over) reacting, paralysis is not an option. Scholars and educators need to talk with one another before seeking to find the King, as Chicken Little thought should be done. Gathering friends along the way will be necessary. An internal discussion that identifies more than an internal conflict (Coalter, 1999) is needed. If the sky is falling then a plan is essential to be shared among ourselves and with others. Isolating ourselves from one another or from the issues will only lead to a faster demise. Talking to each other and identifying our friends will enable us to take charge of the future rather than relying on the political economy, which is most likely (the) King.
What about the Falling Sky?

I have tried to make the case that a crisis is normal and necessary for any field to move forward. However, rather than simply stating and restating the situation, possible solutions need to be identified recognizing that all solutions are tentative and always flexible. Panicking as Chicken Little did may not be the best approach. However, courage is needed to move forward and remain critically self-reflective. I also believe, as Godbey (2000) admonished, that we must quit apologizing for the subject matter of leisure. Leisure is important and is evolving in new ways that must be embraced.

I offer four approaches to contemplate to move forward and prevent the sky from falling. Acorns will naturally fall, but our concern must be for a bigger picture. These ideas are not revolutionary or necessarily new. However, they together may define one perspective regarding the current situation.

- Embrace change
- Articulate a collective identity
- Celebrate the contributions of leisure
- Identify collaborators

Change is Inevitable, but not Uncontrollable

The world is in a state of continual change. Researchers and practitioners must recognize that all knowledge is relative to changing social, cultural, and historical contexts. Change is difficult and inevitable. Rowe (2002) contended that “the future of leisure studies is bound up in changes that far exceed the powers of its practitioners to control. What they can do is to recognize these circumstances and seek to mould them, contextually, to their advantage” (p. 10). Rowe further warned that a self-defeating crisis will occur if we are inflexible, insecure, and illusionary. Similarly, Godbey (2000) emphasized that “. . . the field [must] decide to take risks, confront change, expose the content of the curricula to scrutiny, forget stand alone professionalism as a relevant model, and, above all, lead rather than blindly follow” (p. 41). Ultimately, we have some amount of control internally over how we react to change.

Most change is evolutionary and not revolutionary. Sometimes change is not evident until it becomes a crisis. The challenge is to anticipate change before it becomes a crisis. In addition, change is the new normal for leisure and society. Leisure studies must become homeostatic. Homeostasis is defined as self-regulating processes that systems use to maintain stability while adjusting to optimal conditions for survival. If homeostasis is successful, life continues. If it is unsuccessful, life ends. The stability is a dynamic equilibrium with continuous change occurring but uniform conditions prevailing. When a system is disturbed, the result is to regulate to establish a new balance. Professionals in leisure studies must recognize that the field is about self-reflexive change and homeostasis. Rowe (2002) summarized:

The dilemma for an applied field like leisure studies, then, remains: to transform or exchange its object of study in response to a real or imagined crisis or to affirm that the ‘object of study of the field is fixed’. Fixing the object of study becomes highly problematic; however, object, perspective and context are all subject to continual transmutation. (p. 6)

Articulating Collective Identity

Because change is inevitable, leisure researchers and educators must consider the evolving collective identity, even though that approach may be counter to the postmodern condition.
Burton and Jackson (1989) argued that leisure researchers must be concerned about the place at the end of the road as well as the means of getting there. The desired destinations must be known as well as the roads to travel. I contend the destinations hinge on collective identity. Pronovost and D’Amours (1990) implored that the field must be more than just applying management to leisure. Chick (1997) also suggested articulating what leisure is good for is essential. Similarly, Burton and Jackson concluded that the most important research topic is to address the values ascribed to leisure.

A collective identity may sound essentialist, and I agree with Aitchison (2000) who warns to be wary of totalizing or unidimensional depictions of any idea. However, unless researchers and educators can articulate what makes leisure studies different from other fields, perhaps we should not exist. Without a collective identity, fragmentation is inevitable. The world may change but basic values do not. Leisure should be a basic value. I contend that leisure is about enhancing the lives of people through enjoyable activity. This value makes leisure studies unique even though leisure has many containers in the form of specialties. Articulating and affirming the collective identity for ourselves as educators and researchers as well as for our students is a unique contribution we can make to grandparent disciplines as well as the specialized children.

**Contribution to Make**

If leisure researchers and educators are astute enough to recognize change and articulate a collective identity, the contributions the field can make to society, universities, knowledge systems, and students will be obvious. Leisure studies must contribute to the analysis and affirmation of what makes life meaningful. The imperative calling for leisure researchers is to provide a leisure analysis for the social sciences. No other field can make that contribution. If leisure is essential as a value, right, a privilege, and a responsibility then its importance must be articulated to society.

Further, leisure can be considered interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary all at once. Interdisciplinary is combining the knowledge from disparate disciplines to understand aspects of leisure from new perspectives. Multidisciplinary approaches are organized around a complex applied social problem or phenomenon that I would contend is leisure. Finally, transdisciplinarity connotes crossing many disciplinary boundaries to create a holistic approach to a subject. These multidimensional characteristics of our field enable us to connect and collaborate with others to make broad contributions to improving people’s lives and to better understanding leisure behavior.

**Collaborations**

Talking about communication, connections, and collaboration are cliché. Yet leisure does not exist in isolation and will not survive as a field of study without identifying integral connections with other researchers and practitioners. Pritchard (2006) affirmed that new leisure studies will be based on cooperation and collaboration. She advocated for the need to address multiple positions, practices, and insights, which she called *co-created knowledge*. Chick (1997) noted that some of the crisis experienced in our field may be due to boundary issues. The best way to break down boundaries is to communicate and collaborate. Although finding a collective identity is important, applying that identity to the study of social issues is paramount. The future will depend on collaborating with others both within the broad field as well as across disciplines and professions. If we try to institutionalize leisure as only for leisure professionals, we will not survive.

Jackson and Burton (1989) suggested that to enhance communication, and ultimately to break down barriers to the development of a common purpose in leisure studies, periodic
retrospective and prospective assessments of the field must be undertaken. Those assessments require internal collaboration as well as communication with our friends as well as the Foxy Loxy’s of the world.

Conclusions

The story of Chicken Little posed several questions to consider. I do not believe the sky is falling, but concerns (i.e., acorns) exist that cannot be ignored. The intellectual foundations of leisure studies must be continually examined as they have direct implications for institutional structures. Acorns are falling, but the sky has not fallen yet. Leisure researchers, educators, and practitioners must have the courage to recognize that change is occurring and that leaving the chicken yard and seeking friends is advisable. The King and the political economy cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, the King does not have the answers. We as a field hold the answers if we are willing to be open and flexible about the future and our important calling.

Similar to Burton and Jackson (1989), I am an unashamed pluralist. I believe room exists for a diversity of concepts, specialties, theories, and methods. However, I believe this pluralism must have articulated goals. Pluralism always is in danger of sliding into fragmentation (Jackson & Burton, 1989). Worthy visions for the future include embracing change as inevitable, articulating a clear but not inflexible collective identity, taking great pride in and celebrating the contributions made through leisure analyses as well as enhancing leisure for all, and actively identifying collaborators on all levels. We in leisure studies can create our own moral for the ending of the Chicken Little story.

References


