

LEISURE AS RESISTANCE: ACADEMIC DEBATES, SOCIAL ACTION, AND APPLICATIONS TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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Introduction

The concept of resistance in academic writing refers to actions or processes that challenge constraints or challenge forms of oppression imposed by powerful others. Thus resistance is closely tied to issues of freedom of choice, human agency, and individual empowerment. In addition, the notion of resistance also raises questions about the potential for social action and social and cultural change through challenges to existing power relations.

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the idea of leisure as resistance. It has been argued that leisure is an important site for resistant behaviours because of the relative freedom associated with leisure situations, as well as the opportunities for self-expression through leisure (Green, Hebron, & Woodward, 1990). Much of the discussion has been theoretical in nature, addressing, for example, how resistance should be conceptualized and defined, as well as different paradigmatic perspectives on resistance (Shaw, 2001). Empirical studies have also examined resistance in action, and the ways in which individuals have resisted constraints and empowered themselves through leisure (e.g., Dionigi, 2004; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Wearing, 1992).

Despite interest in the idea of leisure as resistance, this topic does not seem to have infiltrated the professional or applied component of the recreation and leisure field. The lack of attention to the practical applications of leisure as resistance may reflect the relatively recent discussion of this concept in the academic literature and/or the inaccessibility of this literature to practitioners in the field. The purpose of this present paper is to help to bridge this gap between theory and practice. Through analysis of current theoretical debates, as well as recent empirical research, the paper addresses the question of whether, and in what ways, the concept of leisure as resistance is applicable to recreation and leisure practice.

The Theoretical Debate

Current thinking about resistance is often attributed to Foucault's writings, particularly as they relate to his notion of power (e.g., Foucault, 1983). For Foucault, power was seen to be not only personal and individual, but also pervasive and unstable. He argued that power is produced and displayed through discourse, i.e., through ways of talking or communicating ideas about knowledge and truth. Thus he saw resistance -- or the enhancement of personal power -- to be available to everyone through the ever-present opportunity to challenge the discourse of powerful others and to create alternate ways of communicating and thinking about "truth".

Foucault's work has been criticized by other (more structuralist) theorists, who argue that his conceptualization of resistance as personal power tends to ignore structured power relations in society. In particular, Foucault paid relatively scant attention to the role of dominant groups in society that have easy access to power and thus have considerable control over dominant discourses, ideologies, or ways of thinking. This criticism of Foucault's ideas has led structuralist theorists to argue that resistance is not

just about ways to gain individual or personal empowerment, but also about collective or group challenges to dominant orthodoxies or ideologies (Ramazanoghu, 1993). In other words, while individual resistance may enhance personal power, collective resistance is more clearly linked to social activism. It challenges dominant societal views related to issues such as sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, ageism, heterosexism, and the stigmatization of people with mental or physical disabilities.

Other theoretical debates have addressed the need to recognize the various and complex ways in which resistance can occur. For example, resistance may not always reflect deliberate intent, but may sometimes be the unintended consequence of particular activities or behaviours (Shaw, 2001). Also, resistance can help individuals to create new identities for themselves (e.g., Wearing, 1992), and may influence, and in turn be influenced by, various contextual factors, such as other participants, supporters, or spectators. The complex nature of resistance, including differences in settings, intentions, outcomes, and behaviours, means that the process of resistance is often contradictory and incomplete. Settings where resistance occurs can also include reproductive processes (i.e., the “flip side” of resistance, when dominant power relations are reinforced and stigmatized individuals or groups are disempowered) at the same time.

The Empirical Research

Most of the empirical research on leisure as resistance has focussed on gender, and, more specifically, on ways in which women challenge dominant societal assumptions and beliefs about gender through their leisure behaviour. The specific gendered constraints on women’s leisure mean that simply claiming entitlement to personal or self-determined leisure can be seen to represent a form of resistance against the sometimes constraining roles of wife, mother, or girlfriend (e.g., Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Herridge, Shaw, & Mannell, 2003; Wearing, 1990). In addition, participation in certain types of leisure activity, such as sports, or motor bike riding, or even friendships with other women, can be seen as resistance because they can be used to challenge dominant beliefs or discourses about femininity and appropriate feminine behaviour (e.g., Auster, 2001; Green, 1998; Theberge, 2000).

Some of this research has shown that women’s resistance through non-traditional leisure choices is clearly facilitated by certain environmental, situational, or interactional conditions, that, for example, include support for and awareness of such opportunities (Auster, 2001). In addition, a number of studies have reinforced the idea that reproductive and resistant processes can occur simultaneously. For example, women’s participation in sport can celebrate the idea of women’s strength and power, while at the same time the media might be focussing on the athletes’ traditional female roles or representing them as sex objects (Guthrie & Castelnovo, 1992; Theberge, 2000).

These empirical studies of women’s leisure as resistance have also led to discussion of the many different and diverse ways in which social action through resistance can occur in leisure. For example, some of the constraining aspects of traditional masculinity imperatives could be challenged through men’s participation in resistant forms of leisure (Shaw, 2001). In addition, these ideas also apply to leisure that challenges other dominant orthodoxies such as stereotypes associated with age, ethnicity, or race. These types of resistance may take on different forms from gender-related resistance. It has been suggested, for instance, that there may be two different types of

resistance to race-related constraints. Resistance could be directed towards breaking down barriers and gaining opportunities to participate in a wide range of leisure activities. This would be consistent with arguments about women gaining access to male-dominated activities such as “male” sports. However, race-related resistance could also be manifested in a different way, through the choice of pursuits that reinforce the individual’s unique subcultures, thus helping to maintain cultural identity (Shinew, Floyd, & Parry, 2004).

Applications to Practice

Thinking about applications to practice of leisure as resistance leads to a number of suggestions about how this can or should be done, and also raises further questions for consideration. Since resistance is an act of empowerment, and since leisure is closely associated with choice and self-determination, resistance would appear to defy control or determination by others. Instead, the role of recreation practitioners may be more appropriately conceived as awareness, support for the initiative of participants where appropriate, and the provision of a supportive and receptive environment where possible. Awareness of the potential role of leisure as reproduction, or the reinforcement of dominant ideologies, is also an issue for consideration, leading to the suggestion that recreation professionals should take action, where possible, to discourage activities that act to further disempower groups that are already marginalized. This might mean discouraging activities that reinforce the sexualization of girls and women, or activities that reinforce stereotypes related to disability, or age etc. Further, awareness of individual desires to create new and different identities for themselves can lead to a better understanding of, and empathy for, various types of non-conforming behaviours or modes of dress, especially among young people.

The more difficult questions related to application to practice revolve around the “political” or social action aspects of resistance. The notion of leisure as a site for resistance (and reproduction) suggests that leisure is not simply the healthy enjoyment of freely chosen activities, but also has political implications related to power and ideology. Some recreation professionals may feel that their role does not include political involvement in any way. However, an argument could be made that the profession has been involved in political questions from its inception, ranging from the early playground movement, to programs for at-risk youth, to the more recent advocacy of the benefits movement. The idea of leisure as personal empowerment through individual resistance may have fairly widespread support, but the question of the profession’s role with respect to collective resistance, and the potential for leisure to bring about social and cultural change also need to be addressed. These ideas suggest that leisure plays a more important societal role than previously conceived -- a suggestion that can be both stimulating and disconcerting.

Overall, the issue of leisure as resistance places emphasis on personal empowerment and opportunities to challenge the constraints and difficulties that individuals face in their everyday lives. Recognition of this possibility clearly has implications for professional as well as personal practices. At the same time, the notion of resistance also directs attention to the potential role of leisure as an instigator and catalyst for broader social action and social change, including the potential to move towards a

more equitable society. This idea raises some new and challenging questions for practitioners as well as academics, but questions that are worthy of attention and debate.

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