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Is leisure studies “ethnocentric”?  
A view from Taichung, Taiwan

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Introduction

Roberts raises an important issue concerning cross-cultural or multi-ethnic comparative studies in leisure. His central thesis is that leisure studies has become more uniformly Anglophone and thus more “ethnocentric” over the past 40 years. Despite this, Roberts observes that the discipline has shown maturity by encouraging international comparative study. While I agree with him, it seems to me that Roberts’ emphasis is on larger social entities — mostly countries or continents — but neglects smaller units: local, folk traditions and their associated cultural differences. In other words, Roberts is in danger of adopting a “top-down” approach to leisure studies.

In referring to larger social groupings, Roberts was perhaps unintentionally applying definitions of “leisure” derived from the opinion shapers of societies such as China or India and then applying them in a top-down fashion. In this process, an anthropological or specifically cultural anthropological “bottom-up” approach (Chick, 1997, 1998) is neglected. In this tradition the researcher begins by observing the community — looking for repeated patterns of behaviour from which tentative hypotheses can be developed, tested, refined, and turned into a theory as data from other communities within the same society accumulates. The researcher asks: How do everyday people experience and understand leisure, and why do people tend to have certain leisure behaviour patterns (Li, 2009)? Researchers are faced with the problem of how to arrive at scientific conclusions that help explain similarities and differences in cultural patterns of leisure, especially when the researchers themselves are influenced by their own cultural biases and preconceived notions concerning the society that they are studying.

Cultural homogeneity and intra-cultural comparisons

A focus on larger-scale comparative leisure studies places more emphasis on inter-cultural comparative research. Intra-cultural comparisons and the issue of within-group homogeneity and heterogeneity, may be neglected. Recent studies (e.g., Li, Chick, Zinn, Absher, & Graefe, 2007) illustrate that there may be little agreement on what constitutes leisure within groups distinguished by country of origin (or cultural origin), even when broken down into subgroups by gender, age, and so on. As Brubaker (2006) indicates, ethnic groups are really folk categories, not scientific categories. The assumption of cultural homogeneity with respect to leisure underlying comparative

1 The author wishes to thank Garry Chick for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
research within countries, or even continents (e.g., leisure among Asians or Africans) must be turned into an empirical question. If groups fail to show consensus in some indicator presumed to constitute cultural groups, then the assumption of cultural homogeneity with respect to that group is shown to be unfounded. If comparative research fails to find cultural consensus on any particular leisure variables/domains, then comparing societies or groups on those variables/domains is not appropriate. Chick, Dong, Yeh, and Hsu (2009), for example, show that the domain of leisure activities differs substantially within cities in mainland China and Taiwan. The differences between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese cities are even more pronounced.

To refer now to my own field of interest, to the best of my knowledge, cultural anthropological approaches have not been brought to bear on research into marketing factors in leisure. Few studies explore the relationship between values/attitudes and marketing factors such as service quality, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (Li, Absher, Zinn, Graefe, & Chick, 2009). I suggest that further research take advantage of the existing research literature (e.g., Li, Zinn, Barro, & Manfredo, 2003; Li, Absher, Hsu, & Graefe, 2008) and apply methods such as cultural consensus analysis to leisure research. A better understanding of the relationship between cultural homogeneity/heterogeneity and marketing factors will, in my field, move the international comparative study of leisure forward (Li, Absher, Hsu, et al., 2008; Li, Chick, et al., 2007).

**Issues in international comparative studies of leisure**

According to Roberts “Asians can argue that theirs is an appropriate vision of global leisure for the 21st century,” but I wonder what research demonstrates that Asians share a single vision of leisure? My research suggests that Asians do not share a single vision, and I can find no other cross-cultural comparative research that suggests they do (Li, Chick, et al., 2007; Li, Lai, Chick, Zinn, & Graefe, 2007). Asian culture may be more “collective” than that of Westerners in some general sense but even this is open to debate or, at least, must be placed in appropriate contexts. “Asians” consist of a large number of cultural groups such as Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Mongolians, Indians, and Taiwanese, and there are subcultures within each of these national groups. Lumping cultures altogether, labelling them as “Asian,” and assuming they are all culturally homogenous, is not appropriate. (Gobster, 2007; Chick, Li, Zinn, Absher, & Graefe, 2007; Li, Absher, Graefe, & Hsu, 2008).

From the perspective of the study of “values,” to assess whether “Asians” do indeed possess an appropriate vision of global leisure, my research on Asian recreation visitors in the US, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from a cultural anthropological perspective, showed mixed results. For instance, my Hong Kong and Taiwan studies showed that Hong Kong and Taiwanese residents rated harmonious values higher and hedonistic values lower than Westerners. The findings also revealed mixed patterns of values and the effects of values on leisure behaviour on the part of different Asian cultural groups.

**Definitions of ethnicity and culture**

Roberts concludes that the quantum leap through comparative research will be theory driven. I completely agree with him and believe that in order to conduct a comparative examination which is theoretically informed, it is essential to have a relatively clear definition of *ethnicity* and *culture*. Unambiguous definitions would help when
investigating the causes of leisure behaviour cross culturally, reducing possible ethnocentric limitations. As Floyd (1998, p.6) noted:

Researchers have tended to be content with accepting ethnicity and subculture as givens rather than as concepts in need of definition and explanation. This is reflected in the reliance on racial categories and ethnic labels as measures of “culture” to test for ethnic differences. The conventional approach has been to interpret significant differences in participation rates that remain after controlling for socio-economic factors as cultural differences, without specifying which aspects of ethnic culture affect leisure behaviour.

It should not come as a surprise that there are many more definitions of culture than of ethnicity. Among definitions of ethnicity, I favour Nagel’s (1994) definition of ethnicity as a category distinguishable from other categories of the same type: Ethnicity is socially constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality. The location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalised both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outside observers (Nagel, 1994, p. 154).

For a definition of culture, I suggest using Goodenough’s (1957, p. 167) highly influential definition which includes values, along with knowledge and beliefs, as a major component. Goodenough’s definition also provides a theoretical approach in the use of values to explain leisure behaviour:

A society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, behaviour, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them (Goodenough, 1957).

The power of values segmentation on leisure behaviour

In order to learn comparative insights about people’s leisure behaviour, I suggest examining the relationships between the segmentation of cultural values and leisure behaviour variables. Given that within-group variations in values can be as great as between groups, one way to solve this problem is to employ cluster analysis to find interpretable values segments. Cluster analysis segments meaningful cultural groups with homogeneous values, especially when socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, age) and cultural values dimensions are combined. The value segments, if found, give a skeletal structure and provide a straightforward and parsimonious approach to investigating complex sets of values. Value segments translate abstract cultural values into actionable portraits on which to base service and product development, communication strategies, and other marketing actions to match different group segments’ value orientations. This approach provides a scientific way to explore the relationships between cultural values and behaviour variables and allows marketers to develop niche leisure products and promotional themes that fulfil the segment’s values (Li, Zinn, Chick, Absher, Graefe, & Hsu, 2007).

Conclusion

I advocate the adoption of a cross-disciplinary approach in comparative leisure research, an approach which may include dis-
ciplines such as cultural anthropology, psychology, sociology, geography, political science, management, marketing, hospitality, and natural science. Such an approach can reduce ethnocentric bias to a certain degree and enhance the validity of the variable/domain under comparison. Furthermore, I suggest that future comparative research in leisure studies needs to include intra-cultural (e.g., within country), cross-regional comparisons to complement the study of individual ethnic and cultural groups, such as the Taiwanese.

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