Research Reflection

The Potential of Interdisciplinarity for Leisure Research

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Interdisciplinarity has the potential to reflect, assess, and even re-structure how social life is experienced and understood. Interdisciplinarity presents a way not only to build upon and enhance the descriptive capacity of leisure theory but also to challenge how researchers question, understand, frame, and provide solutions to broader social problems. In this essay, I explore concepts of interdisciplinarity and consider its potential for the leisure field. Incorporating an interdisciplinary approach based upon a dialectical mode of inquiry and concentrating on relationships and context can help leisure researchers to forward the debates regarding the place and role of leisure in social life as well as the development of concepts and theories. Further, revealing new understandings and approaches can shake the foundations of theory, research, knowledge, and validity. Using a few examples from past and current research, I explore how a critical interdisciplinary approach can strengthen leisure and tourism research by allowing a variety of perspectives to converse with one another.

As a field of social inquiry, leisure has been investigated from a variety of approaches including economics, psychology, geography, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, history, environmental science, and cultural studies. Although these approaches have contributed to a more sophisticated understanding of leisure, they have generally been either discipline-based or multidisciplinary. In addition, the body of theoretical work has been relatively thin due to borrowing concepts and tools from “parent” disciplines. Although interdisciplinary approaches in leisure and tourism fields are growing, they are still the minority. In many instances, the location of leisure, recreation, and tourism studies departments within the confines of particular university faculties and/or business schools limits their reach and exposure to other ways of thinking. Many researchers embrace opportunities to build upon their disciplinary training, but more possibilities remain to systematically enhance these opportunities and to encourage exploration outside of the intellectual comfort zones fostered by disciplinary training. When confronted with a new way of thinking about leisure, are researchers encouraged to learn about other disciplinary traditions and methods of inquiry? Is there enough time and opportunity to have a meaningful conversation across the disciplinary divides?

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Investigating leisure questions from a deliberate interdisciplinary perspective is a necessity for more than the reason that leisure is a complex and changing subject that requires assessment from multiple perspectives. Interdisciplinarity provides opportunities to extend the debate through the development of integrative contextually-based and theoretically-driven critical analyses. These analyses are integral to the future of meaningful leisure research as they challenge the ideological assumptions underpinning current research in this area.

**Moving into Interdisciplinary Spaces**

Engaging the on-going debate about terminology is not useful, but clear distinctions are made increasingly between multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity. Multidisciplinary approaches bring together the knowledge of one or more disciplines but do not seek to transcend their respective paradigmatic, epistemological, ontological, or methodological boundaries to generate new understandings. Team-based research undertaken at universities, for example, would be placed here. Interdisciplinarity, however, represents an effort to undertake inquiry through the systematic and deliberate integration of more than one discipline to develop new paradigmatic, epistemological, ontological, and methodological approaches. It is a purposeful challenge to old ideas to create new understandings. While transdisciplinarity is undoubtedly a lofty goal of social research and leisure research (Hemmingway & Parr, 2000), the purpose of this essay is to consider interdisciplinarity as arguably a much more practical undertaking and one that does not necessarily preclude the development of transdisciplinarity. Indeed, whether transdisciplinarity is even feasible as an effort to interconnect all aspects of the social world and grasp the total dynamics of reality as a whole is debatable.

Perhaps a useful approach for engaging more directly with notions of interdisciplinarity is to deal briefly with conceptions of disciplinarity. Echoes of Kuhn (1970) abound in thinking of disciplines built on sets of internal and external rules and relationships that underscore that particular approach to inquiry. In this way, the methods and motivations of research are concentrated and deemed valuable. A particular version of social reality is created and reinforced. Disciplines have undergone important intellectual shifts in response to challenges by constructivists, post-modernists, feminists, and others. If change is beneficial to social research, then the benefits of acting to remove disciplinary “blinders” can help further these developments.

Intra-disciplinary epistemological and ontological challenges notwithstanding, the particularity and partiality of research guided primarily by one discipline is not surprising. In my view, at least four fundamental difficulties underscore an adherence to analyses generated from one disciplinary “take” on the research problem. First, as one discipline illuminates a specific set of social relationships, asks specific questions, and shapes a specific appreciation for the research topic and modes of inquiry, another discipline undertakes the same exercise from a different position. Pulling apart and casting light on one component leaves others in shadow.

A second and related difficulty is that the disciplinary act of identifying particular components of a research problem for investigation, albeit with the goal of achieving objectivity and rigor, often lacks a contextual grounding. Rather than slicing one facet of social life and placing it under the “microscope,” researchers and theorists must appreciate the varying and ever-changing sets of relationships and entanglements that guide social life as well as their various interpretations.

Third, one-sided disciplinary approaches have the potential to prevent a reflexive appreciation guided by challenging the sets of assumptions, beliefs, and motivations that shape theory and responses. For instance, when I talk with colleagues from psychology, sociology, and geography, I am thinking not only about the topic or problem being discussed but also
about the assumptions and ways of thinking about the world that underscore each statement a colleague makes. In this way, I am involved in an intellectual exercise in its own right, thereby forcing a deeper thinking about my own position.

The final and most important difficulty is that partial understandings reveal only partial opportunities for social struggle and meaningful social change. Disciplinary approaches validate some interpretations over others and may thereby occlude opportunities for change. To continue the microscope analogy, which facet of social life will the disciplinary researcher slice? Why? Which slices will be ignored or unseen? Of course, all who undertake to capture the complexity of social life at a given moment in time face this challenge. I am not suggesting that disciplinary approaches are without value, but rather that these partial understandings are most useful insofar as they might be combined with others to reveal a picture of the greater whole as well as new opportunities for struggle and change.

Interdisciplinarity has the potential to address the four difficulties mentioned above. First, its aims at integration to cultivate a more holistic approach based on new sets of understandings. While multidisciplinarity is generally considered to be additive, interdisciplinary research often expects to enhance dialogue, generate mutual understandings, create new knowledge, and even lead to a radical restructuring of the disciplines (Stefanovic, 1996). Kroker (1980) argued that interdisciplinary research holds the promise of an alternative approach to knowledge, a rearrangement of the human sciences, and thereby the potential for a new critical approach to what Anderson (1996) called creative disobedience. Revealing new understandings entails challenging this specialized abstraction and should be considered a new form of knowledge and knowing.

Exactly how this new knowledge is created through interdisciplinarity is still somewhat vague. The reflexive act of self-questioning that stems from an openness to new ideas and ways of thinking allows for an imagining of other interpretations and explanations. Disciplinary self-awareness develops as the concepts and notions used in different disciplines come into contact with one another. Many authors suggest that interdisciplinarity incorporates a dialectic approach. Integrated understanding comes at the resolution of disciplinary differences. Yet, conceptualizing interdisciplinarity as a dialectical process need not rest on the assumption that opposites or even antagonisms must clash to create a new synthetic understanding. Instead, thinking about the spaces where the disciplines meet and reveal other ways of knowing as they influence and shape one another is more instructive. Following Massey (1999), one must appreciate the interrelationships between disciplines as they work together to create an enhanced understanding: “[a] consciousness not of one’s identity as the result of difference from, but as the product of one’s specificity in terms of multiple relations to” (p.6).

Discipline-based research that is abstract and removed from the real life context is also a concern. As Klein (1990) argued, interdisciplinarity can be problem-based research “responsive to, and partly dependent upon, social needs” (p.122). Additionally, this in-depth contextualized assessment of real life is a way of creating space for an improved understanding of the forces at work and hearing new voices through ontological and epistemological exploration. Setting the forces of interdisciplinarity against the various critiques of discipline-based approaches in this fashion is informative if only to garner an understanding of the potential that interdisciplinarity has for research in general. The rest of the essay locates these ideas more deeply in a consideration of my own areas of recent leisure research inquiry.

(Rural) Tourism as an Interdisciplinary Leisure Research Project

For researchers engaged in tourism, an unbridled acceptance of tourism as a mechanism for rural growth with long-lasting political, social, economic, and environmental implications
is an issue. While it is becoming increasingly clear that rural tourism development generally needs to be rethought, few attempts have made connections between tourism as a mechanism for rural growth and the larger relatively unchallenged ideological underpinnings that portray tourism as the panacea of rural development. Disciplinary and even multidisciplinary approaches are not generally sufficient in their ability to reveal alternative conceptualizations of tourism insofar as they do not necessarily counter the ideological bases and unspoken assumptions that dominate much of the field of tourism studies.

Using an interdisciplinary approach to rural tourism studies provides an entry point into contemporary social theorizing and creates room for bridging the spaces between disciplinary thinking. Unveiling tourism as an activity driven by the inherent and defining social dynamics of the capitalist system, for example, is clearly a project that resides within the interconnections of many disciplines such as political science, economics, geography, and sociology. Case studies undertaken in rural communities that identify sociological, cultural, political, historical, geographical, spatial, economic, environmental, and other sets of relationships come closer to providing an in-depth understanding of the multi-faceted and ever-changing context of tourism development than any one discipline-based approach. The relationships that become important for analysis is determined more by the context of the particular case than by the dictates of the dominant discipline.

Even those analysts seeking to draw attention to the ideological underpinnings of most tourism studies, as well as planning and development, would benefit from interaction with other approaches. Arguments put forward by Marxian historians, for example, are useful in that they draw attention to the unequal power relations underlying the processes by which meanings and definitions are created through tourism. A need exists, however, to broaden the assertion that the forces of capitalist relations are the only defining powers at work. As discussed in the community development and cultural studies literature, power rests with developers, operators and those customers who pay money to see a tourism attraction or to have an experience. However, power also rests with community members who work to define how they are viewed by the outside world, and which aspects of community life they choose to commodify and which they choose to preserve. Challenging the ways that rural areas are defined, constructed, and re-constructed over time and across space is a necessary component of grounded social research. Understanding the ways tourism development works as part of this construction as well as the impacts of these processes is also necessary. An interdisciplinary approach has helped to make the point that challenging the assumptions underlying the why of tourism development is as or more important as challenging the how of tourism development.

A current example involves a project with curling clubs in rural Canadian communities. Disciplinary training leads me to incorporate the perspectives and assumptions of political science, political economy, and geography but this work even at these early stages is already touching on the worlds of sociology, psychology, community health, economics, and organizational behavior. My own training will hardly be cast aside, but the exploration of these other worlds can only broaden and deepen my understanding as research decisions are taken and analysis begins.

How we approach questions of leisure and its connection to larger questions of social reality will determine the outcomes of the enterprise. Actively seeking to integrate other disciplinary perspectives into leisure research is one step in confronting important considerations that must be made transparent rather than being mere givens in the research process. Who we speak to, what forms of information we deem valid for our study, how we gather and assess that information, and who ultimately sees and uses the results of our research as well as the overarching purpose and motivation for the project must be considered from outside our disciplinary dictates.
Leisure research is undeniably complex. An interdisciplinary approach may be used to help shape critical social research as leisure researchers struggle for better more nuanced understandings and theories. I do not mean that no benefit exists in continuing research within the confines of various disciplines. Increased attention, however, should be given to the spaces where these disciplines reveal different aspects of the overall question of leisure development and especially where these understandings can be integrated. Investigating leisure with many lenses holds the potential to better understand social life. Having these lenses brought together within an integrated focus holds the potential to develop better social theory, build the field, and reveal avenues for more effective social change.

Moreover, a critical stance within leisure research is essential for academic and practical reasons. Like most fields within social science, a new injection of ideas and challenges is needed to keep the field healthy and growing. This essay encourages new directions for leisure research as part of exploring the potential to meet that need. Second, and arguably more important, the corporatization and growing commodification of tourism and leisure experiences have the potential to wreak havoc and leave pervasive and irreversible political, economic, social, and environmental damage in their wake. Critical approaches are essential if they can stretch the debate and help include a more cautious attitude.

For me, the challenge and opportunity of leisure studies rest with its continuing move towards interdisciplinarity. This stance creates an opportunity for bridging the spaces where disciplinary thinking intersects. Although this discussion of interdisciplinarity is undoubtedly still falling within the rubric of the social sciences, the understandings gained are no less meaningful and the steps across the so-called hard/soft science divide are perhaps more easily taken when some of the footing is already there. Leisure problems are real life problems and require an approach driven by issues at hand rather than the dictates of the disciplines involved.

**Interdisciplinarity or Just Touring the Disciplines?**

Hutcheon (1997) wrote that, “what is currently passing for interdisciplinarity in the academy may well be a more modest form of disciplinary tourism that we might call ‘interdiscursivity’ “ (p.20). Using tourism as a metaphor allows her to warn against a rather arbitrary approach to research that is in danger of passing for interdisciplinarity. She also posits that to do interdisciplinary research, one must be grounded in one or more disciplines to be able to cross borders. Is it necessarily a question of crossing borders or are we revealing the extent to which knowledge is not divisible? Does this idea mean that social researchers can just pick and choose their theoretical tools from a variety of disciplines and combine them in an ad hoc approach? These types of questions suggest that reflection and investigation into the challenges and implications of interdisciplinary leisure research is warranted.

Although I have not engaged notions of leisure and tourism experiences directly, it is clear that they are much more than a collection of meaningless tokens and stories. Interdisciplinary leisure researchers journeying through the disciplines should take the time to investigate the contexts into which they are entering, treat those they meet in those contexts with respect and interest, keep their minds open for new understandings and perspectives and, as I would hope for tourists, be changed fundamentally by their journeys.

**References**


