

Conceptual paper

Some Thoughts about Leisure Education, Therapeutic Recreation, and the Philosophy of Spiderman

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Abstract

In this brief paper, the authors identify a few principles that guide their work as therapeutic recreation practitioners, educators, and researchers that seem appropriate to share here. The authors describe how they believe that respect and self-determination are the foundation of therapeutic recreation practice and leisure education delivery. An overview of these concepts is provided and information is presented about the complexity of the construct of self-determination. In addition, research examining the value of promoting self-determination is highlighted. When providing leisure education and analyzing therapeutic recreation services, professionals are encouraged to access various methods and perspectives to address any issue. Next, the authors draw the reader's attention to the difference between conducting research and providing comprehensive leisure education services. Further, they suggest that engaging in a dialogue on a topic is helpful and that there is a variety of ways to engage in scholarly discourse. Finally, the authors admit their position of privilege and communicate their dedication to conscientiously pursuing truth in a respectful manner.

Keywords: *Leisure education, therapeutic recreation, self-determination, respect, research*

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Recent critiques of leisure education research (e.g., Dieser, 2011) have created a unique learning opportunity to share some ideas that have helped to guide us as facilitators of therapeutic interventions and leisure services, therapeutic recreation educators, and researchers when we provide services, learn with our students and practitioners, and conduct research. Although some of the concepts addressed in this paper are articulated elsewhere (e.g., Dattilo, in press), this paper addresses ideas that we feel are particularly relevant given the recent critique of leisure education research. We hope other therapeutic recreation specialists who are engaged in research and service delivery might find these issues useful to consider.

The first two ideas addressed in this paper are the importance of respect and the value of self-determination. These two beliefs create the foundation for our work related to therapeutic recreation and leisure education. The third idea we present focuses on the importance of considering multiple perspectives when involved in service delivery as well as any evaluation or research associated with such services. Given some of the confusion about the connection between practice and research we devote the remaining portion of the paper to sharing our thoughts about distinguishing between providing therapeutic recreation services and conducting research, as well as considerations and responsibilities when engaged in scholarly pursuits and dialogue.

We Ought to Treat Everyone We Encounter with Respect and Dignity

The importance of demonstrating respect for others is a principle that many of our role models such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama, and Martin Luther King, Jr. have all expressed and bears repeating here. It is valuable when we present a particular perspective that we remain respectful and treat others with dignity. Sometimes even the choice between words that are otherwise synonymous can change the tone of a sentence from respectful to disrespectful, and it is important for us to consider those choices carefully. Choosing to identify a scholarly body of work as oversimplified may create division between the originator of a message and the person providing feedback. If we are genuinely seeking to offer helpful feedback, it is always worth the time for us to consider how our words may be perceived and work to communicate respectfully, perhaps by suggesting, "The author's conclusions raise some concerns such as . . ."

Respect for others is a trait essential to the provision of human services. One of the motivations that first drew us to the delivery and research of therapeutic recreation services was a deeply personal concern about the ways in which others are treated. Over the years we have found that an important antidote to oppression of any kind is to consider our common humanness, to be considerate of another's rights, and to treat each other with dignity. Similar ideas can be presented in very different ways depending on the degree to which the conveyer of ideas maintains respect for others.

Everyone Has the Right to be Self-determined

While not above critique, self-determination is a well-founded principle that is important to our understanding of human behavior. Over decades of research, Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, and colleagues have concluded that three fundamental psychological needs are the basis for motivation and characterize self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Although these three needs associated with self-determination have been identified, the relevance and importance of each of these varies across individuals and cultures.

Given the interaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, many people's sense of self-determination is affected by a variety of socially influenced factors including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Scully (2008) observed that "what actually makes autonomy possible is not detachments, but the social relationships that provide the conditions for experiencing and maintaining self-determination" (p. 161). Rather than being antithetical to social contexts, self-determination is often intertwined with them. It is worthwhile noting that the social context of leisure experiences is reflected in the leisure education curricula we, and most, if not all others, have developed.

Ryan and Deci (2006) cite several studies that support the conclusion that autonomy functions similarly across cultures, including those where collectivistic thought predominates, such as in Japan (e.g., Yamauchi & Tanaka, 1998) and South Korea (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003).

Based on extensive research, Ryan and Deci commented on theorists who identify the irrelevance of autonomy in non-Western samples:

These theorists seem to assume that when one fits in with a group, acts in accord with tradition, or follows the guidance of parents, one is necessarily lacking autonomy. Yet the view that assenting to external guides or influences is antithetical to autonomy is inconsistent with current philosophical perspectives on autonomy and is counter to considerable self-determination theory research (Ryan, 1993). Further, we do not dispute that cultures value independence and individualism differently. But the question is, if people truly valued and endorsed collectivism, would they not be autonomous when acting in accord with these values? Conversely, if they felt controlled to act collectively, would this not have psychological costs for them? (pp. 1577-1578)

The principle of self-determination offers both understandable and well-researched explanations for human behavior that are invaluable to research involving humans and with therapeutic recreation services.

Research supports the value of promoting self-determination for people with disabilities. While Deci, Ryan, and others have conducted numerous investigations on self-determination, especially as it influences learning, Wehmeyer and colleagues have extensively researched the implementation of techniques designed to empower people to be self-determined; specifically, people

with disabilities. These researchers have found that instruction that promotes self-determination has a variety of positive effects and has become a best practice in providing services to people with disabilities (e.g., Wehmeyer et al., 2012). For example, after conducting a narrative meta-synthesis on self-determination for youth with disabilities, Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar and Alwell (2009) concluded that there has been considerable progress in research and interventions to promote self-determination. Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm, and Soukup (2010) reported that such advances are important because research has linked individual self-determination status to the attainment of a variety of positive outcomes for people with disabilities including the ability to transition to adulthood in such areas as recreation (McGuire & McDonnell, 2008), and experiencing a more positive quality of life and life satisfaction (Lachapelle et al., 2005; McDougall, Evans, & Baldwin, 2010).

Over the past decade, Weymeyer and colleagues have tested the self-determination learning model of instruction (Wehmeyer, Palmer Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000) and found considerable evidence supporting the value of such instruction. For example, Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, and Little (2011) examined the impact of education services based on the model and identified significant positive changes in goal attainment and inclusion for youth receiving such treatment.

We Ought to Consider Perspectives that Differ from Our Own

Providing leisure education can be challenging given that people living in diverse situations within our community consider different elements of an experience to be important to a meaningful existence. As a result, developing leisure education services requires careful attention to cultural factors and contexts. It is helpful to develop an understanding that various perspectives exist and are important to consider when attempting to meet the needs of the people we serve. Sackett, Rosenberg, Muir Gray, Haynes and Richardson (1996) identified the importance of considering the values and preferences of clients and that it is a fundamental principle of evidence-based practice. As such, it is helpful for us to learn about these values and preferences. We might discover that some people whom we serve prefer (and respond to) educational interventions that are delivered in settings other than a classroom and that utilize social media rather than paper and pencil worksheets. It also can be useful to remember that it is unlikely that we will ever work with a client who shares the precise set of values and worldview as any other person (including ourselves). These differences provide us with an opportunity to celebrate the uniqueness of each individual and allow us to learn from others and to improve services at the same time.

When we reflect on the many perspectives that are held by individuals across the world, we recognize that our own perspectives on any issue are limited. The more we realize how narrow our perspectives are, and subsequently, our need to broaden our perspectives, we feel humility. As we

experience opportunities to become more humble, we believe we grow as individuals.

There is a Difference between Conducting Research and Providing Services

People who conduct research with humans recognize that there are requirements in the design of research studies that differ from those demands associated with typical service delivery. When conducting systematic inquiry about humans, questions are often narrowly-focused so that many variables can be held constant; thereby increasing the validity and reliability of conclusions. Thus, demands of service delivery and research can be quite different.

It is one thing if we limit service delivery to a particular approach; it is a very different thing if we conduct research examining a specific aspect of service delivery to determine effects of the approach on people. When applied researchers work to systematically ask specific and focused research questions, it does not mean they are suggesting that the particular approach being studied is the only idea that practitioners need to consider when addressing the complex challenges that their constituents encounter.

A research study, regardless of how well it is designed, is unable to account for all theoretical perspectives. Accounting for all theoretical perspectives would be intellectually overwhelming, and different theories can contradict one another. Also, when researchers conclude that “X influences Y,” they do not typically mean that “X influences Y, and that there is nothing else to consider” or “Other variables are not important for Y.” Each study adds

a piece to a puzzle, moving us closer to evidenced-based practice. Researchers have a relatively narrow scope and are afforded limited space in describing a particular study. We encourage practitioners, researchers, and theorists (e.g., postmodern critics) to realize these limitations and strengths of research and to avoid treating research conclusions as being reflective of comprehensive service delivery.

As discussed, research is often designed to answer relevant and meaningful questions that address socially and personally relevant problems; we are unaware of research associated with therapeutic recreation that is designed to restrict service delivery to only the findings associated with a given study. To this end, we have been taught, and now we teach individuals who plan to conduct research, to be extremely cautious in drawing conclusions that are outside the narrow parameters of the research questions and associated findings of any study.

We suggest that based on available evidence, it may be helpful to evaluate services relative to the impact they have on people’s lives. There is a need for research examining interventions designed to influence service providers, families, individuals with disabilities, and the list goes on. We encourage people conducting research to examine effects of a service such as leisure education that is designed to alleviate barriers. There are advantages in examining issues from a variety of perspectives, and both service providers and researchers can benefit from the influence of such areas of study as psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Critical and Constructive Thinking Contribute to a More Just Society

We challenge readers of the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* to not accept anything presented at face value; rather, we encourage you to think critically about the issues raised in research and other articles and decide for yourself what you believe about these issues. We suggest that you consider clarifying the meaning and significance of what is being presented to you and determine if there is sufficient explanation for you to accept the information as being true. In this way, it is our hope that you analyze others' behaviors and material closely before accepting the information.

We think it is important as we learn new information for us to apply critical thinking. The practice of critical thinking can and does challenge unreasoning prejudice and discrimination of all kinds and encourages us to be fair and reasonable. We also believe we then have the responsibility, as we critically examine something, to actively engage in the process of constructive thinking. So, while it is helpful to critique information, it is also important to offer alternatives. It is our hope that professionals choose to use critical and constructive thinking to move beyond the suggestions contained in this article by discovering and creating innovative ways to provide leisure education services. One example of innovative service delivery is titled *Get Real and Heel* (Groff et al., 2010), an interdisciplinary support program for women recovering from breast cancer. Therapeutic recreation is an integral part of the program that includes using facilitation techniques

such as mindfulness training, pain management, and stress management.

There Are a Variety of Ways to Dialogue about a Topic

Dialogue is a valuable way to pursue truth and advance knowledge. One way to dialogue is to conduct research individually and publish findings of the research for public discourse. Although this method can achieve dialogue, there are others. Another way to approach research is to work with colleagues in a collaborative approach, engaging in collegial dialogue during the design, implementation, and dissemination of the research. Working with others during the entire process often helps researchers provide a broader approach to a topic.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

We realize that as writers of any published paper, some readers may immediately place us in the role of expert and, as such, we are privileged individuals who are in a position of power even though we present ideas from a limited perspective. This position of power involves the capacity to influence other people and their actions. We are humbled by being in this position of privilege and feel an important responsibility to be as truthful and respectful as possible. We feel committed to readers of this journal and professionals who consume other scholarly works because we realize that our writings have the capacity to influence therapeutic recreation service delivery. As such, and at the risk of undermining our credibility, we would like to suggest that it is not trivial to remember the advice given to Peter Parker (better known as Spiderman) by

his Uncle Ben: *With great power comes great responsibility*. Each time we write something, we find it helpful to reflect on that idea to remind us to be humble and respectful of all people.

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