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Social Change Through Leisure Recreation can challenge social standards and result in empowerment...

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- **Source: Academic**
- **Country:** Canada *(https://benefitshub.ca/list/country/Canada/)*
- **Language:** English *(https://benefitshub.ca/list/language/English/)*
- **Year:** 2007 *(https://benefitshub.ca/list/year/2007)*

Key Message

Leisure activities can facilitate acts that challenge constraints and constraining belief systems. Typically there is more freedom of choice, fewer formal controls on behaviors and less restrictive codes of dress in leisure compared to work settings. In addition, most leisure activities are social in nature, so new ideas and challenges to traditional ways of thinking can spread to family members, friends and other acquaintances.

Source

Shaw, S. (2007). *Social Change Through Leisure Recreation can challenge social standards and result in empowerment or social change.* Waterloo, Ontario: Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo.

Purpose

The idea of leisure as resistance has garnered considerable attention in the academic world in recent years. Resistance is seen to be an important aspect of leisure because of its potential for both individual empowerment and for broader social change. Yet discussion of this idea is often deeply buried in theoretical and conceptual literature, and applications to professional practice in parks and recreation are rarely addressed.

What Is "Resistance?"
Social scientists use the term "resistance" to refer to actions or processes that challenge difficulties that people experience in their everyday lives. These difficulties reflect the social and

material conditions of people's lives, such as living with social stigmatization or living in poverty. The conditions of constraint are then reinforced and perpetuated through societal beliefs, values, expectations and ideologies.

For example, the continuation of stereotypical beliefs about people of color, persons with disabilities, single parents, older adults, immigrant populations or people living on social assistance limit life opportunities, as do traditional and narrowly constructed views about gender, gender roles and sexual orientation.

Actions that go against or challenge these societal belief systems can be seen as forms of resistance. These include:
1. individuals behaving in ways that do not conform to societal expectations;
2. organized or collective actions against discrimination;
3. the presentation of new and divergent images of stigmatized or disadvantaged population groups; and
4. new forms of discussion that allow for different, nonstereotypical perspectives to emerge.

Evidence

Where Does Leisure Fit In?
Many researchers have noted that leisure is an avenue for resistance because leisure activities can facilitate acts that challenge constraints and constraining belief systems (e.g., Green, Hebron & Woodward, 1990; Shaw, 2001). Typically there is more freedom of choice, fewer formal controls on behaviors and less restrictive codes of dress in leisure compared to work settings.

In addition, most leisure activities are social in nature, so new ideas and challenges to traditional ways of thinking can spread to family members, friends and other acquaintances. In this way, through many small acts of resistance, societal beliefs can be influenced and changed. It should be noted, though, that social leisure can also act to reinforce (or reproduce) dominant perspectives and beliefs, as well as challenging and changing them.

Leisure is also thought to be an important site of resistance because of the role of the media. Media consumption is a common form of leisure, and leisure activities themselves (especially sports) are often portrayed and popularized through the media. Images and messages embedded in the media influence people's opinions and can either challenge or reinforce stereotypes (Downing, 2004;Wykes, 2005).

Some Insights From Studies of Resistance:
Most research in this area focuses on gender, and more specifically, on ways in which women have challenged gender and femininity stereotypes through their leisure behavior. For example, a classic study by Wearing (1990) showed how simply claiming entitlement to leisure was an act of resistance for mothers of new babies who were supposed to be caregiving rather than experiencing personal leisure.

Other studies have focused on how participation in activities normally thought of as "masculine

activities," such as ice hockey, motor bike riding, weight training and other forms of physical activity, can be empowering for women and can challenge traditional ideas of femininity (e.g., Auster, 2001; Brace–Govan, 2004; Currie, 2004; Theberge, 2000).

More recently, discussion of other forms of resistance through leisure have also begun to emerge. For example, attention has been directed, toward different ways in which leisure can be used to resist racist ways of thinking, including both the promotion of traditional cultural activities (such as multicultural festivals or events) and the participation of members of minority cultural groups in "mainstream" activities (Shinew, Floyd & Parry, 2004).

Of course, not all leisure activities can be seen as resistance, and many forms of leisure tend to reproduce or reinforce stereotypical ways of thinking such as violent, sexist and racist video games (Delamere & Shaw, 2006). So, the research has shown that participation in leisure does not necessarily imply resistance.

A Brief Look at the Theoretical Debates:

While the basic idea of resistance is relatively straightforward, the practice of resistance can be complex and difficult to identify. It is this complexity that helps to explain why much of the literature on resistance is theoretical in nature and has focused on clarifying concepts and processes.

For some theorists, acts of resistance can be seen to reside primarily within the individual. These acts are forms of "personal power" (Foucault, 1983) or individual challenge. Other theorists put more emphasis on "collective resistance," in which groups of individuals act together to change values and beliefs (see Shaw, 2006).

The process of resistance is often contradictory in that reproduction and resistance can occur at the same time (Parry, Glover & Shinew, 2005; Shaw, 2001). For example, a study of master's athletes in Australia Dionigi, 2002) showed that this form of competitive sport challenges stereotypes associated with aging. At the same time, though, master's level sports can also lead to a denial of the aging process.

Another complexity related to resistance is the issue of intent, since an act of resistance may or may not be intentional on the part of the participant. In addition, there are also issues of outcome or impact because different audiences and different participants may react differently to specific leisure practices such as the Special Olympics, the Gay Games or women's participation in ice hockey. For many, watching these sports may challenge traditional ideas about disability, sexual orientation or femininity, but for others existing attitudes may be reinforced.

Additional Information

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Benefit Statements / Outcomes

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- 3.03 Enhance perceived/actual QOL and place/infrastructure *(https://benefitshub.ca/list/C87)*
- 5.03 Produce leaders *(https://benefitshub.ca/list/C97)*

- 5.04 Build social skills *(https://benefitshub.ca/list/C98)*
- 5.10 Explore forms of families & communities *(https://benefitshub.ca/list/C151)*

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