Towards a Model of Optimal Family Leisure

Keri Schwab, California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo
Daniel Dustin, University of Utah
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Keri A. Schwab\textsuperscript{a} & Daniel L. Dustin\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Recreation, Parks, & Tourism Administration Department, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, USA
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

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Towards a model of optimal family leisure

Keri A. Schwaba* and Daniel L. Dustinb

aRecreation, Parks, & Tourism Administration Department, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, USA; bDepartment of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

Leisure is an important component of family life, yet many families struggle to focus on or participate in family leisure. This study examined the structural characteristics of family life that can impede or promote family leisure. Employing a systems perspective, a literature-based model of family leisure was created, and in-depth interview data were gathered from three families to compare to the model. Results indicated that while the content of the families’ leisure varied, their leisure shared similar organizational properties; the need to negotiate constraints, increase focused interactions and decrease fragmented interactions to achieve higher-quality family leisure. The paper concludes with a discussion of the study’s relevance to the existing family leisure literature, a description of a simplified model of optimal family leisure functioning based on the study’s findings, implications for its application and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: family leisure; family systems theory; parent-child relations; family development; recreation

Introduction

Family leisure is an important component of family life and is often considered vital to the growth and socialization of children and overall family cohesion. Decades of research support the idea that family leisure contributes to strong parent–child relationships (Barnett 1991; Shaw 1999), cohesion, adaptability, communication (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001), overall family functioning (Freeman and Zabriskie 2003; Zabriskie and Freeman 2004) and satisfaction with family life (Zabriskie and McCormick 2003). Leisure time spent interacting with family members can also build an individual’s overall sense of competence (Bronfenbrenner 1979), enhance communication and bonding (Shaw and Dawson 2001; Smith, Freeman, and Zabriskie 2009) and create a sense of equity (Orthner and Mancini 1991). In addition, many parents report the importance of family leisure for socializing children to family values or teaching them about health and fitness (Kleiber 1999; Shaw and Dawson 2001). Multiple studies also indicate a relationship between core and balance leisure activities and family life satisfaction and family functioning (Hornberger, Zabriskie, and Freeman 2010; Smith, Freeman, and Zabriskie 2009; Zabriskie and McCormick 2003; Freeman and Zabriskie 2003). The Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning (Agate et al. 2009) suggests that core or everyday leisure activities are important for family bonding, while balance or novel and unique activities provide opportunities for challenge and adaptability.

*Corresponding author. Email: keschwab@calpoly.edu

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Given family leisure’s benefits, it is unfortunate that many families struggle to find time to participate in, or focus on, family leisure (Gillis 2001; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Not engaging in quality family leisure appears to stem from multiple causes, including increased social pressures regarding parenting, a lack of time for family leisure and general multitasking and disengagement during leisure activities (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Rushed or fragmented leisure may decrease the quality of leisure interactions or contribute to contradictory leisure experiences for family members, as parents and children put much effort into completing work, household chores, self-care and otherwise trying to fit family leisure into their harried lives.

A perceived lack of time and an increase in work-related obligations are increasingly commonplace in modern families (Bianchi 2011). The nature and structure of family life has shifted greatly in the past several decades with notable increases in single parent (Hornberger, Zabriskie, and Freeman 2010) as well as dual earner families (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Seldom is someone home to provide childcare, carry out domestic chores or help in general, which leads to an increased perception of too much to do and not enough time to do it. This feeling is especially pronounced among women working outside the home, who are still largely responsible for the bulk of household chores (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Lareau 2003; Lee, Zvonkovic, and Crawford 2014). Women, who often do the hidden work of family leisure organization (Shaw 1992; Trussell and Shaw 2012), report feeling overworked, stressed, sleep deprived and unable to accomplish everything required of them (Bianchi 2011).

The absence of quality family leisure may also stem from increased social expectations and pressure on adults to be “good” parents by being highly visible, active and involved in their children’s lives (Coakley 2006; Shaw 2008; Trussell and Shaw 2012). Families invent domestic rituals such as dinner time, bed time or play time to increase family interactions, yet ironically they increase the perception of not having enough time to complete the acts (Grimes 2000). Still other research suggests that family leisure has been “respaced” and “despaced”. Respacialization means family leisure occurs in non-household settings such as the car, vacation homes or family-friendly resorts. Despacialization means family leisure can occur digitally through cell phones or electronic communications (Daly 1996), increasing access to family time, yet also changing the pace and nature of these interactions. In addition, recent research suggests that parents with non-traditional work hours – such as those who work varying shifts, or on the weekend – also experience respaced, or simply less, leisure time with their children (Craig and Brown 2014).

Attempts to create more family leisure opportunities have thus led to the unintended consequence of less perceived leisure time. Technology meant to increase leisure time often serves to speed up interactions and expectations for change. Family members, including children, frequently feel rushed during the day (Gillis 2001), and the ability to multitask only adds to a sense that life is speeding up rather than slowing down. Family leisure researchers have noted that in a busy society, “optimal contexts for family communication to regularly occur appear to be increasingly limited” (Smith, Freeman, and Zabriskie 2009, 81).

In sum, modern families spend more time in paid employment, experience less support at home, feel increased pressure to meet or exceed social expectations of “good” parenting and experience family time in respaced and despaced ways. These lifestyle changes have contributed to the perception of time famine and a decline in the quality of family interactions. Family leisure, once touted as “one of the few experiences that bring family members together for any significant amount of time” (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001, 287), now occurs in ways and environments that feel rushed, fragmented and
distracted conditions that may not be conducive to the quality interactions needed to realize the full benefits of family leisure.

A family systems perspective

To date, research on family leisure has focused largely on individuals in family settings and has examined less often the family unit as a whole. This reductionist approach has created knowledge gaps regarding family leisure interactions. This is not entirely surprising given the methodological difficulties of studying complex systems in their totality. Family time, writes Gillis (2001), is “notoriously difficult to measure … because it has a qualitative as well as quantitative dimension” (24). For example, previous research has focused on the relationship between leisure and individual reports of family satisfaction (Poff, Zabriskie, and Townsend 2010; Zabriskie and McCormick 2003), perceptions of constraints and social support (Brown et al. 2001) and mothers’ experiences in family leisure (Shannon and Shaw 2008; Irving and Giles 2011), or has relied on individual census data or self-reports to gauge daily leisure time experiences (Robinson and Godbey 1999). These approaches have sought to measure or understand an individual’s experiences, or have isolated variables, rather than examining whole family functioning and the role leisure plays in such functioning. For example, the Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning analyses data points independently. While Poff et al. (2010) have examined large data sets through advanced statistical methods, they have also acknowledged that this approach has limitations, and that “alternate analytical methods would allow for family level analysis and provide better use of the rich interdependent family data collected” (Poff, Zabriskie, and Townsend 2010, 388).

Additionally, studies that focus on individual experiences of leisure within a family context have frequently been conducted using a definition of leisure as an individual experience. When viewed this way, leisure is understood as something a person participates in for individual reasons, and from which individual benefits are derived. Furthermore, leisure is seen to occur when an individual is free from obligation, intrinsically motivated to participate and finds the experience personally pleasing or satisfying for its own sake (Kelly 1983; Neulinger 1974). In a family, however, traditional individual-focused leisure constructs like intrinsic motivation, obligation and personal pleasure may be filtered through one’s roles or responsibilities within the family unit (Buswelle et al. 2012; Coakley 2006; Kelly 1983; Shannon and Shaw 2008). These roles and responsibilities are often played out in family leisure, thus changing the nature of the experience. Leisure may no longer be participated in for individual reasons or benefits, but rather for reasons and benefits associated with the family as a whole. For example, a mother may organize a family leisure activity not because she enjoys the activity, but because she values the final outcome for the whole family (Schwab 2011). Put differently, leisure is experienced relative to one’s role in the family system. Breaking down the family in a way that isolates experiences, outcomes or variables may thus not be the best way to understand family leisure.

A more holistic approach, one that focuses on the overall functioning of a family, including interactions, reciprocity, patterns and feedback, may be better suited for understanding the whole of family leisure. If family leisure is contextual, relational and social, one way to examine it is through the lens of Family Systems Theory (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001). A derivative of General Systems Theory, Family Systems Theory is often used by therapists and counsellors to better understand the interactions, behaviours and beliefs of all family members within the context of the family unit.
General Systems Theory posits that a system is more than the sum of its individual parts and that to know anything about the system, the interactions among the parts must be understood in their totality rather than by isolating each part for observation (Fingerman and Bermann 2000). Family Systems Theory also assumes that families are mutually influential and reciprocal in their interactions, and that there is circularity to family interactions rather than linear cause and effect relationships. These reciprocal and interconnected influences shape the family system into a unique whole (Fingerman and Bermann 2000; Mactavish and Schleien 2004) and can be studied as such.

The study on which this paper is based aimed to extend previous research by applying systems thinking to create a literature-based model of family leisure and then testing the model’s usefulness by examining three families’ leisure functioning relative to the model. Proceeding from the assumption that the content of the three families’ leisure pursuits could vary substantially, our approach focused on the identification of common organizational properties shared by the three families that might be useful for better understanding, planning and programming for family leisure.

Methodology

The research reported here emphasizes the interactions among important elements that occur during family leisure. First, guided by an extensive review of the relevant literature, the most important elements that typically characterize family leisure were identified. Second, a literature-based model of family leisure was created to represent the interactions among those elements. Third, in-depth interviews were conducted with three different types of families to test the model’s usefulness. Fourth, based on an analysis of the interviews, the literature-based model was pared down to its most essential parts, suggesting a more simplified model of optimal family leisure (MOFL).

A literature-based model of family leisure

The first stage of the study involved creating a literature-based model to graphically represent important elements, interactions and feedback loops characterizing family leisure. In model building the goal is to find an “economical set of interrelated assumptions and principles that can account for both the patterned behavior of family members and the variations in these patterns across and within families over time” (Broderick 1993, 59). Based on an extensive review of the family systems literature concerning itself with leisure behaviour, the most common structural characteristics evident in family leisure were employed to create a literature-based model of family leisure. These common characteristics shared a similar order of occurrence, including antecedents to leisure, the leisure experience and outcomes. The common characteristics included motivation; social role constraints and obligations; work or effort in the antecedent subsystem; focused and fragmented interactions; conflict, communication, adaptability and support in the experience subsystem; and education, shared values, family cohesion and identity salience in the outcome subsystem. Finally, the literature reviewed suggested many relationships among the characteristics, and those most frequently suggested were then incorporated into the model. For example, the leisure constraints literature suggests that social obligations can increase motivation to negotiate constraints. This is indicated in the model by linking social role obligation to increasing motivation. As another example, the family leisure literature indicates that parents experience greater identity salience from quality family leisure, or that of focused leisure.
interactions, in which they have a chance to enact their desired parent identity (Shaw and Dawson 2001). This link is illustrated in the model as a line from focused interaction to increasing identity salience.

Once the model’s elements were chosen and relationships outlined, the next step was to create a graphical representation with the aid of a computer software program (see Figure 1). The program, called Stella™ software, made it possible to draw, move and connect elements in various ways, as well as to simulate the influences of elements on one another. Stella offers several building blocks for creating a visual representation of a

Figure 1. Literature-based model of family leisure.
system; namely, stocks, flows, converters and connectors (Richmond 2001). These are the internal pieces that enable the system to operate. Stocks, or reservoirs, are collections of resources and are represented by a square. In this study, one stock was the motivation to engage in leisure. Like a reservoir, stocks can fill up or drain down depending on how much of something flows into or out of it. The flow is the process of resources moving into or out of a stock, and is represented by a valve-like piece on a line running into the stock. An example from this study is the flow controlling how social role obligation flows through motivation. Another piece, a converter, is used to regulate the flow of something into the reservoir, thus causing the level in that reservoir to increase or decrease, such as the line between social role obligation and motivation. Finally, connectors represent links among all the elements of a system (Richmond 2001). For example, support might flow through a cohesion converter, which results in an increase in the stock of family cohesion.

In essence, the literature-based model is a hypothesized “mental map” of family leisure based on ideas found in the family leisure literature. It is one way to think about how the important elements that occur during family leisure interact with one another and influence the desired outcomes from family leisure experiences.

Data collection for model comparison
After creating the literature-based model of family leisure, the next step was to gather information from different kinds of families to provide data by which to compare the elements and interactions in the literature-based model. This information was gathered through a single, afternoon-length interview and observation with each of three families during late 2010 and early 2011 in the USA. Each family was first interviewed about its family leisure behaviour, then the family was asked to plan and engage in a leisure activity and then after, the members were again interviewed to discuss and reflect on their experience. The researcher video recorded all parts to preserve the audio and video for later data analysis. The audio portions were transcribed verbatim and became the qualitative data for this study. The video recordings were a potential second data source, but the dialogue provided by each family was much more informative data than the video recordings, and the video was ultimately not used. During each interview, the researcher asked the family open-ended questions, and at first let responses flow as the family might naturally talk. But, if a member did not respond to two questions in a row, the researcher would specifically ask that person for thoughts on both previous questions, to ensure that all voices were included. The findings of these interviews were then used to compare the leisure functioning of each to the literature-based model. Because each of the families’ leisure functioning ended up differing substantially from the literature-based model, three individual family leisure models were then created to compare all organizational properties. Finally, based on the discovery of shared organizational properties among the families and the study’s overall outcomes, the literature-based model was simplified to provide a more general overview of family leisure functioning.

Sample characteristics and procedures
Three families were recruited for the study using purposive sampling. Because of the study’s exploratory nature, three families was deemed to be a sufficient number for revealing pronounced organizational similarities or differences. The families were of different socio-economic status, age and educational backgrounds. Each family included two heterosexual parents and at least one child between the ages of 10 and 17. Families
were asked to participate in one video-taped family interview and one leisure activity of their choice, with a researcher present. The Reynolds family (all names are fictional) was an affluent family with two children aged 10 and 13, and the parents were in their late 40s. The family lived in a large home in a mountain town, with access to many natural resources, as well as the time and money to purchase equipment to recreate together. The Perry family was a low-income family that lived in a small townhouse in a downtown, urban area. The parents were 28 and 29 years old and their daughter was 11 years old. Neither parent completed high school or had a job. The third family, Greg, Emma and Abe, consisted of an unmarried couple raising the father’s son from a previous marriage. The parents were in their mid-30s and Abe was 11 years old. Both parents had college degrees and worked as artists, careers that brought in varying amounts of income each month.

The mothers from each family were contacted to set up an interview. They were told that the study was about family leisure, and that they would be asked to discuss and participate in a family leisure experience of their own choosing. The interviews, including videotaping, lasted approximately three hours, took place in each family’s home, and each family was compensated US$100 for its time. The interview questions were designed to explore family members’ ideas about antecedents, experiences and outcomes from their family leisure in general. In each interview, members were asked to discuss leisure activities they participated in most often, and to describe one activity they had completed recently. As the family talked, the researcher asked follow-up questions to probe further into each topic, such as why the family chose an activity, what they hoped to gain from it, and what went into planning the activity.

Next, each family was asked to choose and plan a leisure activity they could complete during the data collection process. The researcher recorded their conversations, and once they decided on an activity, the researcher asked follow-up questions about their choice. The questions were intended to explore the family’s antecedent motivations and expected outcomes from their experience. Questions included why the family chose the activity, what they hoped to gain from it, and how they would prepare for it.

After the antecedent portion of the interview, the family completed the activity and then discussed it. Interview questions following the activity were intended to explore the family’s actual experience as well as their reflections on the experience and desired outcomes. Questions included asking the family to describe how others influenced their participation during the activity, why the activity “worked” or did not “work” for them, and any positive or negative outcomes. During each interview, the researcher provided clarification on questions as needed, and at times asked for additional information.

The researcher chose to interview the family members as a unit rather than interviewing them separately. While acknowledging that individual family members might have been hesitant to be completely forthcoming about their feelings regarding their family leisure experiences because of other family members’ presence during the interviews, to break down the family unit into its individual parts for the interviews could have obscured what transpired as a family unit. It is important to remember that systems theory suggests the total family experience is more than the sum of its parts (Fingerman and Bermann 2000; Zabriskie and McCormick 2001), and of interest in this study was the family in its totality.
Content analysis was used to interpret the data, and identify themes, patterns and insights within the data (Patton 2002). This method consisted of developing a coding scheme, coding and classifying data into themes while looking for convergence and divergence, organizing themes into a useful framework and interpreting themes. Following Patton’s (2002) recommendation, the study moved back and forth between induction and deduction, using both opened-ended and hypothetico-deductive approaches to examine hypotheses or solidify ideas that emerged, sometimes even manipulating elements.

Prior to data analysis, the researcher created an *a priori* coding scheme for labelling and categorizing themes and for noting which themes were most important for each family and which themes should be included in later analyses and modelling. The *a priori* codes were based on the literature-based model of family leisure as well as other themes present in the family leisure literature.

To prepare for coding, the researcher watched all the videos and divided each into 2- to 3-minute segments, befitting the flow of conversation. Two coders were selected for their relevant educational background, experience working with families in social work settings and knowledge of family dynamics, interaction patterns and parenting styles. Before coding the data, coders were given a sheet that listed all the codes and a brief definition of each. The coders and researcher reviewed all the codes and definitions, discussing and clarifying differences among codes. The research group then watched, coded and discussed five short practice videos to make sure everyone understood the codes. Once trained, the trio coded the family interviews by watching them in predetermined 2- or 3-minute intervals, then coding and discussing each segment until they reached agreement on the codes that best fit the interactions. New codes were added and defined (coders added bonding, shared memories, happiness and variety), while other codes were relabelled to more accurately describe what the family expressed (e.g., intensive parenting became concerted cultivation; effort was clarified as constraint negotiation). When a new code was added, the group discussed what it looked like in the video, what it meant and how it differed from an existing code. In total, 10 codes were added, indicating that some aspects of family leisure experiences were not well-represented in the initial literature-based model. This systematic observation of behaviour and coding was an effective way to identify and label themes and relationships present for each family and as related to the topic. Finally, coders were asked to pause after every two or three video segments to draw connecting lines (via the codes) of any themes that influenced another.

Using the data analysis provided by the coders, the researcher wrote a narrative for each family. The narratives provided an overview of each family’s demographics and described what went on during their interviews. Each narrative included quotations used by family members that illustrated the major themes discussed during the interview and evidenced during the activity. While writing the narrative, the researcher hand-sketched causal fragments (Miles and Huberman 1984) of the antecedent, experience and outcomes experienced by each family. These fragments included the major themes identified during the coding process, and looked similar in structure to the individual subsystems presented in the literature-based model. The fragments were the beginning of the eventual models created to illustrate each family leisure system. The researcher created many causal fragments, trying out various combinations of elements, stocks and flows before finally combining fragments into one model for each family. This process was iterative and, like coding and categorizing data, went through many revisions. The final individual models
illustrated the major themes present, and connections among them, for each family. Overall, the process of spending additional time with the interview data, videos, codes, quotations and model drafts helped the researcher gain deeper insight into the most important themes for each family, and the connections among them.

Finally, the literature-based model of family leisure was compared to the three individual models of family leisure to identify organizational similarities and differences, of which there were many, and this led to the development of a new MOFL. This model better fit the more general structure of family leisure functioning exhibited by all three families in the study.

Results

First, the qualitative interview data for each family’s leisure experience are summarized, along with the main themes reflected in those experiences. Then, the individual family leisure models constructed for each family are described, illustrating their common organizational properties – properties that led to the development of an MOFL.

The Reynolds family

The Reynolds family consisted of four members: Maria and John, the parents, and two children, Ashley, aged 10, and David, aged 13. The family lived in a large house in an affluent neighbourhood with access to many nearby recreational activities, such as hiking and biking trails, ski resorts and local parks. Both parents had college degrees and the father worked full-time operating a successful small business. The mother assisted with her husband’s business and cared for their children, who attended a nearby public school.

The Reynolds family was highly motivated to participate in family leisure. During the interview, all members expressed several reasons why they liked family leisure, specific activities they enjoyed and activities they would like to try again. As the family chose their leisure activity for the interview, they discussed their leisure repertoire, reviewing varying skills and interests, challenges related to certain activities and how much they liked or disliked activities.

For their activity, the family decided to play Frisbee in a nearby park. This choice built on prior experience, that of walking to the park together, but the addition of Frisbee was new to them, and they all agreed it was not one of their strengths. There was a strong sense of family throughout their conversation, as each member always considered or included the others in their memories or ideas about family leisure.

What emerged from this conversation was a dominant theme of the family engaging in leisure for the long-term outcome of building and reinforcing their family and individual identities. This idea came up again in their conversation after the activity. In looking at specific antecedents to leisure, their conversation touched on several motivators to engage in family leisure, specifically having and creating shared memories, concerted cultivation, challenge, bonding and, as a de-motivator, constraints to leisure.

The primary antecedents that motivated the Reynolds family included shared memories, concerted cultivation, challenge, bonding and minimal constraints. The main themes during their activity included a high level of focused interactions, which were fuelled by shared learning experiences and support. Focused interactions were those that took place without any distractions, when the primary activity was the only activity going on. For this family, within their focused interactions, two main themes noted included shared learning experiences and support.
After playing Frisbee, the family returned home to discuss their experience. They were asked to review what they did, their interactions with one another, what they learned about each other and their overall reactions. Each theme expressed in the final stage of the interview was related to teaching and sharing values. The themes that helped support the transmission of values included bonding, having fun, education and being outdoors. During this portion of the interview, the family talked in general terms about their leisure, rather than about specific activities.

Each member of the Reynolds family appeared to enjoy family leisure activities. The family worked well together, sharing stories, ideas and learning. Family members were supportive of one another, even when frustrated. The parents put much time and effort into their family leisure, and the children seemed to appreciate their opportunities. Their family leisure appeared to most often consist of easy, positive, focused interactions that increased their shared family values.

Figure 2. Reynolds family leisure model.
Reynolds family leisure model

Based on the interview data and themes described in the vignettes, the Reynolds family’s themes were organized into a basic model (see Figure 2). The model is a mental map of what occurred during the family’s leisure and how the elements interacted to influence outcomes or stocks. The model followed the structure of the initial literature-based family leisure model, with an antecedent, experience, and outcome subsystem. Each subsystem consisted of elements that flowed into or out of the three main stocks, filling up or draining that resource.

The Reynolds family offered many reasons why they were motivated to participate together in family leisure. Those reasons are part of the antecedent subsystem flowing into and building up their stock of motivation to leisure. Elements flowing into that stock included challenge, shared memories, concerted cultivation, bonding and negotiating constraints. The only elements flowing out of the stock were interpersonal constraints (which were in the experience subsystem in the literature-based model), such as recreating with different skill levels. In this subsystem, elements flowing into motivation were of greater importance to the family than reasons not to recreate together, likely increasing this stock at a greater rate.

The only element draining the stock, interpersonal constraints, was also linked to negotiating constraints on the left side, indicating that the family realized their constraints, and could usually find strategies to successfully negotiate around them. Overall, this first subsystem had many elements increasing the stock of motivation.

In the experience subsystem, shared learning and support flowed into the stock of focused interactions, while nothing flowed out of it. The stock of motivation also flowed into support and shared learning, helping to increase focused interactions. It is clear that this family had more elements flowing into their subsystems than out of them. In their interview, the family talked more about reasons for participating and their positive experiences in family leisure than they did about anything taking away from their experiences. This is reflected in the model.

Finally, the stock of focused interactions flowed into the elements of education and fun, both of which, along with valuing the outdoors, flowed into the stock of shared values. Nothing flowed out of it. Increasing shared values also flowed back up to motivation increasing, creating a feedback loop for the entire system.

The Perry family

The Perry family consisted of three members: Paula, the mother; Steven, the father; and Abby, their daughter. Abby was 11 years old, and Paula and Steven were in their late 20s. The family lived in a low-income housing unit in the downtown area of a midsized city. Their townhouse was one of four in a row, with another row directly behind them and a long, narrow common area between rows.

The family identified itself as poor, and Paula and Steven attributed that to their lack of education and poor choices as teenagers. They both dropped out of high school and neither returned to complete a degree. Paula gave birth to Abby when she was 16, and spent most of her life caring for Abby, and occasionally for Steven’s mother, who had a mental disability. Steven was at one point employed as a construction worker, but lost his job six months prior to the interview. At the time of the interview, he spent much of his time at home with Paula, or working odd jobs.

When asked about their family leisure experiences, Paula and Steven talked mostly about their lack of income and how that dictated what they could and could not do. They...
also said that because they were unemployed, they had ample free time to participate in family leisure, but little income or resources with which to do so. They talked about trying to provide as many educational leisure experiences for Abby as they could because they wanted her to have more opportunities and a better life than they had. From the first portion of the interview, the major antecedents to their family leisure included constraints to leisure, free choice, constraints negotiation and educational opportunities, all of which led to or took away from their motivation to engage in family leisure.

The Perry family decided to play ball and Frisbee for their leisure activity. They wanted their family to be happy, safe, have ongoing educational opportunities and understand their shared family values and choices. They spoke about sharing their values with Abby through direct conversations and by modelling behaviours, both of which they noted could happen during family leisure. From this final interview portion, the main themes were the importance of leisure for providing variety or a change in routine, for facilitating communication to share values, and for bonding. These themes seemed to lead to their final desired outcome of family leisure, happiness.

Overall, the Perry family did their best to find free leisure activities that provided education and a sense of variety in their daily life. While their leisure interactions were often fragmented, they continued to put much effort into seeking out opportunities for family leisure.

**Perry family leisure model**

Based on the Perry family narrative, the themes presented were organized into a model of family leisure (see Figure 3). This model is a simplified picture of the most notable interactions that occurred during their family leisure and influenced their desired outcomes. The Perry family had a simple life, restrained by lack of income, yet with ample free time. The family also placed great value on education. This simplicity is reflected in their family leisure model, and its stocks of motivation, quality interactions and happiness.

In the antecedent subsystem, education and constraint negotiation flowed into and increased the stock of motivation, while constraints decreased motivation. The family members made it clear that education was a strong motivator for family leisure activities. A desire to find educational and no-cost activities increased their motivation to leisure and was part of their constraint negotiation process. However, the family could not always find free or nearby activities, and these constraints seemed to drain their motivation.

Somewhat disconnected from their antecedent subsystem and stock of motivation was their experience subsystem. Their desired experience stock was quality interaction, which was fed by the parents’ sense of role obligation. Fragmented interactions drained their quality leisure experience and were prevalent during the leisure activity. Overall, the family’s experience was choppy and their interactions did not link very well to their desired outcomes. When discussed, their experience seemed to stand alone with little connection to the antecedents or outcomes they had talked about. Looking at these two systems together, there is not a strong connection between motivation and experience. While the family was highly motivated to do activities, and found no-cost leisure on a regular basis, this did not translate to focused or quality interactions. Motivation to leisure moved them to action, but did not help with leisure quality.

The outcome subsystem contained the stock of happiness. During their interview, they said they wanted a happy life with positive outcomes, such as fun and happy times together. The family drew from their quality leisure interactions to support elements they
thought would create more happiness. These elements included trying to find a variety of leisure activities, communication, transmitting values and bonding. Each element had a specific way it could add to the stock of happiness. Variety provided a needed change in routine, communication allowed the parents to teach their daughter life lessons and the parents felt teaching values would improve chances of lifelong happiness. Bonding flowed directly from quality interactions, as these experiences could help the family increase their sense of emotional closeness. On the right side of the model, nothing was discussed as decreasing happiness, seemingly as the family had so little to work with to get to the leisure experience, little else could be taken away. Transmitting values was discussed as an outcome and a motivator for their family leisure and linked the outcome subsystem to the antecedent subsystem.

**Greg, Emma and Abe**

Greg, Emma and Abe were a blended family. Abe was Greg’s 11-year-old son from a first marriage. Greg and Emma had been dating for four years and the trio had lived together for three of those years.
The dominant theme from this interview was about the process of becoming a family, and the role family leisure could play in that process. Throughout the interview, Greg, Emma and Abe talked about family leisure as a potential way to help them learn about one another, adapt to living together and bond. They also talked about the challenges in their family leisure as they went through the process of becoming a family. The main themes articulated during their interview included a level of high motivation to engage in family leisure. During their leisure, the experience was influenced by constraints and their ability to negotiate them, as well as by their focused and fragmented interactions. Finally, the desired outcome for their family leisure had to do with increasing overall bonding, and was influenced by a desire to learn, grow and create shared memories.

For their activity, the family decided to play a new version of *Clue.* They had played it together once before and found it confusing, but were interested in trying again. Emma and Abe were especially interested in playing, and in using a text message feature with the game. While they were trying to create a quality leisure experience, their interactions overall were characterized by segments of total focus by all members, and segments of fragmented interaction, especially caused by Greg. This was likely due to their differing levels of interest in the game. *Clue* took several minutes to set up, and Emma and Abe focused on reading the rules while Greg cleared dinner dishes.

The main desired outcome noted during their interview was that Greg, Emma and Abe wanted to engage in family leisure in order to bond as a family, and that quality leisure experiences might help them do this. In their conversation afterwards, they talked about how quality family leisure experiences created a space for them to learn about one another, grow into their new family roles and build memories, all of which could increase family bonding. But, as noted in the antecedent section, the family members did not have many similar interests, and sometimes experienced conflict because of this, which actually served to further fragment their leisure.

**Greg, Emma and Abe family leisure model**

After completing the vignette for this family, the themes were organized into a model that provided a simplified picture of what occurred during this family’s leisure (see Figure 4).

In this model, the first subsystem was motivation to participate in leisure. This family’s main reason for participating in leisure was to create a way to spend time together, whether directly interacting or not. Being together for this family often meant being in the same room together but doing separate activities. Wanting to be together increased their motivation to participate in family leisure. However, their interpersonal constraints of a lack of shared activities served to deplete their stock of motivation. The family was in the process of learning to negotiate constraints via compromises to find activities they could all enjoy.

In the experience subsystem, both interpersonal constraints and negotiating constraints flowed into the stock of quality leisure experiences. As indicated in the interview, both elements influenced the family’s ability to have quality experiences, or those in which the only activity occurring was the leisure activity, and the family was focused on that activity. Interpersonal constraints often prevented quality leisure from occurring, while negotiating constraints did the opposite and helped the family find ways to have quality experiences. However, their interview data indicated that these two elements flowed into and out of quality leisure experiences at different rates, preventing that stock from ever filling completely.
As all the systems in this model were connected, the stock of quality leisure was also affected by the elements between it and the outcome subsystem. Focused interactions contributed to quality leisure increasing, while conflict and fragmented interactions contributed to it decreasing. Finally, in the outcome subsystem, many elements are present. When this family had a quality leisure experience, it appeared to pique their interest in learning about one another, sharing experiences and practising their new roles together. These processes fed into their stock of bonding as they shared these elements of emotional closeness through their leisure. Keeping in mind that this family came together about four years ago, it made sense that these elements were part of the outcome of their family leisure. Focused interactions also helped increase bonding, and fed back up into quality leisure experiences. On the right side of the outcome subsystem, fragmented interactions, conflict and a chaotic structure decreased their level of bonding. There is nothing linking the outcome subsystem back to motivation, or the antecedent subsystem, which could cause further delays in increasing motivation.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study reinforce the growing conviction that family leisure is an increasingly important part of healthy family functioning (Poff, Zabriskie, and Townsend 2010; Shaw 2008; Shaw, Havitz, and Delamere 2008; Taylor et al. 2012; Ward and Zabriskie 2011). All three families, while very different, seemed to understand leisure’s potential for strengthening family values and enhancing family cohesion. In a similar
fashion, the study’s results reinforce the significance of “core” leisure experiences in promoting family satisfaction (Buswell et al. 2012). The opportunity for everyday family-focused enjoyment was in reach of all three families, regardless of their social or economic status.

Of more particular note, systems modelling was used to organize complex family leisure interactions to gain an overview of family leisure functioning. The initial literature-based model of family leisure was only partially supported, as the three individual family models shared some stocks and elements, but not others. Based on those shared organizational properties, a more simplified MOFL is proposed, including its potential usefulness for better understanding, planning and programming for family leisure.

Towards a model of optimal family leisure

General Systems Theory suggests there are models or principles that can be applied across systems to help explain the relationships and interactions among elements within those systems (Bertalanffy 1968). But a model that is too specific will lose its meaning, and if too general, will have no content. The challenge is to find an “optimum degree of generality” (Boulding 1956, 197). In this study, the three families appeared to have similar stocks each wanted to fill. Supported by the idea of equifinality (Becvar and Becvar 1999), it could be said that the families tried to arrive at these outcomes through their family leisure, but each family reached them by different paths. These different paths were paved with specific content that made up each individual family model. While the content gathered for each family model was not helpful for creating a general model of family leisure, the more general stocks, converters, connectors and flows shared by the families revealed a set of interactions that may typify family leisure experiences, and thus proved useful for creating a pared down model of family leisure.

An MOFL integrates similarities between the literature-based model and the three individual family models into one pared down model (see Figure 5). The model provides essential stocks, converters, connectors and flows and offers one way to understand the most important interactions that occur during family leisure. The MOFL suggests an organizational path families might take en route to leisure outcomes, regardless of the individual content of their leisure. It provides an organizational framework that family therapists, researchers and recreation practitioners might find useful when thinking about creating or facilitating family leisure opportunities.

In the MOFL, the antecedent subsystem contains motivation as the stock, with constraints depleting it and constraint negotiation filling it. It was evident in all three family models that an ability to negotiate constraints impacted motivation. This differs from the literature-based model of family leisure which included effort as an element that decreased motivation. The term “effort” was taken from the family leisure literature and indicated the effort, or work, parents put into planning, organizing and executing family leisure, and that can be draining or de-motivating for parents. However, data gathered from the family interviews indicated that, for two of the families, effort required to arrange family leisure became a motivator as members discovered ways to negotiate constraints so they could participate. As previous literature notes, the activation of negotiation strategies can be motivating (Hubbard and Mannell 2001) and may be more motivating for families than previously thought. Further, negotiating constraints may require family members to compromise and problem-solve, listen and consider various opinions, interests, strengths and weaknesses. These efforts, as indicated in the MOFL, could lead to increased focused interactions and ultimately increased bonding.
Constraints are also included in the motivation subsystem, as each family talked about personal and structural constraints that influenced motivation to participate. The leisure literature has many examples of constraints as stalling or changing leisure choices, and families in this study were no different. Constraints in the initial literature-based model were specifically social role constraints, indicating that constraints were more likely to be of an inter- or intrapersonal nature (as related to beliefs about self, role and others’ perceptions of the parenting role). In the interviews, families talked about all types of constraints, so the MOFL contains only the element of constraints, recognizing that the specific content of those constraints will be unique to each family.

The experience subsystem contains the stock of quality leisure experience with focused interactions increasing it and fragmented interactions decreasing it. The initial literature-based model contained quality leisure experiences as the stock, and information from the families somewhat supported this as being a desired outcome. A quality leisure
experience is hard to define, but from this study, it appears to be made up of focused leisure interactions, in which only one leisure activity is engaged in and nothing else is going on in the background. Such quality interactions supported bonding, sharing memories, learning about one another and growing into roles. The content of the goals may differ from family to family, but in the end a quality leisure experience will be focused and aid a family in attaining desired leisure outcomes. In contrast, fragmented interactions occur when more than one activity is going on, and the main activity is often interrupted or disrupted by other events or people (Beck and Arnold 2009). Fragmented leisure often feels more rushed and less satisfying as it is made up of many, short, disconnected leisure moments (Bittman and Wajcman 2000). This idea has been supported in the literature as well. For example, a study of adolescent well-being found that joint family leisure (such as enjoying a meal together) was positively associated with teens’ emotional well-being (Offer 2013).

It should also be noted that activity choice may influence focused or fragmented interactions. In this study, not every family member was interested in the family-chosen leisure activity all the time, and this contributed to that person being distracted, or distracting others, from the main activity. In a family, it can be very difficult to find an activity of interest to everyone, but to the extent that each member can maintain a certain level of focus and remove distractions, the family may have a better chance to achieve a quality leisure experience.

The antecedent and experience subsystems are connected through constraints, negotiated successfully or otherwise. As previously noted, the presence of constraints can activate negotiation strategies, which can lead to more focused interactions among family members. The model of optimal leisure suggests that if families have to work together to overcome constraints, they may be more focused on their leisure experience. On the other hand, if constraints persist, the family may experience fragmented leisure as they struggle to find a shared activity.

The outcome subsystem of the MOFL features bonding as the desired outcome. During the family interviews, members used different terms to express ideas of gaining emotional closeness to one another, but most often they used the term bonding. Each family also had many elements flowing into their final outcome, as well as similar elements flowing into their antecedent stock. Almost all elements flowing into their final outcome stock and, in turn, into their new antecedent stock, could be considered desired goals for family leisure. Based on this study, the elements flowing into or out of bonding vary depending on the family, their values, history and place in the family life cycle. In the MOFL, the stock of bonding is filled or depleted by focused or fragmented interactions. If bonding is made up of emotional closeness, and emotional closeness is more likely to occur through focused interactions, then focused interactions are necessary to support bonding. Similarly, fragmented interactions will detract from the quality of the experience, and the family’s ability to bond during a leisure experience.

Finally, the MOFL contains a feedback loop from bonding to motivation to engage in family leisure. During the post-activity interviews, each family expressed the idea that a positive leisure experience with increased bonding would motivate them to participate in the activity again. Similarly, a leisure experience comprised of fragmented interactions and less bonding would likely decrease motivation to participate again. Overall, the MOFL provides an organizational framework within which to fill in individual family elements. The model could be useful for better understanding the challenges families face as they attempt to achieve their family leisure goals.
Implications for theory and practice

The results of this work have numerous implications for theory and practice. They can best be discussed in the contexts of motivation, freedom and constraints.

Motivation

One of the main findings of this study was the impact of multiple motivations on family leisure. The decision to engage in a particular leisure pursuit often appeared to be secondary to concerns for doing something that would enhance educational opportunities for children, bring the family together for some quality time or bond the family as a unit. This indicates that in a social context desired outcomes for self and others may be more important and a greater source of motivation than the activity itself. This finding is reminiscent of Samdahl and Jekubovich’s (1997) assertion that leisure activity itself can be secondary to what is valued in social relationships. If being together matters most, then what families do when they are together may matter less, and this has research and programming implications. This study’s findings also support Henderson’s (1997) observation that “being with a partner or others is activity” (457), and that a broader definition of activity may be called for so leisure service providers can “understand better what people do and what’s important to them” (Henderson 1997). For practitioners, then, this suggests it is more important to consider how an activity is designed and experienced by family members, rather than what the activity is. While activities must attract a family of participants, what should be given more consideration by the programmer are the opportunities for family members to interact with one another in a meaningful and focused manner. This means considering and removing as many barriers to participation as possible, and creating an environment in which family members are encouraged to talk and recreate together, as a unit.

Family member motivation to recreate together is also impacted by a variety of sources, and this was one of the primary lessons learned from studying family leisure from a systems perspective. Motivation ebbs and flows as multiple forces affect it, and the motivational determinants of leisure behaviour are highly nuanced. Engaging in a particular leisure activity is determined by a variety of social considerations, some of which have little to do with the activity itself. Understanding that it is the individual in relationship to others that may be the most influential aspect of leisure involvement has important implications for a profession that has traditionally focused on the provision of activity for activity’s sake without fully appreciating the social embeddedness of the constituency it serves. For practitioners, it is important to be aware that parents are likely motivated to engage in an activity not because they enjoy it, but because of their desire to fulfill their relational role of parent, or to meet perceived social expectations of what it looks like to be a “good” parent. Providing parents with specific ways to engage with their children during an activity, such as having a specific task to complete, or taking turns with their child may help increase their satisfaction with themselves, their role fulfilment and ultimately increase their motivation to engage in a family activity again.

Freedom

In the same way that studying family leisure from a systems perspective alters the way in which we might think about motivation, it also changes the way in which we might think about freedom. The freedom to pick and choose our individual leisure pursuits has been viewed as sacrosanct, but when examined in the context of family leisure, freedom, too,
becomes a much more nuanced construct. Rather than seeing freedom as the unobstructed pursuit of intrinsically rewarding experiences, freedom in family leisure tends to be tempered by concern for others. Freedom becomes obligation as well as opportunity (Brightbill 1960). This represents a shift in focus from a more psychologized view of leisure, a shift that necessarily comes about when we acknowledge that aspect of ourselves that is connected to others.

In this family leisure study, the parents in general, and the mothers in particular, chose to limit their freedom out of a social concern for others. They put their own individual preferences on hold out of an interest in doing something that would benefit the family system as a whole. Often times this meant considering what was best for the children, spouse, partner or the whole unit. The emphasis was on the family as a whole and on nurturing a sense of family and strengthening family ties. Moreover, singular leisure engagements, rather than being treated as discrete events, were treated as part of an unfolding pattern of familial interactions that could be sustained over time and that could lead to a much stronger and harmonious family unit.

This study also illustrated that it was more difficult for the fathers and husbands to limit their freedom than the mothers and wives, resulting in a lower-quality leisure experience for the fathers and husbands. The kinds of “focused interactions” that were required to work through competing motivations to engage in family leisure and to work through the leisure engagements themselves were more difficult for the fathers and husbands to effect. The fathers were more often characterized as having “fragmented interactions”, which means they were harder pressed to do what was necessary to achieve a quality family leisure experience. They were more scattered in their attention and in their commitment to ensuring successful family leisure outcomes. By not imposing limits on their own freedoms, fathers had too much choice and were not able to concentrate on the activity or people around them. This study thus supports the seemingly counterintuitive notion that limits to freedom may in fact help create smaller social or interactive spaces, thus freeing people to choose from the few rather than feeling overwhelmed by the many. As McGuire and Norman (2005) suggested, such restraints may actually help set individuals free. The degree to which mothers and wives are more acculturated into such sacrifices, or self-imposed limits to freedom, for the sake of family welfare vis-a-vis fathers and husbands remains an important topic for research, discussion and debate. For professionals and recreation programmers, this means that offering specific programmes with simple, clear goals and limited choices may actually benefit family leisure, and fathers in particular. Too many choices or too little structure, such as “open-gym” time or free play at the swimming pool or on the playground, may offer too many options, allowing family members to each choose a different activity, switch between activities or participate in one activity while watching another, thus leading to fragmented interactions.

**Constraints**

Throughout the leisure literature, constraints are considered to be something that creates a barrier to, or prevents an individual from, doing what he or she would like (Jackson 2005). Constraints are most often portrayed in a negative light with research focusing on how constraints limit individual freedom and choice, and then discussing how constraints can be mitigated, negotiated or avoided so individuals can maximize their full range of leisure choices.

However, when viewed from the perspective of family leisure or in a larger social or environmental context, constraints may be seen as more than mere limitations on
individual freedoms. They may be seen as acknowledgements of our social existence. People do not live solitary lives. They are in constant interaction with one another and the environment around them. People exist in a complex web of social and ecological interrelationships, and when we recognize this interconnectedness, we can see that our actions are not ours alone. They frequently have far-ranging impacts. When we acknowledge our social selves as well as our individual selves, we understand that we live in relationship to family members, friends, neighbours, communities, and the larger living world. This reality is seldom acknowledged in cultures that champion individual freedom and prize individual effort, but it is a fundamental assumption underlying systems thinking. When we consider the influence we have on one another, both good and bad, we can more easily appreciate that there are times when we should constrain our behaviour for the sake of others. Such constraints, when self-imposed through ethical consideration, are not to be negotiated, avoided or surmounted. They are to be embraced and lived with. They are the accommodations we make in recognition of our social obligations to others (Samdahl and Jekubovich 1997).

In the context of family leisure, such a “constraint” is most evident in a mother’s “ethic of care” (Noddings 1984). An ethic of care is a type of moral development oriented towards intimacy, caring, concern and relationships with others (Gilligan 1982). It is considered specific to females and suggests that a woman’s moral compass directs her to place care and concern for others before herself. Putting others first clearly creates a constraint on a woman’s behaviour, yet many women report that in doing so they gain greater satisfaction from their behaviour than if they act only out of self-interest (Schwab 2011). An ethic of care can thus be considered a constraint on one’s behaviour or it can be embraced as a condition of living a social life.

Finally, and again in the context of family leisure, when an individual enters into a partnership, such as a marriage or child-rearing relationship, the individual may choose to limit her or his behaviour based on what is good or bad for the other person(s), the relationship or for oneself. By choosing to limit one’s own behaviours, the individual is not really choosing to limit freedoms or choices, but rather to behave in ways that might better serve the relationship in its totality. Under these circumstances, “constrained” individual behaviour may improve relations and open up possibilities for the family as a whole to prosper. When parents, for example, choose activities that are of interest to their children rather than to themselves, they are placing limits on their own freedom, yet they accept these limitations because they understand the social benefits for the family unit. The “constraint” is really an acknowledgement of a greater social duty.

Optimal family leisure, in sum, is likely the result of successful negotiations among family members about what leisure pursuits can be engaged in that benefit the family as a whole. Satisfying individual preferences is less of a concern. “Optimal”, then, does not mean recreation programming that ensures everyone gets to do what he or she wants. “Optimal” means recreation programming that serves a family’s common interests. Group activities more so than individual activities take centre stage. Social concerns trump individual concerns. Family bonding, growth and development require engaging in leisure pastimes together.

**Recommendations for future research**

The research reported here is based on a systems view of family leisure that proceeds from the assumption that while the specific content of family leisure may vary, general family leisure functioning may share similar organizational properties, and by better
understanding those shared organizational properties, researchers and practitioners might be better positioned to understand and plan for family leisure experiences. Testing the utility of the proposed MOFL would be a logical first step.

Focusing on constraint negotiation in family leisure as well as the role of focused and fragmented interactions in contributing to quality family leisure are also promising areas for future research. The results of this study suggest that an ability to negotiate constraints may be helpful in increasing motivation to engage in family leisure. There is already a large body of leisure research that examines constraints at both theoretical and practical levels (e.g., Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey 1991; Hubbard and Mannell 2001), but more work is warranted that focuses on how or by whom constraints are negotiated in a family. Understanding constraints can help practitioners and policy-makers work towards removing barriers to participation. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that constraints can activate a desire to negotiate them. Negotiating constraints requires problem-solving and compromising skills, which, when done successfully, can help family members hone valuable life skills, learn about one another and bond as a family. Future research might consider the unique constraints experienced by families, how these constraints impact their leisure experiences and how negotiating these constraints can enhance family bonding.

This study also found support for the proposition that quality leisure experiences can be adversely affected by fragmented interactions. This finding suggests two questions for future research. First, researchers must agree on what defines a quality leisure experience. One example comes from Bittman and Wajcman (2000), who defined it as uninterrupted or unobligated time, or time in which only one activity occurs. A second question for future research concerns how fragmented interactions specifically detract from family leisure and overall family functioning.

Conclusion
The findings from this study illustrate the utility of systems thinking for better understanding family leisure functioning. General Systems Theory has proven useful for understanding systems’ organizational properties that are invariant to change even as the content changes continuously from system to system and within systems over time. This study has demonstrated the usefulness of thinking of family leisure functioning in terms of stocks, flows, connectors and converters that represent the social and relational aspects of family leisure. The study ascertained that while it may not be possible to create a highly detailed model of family leisure, a simplified model may still be useful for better understanding the dynamics of family leisure. Leisure professionals might employ the MOFL to improve constraint negotiation through focused interactions, while also decreasing constraints and fragmented interactions. Together, these actions might help families increase problem-solving skills, learn to compromise, increase their undivided attention, appreciate one another and increase bonding through family leisure. These would be important steps towards improving overall family functioning and well-being.

Note
1.  Clue is a board game in which players try to gather evidence and solve a murder mystery.

Notes on contributors
Keri A. Schwab, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Administration Department at California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, California,
USA. She earned her undergraduate degree in Journalism from James Madison University, and a Masters and Ph.D. from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. Her research interests include youth development, community recreation, and family leisure. She currently teaches core undergraduate classes and is currently working on a research project to examine how social media can be used to motivate youth to recreate outdoors. She is co-editor of several books including A Career with Meaning and Just Leisure: Things that we Believe In.

Daniel L. Dustin is a Professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism in the College of Health at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. He holds a bachelor’s degree in geography and a master’s degree in resource planning and conservation from the University of Michigan, and a Ph.D. in education with an emphasis in recreation and park administration from the University of Minnesota. Among his recent works as an author and editor are Stewards of Access-Custodians of Choice: a Philosophical Foundation for Parks, Recreation, and Tourism; Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Working for Social and Environmental Justice through Parks, Recreation, and Leisure; Service Learning: Building Community through Public Parks and Recreation; The Wilderness Within: Reflections on Leisure and Life; Making a Difference in Academic Life: a Handbook for Park, Recreation, and Tourism Educators and Graduate Students; and Nature and the Human Spirit: Toward an Expanded Land Management Ethic.

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