

UNDERSTANDING THE LEISURE CONSTRAINTS OF HISPANIC-AMERICANS IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF CONSTRAINTS, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND ACCULTURATION

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the constraints to use of outdoor recreation resources and participation in leisure activities among Hispanic restaurant workers in Northern Virginia; specifically, the relationship of socioeconomic status and acculturation to leisure constraints. The dramatic rate of increase of Hispanic-Americans, the group's low socioeconomic status, and reports on low recreation participation and resource use illustrate the need for a better understanding of this population segment and their patterns of recreation participation. This paper includes a brief review of pertinent theory, and the results of analyses together with their implications for recreation service providers.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the constraints to use of outdoor recreation resources and participation in leisure activities among Hispanic restaurant workers in Northern Virginia; specifically, the relationship of leisure constraints to socioeconomic status and acculturation. The study is based, in part, on the theories of Acculturation and Ethnic Assimilation, and the Marginality hypothesis. The United States was built upon the diversity of its population. During the industrial revolution, immigrants flooded into the country in pursuit of religious freedom, land ownership, and a better way of life. They labored in poor work environments for little pay, long hours, and rarely did they consider recreation among their necessities. This pattern of immigration has carried well into the 21st century. At the top of the poverty class is the growing Latin American¹ population. In 2000, 28.4 million foreign born people resided in the United States, representing 10.4 percent of

¹ In this paper, Latin Americans are defined as residents of the U.S. with ancestral ties to Spain. These include Mexican Americans, Central Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other sub-groups of South American decent. This word is used interchangeably with Hispanics, Latinos, and Hispanic Americans.

the total U.S. population. Among the foreign born, 51 percent were born in Latin America (Lollock, 2001). In 1999, 22.8 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. were living in poverty, compared with 7.7 percent of non-Hispanic Whites. Hispanics represented 12 percent of the total population but constituted 23.1 percent of the population living in poverty (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). The definition of leisure experience and delivery of recreation and leisure services has been profoundly altered by the burgeoning lower class Hispanic population in America. Classically, Hispanics view themselves as an integral part of the natural world/landscape. Floyd and Gramann (1993) note that this view has influenced their selection of leisure activities such as picnicking, soccer, volleyball, softball, and family outings. However, while struggling through what Gordon (1964) calls "cultural assimilation,"² newly immigrated Hispanics attempt to first gain political, civil, economic, and social integration. Through this process, the cultural importance of leisure and recreation is severely diminished or often lost, as financial well-being and the elimination of communication barriers precede them on the hierarchy of needs.

Much of the leisure research focusing on the issue of ethnicity can be traced to the works of Washburne (1978) and Gordon (1964). Gordon's ethnic assimilation theory has served as the predominant conceptual model regarding leisure and ethnicity. Keefe and Padilla (1987:18) defined the concept of assimilation as the "social, economic, and political integration of an ethnic minority group into mainstream society." Gordon divided the process of ethnic assimilation into seven subprocesses: acculturation, or behavioral assimilation; structural assimilation, or access to societal institutions; amalgamation, or marital assimilation; identificational assimilation; attitude receptional assimilation, or the absence of discrimination; and civic assimilation, or the absence of value and power conflicts. Shaul and Gramann (1998) referenced Gordon's theory to examine patterns of Anglo-conformity in perceived recreation benefits, and to look for deviations in these patterns that perhaps suggest selective acculturation. In other words, the ethnic minority group does not alter all of its cultural patterns to conform to those of mainstream North American society. In McLemore's (1991) "melting-pot metaphor", an outgrowth of Gordon's work, both the host and the immigrant culture change, whereas in "cultural pluralism", ethnic differences are maintained and encouraged within a single political framework. According to Washburne (1978) there are two explanations as to why minority groups and whites are divergent in their leisure pursuits. The marginality hypothesis, the first of these theories, states that minority status is a causal factor in explaining under-participation among minority groups. This under-participatory characteristic of minority populations results primarily from limited economic resources, which in turn are a function of historical patterns of discrimination. Minorities may have limited access to

² Cultural Assimilation is defined as "the social, economic, and political integration of an ethnic minority group into mainstream society" (Keefe & Padilla, 1987).

resources, thus affecting lifestyle, life-chances, and participation in many forms of recreation. The ethnicity hypothesis states that cultural processes including value systems, norms, and socialization patterns, are more important in studying the under-participation among minority groups.

Applying the work of Washburne, Stamps and Stamps (1985) hypothesized that middle class persons irrespective of race should have similar participation patterns, and Floyd, McGuire, Noe, and Shinew (1994) found that blacks and whites that define themselves similarly in terms of social class would exhibit similar leisure activity preferences. The multiple hierarchy stratification perspective developed by Markides, Liang, and Jackson (1990), specified that philosophy, race, gender and social class be viewed as potential sources of inequality. The author's defined the low end of the stratification continuum as consisting of minorities, individuals of low social class, females and older adults; upper or middle class members, middle-aged (or younger), white males were at the higher end of the continuum. The multiple hierarchy stratification perspective served as the theoretical framework for a study by Arnold and Shinew (1998), where administrators examined constraints to urban park use as effected by gender, race, and level of income. In large part, constraints to leisure, and behavior among ethnic/racial minority groups have been regarded as two distinct domains. Stodolska (1998) identified the fallacies in studying the leisure of minorities with any degree of effectiveness without understanding the constraints that these groups

face. Carr and Williams (1993) examined the influences of ancestral, generational, and acculturational differences on meanings and preferences related to outdoor recreation experiences and forest use. Floyd and Gramann (1993) studied the effects of acculturation levels on participation in outdoor settings. They studied first and second generational Mexican-Americans. Based on the ethnic assimilation theory, they found that the greater the level of acculturation or primary structural assimilation, the more similar Mexican-Americans were to Anglo-Americans. According to Gordon (1964), cultural behavior, access to resources, and marriage are important factors in determining the level of acculturation, which in turn affect the level of participation. Washburne (1978) issued a reminder that certain segments of the population, including immigrants have been distanced from access to resources.

Methods

Participants in this study were selected from the population of self-defined Hispanic-Americans employed at restaurants in Northern Virginia. This particular area was selected because of its proximity to and ease of access by the researcher, and its representative concentration of Hispanics (Table 1) (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). Among restaurant employees in Northern Virginia, there is an unusually high percent of newly immigrated Hispanics, and the salary paid is generally well below the County median income. It is for these reasons that this specific sub-population was selected.

Table 1. Comparison of Total and Percent Hispanic Population by Geographic Region, 2000

	Total Population	Total Population of Hispanics	Hispanics as Percent of Total Population
United States	281,421,906	35,177,738	12.5%
Virginia (VA)	7,078,515	332,690	4.7%
Northern VA	1,609,614	179,155	11.1%
Arlington County	189,453	35,238	18.6%
Fairfax County	969,749	106,672	11.0%
Loudoun County	169,599	10,006	5.9%
Prince William County	280,813	27,239	9.7%

It is necessary to note one key potential source of bias in this study – the restaurants (and employees) selected for assessment may not be representative in characteristic of the industry as a whole nationally or regionally. The restaurants selected were all in a relatively developed area – the majority of surrounding housing and businesses are new, a sophisticated system of transportation is not yet available nor is low-income housing. In addition, the unemployment rate in this area is 2.3%, well below the national average, so that the types of jobs (e.g., number, variety, level) that are available to the Hispanic population may be greater than in other areas. This results in low income workers often moving quickly to higher paying jobs, which indirectly inflates entry-level salaries in order

to lure employees. However, workers living in local housing tend to work more than one job, have multiple earners within the family, and work a greater number of hours to pay for the higher cost of living.

The survey was administered between 2:00 – 6:00 p.m., typically the least busy hours in most restaurants. This was to ensure that everyone, both day and evening workers, would complete the survey. The questionnaire was distributed on a Friday, in that workers who only work during the day are present until 3:00 p.m.; workers who only work on the weeknights or weekends arrive at 4:00 p.m.. Those who were on vacation, had taken sick leave or had been suspended from employment were hand delivered

the questionnaires when they returned to work. Although the survey instrument and cover letter had been translated into Spanish, several individuals chose to meet with the researcher to clarify questions.

The survey instrument comprised four sections, with a total of 27 questions. The choice and formatting of each question reflected the need to address the issues surrounding leisure constraints with this particular subset of the population. The first section solicited demographic information on study participants (i.e., gender, education level, marital status, number of children, annual household income, race and ethnicity, and country of origin). Gender, level of education, and number of children have previously been found to contribute to cultural assimilation levels which in turn affect recreational use and benefits (Arnold & Shinew, 1998; Shaull & Gramann, 1998). The second section of the survey instrument was designed to gain an understanding of the work patterns of respondents (i.e., current employment outside of the home, number of jobs held), in an attempt to relate these patterns to structural or perceived leisure constraints. Questions in the third section of the survey sought information regarding respondent perceptions about the time and distance to outdoor recreation opportunities, and use of various transportation modes. Specifically, respondents were asked a series of questions regarding the distance to local parks, availability of transportation services, and their willingness to utilize them if they exist. The fourth and final section of the survey instrument was designed to assess cultural assimilation. Participants were asked the degree to which they preferred and used English over Spanish. English and Spanish comprehension was measured by asking respondents to report their ability to comprehend, speak and read in that language. Additionally, participants were asked their abilities with regard to command of the English language and actual use of English and Spanish in the home (including while reading, watching television, and talking with friends and family).

Results and Implications

The results of this study indicate that there are specific barriers to recreation experienced by recent Hispanic immigrants that are indicative of their level of acculturation, and not necessarily their race affiliation. Differences in the ability of this group to communicate, travel, and integrate into an established society are compounded by minority status. The majority of non-skilled Hispanic workers surveyed defined their personal leisure constraints as communication barriers, monetary limitations, time limitations due to work commitments (specifically holding multiple jobs), and transportation limitations. Language barriers among recent immigrants tended to be the greatest constraint to recreational participation among those surveyed. In order to obtain greater access to resources, Hispanic-Americans must first obtain a measure of control over the English language, or have pertinent materials translated. Language education in the US for working age immigrants is very expensive. Respondents reported that on average, they paid \$180 per month for English as a Second Language courses. The

added expense of linguistic training leaves this population group financially burdened. The potential for community outreach and language training programs is great. Many of the survey participants reported that they currently work multiple jobs. In fact, some participants work at least three jobs – in total, over sixty hours per week. Multiple employments are in large part the result of minimal pay scales for this population segment (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). With the high cost of living in the Northern Virginia area, immigrant populations are forced to work multiple jobs in order to afford basic life necessities. Many also reported having several young children living in their households. The combination of these factors appears to contribute to a lack of discretionary time for leisure pursuits. A willingness on the part of service providers to remain flexible in service offerings – making accommodations for such needs as childcare and evening programming – is essential. Participants also noted that they carpool, walk, or use bicycles. This result reflects the high cost of automobile ownership, and the relative low-income status of these respondents. Without transportation services, access to recreation and leisure offerings is limited to those places within walking distance. These results indicate that mass transportation may be an effective tool for extending services to this population segment. The cumulative effect of these constraints appears to contribute to limited leisure experiences for newly immigrated Hispanic-Americans. Those surveyed noted an inability to acquire the income necessary to initiate and sustain recreational participation. For leisure service providers, this may justify the necessity for a sliding scale fee structure and “down time” offerings.

In an effort to gain a greater understanding of future users of recreational facilities and services, further research must be conducted to examine the dynamic growth of such population groups: their characteristics, culture and customs, and potential barriers to participation. It is incumbent on recreation providers to develop appropriate and desirable services to meet the needs of a rapidly changing and diverse population.

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