World Leisure Journal

ISSN: 1607-8055 (Print) 2333-4509 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwle20

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To cite this article: Rodney B. Dieser (2012) Leisure education research and the fundamental attribution error, World Leisure Journal, 54:1, 48-57, DOI: 10.1080/04419057.2012.668037

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/04419057.2012.668037

World Leisure Journal
Vol. 54, Issue 1, March 2012, 48–57

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER

Leisure education research and the fundamental attribution error

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The purpose of this paper is to summarise and integrate two history-based content analysis studies related to leisure education in order to highlight the pervasive existence of the fundamental attribution error in leisure education research and to outline its problematic consequences. The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to overestimate dispositional or internal attributions of a person when explaining or modifying behaviour, and to underestimate the influence of environmental factors. In a span of approximately 30 years, there have been 159 leisure education learning components developed from 27 research studies in which leisure education was treated as an independent research variable. Of these 159 leisure learning components, only six components – or just under 4% – focused attention on changing environmental factors outside of the leisure education participants. Recommendations regarding future leisure education practice and research are provided.

Keywords: attribution theory; ecological approaches; fundamental attribution error; individualism; leisure education; system-directed change

Introduction

The fundamental attribution error is a well-known cognitive thinking mistake that has been outlined for over 30 years in the area of social psychology (see Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977), but has been examined only minimally in the area of leisure studies. For example, although Kleiber, Walker, and Mannell (2011) acknowledge the importance of the fundamental attribution error as it relates to understanding and predicting leisure behaviour from a social psychological perspective, they provide little more than this acknowledgement. The purpose of the present paper is to summarise and integrate two history-based content analysis studies related to leisure education (Dieser, 2011a; Dieser, Fox, & Walker, 2002) in order to highlight the pervasive existence of the fundamental attribution error in leisure education research and to outline its problematic consequences.

The fundamental attribution error

This error is the tendency to overestimate the influence of dispositional or internal attributions of a person when explaining or attempting to change behaviour, and to underestimate the impact of the actual situation or other environmental factors (Alcock, Carment, & Sadava, 1991; Ross, 1977). That is to say, the fundamental attribution error is a person's inflated belief in personal factors when explaining behaviour (whether it is one's own behaviour or the behaviour of others), together

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ISSN 0441-9057 print/ISSN 1607-8055 online

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/04419057.2012.668037
http://www.tandfonline.com

with the failure to recognise social and environmental variables (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Alcock et al. (1991) underscored that "this tendency to exaggerate the importance of personal factors and to underestimate the influence of other people and other aspects of the situation is called the 'fundamental error' because it is so widespread" (p. 88).

There have been ample studies that demonstrate the pervasive nature of the fundamental attribution error; however, the study by Ross, Amabile, and Steinmetz (1977) is considered a classic experiment that has brought a great deal of attention to the fundamental attribution error. In this study, which simulated a quiz game show, Ross et al. (1977) randomly assigned students in a Stanford University class into the following three game show roles: questioners, contestants, and observers. Ross and his colleagues asked the questioners to make up difficult questions that would demonstrate their general wealth of knowledge. That is, the experiment was designed so that students would know that the questioners would have the advantage in answering the questions since they were the ones who created the questions. The results of this study concluded that both the contestants and observers came to the erroneous conclusion that the questioners really were more knowledgeable than the contestants. Both the contestants and the observers overestimated the internal/personal attributions of the questioners (regarding the knowledge base of the questioners), and underestimated the influence of the situation (that the questioners had the advantage in creating the questions).

More recently, concerns regarding the fundamental attribution error have been raised in various human service professions and in different academic fields of study. Crumlish and Kelly (2009) noted that the fundamental attribution error is one of the more pervasive cognitive errors in medical practice and that such medical errors oversimplify the complexity of illness. Gilibert and Banovic (2009) demonstrated how easy it is to make the fundamental attribution error in clinical psychology because training leads students to believe that psychological disorders result primarily from dispositional factors and to ignore environmental factors. According to Kennedy (2010), the fundamental attribution error is pervasive when it comes to teaching quality and accountability because educational administrators are too focused on the characteristics of teachers themselves when evaluating teaching quality, and pay little attention to environmental aspects of teaching, such as teachers having inadequate time resources and materials and students' lives away from the classroom (e.g. poor school attendance, problematic parents).

The fundamental attribution error has troubling consequences for all people. Providing pervasive causal attributions articulated in terms of internal attributes or personality-based explanations can lead to: an illusion of control (Alcock et al., 1991); oversimplified and inaccurate explanations of complex social problems (Alcock et al., 1991); and psychological harm being done to people from collectivistic cultures (Sue & Sue, 2007). Elaborating on this last point, assertiveness training based on expressing oneself – which is a common leisure education learning goal (e.g. Dattilo, Williams, & Cory, 2003; Cory, Dattilo, & Williams, 2006) – goes against the ethic of non-interference that is common among many (but not all) American Indian populations. The ethic of non-interference is a behavioural norm among North American Native tribes in which a person will not interfere in any way with the activities of another person (Brant, 1990; Good Track, 1973). The pervasiveness of explaining and modifying behaviours based on internal attributes can lead people

from collectivistic cultures (e.g. North American Indians) to adopt individualistic lifestyles. The cognitive dissonance that results can lead to a host of unhealthy behaviours such as suicide and drug/alcohol dependency (Red Horse, 1982; Waldram, 1997).

The fundamental attribution error occurs primarily in Euro-North American societies because of the dominant prevalence of individualistic values. For example, the value of personal causation and an internal locus of control are, from an individualistic Euro-North American cultural perspective, associated with sound mental health, which does not align with mental health from an Asian collectivistic perspective (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Matsumoto & Juang, 2007). People from individualistic cultures are more prone to make the fundamental attribution error than people from collectivistic cultures (Miller, 1984) because of a difference in the attention paid to social factors in behavioural causation (see Masuda & Nisbett, 2001).

Leisure education

Leisure education is a process of teaching recreation and leisure-related skills, attitudes, and values, usually directed towards people with special needs (Dattilo, 2008; Johnson, Bullock, & Ashton-Schaeffer, 1997). Although there are many different leisure education models, leisure education is usually based on individualistic developmental models (Dieser, 2004). These focus primarily on changing individuals in relation to leisure and focus little attention on changing environmental factors. For example, in Dattilo's (2008) model of leisure education, people with disabilities need to change internal attributes, such as gaining greater self-determination or developing greater skills regarding leisure decision making. The model illustrates an assumption at the foundation of the individual development model of leisure education: that internal attributions need to be changed (e.g. attitudes, social skills) if people are to experience leisure.

In contrast, an ecological approach to change, also known as "system directed change," is manifest when strategies are put in place to improve communities or other environmental factors in the provision of human services to people with special needs (Mandell & Schram, 2008). That is, social ecology models examine how environmental factors, such as neighbourhoods, family members, peers, schools and social services, need to change in order to help people make behavioural changes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An ecological approach to leisure education has been advocated for many years (see, for example, Howe-Murphy & Charboneau, 1987; Sylvester, 1983; Witt, 1991). The Together We Play programme (Scholl, Dieser, & Davison, 2005), for example, provides leisure education from an ecological perceptive directed toward parents who have children with disabilities and provides inclusion training/education to community organisations so that people with disabilities can experience leisure. That is, the leisure education component of the Together We Play programme focuses on social system change – such as helping community organisations make needed changes/accommodations – rather than having people with disabilities make individual change. Having leisure professionals focus greater attention on ecological change makes sense since attitudinal barriers displayed by non-disabled people significantly influence the ability of people

with disabilities to experience leisure (Hironaka-Juteau & Crawford, 2010; Smith, Austin, Kennedy, Lee, & Hutchison, 2005).

In the remainder of this paper, two history-based content analysis studies related to leisure education (Dieser, 2011a; Dieser et al., 2002) will be integrated in order to present a 30-year overview of the existence of the fundamental attribution error in leisure education research and outline the troubling aspects of leisure education research when such research is so strongly associated with the fundamental attribution error.

The first leisure education study to outline the fundamental attribution error

Dieser et al.'s (2002) historical content analysis study examined whether the fundamental attribution error had occurred in leisure education research. In particular, the authors investigated the prevalence of the fundamental attribution error among leisure education programmes that were treated as independent variables as part of research during a 20-year span from 1978 to 1998. The units of data collection for this study were the following academic journals: *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Journal of Leisurability*, *Leisure Science*, *Leisure Studies*, *Journal of Applied Recreation Research*,[1] and the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*. Dieser and colleagues reported that these six journals were selected because they represent leisure-orientated research being undertaken in three countries: the US, Canada, and Great Britain.

The criteria for selecting research articles followed four steps. First, only articles published during 1978 through to the end of 1998 were chosen. Second, the construct of leisure education or leisure counselling had to be listed in the keyword section or title of the article. Third, only those articles that used some type of systematic investigation or collection of data (e.g. research articles) were selected (i.e. articles that did not have some type of systematic investigation, such as theory-based articles, were not included in this study). Last, within the research article, leisure education needed to be treated as an independent research variable.

Dieser et al. were able to identify 19 research studies, from which they clustered 121 leisure education learning components into 19 clustered themes. However, only two leisure education components focused attention on changing environmental factors outside of the leisure education participants. The first leisure education component that addressed changing social and environmental variables was located in Schleien (1984) and related to exposure to leisure-related games and materials. Schleien reported that a recreation partner's play/leisure behaviour, along with the client's, was targeted to create an awareness and understanding that leisure in "cooperative type, leisure related games ... required at least two players for participation" (p. 30). Hence, this leisure education component went beyond changing the individual client to explicitly targeting an external variable – namely, recreation partners. The second leisure education model that addressed changing environmental and social variables was the School–Community Leisure Link model facilitated by Mahon and Martens (1996). Under the leisure education component of making decisions, one of Mahon and Martens' objectives related to *teaching the family to incorporate choice into their child's leisure time*. The other 27 learning objectives in this leisure education model, which were derived from six leisure

education components, focused on having the client change internal attributes, such as changing personal values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge regarding leisure.

Overall, and in regard to this 20-year history-based content analysis study, Dieser et al. (2002) concluded that the overwhelming majority of leisure education interventions committed the fundamental attribution error.

The second leisure education study to outline the fundamental attribution error

This second study by Dieser (2011a) investigated the relationship between the fundamental attribution error and leisure education in parallel with the earlier study (Dieser et al., 2002). Again, the purpose of the study was to investigate the prevalence among leisure education programmes of the fundamental attribution error treated as an independent variable, this time in research reported during the past 10 years (1999–2009). In order to make a fair-minded comparison between the earlier and more recent timeframes, the same observational unit of analysis was followed: *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Leisure/Loisir*,[2] *Leisure Science*, *Leisure Studies*, and the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*. However, because the *Journal of Leisurability* ceased publication in 2000, the *World Leisure Journal* was substituted as a unit of analysis. As in the first study, criterion-based sampling was used with the same four criteria: (1) articles had to be published between 1999 and 2009, (2) the terms "leisure education" or "leisure counselling" had to be listed in the keyword section or title of the article, (3) leisure education had to be treated as an independent variable, and (4) only research articles (data collection) were selected.

In regard to results, Dieser was able to identify eight research studies, and from this clustered 38 leisure education learning components into nine clustered themes. However, only four leisure education components focused attention on changing environmental factors outside of the leisure education participants. Of the 38 leisure education components identified (e.g. leisure appreciation, identification of leisure resources, self-determination in leisure), 34 emphasised changing personal factors, with scant attention directed toward changing environmental factors. The only study in which environmental factors were purposely targeted for change was the study by Ryan, Stiell, Gailey, and Makinen (2008), in which all four of the leisure education components outlined (e.g. understanding leisure and leisure decision-making skills) were aimed at teaching both the client and family/spouses about leisure, thus moving beyond changing individuals to changing a family (social) component.

Summarising and integrating the two studies

It can be concluded from this review of research over the 30-year time period, 1978–2009, that leisure education research has committed the fundamental attribution error; the overwhelming majority of leisure education components overestimated people's internal attributions and underestimated the significance of external variables when proposing actions to enhance leisure. Ten years ago, Dieser et al. (2002) located 119 components out of 121 (approximately 98%) that focused on changing internal factors within the person, with only scant attention given to changing social factors (2%). Results from the second study by Dieser (2011a) indicated that 34 components out of 38 (approximately 89%) were focused on changing internal factors within the person, with little attention given to changing

social factors (11%). Overall, over a span of approximately 30 years, there have been 159 leisure education learning components developed from 27 research studies in which leisure education was treated as an independent research variable. Of those 159 leisure learning components, only six – which equates to just under 4% – focused attention on changing environmental factors outside the leisure education participants. The leisure education components that did take into account environmental and social factors are outlined in Table 1.

All three studies that included a focus on addressing social factors in leisure education had some type of Canadian connection. Two were conducted by Canadian researchers at Canadian universities and the sole American author (Schleien, 1984) published his results in the Canadian *Journal of Leisurability*. Mahon and Martens' (1996) study, "School–Community Leisure Link," was published in the Canadian *Journal of Applied Recreation Research* and both authors of that paper were affiliated with the University of Manitoba in Canada. All of the authors in the Ryan et al. (2008) study and the leisure education programme were affiliated with the University of Ottawa and the Royal Ottawa hospital. Further, in the case of the two historical content case studies discussed in detail above (Dieser, 2011a; Dieser et al., 2002), and which note the prevalence of the fundamental attribution error in leisure education research, the researchers/authors are Canadian citizens.[3]

Discussion and future directions

The purpose of this paper was to integrate two history-based content analysis studies related to leisure education (Dieser, 2011a; Dieser et al., 2002) in order to outline the ubiquitous nature of the fundamental attribution error as it relates to leisure education research and identify the problematic consequences. With respect to research-orientated leisure education programmes from 1978 to 2009, it can be concluded that, collectively, leisure education interventions considerably overestimate the importance of changing internal factors of a person when facilitating leisure education research and underestimate changing social and environmental factors that extend beyond leisure education participants.

Table 1. Leisure education components which address environmental/social factors.*

Author	Environmental factors
Schleien (1984)	Teaching a recreation companion/partner of a person with disabilities to become more aware, and to better understand, leisure in cooperative type leisure-related games.
Mahon & Martens (1996)	Teaching a family of a child with disabilities to incorporate choice into their child's leisure time.
Ryan, Stiell, Gailey, & Makinen (2008)	Teaching the family/spouses of a person with a stroke to: (1) understand leisure; (2) develop leisure participatory and decision-making skills; (3) develop a positive attitude toward leisure expression; and (4) increase knowledge and ability to utilise leisure resources.

*Note: These components represented six of 159 leisure learning components in 27 research studies, 1978–2009.

The reader needs to be mindful of a number of limitations in the case of the two content analysis studies that were summarised in this paper. First, the unit of data collection was focused on six journals within the field of leisure studies. Other journals within and outside the field of leisure (e.g. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, *Annals of Leisure Research*, *Annual in Therapeutic Recreation*, and *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*) were not part of this study. Second, the studies only examined research articles; they did not look at differing theories and models of leisure education outside of the framework of research. Some non-research data driven articles (e.g. see Sivan & Ruskin, 2000) point to leisure education models that *do* address social and environmental variables.

In regard to the practical implications of the historical content analysis studies, and drawing heavily on suggestions in Dieser et al. (2002) and Dieser (2011a), it is apparent that leisure education research may be culturally or paradigmatically encapsulated within an individualistic framework. As mentioned earlier, the fundamental attribution error is associated with individualistic values (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Matsumoto & Juang, 2007) and the majority of the research in the leisure education field has been conducted by American researchers in American universities. These universities embody individualistic values tied to a standardised way of thinking through accreditation via the higher education curriculum. (Again, the three studies that *did* address changing environmental factors as part of leisure education research had affiliation with a Canadian perspective.[4]) Although individualistic values are important and may be held by the majority of people in North America and Europe, there are still many differing cultures that follow collectivistic values (Pedersen, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2007). Presenting and working within an individual developmental model of leisure education, which focuses on analysing and changing internal attributes, may have detrimental consequences in the case of people who maintain collectivistic values. Furthermore, committing the fundamental attribution error is problematic with reference to *all people* because it develops an illusion of control and provides oversimplified explanations and low-level thinking abilities with respect to complex social problems (Alcock et al., 1991), such as ways in which leisure education can address obesity or leisure boredom.

In regard to future research and professional practice, an obvious first step in reducing the emphasis on the fundamental attribution error in leisure education research is to acknowledge that it exists and can have troubling consequences for all people, but especially people from collectivistic cultural groups. This is not to deny that leisure education that is built on changing dispositional or internal attributions of a person has its proper place in leisure education and is appropriate to peoples drawn from individualistic cultures. What leisure professionals should not do is attempt to brush off critical views of the problematic aspects of individualism and argue that there is nothing wrong with leisure education professions, such as therapeutic recreation, valuing American individualistic paradigms and notions in practice and theory. Some leisure academics have acted in this way (see Van Puymbroeck, Austin, & McCormick, 2011) when confronted with arguments that too much of leisure service delivery, including leisure education, and leisure education research, shows a one-sided emphasis towards individualistic values.

To this end, a second obvious step in reducing the emphasis of the fundamental attribution error in leisure education research is to direct greater attention toward

developing leisure education research that takes a sociological or ecological approach in order to remedy or prevent social problems and individual disabilities/disorders. As outlined by Jenson and Fraser (2010), most social problems and problematic individual disorders (e.g. adolescent substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, mental health, children and youth with disabilities) are a combination of individual characteristics and multiple environmental conditions. For example, Barton (2010) underscored the multitude of social factors that affect juvenile delinquency: family management, peer relations, school programmes, and neighbourhood/community factors (e.g. high neighbourhood crimes rates, lack of community opportunities and resources such as leisure). As such, leisure education programmes and research need to break free of the cultural encapsulating values of individualism (Dieser, 2004) – in which all problems and solutions begin and end with the individual – and begin to provide programmes that address the ecological and sociological aspects of real social problems and personal disabilities and disorders. Although there *are* models of ecologically-based leisure education (e.g. Levy, 2000; Scholl et al., 2005; Sivan, 2000), these models do not seem to be appearing as research variables in research-based journals. Simply stated, greater attention should be given to ecological/system directed approaches to leisure education research.

Notes

1. Prior to the fifteenth volume, the *Journal of Applied Recreation Research* was named the *Recreation Research Review*. Further, in 1999/2000 the *Journal of Applied Recreation Research* changed its name again, this time to *Leisure/Loisir*. Although this journal has had three name changes, it is the academic journal published by the Canadian Association for Leisure Studies.
2. Again, the *Journal of Applied Recreation Research* changed its name to *Leisure/Loisir* in 1999/2000. However, it is exactly the same journal, published by the Canadian Association for Leisure Studies.
3. Although Dieser is affiliated with an American university, he is a Canadian citizen who spends time involved in therapeutic recreation and leisure service delivery from a Canadian perspective. Fox and Walker are Canadian citizens affiliated with the University of Alberta.
4. See Dieser (2011b), who argues that the US university leisure curriculum allows less diversity of thought because, unlike Canada and most European countries, American leisure curriculum follows a melting pot ideology of standardisation whereby competencies are made uniform and melded into a homogenous body of accreditation.

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