The Formative Nature of Conducting Research for a Metropolitan Park District

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In this paper I show that conducting ongoing research for a metropolitan park district is very much a formative process (Blumer, 1969). My job description, the nature of the projects, the needs of park district staff, the perceived needs of constituents, my personal needs, the resources at my disposal, and the help I was able to secure on different projects were all contexts that influenced how research projects were conducted, and how findings were interpreted and reported. Yet none of these were determinative in their own right. Getting projects done required interpretation and negotiation.

Organized public and private park and recreation delivery in the United States and other countries have their origins amidst the deplorable living conditions of late 19th century urban areas. According to Galen Cranz (1982), the movement to preserve open spaces and provide parks in the United States sprang "from an anti-urban ideal that dwelt on the traditional prescription for relief from the evils of the city—to escape to the country" (p. 3). Even today, there are few people who argue against the benefits of public parks and open spaces. Yet who is served and how people are served by public park districts are very much matters of interpretation and politics. Decisions about where to locate parks, what services to provide, and what facilities to maintain occur within a public arena where the interests and needs of different stakeholder groups are weighed and given voice.

Citizen input into park and recreation decision making has a long history. Park districts receive feedback from the public via politicians, advisory councils, public

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meetings, pressure tactics and protests, and citizen and visitor surveys. Citizen and visitor surveys are potentially the most democratic forms of citizen input, yet they have often been conducted by park and recreation practitioners who have little training in research techniques. Hence, results tend to be flawed in terms of both validity and reliability. Many park districts utilize paid research consultants to conduct needs assessments; a very few others actually employ full-time researchers to carry out these activities.

I was one of these full-time researchers. In this paper, I provide a retrospective glance back at the three years I spent as Manager of Research and Program Evaluation for a metropolitan park district (henceforth called the District). As the individual responsible for conducting research projects, I incorporated and gave voice to a multitude of stakeholders’ interests, needs, and perspectives. Citizens (or simply constituents) were just one of these groups. Giving voice to different groups of constituents (e.g., marginalized groups) was done by controlling the analysis and reporting of data. Accordingly, I was in what Herbert Blumer (1969) might have called an “interpretive situation.” While I had a job description with a number of “performance responsibilities,” it was, ultimately, up to me to bring meaning to the position statement. Here I had to learn to define my duties in light of my own interests, the resources at my disposal, and the requests and interests of constituents in the population and District staff. These tasks and activities were performed in sequence, and the timetables under which tasks were performed were variable in nature (Hall, 1987; Maines, 1983; Maines, Sugure & Katovich, 1983). Undertaking and implementing projects also entailed considerations of what happened in the past (e.g., perceived cooperative-ness of groups in the past) and what is likely to occur in the future (e.g., the prospect of collecting data that can be used as a basis for writing publications). Conducting projects thus was very much a negotiated affair that involved myself and various stakeholder groups (Maines, 1977; Strauss, 1978). Negotiation was ongoing and entailed choosing the kinds of information to be collected, mobilizing resources, and communicating findings. Collectively, these processes are at the core of Herbert Blumer’s (1969) dictum that “the essence of society lies in an ongoing process of action—not in a posited structure of relations” (p. 71). Accordingly, it is the formative nature of conducting ongoing applied research that I address here.

SETTING AND BACKGROUND

The District is a public park and recreation agency located in the Midwest. At the time of the 1990 census, the tax district of the agency included approximately 1.4 million residents from two counties. The District is situated in a large metropolitan area of 2.7 million people. As a special governmental agency, the District has the authority to levy taxes. This is significant because, unlike other local park and recreation agencies across the country, the District does not compete with other government agencies (e.g., police) for scarce tax dollars. Hence, the District has a larger budget and tends to be less impacted by political pressures compared to other park districts. The District is managed by an executive-director who is overseen by three appointed (nonpaid) park commissioners.
At the time of my employment, there were approximately 450 full-time and 100 part-time and/or seasonal employees. The District owned over 19,000 acres of land in 12 reservations (parks), over 100 miles of parkways, and a world class zoo. The mission statement of the District encompassed three elements: conservation, education, and recreation. Facilities and features operated by the District included hiking, bridle, all-purpose (paved) and fitness trails, golf courses, swimming beaches, nature centers, interpretive (nature) programs, picnic areas, play fields, wildlife sanctuaries, and boating and fishing areas. The District also coordinated a number of special events and festivals throughout the year, all of which had a theme that was related in one way or another to conservation and/or education.

The District created the position of Manager of Research and Program Evaluation in the Fall of 1990 and hired me in the Summer of 1991 as its first occupant. [Impetus to create the position came from a newly hired executive-director who strongly believed in the value of a systematic and ongoing program of research and evaluation. The executive-director is perceived by many of his professional colleagues to be thoughtful and possess an academic inclination.] I stayed in that position until 1994 when I joined the faculty at Texas A&M University. I reported directly to the Director of Marketing and Visitors Services. According to my job description, I was to “monitor and assess the leisure needs, attitudes and interests of citizens served by the District, and to evaluate its effectiveness in meeting those needs.” My primary responsibilities included conducting surveys to assess the needs of constituents and evaluate programs; directing and implementing an ongoing program for counting park district visitors; and analyzing, interpreting, and communicating findings to District staff. At first, I did not have a staff; later the District gave me the resources to hire three part-time employees to assist in the counting of park visitors.

**SERVING STAKEHOLDERS**

According to Babbie (1989), conducting “applied research is fundamentally predicated on a need for specific facts and findings with policy implications” (p. 34). Within the context of a park and recreation setting, this may involve undertaking needs assessments to determine what constituents believe the agency should be doing, identify target markets and determine how these target markets will react to various program and facility initiatives, establish what prices should be charged for services, determine how availability can be best communicated, and establish what time and locations different service alternatives should be offered (Crompton, 1983). It may also entail evaluating existing programs to demonstrate their legitimacy, impact and effectiveness; show accountability for a program to sponsors and administrators; assess whether or not goals and objectives are being met; and aid in program revision (Henderson, 1995).

While these objectives may be straightforward enough, an applied research project is bound by a multitude of interested parties (Coleman, 1978) or stakeholders who assign different meanings and varying amounts of salience to both the project and its findings. A stakeholder is defined here as any group that initiates a research project or is potentially impacted by the research. In my job with the District, I served five major
types of stakeholders, including (a) constituents and/or visitors, (b) District staff and local groups that were not under the employ of the District, (c) local foundations, (d) myself, and (e) my professional colleagues and the broader research community. On any given project, any number of these different stakeholders were served. What is more important, conducting applied research was more than simply collecting data for purposes of policy making. Rather, it was a process of undertaking projects wherein the interests and needs of different stakeholder groups were taken into consideration and given voice.

Serving Constituents

As noted, my job title directed me “to monitor and assess the leisure needs, attitudes and interests of citizens served by the District, and evaluate its effectiveness in meeting those needs.” I took very seriously the idea that it was my job to give voice to constituents’ leisure, or simply recreation, needs. Even with unlimited resources at my disposal, however, I could not have begun to do this unless I came to grips with what comprised a “constituent” and what comprised a “recreation need.” These were matters of interpretation and definition, which underscores the fact that interests and needs of constituents were mediated and refracted by the interests and beliefs of the stakeholders who initiated the research in the first place. Thus, deciding who were constituents influenced what projects got done, whose recreation needs were assessed, and, in the end, which voices within the population were heard.

A general definition of constituent is any individual who lived in the tax district, including both park district users and nonusers. This point of view, while shared by a number of other District employees, was a minority opinion. A far more restrictive definition was used by most District employees. For these individuals, constituents were those people who were currently using park district services and facilities. Underlying these two definitions were differences of opinion about the role of public park and recreation agencies in meeting people’s recreation needs (Mercer, 1973; Godbey, 1994), the objectives of research, and where we believed data should be collected.

I personally believed that public park and recreation agencies have a special mandate to try to meet the recreation needs of marginalized groups in our society. In the words of Howard Becker (1967), I felt that the District needed to be a champion of the “underdog.” Research has historically shown that use of public park and recreation services tends to be lowest among people with low incomes, minority groups, older adults, women, and people with disabilities (Howard & Crompton, 1984; Godbey, Graefe & James, 1992; Dattilo, 1994). My research with the District overwhelmingly confirmed these findings (Scott, 1994; Scott & Hinkle, 1994; Scott & Munson, 1995; Scott & Jackson, 1996). I generally explained these patterns in terms of unequal distribution of public park services, the failure of park and recreation practitioners to direct services to identifiable client groups, and marginalized groups lacking the resources at their disposal to effectively access park and recreation services. Doing research for the District, I felt it was our objective to determine what groups were being under-served by the District and what kinds of constraints or barriers were limiting their use of park services. To obtain this kind of information, I tended to favor data collection tech-
niques such as mail surveys and telephone surveys that allowed us to reach people inside their homes.

In contrast, many other District employees felt that our mandate was to better serve those individuals currently using park district facilities and services. They believed that residents of the tax district were able to act freely on the basis of their leisure preferences, that there was a relatively just distribution of recreation resources in the county, and that the vast majority of individuals had equal resources and access to park resources. These individuals favored on-site surveys where the objectives typically were to determine what visitors were doing, how often they visited, their motives for participation, their satisfaction with District services, how they kept informed about park district activities, and whether their enjoyment was stymied as a result of their interaction with other visitors.

I agree with those who say that leisure service organizations can never determine people’s recreation needs in a completely scientific or objective way (Godbey, 1994). A “needs assessment” is fundamentally an interpretive process whereby a particular definition of recreation need is given priority. While some District employees and I felt that research should provide a voice for the “underdog” in the population, other employees felt that studies should be conducted to voice only the needs and concerns of park and zoo visitors. What research project I worked on contributed in large measure to whose voice would be ultimately heard, and in most cases it was not the “underdog.” However, as I will explain below, giving voice to the underdog and other constituent groups was accomplished by controlling the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of data over time.

Serving District Staff, Commissioners, and Local Groups

Most of my daily activity was spent on projects that were initiated by divisions and groups under the employ of the District. These projects were initiated because some individual and/or group in the District perceived there was a problem (e.g., conflict among trail users), an information gap (e.g., what fraction of festival visitors are visiting for the first time), or a need to document their unit’s performance (e.g., how satisfied are visitors with parking arrangements). In addition, I was sometimes asked to represent the District on various local inter-agency task forces. I served District staff and local groups by helping them frame research problems; developing research instruments and research designs; coordinating data collection and data entry; analyzing and interpreting data; and reporting findings. In the eyes of District staff the most important service I provided them was a reporting of findings which could be used as a resource for making decisions, demonstrating effectiveness, and justifying actions. Even today, findings I reported are still being used by District staff. However, as I will show in a subsequent section, these reports reflect a personalized style of analysis and interpretation.

Serving Local Foundations

On one occasion, the scope of a project was defined by a local foundation that provided the District a sizable grant to conduct a region-wide telephone survey. The
District originally initiated the study to provide information about why people did not use facilities and services operated by the District, and determine what open space initiatives people in the population favored. The foundation that funded the study, however, insisted that it be broadened to include information that could be used by two other major park districts (the National Park Service and the State Park System) that had holdings in the region. Broadening the focus of the study meant surveying residents of the greater metropolitan area rather than just the constituents of the District. It also meant that the District could not control all that went into the survey instrument.

**Serving Myself**

I cannot think of a single project where my own interests were not served or taken into consideration at one time or another. Essentially, my interests were served (and continue to be served) by projects in four ways. First, I felt that my performance on research projects, particularly during my first year of employment with the District, had direct relevance and consequences for my personal identity and my job security (Becker, 1960). While my graduate training had provided me opportunities to conduct leisure research, I had never done research in a park and recreation setting before. Thus, the projects were a kind of proving ground. At stake were judgments and evaluations (made by me and others) about my ability to solve problems, conduct independent research, and relate to park and recreation practitioners. Simultaneously, I felt that a poor job performance could result in unemployment, the eventual relocation of my family, and the rethinking of my career. A second set of interests at stake was the conditions of my employment. Projects provided me varying opportunities for creative expression, satisfaction, and the experience of intrinsic rewards. Third, the projects produced data sets that I knew could eventually be used for publishing research articles. Indeed, I have already published or presented several professional papers from these projects, and expect to do more of the same in the future. A final way that projects served me is that the output from these projects (technical reports, professional papers, conference proceedings, journal articles) occupy lines on my curriculum vita which will have bearing on my ability to earn university tenure.

The interests that I have just described were not merely outcomes of research projects. I fully considered these interests during the early stages of every project. My question always was, “What am I going to get out of this?” I actively sought to frame problems, design studies, and create research instruments (surveys) in ways that would benefit me personally while fulfilling the District’s needs. This generally involved adding items or scales to surveys that were of theoretical interest to me and could be used for purposes of publishing.

**Serving Colleagues and the Research Community**

To some extent the interests of my professional colleagues and the research community were served by projects. On a few occasions, colleagues at universities collaborated with me in the design and implementation of projects. Their interests in these projects were driven by a desire to have data sets that could be used for publishing articles. Projects have also resulted in the publication and presentation of findings,
thus adding to existing bodies of knowledge. This will hopefully continue into the future. Finally, professional journals and conferences were also served. Editors and coordinators are always in the need of manuscripts to keep their journals and conferences viable, and a number of projects have contributed, albeit indirectly, to this.

**WORKING ON PROJECTS**

The various stakeholders just described were served and given voice within the context of research projects. Specific projects I worked on included a three-season in-park survey, a telephone survey, three zoo surveys, a trail study, evaluation studies of different special events, and an on-going program for counting park district visitors. Some of these projects were rather large scale tasks. One of these was a telephone survey of over 1,000 residents of the metropolitan area. The study was conducted over a two-month period and was designed to provide insight into people’s use and nonuse of park services in the region. Other projects were far smaller in scope. An evaluation of a special event, for example, was conducted over one or two days and generally involved surveying no more than 200 people.

These and other projects provided an underlying context for how I did my job, but they in themselves were not determining elements. Indeed, I was able to negotiate the contours of almost all projects. Moreover, at various stages or phases of each project, I was able to exert varying amounts of control, which affected the conditions of my work, over what stakeholders were served and the extent to which different constituent groups were given voice.

It is important for this discussion to understand that projects were conducted within the context of temporal frames of reference. (Hall, 1987; Maines, 1983; Maines, Sugure & Katovich, 1983). Tasks and activities were organized in sequence and according to different timetables. The primary tasks and activities of a project included: project initiation; framing the project and creating a research instrument; collecting data and creating a database; and interpreting data and presenting results. The timetables underlying some of these activities were brief and temporally fixed. Creating a research instrument, for example, was a one-time affair and, in some cases, completed in a few days. In contrast, timetables underlying other activities were longer and much more open-ended. In the course of some projects, for instance, I presented results on multiple occasions and for multiple audiences.

In addition, activities were organized within the contexts of pasts and futures. These considerations changed from project to project. My ability to conduct studies of zoo visitors improved over time as a result of having conducted such studies in the past. Each new zoo study also provided me opportunities to make novel inquiries into visitors’ behavior. As I approached each new study, I considered what questions would be theoretically interesting and how I would go about using the data in the future to write journal articles.

**Project Initiation**

As noted, District staff initiated research projects for different reasons. For the most part, I did not control the initiation of projects. The executive-director, for example,
was very keen on knowing how many people the District served, and he directed me to devise a system for counting park visitors. Similarly, I conducted evaluation studies of special events because my supervisor, the Director of Marketing and Visitors Services, wanted to know about the characteristics of visitors, their motives for attending, and their satisfaction with the events. Other District units initiated projects through my supervisor. The three zoo studies began this way. Other District staff proposed projects to me directly, which I chose to undertake when they were of sufficient interest to me.

Why groups initiated research projects influenced, in large measure, what combinations of stakeholders were likely to benefit from them. Cumulatively, the District chose to undertake projects where the primary goal was to document the success or performance of an event or facility. In almost all of these studies, the unit of analysis was the park or zoo visitor, and data collection occurred on-site. This meant that underdog constituents were largely under-served by the majority of research projects. There was one project, however, that did provide an opportunity to vocalize the recreation needs of underdogs in the tax district. This was a telephone survey that was undertaken in conjunction with a comprehensive master plan initiative. As described below, I was able to use this study to voice the recreation needs of marginalized groups by including pertinent questions in the survey instrument, and subsequently controlling the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of data.

**Framing a Project and Creating a Research Instrument**

After a project was initiated, decisions had to be made about how to design the study, what items and questions to include in the research instrument, who would help in the data collection, and how the data would actually be collected and eventually entered into the computer. Practical matters pertaining to time, cost, and personnel all figured into these decisions. In addition, I had to consider and interpret the needs and interests of different stakeholders. Together, these factors contributed to the framing of a project.4

The telephone survey described above provides a good example of how different factors and stakeholder interests' frame a project. For purposes of brevity, I will focus primarily on the design part of the survey instrument for this project. This was one of my first tasks that I undertook as Manager of Research and Program Evaluation. As already noted, the foundation that funded the telephone survey insisted that it be expanded to include information that could be used by the National Park Service and the State Park System. This meant expanding both the study population and the kinds of information to be collected. Early on, there was no consensus among representatives within each of the park districts about what should go into the survey. While each of these groups had a "wish list," we were all bound by a budget that allowed us to collect only 10 minutes of information per respondent.5 Representatives from all three park districts, however, were interested in why people did not visit parks. From my point of view, this was fortuitous because it corresponded with one of my research interests. I was subsequently able to include several scale items in the survey that measured perceived leisure constraints and help determine whether changes in park operations or programming might result in their using public parks more often. While I would have
liked to have included more items, the cost of the study and others’ information needs were limiting factors.

The completed survey instrument was created in light of the interests and information needs of representatives from all three park districts. It also reflected my personal interests. It included items that were theoretically interesting to me and of potential interest to the research community. I looked forward to analyzing the data and using the data as a basis for writing journal articles and professional papers. Most importantly, the survey provided a forum for voicing the recreation needs and interests of different constituent groups. Underdog groups, in particular, were served by the inclusion of the constraints and change items, and demographic questions. Later, my analysis of the data would reveal that African-Americans, people with low income, women, and older adults were disproportionately nonpark users; that these groups experienced different constraints to park visitation than their counterparts in the population; and that they were more likely than others to state that they might use parks more given certain changes in park operations.

### Project Implementation

Preparing surveys, distributing them to park or zoo visitors, monitoring returns, sending out postcard reminders and replacement surveys, and entering data are rather mundane activities, but they figured prominently in how I framed projects. With the exception of counting park visitors, I did not have paid staff to help me perform these activities. Hence, the size of a project was shaped by the resources I was able to procure from District units who initiated a project. Not surprisingly, units who were able to provide me extensive aid were in a good position to help themselves. The zoo studies are a case in point. The zoo had a large volunteer program, of which I was able to use as a resource in the collection of data and the building of data sets. One volunteer was especially helpful and offered to help me enter data on several other projects.

My own interests in a project affected how much energy I personally put into the preparation of surveys, the collection of data, and data entry. To take a single instance, I exerted much energy in the implementation of a trail study that was conducted during the last few months of my job with the District. At the time, I knew I was conducting the project for both the District and me. I wanted the data from the project for writing journal articles and professional papers. My actions were dictated, in part, by tenure and promotion standards that I knew I would face in my position at Texas A&M. Hence, I engaged in activities (e.g., folding and stuffing envelopes and distributing surveys on weekends) that I probably would not have done had I not a personal stake in the study.

### Analysis and Reporting of Data

Responses from surveys were extracted and converted into the production of data sets, and I maintained a large measure of freedom and control in how I did this. This was due, in part, because I had the technical and analytic skills to run the computer software and interpret the results. Having control over data sets meant being able to
control my working conditions, what findings were presented and interpreted to District staff, and the contexts through which findings were reported.

I have heard colleagues say that they “play” with data sets. For individuals who are either computer illiterate and/or have an aversion toward statistics, this choice of words must seem ludicrous, if not extraordinary. Yet I understand that data sets provide opportunities for play. Being able to control this part of my job meant controlling the very conditions of my work. Playing with data sets provided intrinsic rewards and all those elements generally associated with a “flow” experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Each new data set provided new challenges and opportunities for exploration. There were hypotheses to be tested, relationships to be examined, scales to be factor analyzed, variables to be cross-tabulated, statistical techniques to be tried out, and methods of presenting findings to be tried out. I cannot overstate the amount of enjoyment this part of my job provided me.

Having control of data sets also meant that I controlled how data were analyzed, interpreted, and reported. The reports that District staff ultimately received were very much the product of a creative, personalized style of interpretation on my part. My actions were bound and shaped by what questions and scale items went into a survey, my abilities as a statistician, what knowledge I had about the topic area, what information I knew District Staff wanted, and my personal conception of constituents’ recreation needs. Having control over a data set meant being able to voice the recreation need of underdog constituents. I did this by giving extra meaning to select findings. On all reports involving park district visitors, for example, I compared demographic characteristics of visitors relative to their numbers in the tax district. My goal here was to make clear exactly what groups the District was under-serving.

By having control of data sets, I was also able to control the contexts under which findings were reported. Individuals who initiated a project were always presented a technical report of findings a few months following the completion of the data collection. However, I found other avenues to report findings, including journal articles, papers at meetings, conference proceedings, and presentations to local agencies. While these reports were certainly self-serving, they provided a broader forum for voicing the recreation needs of marginalized and other constituent groups in the region. Publication of findings in a refereed journal lent credibility to findings presented to District staff in memos and technical reports. Similarly, publication and reporting of findings through external channels provides a basis for voicing the recreation needs of groups in general. I have had two papers published in the last two years that highlight the constraints that limit underdog groups use of public parks. While the findings were based on data collected locally, they are in all probability, applicable to marginalized groups in general.

**DEVELOPING IDENTITY AND GAINING LEGITIMACY**

Maines (1978) defined identities as “social categories through which people may be located and given meaning in some organizational context.” (p. 242). Identities are created, sustained, and given meaning through interaction. Yet identities are not taken for granted. They must be legitimized through role performances and role support (McCall & Simmons, 1966). According to Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin (1988),
identity is the central object to be negotiated in interaction. Thus, identities are symbolic, "calling up in one person the same responses as are called up in others" (Burke and Reitzes, 1991, p. 242).

The District hired me as the first "Manager of Research and Program Evaluation." Being a new position, there were no clear-cut standards for me or anybody else to judge my performance. To succeed in this position, I had to develop a viable identity. My supervisor made this very clear to me the first day on the job. She said, "I'm going to give you enough rope to either climb up or hang yourself." Developing a viable identity involved gaining legitimacy or role support for what I did. In retrospect, I was able to do this in three ways: (a) learning how to interpret and communicate findings, (b) completing projects and solving problems, and (c) locating allies and developing credibility outside the District.

Gaining legitimacy involved learning how to interpret and communicate findings to District staff. I learned rather early that it was not enough for me to simply report frequencies, descriptive statistics, bivariate relationships, and so on. The executive director told me, "You are going to have to tell people what the results mean." His exhortation taught me the importance of "taking a stand." Taking a stand meant vocalizing constituents' recreation needs and drawing implications and inferences.

Taking a stand was more than a set of activities; it involved learning how to communicate findings in ways that were straightforward and nonthreatening. I learned how to do this using two tactics. One was to "sandwich" controversial findings between bolstering or more flattering kinds of results. The other was to contextualize findings in light of the District's conservation mission. Text taken from a report I wrote provides an example:

African-Americans currently do not use the District ... at rates equal to their numbers in the population. Since African-Americans and other minorities are expected to increase their share of the region's population in the future, the tax base for the District ... will fall increasingly on people who have not traditionally used these areas. From a policy point of view, these facts are problematic because the principle mandate of the District ... is to conserve area natural resources. Strategies to make park services and programs more relevant to African-Americans and other groups must be done in ways that are consistent with the underlying mission of the District.

Contextualizing findings in this way showed District staff that I was loyal and had in mind the interests of the park district.

Developing a legitimate research identity meant learning how to act like a researcher. This point follows directly from the appearance principle in Turner's (1978) discussion of role-person merger: "In the absence of contradictory cues, people tend to accept others as they appear" (p. 6). Appearing or acting like a researcher meant providing clear and unambiguous evidence of my work. One kind of evidence I was able to display was very high response rates on zoo or in-park surveys. Using mail-back procedures, we typically received 80% or higher response rates. The written reports I distributed were another kind of evidence. I sought to write reports that were deliberately brief, visually appealing, easy to understand, and potentially useful. A related kind of evidence pertained to the visibility and distribu-
tion of reports. While working on the master plan, I authored a number “research updates” and distributed these to the 15 members of the master plan task force at approximately two-week intervals. Each research update was one-page in length, and concisely described findings from surveys pertaining to a single issue (e.g., changing population and racial complexion of the tax district). These research updates provided park staff useful information, and made my work visible to a large group of Park staff on a frequent basis.

Developing legitimacy also involved locating allies in the District and developing credibility. In part, locating allies was necessary because the particular stand I took on interpreting data was perceived by some as controversial. When I emphasized the recreation needs of underdog constituents during slide show presentations, some District staff were vocally contentious and skeptical. These people discounted my interpretations by arguing that the District was already at capacity; that the District serves everyone and people are free to come and go as they wish; the District is in the conservation business and should not be pandering to special group interests; the District already serves those groups; and the data collection techniques were not valid. Fortunately for me, not all Park staff shared these points of view and many came to my defense. Some, in fact, seemed empowered by the data I presented. These individuals told me privately that study findings had supported some of their long-held hunches (“we’re not serving minorities”). Hence, these individuals used study findings to more openly declare their beliefs about recreation needs and what facility and program initiatives the District should initiate.

Gaining legitimacy was facilitated by developing credibility outside the District. My supervisor, the executive-director, and other District staff interpreted my scholarly activity (becoming an associate editor for a journal, having articles published, giving papers at professional meetings) as further evidence of my abilities and research identity.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Conducting research is very much a formative process (Blumer, 1969). My job description, the nature of the projects, the needs of park staff, the perceived needs of constituents, my personal needs, the resources at my disposal, and the help I was able to secure on different projects were all contexts that influenced how research projects were conducted, and how findings were interpreted and reported. Yet none of these were determinative in their own right. Getting projects done required interpretation and negotiation.

On any given project, there were multiple stakeholders or interested parties who assigned different meanings and salience to both the project and its findings. Significantly, some stakeholders had greater power than others to decide what research projects the District should undertake. This fact underscores the political nature of park and recreation research. Choices about what research projects to conduct meant that a specific definition of recreation need is given priority. While leisure researchers strive to employ methods and techniques that are objective and nonreactive in nature, the primacy of one conception of recreation need over another will mean that certain
groups of constituent groups will be given voice while other group will not. In sum, the application of data to decisions is not only a function of what data say, but what stakeholders believe and the values they hold.

It is questionable whether a park and recreation agency can ever conduct needs assessments and other research projects that are truly objective in nature. By implication, the researcher who conducts such studies can hardly be objective either. This point of view was emphatically made by Howard Becker (1967): “For it to exist, one would have to assume ... that it is indeed possible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies” (p. 239). The very act of agreeing to conduct research for a park district entails the investigator becoming an agent of representatives of the park district (Coleman, 1978). This collaboration necessarily entails embracing a particular definition of recreation need.

While an investigator may have little control over what projects to undertake for a park district, s/he may be able to control what gets asked in a survey and the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of data over time. As I have noted in this paper, controlling these facets of a project provided me a way to highlight the recreation needs of constituent groups that had been traditionally underserved by the District. My actions were based, in part, on my belief that some people in the population have a greater comparative need for public park and recreation services.

It is possible to conduct research for a park district and ignore issues pertaining to recreation need and giving voice to different constituent groups. It is also possible to undertake research projects without considering the possibility of using the data to publish research articles. In each of these cases, the research act is likely to be perceived as a mechanical task, one that can be carried out by a skilled “technician.” I could have taken on this perspective in my job as manager of research and program evaluation for the District but I chose not to. While I sought to serve the District and its constituents, I actively maintained professional linkages with the discipline of leisure studies. These ties informed my beliefs about what constituents the District should be serving, how research should be conducted, and the importance of having peers evaluate my work and adding to existing bodies of knowledge.

NOTES

1. Nonreactive methods, such as in-depth interviewing, focus groups, and participant observation, were used only sparingly.
2. Recently the executive-director of the District has been criticized by members of the public for a tree and brush trimming project he directed in late 1994. He recently justified his decision by citing findings from one of my reports that stated that nonusers do not use parks because of their of fear of crime. It is not clear to me whether the study findings were used as a guide for action (ordering the tree and brush trimming), or are being used retrospectively (as a justification for action taken).
3. The experience of intrinsic rewards in work situation is nicely documented by Csikszentmihalyi (1990).
4. One disadvantage any park district faces when hiring a researcher full-time is that s/he will have varying interests and skills. I was asked to undertake some research projects in which I had little prior training in the substantive area (e.g., tourism marketing). Given the time frames involved, it was impossible to develop an “overnight” expertise in these areas.
Hence, I found it advantageous to seek consultation from university colleagues. They helped me to develop survey instruments on three different projects. These collaborations yielded a number of benefits for both the District and my colleagues. The District benefited because they were given a better product. My colleagues benefited because I gave them access to data sets that they could use for writing journal articles and professional papers.

5. Data collection was carried out by a private research center.

6. Consistently, studies show that the District under-served African-Americans and people with low incomes. Findings from a zoo study conducted in 1992 are typical. While African-Americans comprised 25% of the population in the tax district, they constituted only 7% of zoo visitors. Similarly, 20% of zoo visitors reported annual household incomes of less than $20,000, compared to 35% of residents in the tax district.

7. I made extensive use of an evaluation tool called an importance-performance (I-P) appraisal (Martilla & James, 1977). The logic and administration of the tool are simple. Respondents are asked to rate different service attributes in terms of their importance and performance. Mean scores are calculated and these serve as coordinates on a scatter plot. A comparison of I-P scores provides a simple and easy tool for determining which service attributes an agency may wish to improve, maintain, and, perhaps, de-emphasize.

REFERENCES


