Editorial: Opportunities for Cross-Cultural Comparative Research on Leisure

GARRY CHICK
School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Recreation Management
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Cross-cultural comparative research on leisure is extremely rare in both the anthropological and leisure literatures. The opportunities for conducting such research are excellent, however. Ethnographic data archives, such as the Human Relations Area Files, are widely available and contain a trove of information on leisure in societies, both past and present, from around the world. Methods for cross-cultural comparative research have improved greatly in the past two decades. The purpose of this editorial is to urge leisure researchers to make use of both cross-cultural comparative methods and existing sources of data.

Keywords anthropology, cross-cultural research, culture, games, leisure, recreation


Valentine et al. (1999) also expressed the need for comparative research on leisure. Several recent publications have involved intracultural comparisons (e.g., Bialeschki & Walbert, 1998; Floyd & Shinew, 1999; Floyd, Shinew, McGuire, & Noe, 1994; Virden & Walker, 1999), but empirical, cross-cultural comparative studies on leisure are rare (e.g., Chick, 1993, 1995) or at the margins of the field (e.g., Chick, 1998a; Duda & Allison, 1990). This does not need to be the case. As I point out in this editorial, ample opportunities for the conduct of empirical, cross-cultural comparative research exist, especially for those who are willing to use secondary data. In particular, the Human Relations Area Files is a valuable archive of ethnographic data from cultures around the world, both past and present, that can be used for cross-cultural comparative research on leisure, recreation, sport, and related forms of expressive culture.

The field of anthropology developed during the second half of the 19th century with the recognition that the cultures of people to be found in the various corners of the world are both similar and different in many ways. Hence, anthropology has long had an important comparative tradition. Nevertheless, only a few modern anthropologists have conducted explicitly
comparative research, but ethnographic description is commonly regarded as the defining characteristic and core of the discipline. Further, the ethnography of recreation, leisure, and expressive culture has always taken a back seat to the description of the more utilitarian aspects of culture, including social organization, economic systems, political systems, and the like (Chick, 1998b). It should come as no surprise that comparative studies of recreation, leisure, sport, and other expressive systems are relatively rare in the anthropological literature.

The rarity of such studies does not mean that they are without value, however. I believe that cross-cultural comparative studies of recreation, leisure, sport, and other expressive activities have immense potential for informing us about the place of such phenomena in human culture. Cross-cultural comparative studies have several clear virtues. First, such studies permit data exploration. A survey of the cross-cultural literature shows, for example, that a variety of expressive phenomena, such as games, music, art, and casual leisure, are ubiquitous in human cultures, both past and present (Chick, 1998b; Roberts & Barry, 1976). Second, examinations of the cross-cultural literature permit the formulation and testing of hypotheses generated from case studies or from wider consideration of the ethnographic record. Later in this editorial, I describe several tests of hypotheses that deal with aspects of leisure or recreation in cross-cultural samples of societies. Third, because cross-cultural researchers sample from societies around the world, they are able to examine the widest possible range of human variation in culture traits. Finally, in the case of comparisons where secondary data are used, cross-cultural comparative studies tend to be extremely cost efficient. That is, a relatively large number of cases can be included in a relatively inexpensive study.

As the name implies, cross-cultural research involves the comparison of two or more presumably distinct cultures or, put another way, two or more societies that possess distinct cultures. Cross-national research, such as a comparison of leisure activities in the United States and Canada, involves distinct political entities but not necessarily distinct cultures. Political boundaries are not always, or even usually, coterminous with cultural boundaries (see, e.g., Fox, 2000). Large countries, such as the United States, Canada, China, or Brazil, may contain numerous more or less distinct cultural entities, and even smaller nations, such as Belgium, often encompass two or more distinguishable cultural traditions. In Belgium, for example, one could conduct a cross-cultural study of traditional folk games as played in the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking parts of the country. Although cross-national research has merit, as pointed out by Valentine et al. (1999), my concern in this editorial is with cross-cultural comparative research.

Cross-cultural comparative research deals with two or more societies that possess relatively distinct cultures (though they may share many cultural traits, such as each having patrilineal descent and each having some form of wrestling). That brings up the problem of what culture is, on the one hand, and how one determines how one culture is distinct from another, on the other. There are many different definitions of culture, but fortunately nearly all involve three key concepts. First, many definitions of culture are based on the idea that it is something in the minds of members of a particular society. According to this type of definition, culture is the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and other mental traits that characterize a particular group of individuals and presumably guide their behavior. Second, some add behavior to the mental component of culture. This is because many behavioral characteristics, such as the distances people keep between themselves in both public and private encounters or the way in which they handle knives, forks, and spoons at the dinner table, are culture specific and learned, but largely unconscious. Third, certain material objects are peculiar to particular cultures, so such items may be included as part of the definition of culture. For example, mention of the boomerang immediately brings native Australian cultures to mind, whereas the computer chip would not. So, definitions of culture
may involve only its ideational components, its ideational and behavioral components, or its ideational, behavioral, and material components (Chick, 1997).

The problem of how cultures may be distinguished also remains problematic. Societies existing in close physical proximity to one another may have shared cultural traits at some point in their histories. Further, unlike political boundaries, cultural boundaries tend to blend one into the other at the edges. So, cross-cultural researchers have typically adopted sampling strategies that permit them to claim that the cultures in their studies are historically autonomous so that any shared traits developed independently. As noted later, this is a major bone of contention in cross-cultural comparative research.

A Brief History of Cross-Cultural Comparative Research

In 1889, Edward B. Tylor presented the first cross-cultural comparative study at the annual meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Tylor’s paper, which pioneered what has become known as the cross-cultural survey, was titled “On a Method of Investigating the Development of Institutions Applied to the Laws of Marriage and Descent.” In his study, Tylor used a small sample of societies culled from the then-extant ethnographic literature in an effort to explain the associations among marital residence and kinship with other aspects of culture, including kin avoidance and joking relationships. Sir Francis Galton, the president of the society at the time, asked the first question of Tylor from the audience, as was the tradition. He asked Tylor how he knew that the traits in which he was interested developed independently in the cultures sampled when it was possible that they could have diffused from one to the other? The assumption that sample units are independent is fundamental for statistical tests, and the question posed to Tylor has since become known as Galton’s Problem in cross-cultural research. It has attracted more methodological attention than any other concern with cross-cultural comparative research (Levinson & Malone, 1980). Naroll, Michik, and Naroll (1976) succinctly summarized Galton’s Problem:

If cultures are interdependent with respect to the characteristics being studied, the actual number of independent observations may be less than the number of cultures the investigator examined. The effect of interdependence on the significance tests of a study might be similar to systematic error. The spuriously high number of cases involved in the computation of statistical significance would tend to decrease the probability of chance occurrence indicated by those tests. . . . In addition, the inclusion of interdependent cases can produce spuriously inflated (or deflated) coefficients of association. (p. 127)

The effect of Galton’s question was to suppress cross-cultural comparative research for more than 30 years. Though a few such studies were produced between 1890 and 1920 (e.g., Hobhouse, 1906; Hobhouse, Wheeler, & Ginsberg, 1915; Nieboer, 1910), they had relatively little impact and were often not highly regarded. Evans-Pritchard (1965), for example, dismissed Hobhouse et al.’s (1915) attempt to explain the existence of slavery as demonstrating only that slaves were kept where they were useful. The father of American anthropology, Franz Boas, though originally enthused over the potential of the cross-cultural comparative method, later rejected it completely. Boas left a lasting impression on American anthropology, and few anthropologists engaged in cross-cultural comparative research during the first half of the 20th century.

Cross-cultural comparative studies were reborn in the United States largely under the tutelage of George Peter Murdock (1897–1985). Murdock received his PhD in the
Department of the Science of Society (later, the Department of Sociology) at Yale University in 1925. He was trained by Albert G. Keller, who in turn had been a student and later a colleague of William Graham Sumner. Sumner had compiled extensive ethnographic materials on cultures around the world and conducted comparative studies on them (e.g., Sumner, 1906). But his database was idiosyncratic, and his studies involved only societies in which he had a special interest.

Murdock realized that for comparative research to be successful, a representative sample of the cultures of the world was required. He aspired to create such a sample, along with a comprehensive bibliography for each society, verbatim information for each, and a set of uniform codes for cultural topics. Further, all similarly coded materials should be filed together for easy access. With such a database, he felt that the researcher’s theoretical orientation would be unimportant. If they were evolutionists, for example, they could seek cross-cultural patterning, and if they believed that forces of cultural diffusion were critical, they could search for geographical distributions of traits.

Murdock began to implement his plan with the publication of *Our Primitive Contemporaries* in 1934. In that book, he summarized information about 18 societies that he had selected to be geographically representative as well as representative of varying levels of cultural complexity. More important, he created a series of topics that he presumed to cover all aspects of cultural life, including subsistence, technology, social and political organization, games and recreation, and religion. These topics served to keep the summaries comparable (Goodenough, 1996) and permitted additional summaries to be added in a systematic fashion. This initial series of cultural topics would itself evolve into the *Outline of Cultural Materials* (Murdock et al., 1938), a comprehensive list of topics under which all aspects of human culture could presumably be cataloged.

The second step of Murdock’s agenda was realized with the development of the Cross-Cultural Survey at Yale University in 1937. Housed at Yale’s Institute of Human Relations, this ethnographic filing system was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Murdock planned to have a sample of 200 societies in the survey. After World War II, the survey was reorganized under Murdock’s direction as the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), Inc., a not-for-profit corporation supported by a consortium of universities. This was the third step in Murdock’s agenda. Fourth, Murdock established the Cross-Cultural Cumulative Coding Center at the University of Pittsburgh, where he had moved in 1960. The purpose of this center was to code specific culture traits on cross-cultural samples, rather than the subject matter of entire cultures as with the HRAF, in order to allow quick comparative studies on large numbers of precoded traits (Goodenough, 1996).

Fifth, and finally, Murdock helped found the Society for Cross-Cultural Research in 1972. When the society was established, it began to publish *Behavior Science Notes* (later *Behavior Science Research* and now *Cross-Cultural Research*) as its official journal. As a result of Murdock’s work, and others, there are now more than 1,000 published cross-cultural comparative studies, compared with only 80 or so in 1964 (M. Ember, 1997).

**Organization of the Human Relations Area Files**

The HRAF was developed in order “to facilitate the comparative study of human society, culture, and behavior by collecting, organizing, and distributing ethnographic materials on the cultures of the world” (M. Ember, 1997, p. 5). This mission was originally served by the distribution of annual installments of paper files that contained copies of pages of original ethnographic materials to member institutions. These copies were on 5-in. × 8-in. slips of paper with the text indexed in the margins with Outline of Cultural Materials (OCM) code numbers. All pages, from all sources, for each society in the files that contained material
indexed by a specific OCM number were then filed together for easy and rapid retrieval. Hence, individual pages were usually reproduced several times, as each typically had several different OCM categories indicated in the margins. Currently, the OCM divides all cultural information into 79 major divisions, indicated by two-digit codes numbered 10 through 88, and 637 minor divisions indicated by three-digit categories. The minor divisions are created by adding 1 through 9 to the two-digit categories under which they fall. A researcher who was interested in leisure activities among the Thonga, for example, simply had to go to the file drawer (or drawers, as the collections for some societies required several) for that society and pull out the bundle of pages grouped together under OCM Category 517, Leisure Time Activities. Each page would have at least one instance of 517 written in the margin, indicating a mention or discussion of some sort of leisure activity or aspect of leisure. The major category, Recreation (52), includes the minor categories Conversation (521), Humor (522), Hobbies (523), Games (524), Gambling (525), Athletic Sports (526), Rest Days and Holidays (527), Vacations (528), and Recreational Facilities (529). Fine Arts (53) and Entertainment (54) are other relevant major categories, and 461 (Distribution of Labor and Leisure) and 512 (Daily Routine) are potentially useful minor categories.

The HRAF greatly simplified the retrieval of information on the range of topics indexed using the OCM categories. The HRAF renders it unnecessary for researchers to develop bibliographies of the societies that they wish to study and then find the books or articles in their bibliographies. Further, because HRAF ethnographies are already indexed with the OCM categories, it is not necessary to read every page of every source in order to find the desired information (M. Ember, 1997). From 1949 through 1957, the annual installments to “sponsoring members” (of which there are 21) were on paper only. Between 1958 and 1993, sponsoring members of the HRAF and associate members (of which there are more than 300) also received microfiche copies. Beginning with Installment 43 in 1994, the HRAF Collection of Ethnography was distributed on computer compact discs and is now available on the World Wide Web, as well. The CD and Web versions are known as the eHRAF.

The eHRAF is radically superior to either the paper or the microfiche versions of the HRAF. According to Melvin Ember (1997), president of HRAF, Inc., researchers can scroll backward and forward through the texts in eHRAF to get the full context of your search “hits.” You can also click on icons that call up full citational information, footnotes, tables, and images; and you can call up a cultural summary to give you an overview of the culture. And, of course, search and retrieval is now much faster, as well as more sophisticated, with eHRAF. (p. 6)

Searching the eHRAF can be accomplished in three ways (M. Ember, 1997). First, one may use the OCM categories, as with the paper and microfiche files. The virtue of using the OCM categories is that desired topics that contain few or no standard terms can be accessed. Second, searches can be based on key words in the texts, either singly or in Boolean combinations. Finally, searches can involve both OCM categories and key words. The eHRAF still does not provide precoded data but, as with both the paper and microfiche versions, indexed full-text data.

At present, the HRAF cover approximately 370 societies, or about 30% of the world’s well-described cultures (M. Ember, 1997). For the future (starting in the year 2000), the HRAF board of directors has approved a plan designed to accomplish three tasks: (a) catching up on world ethnography, (b) improving the sampling strategy, and (c) updating existing cases and adding new ones (M. Ember, 1997). With respect to the second goal, files on cultures not previously in the collection will be added on a random basis from a newly designed sampling frame. In addition, the HRAF Collection of Ethnography is to be augmented by the
HRAF Collection of Archeology. The HRAF Collection of Archeology will permit testing of causal hypotheses for cultural variation and evolution as it will provide researchers with time-series data (M. Ember, 1997).

**Doing a Cross-Cultural Comparative Study**

Cross-cultural studies can differ along several dimensions (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998). First, studies may be primarily or wholly descriptive; that is, the researcher may only be interested in trait frequencies in his or her sample of societies. Or the researcher may be interested in relationships among traits/variables. Second, studies can also differ in terms of their geographical scope; they may be worldwide or regional. Third, the samples in cross-cultural studies can range from two to many. Fourth, data can be primary, collected by the researcher in the field, or secondary, gleaned from existing data sources, including censuses, ethnographies, and other documents. Fifth, the study can be either synchronic, where the data on each case pertain to only one time period, or diachronic, relevant to several time periods. Most existing cross-cultural studies involve both the description of trait frequencies and their associations with other variables. Most are also worldwide, use samples with many cases, and are based on secondary data. Nearly all are synchronic.

**Sampling in Cross-Cultural Research**

There are two basic questions in sampling for a cross-cultural study. First, how many cases should be in the sample, and second, how should the cases be selected? The minimum number of cases is obviously two, but the scientific value of two-case comparisons is questionable (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998). This is because any particular difference between two cases can be explained by any other difference or differences between them (Campbell, 1961; C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998). Munroe and Munroe (1991) indicated that the minimum number of cases necessary for meaningful statistical testing is four, and that assumes unbiased sampling and errorless measurement, both of which are unattainable in practice. The number of cases to be included in a sample also depends on whether the study will use primary or secondary data. The cost of conducting field research is so high that studies based on primary data will necessarily have much smaller samples than those that use secondary data. With secondary data, the size of the sample depends on the statistical power of the tests to be used, along with the strength and confidence level of the associations sought. If strong associations are expected, smaller samples (on the order of 30 at the minimum) may be used, whereas larger samples are needed if weaker associations are anticipated.

Major considerations with respect to the choice of primary over secondary data include whether the variables of interest are available in secondary sources, cost, political considerations (field research is not possible in many places around the world), and the researcher’s particular interests. Because of these factors, the samples for cross-cultural studies using primary data have generally relied on purposive, rather than random, samples (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998). For secondary data, other choices must be made. First, the research must denote a sampling frame; that is, what is the list of societies from which the sample is to be selected? Second, is the sample to be worldwide or regional? Third, will the sample include only presumably distinct cultures? Or will it include nation-states, which may not be coterminous with cultures?

Several cross-cultural samples already exist. These include the *Ethnographic Atlas* (Murdock, 1967), with 862 cases; the HRAF Collection of Ethnography, with about 370 cases; the Standard Ethnographic Sample (Naroll & Sipes, 1973), with 273 cases; the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Murdock & White, 1969), with 186 cases; and the HRAF
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Probability Sample (Lagacé, 1979), with 60 cases. Beginning in 2000, HRAF, Inc., will begin the development of a true random sample of the world’s well-described cultures. Of the samples noted above, the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) is by far the most commonly used, and nearly 2,000 coded variables are available for it in the cross-cultural literature. Each of these samples is purposive in some way or another, and only the HRAF Probability Sample uses random sampling as part of the selection procedure: One case was randomly selected from within 60 “culture areas,” although the culture areas were determined purposefully. Culture areas were selected to ensure that the chosen societies would not be located near each other as a way to deal with Galton’s Problem.

Although the SCCS has the great virtue of having many variables already coded for it, and thus available for use by researchers, it also has drawbacks. First, it is a purposive sample in that three societies were selected (judgmentally, not randomly) from within 62 culture areas from around the world. Because the culture areas were equally weighted, each case in the ethnographic literature did not have an equal chance of being selected, an assumption for most statistical tests. Moreover, there is good evidence to indicate that the 62 culture areas lack ethnographic validity (Burton, Moore, Whiting, & Romney, 1996). Finally, the SCCS includes no modern industrial societies, a significant and meaningful deficiency. Unfortunately, until the true random HRAF Collection of Ethnography is available, the SCCS will continue to be the most used sample for cross-cultural comparative research.

Measurement of Variables in Cross-Cultural Research

Measurement concerns for cross-cultural comparative research are similar to those for other sorts of research. It is important for the measurements of variables to be both valid and reliable, and there are several points at which error can occur in cross-cultural comparative research. First, informants themselves may give erroneous information, either out of ignorance of their own culture or because the topic they are addressing is sensitive. Illegal activities or issues such as sexual behavior or witchcraft may elicit error (e.g., see Freeman’s [1983] analysis of how Margaret Mead’s Samoan informants lied to her regarding sexual mores). Second, ethnographers may introduce error. They may overreport (idealizing behavior to fit preconceived typologies, e.g.) or underreport (not report the number and types of leisure activities in a community because social organization, e.g., was thought to be more important). Third, the coders who analyze ethnographic materials may introduce error through their interpretations of what the ethnographers reported. Finally, error may be introduced through sampling (i.e., Galton’s Problem).

Underreporting is a major form of ethnographic error. American ethnographers who were concerned with studying Native American cultures before they vanished spent considerable effort on describing games, sports, and other recreational activities. In contrast, British ethnographers working in Africa during the colonial period were much more concerned with social and political organization, and their descriptions of games, sports, and recreations were less thorough. Coders of ethnographic materials, therefore, must be cautious not to assume that a “presence of absence” means an “absence of presence.” That is, simply because something is not reported does not mean that it was not there. This situation also raises the difference between random and systematic error. Random error has the effect of depressing the strength of relationships (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998). Because social scientists have traditionally been more concerned about accepting hypotheses that are false (Type I error) than rejecting hypotheses that are true (Type II error), Naroll (1962) termed random error “benign.” Systematic error, on the other hand, is “malignant” (Naroll, 1962) in that it can create apparent relationships where none, in reality, exist (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998).
C. R. Ember & Ember (1998) discussed numerous ways in which both random and systematic error in cross-cultural research can be minimized. In particular, they suggested that multiple coders work independently so that their codes can be compared for interrater reliability. They further suggested that direct, low-inference variables should be preferred over indirect, high-inference variables. Demographic variables, for example, tend to be low inference—it is fairly easy to count village populations, sex ratios, or the number of different kinds of children’s games—whereas “unconscious fear of witchcraft” requires substantial inference and is much more difficult to measure reliably. Similarly, should mentions of witchcraft in folk tales be considered valid measures of fear of witchcraft? C. R. Ember and Ember suggested that researchers be very explicit with both theoretical and operational definitions of their variables. Explicit definitions that indicate clear empirical referents simplify coding. Ember and Ember also recommended that coders rate the degree to which they believe that the ethnographer has supplied reliable information. In this way, data for cases that are deemed untrustworthy can be eliminated from analyses.

**Galton’s Problem**

Over the years, cross-cultural researchers have suggested a variety of approaches to Galton’s Problem. These have taken three basic forms. The first is the sampling response, wherein a sample is designed so that the societies in it are relatively distant or are separated by geographical obstacles, thus minimizing the possibility of culture trait diffusion. The SCCS and the HRAF Probability Sample are examples of such efforts. The second type of approach to Galton’s Problem is the historical connections response. Here, it is assumed that there are always historical connections among societies. These connections are then controlled for statistically by means of techniques such as spatial autocorrelation, wherein the proximity of cultures is measured in terms of variables such as distance or language similarity (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998).

As it turns out, most studies that have used statistical controls for Galton’s Problem have relatively little evidence that it affects obtained correlations. Hence, C. R. Ember and Ember (1998) suggested that the problem is really much less important than has been claimed in the past. Indeed, as they pointed out, if the diffusion of information among cases in a sample was a problem, then psychological research that samples university students (who obviously share a common history, geography, and language) would be deeply suspect. Therefore, the Embers advocated the third response to Galton’s Problem, simply, adherence to pure random sampling. This is the method adopted for the eHRAF.

**Time and Place Focus**

In cross-cultural studies conducted before the 1980s, it was common for researchers to mix data from different communities from the same society or from different time periods for the same society. This practice was, at least in part, based on the 19th-century idea that cultures are homogenous and relatively stable over time. Modern anthropologists recognize that neither of these beliefs is accurate. Culture traits within different communities of the same society may vary, and even technologically simple societies change over time. Hence, cross-cultural comparative researchers who use secondary data must ensure that the information they use for particular cases are all from the same community and from, more or less, the same point in time. Otherwise, error is introduced into the study.

**Cross-Cultural Studies of Expressive Culture**

Cross-cultural comparative studies of leisure are very rare. In fact, anthropologists rarely use the term *leisure*, and when they do, they generally refer to it only in the sense of free
time (Chick, 1999). When they have addressed leisure at all, anthropologists have typically examined it as part of *expressive culture*. Basically, expressive culture refers to that part of culture wherein activities or practices serve for the release of emotions or as models, reflections, or expressions of themes inherent in the more instrumental aspects of culture. As such, the concept of expressive culture encompasses the arts, including painting, sculpture, music, drama, dance, myth, narrative, and so on, and entertainment, such as play, games, sport, recreation, and leisure (Chick, 1998b). Religion, including taboos and morals, is often considered part of expressive culture as well.

Cross-cultural comparative researchers have largely ignored expressive culture in general and entertainment in particular. Among the nearly 2,000 variables already coded for the SCCS, only 2 refer to leisure directly, though a few others deal with leisure activities, such as games, sports, or festivals. So far as I am aware, the cross-cultural literature contains no studies on leisure that are based on HRAF data. The few that do exist are based on cross-national data (e.g., Florian & Har-Even, 1984; Gibbons, Lynn, & Stiles, 1997; Stiles, Gibbons, & Peters, 1993).

Games are, by far, the best studied area of expressive culture from a cross-cultural comparative perspective. The anthropologist John M. Roberts, the psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith, their colleagues, and their students (I am a former student and colleague of Roberts) have produced the majority of cross-cultural comparative research on games. The coverage of games is relatively extensive in the cross-cultural literature. As games have often been regarded as models of other real-world activities, such as war (Chick, Loy, & Miracle, 1997; Sipes, 1973), social organization (Roberts & Barry, 1976), or religion (Roberts, Arth, & Bush, 1959), they have been more interesting to researchers than other expressive activities. Other research has suggested that both the presence and the number of certain types of games, especially those that involve strategy, correlate positively with cultural complexity (Chick, 1997, 1998a; Roberts & Barry, 1976; see Chick, 1984, for a review of cross-cultural research on games).

**An Example Cross-Cultural Comparative Study**

Although cross-cultural comparative studies of sport are relatively rare, one of them has achieved the status of something of an anthropological classic. In 1973, Richard G. Sipes published “War, Sports and Aggression: An Empirical Test of Two Rival Theories.” In this study, he used a small (N = 20) cross-cultural sample to examine the relationship between the presence or absence of what he termed *combative sports* and the presence of absence of warfare in culture. For Sipes, a combative sport is one wherein there is real or potential body contact between opponents (either individuals or teams) and where one of the objectives of the sport is to inflict real or symbolic injury to or gain playing field territory from the opponent. Sports that lack these characteristics but that involve “patently warlike activity,” such as the use of “actual or simulated combat weapons against an actual or simulated human being,” were also defined as combative (Sipes, 1973, p. 70).

Sipes (1973) tested two contrasting explanations. The drive discharge model, which was based on ethological theory prevalent in the 1960s, holds that aggressive behavior is an innate human drive and that aggressive feelings build up over time and have to be discharged. This can be accomplished in varying contexts, such as warfare or combative sport. Hence, the drive discharge model predicts an inverse relationship between warfare and combative sport. The culture pattern model suggests that aggressive behavior is learned, not innate, and that societies wherein aggression is valued and taught should show evidence of it in multiple forms. Hence, the culture pattern model predicts that societies that have high levels of warfare should also have combative sports.
For his sample, Sipes (1973) selected 10 “extremely warlike” and 10 “extremely peaceful” societies from the ethnographic literature (he found it very difficult to find 10 extremely peaceful societies). He then scored each of the 20 societies on presence or absence of combative sports. The results strongly supported the culture pattern model. Of the 10 extremely warlike societies, 9 had combative sports and only 1 did not. Of the 10 extremely peaceful societies, 2 had combative sports and 8 did not. Sipes concluded that his result “clearly supports the validity of the Culture Pattern Model and as clearly tends to discredit the Drive Discharge Model” (p. 71).

Two of my colleagues and I (Chick, Loy, & Miracle, 1997) conducted a reanalysis of Sipes’s (1973) hypotheses using a larger data set (the SCCS). We also divided combative sports into those involving only individuals (such as wrestling), those involving teams (such as lacrosse), and what we termed sham combats. Sham combats are activities that may involve either individuals or teams and have sportlike characteristics but that seem to lack winners and losers (except in the sense that individuals might be injured or killed). These activities often appear to be informal mechanisms for combat training. We counted the number of each of these types of activities reported by ethnographers (we used the HRAF as the source for our data, coding from OCM Categories 524 [games] and 526 [athletic sports]).

In general, our findings (Chick et al., 1997) supported the culture pattern model, though the relationships that we found were much weaker than those reported by Sipes (1973). The weaker relationships were to be expected as his sample included only the two tails of the warlike distribution (extremely warlike and extremely peaceful), whereas our sample had three values for warfare (1 = absent or rare; 2 = occasional or seasonal; 3 = almost constant). We found that 13 of the 33 societies wherein war was absent or rare lacked combative sports, and 20 had them. Of the 18 societies where war was almost constant, only 3 lacked combative sports, and 15 had them. Although this relationship is in the same direction as that found by Sipes, it is not statistically significant. Further, we found no relationship between the presence or absence of individual combative sports (e.g., wrestling or boxing) and frequency of warfare. Similarly, there was no relationship between the presence or absence of team combative sports and the frequency of warfare. However, we did find a strong positive relationship between the presence or absence of sham combats and the frequency of warfare. Finally, we found a strong positive relationship between the presence or absence of individual combative sports and the frequency of homicide within societies (a variable not examined by Sipes).

Other analyses are also possible. For example, Chick et al. (1997) did not examine the relationship between cultural complexity (for which there are several published measures; see Chick, 1997, for a review) and the presence or absence of combative sports. An associate of mine and I are currently working on the relationships among the degree to which young men are socialized for aggressiveness and competitiveness, their participation in combative sports, and their propensity for violence and aggression in other areas of life.

Summary and Conclusions

A large quantity of descriptive material on leisure, games, sport, and other forms of recreation exists in the ethnographic literature. Despite this fact, very few cross-cultural comparative studies of leisure have ever been undertaken. In part, this may be because the advantages of the cross-cultural comparative method are not well-known to those with interests in sport or because researchers perceive some disadvantages with both the method and available data. Nonetheless, if used properly, cross-cultural comparative research using secondary data, such as that in the HRAF, should contribute to both theory development and theory testing in leisure studies.
Most of the advantages and disadvantages of the cross-cultural method have already been discussed. A problem for which there is no solution is inadequate (or no) ethnographic coverage of pristine (pre-Western contact) or extinct societies. The effects of contact with imperialistic and/or proselytizing outsiders (who also often carry diseases to which native peoples have no resistance) have typically been devastating, both biologically and culturally. The cultures of societies that have either been extinguished or Westernized are gone; their contribution to the pool of variance of human cultures is irretrievable and lost to the purview of cross-cultural comparative researchers.

Other disadvantages are occasionally suggested. One is that cross-cultural comparative research ignores context and denies the individual uniqueness of cultures. First, as for uniqueness, I am unaware of any cross-cultural researcher who claims that individual cultures are not unique. But that does not mean that they cannot be compared. Every person is unique, as well, but that does not mean that their heights or weights cannot be measured and compared or that they cannot be tested in terms of how fast they can run or how far they can throw a ball, or even in terms of more subtle things like personality. Researchers must always be sensitive to context, as well. Lacrosse among Native Americans, depending on context, was played for fun, for gambling, for divination, or for other ritual purposes, and researchers should be sensitive to those meanings. Nevertheless, to the extent that the rules remain constant, it is the same game, whenever or wherever it is played. Finally, if every culture was truly unique and knowledge of the total context for every cultural act was always necessary for understanding, cross-cultural communication would be impossible. It would be inconceivable for anyone to enter another culture and function in even the most rudimentary way. We know that this is not the case.

**Issues in Cross-Cultural Comparative Research**

For cross-cultural comparative research to improve as a method in the future, several issues should be addressed. First, most research in the past has been correlational, though cause-and-effect relationships have often been implied. Future research should make use of statistical techniques, such as path analysis and LISREL, that are more appropriate than correlational methods for testing causality. At the same time, the data are available for diachronic research that would permit tests of causal models, but such studies are rare (C. R. Ember & Ember, 1998).

Two goals of the HRAF, Inc., are to improve its collection of ethnography and to develop a truly random sample of societies (M. Ember, 1997). To the extent that these goals are realized, cross-cultural comparative research will improve, as well. Good methods and a good sample are of no value, however, if there are no researchers interested in cross-cultural comparative research. The recent turn away from science and toward the humanities in American anthropology has been to the great disadvantage of cross-cultural research, and relatively few young anthropologists are pursuing cross-cultural studies. But if anthropology abandons cross-cultural comparative research, that does not mean that others cannot take it up. Because data on leisure in several hundred societies from around the world exist, and appropriate methods to take advantage of such data are available, there is no good reason why intensive and extensive cross-cultural comparative analyses should not be undertaken. I urge leisure researchers to consider the possibilities.

**References**


