

Mexican-American Recreation: Home, Community & Natural Environment

Deborah J. Chavez, Ph.D.
USDA Forest Service
Pacific Southwest Research Station
4955 Canyon Crest Drive
Riverside, CA 92507
E-mail dchavez@fs.fed.us

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the importance of leisure in Mexican-American families. Structured in-depth interviews were conducted in Spanish with four families, representing 58 individuals, at National Forest sites in southern California. These sites were located along rivers on two National Forests. The interviews were tape recorded and later translated into English and transcribed for analysis. Leisure activities included in the study were those done in the home (such as watch television, play with the children, have barbecues), in the community (such as bicycle, jog, swim), and at natural resource sites (such as National Forests; included hike, camp, horseback rides). Respondents were asked who in the family usually engaged in these activities. They were also asked whether these activities contribute to family togetherness and/or to cultural identity. Three themes emerged from the data. First, leisure was important to the Mexican-American families interviewed. The respondents felt that leisure contributed to family bonding. Second, nuclear and extended family members tended to be included in the activities. Third, leisure at natural resource sites was particularly important to these Mexican-Americans as recreation, and as cultural outings. This finding was partially related to perceptions of safety and sense of place. Some of these families did not feel that their local community was a safe place in which to recreate with the family and found that natural areas gave them a sense of security. Also, several families noted that the physical setting at the National Forest reminded them of their homeland. Being there with their families gave them the opportunity to pass along their love for the land and the river. The findings suggest the importance of natural areas for providing leisure services and spaces; these areas may be providing a service that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

Introduction

All people recreate. Most of us participate in recreation activities in our homes, in our communities, and in natural areas. In our homes we might read books and magazines or watch videos and television. In our communities we might swim or picnic. In natural areas (such as forests) we might hike or camp. Whatever the leisure activity and however the leisure profession delivers that service to the public, it is necessary for leisure professionals to think about whom they serve (Chavez 2000) and how to better serve them.

The U.S. socio-demographic profile is changing. There is a shift away from one large “majority” and several smaller “minority” groups. Hispanics are expected to become the nation’s largest “minority” group (Davis, Haub & Willette 1983). It is important to evaluate leisure from the perspective of members of these “minority” groups. This paper addresses leisure in the lives of selected Mexican-American people and focused on leisure as they characterized and lived it.

Early research on race and leisure participation most often focused on outdoor recreation behavior (O’Leary & Benjamin 1982; Washburn & Wall 1980). Since then, several hypotheses have been proposed and tested to help explain differences in ethnic and racial participation patterns. One of these is the marginality hypothesis, which states that under-participation of ethnic and racial groups results primarily from limited economic resources. The marginal position is seen as the result of historical and ongoing patterns of discrimination. A competing explanation, called the ethnicity hypothesis, suggests that ethnic and racial participation patterns result from culturally based differences in value systems, norms, and leisure socialization patterns. Both explanations have been subjected to empirical testing. Several researchers have found that even when variables such as income, gender, area of residence, and household size were statistically controlled, ethnic and racial differences in participation patterns persisted (Dwyer 1994; O’Leary & Benjamin 1982, Stamps & Stamps 1985). While there is merit to each of the explanations, each alone has not been able to explain the myriad of observed racial and ethnic differences.

It is important to continue to explore the relationship between race and ethnicity and leisure. It is particularly important to place this work in context.

The social environment for many natural resource sites has been changing (Chavez 2001), making them ideal for leisure research. Several studies have identified particular outdoor recreation sites that are popular places for multiple racial and ethnic groups (Chavez 2001). Studies conducted at these sites provide the benefit of getting leisure activity information from active participants in natural areas. It may be considerably easier to contact families where they live and one could probably acquire data about leisure in the home and the community, but to get information about leisure in natural environments may require gathering the data at those natural environments.

When conducting research studies with “minority” groups it is important to consider personal and cultural group characteristics. Personal characteristics can be measured using the traditional socio-demographic measures (gender, age,

etc.). Cultural characteristics, such as cultural identity, can be measured by ethnicity and acculturation (such as language spoken). For Hispanic groups we should also consider familialism (Marin & Marin 1991). Familialism is a cultural value that involves individuals' strong identification with and attachment to their nuclear and extended families. The key to understanding leisure participation for "minority" groups may be cultural identity.

The purpose of this research was to examine leisure in the lives of Hispanic families. One goal was to conduct a qualitative examination of leisure to inform future efforts at quantitative research on this topic.

Methods

Typically, qualitative analysis is not guided by hypotheses before data collection is undertaken, but begins inductively with questions about individual experiences in order to build toward general patterns (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992; Henderson, 1991; Patton 1987, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To accomplish this, researchers often use an in-depth interview process, which utilizes a "guided conversation" or semi-structured document (rather than a developed questionnaire with closed-end response categories).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews in Spanish were conducted with four families (for a total 58 individuals) at two National Forest resource sites, located along rivers, in southern California. The interviews were tape recorded and later translated into English and transcribed for analysis.

For the purposes of this study leisure was defined as "time spent not during work hours, doing things for personal enjoyment." Leisure activities included in the study were those done in the home (such as watch television, play with the children, have barbecues), in the community (such as bicycle, jog, swim), and at natural resource sites (such as National Forests; included hike, camp, horseback rides). As a prompt, the spokesperson was provided a list of activities that often occur within each of these three settings (Kelly 1987). Guiding questions included: 1) Which leisure and recreation activities do you engage in at home, in your residential community, and at natural resource sites? 2) Who gets included in those activities? 3) Do your activities contribute to family togetherness or to your cultural identity? Respondents were also asked about personal characteristics and group/cultural characteristics.

For each family the interviewer was directed to the head of household or head of the group. This person determined entrée into the group and acted as spokesperson, although each family member was free to participate. The group leader often asked questions of other family members before responding to the queries. The unit of analysis for the study purposes was the group. No one that was approached refused to be interviewed, nor did anyone refuse to continue the interview process even though it took up to four hours to complete.

Findings from the interviews, derived from content analysis, are organized around emergent themes. Quotes from the interviews are provided in italics.

Results

Four family groups agreed to participate in the study. As part of the interviews, information about each group was gathered; brief descriptions of each follows. All groups included “extended” families.

Who We Interviewed

Family One: This family had seven members in their group. There were four adults and three children. They considered themselves to be “Mexicans” or “Mexicanos.” There were five males and two females in the family group. One member of the group had a high school diploma. There were two sets of parents in the group. Both sets of parents were immigrants to the U.S., and their children were first generation U.S. Spanish was the primary language in the home and the primary language spoken at family gatherings. Four members of the group spoke some English. One of the families owned their home. All four adults worked outside the home, and three of them worked more than 40 hours per week. They reported an annual household income to be \$38,000 and they spent about \$100 for the trip that day. The family was from Jalisco, Mexico and had family ties in Jalisco. They typically visited Mexico once a year, and usually about once a year family from Mexico visited them in the U.S.

Family Two: This family had twenty members in their group. There were six adults and 14 children. This was a multi-generation group. They considered themselves to be “Latinos.” There were 11 males and nine females in the extended family group. Six members of the group had a high school diploma. Spanish was the primary language in the home and the primary language spoken at family gatherings. Seven members of the group spoke some English. One of the families owned their home. All six adults worked outside the home 40 hours per week. They reported an annual household income to be \$60,000 and they spent about \$150 for the trip that day. The family was from Mexico and had family ties there. They typically visited Mexico once a year, and relatives from Mexico visit them in the U.S. every two or three years.

Family Three: This family had seventeen members in their group. There were seven adults and ten children. They considered the adults to be “Mexicans” and the children to be “Chicanos.” There were 10 males and seven females in the group. Two members of the group had a high school diploma. They were second-generation U.S. citizens. Spanish was the primary language in the home and the primary language spoken at family gatherings although all members of the group spoke English. They said that they use Spanish but if someone were at the gathering that spoke only English, then they would only speak English. One of the families owned their home. Six members of the family worked outside the home, two of them worked 40 hours per week. One person had his own business. Another worked about 60 hours per week for a hazardous waste

company. They cleaned out factories that were contaminated with hazardous waste materials. He said, *"We go in there and clean them up, and of course, that is a lot of work. What I really do is all this contaminated materials we put in barrels, 10,000-20,000 pounds. What I will do is I get these barrels and load them up in the trucks, so they can dump at the sites. It is dangerous but we have all the materials, all the safeguards to make sure we are safe."* They reported an annual household income to be \$30,000 and they spent about \$100 for the trip that day. *"We have close ties to Mexico since about half of our family lives here and half lives there. We visited there once in the last year for about 3 weeks. We only stayed three weeks because we do not have that much money to go around and we have to get back to work. You know you have to get back to work. You can only recreate or go for as long as the money takes you. Also, it is important to go for a brief period of time because the kids have to get back to school. It is important for the kids so we have to get back to school. Family members from Mexico visited here once last year. Money is a barrier for them to visit us. They are more likely to visit us if there is a party, wedding or if someone is sick."*

Family Four: This family had fourteen members in their group. There were six adults and eight children. They considered themselves to be "Hispanic" or "Mexican." There were eight males and six females in the family group. One member of the group had a high school diploma. The group had members who were new immigrants, some first generation and some second generation. Spanish was the primary language in the home and the primary language spoken at family gatherings. Two members of the group spoke and read English. They rent a house. Six members of the family worked outside the home 40 hours per week and another person works more than 40 hours per week, often working 7am until 7pm. They reported one family had an annual household income of \$30,000 and they spent about \$120 for the trip that day. Members of the group visited their family in Mexico once last year, and twice last year family members from Mexico visited them in the U.S.

An examination of the data, using content analysis, resulted in the identification of three themes. First, leisure was important to the Mexican-American families interviewed. The respondents felt that leisure contributes to family bonding. Second, nuclear and extended family members tended to be included in the activities. Third, leisure at natural resource sites was particularly important to these family groups as recreational and cultural outings.

Theme 1: Importance of Leisure

Respondents were asked about their family group (nuclear and extended). The families perceived themselves to be close-knit within their nuclear units as well as with extended family members. Leisure was an important contribution to family bonding.

"We are a close family. We have very good communication and we have family gatherings. Take today for instance. We came here together as a group to spend our time, our happy time with the kids, with the family, in the water. We as a group used to telephone a lot. For instance I call my brother...we keep close communication. The kids call each other all the time, even to discuss what to watch on television, or at the movies" (Family One).

"We are a close family. Our family is very united and it is things like this outing that unify us and basically we like to be united as a family" (Family Two).

"My family is close. Coming to a place like this let's us cook food together. We have a good gathering where everyone can enjoy themselves and be together as a unit. This is relaxing for everyone and you can get away from work for the day" (Family Three).

The family groups were also asked about length of leisure activities (day trip, "short" two to four day trips, and "longer" trips of more than four days). They were asked how many of the lengths of trips they took in a 12-month period.

Family One took only three-day trips in a 12-month period. All of those were to the outdoor recreation site where the interview took place. They had also been to Mexico once on a short trip and one other time for a longer trip. They said, *"We took three trips this year. All three were to this place. We come here to have a pleasant time, to have carne asada, to relax, to visit with the kids, to be with the family. We'll come back next Saturday, that will be the fourth time here."* [Carne asada is a thinly sliced, spicy beef often barbecued.]

Family Two had taken several day trips to *"the beach, the park, and sometimes from house to house to visit relatives."* They did not take any other trips.

Family Three took several day trips in the 12-month period; they went to Las Vegas often because they had family members there. Some of the members of the group were able to travel often because their finances allowed, but others took no other trips.

Family Four said, *"We took a few trips to parks, to rivers, wherever we can take the whole family. It is important."* They took no other trips.

Theme 2: Including the (Nuclear and Extended) Family in Activities

For the purposes of this study leisure was defined for the family groups as "time spent not during work hours, doing things for personal enjoyment." They were asked about the types of leisure activities they did in their home, in their community, and in natural environments (such as the forest they were visiting at the time of the interviews).

They were first asked a general question about the activities done in the home. The interviewer found that people had difficulty thinking about their activities in this way. Responses to this included, *“Sunday is the only day we recreate at home. We stay at home and usually cook carne asada and invite relatives. We usually go to their house or they come to our house”* (Family One); *“None really”* (Family Two); *“I work on my car and I do the yard. I would say that is the only recreation that we do at home”* (Family Three); and *“We do not have time for recreation at home; any free time is spent moonlighting at another job”* (Family Four).

The respondents had similar difficulties in describing leisure activities in community settings: *“We feel connected in part to the community, and really do not participate in any groups or clubs”* (Family One); *“We play basketball in the community”* (Family Two); *“We go to church every Sunday but don’t do leisure activities in the neighborhood”* (Family Three); and *“We have a very good relationship with our community, very cohesive. We worry about gangs but we do sometimes get together in a local park to play football”* (Family Four). In part their perceived lack of leisure activities in the community were tied to perceptions of safety: *“To stay home is hard; it is not a safe neighborhood”* (Family Three) and *“We do not do any leisure activities in the community because there is a big factor in our community that deters us from most participation. There are a lot of gangs in my community. We try not to be around any gang activity or with gang culture groups. And though we are close to our neighbors we do not have any organized activities because of the gang factor. We have a sense of security here”* (Family Four).

The respondents gave more complete responses to a similar query about leisure in natural environments: *“Well, we like to come here. Part of the group plays in the water. Part of the group stays behind looking after kids, making sure everything is okay. Part of the group stays behind resting and cooking carne asada and kind of resting and relaxing, getting away from the city. Just relaxing”* (Family One); *“We come to relax, to cook some food, to get in the water and swim. Mostly we relax. We do not have anything special to do, just relax and have a good day”* (Family Two); *“We come to rest. We also have a barbeque and basically enjoy the environment, the air. We enjoy the site”* (Family Three); and *“We swim, we go in the water, we barbecue, we relax and nap, basically we just rest”* (Family Four).

To elicit additional information about leisure pursuits the families were provided a list of activities that often occur within each of these three settings (Kelly 1987). They were asked which of these leisure and recreation activities they engaged in at home, in your residential community, and at natural resource sites. They were also asked who gets included in those activities (see table 1).

Based upon the list of activities provided, the following activities were done in the home, in the community, and at natural resource sites by each family. Also in the discussion was which family members were typically included in the pursuits:

- In the home, Family One reported they cooked and baked for fun, read books and magazines, watched television and videos, played with the

- kids, and talked with others. They had barbecues every week. Community activities included bicycle, jog, swim, arts (paint, draw, sculpt), picnics, roller skate, and going to movies. Natural resource site activities included hiking, downhill skiing, and horseback. They said, *“We need to be with the family, and we also need to respect other people and be united. Include the immediate and extended family in leisure activities at home, in the community, and at natural areas. And sometimes they also invite friends.”*
- In the home, Family Two reported they cooked and baked for fun, did outdoor gardening, read books and magazines, walked for pleasure, watched television and videos, played with children, and talked with others. Community activities included swim, arts, picnics, and going to movies. In natural environments they reported hiking, camping, and hunting. They said, *“We need to respect our elders, and love all family members definitely. We include the immediate and extended family in leisure activities at home, in the community, and at natural areas.”*
 - In the home, Family Three reported they cooked and baked for fun, did outdoor gardening, read books and magazines, watched television and videos, played with children, and talked with others. Community activities included swim, arts, picnics, roller-skating, and team sports. In natural resource sites they hiked. They said, *“This is a good family outing; the kids really enjoy the place. Leisure is very important to us because it brings our family together. We include the immediate and extended family in leisure activities at home, in the community, and at natural areas.”*
 - In the home, Family Four cooked and baked for fun, did outdoor gardening, did indoor gardening, played cards, read books and magazines, walked for pleasure, watched television and videos, played with children, talked with others, and had barbecues. Community activities included jogging, swimming, picnics, and team sports. Natural environment activities included backpacking, hiking, camping, fishing, birdwatching, canoeing and kayaking. They said, *“We need to love all family members and we need to attend church. We include our extended family for leisure activities at home and at natural areas, but we also include neighbors for community leisure activities.”*

It seems the list (see table 1) helped to expand the descriptions of activities originally given, suggesting that this sort of prompt is of importance in gaining information about leisure.

Table 1. Participation in Leisure Activities

<i>At Home</i>	<u>Number*</u>
Cook and bake for fun	4
Read books and magazines	4
Watch television and videos	4
Play with children	4
Talk with others	4
Outdoor gardening	3
Walk for pleasure	2
Barbecues	2
Indoor garden	1
Play cards	1
<i>In the Community</i>	<u>Number*</u>
Swim	4
Picnics	4
Jogging	2
Roller skate	2
Team sports (softball)	2
Movies	2
Bowl	0
Golf	0
Ice skating	0
Racquetball	0
Tennis	0
Outdoor concerts and plays	0
Pool	
<i>At Natural Areas</i>	<u>Number*</u>
Hike	4
Camp	2
Backpack	1
Fish	1
Birdwatch	1
Downhill ski	1
Horseback ride	1
Canoe and kayak	1
Powerboat	0
Waterski	0

* Number indicates how many families did the activity

Theme 3: Importance of Leisure at Natural Areas

Respondents were asked how they learned about the natural resource site where they were interviewed, and they were asked if they would recommend the site to other people. They said, *"We learned about the area from some friends. We would recommend it to other friends and family"* (Family One); *"A compadre brought us here years ago and we've been coming here since then. We would recommend this place to others because of the pureness of the air and water"* (Family Two; a compadre is comparable to a friend named as a god-parent); *"A friend from work told me about this place soon after I moved into the community. Since it is not far we decided to come here and have been coming here since. We would recommend this place because it is very quiet and peaceful"* (Family Three); and *"We just discovered this place, no one told us about it. We would recommend it to family members"* (Family Four).

Respondents were asked about specific activities engaged in the day of the interview. They said, *"Cook chicken and hens, beans tortillas, guacamole, sodas, watermelon, macaroni salad, salsa, quesadillas"* (Family One; quesadillas are a dish made with tortillas and cheese and often meat); *"We have beans, tortillas, salsa, and we're barbecuing chicken. One of the women in the group is crocheting which she does most every time she comes to the forest. Other members of our group are napping and the kids are playing in the creek. Really we come here to relax. This is a relaxing experience"* (Family Two); *"We come here to rest and to swim. We like to barbecue carne asada, hot dogs, rice, beans, tortillas, guacamole, chicarrones, some soda, and beer to create an appetite"* (Family Three; chicarrones are pork rinds); and *"We like to barbecue here. We have carne asada, salsa, beans, tortillas, all of the traditional foods. So we come here to eat and also to rest and the kids like to play in the creek"* (Family Four).

As a follow-up the families were asked about the natural resource site and what was it about the site that drew them there. Specific comments about the area and the importance of the outing to the families interviewed were:

- Family One: *"We come here a few times each year. We like the ambience, the water, we like the place. The kids enjoy the water, the arroyo. The place is very fresh and it is a nice environment. The place is relaxing. The place reminds us of our homeland in Mexico. It is good to get away from the heat and the city. The best thing about coming here is how relaxing it is, how much fun to play with the kids. I like to broil the carne asada and I like to be with my family. This place is fresh, the air is clear."* The group leader grew up on a small ranch in Jalisco, and said the place reminded him of that ranch with the stream. Of leisure in the home, the community and natural environments they said, *"We like the natural environment the best because you are more free to recreate, you don't have to worry about the heat and the noise or the smog of the city. This is a clean area."*
- Family Two: *"We came for the entire day and have been here twice before. We like natural environments. It is different from our usual environment to go to the beach or other places. We like to come here. It*

brings our family closer. This area allows us to have a cultural experience, to enjoy our foods and our people. It is a good reminder of our homeland in Mexico.” When asked to compare leisure at the natural resource sites to leisure in the home and community they said, *“The air is great here. The air is pure and the place is just so fresh. We like the water, the trees, the rocks the feeling this place gives to us. There is no comparison to the city; this is something unique and different. We like the natural environment because you can get out of the city and come over and relax here and have a very good time.”*

- Family Three: *“We are here for the entire day. We come here a couple of times each year. We come here for resting and swimming. This place reminds me of where I grew up because there is little river in Durango, Mexico. It was a really nice place with lots of trees. Where I grew up had lots of vegetation and before I came to this place, I had not seen anything that reminded me so much of my homeland.”* When asked to compare leisure at the natural environment to leisure in the home and community they said, *“It is important to have leisure time in the natural environment because you can rest and you breathe clear and nice air here.”*
- Family Four: *“We’re here for the whole day. We come here because you can breathe clean air, and because my family enjoys coming to the creek and getting into the water. This place reminds me of my homeland, Jalisco, Mexico. We like the creek the best, the water running down the stream.”* When comparing leisure in the home and community to leisure in natural environments they said, *“It is important to have leisure time in natural environments. Unfortunately we cannot afford to come here year-round but we do come a couple of times each year and we bring our whole family.”*

Leisure at natural resource sites was particularly important to these Mexican-Americans as recreation and as cultural outings. This finding seemed partially related to previously stated perceptions of safety and sense of place. Some of these families did not feel that their local community was a safe place in which to recreate with the family and found that natural areas gave them a sense of security. Also, several families noted that the physical setting at the National Forest reminded them of their homeland and being there with their families gave them the opportunity to pass along their love for the land and the river.

Conclusions

This paper addressed leisure in the lives of selected Mexican-American families and focused on leisure as they characterized and lived it. Four family groups were interviewed at natural resource sites in southern California. Despite the small number of groups interviewed there are several themes worth further study. First, leisure was important to the Mexican-American families interviewed, especially as it contributed to family bonding. Second, nuclear and extended family members tended to be included in the activities of these families. Third,

leisure at natural environments was particularly important to these Mexican-Americans as recreation and as cultural outings.

One goal of the study was to conduct a qualitative examination of leisure to inform future efforts at quantitative research on this topic. For these groups it was found that no one term suffices for group identification: some preferred Mexican American, others Latino and others Hispanic. When conducting research with these groups it is advisable to provide several forced response choice options or leave race/ethnicity as an open-ended item.

For these families, proximity to their homeland (Mexico) was important to the family and may have influenced where they take leisure trips. This can also be addressed in future studies. Another interesting, though not unexpected (Marin & Marin 1991), finding was the closeness of the nuclear and extended family for these families. Future research might also investigate length of leisure outings. For these families there was a propensity for day trips.

Perceptions about safety and personal and family security are also topics for future study. For this study it was found that these families felt that they had a good relationship with the community but they did not necessarily participate in community activities. This may be tied to unsafe conditions in those communities or it may be tied to lack of information about activities available in those communities.

Finally, future research should explore the importance of natural areas for leisure pursuits. The findings from this study found that family groups were at natural environments to rest and relax and have enjoyable family outings. Natural area importance was found in many comments from the families interviewed. Particular aspects in need of additional research in natural environments are: how (and if) the natural site is a reminder of homeland, how being a "beautiful place" affects leisure, whether natural sites are as safe as they are perceived to be, and how natural environments contribute to family togetherness as well as feelings of serenity and spiritual well-being.

The study suggests the importance of natural environments for providing leisure services and spaces for some Mexican-American families. These areas may be providing a service that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

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