Leisure Behavior across the Course of Life of Rural Oklahoma Residents

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to determine if rural Oklahomans fit the criteria discussed and described by the following four theories of leisure: Leisure motivation theory, outdoor recreation theory, flow theory of leisure, and social meanings theory. For this purpose, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with three individuals of different age generations separately. The findings of this qualitative study indicate that leisure is a meaningful aspect of people’s lives independently of their age in a rural setting in Oklahoma.
Introduction

Researchers have addressed the concepts, motivations and role of leisure in the lives of people by developing theories that aim to explain their leisure behavior across the course of life. Certainly, there is no single definition of leisure which can be applied to all people that can explain leisure motivations and leisure behavior. Leisure has traditionally been defined as free time from obligations of life, usually work or study. However, leisure may also be defined in terms of the way people like to spend their free time, whether for internal or external motivations, by themselves or with others. Leisure, therefore, may be an individual choice for people to pursue their own preferred recreational activities, but it may also be socially oriented when they are looking for the rewarding experience of social interaction with friends or family. Iso-Ahola’s (1980) motivation theory explained the intrinsic personal motivation of people engaging in leisure, either for escaping from the environment or seeking personal and interpersonal rewards.

The purpose of this study was to identify the different aspects of leisure behavior in people from different generations in relation to four leisure theories. In order to better organize the study, the authors tried to address different aspects of leisure theories (leisure motivations, outdoor recreation, flow theory of leisure, and social meanings of leisure) followed by the interviewees’ responses to the questions related to each aspect.
Methods

The authors conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews separately with three different individuals of different age generation residents of Stillwater, Oklahoma, referred as participant 1 (22 years old), participant 2 (45 years old) and participant 3 (60 years old) in this paper. The qualitative approach of the interviews allowed participants to freely discuss personal leisure concepts and experiences with the researchers. The interview questions focused on four prominent theories of leisure: Leisure motivation theory, Outdoor recreation theory, Flow theory and Social meanings theory. Individual answers led the researcher to find patterns and perceptions of leisure compared to the tenants described by the four theories being discussed. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were recorded for later analysis with the permission of the interviewees. The places where the interviews were conducted varied. The common leisure themes found within the participants’ answers are presented below with supporting leisure theories that help to explain and understand their leisure behavior.

Leisure Motivation Theory

Dumazedier’s (1967) theory of leisure defined leisure as a way of relaxation, entertainment and personal development. People usually try to engage in leisure activities that are relaxing and relieve stress from school and work (e.g. watching TV, listening to music, exercise, reading), or keep them entertained (e.g. watching movies, dance, meeting with family or friends, hobbies, shopping), but also may be looking for meaningful leisure activities that enrich their lives through achievement, self-actualization and satisfaction of higher level needs and goals (e.g. volunteer work, travel, acquire new knowledge and skills). Neulinger (1981) introduced the distinction between intrinsic motivation and external motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the
internal motivation for participating in the activity for its own sake; where the experience is crucial and where perceived freedom leads to see leisure as an ideal state of mind. The authors asked the interviewees about *what is their main motivation for engaging in leisure activities?*

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| Part. 1 (22 yrs. old) | • Relaxation  
• Entertainment  
• Personal development | • Relieve stress from exams and study  
• Have fun  
• Rest and relaxation | Yes |
| Part. 2 (45 yrs. old) | • Relaxation  
• Entertainment  
• Personal development | • Do something that I like  
• Relaxing  
• Learning something | Yes |
| Part. 3 (65 yrs. old) | • Relaxation  
• Entertainment  
• Personal development | • Spending time with others  
• Be active and keep myself busy  
• Be patient | Yes |

Table 1. *Interview Responses to Leisure Motivation Theory.*

**Outdoor recreation**

Leisure is pleasurable when it is intrinsically motivated, and when people voluntarily choose to practice recreational activities for enjoyment, fun, personal satisfaction and revitalization (Weiskopf, 1982). But, why do people engage in outdoor recreation? Dr. Driver at the U.S. Forest Service developed a theory for understanding satisfaction of people engaging in outdoor recreation (Kelly, 1982). According to Driver´s theory, people participate in outdoor recreation for a variety of motivations. People may also be looking for a change in their daily routines and an escape from stress, or searching for experimental satisfaction that involves risk-taking, stimulation or nostalgia. However, the main satisfaction for participating in outdoor recreation may derive from both social and personal drives. The social aspect of engaging in outdoor recreational activities, facilitate the sharing of skills and the experience of leadership due
to the social exchange. For instance, participation in sports not only produce social status in the social network of the school through roles of leadership, influence and cooperation, but can also help students to acquire physical condition and social self-esteem (Kelly, 1982). Therefore, participation in outdoor recreation contributes to achieve personal expression and development while reinforcing self-image, discovery, learning and a sense of achievement. The outdoor recreation question asked was: what is your favorite outdoor recreation activity and why?

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| Part. 1 (22 yrs. old) | • Experimental  
• Personal development  
• Social  
• Nature appreciation  
• Change | • Camping because it involves many other activities  
• Going to mountains  
• Play sports in outdoor | Yes |
| Part. 2 (45 yrs. old) | • Experimental  
• Personal development  
• Social  
• Nature appreciation  
• Change | • Mountain biking  
• Going to the beach | Yes |
| Part. 3 (65 yrs. old) | • Experimental  
• Personal development  
• Social  
• Nature appreciation  
• Change | • Used to walk in the park, but not anymore because there is nobody to walk with | Yes |

Table 2. Interview Responses to Outdoor Recreation Theory.

**Flow theory of leisure**

Flow is a state in which a person fully occupied in a feeling of thrilled focus, full involvement, and success in the progress of the activity. There are three conditions that are necessary to achieve the flow state: (a) a person must be involved in an activity with a set of goals that adds direction and structure to the task, (b) a person must have a good balance between the perceived challenges of the task and his or her own perceived skills and should have confidence that he or she is capable to do the task, (c) The task must have clear and immediate feedback. The
Flow theory embraces that humans have definite basic drives that can affect a person to do something. A person will quickly learn to do something if that person is rewarded for an action. Flow is perceived as an optimal experience therefore, a person will want to continue in that state as often as possible.

The flow state can force people to take on more and more challenges, and improve their skills and abilities. The flow experience usually occurs in structured activities such as games, sports, artistic performances, etc. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). When a person’s skill matches the challenges of the situation, the quality of experience improves noticeably. The authors asked the interviewees about how their leisure activities influenced their life?

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| Part. 1 (22 yrs. old) | ● Activity is challenging and requires skills  
● Action and awareness merge  
● Concentration on the task at hand  
● Loss of self-consciousness  
● Clear goals and feedback | ● The development of skills  
● Learn how to work in teams  
● Developing leadership and organizational skills  
● Helped in coordination | Yes |
| Part. 2 (45 yrs. old) | ● Activity is challenging and requires skills  
● Action and awareness merge  
● Concentration on the task at hand  
● Loss of self-consciousness  
● Clear goals and feedback | ● Learned a lot of skills  
● Helped to pay for my education  
● Helped in my academic career  
● Challenging | Yes |
| Part. 3 (65 yrs. old) | ● Activity is challenging and requires skills  
● Action and awareness merge  
● Concentration on the task at hand  
● Loss of self-consciousness  
● Clear goals and feedback | ● It gives me pleasure and joy  
● Challenging  
● Making money  
● Being patient  
● It makes me feel good and be proud of myself | Yes |

Table 3. Interview Responses to Flow Theory of Leisure.
Social meanings of leisure

Leisure decisions may be based on intrinsic motivations to pursue own personal preferred activities or may also involve the desire to interact and socialize with others. People may engage in a certain sport or recreational activity for personal satisfaction, e.g. physical fitness and personal achievement but also to be able to participate in group activities, such as playing in teams where they may play different roles, e.g. leaders and followers, that contribute to their personal development. According to Kelly (1982) there are two types of leisure satisfactions, the first is intrinsic to doing the activity, that is, the satisfaction results from the experience of the event itself, based upon personal preferences. The second kind of satisfaction is social. The social meaning of leisure is derived from the interaction with others, either developing new relationships or building and consolidating previous ones. In this case, the satisfaction depends upon with whom people spend their time with rather than the place or the type of activities they participate in during their leisure time. Clearly, intrinsic and social meanings of leisure are not mutually exclusive and people may participate in a leisure activity freely chosen for its own sake (Neulinger, 1981) but it may also be due to the desire to build a stronger relationship with family and/or friends to develop a sense of togetherness.

Definitions of leisure that put emphasis on the social and interactional context of leisure would help to understand the experiences associated with relational leisure. Kelly’s (1983) model of leisure, integrating social as well as intrinsic meaning, led him to recommend that relational leisure and role-determined leisure should be distinguished from intrinsically motivated leisure. Kelly (1996) considered the social aspect of leisure and the intrinsic aspect of activities in the study of leisure. Kelly’s leisure paradigm also reflected another dimension which is the freedom
of choice (ranging from low to high). Kelly believed that there are four primary types of leisure including: (a) unconditional leisure (the leisure activity is chosen for its own sake and requires high freedom and activity-intrinsic meaning), (b) recuperative leisure (the purpose of leisure activity is rest and relaxation and to make up for some deficit or loss, it requires low freedom and activity-intrinsic meaning), (c) relational leisure (the leisure activity is chosen in order to be with others and requires high freedom and social-focused meaning), and (d) role-determined leisure (the leisure activity is chosen in order to satisfy the expectations of others and requires low freedom and social-focused meaning).

In order to better understand the social aspect of leisure in the interviewees’ life, this question had been asked: *Is your leisure pursuit an individual choice or socially oriented?*

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| Part. 1 (22 yrs. old) | • Unconditional leisure  
  • Recuperative leisure  
  • Relational leisure  
  • Role-determined leisure | • It’s divided.  
  • ¾ of my leisure time is about spending time with others | Yes |
| Part. 2 (45 yrs. old) | • Unconditional leisure  
  • Recuperative leisure  
  • Relational leisure  
  • Role-determined leisure | • Individual choice except my family gatherings | Yes |
| Part. 3 (65 yrs. old) | • Unconditional leisure  
  • Recuperative leisure  
  • Relational leisure  
  • Role-determined leisure | • I like to be around people  
  • I like to read alone | Yes |

Table 4. *Interview Responses Social Meaning of Leisure Theory.*

**Findings**

The researchers addressed different aspects of leisure behavior across the course of life of three rural Oklahomans in relation to four theories of leisure: Leisure motivation theory, Outdoor recreation theory, Flow theory and Social meanings theory. The leisure motivation theory refers
to the distinction of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for engaging in leisure activities that may be self or social rewarding. Outdoor recreation theory indicates that the main satisfaction for participating in recreational activities within natural environments may stem from both social and personal drivers. People engaging in outdoor recreation not only do it for physical activity or personal achievement but also for social exchange. The flow theory explains the personal enjoyment and quality of the experience of people when their skills match the challenge in any leisure and recreational activity. The social meaning of leisure theory is derived from the social interaction with others, where people try to develop their existing relationships or build new ones. In this case, people care more about whom they spend their leisure time with, rather than the place or kind of activities they engage in. The findings of the interviews conducted for the purpose of this study, led the researchers to conclude that rural Oklahomans fit the criteria of these four theories.

According to the responses, motivations for engaging in leisure activities and their preferences may seem to differ across ages. For younger people, leisure activities serve to relieve stress from obligations from work or school. But for older people leisure is not only about relaxation but also to find something to do to enhance their lives, whether physically or intellectually. However, for seniors although leisure activities help them to be active, they don’t like to overdo the activity so much that they will feel worn out.

In terms of outdoor recreation, younger people want to remain active and like to be in contact with the nature. People who engaged in outdoor recreation early in their lives, still enjoy camping or practicing sports in outdoors not only as a recollection memory of the past but also as a leisure and recreational experience they are willing to engage in. But when people grow older
and they do not have anybody to accompany them in their leisure, they tend to lower their level of leisure activity, reduce the variety of activities, and have a more passive leisure pursuit, less physically demanding and more indoors.

Furthermore, in the middle age and older age, their leisure activities helped them to make money while enjoying their leisure activity. In the younger age, it became a way of learning new skills as well as developing leadership and organizational skills. Any person, regarding of age, can experience flow by doing leisure activities such as making artistic things or playing a game. Reasons for participation in leisure activities have changed throughout life. There were certain types of activities which meet some needs better than others such as activities for which skill development is particularly important.

Additionally, social interaction was considered as a significant aspect in the lives of older participants as well as young and middle age participants. Participation in leisure activities with others was the most important motivation factor reported by the participants. Engagement in leisure activities was one of the main reasons to interact with other people and meet their social desires. Social needs were very important to all of these age groups. Therefore, leisure can be a way of communicating with others for people of all ages.
Leisure surely is a meaningful part in everyone’s life which helps them not only to relax and have a good time, either by themselves or in the company of others, but also for their personal and social development. For many, leisure allows them to find a balanced state of mind, body and soul. Certainly, the researchers acknowledged the limitations of this study due to the small sample size of the study. However, the qualitative nature of the study allowed the researchers to find relevant aspects of leisure behavior in people across the course of life as reported by the participants of this study. In early stages of life, people are looking for building relationships and developing their skills as much as they can. Therefore, they are more interested in getting involved in recreational activities for personal and social development. However, in middle stage, people have already established some social bonds and preferences which are difficult to change, so they are more independent in their leisure activities and satisfaction results from the experience of the leisure activity itself. Later in life, leisure preferences change because people may lose some of their loved ones and feel the need to build new relationships and social connections through leisure. Therefore, at this stage, leisure satisfaction depends more on the social context of leisure rather than the activity. Getting involved in leisure activities allows people to bond with others and strengthen the interpersonal relationships. People need to interact with others in order to improve their self-esteem and confidence, and the social interaction would not restrict people in having leisure if they are intrinsically motivated. In conclusion, leisure plays a significant role in lives of all people. However, leisure preferences, perceptions, and behaviors differ depending on the way their leisure behavior has been shaped and the stage of life they are at.
References


