Leisure Themes across the Lifespan: Interviews with Oklahomans

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Abstract
This qualitative study considers emergent themes from purposive interviews with four individuals representing different age groups (child, young adult, adult, and older adult). The purpose of this study was to explore participants' meanings of leisure in relation to current recreation and leisure literature. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview questions and responses were examined for leisure themes. The findings of this study suggest that common leisure concepts and experiences emerged consistent with themes and definitions common in the leisure and recreation literature.

Introduction
The experience of leisure has been explored by numerous researchers and philosophers and is typically associated with the concepts of perceived freedom (Neulinger, 1974), activity (Nash, 1953), free time, personal expression, and enjoyment (Kleiber, 1999). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine common definitions and concepts of leisure and recreation through the lived experience. Specifically, two researchers conducted interviews with four individuals at four distinct ages. Five themes emerged from participant responses: leisure as freedom from obligation, leisure as voluntary participation, leisure as an activity, leisure as a social outlet, and connection to nature through leisure.

Methodology and Interviewee Profiles
To respond to Kleiber's (1999) call about the lack of examination of leisure behavior throughout the lifespan, this study employed a cross-sectional, semi-structured interview-design during spring 2010 to explore the experience of leisure with four individuals. A qualitative analysis was chosen to explore the leisure and its meanings through the lens of both investigators and interviewees (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Viewing the nature of reality as being individually and socially constructed, Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) added that the central assumption of basic interpretive qualitative research is that a person’s reality is subjective to the experiences and relationships lived. To this end, and to compare interview responses, the researchers
had a set list of interview questions, but encouraged tangential conversations stimulated by the original questions that emerged naturally. The interviewee varied in age to examine the relationship between age and the conceptualization of leisure. These interviewees were coded as child, young adult, adult, and older adult.

The first interview was conducted with, at the time, a four-year-old Caucasian child. He was born in a two-parent household where both parents worked full-time. The family recently relocated to a western state and lived in a single family home with an enclosed backyard and play area. The child attended pre-school five days a week. The child enjoyed playing outside and being active with his family including soccer, catch, and imaginative games, as well as playing electronic games.

The second interview was conducted with a Caucasian young adult who at the time of the interview was a 22-year-old undergraduate college student. He described himself as active in the outdoors, was employed as an outdoor leader, and spent much of his free time rock climbing. He indicated that he grew up in rural Oklahoma and spent much of his youth playing outside and interacting with the natural environment. He spoke of enjoyment and engagement in the outdoors as a result of camping trips with his family and vacations to national parks and forests.

The third interview was conducted with a Caucasian adult who grew up in a northern state. The adult was 31 at the time of the interview and described himself as a working professional with two children both under the age of two. He was employed in sales and manufacturing and spent long days at his job. As an experienced member of the work force, the Adult was beginning to explore new ways to develop and incorporate more physical activity into his daily routine. He primarily spoke of playing soccer, running, and his training regimen and preparation for an upcoming 25K running road race. Growing up, he was active in organized sports, including soccer.

The researchers included two adult individuals (young adult and adult) due to their different life circumstances. The young adult was in college while the adult was employed fulltime. Godbey (2008) wrote that an adult’s leisure behavior and interest may change through life dependent upon life circumstances (e.g., social group, intrapersonal motivations, and interpersonal responsibilities). It was expected that due to obligations (school versus work) and access to resources (free for students), for instance, that their experiences at the time of the interviews would be different.

The older adult, a Caucasian male age 62, was the final interviewee. He spoke of the flow and progression of leisure throughout his lifetime. This interviewee grew up with a connection to the natural environment and ultimately developed a career integrating his outdoor interests to his profession. Additionally, he discussed the role of family and how family-leisure impacted and influenced his leisure pursuits.

Each interviewee provided a snapshot of their leisure through the context of their age. Through the interviews, the authors attempted to examine the pattern of leisure through the essence of each interviewee’s self-reported leisure experience. In analyzing the interviews, five themes emerged and were consistent with leisure and recreation literature. The themes included: leisure as freedom from obligation, leisure as voluntary participation, leisure as an activity, leisure as a social outlet, and connection to nature through leisure.

**Theme 1: Leisure as Freedom from Obligation**

Leisure as freedom from obligation was best exemplified by the adult. His primary leisure pursuit at the time of the interview was running. For him, the only time set aside for running was in the late-evenings. He specifically mentioned needing to fulfill his
work and family obligations before he could take time for his own leisure pursuits, which in this case, was running.

Similarly, the older adult spoke about his leisure pursuits being secondary to his work and family obligations during his childhood and adulthood. During the mornings, as a child, he would wake up and assist with the chores of his family’s farm. He helped his family tend to the animals and the soy harvest. After working in the early mornings, he went to school. After school, he would go back to his farm and help his family or help his older neighbors when they needed a strong, young person. Toward dusk, he was finally able to pursue his leisure activities with his siblings. This trend continued through adulthood. The older adult put his family obligations first and chose to give up certain leisure pursuits until his children were adults. For example, he stated that when his children were old enough to participate in sporting activities, he gave up his evenings of softball and coached his children’s teams instead.

The perceptions of the above interviewees were not uncommon. Leisure is most commonly perceived temporally, as time differentiated from obligations like work, school, and family responsibilities (McLean, Hurd, and Rogers, 2008). Kleiber (1999) noted that leisure is often perceived as the fourth concern behind work, family, and school. This attitude was prevalent. The child commented that he had school-time and then playtime. For him leisure did not occur at school. The child, in fact, may experience leisure at school, but it may occur during recess and other ‘free periods’ where the child was not obligated to engage in the curriculum. Most interestingly, this dichotomy manifested itself in different sets of clothes. For the child, he had school clothes and play clothes.

To the child, leisure was so different from school that one set of clothes could not be worn in the other context. Compensatory leisure could be one explanation for this differentiation. The compensatory theory best exemplifies the relationship between work and leisure (Godbey, 2008). In this theory, compensatory leisure is purposefully different with a clear division between work and leisure; hence, markedly different clothing appropriate for each realm.

Conversely, the young adult attempted to challenge this compensatory relationship with work through leisure. The young adult was attempting to blend work and leisure behaviors through spillover. As he indicated in his interview, he had a deep connection with the outdoors and related-activities (e.g., backpacking and rock climbing). At the time of his interview, he was trying to integrate these activities with his career aspirations in outdoor and adventure recreation. For example, he participated in outdoor leadership training so that he could be a backpacking and climbing leader for outdoor trips.

**Theme 2: Leisure as Voluntary Participation**

Deci and Ryan (2000) proposed a motivational continuum representative of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation, or complete lack of motivation. For example, the adult participated in two activities in which one was clearly a leisure pursuit and the other was not. The adult was a soccer player. His soccer pursuit was intrinsically motivated and he often spent three days a week on a soccer field practicing and playing games. He stated that he enjoyed playing soccer not for the physical or mental benefits, but because of the autotelic nature of the activity; that soccer was part of who he was. Kleiber (1999) and Deci and Ryan (2000) wrote that self-identity often developed through independent and freely chosen pursuits.

While the adult’s pursuit of soccer represented an intrinsically motivated leisure...
behavior, his pursuit of racing appeared to stem from a more extrinsically motivated source. The adult’s responses highlighted a conceptual issue with considering leisure to be defined solely through freedom of choice. For example, the adult described his decision to race in a 25K fundraiser race to support a personally meaningful cause. While the choice to participate in the event may be considered voluntary, the participation in the training regimen seemed, according to the adult, to lack freedom of choice. As the interview progressed, it became apparent he did not like racing and perceived the training regimen to be required even though, again, he classified running as a leisure pursuit. It was arguable that based on traditional leisure definitions (intrinsically pursued, autonomously chosen) racing and training were not voluntary (i.e., obligatory) and therefore, were not leisurely pursuits. He may have perceived racing as leisure because the training occurred during discretionary time and he volunteered to run in the race.

Theme 3: Leisure as Activity

McLean, Hurd, and Rogers (2008) wrote that a common definition of leisure was defined by activity. In analyzing the interviewees’ responses, each spoke of their leisure as an activity. For instance, the child discussed his play pursuits in multiple ways such as activities at recess, like playing on the monkey bars (his favorite activity). He also associated leisure with a card / electronic anime game. Nash (1960) would describe this type of activity as amusement and entertainment because it lacked the creativity and active participation of higher-order leisure and recreation.

The young adult discussed his leisure as an activity as well. Specifically, his leisure was rock climbing and hiking. He spent approximately 20 hours per week climbing at an indoor gym; climbing, building routes, or reading about climbers on the Internet. He also spent at least two weekends per month hiking and climbing outdoors.

In examining the responses for both the child and young adult, leisure for them was clearly doing something. By defining their leisure through activity, what is not known is how often a named activity is not leisure. Perhaps the young adult excitedly plans for a week to take a trip outdoors to climb, but the experience is not considered leisurely due to the climbing spot being too crowded. Would the young adult consider the planning for the trip to be leisure? For this study, these ideas were not explored.

For the interviewers, the above activities were more aligned with the common definition of recreation, often interchanged with leisure. Recreation, often considered an activity, can occur in groups or be individually-pursued, is often freely-chosen, and involves maturation and growth. In short, recreation is often considered restorative. For these interviewees, getting outside or playing at recess may be restorative as well as physically and mentally beneficial.

Theme 4: Leisure as a Social Outlet

Throughout history leisure has served as a socializing agent. Dating back to some of the earliest records of human history, successful hunts (work) were followed by celebrations (leisure). These community celebrations often revolved around the agricultural calendar (Cross, 1990). Read and Miller (1995) noted that humans were perhaps the most social creatures on the planet; they believed that interactions helped in goal creation, cognitive development, the development of empathy, as well as learning. Kleiber (1999) wrote that individuals socialized as a way of learning about rules, teamwork, resilience, development of morals, among other developmental aspects.

All four interviewees spoke about their leisure activities involving siblings, significant others, and friends. Social interactions were
important to each person. The child played imaginative games with his brother. The young adult climbed and hiked with his girlfriend and best friend. Rock climbing provided him with a social community as well as an opportunity for self-expression by adopting mannerisms, language, and the clothing styles of his peers. Through his experience in rock climbing with others, he developed and refined his climbing skills as he learned from his peers and his confidence increased as his skill level increased. The adult pursued leisure with his family, specifically mentioning his son and soccer teammates where he learned about rules and working together as a team to pursue the common goal of winning. The older adult discussed his travel and coaching pursuits directly related to his wife and children. These involved providing travel experiences to pass values of the outdoors and other cultures to a younger generation as well as coaching, a responsibility that demanded the development and understanding of rules, acting ethically (i.e., not cheating), and working and relying upon each other as a unified group.

**Theme 5: Connecting to Nature through Leisure**

Research has shown that extreme sports athletes, outdoor recreationists, and childhood exposure to the out-of-doors creates a connection with nature (Brymer & Grey, 2009; Chawla & Flanders Cushing, 2007; Hacking, Barratt, & Scott, 2007; Louv, 2005; Malone, 2007; Measham, 2006; NPS, 2007). These studies presented a relationship where one’s connection to nature was important for developing stewardship and environmentally-friendly attitudes and behaviors. These pro-environmental feelings and behaviors may prove to be important for subsequent generations.

The older adult discussed his connection with nature stemming from his early childhood experiences. Growing up in the rural north on a farm led to many of his leisure pursuits being outside. His connection to nature now is evident through his research and work pursuits as well as his comfort level in the outdoors. He speculated that if he had grown up in a city, he believed he still would have this innate love for nature, but would be unsatisfied with his life because of the lack of access while growing up. Interestingly, he did not think that this dissatisfaction would be alleviated as he got older and was able to relocate.

The young adult pursued adventure activities in the outdoors through his hiking and rock climbing pursuits. As a child he was exposed to nature. He remembered that he often played cars outside with his brother and during many weekends, camped, hiked, and traveled with his family. Though he primarily climbed indoors he said that he felt more connected to climbing when he was outdoors. This closeness to nature created an appreciation for it and was further evidenced in his pursuit of and attainment of a Leave No Trace Master Educator. His behavior was consistent with research demonstrating that outdoor experience was correlated with pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Budruk, Thomas, & Tyrrell, 2009; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001; Vorkinn & Riese, 2001). Future investigations should examine a participant’s outdoor-related experiences growing up as correlated to an individual’s environmental values and stewardship behaviors.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this cross-sectional, qualitative inquiry examined the leisure behaviors and attitudes of four individuals at different stages in their lives. The researchers found that core concepts of leisure emerged from the interview responses. The inquiry produced five emergent themes; however, generalizing beyond the context of this inquiry would be inconsistent with this form of investigation. Though five themes emerged, these themes surfaced differently for different
interviewees. For example, freedom from obligation was a significant theme discussed by all four interviewees, whether it was freedom from school, work, or family obligations. The obligation could even be a perceived one. Though the adult enjoyed soccer and running, the personal cause that motivated him to race was perceived as an obligation (i.e., not voluntary) and racing was not perceived as leisure for the adult. For the third theme, leisure as activity, only two interviewees consistently mentioned needing to do something, whether it was rock climbing or playing a video game. Though the other interviewees mentioned activities, it was not as pervasive. As a child and young adult, these individuals were interested in pursuing activities perhaps for skill development for a potential future career or simply to avoid boredom.

In conclusion, leisure is a pursuit for any individual, though it clearly manifests differently based on time, state of mind, activity, access, and social meanings. Even in the same individual, leisure can be described differently and is clearly multifaceted, often leaving the true definition of leisure to the individual.

References

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