Experiencing leisure: The case of Chinese university students

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Abstract

One hundred and fifty undergraduate students took part in group discussions regarding their subjective experiences of leisure. A combined qualitative and quantitative analysis revealed that (1) functionality, autonomy, and contrast with work were major components for defining leisure; (2) relaxation, enjoying life, self-growth, filling the time, social interaction, and health promotion were motivations for leisure; (3) biopsychological factors, activity itself, interpersonal factors, time, economy, and facility were both facilitators of and barriers to leisure; (4) relaxation, self-growth, enjoying life, social interaction, health promotion, filling the time, and costs were the actual the consequences of leisure.

Key words: meaning of leisure, leisure motivation, facilitators of leisure, barriers to leisure, consequences of leisure

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Leisure is a very important topic, for many reasons. For instance, many people find their leisure more satisfying than their work; leisure can be a major source of pleasure and sense of achievement; we are having more leisure time than ever in the human history; however, many people who have a lot of spare time fail to find satisfying forms of leisure. Leisure has not really been accepted as a recognized field of psychological research, though there has been work on certain types of leisure, such as sports, musical activities, religious activities and watching TV. Research on leisure with Chinese people is even more in the rarity. Perhaps until very recently, leisure has never been accorded a significant status in the life of Chinese people either in a traditional subsistence economy or during the stage of economic take-off. However, things are changing. With relative material abundance and shrinking working hours, the vast population of the Chinese people is paying increasing interest in high quality and wide variety of leisure activities. Thus, understanding the subjective experiences of leisure will not only help to answer some interesting issues for psychology but also contribute ultimately to better leisure policies and practices. In the present paper, we will rely on qualitative data collected from Chinese university students in Taiwan to inform us on perceived meaning of leisure, personal motivations, facilitators of and barriers to leisure, as well as received effects of leisure. We concede that this effort is just a start, but a significant start in the bare field of the Chinese psychological study of leisure.

The meaning of leisure

In the Western literature, there has been a lot of learned discussion about the definition of leisure. Leisure has often been defined as time left over from work, and understood as activities contrasted with work. However, leisure is obviously not the entirety of free time, as Neulinger (1981) found that people regarded only one-third of their free time as leisure. Furthermore, unemployed people don’t experience their free time as leisure, rather as “embarrassment” (Glyptis, 1989). The difference between leisure and work is very subtle. For some people, the line between leisure and work is impossible to draw, for instance academics and artists, and some businessmen who carry on the public relation activities off-time. It seems that the only reliable difference is that leisure is not paid.

Recognizing the subjective element of leisure, other scholars have attempted to define leisure as a unique personal state of mind, or an evaluation of an activity (deGrazia, 1962). Emphasizing perceived freedom and internal motivation, Iso-Ahola (1976, 1997) asserted that leisure can only be subjectively defined and personally recognized. Encompassing the above discussion, Argyle and Lu (1992) proposed a comprehensive definition of leisure as “what people choose to do in their spare time, for its own sake, because it is enjoyable, or felt to be intrinsically worthwhile, but not for any external reward” (p.5). However, there are unresolved issues lingering still. For instance, do people really have the freedom to choose leisure activities and actually engage in them? In other words, are there facilitators of and barriers to leisure? Which aspect of leisure is most emphasized in people’s perception of its meaning? Our present study was designed to offer some answers to these questions.

Leisure motivation

This is an important aspect of the study of leisure because it can partially explain why people engage in leisure activities, or particular types of leisure activities. Examining leisure motivation can also inform the psychological study of motivation in general, especially intrinsic motivations. In a study with Australian adults, Kabanoff (1982) listed ten leisure motivations: autonomy, relaxation, family activity, escape from routine, social interaction, stimulation, skill utilization, health, self-esteem, challenge/competition, and leadership/social power.

For more serious forms of leisure, such as rock climbing and sky diving, where casual efforts, long-term devotion and physical extremity are often involved, intrinsic motivations are most prominent. Csikzentmihalyi (1975) interviewed 173 individuals who engaged in serious leisure activities, and found that the reasons were:
enjoyment of the experience and use of skills; the activity itself—the pattern, the action, the world it provides; development of personal skills. Csikszentmihalyi regarded these as the main sources of intrinsic motivation, though other reasons were mentioned too—friendship and relaxation, risk and chance, problem solving, competition and creativity. For devoted viewers, watching “soap opera” is arguably a serious leisure. Livingstone (1988) found that reported motivations of committed viewers were quite varied: entertainment and escapism, realism, characters as extension of real-world social networks, as an educational medium, as part of daily life, and emotional experience. In a rare study of the idolatry phenomenon, Ju and Lu (2000) found that young Chinese fans of popular music engaged in idolatry behavior for reasons of self-presentation, social learning, vicarious satisfaction, emotional expression, and nostalgic memory.

To sum, social motivation, physical excitement, and social learning seem to be the most important elements of intrinsic motivation for those who engage in serious committed leisure. However, in mundane and trivial daily leisure activities such as watching TV (non-serious viewers of particular programs) and singing in KTV, simple relaxation and casual interaction may be more prominent motivations for a much wider section of the population. It may be more so for the Chinese people, as they are yet to fully recognize the value of leisure (Chen, 1989), and many have no committed forms of leisure (Chen, 1997). Thus, we hoped to delineate general leisure motivation of the Chinese students with their own accounts.

Facilitators of and barriers to leisure

Facilitators of leisure are usually conceived as the opposite of barriers to it and most extant research focus on the latter. Kay and Jackson (1991) noted money and time as the two most significant constraints of leisure. Later Jackson (1993) identified six dimensions of barriers among a large community sample: social isolation, accessibility, personal reasons, costs, time, and facilities. Furthermore, Alexandris and Carroll (1997) found that perceived barriers to leisure were indeed related to reduced engagement in leisure.

There has been relatively more research on this topic with the Chinese population. For instance, Chang (1998) found that university students reported intrapersonal, interpersonal as well as structural barriers to leisure. Li (1997) noted family responsibility, lack of facilities, and lack of companions as the three major barriers to leisure for urban women.

It seems that various factors may be perceived as barriers to leisure, including money, time, resources and accessibility, ability, conflicts with family and work. However, the relative importance of these factors may vary for different people, and it would be interesting to reveal the specific list for young students. It would also be interesting to empirically test the implicit assumption that facilitators of leisure are the opposite of barriers and to uncover possible distinct facilitators or barriers.

Consequences of leisure

If leisure were what people truly and freely choose to do, then it would be very odd if they didn’t enjoy it. However, if we allow people to define the “leisure” as they will, then it is possible to enquire whether it does in fact produce positive effects, or even negative effects at time.

Leisure satisfaction and happiness are perhaps the most direct indicators of leisure effects. Andrew and Withey’s (1976) early US survey showed that most people (43%) were pleased or delighted with their leisure, and only a small minority (8.5%) was dissatisfied. However, different leisure activities may generate different levels of satisfaction. Lu and Argyle (1994) found that people reported greater leisure satisfaction and happiness when they had a serious, committed, and constructive leisure activity. They experienced their leisure as more stressful, challenging and absorbing, but more under control. In contrast, less serious leisure activities, such as TV watching, have been found to produce less positive effects. Lu and Argyle (1993) noted that people who watch a lot of TV were bored more often, had lower leisure satisfaction, and less happy. Nonetheless, the same study also found that regular “soap opera” watchers were more satisfied with their leisure and happier, perhaps because this activity has some elements of a serious leisure.
In addition to satisfaction and happiness, leisure has been found beneficial for mental health, perhaps through its stress buffering effects (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). Social integration, companionship, and social support are most pronounced effects of leisure (Argyle & Lu, 1992) and beneficial to mental health. Needless to say, some forms of leisure, such as sports, can greatly enhance physical health (Wannamethee, Shaper & Macfarlane, 1993). In addition, physical and mental health has a mutually effecting relationship (Lu & Hsieh, 1997).

Thus far, existing leisure research has focused almost exclusively on positive effects and found short-term benefits including positive mood, physical fitness and immediate satisfaction, as well as long-term effects of happiness, mental health, physical health, and social integration. In the present study, we aimed to find out which benefits were actually perceived by students, and whether they perceived less pleasing even negative consequences of leisure.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty undergraduate students, age 19 to 25, participated in the study. The students were in their second to fourth year, enrolling on a health psychology and a social psychology course at a medical university in Taiwan. These students freely formed 26 groups for class discussion (3-8 in a group).

Procedure

To reflect the exploratory nature of the present study, a qualitative approach was adopted. Data were collected through group discussions that took place in fall 1999. Participants were instructed to freely and thoroughly discuss four open-ended questions: (1) What is the meaning of leisure to you? Please give a definition of leisure. (2) Why do you engage in leisure activities? (3) What factors facilitates your leisure participation, and what factors prevents you from leisure participation? (4) What are the consequences of leisure participation? Each group handed in a point-to-point record, which formed the basis for later data analysis.

All the transcribed verbatim were first coded using thematic analysis to create master schemes of categorization for each of the four issues discussed. This allows the emergence of concepts, constructs, and typologies directly rooted in data, reflecting the essence of grounded theory practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Frequency counts were then made for each subcategory in the master schemes, following the usual practice of content analysis. However, similar responses by different participants were counted only once. The combination of thematic analysis and content analysis enabled the development of new organizing schemes firmly supported by data as well as the presentation of relative prominence of subjective experiences. In other words, both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the leisure experiences were explored for this group of students.

The thematic analysis were mainly conducted by the two researchers, but a regular research group composed of scholars of psychological, sociological, and social work background provided insightful and constructive inputs in interpreting the data, clarifying the constructs, and elaborate the schemes. The results of this series of analyses were then communicated back to the participants at a later class session. The researchers explained their construction of the master themes, presented results of the frequency calculation, elaborated on the major findings, and answered any queries. This communication exercise served as a debriefing act as well as a validation practice. Participants were invited to actively engage as co-researchers too. They largely agreed with researchers’ interpretations of and conclusions drawn from the data, and enthusiastically engaged in the discussion. This procedure of data analysis hence ensured the “trustworthiness” of the study, through the intersubjectivity between the researchers and their academic peers, as well as between the researchers and participants.
Results and Discussion

Results are presented below and grouped into categories and subcategories representing the main themes emerged for each issue. Numbers in brackets are frequency counts for each category and subcategory.

The meaning of leisure

Usually a definition of leisure included several aspects. We discerned three major components: functionality, autonomy, and contrast with work. The diagram in Figure 1 shows the frequencies these components were mentioned when participants attempted to define leisure.

Category 1: Functionality (30) Leisure was defined in terms of its positive function to the individual. For instance, “leisure is to make myself happy”, “leisure is a kind of liberation”, and “leisure is to get rest and loose up”.

Category 2: Autonomy (25) Leisure was defined as things one can freely choose to do. For instance, “leisure is time I can freely use”, “leisure is things I want to do”, and “leisure is no constraint and totally free”.

Category 3: Contrast with work (18) Leisure was defined as the opposite of work. For instance, “leisure is time after work”, “leisure is things I do which are unrelated to work”, and “leisure is completely different from work”.

![Figure 1. Frequency for components in leisure definition.](image)

From Figure 1, we can see that functionality and autonomy were the most often emphasized components of leisure. The emphasis on functionality is in consonant with the view that people engage in leisure “because it is enjoyable, or felt to be intrinsically worthwhile” (Argyle & Lu, 1992, p.5). Leisure is indeed pursued for its positive value and generally regarded as pleasurable activities. The emphasis on autonomy is consistent with views of leading scholars in the field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Iso-Ahola, 1976, 1997), which stress the importance of perceived freedom in leisure. Leisure is not only pleasurable but also under personal control, and is a manifestation of human agency. Leisure pursuits have been suggested as a way of self-expression (Little, 1983; Ju & Lu, 2000), and have implications for identity development (Argyle & Lu, 1992). The exercise of autonomy in leisure has also been suggested as a counter dose for stress, which often threatens personal control (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). However, the exact mechanism of applying autonomy to leisure construction and factors enhancing or hampering autonomy need to be delineated more systematically in the future.

Also consistent with learned views in the field, leisure is often held in contrast with work. May be for our young students, the line between leisure and work is relatively easy to draw, and even consciously maintained. Some students volunteered in the feedback discussion that they used leisure as a safe haven to escape from academic pressure. It is also a common practice in the campus to celebrate the end of exams with some frantic leisure activities. We thus confirmed that at least for some people leisure is conceived of as something different from work or even an escape from work.

However, as stated early, our students typically defined leisure with a combination of two or even three components. For example, one participant stated that “leisure is no constraint and totally free, it’s a kind of liberation”. It is obvious that any one of the elements is not sufficient to encompass the leisure experience. In other words, different scholarly views in the field all have some of the truth in reality, but none is encompassing the whole truth yet. With this valuable insight into lay people’s conception of leisure, we should modify Argyle and Lu’s (1992) definition.
to make it even more comprehensive: “leisure is what people choose to do in their spare time, to escape or to be different from work, for its own sake, because it is enjoyable, or felt to be intrinsically worthwhile, but not for any external reward”.

**Leisure motivation**

Most students gave several leisure motivations. We discerned six major motivations: relaxation, enjoying life, self-growth, filling the time, social interaction, and health promotion. The diagram in Figure 2 shows the frequencies these motivations were mentioned by participants.

**Category 1: Relaxation (61)** Leisure was pursued for its value in relaxation. More actively, some students engage in leisure activities to build up resources to cope with stress. For instance, one student claimed that his work efficiency was improved after playing sports. Less actively, students engage in leisure activities simply to get rest and get the mind off.

**Category 2: Enjoying life (13)** Leisure was actively pursued for its hedonic value. For instance, “I engage in leisure to seek happiness”, and “I take part in leisure to lead an interesting life”.

**Category 3: Self-growth (10)** Leisure was actively used to acquire new knowledge, learn new skills, and achieve self-growth. For instance, “leisure is to accumulate new knowledge”, and “leisure is to develop a wider interest”.

**Category 4: Filling the time (10)** Leisure was used to handle the vacuum of tasks and responsibilities. For instance, “I engage in leisure because there is nothing else to do”, and “I take part in leisure to kill time”.

**Category 5: Social interaction (9)** Leisure was actively used to promote social integration and communication. For instance, “I engage in leisure to maintain my social relationships”, and “I take part in leisure to make new friends”.

**Category 6: Health promotion (5)** Leisure was actively used to enhance or maintain health. These leisure activities are usually sports and exercise. For instance, “leisure is to build up physical strength”, and “leisure is to help me lose weight”.

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**Figure 2. Frequency for leisure motivation.**

Two of our findings here should be noted. First, relaxation is the most prominent leisure motivation for our students. Second, filling time is the only one not on Kabanoff’s (1982) list of ten leisure motivations. These two features may be embedded in a common cultural milieu. Seeking relaxation is considered a minor motivation for people with committed leisure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). However, if people engage in leisure simply to kill time and banish boredom, they most likely don’t have a serious committed leisure activity and often indulge in more passive forms of leisure such as watching a lot of TV, which end up producing less satisfactory results (Lu & Argyle, 1993). Empirical research with the Chinese people has shown that the actual participation in leisure is very low (Chen, 1997; Tu, 1998), not to mention serious leisure. Perhaps as we expected, for the Chinese people who are still in an early stage of forming a constructive culture of leisure (Chen, 1989), seeking simple relaxation is no less important than other deeper and more seasoned intrinsic motivations as emphasized in the Western culture. In particular, relaxation as a leisure motivation may be related to the conception of leisure as a counter dose to, or escape from academic stress among students.

**Facilitators of and barriers to leisure**
Facilitators of and barriers to leisure were conceived as opposites to each other, and were encompassed by a single set of categories. These factors were: biopsychological factors, activity itself, interpersonal factors, time, economy, and facility. The diagrams in Figure 3 and 4 show the frequencies these factors were mentioned by participants. For easy comparison, facilitators of and barriers are presented together below.

**Category 1: Biopsychological factors (29/11)** Subjective biological and psychological states can either facilitate or inhibit leisure participation. For instance, good mood, end-of-exams high, longing for a long time, and optimal physical state were generally regarded as facilitators. On the other hand, for instance, stress, impending exams, certain personality traits and lack of ability were regarded as barriers.

**Category 2: Activity itself (27/11)** Positively or negatively perceived characteristics inherent in a particular leisure activity might become facilitating or inhibiting factors to participation. On the positive side, for instance, if a certain activity can open up new horizons, offer a sense of mastery and achievement, or improve body image, these may facilitate participation. On the negative side, for instance, lack of interest, and extensive requirement of physical strength may become inhibiting factors.

**Category 3: Interpersonal factors (26/18)** Positively or negatively perceived social influences may become facilitating or inhibiting factors to participation. On the positive side, for instance, invitation from friends and approval of parents may facilitate participation. On the negative side, for instance, lack of companions, being pushed by friends, and undesirable persons on the scene may become inhibiting factors.

**Category 4: Time (20/20)** Availability or lack of time may become facilitating or inhibiting factors to participation. On the positive side, for instance, having free time, and being on holidays may facilitate participation. On the negative side, for instance, lack of free time, and having too much work to do may become inhibiting factors.

**Figure 3. Frequency for facilitators of leisure.**
Figure 4. Frequency for barriers to leisure.

Our list of 6 barriers to leisure was almost identical to Kay and Jackson’s (1991) list, and can be read as a detailed account of Chang’s (1998) list of intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural factors. However, conflicts with family responsibility were not prevalent for students for obvious reasons.

Our analysis has confirmed that facilitators of leisure are in general the opposite of its barriers. However, the relative importance of the same factor as a facilitator or a barrier varies. For facilitators, biopsychological factors, activity itself, and interpersonal factors were the top three most prominent factors. For barriers on the other hand, activity itself was the least prominent factor while the remaining five were almost indistinguishable in their importance. Basis for this disparity needs further exploration.

Consequences of leisure

Most of the consequences mentioned by students could fit into the same categorization scheme for leisure motivations. One distinct feature though was negative consequences, which we termed “costs”. We thus discerned seven major consequences of leisure: relaxation, self-growth, enjoying life, social interaction, health promotion, filling the time, and costs. The diagram in Figure 5 shows the frequencies these consequences were mentioned by participants.

Category 1: Relaxation (43) Leisure was perceived to lead to relaxation, for instance, releasing stress and recovering strength.

Category 2: Self-growth (31) Leisure was perceived to lead to self-growth, for instance, acquiring new knowledge, and facilitating academic work.

Category 3: Enjoying life (18) Leisure was perceived to lead to hedonistic enjoyment of life, for instance, inflated happiness, and a more interesting life.

Category 4: Social interaction (15) Leisure was perceived to lead to improved social integration, for instance, maintaining relationships, promoting friendships, and increasing social participation.

Category 5: Health promotion (10) Leisure was perceived to lead to the enhancement of health, for instance, enjoying the pleasure of sweating, and promoting health.

Category 6: Filling the time (5) Leisure was perceived to lead to better structuring of free time, for instance, filling up free time, and getting rid of boredom.

Category 7: Costs (5) Leisure was perceived to have various negative consequences, for instance, getting even more tired, and reduction in sleep time.

Figure 5. Frequency for consequences of leisure
It seems that regardless whether people have a serious, committed leisure activity or not, most people were pleased with their leisure, as found by Andrew and Withey's (1976) and Lu and Argyle (1993, 1994). The overwhelming perception of positive results of leisure is understandable, after all leisure is done out of free choice largely, in free time, and usually under high expectations to generate a pleasurable state of mind. Reading Figure 5, we can see that leisure indeed was perceived to have short-term benefits including positive mood, physical fitness and better structure of time, as well as long-term effects of happiness, health, educational benefits, and social integration. The use of leisure to structure time may be particularly useful for certain sections of the population, such as housewives, the elderly and unemployed. As we have seen earlier, free time does not equate meaningful leisure (Neulinger, 1981; Glyptis, 1989). However, helping those people to plan leisure constructively can not only provide a more manageable time structure, but also bring about a whole array of positive effects such as social integration, health promotion, self-growth, and happiness.

However, unlike the rosy picture painted by the existing research, our present study noted that students did perceived some less pleasing even negative consequences of leisure. We suspect that these costs of leisure may encompass many aspects, for instance, physical (overeuse of physical energy), economic (budget pressure), work (competing priority), social (interpersonal friction) aspects. Few early studies did found that watching TV put people in a drowsy, weak, and passive psychological state (Csikzentmihalyi & Kubey, 1981), and heavy TV watchers were bored, dissatisfied, and unhappy (Lu & Argyle, 1993). It is imperative then to more systematically explore the negative sides of leisure, in order to rectify theoretical blindness as well as to inform leisure management practices.

Conclusion

This study probed into the subjective experiences of leisure, in particular the conceived meaning of leisure, reported leisure motivation, perceived facilitators of and barriers to leisure, as well as actual consequences of leisure. Some of our findings were consonant with the views and results in the extant literature, while others extended or challenged the established accounts about leisure. Whether these distinct findings are due to sample characteristics (e.g. students), social characteristics (e.g. under-developed culture of leisure), or cultural characteristics (e.g. Chinese views of leisure) need detailed examination in the future. Although our effort is just a start, we hope that data we collected will contribute to the development of a Chinese psychology of leisure.

Authors’ Note

The first author writes the present paper, while empirical data were drawn from part of those in the second author’s Master thesis, which was completed under the supervision of the first author.
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休閒的主觀體驗－以台灣大學生為例

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摘要

150位大學生參加了有關主觀休閒體驗的團體討論，以質、量並重的分析方法發現：（1）「功能性」、「自主性」、「與工作的對比」是休閒定義的三大主要成分；（2）放鬆減壓、享受生活、自我成長、填補空間、社會互動、及健康促進是休閒的主要動機；（3）生心因素、活動本身、人際因素、時間因素、經濟因素、及設施因素既可能是休閒活動的促進因子，也可能是阻礙因子；（4）放鬆減壓、自我成長、享受生活、社會互動、健康促進、填補空間、及活動負效則是休閒的後果。

關鍵詞：休閒定義、休閒動機、休閒促進因子、休閒阻礙因子、休閒後果