New directions in the psychology of leisure

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The meaning of leisure

Almost any activity can be regarded as ‘leisure’, including many which are identical with serious or strenuous work — digging, wallpapering, looking after the sick, scuba diving and playing in orchestras, for example. The difference between leisure and work is very subtle. The only reliable difference perhaps is that leisure is not paid. Other differences are that leisure is more autonomous, although less so when done in a group, there is little or no supervision, and the product, if any, is one’s own property (Argyle, 1989). Leisure could be defined 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.

Many ‘theories’ of leisure have been proposed. It has been suggested that leisure is a form of play, a source of self-fulfilment and personal growth, is for relaxation, a compensation for work or a continuation of work. It is obvious that each of these theories describes some kinds of leisure, but fails to fit others. Take play: party games are playful, serious leisure activities are not. Take relaxation: watching TV is relaxing, sport is not. During childhood and early life, people learn to find some activities enjoyable, certain kinds of sport, certain hobbies, for example.

Research on the socialization of leisure has found that about 50 per cent of adult leisure activities began in childhood, under the influence of family (especially for girls), peer group (especially for boys), and school. These influences include passing on values, for example that cooperation is good, or killing animals is wrong. On the other hand about 50 per cent of adult leisure activities were not begun in childhood but developed later.

Serious leisure

Some of the most interesting kinds of leisure are those which are serious, constructive, and involve commitment; the end-product may be a concert or other performance, but nevertheless some goal is pursued with dedication. This is quite unlike going to the pub, playing bingo, or watching TV. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) studied several groups of people who were involved in such serious leisure — very dedicated rock climbers, chess players and others. He found that they experienced intense absorption through the development and use of skills. Similar conclusions came from a sociological study of amateurs in drama, archaeology and baseball, who were found to be deeply devoted to a disciplined and demanding form of activity which was the very opposite of relaxing (Stebbins, 1979).

How many people do engage in such serious leisure? Surveys such as the General Household Survey find that in Britain 18 per cent regularly take part in an outdoor sport other than walking, 28 per cent in an indoor one, 9 per cent doing voluntary work at least weekly, 10 per cent are active members of churches, 4 per cent engage in amateur music or drama and 3 per cent go to evening classes, for a start.

We recently carried out a study of the possible effects of serious leisure. Out of an initial sample of 114 adult members of our subject panel, 69 reported a serious leisure activity — voluntary work, clubs, sport, arts or education, hobbies or crafts. They experienced their leisure as more stressful, challenging and absorbing, and more under control than the other people did (Fig. 1).

They also reported greater leisure satisfaction — psychological, social and physical. We tested the same subjects again five months later, in order to investigate some hypotheses about causation. Multiple regression showed that leisure satisfaction at Time 1 predicted happiness at Time 2, independently of happiness at Time 1.

We also looked at the causal predictors of serious leisure from various personality measures administered at Time 1. Sport, clubs and voluntary work were all chosen more by subjects who were younger, cooperative and high in self-esteem. Hobbies and crafts (which are mainly individual activities) were taken up more by those high in neuroticism. Arts and educational activities were not predicted by any of our variables. These
It is very interesting that some of the most satisfying kinds of leisure are those which are very similar to work. There is probably going to be more leisure in the future, as a result of automation and computerization. Some writers have suggested that work should be made 'more like leisure' (Parkes, 1983). There are some ways in which this can be done, for example enhancing a social life at work, and providing work which is intrinsically interesting and satisfying and which makes use of skills. In addition, we have seen that for a number of occupations the line between work and leisure is very blurred. However, a number of differences between work and leisure are likely to persist. Work requires discipline - in terms of the hours worked and the standards of performance met.

**Less serious leisure — watching TV**

However, the most popular leisure activity in the modern world doesn’t look very serious at all — watching TV — though there may be ‘commitment’ to a particular series. The number of hours people spend on it are surprising — 4½ hours a day for women, 3½ for men, working-class people nearly twice as many hours as middle class; more than average for the old, young, ill, unemployed, housebound, lonely and members of minority groups (Comstock et al., 1980). On the other hand the level of satisfaction reported is quite low: Robinson (1977) found that only 17 per cent reported ‘great satisfaction’ with TV, compared with 25 per cent for housework, and 32 per cent for reading. For example, Csikszentmihalyi & Kabey (1981) asked people to fill in a number of mood rating scales while engaged in different leisure activities. They found that while watching most TV programmes people are generally relaxed, cheerful and sociable; they are more drowsy, weak and passive than for reading or any other activity — for instance, work, other leisure, eating or talking. Other forms of leisure have a higher quality in terms of the greater intensity of joy, greater effort and use of skills, and experience of self-fulfilment.

We tried to understand the charms of TV more with the same 114 adult subjects in the last study. We compared the 42 high TV watchers with the 72 low TV watchers, dividing the sample at the mean. The high TV watchers reported themselves to be bored more often, less happy, had less physical leisure satisfaction, but more educational satisfaction from their leisure. This supports the theory that TV is a passive leisure activity for bored people, which does not make them very happy, but may educate them a bit.

We did a separate study of high and low soap opera watchers, and the results were completely different. Where high TV watchers in general were less happy, high soap watchers were more happy than the infrequent watchers (Fig. 3). High soap opera watchers also reported more leisure satisfaction overall, and greater social, psychological and educational satisfaction, especially the last (Fig. 4). This supports the theory that one reason for watching soap opera is to learn how to cope with everyday situations.

**Figure 4. Effects of watching soap operas on leisure satisfaction.**

The greater reported social satisfaction is consistent with another theory, the idea that these programmes provide ‘parasocial’ activity, i.e. social behaviour or relationships at second hand. Livingstone (1988) found that 62 per cent of her subjects gave this as a reason for watching soaps, e.g. ‘I know that after a while the characters become real people and we are concerned for their well-being just as we are for our friends and colleagues’. Which individuals watch most soap opera? We carried out regression analyses and, although the data are cross-sectional, it is consistent with the causal model in Fig. 5. The greatest soap watchers were women, with part-time jobs, scoring high on extraversion and on cooperativeness.

Another common reason people give for watching TV is ‘relaxation’, and this is partly the motivation for holidays too. However, relaxation, to recover from work, may become less important in the future, as working hours become shorter, and work becomes less physically demanding at least.

**Leisure in groups**

A lot of leisure is spent with other people, and most serious leisure is done in leisure groups. This is partly because many leisure activities can’t be done alone...
Leisure attitudes
Relax/different from work

Educational satisfaction
TV

Bored

Female

Social satisfaction
Part-time job
Soap operas

Psychological satisfaction
Extraversion

Happiness
Cooperation

Figure 5. TV or soap operas.

— most sports and most kinds of music, for example. Groups also provide training and facilities, but above all make leisure more enjoyable.

Our interest in leisure groups started with a study intended to find out why extraverts are on the whole happier than introverts (we and others find correlations of .40–.50 between happiness and extraversion). Is it because extraverts enjoy more enjoyable leisure activities? We made up a list of 37 pleasant leisure activities and gave it to 131 adult subjects, asking for frequency of participation in each, and factor analysed it. Five clear factors emerged, and these are shown in Table 1. We then found that factor III (teams and clubs), and factor IV (music, parties, debates, dancing, no long baths) correlated both with happiness and with extraversion, and therefore could partly explain the relation between these two variables. A multiple regression analysis showed that these factors still correlated with happiness after extraversion had been removed; it follows that introverts will also be happier if they pursue these two kinds of social leisure.

Leisure groups have mainly been studied by sociologists. They find that about 50 per cent of adults belong to them, and that quite a lot are officers or committee members. The members are more often middle class, male, aged 35–55 and urban, but each club has its own ‘niche’, sociologically and in terms of interests. Allan (1979) suggested that working-class friendships are different from middle-class ones, in being mainly with members of leisure and other groups, who are only seen in the setting of the group; and that these relationships were selfish and interchangeable. However, it is middle-class people who join most clubs, and it remains to be seen how superficial these relationships are.

Our immediate interest is in how these groups generate leisure satisfaction and happiness. There are several possible processes.

(1) Developing identity
For someone living in a house much like other houses, doing a job much like other jobs, it can be very important to be a member, even more an official, of an interesting club. It is not only punks and skinheads who put on fancy dress; Scottish country dancers, Masons, musicians, and many others have their special costumes. In addition, members acquire new skills, and may put on performances for the group or for outsiders. Leisure groups create not only identities but entire social worlds, with their own calendar of events, rituals and ceremonies (Argyle 1992, a).

(2) Help and social support
Most groups provide help and social support for their members when they need it — when ill, bereaved, or in material difficulties for example. Research on social support shows that integration into a social group or network is an essential kind of social support (in addition to having an intimate relationship). It prevents loneliness, keeps up self-esteem, as well as providing help of various kinds (Argyle 1992, b).

(3) Cooperation and coordination
Why are dancing, music and sport so enjoyable? Partly because of the music and exercise, no doubt, but perhaps also because of the immediate emotional benefits of cooperation. An evolutionary theory suggests that whenever there is an important long-term goal more immediate short-term rewards develop to motivate people (this is why sex is enjoyable). The long-term goals of cooperation is mutual help and social integration; the short-term reward is enhanced positive affect, or joy, together with increased interpersonal affection. There is a second process, coordination, where the bodily movements of two or more people are tightly synchronised, as in sex, music, much sport, and even conversation (Argyle, 1991).

From what is already known about leisure groups, they appear to be quite different from most of the groups previously studied by social psychologists. The chapters on ‘social’ groups in social psychology textbooks may need radical revision.

(a) Contrary to Social Identity Theory, many are positively disposed to out-groups: not only those doing voluntary work, or collecting for charity, but other leisure groups, do good works such as giving money away.

(b) Contrary to traditional theories of leadership, many (though not all) leisure groups are run quite undemocratically, with no elections or consultation and no one seems to object. Musical and sports groups appear to be the least democratic.

(c) Contrary to the usual findings on helping behaviour, these groups often help complete outsiders, not personally known to members.

(d) Unlike other groups, these groups are often not at all homogenous, except in one respect — they all share a particular interest or concern. This can make possible the integration of people from different classes, ages and races.

(e) Leisure groups have features which are not found in groups of friends or work groups. Many have ‘uniforms’, either literally (e.g. St John’s Ambulance) or requiring standard dress — e.g. choir, bowls players.

(f) Many have rituals and ceremonies, not only churches and masons, but for the conduct of games, or initiation of new members.

We are starting research into some of these phenomena. We hope to find out for example some of the conditions under which people are given the most happiness and help, when social integration takes place, and the character of the social relationships found. We plan to carry out various quasi-experimental studies, but at this stage are exploring people’s experience of a wide variety of groups.

We would be most grateful if you could help us by filling in the questionnaire in Appendix 1, or by putting the answers on another sheet of paper, and sending it to us at:

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South Parks Road
Oxford OX1 3UD

If we receive enough replies to do some analyses we will report the results in a later issue of this journal.

References


Appendix I

Survey of community groups

Thank you very much for agreeing to help us with this study.

Please choose one of the groups to which you belong, preferably the one in which you are most involved, e.g. spend most time with.

1. Which kind of group is it? (check one)
   - sporting
   - social
   - musical
   - voluntary work
   - evening class
   - other (please specify)
   - dancing
   - religious
   - political
   - hobbies
   - charity

2. What is the typical number of people attending the meetings?

3. What is the typical age of members?

4. What is the percentage of women members?

5. Is there a definite activity? (check one)
   - YES
   - NO

6. Is there a lot of physical activity? (e.g. sport, dancing, theatricals)
   - YES
   - NO

7. Are the activities cooperative (e.g. sports team, choir) or competitive (e.g. some sports) or individual (e.g. hobbies)?
   - YES
   - NO

8. Is the club run democratically? (i.e. elections, limited period of office, committees)
   - YES
   - PARTLY
   - NO

9. Do members wear special clothes or uniforms? (as in cricket, some dancing?)
   - YES
   - NO

10. Do the meetings involve any rituals or ceremonies?
    - A LOT
    - SOME
    - NONE

11. How would you describe the emotional state produced by meetings of the group?
    (on a scale 1–5, 1 = none, 5 = intense)
    - joy
    - excited
    - deep satisfaction
    - frustrated
    - relaxed

12. How would you describe your main relationships with other members of the group?
    (check one)
    - closer than other friendships
    - very similar to other friendships
    - weaker than other friendships
    - different from them (say how)

13. How much help, or other social support, is given to members who need it?
    - A LOT
    - A LITTLE
    - NONE

14. Which social class are members from?
    - I Professional, e.g. doctors, lawyers
    - II Intermediate, e.g. teachers, nurses
    - IIIa Skilled non-manual
    - IIIb Skilled manual
    - IV Semi-skilled
    - V Unskilled

15. How far is their mutual acceptance and integration of people from different classes?
    - A LOT
    - A LITTLE
    - NONE

16. What is the attitude of the group to other relevant groups?
    - HOSTILE
    - COMPETITIVE
    - PATERNALISTIC
    - FRIENDLY
    - NOT INTERESTED

17. Does the group have any other interesting or unusual features?

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