How Do Individuals Experience Leisure?

By Younghill Lee

Researchers have reported many experiential characteristics of leisure participation. Although researchers used different methods of collecting data, recent studies addressing leisure experiences generally reported the following experiential attributes: enjoyment/ban, relaxation, social bonding, positive state of mind, companionship, intimacy, novelty, escape, communality with nature, aesthetic appreciation, timelessness, physical stimulation, intellectual cultivation, creative expression, introspection, freedom, peace, calm, and happiness (Bolla, Dawson & Harmon, 1991; Ellis, Voelkl & Morris, 1994; Hull & Michaud, 1996; Hull, Michaud, Walker & Ruggenbuck, 1996; Hull, Stewart & Yi, 1992; Lee, 1990; Lee, Dattilo & Howard, 1994; Tinsley, Hinson, Tinsley & Holt, 1992). While there may be some other attributes that are unique to personal, social, and environmental circumstances, these experiences are common to most people who engage in leisure. However, merely knowing these attributes of leisure experience contributes little insight for recreation programmers and service providers. In-depth examination of the nature of leisure experience offers understanding of the dynamics and complexities of the experience.

Intensity in Leisure Experiences

People experience different levels of intensity depending upon activity or situational differences. Analyzing the finding from its level of intensity in an experience, recent studies reveal at least two themes as key aspects of leisure experience. One theme is the flow-like experience, an experience characterized by a high level of intensity. The other is relaxation, a low level of intensity in leisure experience.

Flow Experience

People often find flow, or intense, experience when they participate in activities that match their level of skills with the level of challenges they encounter. The experience stands out from normal daily experience and is characterized by the following experiences: total absorption, lack of focus on self, feelings of freedom, enriched perception, increased sensitivity to feelings, increased intensity of emotions, and decreased awareness of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is an ecstatic,
transient experience of being totally integrated and in complete control of the situation. Baldwin and Timsley (1986) administered a questionnaire to 90 college students to assess attributes of leisure experiences similar to the flow experience. The study showed that subjects rated leisure activities higher than work and maintenance activities on seven attributes of experiences.

Calkins and Shally (1989) used the experiential sampling, or beep, method (ESM) to examine the flow experience of 78 workers in the Chicago area for one week. This method requires subjects to carry a beep or pager and a self-report booklet containing a questionnaire. A researcher "beeps" subjects at random intervals, prompting them to respond to the questions in the booklet. This method of gathering information is very unique in that a researcher can uncover immediate leisure experiences that are occurring naturally in daily life. The study allows researchers to investigate differences in the flow experience during times of work and leisure. Findings showed that the flow experience was more prevalent while subjects were working, and clearly indicated that structured work settings were more conducive to the flow experience than unstructured leisure settings.

Using the same method, Mannell, Zuzanek, and Larson's (1989) also operationalized leisure experience as flow and found that freely chosen activities provided higher levels of positive feelings, potency, and concentration and lower levels of tension. Sandahl and Kleiber (1986) also operationalized leisure experience as a loss of self-awareness or deep psychological involvement. Results of their study showed that leisure experience commonly occurred within the context of perceived freedom from role constraint, and is characterized related to positive affect. They concluded, "Leisure may be a much broader phenomenon than that characterized with reference to "flow" and other involving and absorbing experiences" (p. 8).

Relaxation

In an intense, or flow-like, state always necessary or ideal for one to experience leisure? Mannell, Zuzanek, and Larson's (1988) ESM study examined the relationships among freely chosen activities, higher levels of positive feelings, potency, and concentration. They found that intrinsically motivated activities generally provided greater relaxation and lower tension. They further reported that relaxation was a good indicator for differentiating between leisure and non-leisure experience. They noted that the condition defined by freedom of choice and intrinsic motivation, which has been shown to lead people to define leisure experience as pure leisure, was not associated with the most intense flow experience. One interpretation of this finding is that flow may not be the best "experiential model" for leisure/non-leisure states (p. 99).

Matéflex

...the first name in
Modular Sports Surfaces.
The best value on the
market today.

Ideal for:
Basketball, Volleyball,
Hockey, Track and Tennis.

Matéflex II

Please Circle Reader Service Card No. 51
Ellis, Voeck, and Morris (1994) offered further insight into the role of flow experience in the perception of leisure. Using ESM, they observed the high level of enjoyment and positive affect in low-challenge/high-skill contexts, although previous studies in flow reported that such contexts resulted in the feeling of boredom. Further findings indicated that the low-challenge/high-skill situation may be perceived as relaxation (positive) rather than boredom (negative) by subjects.

Lee (1990), using the self-initiated tape-recording method, conducted a study to examine the immediately recalled leisure experience. This method required participants to describe their experiences immediately after a self-defined leisure event using a series of open-ended questions and statements attached to a miniature tape recorder. From this study came the understanding that relaxation is one of the defining mood states of leisure experience. Lee found that relaxation was an important criterion in the definition of leisure, containing a holistic, experiential state that characterized "flowing" oneself physically, mentally, and emotionally. Lee concluded that the presence of intense, or flow, experience is not a necessary characteristic of leisure.

As suggested by this research, the presence of flow experience is not always present in leisure engagement. Perhaps this intense experience happens so rarely that the experience may not characterize natural everyday leisure. Today's multitasked world and "speed lust" society (Kyes, 1991) do not permit rest. Therefore, many people may seek more relaxation rather than an additional challenge or stress during leisure. In other words, people value relaxation as a form of getting away from stressful daily life. It may be that flow is an intense form of pleasure, while relaxation is a casual form.

Multifaceted Nature of Leisure
Leisure experience is not always positive. Lee, Datillo, and Howard (1994) found that leisure experience can often be stressful and unpleasant. They employed the tape-recording method and semistructured interviews to examine leisure experience. The tape-recording method was used to measure immediately recalled leisure experiences, while semistructured interviewing was used to assess retrospective leisure experience. Although Lee et al. (1994) observed positive aspects of leisure experience (fun/enjoyment, relaxation, escape, and communion with nature), they also observed stressful and unpleasant experiences (feelings of exhaustion, apprehension, nervousness, disappointment, frustration, guilt, and rumination). The stressful and unpleasant experiences did not emerge by themselves; they occurred simultaneously alongside positive characteristics during leisure engagement. The leisure experience is not a unitary concept, but is often composed of combining positive and stressful aspects. Therefore, leisure experience is not always pleasant.
and positive even when events are identified by informants as 'leisure' (p. 205).

Bous (1990) also reported similar findings of leisure experience. Labeling them as 'sensuous' feelings, he observed the following attributes of sailing experience: fear, dryness of mouth, sense of weakness, terror, and pounding heart. In addition, Hull et al. (1990) also measured and observed unpleasant experiences such as ‘anxiety’ and ‘dullness.’ Taylor, Nissen, Taylor, and Hall (1990) also observed unpleasant experiences such as feelings of fearfulness, stress, and fatigue as part of leisure experience.

**Multiphasic Experience in Leisure**

The leisure experience changes as participants view it at different times. Some researchers (Hall & Michael, 1994; Hull, Stewart & Ti, 1992; and Stewart & Hull, 1992) investigated how people appraised their leisure perceptions at different times. These studies compared several on-site, real-time perceptions from post-activity appraisals at various times to a day-like activity using a series of surveys. They empirically demonstrated that moods (calmness, excitement, and dullness) changed across time and context of a recreational engagement. Hull et al. (1990) further observed the “ebb and flow of leisure experience.”

In addition, Cehl, Rose, and Leigh (1969) discovered the phases of skydiving experience including the pre-skydive, “opening act” experience of events, ascent in the plane, exit, free fall, under-canopy, and post-performance rituals. Using the Zinger method, Kidney and Colwell (1993) further observed that the mood states from the activities (watching TV, sports, or other recreational activities) change over different stages of engagement, on-site, and post-engagement. Lew, Dattilo, and Howard (1994) found similar patterns in daily leisure engagement. They found that stressful aspects, reported on an immediate basis via the tape-recording method, were later described positively during the in-depth interview.

Recalling is not just a positive experience; it is a subset one. Terrant, Manfredo, and Driver's (1996) experimental study further illustrated the recalled nature of outdoor recreation experiences.

---

**Research Into Action: Enabling the Leisure Experience**

**Introduction**

This month's Research Update's column unifies the commitment that park and recreation services have to developing the "leisure experience" rather than merely providing recreational activities. The provided research studies describe the attributes of the leisure experience.

**Impact of This Research**

Various experiential characteristics of leisure are offered by a number of researchers. These include enjoyment, fun, recreation, social bonding, positive states of mind, companionship, intimacy, novelty, escape, communion with nature, aesthetic appreciation, timelessness, physical stimulation, intellectual cultivation, creative expression, introspection, freedom, peace, calm, and happiness. Not a bad list of outcomes from the efforts of our profession! Furthermore, research demonstrates that different forms of leisure have different characteristics ranging from low to high, and from pleasant to unpleasant. When delivering services, we must develop methods to enhance the likelihood of more intense and positive experiential characteristics through leisure.

**How to Use this Research**

- Programmers need to be sensitive to the complexity and dynamics of the leisure experience.
- Services are planned with the goal of reflecting the experiential needs of consumers.
- Programmers, therefore, should provide opportunities for both low (relaxation) and high-intensity (excitement) experiences.
- Programmers should be aware that their services can facilitate stressful and unpleasant experiences in certain circumstances, these experiences can be productive for consumers.

- Programmers must plan activities that incorporate the multi-stage nature of leisure: the before, approaching, and afterwards experience of leisure.

For More Information

Under laboratory conditions, they report-
ed that people’s recollections of past recreation experience aroused psycho-
logical (negative and positive affective) and physiological (heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductance) responses.

Conclusion and Implications

The review of this literature indicates that the leisure experience is multifac-
ted, featuring different levels of intensity (flow vs. relaxation). Leisure service
programmers and providers need to be sensitive to the complexity and dynamics
of leisure experiences and must reflect the experiential worldview of leisure
that captures the needs of consumers. The awareness of such unique occur-
cences of leisure experience will promote effective programming and management
of leisure services. As indicated in this
review, people seek different levels of
intensity of leisure experience and, thus,
recreation service professionals should
avoid putting a higher value judgment on
an aesthetic or intense experience. Profes-
sionals must remember that people also
value the relaxed nature of leisure
engagement in today’s stress-filled soci-
ety. In addition, recreation service profes-
sionals need to remember that stressful
and unpleasant-experiences often occur
while people engage in leisure. In facili-
tating leisure services, it is naïve to focus
only on the pleasant and positive experi-
ential attributes.

As the findings associated with the
multistage nature of leisure experience
indicated, there are numerous levels of
leisure experiences, and people’s inter-
pretations of these events change over
time. Leisure service providers may want
to express this variety in their assess-
ment, program planning, implementation,
and evaluation.

A good example is Little’s (1993)
leisure experience model, which provides
an excellent tool for program design and
evaluation to facilitate the leisure experi-
ce. Little considered the five experien-
tial stages for leisure program design and
evaluation: before-engagement, movement
to engagement, engagement, movement from engagement, and after
engagement. Little proposed incorporation
of the needs-assessment and program evaluations within the experiential
continuum.

Specific feedback, gained from each
experiential stage, will offer valuable
insight into designing, implementing,
adjusting, and redesigning programs to
provide a quality- leisure experience.

Because current studies have not iden-
tified the interaction between the experi-
ence, the type of leisure, and a variety of
different contexts (temporal, environ-
mental, social, or personal), future study
is urged to follow this lead.

Special thanks to Dr. Shari Perkins, who
reviewed the early drafts of this column.

References

investigation of the validity of Tinsley and
Tinsley’s theory of leisure experience.”
Journal of Counseling Psychology 26 (3):
263-7.

and fluid emotions.” Free Inquiry in

Boake, P.D. Dawson and M. Harrington.
Ontario.” Journal of Applied Recreation
Research 16 (4): 322-44.

“A new exploration of high-risk leisure con-
sumption through skydiving.” Journal of

Calka, J. M. 1993. The evolving
self: A psychology for the third millennium.

work and leisure.” Journal of Personality and

---

CALL KIEFER

They have everything you need for swimming!

"except the water"

Order from the Web:
www.Kiefer.com

Supplies or aquatic products since 1874

Kiefer

Lifeguard Uniforms &
Accessories
Pro Maintenance
Guard Chair & more...

We will beat any advertised prices!
Just call us toll-free today for our FREE catalogs!

800-743-7837

THE BEST PRICES
OFF Goggles, Mask, Snorkel & Fins,
Swimwear and more

Please Code Reason Selling Case No. 16

P.O.R. FEBRUARY 1999
The Professional Exchange Network

Over 5,000 experts in topics ranging from aquatics to youth development, administration to maintenance, programming to facility management, and dozens of additional topics!

For more information, visit the PEN site on the NRPA Homepage or call 800-649-3042

Be an active member of your national association! Join the Network by adding your expertise! Use the network for all your technical assistance!

www.nrpa.org/askexpert/search.cfm