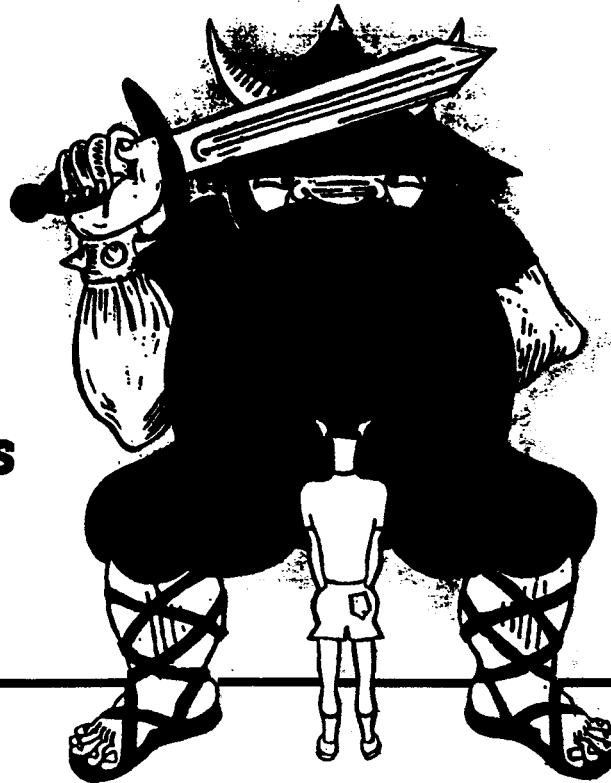


How Do Individuals Experience Leisure?

By Younghill Lee



Rossman (1995) claimed that facilitating leisure experience is the most important goal in providing and delivering leisure services. Hull, Michael, Walker, and Roggenbuck (1996) further reinforced the important role of leisure experience, noting, "Experience is an important part of what recreationists say they want... and what recreation resource managers try to provide" (p. 299). This experiential approach in leisure has moved the emphasis of leisure services from the mere provision of recreation activities to the facilitation of the "leisure experience." The shifted focus on leisure services and management requires an understanding of how people experience leisure. The purpose of this research column is to review and synthesize current research findings in the area of leisure experience.

Over the past decade, a number of

Younghill Lee is an associate professor in the School of Recreation and Sport Sciences at Ohio University.

Research Update is edited by Dr. Irma O'Dell of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

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/fun, relaxation, social bonding, positive state of mind, companionship, intimacy, novelty, escape, communion with nature, aesthetic appreciation, timelessness, physical stimulation, intellectual cultivation, creative expression, introspection, freedom, peace, calm, and happiness (Bolla, Dawson & Harrington, 1991; Ellis, Voekl & Morris, 1994; Hull & Michael, 1995; Hull, Michael, Walker & Roggenbuck, 1996; Hull, Stewart & Yi, 1992; Lee, 1990; Lee, Dattilo & Howard, 1994; Tinsley, Hinson, Tinsley & Holt, 1993). 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, 1993). It is an ecstatic,

transient experience of being totally integrated and in complete control of the situation. Baldwin and Tinsley (1988) administered a questionnaire to 99 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.

Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) used the experiential sampling, or beeper, method (ESM) to examine the flow experience of 78 workers in the Chicago area for one week. This method requires subjects carry a beeper 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 investi-

gate 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 (1988) 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. Samdahl and Kleiber (1989) also operationalized leisure experience as a loss of self-awareness or deeper psychological involvement. Results of their study showed that leisure experience commonly occurred within the context of perceived freedom from role constraint, and is characteristically 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

Is 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. 299).

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Ellis, Voekl, 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 "loosening" 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 fast-paced world and "speed lust" society (Keyes, 1991) do not permit rest. Therefore, many people may seek more relaxation rather than 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, Dattilo, 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, escaping, 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 coexisting positive and stressful aspects. Therefore, leisure experience is not always pleasant



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and positive even when events are identified by informants as leisure" (p. 209).

Bass (1990) also reported similar findings of leisure experience. Labeling them as "sensible" feelings, he observed the following attributes of sailing experience: fear, dryness of mouth, sense of weakness, tenseness, and pounding heart. In addition, Hull et al. (1996) also measured and observed unpleasant experiences such as "anxiety" and "dullness." Tinsley, Hinson, Tinsley, and Holt (1993) also observed stressful experiences such as feelings of fearfulness, stress, and fatigue as part of leisure experience.

Multiphase Experience in Leisure

The leisure experience changes as participants view it at different times. Some

researchers (Hull & Michael, 1994; Hull, Stewart & Yi, 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-hike 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. (1996) further observed the "ebbs and flows" of leisure experience.

In addition, Celsi, Rose, and Leigh (1993) discovered the phases of skydiving experience including the preboarding, "opening act" experience of events, ascent in the plane, exit, free fall, under-

canopy, and post-performance rituals. Using the beeper method, Kubey and Czikszenmihalyi (1990) further observed that the mood states from the activities (watching TV, sports, or other recreational activities) change over different stages (pre-engagement, during, and post-engagement). Lee, 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 passive experience; it is a salient one. Tarrant, Manfredi, and Driver's (1994) experimental study further illuminated the recollected nature of outdoor recreation experiences.

Research Into Action is published monthly by the Society of Park and Recreation Educators, National Recreation and Park Association. As an accompaniment to "Research Update," its goal is to turn research findings into field action by highlighting management strategies. Founding editors are Dr. Ruth Russell and Dr. Daniel D. McLean, Department of Recreation and Park Administration, Indiana University.

Research Into Action: Enabling the Leisure Experience

Introduction

This month's "Research Update" column verifies the commitment that park and recreation services have to facilitating 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 reported by a number of researchers. These include enjoyment/fun, relaxation, social bonding, positive states of mind, compan-

ionship, 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 at different times the intensity of these characteristics ranges 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 (ecstatic) 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 experiences that incorporate the multistage nature of leisure: the before, approaching, engaged in, departure from, and afterwards experience of leisure.

For More Information

Little, S.L. 1993. "Leisure program design and evaluation: Using leisure experience model as diagnostic tools." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 64 (8): 26-9, 33.

Under laboratory conditions, they reported that people's recollections of past recreation experience aroused psychological (negative and positive affects) and physiological (heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductance) responses.

Conclusion and Implications

The review of this literature indicates that the leisure experience is multifaceted, featuring different levels of intensity (flow vs. relaxation). Leisure service programmers and providers need to be sensitive to the complexity and dynamics of leisure experience, and must reflect the experiential sophistication of leisure that captures the needs of consumers. The awareness of such unique occurrences 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 ecstatic or intense experience. Professionals must remember that people also value the relaxed nature of leisure engagement in today's stress-filled society. In addition, recreation service professionals need to remember that stressful and unpleasant experiences often occur while people engage in leisure. In facilitating leisure services, it is naive to focus only on the pleasant and positive experiential attributes.

As the findings associated with the multistage nature of leisure experience indicated, there are numerous levels of leisure experiences, and people's interpretations of these events change over time. Leisure service providers may want to express this variety in their assessment, 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 experience. Little considered the five experiential stages for leisure program design and evaluation: before leisure 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 identified the interaction between the experience, the type of leisure, and a variety of different contexts (temporal, environmental, 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.

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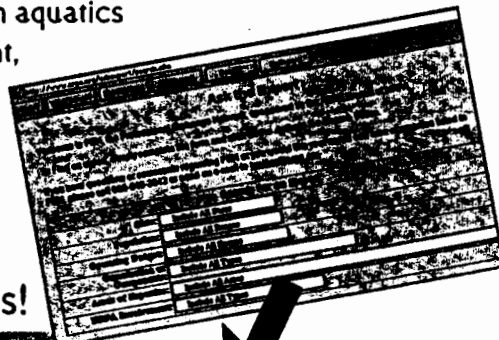
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