

Leisure in the later years

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It is evident that the changing demographic structure of the population along with the emergence of a consumer culture will have implications with regards to leisure for people in later life. Leisure may afford freedom for self-expression not always available in other life contexts. However, there are a number of challenges at the personal and community level that need to be better understood in order to realize such a possibility. This article highlights some of the opportunities and constraints that impact on and influence the leisure of people in their later years.

Introduction

Leisure means different things to different people and it occurs in many forms. It is important to quality of life and provides a context for self-expression, learning, challenge, identity and accomplishment (Atchley, 1999; Godbey, 2003; Kraus, 2000; Agahi, Ahacic & Parker, 2006). In the past leisure was considered somewhat frivolous in comparison to other aspects of the later stages of life (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). However, as the life course is de-standardized and social structures loosen, more and more leisure opportunities become available. People are not only able to express themselves with less constraint but also create alternative roles and identities (Roberts, 2006).

At a personal level, one's leisure is shaped by factors such as relationships, living arrangements, level of education, socio-cultural background, previous experiences as well as gender, race, state of well-being, work opportunities and discretionary income. As desirable as leisure may be with regards to self-actualization and quality of life, it should be noted that not everyone in later life has the freedom of choice for engaging in a diverse array of activities. But freedom not to accept a definition of oneself as 'old' and continue to live a satisfying life requires a particular combination of material, social and cultural capital (Collins, Estes & Bradshaw, 2001). In spite of the complexities of later life "leisure can provide freedom to be" (Roberts, 2006, p. 217).

Scanning the Research

Leisure in later life may be under researched, but that which is available emerges from a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives. Although not all claims are empirically supported, the following overview of ageing and leisure provides a useful guide for framing future research, policy and/or community programs.

- socially constructed beliefs and values about how older people should behave are a strong influence on what they will and will not participate in - and these are clearly gender marked;

- taking up new activities diminishes with age particularly if this requires learning new and/or complex skills - it takes time to achieve a level of mastery that ensures an appropriate degree of self-satisfaction;
- ageing by itself does not change habits and there is a considerable amount of continuity and consistency with one's leisure;
- inequalities experienced in earlier life tend to be accentuated in the later years and this is particularly evident for women;
- men tend to have more difficulty than women adjusting from the world of employed work to a world of leisure - but many current older women were never in paid employment;
- the most frequent leisure activities generally require little effort, minimal organization, tend to be inexpensive and occur within or relatively close to home;
- engaging in leisure with others becomes increasingly important with age for this provides the basis for connectedness to and identity within the community and social groups;
- leisure activity levels have been found to have a strong influence on life satisfaction;
- regular participation in physical, cognitive and/or social activities has a positive effect on improvement in feelings of well-being;
- consumption of passive leisure often becomes the option of choice and can become a problem if continually used as a strategy to fill up free time;
- no one type of leisure activity is more likely to be abandoned or avoided as that which requires regular physical activity;
- many leisure activities offer alternative discourses which challenge stereotyping about ageing;
- older people are increasingly targeted as a niche market for products and services that relate specifically to leisure, well-being and quality of life (e.g., retirement villages, travel, health products, beauty, home comforts, exercise

classes, recreation programs).

The emergence of a consumer culture means chronological age is no longer seen as an accurate indicator of lifestyle options. It also challenges the negative connotations of ageing that once detracted from what this phase of life could and should be about (Atchley, 1999; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Kirkwood, 2001; Kluge, 2005). But this is no surprise given an increasing proportion of older people resist the concept of ageing and do not think about themselves as being old, disconnected from their community or unhealthy (Hendricks, 2004; Vincent, 2003). On the other hand, if older people feel that their life has been less than satisfactory and they're unable to embrace a new direction, then at a personal level they may have feelings of despair (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1986). But irrespective of one's personal circumstances, the later years need not be predetermined by age or the way life has been lived. After all, the naturally occurring but somewhat unpredictable ageing process influences leisure in varying ways (Agahi et al., 2006).

Changing Times

Ageing is sometimes associated with greater amounts of *free* time and although this may be a desirable goal, by itself *free* time is insufficient to ensure an increase in pleasurable leisure experiences. In spite of the populace belief that older people may have considerable amounts of free time, having too much can induce a feeling of uselessness and loss of purpose. It can be like a predator for some while for others it is something to be treasured. But leisure does not happen by chance, and freedom that may allow choice of leisure is not the same for everyone (Freysinger, 1999; Veal & Lynch, 2001). Freedom requires a certain creativeness, discipline and sense of personal responsibility (Grant, 2002). It is also difficult for many older people to conceive a world oriented towards the consumption of leisure when leisure is considered as anything other than self-indulgence (Blaikie, 1999).

Just as the younger age groups seek alternative and new leisure activities, an increasing proportion of older people also recognise new possibilities (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). However, behaving in a way that alters stereotypes can be a formidable challenge (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). From a lifespan theoretical perspective, people remain in a situation of potential growth and development. How this occurs is influenced by the opportunities and constraints that arise out of the interaction between a person and the cultural values, societal expectations as well as the physical and social environment of the community where one lives (Atchley, 1999; Brown & Lewis, 2003; Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). Consequently, engaging in any 'new' opportunities that present themselves as easily consumed products, services and/or pursuits is not always as straightforward as it seems.

A post-modern society with its pronounced culture of consumption is bringing about positive changes as well as contributing to an identity that is more fluid than fixed (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Katz, 2005). The emergence of a consumer culture might suggest contemporary lifestyle evokes a transition to a new life, rather than a continuation of the old (Blaikie, 1999). However, there is a trend to narrow down one's leisure interests with age (Agahi et al., 2006; Roberts, 2006). It is therefore, not surprising that the ordinary everyday leisure becomes more popular in the later

years and consumes most *free* time (Blaikie, 1999). But irrespective of what transpires, accessibility to a leisured lifestyle is more complicated for women than men (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2001). It is women, rather than men, who frequently have to adjust their lifestyle and fit their leisure around family and/or home oriented roles. But in spite of this and other inequalities, it is through leisure that older people "have the opportunity to explore, understand, and express self; to lose and find self; and enjoy the discovery" (Siegenthaler & Vaughan, 1998, p.64). Leisure affords freedom for self-expression, something that may not be available in other contexts of life. The challenge then is to ensure people in later life have opportunities to realize the possibility of *freedom to become* (Atchley, 1999).

Leisure with a Physical Flavour

The process of ageing may be universal but living a longer life in *good* health is another matter. Passivity is no longer an appropriate image of later life. To this effect, considerable effort is being made to keep us alive and although we are being groomed for a prolonged senescence, some suggest there should be more focus on extending the health span while leaving the life span alone (Kirkwood, 2001). The New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy recognizes the tenor of such a message by acknowledging the diversity of ageing. In so doing, it argues all people should be able to grow old with security and dignity and participate in their community as independent citizens with full rights. But ageing is never simply a fixed biological or chronological process. It is also an open-ended subjective and social experience, in which an individual's perception of one-self is based not only on what society defines as appropriate, but also on what is happening in his or her own life.

People in later life generally acknowledge that engaging in physical leisure is *good for you* and the positive relationships between exercise and health are well substantiated (Haber, 2003; Spirduso, Francis & Macrae, 2005). Nevertheless, it is frequently reported that engagement in physical activity decreases with age in spite of numerous intervention strategies being applied in experimental and community settings (Boreham & Riddoch, 2003; Brawley, Rejeski & King, 2003; Grant, 2002). The decline of being physically active is a difficult trend to curb and many studies have endorsed the claim that, "no type of leisure activity is more likely to be abandoned or avoided by the old as regular physical exercise" (Kelly, 1993, p.123). Sedentary lives may be endangered lives or even impoverished lives, but the majority of older people will not engage in an exercise program because of a possible distant and existential advantage - living longer or living better.

The World Health Organization is sufficiently concerned about the consequences of sedentary living that physical inactivity has been labelled a major health risk. This has spurred a variety of responses in different countries. For example, in New Zealand government departments (e.g. Ministry of Health), a range of national organizations (e.g. National Heart Foundation, Sport and Recreation New Zealand - SPARC) and community agencies (e.g. Regional Sports Trusts) increasingly promote physically active leisure as means whereby older individuals can positively influence their functional ability, health status and quality of life. However, in grappling with the concept of a more physically active lifestyle, it should be remembered that not

so long ago the emphasis in the post-retirement years was on passivity, contemplation, and gentle exercise. Rest was considered the virtue of old age (Kirk, 1997).

In addition to their 'scientific' meanings, terms such as physical activity, physical fitness, exercise and active leisure also have socially and culturally constructed meanings. In some instances this causes confusion as to what type of physical leisure one should engage in to ensure good health. Regardless of the meanings, the underlying public discourse surrounding each term advocates preventing illness or poor health and over-looks the essence of the personal experience. This endorses the argument that illness or poor health is seen as being an individual responsibility and something that can be averted or possibly prevented through appropriate choice of lifestyle. Clearly, people do have some responsibility for their own health but such a view is problematic for people over age 65 as they carry the highest load of chronic disease and disability. Furthermore, they are also more likely to suffer from several simultaneous problems, and healthcare utilization (Kilgman, Hewitt & Crowell, 1999). Some causes of not-so-good health are proximate and it is therefore, inappropriate to lay all the blame solely with the individual for many have little, if any, control of the social, political and environmental circumstances under which they live.

Excuses or Explanations!

According to Sport and Physical Activity Survey 1997-2001, older New Zealanders are as active as their contemporaries in other countries but there is a noticeable drop-off in physical leisure with age (SPARC, 2003). There are several possible reasons why this trend occurs and women, more frequently than men, avoid physical activity. The reasons include the lack an exercise companion, having a fear of falling, being concerned about injuries, and are not particularly interested in exercising for health reasons. It is also known that medical reasons (e.g. arthritis, worsening vision, depressive symptoms, high blood pressure) are more prevalent with age and many environments are considered uninviting (e.g. safety, lighting, accessibility). Nevertheless, the majority of older people believe they are already active enough to satisfy personal health. The diversity of findings has prompted a call for a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and meanings older adults attribute to physical activity, particularly that which is supposedly required for good health (Booth, Bauman & Owen, 2002; Rejeski & Brawley, 2006; Satariano, Haight & Tager, 2000).

The meanings and outcomes associated with participating in physically active leisure can be confusing, particularly in a consumer culture where body maintenance and appearance - and the active cultivation of youthful lifestyles - are endorsed as a desirable outcome (Blaikie, 1999). For example, in an Australian based study some of the women were reported to be in pursuit of the out-of-reach ideal body shape, and a youthfulness, which is primarily manufactured by the beauty and health industry. On the other hand, the women also wanted to improve their strength and flexibility ensuring a fully functional lifestyle and maintain a state of independence (Poole, 1999). It appears the prescription for good health is replete with conflicting messages. Hence, there is a very real gap between the promise of imagery and the necessities of everyday living.

Modifying one's leisure behaviour (e.g. engaging in more physical activity) in later life can be difficult as it often

involves dealing with a combination of factors such as a change in personal circumstances, the inertia of habit, self-belief and a variety of social pressures. Older people do not engage with physical activity because someone else deems it is 'good for you' or even for fun. Furthermore, not all older people have the freedom, knowledge, range of prior experiences, resources or desire to opt for an active lifestyle in a way deemed necessary for good health. The struggle for well-being extends beyond the physical body and the belief that leisure or *down time* must be converted to the *up time* of health promotion is problematic. This also causes a predicament for today's older population given they were not socialised into engaging in physical activity for health reasons.

Deciding whether or not to be physically active during one's leisure time is anything but straightforward because of the level of infirmity attached to ageing. This is further complicated because of "the struggle in a society where activity has become the panacea for the political woes of the declining welfare state and it's management of so-called risky populations" (Katz, 2005, p.136). However, living an active lifestyle in a way that best suits an individual's circumstances is encouraged for there are positive physiological, psychological and social benefits that contribute to overall functioning and wellbeing. There are multiple ways in which this ideal might be realized.

Looking Ahead

It is expected that future generations of older people will not only be more leisure literate than today's cohort of 65 years plus but they will engage in a more diverse range of experiences (Atchley, 1999; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Godbey, 2003; Harahousou, 2006; Roberts, 2006). In turn, this will lead to a variety of unprecedented challenges for public and private providers, community services and voluntary groups. But caution is advised when making speculations about what the future might bring given the changing nature of the leisure landscape in an ageing society. After all, ageing is not only a gradual accumulation of the inevitable biological processes but also attitudes, expectations, prejudices, cultural values and ideals of the society in which individuals develop and grow old (Blaikie, 1999; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Katz, 2005; Roberts, 2006).

As noted earlier, not a great deal is known about ageing and leisure. Hence, we need to further explore continuities and discontinuities in identities, values, risk, relationships, and inhibitions with regards to leisure in the later years. In addition to learning more about what actually occurs in the process of engaging in a leisure activity, both in the discrete experience and the longer-term line of action, more attention should be given to those older people who are isolated, withdrawn, and been denied access and opportunities. Ageing is as dynamic as it is complex, full of ambiguities and consistencies and for most older people, engagement in leisure is rarely free from constraints whether these are at a personal or societal level (Harahousou, 2006).

An unprecedented challenge in the future with regards to leisure will be gaining a better understanding of and finding ways to work with and support an increasingly diverse and larger older population. The following would be worth considering;

1. The next generation of older people will be more leisure literate than their predecessors and it is anticipated they will want to continue increasing self-knowledge with

the purpose of changing self-related dispositions through a diverse leisured life.

2. The future older population will have a greater consciousness about health-related matters than the older people of today but the extent to which this will influence their leisure behaviour is questionable. However, given the assumed increase in health related costs with ageing, then knowing how best how to promote an active lifestyle in the later years warrants consideration.
3. To better influence policy and program development we need to learn more about the significance of the different social and environmental determinants and how these influence and interact with the way people age and grow old.
4. There is increasing symbolic value being attached to the older body and the multiple discourses about health and the supposed relationship with individual identity impact on leisure behaviour and quality of life. However, it is imperative we move beyond health and functional status and their impact on life as a proxy concept and measure of 'successful ageing'.
5. Each person is influenced by a multitude of factors over their life course so we should explicate more fully the meanings older people ascribe to their leisure experiences and how they adjust to their changing circumstances.

The enormity of over-coming aged related constraints and ensuring a more leisured life for people in their later years should not be under estimated. This could be enhanced by learning more about what meaning older people make of the influences on and changes in their leisure rather than looking exclusively to establish theories for explanations (Grant, 2002). Such a position reflects the gerotranscendence theory suggesting positive changes can occur throughout one's lifetime given the appropriate environment and support (Kluge, 2005). This broad perspective was acknowledged by Iona Kickbusch, who said when opening the 4th International Congress on Physical Activity, Aging and Sports;

Isn't it strange that when we are faced with one of the greatest successes of humankind, that is a longer and healthier life, we still tend to define ageing as a problem and a crisis in financial terms and a problem for medical care systems and social solidarity. ...Ageing should be considered a triumph for modern societies, a reason for celebration rather than commiseration. ...All our creativity is needed to move us ahead in the 21st century, to turn ageing into an opportunity for the individual and society. ...Remember, when we talk about older persons we are talking about ourselves in the future (1997, p. 24).

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