



The Benefits of Recreation: The Personal Becomes the Public

By Joan Wharf Higgins and Lara Lauzon

Beyond Benefits - Recreation as a Determinant of Health

Traditionally, the rationale for subsidizing public recreation has often been argued in terms of the attendance and dollars it generates rather than on the improvement to society (Toalson & Mobley, 1993). Understanding the benefits of recreation is crucial for programming, leadership, delivery and marketing of services. That is why the recent national survey of use and benefits of public parks and recreation services in Canada (Harper, Neider & Godbey, 1997) is an important and useful document to the field, providing information on the public's perspective of how leisure and recreation services benefits their lives. As well, "The New Benefits Catalogue," is an invaluable aid to practitioners in marketing leisure and recreation programs and services.

Yet, public recreation is a public good, much like health care and policing services, that are mechanisms for the redistribution of wealth. The public's perception of the links to health outcomes and determinants - what makes some people healthy and others not - is crucial for repositioning recreation high upon the social services agenda. As such, we wanted to go beyond the benefits or outcome statements that serve marketing efforts, to explore the determining nature of recreation on health. Research into the determinants of health suggest that a number of variables contribute to health status, with socio-environmental factors (i.e., community living and working conditions, personal behaviours, social support, individual psycho-social characteristics) attributing greater influence than genetic make-up or access to health care services (Evans, Barer & Marmor, 1994).

Inspired by the work of Harper, Neider and Godbey (1997) and the Benefits Catalogue (CP/RA, 1997), we set out to dialogue with community members about their experiences with public and non-public recreation services. We wanted to enhance the quantitative studies with a qualitative look at what the benefits *mean* to people, listening to their words and learning from their experiences. We visited six agencies in Victoria to conduct focus groups. We spoke with users about any benefits that resulted from their individual participation in a variety of programs - physical, social and cultural recreation. We also wanted to find out their views on spill over benefits to their community and the role of publicly subsidized recreation services.

Quality, Not Quantity

A word about our methodology: we approached this research from a constructivist understanding of the world. That is, we think that there exists, not one immutable truth in the world, but multiple 'truths' (Guba &

Lincoln, 1989). The purpose of research was to gather as many perspectives as possible, searching for a consensus, or joint understanding of the world around us. We had suspected from the outset that there may be distinct differences between the public and non-public agencies in terms of the benefits that participants gained, as well as their motivations for attending municipal, voluntary or private centres. As well, we think that 'leisure' and 'health' hold personal and socially constructed meanings for people. This led us to conduct focus group discussions as a way of collecting different perspectives in a qualitative approach. Unlike random sampling that occurs in quantitative studies, qualitative research relies on a 'purposive' sampling strategy - selecting certain people to talk with based upon the *purpose* of the research (Patton, 1990). Focus groups are also a respectful data collection tool (Kreuger, 1994). And, this was borne out in our findings. Our contacts at the agencies were delighted to accommodate us, help us to recruit participants, and interested in our findings. As well, participants thanked *us* for giving them the opportunity to tell their stories (all for a coffee and a muffin!).

The Personal Benefits

Each participant, regardless of their age, gender, recreation activity or agency they attended, confirmed almost verbatim the statements in the Benefits Catalogue about the effects of recreation on their personal lives:

I get a chance to meet new people; we feel good about ourselves; we learn how to handle stress; it's a sense of freedom and fun.[youth, not-for-profit agency]

I find it provides some structure in my life; I get to associate with people my own age; the physical aspect of my health has really benefited - my energy level has soared and housework is easier.[seniors, municipal activity centre]

I like myself more; it's a natural high, a better high than booze; I'm stronger physically - coming here builds muscle tone and it's made such a difference; I need to work out to do my job properly; working out is now the highlight of my week.[adults, private fitness facility]

I always believed that there was a mind - body connection, but now after coming here, I really believe it; you're able to get to know yourself; my ability to now go out and do daily things really hit home after last year's snow storm - I wasn't the one who had to stop shoveling.[adults, municipal centre]

When asked why they initially chose the particular agency, a common pattern in their responses arose concerning convenience, supporting much of what we know about programming, adherence and constraints. Why they *stayed* proved to be the same as well: programming suited their needs, and barriers to participation were minimized. More importantly, a sense of belonging and ownership was what kept them coming back, and this was true for participants at all the agencies.

Our voices are heard - I feel like the centre belongs to me At home, you're taken for granted. But here, you're appreciated.[adults, municipal centre]

There are invisible vibes here, like a silent code - people go out of their way to say hello or make a friendly gesture.[seniors, municipal centre]

It's like home - a safe place to come.[youth, not-for-profit agency]

We know that if we don't come, we'll be missed. People will notice, and ask 'where have you been?' - it makes you feel like it matters whether you come or not.[adults, private fitness facility]

Beyond the Personal: From "Me" to "We"

In addition to the plethora of personal benefits listed, and as the discussion unfolded, participants began to reflect beyond their individual experience to describe the influence these recreation programs had on the lives of others. Not surprising to us, but certainly to them, the discussion of personal benefits segued into a passionate articulation of their tacit understanding of what makes communities a healthy place to live.

I can now pass my knowledge onto others - I live again though them; if it doesn't rub off on the rest of the community, it [my participation] certainly rubs off on my kids; coming here after my hip replacement - I can now walk and take dogs at the SPCA out for walks. [adult, private facility]

It gives me the strength to solve the world's problems; I pass on healthy vibes to others, I'm aware of what's going on in the community and tell others. [adults, municipal centre]

At the seniors' activity centre, a spiritual aspect of participation became evident when members organized a walking team for a fundraising walk for cancer. *"We've built a sense of camaraderie here [at the centre] . . . we can make a difference [in the community]."*

Public subsidization of recreation was also a common recommendation from both the public and non-public sector patrons, where participants saw the need to support the underserved in the community. *The local authorities don't have the same resources as the private sector and they should. Recreation should be provided on a public basis, and people should only go to the private sector when the public sector doesn't meet [their] needs.*

One participant suggested the need for the private facility he attended to sponsor youth programs.

The nations' youth are probably as unfit as they have been in years. [This private facility] should sponsor a youth program. There's a need to promote more programs for kids because they don't get what they need in school. I want to get kids more involved and off the streets.

Others in the focus group concurred, with one woman noting that,

In an ideal world, lower income people should be supported [to participate in recreation] . . . for so many people it's hard to get going anyway, but with no money it's even harder.

Subsidization for persons with a health condition was also a recommendation, and one that could curb rising health care costs. Despite being advised by her physician to avoid physical activity, one woman commented that *"I think this place is the biggest secret there is. It's preventative medicine. [Conventional] medicine is so busy covering up what you could do to prevent disease, and it's been here all along."* Similar thoughts were echoed by others as well: *"The government should stress the prevention of disease."*

So What & Now What?

As former practitioners, particularly for one of us (LL) who had worked for over 10 years as a coordinator and programmer in the public sector, it was a joy to re-connect with former colleagues and old friends and meet new participants whose comments supported our beliefs about recreation. The experience reaffirmed the rhetoric we preach in the classroom: the ability of recreation to meet our physical, creative, cultural, spiritual or social needs, and when we have satisfying lives we are better able to share this satisfaction with

others. Hence, the benefits of recreation where the *personal* does become the *public* as the title of this article suggests.

Yet, this qualitative data collection process did more than reinforce the beliefs about the benefits of recreation. A major discovery, when we put on our former Programmer and Coordinator hats, was the idea that we do not always have to think 'bigger' and 'better' and 'more of.' As researchers, we gained a new understanding of how deeply people felt about the facility they attended, the program they registered for, or the friends they had met at the centres. As practitioners, this information would have been invaluable when making program or service decisions. Perhaps more time should have been spent enhancing what we had, instead of always looking for more money to book more rooms, hire more leaders, offer more programs, attract more participants. We always focused on the breadth of opportunities, but overlooked the depth of the experiences to participants.

Another major discovery for us was that participants of both public and non-public agencies had similar views about the benefits of recreation. As stated earlier, we had suspected there may be differences in terms of the benefits that participants gained and their motivation for attending municipal, not-for profit and private centres. We had fully expected a 'communitarianism' air to prevail in municipal and perhaps, in the not-for-profit agencies as well. We were both ecstatic and humbled by the sense of belonging and ownership experienced by the private patrons. Moreover, we also found that members attending programs at the private facility were as passionate, as grateful, and as excited about the benefits as were participants who registered for programs or used services in public centres.

For us, these findings have clearly supported the existing literature and knowledge base about the benefits of recreation. This experience has also supported the proposition that recreational opportunities shape the living conditions of Canadians that determine their health (see figure 1). The 1996 Report on the Health of British Columbians (B.C. Provincial Health Officer, 1997) explicitly states that, in order to enhance the quality of life and reduce inequalities in health status, improvements in the living and working conditions of citizens are required, in addition to enhancing individual capacities, skills and choices for healthy living and the quality of the physical environment. Indeed, health policies across the country are beginning to acknowledge that societal structures, attitudes and behaviours significantly influence health status and have become to be known as "healthy public policy." This approach acknowledges and addresses the determinants of health and how all policy influences population health, in particular, policy at the municipal and regional levels (Hancock, 1992). As such, the practice of recreation can be seen as healthful public policy. Researchers and practitioners will need to build on the CP/RA (1997) evidence, as well as on citizens' experiences of the (direct and indirect) benefits of programs and policies, to compile a case for recreation as a determinant of personal and public health.

Figure 1

How Access to Recreational Opportunities Helped to Determine the Health Status and Quality of Life for Participants in this Study. Adapted from Labonté (1994).

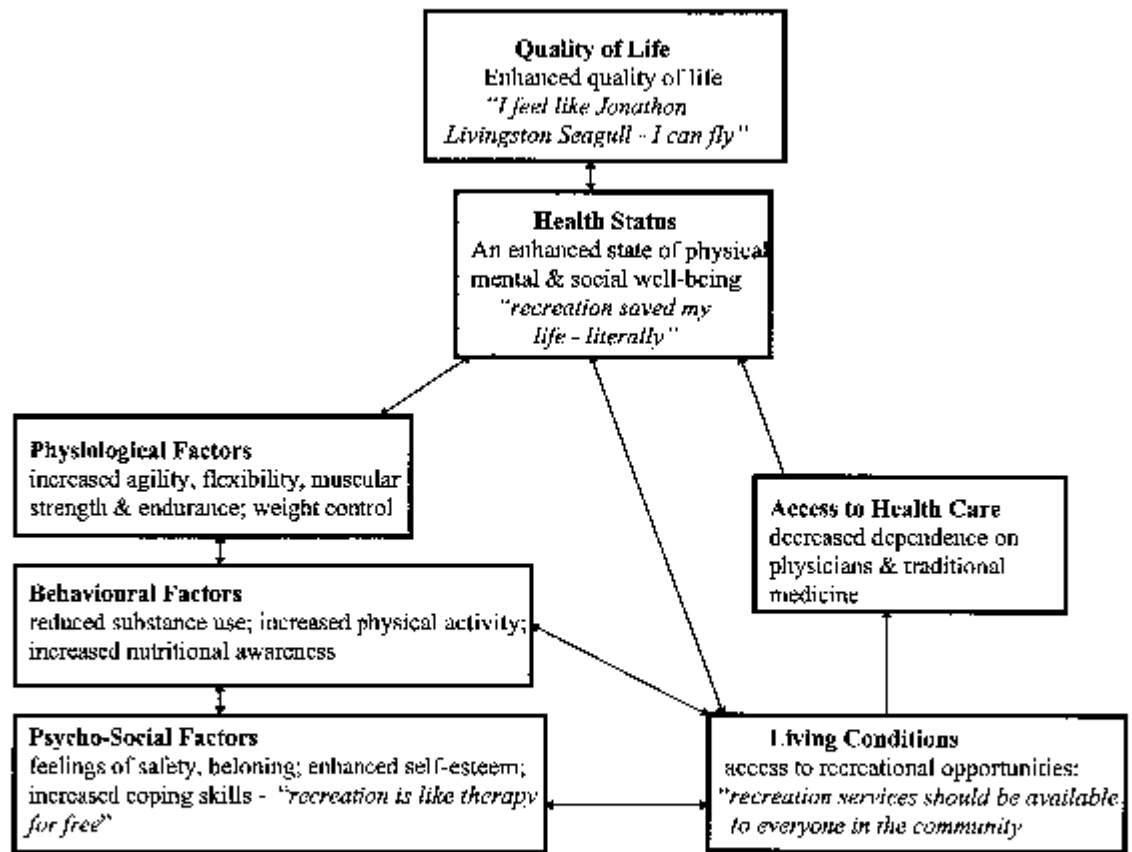


Figure 1 How Access to Recreational Opportunities Helped to Determine the Health Status and Quality of Life for Participants in the Study. Adapted from Labonté (1994).

A complete list of references can be obtained from the authors.

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