

REINVESTING IN ARTS PARTICIPATION: A LONGITUDINAL EXAMINATION OF LEISURE AND LIFE PERCEPTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH A MID-LIFE DECISION TO RETIRE EARLY

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Introduction

Meanings that are associated with leisure and life often shift as adults move through middle adulthood. Theorists suggest that researchers can better understand particular changes in one part of a person's life when such is examined in the context of life structure development (Levinson, 1996). Leisure is a developmental issue in that leisure behavior, motivations, values, and attitudes are affected by developmental stages, social roles, and psycho-social preoccupations that change across the lifespan (Henderson, et. al., 1989). The meanings women attach to their lives with respect to leisure and other life perceptions, for example, will in part be defined by their life experiences. In addition, previous research shows that early exposure to recreation experiences establish roots from which future recreation pursuits re-emerge during adulthood (Iso-Ahola, 1980, Kleiber, 1999). Kleiber (2001) noted that while questions regarding the meaning and purpose of one's existence occur during earlier periods of the life course, they are typically recast in later life. The purpose of this study was to examine the leisure and life perceptions associated with a woman's mid-life decision to retire early. Her decision to take an early retirement was in part formed by her desire to pursue art, having given up that desire earlier in her adulthood because of family and work responsibilities. Leisure and life variables examined were leisure attitude, valuing leisure, time for leisure, the impact of life experiences, life structure, wants-out-of-life, and the importance of family, work, and leisure.

Methods

A case study approach allows researchers to deliberately select what to study (Stake, 2000). Bromley (1986) noted that case studies were especially useful in describing and analyzing a particular entity, and this case, existing data appeared to contain information relevant to the purpose of this study. Data obtained from a longitudinal research project titled "A Study of Leisure During Adulthood" (ASOLDA) was used (Carpenter, 1997, 2003). The overall purpose of ASOLDA was to examine change and continuity of leisure and life perceptions over time during middle adulthood. Original participants consisted of 84 adults from throughout North America. There were two phases of data collection. The Survey Phase included data gathered on a 13-page questionnaire that study participants completed each year for a 10-year period of time (Carpenter & Robertson, 1999-2000). The Interview Phase included data gathered in face-to-face semi-structured interviews that were conducted individually with study participants in the seventh year of the 10-year study. Instruments used to measure leisure and life perceptions included leisure attitude, measured the Leisure Ethic Scale (LES) developed by Crandall and Slivken (1980); valuing leisure, (Carpenter, 1992); time for leisure, impact of life experiences, (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1979); life structure, (Carpenter, 1997), wants-out-of-life, (Kahle, 1983); and the importance of family, work, and leisure. Longitudinal quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Allison, a pseudonym, was a consistent participant in ASOLDA. Allison's written comments gathered from her responses to open-ended items

on the questionnaire were compiled for analysis. Her participation in the interview provided qualitative data for analysis. These data were transcribed verbatim. Specific statements associated with the variables in this study were identified and examined and held for further analysis and comparison with quantitative data generated from the questionnaire.

Results

Longitudinal data for quantitatively measured variables showed that Allison's leisure attitude demonstrated a high regard for leisure as evidenced by her scores on the Leisure Ethic Scale (LES). Allison's overall mean score for the 10 years was 3.2 on the 4-point scale. In examining Allison's responses to specific items on the LES, items that seemed particularly relevant to her mid-life decision were isolated for further investigation as they seemed likely to have helped inform her decision. Allison reported feeling less guilty about enjoying herself during the time closer to her decision, and in less agreement that most people enjoy themselves too much; yet she declined to seek as much leisure as possible during the five years prior to deciding to pursue art. Over time, Allison maintained that leisure was her most enjoyable time (3.1), that she admired people who knew how to relax (3.7), and that she liked to do things on the spur of the moment (3.8); yet she was less likely to want to live a life of leisure (2.4). Allison's high regard for leisure was further validated by her valuing leisure score of 3.2, also on a 4-point scale. Over time, she consistently reported that she desired having more time for leisure than she had and by the end of the study period, averaged 9.1 hours per week while desiring 18.8. The perceived impact of Allison's life experiences associated with her decision to retire early, in part, contributed to her perceptions related to her work, the deaths of friends and family, changes in recreation, and a physical injury. Work items were rated as having a negative impact for Allison even though she was receiving positive recognition for work accomplishments. Other negative impacts included losses of friends or family members to death in four of the last six years of data collection, and the injury she had sustained. In all of these negative impact experiences, Allison reported that she had no control over the events related to deaths, and varying degrees of control (i.e., from some to no) over work related events. She reported that she had some control in receiving recognition in her work and in her recreation experiences. Throughout the duration of the study, Allison reported she was building her adult life structure. Allison most frequently noted that self-fulfillment was her most important want-out-of-life until, in the tenth year when she singled out sense of accomplishment. She also most frequently ranked the importance of family, work, and leisure in that order. In the tenth year of the study, Allison indicated that she had made the decision to declare herself an art major and began taking classes. This decision marked her transition from her professional career to that of pursuing her avocation.

Discussion

This case study depicts a successful career professional who decided upon early retirement in order to pursue her interest in art; an avocation that she had abandoned during early adulthood. In her late fifties, Allison had enough financial security to enable her to forego her professional career in order to pursue her avocation, art. As such, her case may not be representative of other middle-aged women who may have similar

leisure and life perceptions but cannot afford to retire early. This study also may suggest that the timing of such a life altering decision is a factor. Over time, Allison maintained that leisure was her most enjoyable time, that she admired people who knew how to relax, that she liked to do things on the spur of the moment, and yet she did not particularly want a life of complete leisure. Retiring in order to pursue art did not mean 'a life of complete leisure' to Allison. Rather, disengaging in time-consuming work with its inherent responsibilities seemed a way that she could have discretionary time in which to reclaim her passion for art, an experience she previously had a keen interest in pursuing. Change noted in her responses to items on the LES, while not seen as dramatic shifts, may be early indicators that she had been reassessing previously made decisions about continuing her full time professional career. The negative impact and varying perceptions regarding the control that Allison experienced in her life experiences during that time, may have also contributed to her decision to retire early in order to pursue art. Her reactions to other life experiences viewed as less negative, may have also contributed to her reconsidering retirement options. It is noted that as Allison considered her work-retirement-art decision, she did so while believing that she was building and not changing her life structure. This finding suggested that her decision was not characterized by a crisis, but instead, by her own sense of self-determination that may have provided continuity during this transition in her life.

Practical Application

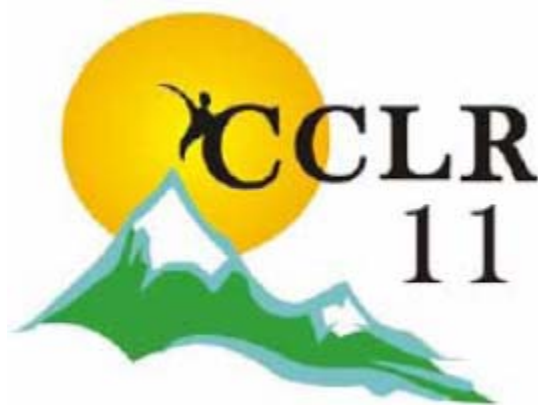
The ways in which people in a free society choose to spend their discretionary time has been an interest of professionals whose jobs it is to develop and conduct a variety of leisure programs for people of all ages. Leisure professionals may tend to believe that programs designed for aging adults should emphasize physical activity rather than the arts. However, to do so would limit leisure opportunities for adults as they age. Self-expression inherent in arts activities contributes to human development and self-knowledge during adulthood. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) reminds us that when involved in expressive activity, we feel in touch with our real selves. The opportunity to express creative ability and potential is not age-specific. Today's middle-aged adults in all likelihood experienced arts opportunities in public education when they were children. As they grow older and come to the point of retirement, early or not, there needs to be opportunities for arts participation designed for them to either rekindle earlier interests that they may have had or enable them to discover and develop their creative interests and aptitudes for the first time.

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