

A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF MAJOR LIFE EVENTS ON PERCEIVED FREEDOM IN LEISURE

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Introduction

Numerous researchers have considered how leisure may contribute to the maintenance or enhancement of health and well-being. Recent examples include studies focusing on specific subgroups within the population, such as older adults (Dupuis & Smale, 1995; Smale & Dupuis, 1993), and those who have faced significant transitions as a consequence of chronic illness or injury (Dattilo, Caldwell, Lee, & Kleiber, 1998; Lee, Dattilo, Kleiber, & Caldwell 1996; McCormick, 1999) or the death of a family member or close friend (Patterson & Carpenter, 1994; Sharp & Mannell, 1996). Indeed, considerable evidence has been generated that suggests that leisure can play an important function in either buffering or mediating the effects of stress generated by serious life events on health and well-being (Caltabiano, 1994, 1995; Coleman, 1993; Hull & Michael, 1995; Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Ouellet, Iso-Ahola, & Bisvert, 1995).

While much of the focus of this previous research has been on impacts of serious life events on health and well-being, much less attention has been given to the impact that they have on the experience of leisure itself. The overriding question that has been considered is how leisure is *used* to mediate the impact of serious life events or transitions, but not how leisure is *changed* as a result. In other words, do we perceive our leisure differently and perhaps adjust it accordingly as a means of coping with stressful situations? Other work has suggested that the experience of leisure remains reasonably stable over time (Carpenter, 1999), even when serious life events are encountered (Iwasaki & Smale, 1998). However, even though global measures of leisure, such as perceived freedom and leisure attitude, remained stable, the underlying dimensions that comprise these constructs may "adjust" to draw on the specific, "needed" values of some dimensions while others diminish in importance as events are encountered. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if changes in perceived freedom in leisure and its dimensions occur as a consequence of experiencing a major life event and whether any changes were associated with the way in which the affected individuals perceived these events.

Methods

Data were drawn from the 10-year longitudinal study, *A Study of Leisure During Adulthood* (ASOLDA), undertaken by Carpenter (1999) between 1987 and 1996. The study's overarching purpose was to examine continuity and change in the leisure, life perceptions, and values of middle-aged adults. In each year of the original study, 84 participants completed a self-administered questionnaire used to gather current data concerning leisure attitudes, perceived freedom in leisure, values and wants out of life, and recent major life events, such as marriage, deaths of family member and/or friends, workplace changes, and changes in recreational and/or social activities. By the end of the 10-year period in 1996, 81 participants were still actively engaged in the project. Consequently, data on each concept are available for each of the 81 participants for every year of the 10-year study period, making possible the examination of life transitions for these middle-aged adults.

The focus of the study was on the construct of perceived freedom in leisure (Witt & Ellis, 1985) and its four constituent dimensions. Measures of each were derived from a 25-item scale to which participants indicated their level of agreement with each item along a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree"). The four dimensions are: (1) *perceived leisure competence*, which measures the extent to which an individual feels he or she is competent in the skills or requirements of the leisure endeavour and has the ability to avoid failure in pursuing it (6 items); (2) *perceived leisure control*, which measures the extent to which an individual feels he or she can control the process of his or her leisure pursuits and consequently affect the outcomes (9 items); (3) *leisure needs*, which assesses the extent to which an individual's involvement in leisure satisfies his or her intrinsic needs and wants (6 items); and finally, (4) *depth of involvement*, which is related to Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) notion of "flow", measures the extent to which an individual's engagement in leisure provides excitement, enthusiasm, and feelings of freedom, thereby satisfying leisure needs and enhancing overall leisure functioning (4 items) (Ellis & Witt, 1994). The sum of the scores across these four dimensions provides a measure of overall perceived freedom in leisure, which is central to deriving greater benefits from leisure involvement.

Six recent major life events were selected from the possible 47 included on the survey based on the desire to include both positive and negative events, and having sufficient numbers of occurrences across the sample for analysis. The six major events selected were: (a) *marriage*, (b) *death of a parent*, (c) *death of a close friend*, (d) *new job*, (e) *major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation*, and (f) *major change in social activities*. Further, participants assessed each event along a 7-point scale according to whether they perceived it as "extremely negative" (value=-3) or "extremely positive" (value=+3). This assessment provided an indication of the personal reaction to each event rather than assuming *a priori* that it necessarily had a positive or negative effect on the individual.

Those participants who had experienced at least one of the six major life events were included in this study. Their scores on perceived freedom and its dimensions over the 10 years of data were reorganised into two time

periods - **Time 1:** mean scores on perceived freedom and on each dimension for the years preceding a major life event, and **Time 2:** mean scores on perceived freedom and on each dimension for the year in which a major life event occurred. This allowed for the calculation of changes in perceived freedom and its dimensions that might have occurred in the face of a major life event. Analyses focused on the magnitude and nature of the change in perceived freedom and its dimensions for each major life event, and whether any change was related to the way in which the individual perceived the event as either negative or positive.

Findings and Discussion

Seventy-three of the original 84 participants qualified for this study by virtue of reporting at least one of the major life events selected for analysis. Females represented a somewhat larger proportion of these individuals ($n=46$, 63.0%), and most of those in the sample were married or cohabiting (67.1%) and had earned a post-graduate degree (54.8%). The 73 individuals in this study had an average age of 45.77 years ($SD=7.05$) when the major life event occurred.

The six major life events selected for analysis in this study occurred a total of 227 times over the 10 year period of data collection - an average of 3.1 events per individual - with the most frequently reported event being a major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation ($n=58$) and the least frequently reported event being marriage ($n=16$). In contrast to the ways in which major events in previous studies are typically assumed as either positive or negative, the evaluation of these events by these individuals revealed quite varied responses to each event. While death of a parent ($MEAN=-1.53$) and death of a close friend ($MEAN=-1.28$) were generally regarded as negative, and getting married ($MEAN=1.94$) and acquiring a new job ($MEAN=1.98$) were regarded as positive, all these events showed considerable variation with standard deviations ranging from a low of 1.38 to a high of 2.07, suggesting that the reactions to such events are not always as had been assumed. The assessments of major changes to recreation and to social activity showed the greatest degree of variation ($SD=2.07$ and $SD=1.90$ respectively) and, interestingly, in the case of major changes in social activity, the assessments were negative on average ($MEAN=-.25$). Such variations among individuals may necessarily lead to quite different reactions within the contexts of their leisure experiences.

In the time period prior to the occurrence of one of the six major life events, the mean perceived freedom in leisure ranged from 3.69 ($SD=0.45$) to 3.95 ($SD=0.42$) with depth of involvement consistently showing the highest mean scores among the four dimensions (ranging from 3.93 to 4.11) and control consistently showing the lowest mean scores (ranging from 3.54 to 3.78). Following the occurrence of a major life event, mean scores on perceived freedom in leisure remained virtually unchanged ranging from 3.86 ($SD=0.47$) to 3.98 ($SD=0.40$) reflecting the stability of the construct overall. Among the four dimensions of perceived freedom in leisure, the mean scores on perceptions of leisure needs showed no changes overall whereas depth of involvement showed small consistent increases across all six major life events. When tests of the correlated samples were undertaken (i.e., change from Time 1 to Time 2) for each major life event without considering the assessment of the event, the results indicated that changes in perceived freedom and its dimensions were not statistically significant for all events except the death of a parent. In this latter instance, significant increases were found in perceived leisure competence ($t=3.408$, $p=.002$) and perceived leisure control ($t=2.820$, $p=.008$), with a notable, but non-significant increase in depth of involvement ($t=1.961$, $p=.059$). Overall, too, perceived freedom in leisure increased significantly ($t=4.109$, $p<.001$) following the death of a parent. Although the changes in the dimensions for each of the other major life events were not statistically significant, the patterns of change were very consistent in that the mean scores on perceived leisure needs routinely declined across the events whereas mean scores on the other dimensions tended to increase to

varying degrees. Apparently, despite the relative stability of the perceived freedom construct in the face of major life events, there are consistent minor "adjustments" being made to the underlying dimensions, perhaps in a conscious or unconscious effort to retain such stability in the experience of leisure. An intriguing follow-up question is whether these adjustments are in response to what the individuals, when faced with a major life event, *hope to receive* or actually *do achieve* out of their leisure experiences.

The assessment of the major life events was introduced into the analyses by calculating the mean assessment score for each of the six events then examining the extent to which they were related to the changes from Time 1 to Time 2 in each of the dimensions of perceived freedom in leisure. Theoretically, significant relationships would be detected if changes in perceived freedom corresponded to the direction and intensity of the reactions to events. In other words, do predictable changes in the dimensions of perceived freedom in leisure occur depending on how the event is assessed? No significant relationships were found between the assessment of the major life event and perceived freedom in leisure or any of its dimensions with the exception of when an individual acquired a new job. Here, the more positively that event was perceived, the greater the increase in the perceived competence in leisure ($r=.299$, $p=.058$) and in perceived control in leisure ($r=.334$, $p=.033$) as well as for perceived freedom in leisure overall ($r=.319$, $p=.042$). Perhaps the enhanced confidence of a promotion or the diminished sense of self from "downsizing" or a layoff from work translated to the leisure domain. Nevertheless, the results overall seem to suggest that whatever small changes might occur in perceived freedom in leisure and its constituent dimensions in response to a major life event are non-significant either because these are basically stable traits we strive to maintain - a notion suggested by Headey and Wearing's (1989) dynamic equilibrium model - or that the changes that do occur are not consistent across individuals or events. In other words, we may adjust our view of leisure, but react quite differently regardless of the type or nature of the event involved.

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