

THE SOCIAL WORLD OF BIRDING: A CREATION OF COMMUNITY

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Background

The literature on leisure argues that leisure contributes to the general life satisfaction of older adults following retirement. Researchers have expressed concern about the need to not merely add years to life, but also to add life to those years (McGuire, 1985). Many of today's older adults lead active, involved lives. This active involvement is found in work substitutes to fill the unobligated time experienced by many older adults. Additionally, older adults seek environments that maximize the use of their increased leisure (McGuire, 1985).

Participation in leisure and recreational settings serves a societal function by providing opportunities for making and maintaining friendships (Ayers-Counts & Counts, 1992; Levy, 1989). As well, Levy (1989) in her study of boaters in a marina, and Ayers-Counts and Counts' (1992) study of Rvers (recreational vehicle users), argued that leisure and recreation settings demonstrate the characteristics of community among participants.

However, how does one define community? The literature on "community" suggests a wide range of definitions of community (Lowe, 2000; Pedlar, 1996; Shaffer & Anundsen 1993; Ayers-Counts & Counts, 1992; and Levy 1989). Community can refer to families, cities, neighbourhoods, as well as interest groups (Shaffer and Anundsen 1993; Ayers-Counts and Counts, 1992). Community can also be defined as an experience, not limited to some geographical setting (Lowe, 2000; Pedlar, 1996; Shaffer and Anundsen 1993; Ayers-Counts and Counts, 1992; and Levy 1989). Allowing for the different ways one can perceive community, researchers state there are a number of characteristics of community that are experienced by members. For examples, social bonds of solidarity can emerge within communities (Lowe, 2000; Levy, 1989 & Ayers-Counts and Counts, 1992). Communities provide a network for shared meanings and values (Brueggemann, 2001; Etzioni, 1998). In addition, communities can create social capital where people work together for a common purpose (Arai, 2000; Putnam, 1996). Finally, people construct community symbolically, thus creating meaning and self-identity (Brueggemann, 2001; Cohen, 1985).

The Study

This paper, based on secondary analysis of data, will examine how, through participation in a leisure activity such as birding, older adults create community. The research was approached from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Interactionists explain patterns of group activity in terms of joint interaction and mutual adjustment to social circumstances. Analysis is generally focused around individual members' shared words, gestures, symbols, and unique collective history (Scott & Godbey, 1992; Waters, 1994).

Qualitative data was gathered over a six-month period through semi-structured interviews with 33 study participants (20 women and thirteen men), 55 years old and older and retired from the workforce. When face-to-face interviews were not possible, other interview strategies were necessary, such as phone interviews (Sinnott, Harris, Block, Collesano, & Jacobson, 1983). Participants were from New Brunswick, with the exception of two from Nova Scotia and one from Maine; and all were English speaking. The majority were married, lived in a rural area, and belonged to a nature club. Taped interviews were transcribed and the data organized into conceptual categories in order to be used in the analysis of the data (Neuman, 1991). Also notes about the interviews, including the researcher's own personal thoughts about the process, were kept in a reflective journal (Neuman, 1991). Participant observation of the birding community was also conducted, including seven field trips and four nature club meetings.

Findings

Group Solidarity

As the older birders described their participation in nature clubs, it was evident a sense of solidarity had developed among them. When asked why they participated in nature clubs, many of the birders stated: *birds of a feather flock together*. Another birder stated: *they [the birders] are all a bunch of kindred spirits*. One birder who was not a member of a nature club indicated that she would join a nature club if there were one in her area; she shared similar views to birders who were nature club members: *it's true of any group no matter whether you know what it is, if you're interested in something and others are interested, there's always a bond there*. When asked what they liked most about participating in group activities, one of the most frequent responses was meeting people with

similar interests and sharing information and knowledge with others.

Thirteen birders enjoyed learning from others, especially from more experienced birders or naturalists. As one birder stated: *I'm not going to learn much if I don't chum around with birders that know more than I do.* The birders also indicated that fellow birders were always willing to teach or help other birders. As one birder stated: *Oh, it's just sharing what you've been doing, what you've been seeing... I think just the friendship is also good.*

Shared Meanings

A number of common patterns shared by the majority of the birders defined their community. For example, their interest in birds and their concern for the environment was a strong connection between them. In determining whom they considered a birder, there were a variety of definitions, but there were common patterns that clearly defined who they considered to be part of their community. For example, it was evident that if a person wanted to be a birder and to be part of this community, one would have to not only enjoy observing birds but also have to like nature. As one birder stated: *it's [birding] a love of nature... it's a part of nature...you've gotta be interested in natural things...you gotta have an interest in nature.*

Shared Values

A deep commitment among members to preserving the environment was shared by participants. Many of the birders went into great detail discussing their environmental concerns, such as the extinction of species, destruction of natural habitats, reforestation, preserving the environment and wildlife. One birder made the following comment: *if we destroy our ecology we're destroying ourselves.* Another birder stated that *birding is more than just looking at birds, it's also preserving our environment.*

Social Capital

In working together, the birding community began to exercise its collective strength in lobbying the government for change in environmental policies. Two birders were involved in the development of a bird sanctuary in their area. And other birders took nature and bird photos or slides into schools where they undertook educational workshops to alert children to the importance of caring for the environment.

Identity

The participants in the study were at different levels in birding but all defined themselves as "birders." They shared many similar experiences. Field observations suggested clothing and equipment served to identify birders. For example, during one whale-watching trip a group of people brought scopes, binoculars, cameras, and bird fieldguides, which were signs of birders. The language the birders used among members was also an indicator that they were birders. While watching whales some people were obviously also watching birds: *Did you see the Wilson's storm-petrel? Hey, I think I saw a puffin,* stated the birders as they peered through their scopes and binoculars. When approached and asked if they were birders, their response was *Why YES, and you must be one?* And the conversation moved to the birds that were being observed. The birders in the group were clearly identifiable and distinct from the other individuals on the boat.

Discussion

Based on the findings, this community of birders provided the opportunity for the creation of social bonds with other like-minded people. Older birders also attached a variety of meanings and values to birding, including being close to nature and conservation. The birders also defined their community through their own definitions of who a birder was and what birding was. In addition, this community provided an opportunity for birders to contribute to the greater society for example, participating in environmental causes. It was evident that for these members birding, with its own practices, values, and meanings, allowed for the creation of community, which played an important role in the lives of the older adults who were part of the study of the social world of birding.

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