

MAPPING LEISURE: AN APPLICATION OF PHENOMENOGRAPHY

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Although many leisure researchers appear to agree that attributes such as perceived freedom, intrinsic motivation and positive affect (eg, enjoyment and relaxation) represent common and essential characteristics for defining leisure experiences, the need to account for difference in leisure meanings represents an on-going challenge. The complexity of this challenge is evident in Freysinger's (1987) claim that leisure can mean the same thing to different people, different things to different people and different things to the same person. Given that this is the case, how can we account for differences in the way people experience the meaning of leisure? Moreover, if we were to explain these differences in terms of changes in meaning within the same individual and for a group of individuals, how can we describe them? This paper reports the initial phase of an eight-year longitudinal study that sought to map differences in meanings of leisure and to suggest how these experiences might change over time.

Method

The study was informed by a descriptive and interpretive research approach called phenomenography (cf, Marton & Booth, 1997). Watkins (2000) describes phenomenography as an approach for mapping the qualitatively different ways that people experience the meaning of phenomena in their world and for interpreting experience as an interrelated and hierarchically arranged continuum of meanings. Phenomenography describes a way of experiencing something using two interrelated components. First, a referential aspect focuses on what is being experienced and describes the overall meaning assigned to the experience. This aspect typically consists of initial verbatim responses to interview questions and tends to reflect the surface content of awareness. Second, a structural aspect deals with how the referential aspect is understood. This latter aspect describes (1) the different elements comprising the experience and the phenomenal meaning assigned to the elements, (2) how the elements are organised or arranged in awareness, and (3) how the experience is delimited from other phenomena. Consequently, the structural aspect illuminates deeper phenomenal understandings and may capture pre-reflective, current or anticipatory awareness. Different ways of experiencing phenomena can thus be understood as variations in referential and structural awareness, while the interrelated and hierarchical nature of meanings can be determined by analysing the complexity (ie, breadth and depth) of the structural aspects across experiences.

Data were collected from Australian first year undergraduate leisure studies students (n= 33) and formed part of a larger data set collected as students moved from University to working life. Meanings of leisure were obtained from open-ended questions administered using dialogic interviews conducted prior to students commencing their studies. In order to avoid self-presentation biases, interviewers with no direct teaching involvement were used to conduct interviews. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes and recorded an average of three separate leisure episodes, resulting in approximately 90 descriptions of leisure for the sample. Data analysis involved generating categories of experience using whole interview transcripts in order to preserve their contextual character. The referential and structural aspects acted as a methodological apparatus for categorising and analysing differences in meanings of experiences. Inter-judge reliability checks using researchers unconnected to the analysis validated the resulting categories.

Results

Within the idiosyncratic ways that students described their experiences of leisure, four qualitatively different categories of experience emerged.

Leisure as Passing Time (Category A)

Leisure means to pass spare time when there is nothing more important to do. For students experiencing leisure in this way, the referential meaning assigned to the experience focuses on using spare time. The structure of the experience consists of several elements related in linear sequence as follows. Students divide their lives into separate aspects (eg, study, sleeping, sport and leisure) and rank each according to their perceived level of importance. In comparison with other aspects leisure is accorded a lower priority. Attention to and completion of other priorities results in "having spare time" or "nothing more important to do." Thus time is characterised as left over and mostly occurs in short gaps between other priorities or in longer periods "after everything else." Time is "used up" to entertain oneself by "relaxing the body" or "do something for fun," and helps to avert boredom.

Leisure as Exercising Choice (Category B)

Leisure means having free time to do what one wants to do and what one enjoys doing. In this experience, choice represents the focus of students' awareness. The elements forming the experience indicate a dual linear pattern of awareness based on phenomenal variations in the meaning of elements and can be described as sub-

categories B1 and B2.

In sub-category B1 leisure is distinguished from obligations such as paid work or domestic duties. These activities are understood as expectations and are resented when imposed by others. In response to these expectations students perceive the need to find ways to actively assert control and plan for time where they are free from constraint and where they can exercise their choice and enjoy themselves. Choice is understood as asserting one's control: "it depends on what I want to do" and to feeling emotionally relaxed: "I don't have to worry about what others think about me." In this experience, leisure is an opportunity for becoming independent.

Alternatively, obligations in sub-category B2 are experienced as personal responsibilities and accepted as a necessary part of life. Some students note these responsibilities (eg cooking) to have the potential to become leisure if they lack obligation. The presence of responsibilities generates a desire for greater control and to use free time to be oneself, to exercise choice and enjoy oneself. Choice is connected to feelings of having control: "performing a difficult physical skill" and relates to enjoyment defined in terms of satisfaction: "getting something out of it like personal or social rewards." In this situation, leisure is an opportunity to display competence.

Leisure as Escaping Pressure (Category C)

Leisure means to escape from pressures of life by getting away, relaxing and rejuvenating oneself. This experience focuses on the need to restore one's feeling of well-being and comprises several elements arranged in a circular pattern of awareness. Leisure is understood as an intentional response to aspects of life associated with pressure and stress (eg, paying bills, family duties, or coping with racial tensions). In the context of pressure, the need to get away and change one's situation by physically or psychologically disengaging oneself from the source of pressure is seen as a priority. This is achieved by "choosing to take time off or "planning to make time," to engage in activities that are often passive and solitary. Physically active and socially oriented pursuits are related to leisure if they assist in removing or "blotting out" pressure. The experience of mentally relaxing and feeling pleasure; the latter which is defined in sensuous terms; "to indulge myself, served to divert attention and relieve feelings of pressure.

Leisure as Achieving Fulfilment (Category D)

Leisure means to feel happy and contented. This way of experiencing leisure is understood as a deeply felt emotional response and centrally linked to fulfilment or happiness. The structure of the experience is more ephemeral consisting of several elements related as follows. Fulfilment is described in terms of "positive and happy feelings about myself and "being at one with myself." Students report they actively look for opportunities for happiness in many aspects of life and thus distinctions between leisure and other aspects make little sense to them. Achieving fulfilment is further characterised as a "spontaneous" response generated by reflecting about one's self or about interactions with others. Concomitantly, leisure is perceived to be independent of time (ie, as timelessness) and activity, and is often accompanied by feelings of "absorption" or "flow" in the immediate situation. Other feelings variously contribute to fulfilment including pleasure; physical, mental and 'spiritual' relaxation; choice, satisfaction, mastery and self worth. These feelings differ in the presence for students and while no one feeling predominates, a deeply felt intensity characterise their presence. While these feelings are focused on the self and one's well being, the feelings of others and their well being contribute significantly to happiness, and are valued for their self-actualising capacity.

Discussion

When viewed as a pool of experiences, a comparison of the categories respective structural aspects reveals several grounds for suggesting the categories are interrelated and hierarchically arranged. First, the categories contain similar elements or dimensions; ie they each say something about the context, intention, temporality, emotion and outcome of experience. Thus the four categories appear to be interrelated through the presence of several critical 'dimensions of variation' around which experiences are formed. However the meanings attached to each dimension appear to become more phenomenally complex. For example in Category A, time is understood simply as a discrete period, whereas in Category B time becomes psychologically relative. In Category C, an intentional response is required to set time aside, whereas in Category D the temporal aspect of experience becomes timelessness. Second, the arrangement of the elements in each category (eg, from Categories A to D) moves from a linear, to parallel linear, to a circular and then to an ephemeral pattern of experience. This finding suggests leisure meanings are further related by starting out as a concrete form of awareness and then progressing to a more abstract awareness of experience. Third, leisure is delimited from other phenomenon in progressively less obvious ways as one moves from Categories A to D. That is, the meanings of leisure become more relative and integrated with other aspects of life, moving from a separate domain of life to an experience synthesised into many different parts of life.

Taken together, variation in meanings, patterns of temporal organisation and delimitation of leisure from other aspects of life, point to the possibility for experiences to be represented as a continuum along which individuals can change, perhaps in response to both developmental (ie, longer term) and situational (shorter term) contingencies. In this respect meanings attached to leisure may become more complex due to ascending changes in the complexity of individual's awareness of their experiences.

In summary, the study presents an alternative approach to describing and interpreting difference and change in

meanings than has been hitherto reported. Additionally, the study suggests the possibility for describing difference in meanings without resorting to limitations associated with dichotomous classification of leisure participants, (cf, Burton, 1996) and for using the categories of experience as the basis of an instrument for measuring multiple experiences of leisure meanings. Further, longitudinal research, however, is required to validate the categories and existence of change.

References

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