The Ethic of Care: 
Leisure Possibilities and Constraints for Women

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review and an interpretive framework for examining the ethic of care as it offers possibilities and constraints for women's leisure. The explanatory implications of the ethic of care are useful in further understanding antecedent and intervening constraints to leisure as well as understanding the empowering possibilities of leisure. The paper addresses the concept of an ethic of care; the ways that the ethic has been embodied in leisure behaviour, primarily within the family; the link between an ethic of care and constraints to leisure; and the possibilities of an ethic of care for enhancing the lives of all individuals.

ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK

The organizing framework for this discussion is feminism. Feminism provides a perspective for understanding, explaining, and interpreting the ways that society operates (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, and Freysinger, 1989). The focus of feminism is on redefining the value of women's lives and making women more visible in society. Feminism also addresses the issues of oppression and power. It asserts the need for women to discover their own "power" in the world. For women, power means being able to make choices and control one's life aside from socialized gender roles.

Leisure is conceptualized from a subjective framework using symbolic interaction theory. This framework suggests that the meaning of leisure, as a subjective interpretation of the social context, is the source of freedoms and constraints that regulate individual action (cf. Samdahl, 1988; Shaw, 1985). From symbolic interaction theory, leisure is viewed as a pattern of ongoing interaction which is experienced in relation to the context in which it occurs. The ethic of care as an interpersonal freedom as well as an interpersonal constraint provides an appropriate context for understanding leisure within symbolic interaction theory.

Two basic assumptions are addressed in this paper: (a) a need exists for a quality of leisure life for all human beings; and (b) that women differ from men concerning the ethic of care and how it impacts leisure. Caring roles of all kinds have typically been the province of women. While the ethic of care is not a construct only for women, it has generally been associated with women. When taking care of others is always first in a woman's life, her "freedom to" and "freedom from" are limited, especially in relation to leisure (Henderson et al., 1989). On the other hand, the ethic of care may be an element that is missing from the conceptualizations of leisure in society. It may be useful to examine how an understanding of the ethic of care can be expanded within the explanations of leisure.

Gilligan (1982) first used the expression an "ethic of care" in a discussion of the difference in the psychological development of women compared to men. She defined the ethic of care as an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, and of taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone. She suggested that women follow a developmental path that concentrates on responsibility and commitment to others and that women define themselves in relation to others. Women, then, often feel selfish and experience moral conflict when they respond to their own needs rather than the needs of those close to them. Gilligan's view has not been without a great deal of controversy from both feminists and psychologists.
THE ETHIC OF CARE AS A CONSTRAINT TO LEISURE

Colley (1984) suggested that there are two approaches to the way in which people choose their leisure: (a) by the opportunities that are available to them; and (b) by the constraints that persist in making choices. The ethic of care appears to offer both an opportunity as well as a constraint to leisure. A growing number of researchers are examining the meaning of leisure constraints. This literature, according to Jackson (1988), shares the notion that constraints inhibit people's ability to participate in leisure activities, to spend more time doing so, to take advantage of leisure services, or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction. The ethic of care may be considered both an antecedent and an intervening constraint to women's leisure. It is an antecedent constraint in that the ethic of care is an attitude that defines how one ought to be in the world. It occurs because of personal capacities and socialization factors that define what opportunities may exist for leisure. This conceptualization fits closely with Crawford and Godbey's (1987) notion of intrapersonal barriers, which they defined as individual psychological states and attributes which interact with leisure preferences. On the other hand, the ethic of care is also an intervening factor because it may have an impact directly upon the decision to become involved in an activity on a situational basis. For example, a woman may not attend her aerobics class because she wants and needs to stay home with her sick child. This intervening impact would be described by Crawford and Godbey (1987) as an interpersonal constraint because it is the result of an interpersonal interaction and the relationship between individuals.

The status of any constraint, as Jackson and Searle (1985) have suggested, is relative and not absolute. Similarly, Green and Hebron (1988) have suggested that women are rarely constrained by one independent variable; rather, it is a relationship between a number of determining and often interrelated factors which either facilitate or circumscribe women's leisure. Since society is organized in a way that places care-giving as the primary domain of women, the constraints imposed by the ethic of care are complex and far ranging. An ethic of care is a constraint when one's life focuses on self-denial and when the needs of others, particularly the family, are always considered first and the self is considered last. Women are socialized into being more accepting of the ethic of care as a constraint to their leisure. Women's roles as caregivers associated with being daughters, mothers, wives, and sisters create the antecedent suggestion that a women's time is really not her own.

THE ETHIC OF CARE AS A POSSIBILITY FOR LEISURE

While an ethic of care can certainly be a constraint to leisure, it can also be an empowering dimension of people's lives. The ethic of care focuses on the web of connection that exists for all people. Thus, this connection can provide a number of positive dimensions. Bella (1986) has suggested that meaning is not in an activity, but in the context of the relationship and responsibility. If Allison's (1988) suggestion is heeded, and leisure and play are considered part of the culture-creation process rather than a result of it, the ethic of care may become an empowering aspect of women's leisure lives. Empowerment, according to Wimbush and Talbot (1988), offers individuals the ability and capacity to control their own activities, to be taken seriously, and to redefine elements of the world according to their own terms and values. The social benefits of leisure may also be embodied in an ethic of care. The fullness of leisure, as Kelly (1983) has suggested, can be explored and developed in relation to others. The family is a place to explore roles and to experience leisure, just as other social situations where women interact with others in support and friendship offer opportunities for leisure.

Thus, the ethic of care provides a framework for examining the constraints and possibilities inherent in leisure. The ethic of care is not meant to further dichotomize the experiences of males and females in leisure, but to offer an explanation of women's leisure and to raise some questions to encourage further empirical research. On one hand, the ethic of care, when it results in continuous self-denial, can be a constraint to women's leisure. On the other hand, the balancing of work, leisure, and significant relationships is a way that the ethic of care can empower women within their leisure.
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