

**It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it!.....The meanings which can be attributed to leisure: a review of the literature**

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**Abstract**

Occupational science has researched the benefits of occupations across the domains of productivity, self-care and leisure (Reed and Sanderson 1999). Positive psychology has researched why some individuals are resilient and navigate negative life circumstances. Salutogenesis (Bengel et al 1999) focuses on the processes that maintain health, arguing for a shift away from illness prevention to health promotion. Therapeutic Recreation is based on a premise that something was therapeutic if it contributes to physical or psychological health and well-being, and prevents risks, supports coping and transcending negative life events (Caldwell 2005).

Facilitating an engagement in occupations should therefore begin as soon as the individual was medically stable, in order to begin to define the sense of self, roles and goals (Jenson and Allen, 1994) and to stave off the negative psychological impacts of acquiring a disability. Yet individuals with disabilities often withdraw from all but the most physically passive of occupations as Farrow & Reid (2004), Parker et al. (1997), Dowsell et al (2000), Morgan et al (2000) and Pound et al (1998) all point out. Due to the perceived freedom that often accompanies leisure, it was sometimes the most important or even only context in which profoundly disabled individuals can be their true selves and feel that occupations are meaningful and authentic.

This article highlights the literature which reinforces the message that leisure is a necessary part of an occupationally balanced lifestyle.

It was not the occupation itself that makes something leisure, but the purpose for which it was carried out. Leisure can restore mental and physical equilibrium, while insufficient leisure opportunities can cause the individual to perform ineffectually in other areas (Passmore 2003). Lobo (1999) challenged the notion that free time was the same thing as leisure when the free time was 'enforced', due to having nothing else to do.

Leisure time was described by Soderback and Hammerlund (1993) as the time during which the individual was not

bound by responsibilities and duties, and by Reed and Sanderson (1999) as not taken up by work/ productivity or self care occupations. Larsson et al (1995) described how opportunities for selecting leisure time occupations are governed by ability, the choices on offer and cultural value judgements, which was why Plato wrote that "You can learn more about a man in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation."

Due to the perceived freedom that accompanies leisure, it was sometimes the most important or even only context in

which individuals with disabilities can be their true selves and feel that occupations are meaningful and authentic. And yet according to Lyons (1993) society values paid work and relegates other forms of occupation to secondary status. So, although leisure is more satisfying than work for many individuals, the lack of income that it generates devalues leisure especially in those who are not working, despite the fact that leisure activities can lead to pleasure, competence development, social support, relaxation, creativity, health, meaning and social identity.

Argyle (1992) therefore suggested that serious leisure (which has many work like qualities) is the most socially acceptable form of leisure while, Neulinger (1990) felt that society did not value leisure for increasing well-being. So there appears to be a dichotomy between leisure being dismissed by society as a whole but valued as important by individuals. Community reintegration is meant to enhance quality of life and yet there is evidence that individuals with disabilities are socially isolated, with higher than average unemployment rates, few leisure activities and a lack of meaning in their lives (Lyons 1993).

The following review of the occupational science, therapeutic recreation and leisure science literature will highlight the value of leisure as a meaningful occupation which impacts on wellbeing and quality of life.

### **Choice, control and curiosity**

Self-determination theory describes how choice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction enhance intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, Laliberte Rudman (2002), Townsend and Wilcock (2004), Ryan and Deci (2000). Molineux and Whiteford (1999) describe this as important for making an occupation meaningful. Leisure is usually self-determined and autonomous behaviour, (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which promotes curiosity, (Berlyne 1966) and requires choices in order to allow individuals to maintain a sense of personal identity and control (Laliberte Rudman 2002). Bartalos (1993) discussed how choice was related to an ability to adapt to life and the environment. Choice therefore leads to motivation, a sense of identity and control and therefore is related to adapting and coping with life. While giving the individual choices about participation, the timing of the occupation (Hocking 2000),

and where it was carried out hands back a sense of control.

### **Competence, achievement or accomplishment**

Competence and accomplishment involve an element of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) as individuals tend to choose to engage in leisure activities that they feel they are competent or can develop competence in (Caldwell 2005). Miller Polgar and Landry (2004) and Laliberte Rudman (2002), describe how achieving a goal allows individuals to reflect on their accomplishment and their part in it with pride whereas unsatisfactory goal achievement can lead to frustration or lack of confidence. Passmore (1998) and Christiansen (1999) described a sense of accomplishment or achievement as coming about through producing an end product or achieving a goal either themselves or through others (Hocking 2000).

### **Perception of health and well-being**

Perceptions of health and wellbeing are either self-orientated or orientated around others (Wilhite et al 2004). Crowe et al (2003), Verghese, Lipton and Katz (2003), Fratiglioni, Palliard-Borg and

Winblad (2004) and Singh-Manoux et al (2003) all describe how carrying out a leisure occupation (such as personal development or social interaction) help to maintain cognitive functioning, and also self-efficacy, self-worth, creativity and self-expression (Passmore 2003) while supporting a sense of coherence in life and psychological well-being (Lammell 2003). Similarly, Passmore and French (2000) concluded that social and achievement-oriented leisure occupations support mental health while uninvolved leisure was significantly related to negative mental health outcomes, because they do not require much engagement (Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber & Datillo 2003). Iwasaki (2001), Iso-Ahola and Park (1996) & Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) found that appropriate social support and self-determination are important buffers to stress.

### **Self-Efficacy**

The competencies needed to carry out a leisure occupation (social, behavioural, physical etc) contribute to self-efficacy, self-worth, creativity and self-expression (Passmore 2003). Vrkljan and Miller Polgar (2001) and Kawaga – Singer (1993) noted that individuals adapted their occupational engagement to cope with

altered health and saw the resumption of meaningful occupations as proof that they were capable and healthy individuals, and equated doing with living.

### **Adjustment to disability**

Dattilo et al (1998) reported that adjustment to a disability was helped by the social relationships built up during leisure activities with others who could act as role models and was influenced by individual, disability and contextual factors (Lyons 1993).

Kleiber et al (1995) described how the reconstruction of a leisure lifestyle serves as a link with a past life and helps the process of learning to live with the “new self” (Jenson and Allen 1994). Wilhite et al (2004) also reported that having a satisfying leisure lifestyle was important to securing and maintaining health and well-being. They described a satisfying leisure lifestyle as including appreciation, relaxation, relationship building, altruism, legacy building, enjoyment, and anticipation.

In Laliberte Rudman’s (2002) study participants carried out “occupations in ways that were aimed at managing their social identity” and helped with

adjustment to their new selves (Kinney & Coyle 1992).

### **Relationships and self-identity**

Leisure was an important context for developing friendships and social networks which lead to the development of social/ cultural roles and values (Molineux & Whiteford 1999, Franke and Engle 2001, Wilcock 1998). Christiansen (1999) proposed that self-esteem and the self-concept result from occupational performance and social negotiations while limitations to occupation limit individual’s perceptions of themselves and their social identity (Laliberte Rudman 2002).

Social approval (Christiansen 1999, Csikszentmihalyi 1985, Passmore 1998) contributes to self-identity and well-being and develops through noting of the reactions of others to behaviour (Lobo 1999) enabling benchmarking to occur. Larson & Zemke (2003) described how the interaction between occupation, location and time was complex to coordinate because social occupations involve interweaving our lives around the lives of others, their deadlines, schedules and routines. Leisure can also be a solitary occupation, providing an opportunity for self-reflection and relaxation thus for

identity development and transcending negative life events (Kleiber (2004), Kleiber et al (2002), Hocking (2000).

### **Preventing boredom**

Berlyne (1966) described curiosity as occurring when there was insufficient information available, which motivates exploration, while complexity, novelty, and uncertainties make situations interesting. The effects of solitary, relaxing leisure and unengaging leisure are little researched because of their perceived lack of productivity. (Kleiber, 1999). The modern motivation to always keep busy has led to a new form of boredom, born of over stimulation/ burn out (Klapp 1986). Klapp proposed that under stimulated individuals seek out stimulation of any kind to achieve a balance; while overload/ inability to process stimulation leads to boredom, inability to deal with distractions and distress.

Farnworth (1998) reported that boredom was experienced significantly more when engaged in passive leisure, and describes how boredom results when an individual perceives the challenge to be less than the skills they bring to the occupation.

The positive effects of physical occupation and sport-based leisure on self-esteem and well-being were noted by Nelson & Gordon – Larsen (2006). Iwasaki (2001), Kleiber, Hutchinson and Williams (2002), Hutchinson et al (2003), Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) concluded that social support and self-determination gained through leisure were important buffers to stress which had itself been noted to have a major impact on well-being and perceived health by Zuzanek and Smale (1997). Folkman & Moskowitz (2000) and Hutchinson et al (2003) described coping mechanisms, which come about during and after leisure engagement such as positive emotional reappraisal of events and problem solving; and found that individuals relied on enjoyable and personally meaningful occupations to act as a buffer between the individual and their stress.

### **Diversion**

The importance of diversion or distraction in helping individuals cope with stress and negative life events was promoted by Kleiber (2004). Haun (1965) reported that leisure activities provided an immediate stress release and diverted attention from illness and disability, helping the individual to focus on and

communicate an 'able' self. Leisure activities help with adjustment, by being diverting, filling an occupational void and offering choice (Reynolds & Prior (2003), Fisher & Specht (1999).

### **Purpose and meaning**

Kleiber (2004) and Kleiber et al (2002) noted that individuals could find new meanings to life through leisure occupations which are diversionary, generate optimism, reconstruct the life story following major life events. Csikszentmihalyi's (1993) concept of flow, whereby the individual becomes so engrossed in the occupation that they forget the environment about them, also included an element of transcendence and forgetting the limitations imposed by the disability.

Because everybody has different priorities, only the individual can assign an importance to the occupation (Jonsson et al 2000), and this contributes to well being (Gauvin and Spence 1996). Hocking (2000), Kleiber (2004) and Kleiber et al (2002) all discuss the individual's capacity to transcend their current situation as a result of self reflection.

Intrinsically motivated individuals appear to have more interest, excitement, and confidence about an occupation, and thus perform better, with creativity and persistence leading to a heightened sense of self-esteem (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### **Goal Orientation**

Nelson (1988) describes how occupational performance follows on from a clear sense of individual purpose and reflection. He describes goal orientation/purposefulness as unique to the individual despite the fact that several individuals may have shared values or be aiming towards a similar outcome, and that a single occupation may have several goals depending on the context. Wilhite et al (2004) describe the contribution of goal attainment as being crucial to health and well-being.

Baxter et al (1995) wrote that non obligatory occupations will require either intrinsic motivation such as enjoyment or extrinsic motivation such as an end product or goal, which will lead to a sense of pride in achievement (Miller Polgar & Landry 2004)

### **Being fully human**

The concept of occupation was central to humankind (Yerxa et al 1989) and understanding individual's occupational potential was essential to understanding what it was to be fully human (Wicks 2005).

Occupational potential, being a complex, individual and unpredictable phenomenon builds on culture, heritage and performance to enable a sense of individuality, self-efficacy and being fully human (Wicks 2005). Christiansen (1999) concludes that occupational engagement was not just important to being human, but to being a unique individual through providing opportunities for individuals to experience flow, make a contribution and discover socio cultural and spiritual meaning through their own actions.

### **Individual growth and life satisfaction**

Balancing and choosing occupations contribute to a perception of quality of life (Yerxa et al 1989), while engagement generates pleasure and satisfaction through achievement and completion of tasks (Miller Polgar and Landry (2004), Kinney & Coyle (1992), Drummond & Walker (1996))

Vrkljan and Polgar (2001) proposed that individuals grow as they move through the life span (encountering new situations) changing the meaning of an occupation along the way. Miller Polgar and Landry (2004) describe how an imbalance in occupational participation can have negative consequences and that imbalance can result from choice, ability or external influences.

When comparing the occupations of individuals with and with out disabilities Brown & Gordon (1987), Law, Steinwender and Le Claire (1998) all concluded that occupational satisfaction was associated with adjustment and well-being. They describe how a lack of engagement in social occupations such as leisure create a sense of truncated occupational experience and skill which itself leads to a reduced sense of competence, self-determination and shared understanding of society and its culture.

### **A clear sense of the rhythm of life**

A range of short and long term reality check occupations (day, week, season, year) was usually part of every day existence (Lobo 1999), which Meyer (1922) suggested contributed (along with

internal rhythms) to a “kind of rhythm”. Longer-term, skill levels and trends alter across the lifespan e.g. a play focussed in childhood leading to a work focus in adulthood (Miller Polgar and Landry 2004).

Larson and Zemke (2003) highlighted how families and groups share values and beliefs about time use and also how complicated coordinating activities are performed with others who also have rhythms, schedules and beliefs to accommodate.

### **Belonging**

Dickie (2003) described the myths, rituals, shared language and sense of humour that are part of the culture of a club. She also described how being part of this culture gave access to “trade secrets”, shared values, attitudes, behaviours, attributes and companionship, and that these were often more important than the occupational skill required.

Tinsley (1995) and Miller Polgar and Landry (2004) describe occupational engagement as meeting altruism and belongingness needs. Crombie et al (2004) noted that the context in which an occupation was carried out reflects the

social status beliefs and collective attitudes of the group. This would seem to indicate that occupational engagement in that particular social context usually brings with it an implicit belongingness (if only for that session). Stebbins (2004) lists the rewards of serious leisure engagement as group accomplishment through being needed and being altruistic.

### **Self-expression and Creativity**

Creativity was something that can be drawn upon to refresh, invigorate (Schmid 2005) and be an outlet for self-expression (Tinsley 1995, Stebbins 2004), freedom and enjoyment (Crombie et al 2004). It has been described as an “innate capacity” which has developed as a survival tool during human evolution (Schmid 2005). Cohen (2000) wrote, “Creativity was a natural, vibrant force throughout our lives—a catalyst for growth, excitement and forging a meaningful legacy.” Markus & Kitayama (1991) claimed that creativity and self-expression allow others to see who we really are.

Reynolds & Prior (2003) and Molineux and Whiteford (1999) felt that creative experiences are important and strengthen self-awareness and self-esteem through enabling self-expression. Reynolds &



Pricr (2006) proposed that “creative adventure” could be a defining feature of “flow”, because it provides concentration, exhilaration & engagement with the occupation etc.

### **Interaction with the occupation / challenge and experimentation**

Occupations that provide the individual with a sense of achievement often do so through competition, pushing the boundaries of previous experience or personal challenge (Passmore and French (2003), Drummond and Walker (1996), Lobo (1999) and Farnworth (1998) which would seem to resonate with Passmore’s (1998) finding that one of the types of leisure occupations that contribute to personal growth was “achievement leisure”. This type of leisure provides challenges, is demanding and requires commitment to produce an end product or result.

Attributing meaning to an occupation comes through interaction with the occupation (i.e. whether as a spectator or an active participant), with others, with the individual themselves (Strauss in Hocking 2000) and in the context of their cultural familial and historical beliefs. Miller Polgar and Landry (2004) and also

Townsend and Wilcock (2004) make the point that experimentation and personal growth are important factors to investing meaning to an occupation.

Autonomy has been shown to encourage intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and a desire for challenge (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Excessive external control, insufficient challenge, and lack of interaction with an occupation on the other hand, disrupts the inherent actualising tendencies of an individual, resulting not only in the lack of initiative and responsibility, but also in distress (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### **Just right environment**

Lobo (1999) highlighted the value of a change of environment when carrying out different types of occupations, especially where there was a need to replace the routine and change of location involved in employment. Rebeiro & Cook (1999) suggests that the creation of a “just right” environment and the provision of occupations based upon client choice, will increase confidence to engage in future occupations as well as a desire to maintain occupational engagement into the future.

Warr (1987) defined the characteristics of occupational environments that are beneficial to health as including a balance

of choice, opportunity for skill use, variety/ balance, suitability of resources, safety and security, and interpersonal contact. The opposite was reported by Feather and O'Brien (1986), i.e. that when occupations are mundane, routine, not meaningful and tiring, they have negative effects on well-being, especially where they provide low rewards, in an unsuitable environment.

### **Cultural (Rules, customs, and traditions) and historical components**

To accept the rules or norms of an occupation, individuals need to understand its context and meaning and synthesise this into their own goals and values. This synthesis requires a sense of choice, volition, and freedom from excessive external pressure according to Kuhl & Fuhrmann (1998).

Wicks (2005) described how occupational potential builds on these rules and habits, while Dickie (2003) described the myths, rituals, shared language, shared values, attitudes, and behaviours etc as being key to belonging. An individual's opportunities for selecting occupations are governed by personal abilities, what the choices are, and cultural value judgements. (Larsson et al 1995)

A social/ cultural role (Molineux and Whiteford 1999) will be shaped by cultural components to the occupation, the individual's beliefs (Franke and Engle 2001, Wilcock 1998), and interactions with others. Knowing who we are i.e. about cultural, historical and religious roots, to understand their meaning for each individual and to have these acknowledged by others, is important for self identity.

Spirituality and beliefs may involve an integration of the dimensions of mind, body and spirit. They may include such things as a strong belief in charitable acts, healing through crystals or the alignment of furniture etc. Spirituality shapes an individual's perspective on the world and was expressed in the way that he or she lives life (Johnston & Mayers 2005).

Gender, age, educational level, ethnicity and socio-economic status all affect leisure engagement patterns according to Dickie (2003) and McKay (1986). Leisure activities often involve rules, rituals, customs, and traditions that are important for the meaning that they give to the participant (Klapp 1986, Farnworth 1998). Social roles involve the individual in

giving of themselves to others e.g. gifts, experience, and interaction.

### Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the current literature in order to describe why leisure occupations are meaningful, and beneficial for health, well-being and Quality of Life.

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