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Re-conceptualizing Serious Leisure: Defining *Leisure as Experience* in Everyday Life

Abstract:

Using qualitative methods of inquiry, this presentation explores complexities of the experience-based world of a remote, rural village in Northern Ontario, Canada. Data gathered through environmental scanning, photo-methods and semi-structured interviews improve our understanding of what constitutes leisure experience in this environment. Findings support Gallant et al.'s (Gallant, Arai, & Smale, 2013) recommendation that serious leisure be defined in terms of experiences that occur within social worlds.

Format:

Formal presentation only

Thematic Areas:

1. Other (Theory Advancement)
2. Community Development
3. Leisure and Tourism

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Appreciate the relationship between the study of experiential information and the study of serious leisure as experience.
2. Contribute to the discussion of Gallant et al.'s (Gallant et al., 2013) re-conceptualization of 'serious leisure as experience' based on empirical evidence.
3. Recognize and advocate for further study of tourism contexts where experiential information and serious leisure theory overlap, particularly where the overlap may lead to community development.

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Introduction

This paper presents findings from a doctoral research project that examines experience as an information source across the work–maintenance–leisure spectrum. Results confirm the fluid nature of the boundaries between work, maintenance and leisure in everyday life, and answer Gallant et al.’s call for “alternative methodologies and expanded theorizing to capture the ideologies and discourses that shape and construct [leisure] experience” (Gallant et al., 2013).

Theoretical Influences

In order to advance our understanding of experience-based information behaviours, including leisure information behaviours, this project draws theoretically from the disciplines of leisure studies and information behaviour studies.

Serious leisure theory developed by Professor Robert Stebbins beginning in the 1980s, is a framework with which to examine the voluntary non-work, non-maintenance, pleasurable activities people engage in (Stebbins, 1982; Stebbins, 1997; Stebbins, 2005). Used to study leisure pursuits as diverse as hobbies (Stebbins, 1996), sport (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002), volunteering (Harrington, Cuskelly, & Auld, 2000) and tourism (Kane & Zink), as well as aging (Heley & Jones, 2013), gendered (Raisborough, 2006) and disabled (Patterson & Pegg, 2009) populations, it has recently come under examination by Gallant et al. (Gallant et al., 2013), who note three challenges associated with the current framework. First, its focus on leisure activities unnecessarily limits the complexity with which leisure can be viewed. Secondly, unacknowledged, socially constructed dichotomies limit the study and interpretation of serious leisure. And third, a lack of attention to the social context in which leisure pursuits are undertaken inhibits examination of other benefits associated with leisure, such as the potential for it to nurture social ties and build identity.

Information behaviour theories explain how and why people actively or passively seek, avoid or encounter information in everyday life contexts, including work, maintenance and leisure aspects of everyday life (Savolainen, 1995; Savolainen, 2008; Savolainen, 2009). The number of studies examining information behaviours in leisure contexts has grown steadily since the introduction of leisure to this discipline in 2003 (Fulton & Vondracek, 2009). Although it is now widely acknowledged that leisure activities facilitate a rich assortment of information behaviours (Stebbins, July 2012), empirical investigation into leisure information behaviours has been limited to activity-based serious leisure contexts and their enthusiasts, for example gourmet cooks (Hartel, 2007), serial collectors (Case, 2009), photographers (Cox, 2013), and backpackers (Chang, 2009). Not surprisingly, it can be said that the development of information behaviour theory around leisure domains faces similar challenges to those identified by Gallant et al. above.

Purpose:

To overcome these limitations, Gallant et al. propose “envisioning serious leisure as an *experience*” (Gallant et al., 2013). This study represents an initial attempt to bring together the disciplines of leisure studies and information behaviour studies in a way that privileges the experiential nature of information behaviours in everyday life. By examining experience as an information source broadly across the work-maintenance-leisure spectrum, we stand to gain a

more nuanced understanding of leisure information experiences than can be obtained by examining individual activities in isolation.

Study Design

This study examines work, leisure, and everyday life experiences in the remote, rural village of Whitney, Ontario¹. Situated adjacent to Algonquin Provincial Park, Whitney is home to approximately 700 full time residents who earn their livings in primarily blue collar and domestic occupations, including the logging industry, caring for home and family, employment with the Ministry of Natural Resources, and through seasonal tourist-related service businesses. This is a particularly interesting location from which to examine both experience in general, and leisure experience in particular, as the residents of this village dedicate a high proportion of resources to the pursuit of a plethora of leisure activities, and in service to a diverse group of leisure experience seekers. The following research questions guided my inquiry:

1. What does experience look like in this environment?
2. What constitutes leisure experience for the people who live here?

I use a qualitative, ethnographic framework to explore contemporary and historical facets of experience in this rural context, from the perspective of the residents themselves. Methods of data collection include photo methods, environmental scanning, and semi-structured interviews with 24 adult residents ranging in age from 20-89. Highlights of the data include over 400 photo-voice, salvage and documentary photographs, more than seven dozen personal letters and documents (c.1940-1960), and a decade of historical elementary school registers and board minutes (c. 1930-40). Data analysis follows according to grounded theory using the constant comparative method, whereby “incidents that are found to be conceptually similar” are given “the same conceptual label” until each emerging theme is fully elaborated (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Significant Findings

Results of this study support Gallant et al.’s claim that serious leisure “is more textured and complex than often acknowledged” (Gallant et al., 2013). In particular, the study finds that boundaries between domains of life and different social worlds are considerably more fluid than previously described in either the leisure studies or information behaviour literature.

While examining leisure information behaviours from the perspective of activity reveals micro-level detail about particular activities, examining leisure information behaviours from the perspective of experience reveals macro-level detail and connections between activities that might otherwise remain hidden. For example, participants did not necessarily discriminate between the imposed domain boundaries of work, everyday life, and serious, casual, and project-based leisure described in leisure studies and information behaviour literature. Participants cited many occasions where the same activity was undertaken for multiple purposes spanning the leisure–work–maintenance spectrum, rewarding participants differently in each domain. Female participants, for example, described foraging for berries as a fun way to spend time, as a way to

¹ Ethics approval for this research project was granted by the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University according to SSHRC Guidelines (2010) and the University’s Policy on Research Involving Human Subjects. All participants agreed to waive anonymity, due in part to the perceived collective benefit of preserving biographical information. Naming the community allows not only a fuller appreciation of the specific context under study, but also highlights a predisposition in that community toward social benefit over individual interests, further supporting Gallant et al.’s use of feminist communitarianism as a lense through which to view serious leisure.

provide fresh fruit for the family, and as a way to earn income. Similar experiences emerged around discussions of other activities including fishing, hunting, crafting, preserving, cooking, and carpentry.

Data also support studying the social worlds of serious leisure in terms of “a fluid plurality” (Gallant et al., 2013). While many studies of leisure social worlds have focused on enthusiasts, results of this study suggest that some leisure activities involve a social ethos consisting of multiple layers of community as well. For example, data suggests that both individuals and small groups enjoy hunting. Yet the impact of a large number of small groups participating in the activity at the same time and in close geographic proximity was both taken for granted and supported by the community at large. Data also shows that students have regularly been withdrawn from school during hunting season (dating back to the 1930s) to participate in the activity. Further, careful attention is paid to family communities and friend communities in terms of who is invited to hunt. These hunting communities not only come together annually to participate, but membership persists across generations, ebbing and flowing with the birth, growth and death cycles of life. Finally, community activities spurred on by hunting season include not only sharing of labour, but also sharing of the proceeds of the hunt among intra-group and extra-group members. Taken together, the data supports Gallant et al.’s suggestion “that experiences of serious leisure influence and are influenced by the socio-political context in which they occur” (Gallant et al., 2013).

Implications for Future Study

Examining serious leisure from the perspective of experience opens the door to a more nuanced understanding of leisure interests, behaviours, practices and activities. While this study supports Gallant et al.’s idea that “the current serious leisure framework may reflect a predominantly Western conceptualization of leisure as distinct from work and does not capture the nature and practice of leisure in some other cultures” (Gallant et al., 2013) more importantly, it suggests that unique leisure cultures may be evident even within a single, larger socio-cultural context.

Findings of this study also hint that further examination of leisure practices and experiences in unique cultural contexts is warranted, particularly in situations that have the potential to “provide a context for [both] individual empowerment and community development” (Arai & Pedlar, 1997 as cited in (Gallant et al., 2013). Non-profit tourist operations have successfully commodified knowledge from everyday life or work contexts like the one in this study, and packaged it for leisure consumption in the form of tourist experiences in several remote, rural locations (for example, Fogo Island Inn and John C. Campbell Folk School). Community-benefit tourism projects that market experiential information of the varieties examined in this study appear to not only preserve elements of culture at risk of disappearing, but also to create cultural awareness among groups of people who might not otherwise meet, and to dissolve the dichotomous ways in which we tend to view both leisure pursuits and information behaviours. Further collaborative investigation of such cross-over leisure and information behaviour experiences are a natural fit that would benefit both disciplines.

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