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Selected Social Gerontology Theories and Older Adult Leisure Involvement: A Review of the Literature

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Selected studies conducted by leisure researchers about the leisure involvement of older adults are reviewed and implications are drawn for readers concerned with aging and leisure. To set the tone, the activity and disengagement theories of aging are discussed within the overall conceptual framework of role theory. The range of contributions found in recent leisure literature related to aging and activity involvement, from testimonials to atheoretical works to empirical studies, is then discussed. Shortcomings of the state of the art lead to the consideration of continuity theory as a fruitful avenue for leisure research within the role theory framework. Finally, some implications for further research and professional practice are highlighted.

Leisure researchers are interested in the leisure involvement of older adults for a number of reasons. Early leisure research emphasized human growth, development, and adjustment by focusing on children's play. With the maturing of the leisure field, the more recent focus is on such constructs for older adults. Second, changing demographics indicate an increase in the number and percentage of older adults in the population of North America. Knowing more about older people is useful to recreators as human service professionals. Third, leisure researchers have developed an interest in understanding changes in

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leisure involvement throughout the life course (Kelly, 1982, 1987). Finally, the social theories of aging offer conceptual frameworks through which leisure roles may be examined.

Kaplan (1975, pp. 146-163) proposed viewing human behavior as a dialectical pattern of tension and resolution. He saw the latent functions (intents and effects) of leisure as a series of dichotomies between constructs such as freedom and discipline or sociability and isolation. Iso-Ahola (1980) also found value in viewing leisure behavior as a dialectical process in which there is a continuous interplay of opposing forces including stability and change, structure and variety, and familiarity and novelty. Such juxtapositions allow leisure researchers to use the work of developmental psychologists and social gerontologists when they are studying what people want out of their leisure experiences, what leisure experiences mean to people, and/or why people are involved in their leisure experiences. Further, a dialectical perspective also facilitates understanding the phenomena of withdrawal and engagement that appear throughout the literature on older adults' leisure. Before turning to such literature, remarks are offered about two of the social theories that relate to these phenomena.

Two Social Theories of Aging: Activity and Disengagement

Kart and Manard (1981) contended that there is no grand social theory of aging and that some of the "theories" that have entered the social gerontology literature are not really theories in the strictest sense of that term. Yet, such theories do serve at least as guideposts for continuing research. These authors purported that role theory was the guiding force for social gerontologists' earliest attempts to understand the adjustment of older persons. They stated, "Activity theory is related to role theory and has appeared implicitly in much gerontological research" (p. 2). The cornerstone of activity theory is a positive relationship between activity and life satisfaction; conversely, the greater the social role loss, the lower the life satisfaction. The most successful aging (adjustment) occurs for those persons who stay active and resist the consequences of changes that equate with losses (Kart & Manard, 1981).

Disengagement theory, on the other hand, proposes a mutually desirable withdrawal between older persons and others in their social

system (Cumming & Henry, 1961). The theory argues that gradual withdrawal is functional for society and satisfying for those older persons who have been socialized for impending death (Kart & Manard, 1981).

Activity Theory of Aging

Lemon, Bengtson, and Peterson (1972/1981) summarized the mixed findings from gerontological research about activity theory through the 1970s. They also conducted their own study to test explicitly the assumptions and evidence about the importance of social role involvement and its relationship to adjustment to aging. After numerous cautions to the reader, they stated that “the most specific suggestion from these data is that participation in an informal friendship group appears to be an important correlate of life satisfaction—but not, contrary to what may be deduced from a formal activity theory, frequency of activity in general” (p. 31). Lemon et al. continued:

The more general conclusion from this study is . . . surprisingly little support for the implicit activity theory of aging that has served as the theoretical base for practice as well as research in gerontology for decades. The propositions that the greater the frequency of activity, the greater one's life satisfaction and that the greater the role loss, the lower the life satisfaction were in the main not substantiated by this research. (p. 31)

Lemon et al. (1972/1981) criticized activity theory as a simple, linear model for predicting life satisfaction. They found such an approach to be too insufficient to capture the complexity of the interplay between people and their social situations. They suggested the following:

It makes more sense to focus on the process involved in adaptation to aging than the static relations among elements; to construct a paradigm reflective of the cyclical qualities implied in feedback loops, rather than linear combinations of terms. Finally, one should . . . examine the multiple interdependent contingencies among variables rather than two-by-two relationships. This, the common-sense, simplistic statement of activity theory, is incapable of doing. (p. 33)

Activity theory alone was found to lack the substance to explain the richness and complexities of involvement in activities as well as the positive sense of well-being found as some people grow older.

Disengagement Theory of Aging

Cumming (1963/1981) elaborated on disengagement theory, postulating that mutual withdrawal between the older person and others in their social system may be initiated by either the person or others in the system. She stated, "When disengagement is complete, the equilibrium that existed in middle life between the individual and society has given way to a new equilibrium characterized by greater distance, and a changed base for solidarity" (p. 40). This mutual, gradual disengagement process is a normatively governed social imperative, with the older person preparing in advance for fewer, more narrow roles and experiencing changes in relationships. It is also an inner experience affected by temperament (pp. 46-54). Cumming also noted that engagement is the opposite of disengagement, not activity. Thus the alleged "obvious" contradictions between the two theories are along the wrong dimensions (p. 56), in her judgment.

Authors in gerontology and leisure (Atchley, 1980; Crandall, 1980; Dowd, 1975/1981; Teaff, 1985; Teague, 1980; Ward, 1979) have recounted the literature that compares and contrasts, defines and delimits, and supports and attacks these two well-known social theories of aging. Their common conclusion is that for both substantive and methodological reasons, *neither* theory is sufficient by itself to explain fully the myriad patterns of adjustment to aging. Each theory appears to be too simple, filled with tacit assumptions, and fraught with ideological overtones. Activity theory can be interpreted to be a prescription for older adults to remain active: To be active is what they *ought* to do to be happy. Disengagement theory can be interpreted as a justification for withdrawal from older persons because presumably that is what they want. Right or wrong, it is the former ideology, the ideology of activity theory, that implicitly underlies the writings of many leisure researchers regarding older adults. The literature shows that leisure researchers tend to reference gerontologists such as Bosse and Ekerdt (1981), Burgess (1960), De Carlo (1974), Gordon, Gaitz, and Scott (1976), Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin (1968), Larson (1978), Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin (1961), Palmore (1968, 1979), Peppers (1976), and Rose (1964) for their consideration of activity theory and/or their findings about the relationship between the frequency of leisure activity participation and happiness or life satisfaction among older adults. For leisure researchers to infer that these gerontologists are advocates of activity theory may reflect the leisure researchers' own predispositions more

than the actual content of the references cited. Gerontological findings may have been misinterpreted as being strongly supportive of activity theory by reducing the theory to a simple quantitative relationship. With respect to the gerontological literature, little suggests that the frequency of activity alone causes a person to be happy. The importance of the *quality* of the leisure involvement is often discussed.

Leisure Roles

Most of the theoretically based leisure research about older adults examines work roles, retirement roles, and leisure roles. Kaplan (1975, p. 26) offered the following definition:

[The leisure role] consists of relatively self-determined activity-experience that falls into one's economically free time roles, that is seen as leisure by participants, that is psychologically pleasant in anticipation and recollection, that potentially covers the whole range of commitment and intensity, that contains characteristic norms and constraints, and that provides opportunities for recreation, personal growth, and service to others.

There is a disparity in the leisure literature about the meaning of *leisure* and *recreation*. The terms are used synonymously, as time, as activity, and as institutions. According to Kaplan (1975, pp. 26-29), leisure is a subjective phenomenon, such that any experience or activity may be labeled *leisure* if so perceived by the person involved in it. Thus leisure is a mental condition or a state of mind that may manifest itself in activity or experience. This conceptualization of leisure is assuming dominance in the leisure literature (Murphy, 1981) and enables leisure researchers to operate from a role-theory framework.

However, not all of the leisure research about older adults is theoretically based. A portion of it is testimonial and/or atheoretical. Those two segments of the literature are addressed in the following section.

Leisure Literature and Research on Older Adults

The review of leisure literature on the involvement of older adults in leisure activities commences with brief descriptions of publications that are testimonial in nature. Such works are a part of the published body of

knowledge put forth in recreation and leisure. Then the review turns to an area that has been reported without much attention to theory: investigations of barriers to leisure engagement. Finally, selected theoretically based leisure research is presented.

Testimonials in the Literature

In 1979, Berndt and Ray published an extensive listing of literature about older adults that they judged to be relevant for persons concerned with leisure programs and services for that group. The books written by *leisure* authors up to the time of their listing (see Berndt & Ray, 1979, p. 55) consisted of activities guides or suggestions of things to do. Rowthorn (1974) earlier cautioned that such “smorgasbords of activities” may be merely busywork—something that feeds but does not nourish. A second illustration of such testimonials was the 1981 special issue of *Parks & Recreation* that emphasized aging. The issue consisted of articles prescribing activities for older people based almost exclusively on the personal opinion of the authors. Last, an issue of *Leisure Today*, devoted to new perspectives on leisure and aging (Bates, 1977), was similar in vein. The following quote from the issue captures this: “We don’t stop playing because we get old; rather we get old because we stop playing” (Corbin, 1977, p. 28). This is not to deny the sentiment of the phrase, but to show that a part of the published leisure literature on older adults is just that—sentiment.

Selected Studies on Barriers to Leisure Engagement

The second area has had limited theoretical development—the investigation of barriers preventing older adults from participating in leisure. Leisure researchers used descriptive techniques, reflecting an applied concern about what prohibits older persons from leisure participation in community and institutional environments. Most of the work led to lists of items that diminish leisure involvement and/or shrink older persons’ leisure repertoires (Buchanan & Allen, 1985; Godbey & Blazey, 1983; McGuire, 1984, 1985; Mobily et al., 1984; O’Sullivan, 1986). As summarized in Buchanan and Allen (1985, p. 42), those barriers include lack of time, perceived poor health, fear of crime, lack of competence, lack of knowledge, lack of companions, and cost. This provides the professional with a set of facts to make service decisions.

Buchanan and Allen (1985) give another insight into the "interpersonal barriers" (see also O'Sullivan, 1986) to leisure involvement by extending the work of Witt and Goodale (1981). Witt and Goodale used stage theory and the family life cycle as a framework for investigating leisure constraints. Buchanan and Allen (1985) focused specifically on the later stages of the life course and status of the family to study barriers to participation. Perceived lack of time remained the major inhibitor across the life course, peaking during the child-rearing years. However, if one probes a little deeper and thinks about the use and meaning of time in the later life stages, perhaps a negative attitude or value orientation to leisure as it occurs within unobligated time is a truer reason for uninvolvement as suggested by Iso-Ahola (1980), O'Sullivan (1986), and Riddick (1986). One may speculate that the current cohort of older adults has some beliefs about work, leisure, and discretionary time that question the value of leisure pursuits.

Ragheb and Griffith (1980) found that for older persons, a positive attitude toward leisure is necessary for them to derive satisfaction from participation and that *satisfaction* with leisure contributes much more to life satisfaction than mere leisure participation. These findings (elaborated on later) suggest going beyond the consideration of frequency of participation alone (or barriers to participation) to an understanding of the quality of leisure. However, the next phase in the development of the body of knowledge was to attempt to identify systematically what activities people were pursuing, thus emphasizing enumeration and categorization.

Leisure Research Emphasizing Activities

These "status studies" enumerated the amount of time spent participating in leisure pursuits; the variety, types, or categories of activities pursued; or the frequency with which people engaged in their pursuits. Typically, the number of activities older persons pursued was counted or the amount of time spent was recorded (Bultena & Wood, 1970; Glamser & Hayslip, 1985; Kelly, Steinkamp, & Kelly, 1986; McAvoy, 1979; Morgan & Godbey, 1978; Strain & Chappell, 1979; Tinsley, Colbs, Teaff, & Kaufman, 1987). The findings showed some differences in involvement in *specific* leisure pursuits. But, the authors conjectured that these differences could be because of subject selection, differing operational definitions of leisure, diverse instrumentation, differing research designs and settings, diverse methods of data analysis, diversity among older persons themselves, or the multifaceted nature of the

leisure phenomenon. Kelly (1983) provided strong methodological and substantive evidence for a core of relatively informal and accessible activities common to most adults as they move across the life course. He found that

such activities as reading, watching television, taking little outings with family and friends, and informal interaction within the household do not appear to be differentiated significantly by any of the allegedly discriminating [SES type] variables. Rather, there may be a realm of common activities engaged in more or less regularly by most adults. (p. 324)

It is not surprising, when reviewing the results of the aforementioned studies, that under *general activity categories* general agreement emerges. According to the studies, older adults report participating in casual social interaction (visiting friends and relatives); media usage (television, radio, and newspapers); home-centered activities (puttering); opportunities for self-development (expressive, spiritual, or educational activities); and informal outdoor activities (walking for pleasure in natural areas and gardening). So, whether one determines that the differences exceed the similarities or the similarities exceed the differences depends on whether one (in looking at the results) considers the *specifically enumerated leisure pursuits* or the *general clusters* of leisure activities.

Another point of controversy is the degree to which the older adult prefers to engage in activities that are solitary or social (Glamser & Hayslip, 1985; Ragheb & Griffith, 1982; Sneegas, 1986). Kleiber and Kelly (1980) framed this as a dialectic between disengagement and relatedness. Basically, they concluded that if so chosen, leisure can be a very effective setting for human/social bonding. Larson (1978), Kelly (1987), and Kelly, Steinkamp, and Kelly (1986) stated that leisure is a context for relatedness and intimacy as well as the evolution of individual identity. Thus leisure involves a dialectic between the solitary and the social as individuals perceive the freedom to make their own choices (Kleiber & Kelly, 1980). This area remains open for further investigation, especially regarding what influences those choices (Kelly et al., 1986).

Theoretical Research on Older Adults' Leisure Involvement

Several empirical studies by leisure researchers tend to support activity theory, although each investigated the contribution of leisure

involvement to the life satisfaction of older adults from a different research perspective.

Ragheb and Griffith (1980) focused on the contribution of leisure activity participation and leisure satisfaction to the life satisfaction of older adults (see also Keller, 1983). They emphasized the relationship of the *quality* of leisure participation (namely, leisure satisfaction) to life satisfaction. Ragheb and Griffith (1980) found that the higher the frequency of participation in leisure activities, the higher the life satisfaction; the more leisure participation, the higher the leisure satisfaction; and the greater the leisure satisfaction, the greater the life satisfaction. Further, they found that leisure satisfaction contributed *much more* to the life satisfaction of older persons than frequency of leisure participation. Their work extended beyond activity theory, while supporting elements of both quality *and* quantity in comprehending the leisure role. Life satisfaction was found to be a composite of different satisfactions, with leisure satisfaction being a primary component.

Riddick and Daniel (1984), by identifying some of the factors contributing to the life satisfaction of older women, examined the efficacy of a model they developed that involved mutable variables for explaining life satisfaction. Their main finding was that "leisure activity participation emerged as the strongest contributing factor to the life satisfaction of older women" (p. 146), cautiously supporting activity theory.

Romsa, Bondy, and Blenman (1985) held that activity and disengagement theories were limited bases from which to examine the relationship between older adults' leisure activity patterns and life satisfaction. In their modeling approach, they examined life satisfaction in relation to psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, life-cycle change, and socioenvironmental influences. They found Maslow's hierarchy a useful framework for understanding the leisure needs and behavior of their subjects. They also found, characteristic of Maslow's need set, that recreation dimensions representing the underlying structure of older persons' leisure activities were identifiable and related to levels of life satisfaction. There was "some evidence that it is the number and type of activities participated in that are more significant than the frequency of involvement with a given activity" (1985, p. 38), which concurs with the work of Lemon et al. (1972/1981). Once again, mixed findings appear.

Sneegas (1986) examined the relationships among perceived social competence, leisure participation, leisure satisfaction, and the life satisfaction of middle and older adults. After applying path analysis to a

justified model, her main finding was that perceptions of social competence influenced levels of leisure participation and leisure satisfaction, which in turn affected life satisfaction. Essentially consistent with Ragheb and Griffith (1980, 1982) but focusing on social competence, Sneegas (1986, p. 256) concluded: "The results . . . indicate that the quality of life of adults is influenced by the effect of perceived social competence on leisure participation and leisure satisfaction."

Teague (1980) acknowledged the complexities of investigating the social psychological aspects of aging whether one is a leisure or gerontology researcher. Both fields have partial theories that are useful under certain conditions and that emanate from a variety of disciplines. Each has a service orientation and a mandate to provide for clientele needs. This "state of disarray" leaves each field with the opportunity either to refine its present theories as maturing frameworks for understanding the leisure involvement of older persons or to discard one or more of them as biased perspectives. This situation also encourages the development and testing of other theories such as continuity theory.

Continuity Theory: A Third Social Theory of Aging

Continuity theory provides a means to return to a dialectical consideration of leisure and a framework to examine the relationship between leisure behavior in early and later life (Kelly, 1982). It proposes that optimal aging is characteristic of those who are able to maintain and continue their roles, activities, habits, or associations on retirement, or to find meaningful substitute pursuits. The older person adjusts to retirement by increasing the time spent in roles already played as opposed to developing new ones (Atchley, 1980). The adult identity is presumed to be based on a variety of roles. Thus loss of the work role does not throw the adjusted older adult into an identity crisis. Instead, there is identity continuity through substituting or embellishing leisure roles for lost roles in the changed work or family situation. In support of this, Iso-Ahola (1980) noted that there is a degree of stability to leisure patterns over time, particularly when older persons join in leisure in which there is perceived competence and familiarity. Tinsley et al. (1987) also supported continuity theory in terms of the psychological benefits of leisure for older adults, including the satisfaction of companionship needs, which may have been previously met through the lost work or

family roles, but are now being met through the leisure role; the satisfaction of recognition and self-esteem needs; and the satisfaction of power needs by involvement with volunteer or other social groups of organizations. Each of these phenomena was considered to be an element of one's identity. On the other hand, Glamser and Hayslip (1985) found variation in the involvement of retirees in leisure activities, with noninvolvement being the most stable form of behavior. They found that the leisure role was not completely substitutable for the work role (p. 37). Miller's (1965) crisis theory deserves mention here.

Miller (1965) holds a contrasting view, crisis theory, which contends that retirement is traumatizing, stigmatizing, and degrading owing to the loss of the work role. In North American society, work is the primary source of identity, which is irreplaceable by any other role, including leisure. The primacy of the work role is normatively supported. The work ethic serves to "legitimize" those who are gainfully occupied. Thus it is assumed that one's sense of self emanates from one's work, and to maintain feelings of worth, most people would not choose to retire. Undoubtedly, involuntary retirement would be a loss and a negative experience. But, the degree to which voluntary retirement elicits an identity crisis may be a highly individualized response that really has little to do with one's work orientation. The diversity of roles and the way they are valued by the individual may be most revealing about adjustment to retirement.

McGuire and Dottavio (1985) also questioned the extent to which early childhood leisure socialization influences later life leisure involvement as part of a nationwide outdoor recreation survey of older adults. They found a divergence in leisure socialization models as follows: A group of individuals, "contractors," typified the childhood determination model, learning about 59% of the outdoor recreation activities they were doing at the time of their study before age 18. They did not add many outdoor pursuits to their leisure repertoire after reaching adulthood, seemingly following the premises of continuity theory. However, a second group, "expanders," learned about 18% of the activities they were doing at the time of the study before age 18. They constituted about one-third of the total sample and initiated over half of their outdoor pursuits after age 50. The authors stated that this group appeared to develop new activities (seeking novelty) on growing older rather than carrying over earlier ones, reflecting change rather than continuity and typifying the life career model of leisure behavior. As was the case with Glamser and Hayslip (1985), a single theory was unable to

explain a given phenomenon entirely. This influence of prior and current levels of involvement, the meaning of the activities in which persons are (or are not) involved, and role substitutability as an indicator of continuity are all in need of further research.

Research Implications

Returning to the definition of the leisure role, the essence of leisure is grounded in free, personal choice from which emotional and/or physical well-being flows (Tinsley et al., 1987). It could be in the realm of free choice and personal development that the richest relationship between leisure and the social theories of aging lies. Some of what people do as leisure may be carried with them over the life course, but the meaning of what they do may shift based on the way in which individuals experience and/or redefine their lives (Kelly, 1987).

If it is hypothesized that involvement in leisure experiences or roles is valid and meaningful in its own right, then research and theory must evolve to encompass the quality of the role and the quality of the experience as they are part of the quality of life of the older adult. This research requires continued probing of the person—exploring attitudes, motivations, values, pleasure, self-definition, intensity, and so on. At present, the centrality of the leisure role does not seem totally verified for older adults. What roles constitute identity for older adults? Kelly (1982, p. 280) suggested that role theory as a basis for understanding the life course is also dialectical, assuming both continuity and change. Leisure is part of the tapestry of roles and identities that composes the personal and social fabric. As a later life role, leisure appears to demonstrate both continuity and discontinuity, perhaps because all involvements change (to some degree) in meaning and salience as one ages. This point needs further investigation, and role theory may be a valuable path to follow.

Practical Implications

Kleiber and Thompson (1980) indicated that positive attitudes toward and experiences in leisure relate to adjustment in retirement. As a practical implication of this idea, they advocated education and counseling programs to enhance leisure literacy. Such a program is quite provocative in terms of professional practice in the field of leisure for older adults. The ultimate end of leisure literacy is independent leisure

functioning. This requires professionals to have skills in assessment, education, and evaluation as well as an understanding of the psychological, physiological, and sociological characteristics of people as they move across the life course. Professionals also have to be able to identify the programs, services, and resources available for referral.

Leisure and aging appear to be best understood by examining personal adjustment, morale, and the meaning of leisure. It is suggested that there is a core of informal, "everyday" pursuits in which most adults are involved. The task of the professional is to help persons throughout the life course to be aware of the potential of leisure for their lives and to be able to function as leisure literates. The recognition of a lifelong dialectic of change and continuity as a source of growth is essential to optimize personal competence in leisure decision making and problem solving, no matter what a person's age.

Theories, as frameworks for research, provide maps for understanding the social and personal landscape of the human experience. At this point in understanding leisure and aging, the routes are incomplete and the roads are rough with wrong turns and dead ends. But the maps do give direction; they allow for the relative determination of where one has been and where one is going, or if, indeed, one has been lost. The task of mapmaking will never be complete but will remain a challenge and a goal to those who chart the dynamics of aging and leisure.

New knowledge may come to bear with an interdisciplinary emphasis on future research on leisure and aging. New combinations of existing theories may allow greater insight and a fuller understanding of leisure in the lives of older adults. Such new combinations may also lead to principles that improve professional practice in the delivery of leisure programs and services to older adults and the education of a leisure literate population.

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