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Issues in Assessing Community Resources for the Leisure-Time Needs of the Elderly

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ISSUES IN ASSESSING COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR THE LEISURE-TIME NEEDS OF THE ELDERLY*

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ABSTRACT

The growth of leisure-time, following retirement, is potentially problematic for the elderly and can result in such adversities as depression, problem drinking, loneliness, and boredom. Leisure-time resources include recreation, education, volunteerism, training, voluntary associations, familialism, and solitary activities. The use of resources for leisure-time needs of the elderly are influenced by idiosyncratic differences; cultural background, financial resources, geographic variations; and the characteristics of programs and services. There is a need to better prepare individuals for the use of leisure-time. Each

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community must ensure that leisure-time resources exist and do not exclude any elderly from possible involvement, for either structural, programmatic, or philosophical reasons.

Ours is a work-oriented society which has evolved from the Protestant Work Ethic and the Spencerian philosophy of Social Darwinism - the survival of the fittest. Work had been the means to an end - survival - but in time developed functional autonomy and has become an end unto itself. Within these contexts, leisure time has been variously viewed as sinful or dysfunctional, restorative for work, or status conveyed to those who are deserving (Kaplan, 1970). Such conceptions have generally excluded the oldest members of society, and also the handicapped. Yet, the number of older people who are spending more and more of their lives in non-job related activities is growing. Whether one desires such free time is immaterial, for free time results from a combination of factors which generally include technological advances and economic fluctuations.

THE GROWTH OF LEISURE TIME

The growth of leisure time is viewed to be problematic; one solution is to eliminate those conditions which have given rise to the growth in leisure time. There are several separate yet interrelated reasons for this growth. As a society, we are facing earlier retirement, either voluntary or involuntary (Atchley, 1980a; Harris and Cole, 1980). While in the past one could work until unable or until one wanted to retire, the Social Security Act defined 65 to be the appropriate age for retirement, and the trend is for earlier and earlier retirement based upon years of service as well as chronological age (Neugarten, 1975). Mandatory retirement age has increased as the result of union demands and

economic forces. Yet, the trend towards early retirement has not abated and the age of 65 continues to be defined as the appropriate retirement age by our society. Attendant to earlier retirement is greater longevity. "Medical science is working on the probability that the apparently ironclad limit on human life will be broken - that humans will live to the age of 125 or 150 years" (Blakely, 1971, p. 175). Taken together, a growth in leisure time results from earlier retirement and longer post-retirement life and it may be that in the near future there will be 25 to 30 post-retirement years (Neugarten, 1975). Looked at another way, retirement which accounted for 3.0% of the entire life expectancy for men in 1900 increased to 20.0% in 1980 (United States Senate, 1984).

LEISURE TIME AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Should we not applaud the trend of the growing amount of time spent in non-work related activities for present and future populations of elderly in our country? It is certainly a testimony to the efficiency and organization of our present society that so many time-saving devices and techniques have accomplished their goal. Yet, this greater freedom has not come without its price. As Fromm (1973) states: "Among the answers to the question of how violence and drug consumption can be reduced it seems to me that perhaps one of the most important ones is to reduce boredom ... in leisure" (p. 88). Boredom from free time introduces a general question of whether free time is related to social problems for any age group and can be used to explain alcoholism (as Fromm did), non-utilitarian crime, depression, and misuse of medication, as well as other problems.

Undoubtedly, to envision the problematic ramifications to leisure time, one need only to view the aged in our society. The boredom from

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lack of activities for our elderly is common knowledge (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1981). Furthermore, the aged are less likely to be in the work world (Harris and Cole, 1980), and have been stripped of the most significant role in their lives: worker. The importance of work for economic reasons is obvious. But work has importance for social reasons; for work provides opportunities to develop friends, socialize, and share common activities (Harris and Cole, 1980). Work gives a reason for getting up each morning, taking care of grooming and appearance, and getting out of the house. Work gives a person a place to go, something to do, and someone with whom to share experiences.

Work has importance for psychological reasons. Self-esteem is often related to occupation, success in that occupation, and the recognition that one is adequately caring for the needs of dependents. The high suicide rates during the Great Depression can, in part, be explained by self-concept crises on the part of those unable to take care of their dependents.

Those who have free time resulting from retirement can face not only economic loss, but also diminished role and status. The consequences can include lowered morale, frustration, isolation, and loneliness. "..., it seems that retirement does constitute a serious threat to the way of life of most people, and some reorganization of the way they satisfy their needs has to ensue" (Chown, 1977, p. 683).

While many make necessary adjustments to free time, others cannot, and seek coping mechanisms. Peterson, et al. (1979) discuss heavy alcohol consumption by the elderly: "Too often the use of alcohol is not the result of emotional illness or psychological stress but merely of increased leisure-time, boredom, and a lack of challenging activities" (p. xv). Mishara and Kastenbaum (1980) have described the late-onset older problem drinker as turning to

alcohol as a result of depression, following loss of one's job.

The abuse and misuse of drugs by the elderly has also been discussed as a coping mechanism. Whittington and Petersen (1979) have suggested that older persons, like younger persons, may sometimes misuse drugs because of "the lack of meaningful work opportunities or leisure-time pursuits, boredom, and loneliness" (p. 25). Chown (1977) has indicated that excessive free time may result in emotional and psychological problems for the aged.

The affluent elderly can respond to free time in dubious ways. Although their leisure-time results from either past economic achievements or from the lack of need to work, the so-called "leisure class" also have such problems as alcoholism, drug misuse and mental illness. While the affluent do have the financial means to travel and can afford many activities, their trips, vacations, and activities can occasionally be interpreted as a pathetic and wasteful search for excitement and meaning. For the more-affluent retired, relative deprivation of role and status can be greater than for the less-affluent.

Another example of adverse ramifications from growing leisure time can be seen when a woman's children grow up and leave the home: the so-called "empty nest syndrome." While men and women in the work world face very similar situations when they retire, housewives whose traditional home and family activities and concerns are reduced must create alternative leisure-time pursuits or adversity may occur. The "empty nest" syndrome is not as problematic today as in the past for women, as they enjoy the options of work and career activities in addition to child-rearing. However, there is the increasingly evident complication of mid-life divorces (Garcia and Kosberg, 1985). Divorce constitutes a number of role exits for each

partner which creates loss of activities and, consequently, increased free-time. Often, this newly-found leisure is unwanted and comes with significant, if not overwhelming, stress. Here, are seen the prime ingredients, time and stress, for self-destruction through any number of escape behaviors (i.e., alcohol and other drugs).

Accordingly, the existence of leisure time has resulted in tumultuous ramifications for the retired, for the unemployed, and even for the divorced. The economic, social, and psychological losses are prodigious. Superimposed upon these losses, and greater leisure time, is the Protestant Work Ethic in our society. Such an ethic maintains that work is good and leisure an idleness. Having been socialized to this ethic, with its philosophical, psychological, and religious overtones, those with leisure time can be viewed as deviant, superfluous, socially superannuated, or nonfunctional (Miller, 1968). Unfortunately, these attitudes can be held and usually are held by those with the leisure time. In addition to feelings of guilt or rejection, boredom and emptiness can occur. "..., the current generation of older people is among the least prepared, practically or socially, to take advantage of its 'leisure'" (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1981, p. 347).

It should be noted that many persons withdraw gradually from the workplace. Social, psychological, and economic adjustments occur for them more easily than results from sudden withdrawal from the workforce. Also, many retired individuals replace work roles through consulting, volunteerism, and other creative and personally rewarding activities.

In sum, while leisure time may be desired and used meaningfully, it also can result in problems. Individually, new-found freedom can be met with guilt or boredom. Further, individuals may cope with free time by the use of alcohol or

drugs, or may become depressed, alienated, or hostile. Leisure time and its adverse reactions are not completely understood. "This freedom is, at best, a mixed blessing, for the human needs remain and so individuals are required to find new ways of satisfying themselves; .... In this context, leisure is viewed as a great opportunity and, concurrently, a grand challenge" (Garcia, 1984, pp. 1-2).

LEISURE-TIME RESOURCES

What opportunities are presently available for those with leisure time? Pre-retirement counseling programs seek to prepare individuals for their retirement years and focus upon different options for leisure-time use. Leisure activities are often conceptualized to include the following areas: recreation, education, volunteerism, employment, and voluntary association. In addition to these traditional and institutionalized areas are solitary and family activities. These areas merit brief review.

Recreation

Recreation means to restore or refresh and is often used synonymously with leisure time; however, it is, in fact, but one area of leisure (Kaplan, 1970). Opportunities for recreation are created by federal, state, and local governments, in addition to private sectarian and non-sectarian organizations. Recreation has its participant and non-participant components. That is, such activities can be enjoyed by doing, observing or listening.

Education

We are presently witnessing an emphasis on educational opportunities for those with leisure time. Many colleges and universities provide reductions in fees for those over a certain age and courses geared to the interests of those with

free time. High schools, extension programs, and
the YMCAs, among others, have been involved in
educational opportunities for those with leisure
time.   However, less then 10 percent of the
elderly take advantage of adult education courses
(Hendricks   and   Hendricks,   1981).   Liberal
education, as opposed to education for practical
purposes, has traditionally been identified with
the aristocratic (Blakely, 1971); yet, "... the
most practical education is that which aids in
the search, clarification, and enhancement of
meaning and value for self and for society"
(Blakely, 1971, p. 170). Accordingly, there is a
need to change conceptions toward education away
from the job market and toward a more general
orientation of psychological and intellectual
growth.

Volunteerism

    Volunteerism has yet to be a part of the
American ethic as it has been in Great Britain,
but it does play a most significant role in
meeting   leisure-time   needs.   Initially,
volunteerism had been for the privileged classes.
The notion of "lady bountiful" combined the
philosophy of Social Darwinism with the growing
awareness of one's responsibility for the
less-fortunate. However, to help others (and be
involved   in   activities   with   no   economic
remuneration) necessitated an ability to "afford"
to be a volunteer. Indeed, the less-affluent
were too busy working to be involved in volunteer
work.   Yet,   this   situation   has   changed,
especially for the elderly. It has come to the
point where volunteer work, even for the poor, is
better than no activity at all. Caution must be
used in not overemphasizing volunteerism. It has
been found, in a 1981 Gallup Poll (Voluntary
Action Leadership, 1982), that volunteer work is
engaged in by about 37 percent of all the
elderly.   Furthermore, it has been found that
volunteerism in old age is an extension of such
activities from younger age; individuals who had

not been volunteers will generally not engage in such activities in old age (Chambre, 1984).

Training

Vocational training and employment have been opportunities created for those unemployed, under-employed, retired, or dissatisfied with their present occupations. The federal government has been active in efforts for employment training and retraining. Efforts have only "scratched the surface" in creating paid employment opportunities for those in their retirement years. Many elderly actively seek out second careers following retirement (Lieberman and Lieberman, 1983), regardless of economic need. Others are motivated by economic necessity. Until pension programs are more adequate, until our Protestant Work Ethic is changed, and until we create better leisure-time activities, employment and employment training will be sought by those with free time. While job training and retraining might be costly, the alternative of having a population which considers itself too old to be useful might be a higher price (Hearn, 1971).

Voluntary Associations

Leisure time can be spent in voluntary associations, whether political, fraternal, religious, or social. There are many organizations, clubs, and affiliations that are open for membership. America is referred to as a "nation of joiners" and for church membership there is an increase with age (Atchley, 1980a). Church membership is important both for religious and social reasons. In addition, union organizations, fraternal and patriotic associations, and social groups all potentially meet many needs of those with free time. Indeed, as a function of free time, people have the opportunity for membership in such activities.

Familialism

In addition to the above-mentioned formal mechanisms which meet the needs of those with leisure time, there is familialism. Free time ceases to be an issue when the person is fully involved in family tasks and activities. For the family-centered aged, grandparenting can play a significant and major role in their lives and they may virtually live for their family and for family events (Neugarten and Weinstein, 1968). In addition to actively being of assistance to one's family, celebrations, holidays, and visits may play a vital role. For example, we know that 75 percent of elderly parents live within commuting distance of their children and 50 percent live in the same neighborhood (Atchley, 1980a). However, there is danger in giving too much importance to this informal mechanism. First of all, the use of family stipulates (1) the existence of family, (2) the convenient location to family, and (3) given both the above, a desire to interact with family.

Solitary Activities

Paradoxically, while we are a "nation of joiners," there seems to be a tendency toward solitary activity in our leisure time. This is especially true for the aged, and one study found that close to 50 percent of their sample spent their leisure time at home, and most of that time was spent alone (Atchley, 1980a). Television plays a major role in the use of leisure time regardless of age (Pfeiffer and Davis, 1971). Both radio and television are convenient, relatively inexpensive, and are non-demanding. The point being that, for many, solitary activity is sought voluntarily, as opposed to being the only alternative.

PRESENT KNOWLEDGE ON LEISURE-TIME UTILIZATION

Our societal system provides institutionalized leisure-time opportunities

which include recreation, education, volunteerism, employment, and voluntary associations. Auspices are federal, state, and local, private sectarian and non-sectarian. Furthermore, the formal network of opportunities is supplemented by familialism and solitary leisure-time activities. Theoretically, the informal and formal systems appear comprehensive and effective. However, the adequacy of these systems can be questioned through findings from empirical research and common knowledge. As Atchley (1980a) states: "Leisure roles are extremely diverse, yet seldom will an older individual [or any individual] be able to select from the entire range of possibilities" (p. 314). Among other variables which impede the use of an entire system of leisure activities are personalities, geographical availability, climate, health, and age. This list is not meant to be exhaustive.

Idiosyncratic Differences

People are not alike; they vary in their personalities and their life styles. Some are extroverts, joiners, inquisitive. Others are quiet, passive, private. Some individuals can accommodate to change and others are rigidly set in their ways. This variation has implications for the use of leisure-time programs. For example, activities in congregate settings will not be utilized by some individuals who feel uncomfortable in large groups.

Some older persons have spent most of their adult lives focusing upon their work roles and, when faced with free time (whether vacations or retirement), the elderly must either find suitable work-related activities or change their focus of life. Havighurst and Feigenbaum (1968) have discussed the relationship between leisure and life-styles and have differentiated between community- and home-centered life styles. Weiss and Reissman (1963) have discussed businessmen, forcibly retired, who may "go to pieces" due to

an inability to fill the void and substitute leisure-time activities. Other individuals will be able to seek contemplative or solitary activities or change interests and activities.

Unfortunately, the use of many leisure activities stipulates good health and ambulation. Those who are house-bound, with handicaps, physical or mental impairments, or who are otherwise restricted cannot use many of the available community resources. The institutional system of leisure activities may not reach this group. Attempts may be made to bring activities to these individuals. In this regard, television and radio play an especially important role. In addition, a community may assist those with health problems in going to available resources for leisure-time use.

Miller (1968) has introduced the concept of "Portent of Embarrassment." This refers to an older individual believing him or herself, or a group of individuals believing itself, to be inappropriate for membership in a certain group. For example, elderly participants in a leisure activity may feel out of place when the majority of the other participants are younger and more active. This may be related to recreational and education activities, as well as membership in voluntary associations. Such "ageism" may be intentional or unintentional, real or imagined, and exist for young as well as old.

Social Variables

Individuals' uses of leisure time are greatly influenced by ethnic, racial, and religious background. People are acculturated differently to use and view leisure time. While we should not overgeneralize or stereotype groups, our social planners have created programs for entire communities only to learn that some subpopulations did not become involved due to cultural barriers or differing values. A recent survey of a retired Hispanic sample illustrates

that ethnicity does make a difference in behavior and, even in the face of need and discomfort, a minority population may not utilize available community facilities and social services (Garcia and Bonnano, 1984).

Significant differences in use of leisure time are most likely a function of social class. As an example of this, Lambing (1972) found professional Blacks averaged 12.8 leisure time activities while a stable blue collar sample average 6.3 activities. A third group, less-affluent than those from the blue collar population, had an average of 4.1 activities. In addition to quantitative differences, those in the three samples engaged in different types of activities as well. For all groups, we know that the more-affluent join voluntary associations and have a greater tendency toward volunteerism. Conversely, we know the less-affluent, the blue collar worker, is more home- and family-centered, enjoys different recreational pursuits, and may be less likely to occupy themselves in solitary pursuits (Havighurst and deVries, 1969; Orzack, 1963).

Financial Resources

"... the most important limitation on older people's leisure options is their lack of money. Pursuits such as travel, entertaining, or going to a movie, concert, or play require money, and those without money are shut off" (Atchley, 1980a, p. 191). This relates specifically to the old, but certainly is true for other age groups as well. Finances are related to doing things directly, such as traveling and affording equipment, entrance costs, tickets, tuition, and memberships. Indirectly, the financial situation can be a more subtle barrier to leisure-time activities. For example, we know the elderly may refrain from church attendance or club membership because they cannot afford to give donations, are shameful of their old and shabby "Sunday Best," or cannot adequately care for their grooming.

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Geographic Variations

The greater the population density, the more numerous the leisure-time opportunities. Persons living in suburbia and in rural areas will generally have less institutionalized leisure-time activities. Yet, their needs may well be the same as their urban counterparts. A concomitant to geographical availability is transportation. Especially for the poor, to be without public transportation is to be limited in the use of free-time activities. Often planners establish recreation, education, or social service programs and expect, ipso facto, all who can use such resources will take advantage. This is hardly true. "Obviously, if you cannot get there you cannot participate. Club and church socials or activities, outings, shopping, eating out, and visiting are all examples of leisure pursuits that can be greatly hampered by a lack of transportation" (Atchley, 1980a, p. 193).

All things being considered, leisure time in the South is more accessible than in the North, as weather presents few restrictions. This is especially important and true for the old, and the handicapped. In the North in the winter, outdoor activities are possible for only those who are healthy, young, or hearty. Cold and windy weather make outdoor activities impossible and drastically curtail the mobility of the aged and handicapped.

Programmatic Issues

Additional considerations, often forgotten by those responsible for leisure-time activities, include the location where activities occur and the time of day they take place. This, of course, is related to transportation needs of the target population. Further, many activities are planned for evenings and some elderly may not wish to go out, or return home, after dark. Another consideration is the setting of the meeting or activity. For example, a recreation

program for the elderly may be established in a multi-service center for Saturday afternoons. However, the entrance to this center, which serves all age groups, may be a location where teenagers congregate and socialize on Saturday afternoons. Elderly individuals may be reluctant to enter the building because of taunts, etc., and may refrain altogether from attending the program.

Some leisure-time programs that are planned to reach an entire elderly population, serve (in reality) a portion of the aged population: women, Blacks, affluent, Spanish-speaking, Jews, etc. Accordingly, other aged individuals are most reluctant to participate. Indeed, they may not be wanted by the participants. Agency staff should be aware of such a potential problem.

The sponsorship of a leisure program can influence the use of that program. For example, a program sponsored by a religious organization, although designed to meet the needs of the aged of all faiths, may only attract the aged from that religion. There may be a reluctance to participate in leisure-time activities sponsored by public welfare, or other programs perceived to be charity or welfare, as a result of the sponsoring agency or organization.

Similarly, often the site of a program may be incorrectly interpreted to be the sponsor and, therefore, affect utilization. For example, a nutrition program located in a church may be viewed to be a church-sponsored program and those not of that faith may be reluctant to participate. Similarly, programs located within long-term care facilities may not be adequately used because of common perceptions regarding institutions for the aged. Leisure-time activities located in public housing may have a stigma attached. Programs located within housing for affluent elderly may not attract those from less-advantaged backgrounds or those not living in that setting. (For example, Waring and

Kosberg (1984) found that a bible-study program,
which was to be available for all the elderly in
the area but located in an apartment building for
only more-affluent white aged residents,
attracted very few from outside the apartment
building and then only wealthier whites.)

IMPLICATIONS

Educating for Leisure-Time Utilization

"An active and creative use of leisure in
one's youth is the surest way to guarantee a
similar pattern in old age, since older people
tend to retain patterns and preferences developed
in the past" (Atchley, 1980a, p. 184). Research
findings indicate that the use of leisure time,
the adjustment to a life of free time, can be
predicted by earlier patterns of leisure-time
use. One of the important implications of such
knowledge is that problems caused by inability to
adeouately cope with free time in youth may well
continue throughout the life cycle and can be
exacerbated by the loss of one's major role and
activity (i.e., retirement). Indeed, Atchley
(1980b) has stressed the importance of "identity
continuity" in explaining adjustment to a retired
status.

It is believed that the preparation for
leisure-time is a responsibility of our
educational system and must occur early in life.
The school system has a prodigious and awesome
responsibility in providing not only vocational
preparation and counseling, but leisure-time
preparation and counseling as well. Educating
for leisure is still a rather novel idea, but one
that has begun to be discussed particularly in
gerontological circles. One educator has
suggested a strategy for time-structuring in the
service of need fulfillment throughout life
(Garcia, 1984). Time-structuring as a tool for
satisfaction and personal growth can be useful at
any stage of life, but is particularly

advantageous to the retiree with a greater degree of discretionary time.

Our societal preoccupation with remunerated activity and production (i.e., work) is a major source of difficulty vis-a-vis the use of leisure time. Such cultural values denigrate quiet contemplation and solitary spiritual or personal activities that renew the non-physical aspects of the human being. Vocational preparation is occurring earlier than ever in the school experience of children and this reinforces the importance given to work and to working. We must begin to instill the notion of the liberal education; knowledge for the sake of knowledge; for spiritual growth and for mental stimulation.

Community Planning

Each community; indeed, each society; must ensure that leisure-time programs exist and do not exclude any from involvement, for either structural, programmatical, or philosophical reasons. The point has been made that not all are being served by institutionalized leisure-time activities. Nor are all individuals aware of the potential benefits to be derived from such activities. There is a need to support the value of "self-determination" and free choice. However, for such a luxury (or right) to be possible, alternatives with individual options are necessary. Some variations in the uses and benefits of leisure-time activities have been discussed. It seems only logical to hope for a comprehensive system of leisure-time activities to exist in a community, or for a specific subpopulation. It is important that a wide spectrum of activities and programs exist for potential use by all elderly in each community.

A final issue for planning consideration deals with the difference between leisure-time activities and meaningful leisure-time activities. The distinction is hardly academic. Often recreational, educational, and voluntary

associations, programs and services have been used once or twice by an individual and then not at all. Among explanations is that the activity did not meet the needs of the individual for special meaning and for a specific role, nor provided a purpose above-and-beyond mere attendance.

Schleisinger (1971) has suggested that a national leisure policy might be created to reflect the need for different methods of using free time to develop and enrich the human personality. Opportunities for recreation, for community involvement, for self-fulfillment, for stimulation and for activity outside the world of work must be increased in number and importance.

This is imperative to meet the needs of the increasing number and proportion of elderly. Indeed, the elderly may lead the way for others. "Perhaps, as the number of retired persons increases, societal views will foster the development of a leisure ethic that can co-exist with the work ethic" (Hooker and Veutis, 1984, p. 483). Should this occur, the oldest members of society will be opening new opportunities to be enjoyed by all other age groups.

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