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COVID-19 and Leisure: Directions for Policy Makers[1]

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Abstract

Epictetus, the Greek Stoic Philosopher, once said "Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one's principle. Some things are within your control; and some things are not". In adopting Epictetus quote for the current COVID-19 world, it has become more important than ever to realize that freedom and happiness can be intrinsic states that come from within the individual. Leisure, also an intrinsic state, is linked with freedom and happiness, and when leisure, freedom and happiness are experienced, a healthy lifestyle can be under your control and achieved. The current paper presents the importance of experiencing leisure, freedom and happiness for physical and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic era. COVID-19 is not only political, social and economic challenge, but also a citizen's well-being challenge. For this reason, three directions for policy making from the current and post COVID-19 era are presented: 1) *the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, 2) individual and community activation* and *3) empowering people.*

Introduction

Defining leisure is no easy task. Leisure means different things to different people in different societies as well as within a specific society. Researchers of leisure do not agree on one holistic, comprehensive definition. However, most researchers do agree that leisure is important to enhance quality of life, wellbeing, sense of freedom and self-control. But what is leisure, and how have researchers of leisure defined this notion?

For some researchers, leisure is simply the opposite of work, that is, freedom from paid work and labour (Voss, 2013). Leisure is a time period in which one is free from paid work responsibilities. Yet, leisure can mean more than this. Josef Pieper (2009), a Catholic theologian, gives us a spiritual based definition of leisure and supports that leisure is a mental and spiritual attitude of mind; leisure is thus a condition of soul. That is, the leisure experience comes from within the individual. Further, Zurawik (2020) states that "leisure can be defined as a mental state that occurs in free time during voluntary activities on the basis of personal interest; it is intrinsically satisfying, pleasurable, and

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pursued for individual rewards (Zurawik, 2020: 4). That is, leisure is a state of mind, a state of condition experience.

Karlis (2004), posits that although leisure is a concept that researchers do not universally agree on, it is a culturally specific notion that means different things to different people in different societies. Despite where or by whom leisure is experienced by, it is an important notion in life – a concept that has been coined as "serious leisure." Robert Stebbins many years ago, put forth the term "serious leisure" ultimately justifying how important leisure is in one's life. Serious leisure is defined as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical launch themselves on a [leisure] career centered on acquitting and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (Stebbins , 1992, p.3 cited in Kim et al., 2019). Leisure not only helps individuals to further develop their lives, but also [leisure] support people's communities, contributes to the development of a social health system and adds to the promotion of a balanced lifestyle (Trenberth, 2005). Research by Park (2004) purports that "serious leisure participation can be seen as an individual's continued effort to improve and nurture their life quality (cited in Kim et al., 2019, p.5). Similarly, Paggi et al., (2015) present that leisure activities create a positive relationship between physical health and well-being.

Leisure experience stem from the needs and capacities of the individual and has unlimited potential (Karlis, 2004). That is, the leisure experience evolves from seven important elements: 1) understanding ourselves, 2) helps us to address our leisure needs as well as others individual needs, 3) improve the quality of our life and the quality of the community in which we live, 4) help us develop our social skills, 5) support us in the adjustment of life stages and life cycles, 6) help us better understand the society we live in and 7) contributes to society as a whole (Havighurst & Feigenbaum, 1959; Karlis, 2004; Zurawik, 2020). Thus, the leisure experience helps individual to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Moreover, Havighurst & Feigenbaum (1959), identifies two leisure categories: a) home centered activities (e.g. TV, radio. movies, sewing, home exercise) and b) community centered activities (this category includes the home centred activities as well as, sports events, movies, Church, theatre, etc.). Thus, there is no denying that leisure is individual, yet it is a social phenomenon as well, as it is driven by people in home and/or community settings.

COVID-19 and Leisure

In 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was identified in the Republic of China, and on January 30th 2020, the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outbreak of the virus, ultimately declaring a public Health Emergency while issuing a set of temporary

recommendations (WHO, 2020). Countries all over the globe applied restrictive measures to fight the virus. Social distancing and social isolation measures were implemented, and restrictions were placed on the service sector including leisure, recreation, and sports. Outdoors restrictions led to the closure of public parks and recreation centres and facilities, the closure of private and non-profit recreation service, and on physical social interactions in leisure and recreation spaces. The dynamic of the leisure services changed suddenly with people facing the challenge of finding leisure in different ways to ensure quality of life, well-being, and physical and mental health.

Self-isolation and social distancing measures caused dissatisfaction and frustration amongst many individuals. Some negative emotions and concerns were expressed through social media. It can be said that this negativity resulted by the sudden change and disruption of lifestyles, and the social and economic implications of people's daily routine. Thus, COVID-19 caused drastic change in the way we live. What usually follows drastic change such as those generated by COVID-19, is policy change. Researchers have supported that "policy change occurs through interactions between wide external change or shocks to the political system and the success of the ideas in the coalition, which may cause actors in the advocacy coalition to shift coalitions" (Cerna, 2013:5). Leisure, and its industry, has been subject to this drastic change and the re-thinking of policies and directions for change.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for individuals during COVID-19 and its social isolation and social distancing measures is distinguishing paid employment (work) from leisure time – as work has moved for many into their homes – and, finding ways to experience leisure in the household. Pre-COVID-19, the place of work had a physical location outside of home, and the place of leisure had physical locations outside of the home (e.g., parks, sports bars, the coffee shop, the stadium, etc.), as well as inside the home. Although some leisure was experienced at home, the outdoors and outside the home has always been a prime resource for leisure. COVID-19 caused a sudden change in the way we experienced leisure and, in the challenges, posed on us to engage and find enjoyment in leisure at home.

Mannell (2013), a psychologist examining leisure, developed a theory a few decades ago called the Self-As-Entertainment (S.A.E) theory of leisure. This theory asserts that the way we experience leisure depends on our personality. Some of us can entertain, and find leisure things to do, easier than others. Mannell claims that our differing personalities make it harder for some people to find what to do during leisure time, whereas, for others entertaining themselves is quite easy. The challenge during COVID-19 is that we do not have recreation directors at the local community centers guiding us with what to do, camp counsellors coordinating activities, or access to swimming lessons at public swimming pools. However, we have time, and more time than ever before as we save time from

commuting to and from work offices or sites. We not only have more time for leisure, we also face the challenge of having to experience leisure at home and with limited leisure activity guidance and resources.

Leisure has been characterised as a *normal good*; this *normal good* not only benefits the society, but also has positive income effect (Voss, 2013). In other words, leisure is perceived by society, as well as individuals, as something that is positive and beneficial for you (Karlis, 2004). The benefits of leisure are many. Karlis (2004) presents the benefits of leisure as consisted of four different types. These are: a) personal, b) economic, c) environmental, and d) social.

The *personal* benefit of leisure consists of individual, case specific benefits. Through leisure, individuals recognize the meaning of life, manage their stress, and can lead their lives in a balanced way. Individually also, leisure, contributes to the development of skills, and finally, gives people satisfaction, and improves quality of life. The personal benefit of leisure also includes fun, satisfaction and well-being, all attributes that are important for physical and mental well-being. The fact that leisure opportunities outside of the household have diminished as a result of COVID-19 restrictions has had an impact on the leisure lifestyles and leisure benefits of individuals.

The *economic* benefits, according to Karlis (2004), include the preventiveness of health service, contributes to a productive work force, as well as to the yielding of big economic returns, motivates the business relocation and expansion in communities, reduces high cost of vandalism and criminal activity, and finally, leisure is a catalyst for tourism and an important investment for the environmental protection. It has also been supported that individuals who buy leisure are the suppliers of labour (Voss, 2013). Economical, the leisure, entertainment, and sport industries have all been affected by COVID-19. Leisure, entertainment, and sport industries outside the household are places of large people gatherings – these opportunities are not only on hold for now but will take some time to rebound to where they were before.

The *environmental* benefits include the environmental health of the community, environmental protection and rehabilitation, investing in the environmental leading to increase in neighbourhood property value, and is also an insurance for a new improved environmental future (Karlis, 2004: 16). Although the detrimental overuse of national parks and historical sites has been relieved during COVID-19 pandemic, our appreciation and experience of the outdoor areas such as National Parks and archeological sites through firsthand visitations is missed. Perhaps post COVID-19 society will be one in which we learn to greater value our outdoor leisure and recreation resources while build a deeper appreciation, care and respect for our outdoors and its environment.

Humans, by nature, are social animals. We need to be with others, to socially interact, to share, to love, and to be loved. Leisure is a means and a tool for enhancing social interaction. Furthermore, under the social benefit umbrella, Dodd et al., (2009) supported that there is a positive relationship between core family leisure and family cohesion as well as family adaptability, and also leisure activities can benefit the adolescents' life satisfaction (cited in Chen et al., 2019: 2; Specht et al., 2002). The social benefits of leisure, include the capability of building strong communities, reducing alienation and anti-social behaviour, building strong families, developing sense of the community pride, and enhancing services for children through after school programs (Karlis, 2004: 16). During COVID-19, family social interaction has increased at home, yet the social-physical opportunities of the outside world have been restricted and even halted.

In sum, leisure is an internal state of condition that helps individuals to improve their lives, but also, an external tool, as it can be used by governments in the policy making process. Thus, from the external point of view, leisure has a political character. The challenges for policy makers are how can leisure be implemented and directed in a socially distant and social isolation society that is restricted primarily to home leisure resources, opportunities, and experiences.

Suggestion for policy makers

Leisure through the years has developed a political character which is connected with the concept of civil rights and the concept of citizenship. During the post-World War II, western countries tried to create a welfare state based on political, economic and social development. The first step for this achievement came through citizensh*ip.* Bianchini (1992), supported that citizenship "represents an attempt not simply to extend social rights, but also to bridge the potentially socially disruptive gap between the individual and the community, and between the exercise of individual rights and the common good" (quoted in Coalter, 2010). Marshall (1963), identifies three areas of rights: a) political rights, b) social rights, c) civil rights. These rights translate to the ability of individuals to participate in activities of their choices. Thus, individuals holding citizenship, are free to act in accordance of their needs. In other worlds, people are free to develop their quality of life through plenty of available choices (Choi & Bum, 2019). One of these choices includes the participation in leisure. Thus, as it is also supported by Trenberth (2005), leisure played an important role not only in the development of a healthy lifestyle, but also in the development of citizenship. This is the reason why leisure is characterised as a component of social citizenship (Coalter, 2010).

It is widely argued that citizens have a duty to themselves and to their state. Citizens have a duty to develop a healthy and responsible lifestyle (Coalter, 2010). According to Stebbins' (1992) the

development of a healthier society can be achieved as people practice their citizenship through their participation in leisure activities. However, we should wonder how possible is it to practice our citizenship rights through leisure in an era of social restrictions? In other words, how possible is it to exercise your rights for improvement of your leisure lifestyle in an era of self-isolation; in the era of COVID-19?

After the end of self-isolation and social distancing in plenty of countries all around the globe, people will need to gain back their lives. Services will once again be opened, including leisure services. The experience of COVID-19 has illustrated to the world how important leisure is for physical and mental health, and how we should not underestimate its overall significance on well-being. People have the need for mental, physical and social support; this need in the post COVID-19 might become greater with a greater reliance on social and political services. It is for this reason that the following directions for policy makers are put forth:

1. *Promotion of a healthy lifestyle*

People all over the world, during the COVID-19 restrictions used social media to express their needs and concerns. The *"we stay home"* social media campaigns influenced people by creating a sense of protection for ourselves and others. People united and showed responsibility. Post COVID-19 will be a time for governments to use the same means of social communication for the betterment of society. The best way to do so, is to understand the meaning of a healthy lifestyle; thus, the importance of the presence of leisure in their lives. Social media can be used as a great tool for the promotion of a healthy lifestyle through leisure, leisure activities, and leisure services.

2. *Individual and community activation*

People today more than ever have the need to interact with each other and with their communities. This need is interconnected with the maintenance of mental and physical health. Healthy lifestyle can be achieved not only when people have motivations to stay healthy, but also, when governments create a safe and positive environment for its citizens, through leisure services, so to further develop the well-being of society. Thus, governments need to create and re-create leisure facilities, which not only will protect citizens from the expansion of COVID-19, but also help them to maintain their physical and mental health through community leisure services.

3. *Empowering people*

Social distancing and social isolation have been challenging "socially" for everyone. The social and work impact on society have been drastic. Some people have lost their jobs because of the expansion of the virus and some feel insecure about the future. Governments post COVID-19 will need to act to

re-create and re-energize not only the economy, but also the social fabric and wellbeing of society as well. Leisure and its services can play a vital role as focus expands beyond mass society to the individual. Leisure activities are a great tool of people empowerment. It helps build individual and community spirit from grassroots, bottoms-up perspective, ultimately contributing to the wellbeing of individuals and society.

Conclusion

This paper while focusing on the importance of leisure for healthy lifestyles, provided a brief overview of leisure and the COVID-19 era. Three directions for policy have been put forth as a means to help re-establish and re-create leisure, and its activities and services post COVID-19. Leisure, as a state of mind condition helps one feel free while also building feelings of self-esteem (Karlis, 2004). Indeed, by taking policy measures that incorporate leisure, societies would be in a better position to establish a positive social-psychological dynamic post COVID -19. This paper has called for decision-makers to consider the importance and key role that leisure, its activities, and services can play as societies work towards returning to normal post COVID-19.

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