Adolescent leisure dimensions, psychosocial adjustment, and gender effects

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ABSTRACT

Leisure provides the context for much of adolescent behaviour and development. While both theory and research point to the benefits of participation in leisure activities that are highly structured, the association between structured leisure and psychosocial adjustment is not uniformly high. This paper presents a model of adolescent leisure comprising three dimensions: structure, effort, and social contact. Adolescent adjustment is hypothesized to increase with participation in activities characterized by each of these attributes. Adjustment is also predicted to vary with gender, and with the interaction of gender and leisure participation. These propositions were tested in a questionnaire-based study of 433 Australian adolescents. Results revealed majority support for hypotheses pertaining to the positive effects of the leisure dimensions, and for gender differences in leisure participation and adjustment. Evidence was also obtained of gender-differentiated effects of leisure on adjustment, with social leisure predicting adjustment more strongly in females than males.
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Introduction

Adolescents have approximately half their waking hours available for leisure (Larson & Verma, 1999). During this time, they engage in varied activities that may include individual and team sports, hobbies and creative pursuits, shopping, socializing, use of social network sites, and hanging out with friends. Just like family and school, these leisure activities provide important contexts for adolescents to develop qualities such as self-worth, self-control, and social connectedness (Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).

Despite considerable research demonstrating links between adolescent leisure and adjustment (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009), several issues remain unresolved. Substantive issues include: What types of leisure involvement contribute to adolescent psychosocial adjustment? Do the effects of leisure participation differ between genders? Crossing these issues are method-related questions: What is the most appropriate way to differentiate between leisure activities? How should leisure activities be selected for study? The current study addresses these questions.

Differentiation of leisure activities in past research

Leisure activities are activities that people do during their spare time, usually on a discretionary basis for intrinsic pleasure (cf. Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Much of the past research has divided leisure activities into structured and unstructured

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categories (Larson & Verma, 1999; Osgood & Anderson, 2004). Structured activities are those in which timing and duration of participation are prescribed, goals are predetermined, dress is standardized, and adherence to rules is monitored by adults. In contrast, unstructured leisure is more spontaneous, with direction and duration determined by the participants themselves (Abbott & Barber, 2007).

Research based on this distinction has found that participation in structured leisure is associated with high levels of school adjustment and psychological wellbeing, and low levels of internalizing symptoms, externalizing behaviours, and health risk behaviours (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004; Mahoney et al., 2009; Osgood & Anderson, 2004; Osgood, Anderson, & Schaffer, 2005; Trainor, Delfabbro, Anderson, & Winefield, 2010). In some research (e.g., Denault & Poulin, 2009; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006, 2008; Mahoney et al., 2004), these effects have been demonstrated longitudinally and/or after controlling for factors that predict self-selection into activities. These differentiated effects on adjustment are consistent with theories of adolescent deviance. For example, social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) maintains that problem behaviours are most likely to occur when bonds between individuals and conventional societal institutions (e.g., family, school, church) are severed; unstructured leisure activities potentially weaken these bonds, whereas structured activities reinforce them. Routine activities theory (e.g., Osgood & Anderson, 2004) similarly emphasizes the contribution to deviant behaviour of time regularly spent with peers in unsupervised settings.

While research shows that positive adolescent outcomes more often accompany structured than unstructured leisure, several caveats apply. First, much of the research (e.g., Guest & McRee, 2009; Kort-Butler & Hagewan, 2011) has been limited to evaluations of school-based extracurricular activities. Findings from these studies may not generalize to broader leisure contexts. Second, many factors moderate the impact of structured leisure. For example, effects depend on the nature, breadth, and frequency of leisure involvement, and with the ethnicity and socioeconomic background of participants (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008).

Third, effects vary between specific activities within the broad categories of structured and unstructured leisure. For example, while involvement in school-based clubs and community service activities provide uniformly positive outcomes, involvement in other structured activities such as competitive team sports and some arts activities are sometimes associated with less favourable outcomes (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Kort-Butler & Hagewan, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2009). Researchers (Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995) have also observed considerable within-category differences in the correlates of unstructured activities. Abbott and Barber (2007), for example, found that dedicated hobbies and unstructured sports afforded many positive initiative- and identity-building experiences, whereas other unstructured activities, such as television-watching, provided few developmental benefits. In short, the categories of structured and unstructured leisure are neither entirely homogenous, nor entirely opposing in their effects.

As a result of the mixed findings regarding at least some structured and unstructured leisure, authors (Abbott & Barber, 2007; Caldwell & Smith, 2006) have argued that researchers must differentiate more precisely between leisure activities. To not do so risks falsely attributing psychosocial benefits of leisure activities to their structural qualities, rather than to other ways in which they differ. One approach evident in recent work (e.g., Guest & McRee, 2009; Mahoney et al., 2009; Rutten et al., 2007) is to identify micro-contextual variables pertaining to the quality of the leisure experience that mediate the impact of structure on youth outcomes. Examples of such contextual variables include level of participant safety, autonomy and commitment, intensity of involvement, extent of participation in decision-making, ratio of successes to failures, sociomoral group atmosphere, and quality of peer and leader-participant relationships. While the value of this process-variable approach is yet to be fully realized, a potential shortcoming is that it may generate a very long list of moderating factors. As an alternative to both the structured versus unstructured leisure dichotomy and to the micro-process approach, we propose a three-dimensional framework in which to understand leisure involvement and explore its impact upon adolescent adjustment.

A three-dimensional framework for understanding leisure activities

In our view, leisure structure represents not a dichotomy, but a continuum ranging from highly pre-planned, rule-governed, and adult-controlled activities at one pole, to highly spontaneous, informal, and participant-directed activities, at the other. Moreover, leisure activities vary in ways other than the extent to which they are structured, with more precise predictions as to leisure impacts likely if activities are distinguished on additional grounds. One such additional criterion is the extent to which leisure involves social contact. Clearly, this is not a single or simple dimension of difference, with finer distinctions potentially made based on such attributes as the nature of the other person's presence (actual versus virtual), the relationship to the other person (e.g., friend versus family member), the extent of interaction taking place, the number and diversity of others present, and so on. Social interactions differ in many ways (e.g., warmth, conflict, supportiveness) that are relevant to adolescent psychosocial outcomes. Research (e.g., Fawcett, Garton, & Dandy, 2008; Trainor et al., 2010) has demonstrated that participation in leisure activities involving at least minimal levels of social contact predicts such outcomes as participant self esteem, life satisfaction, and negative mood.

A further leisure dimension is the extent to which activities require the application of physical, cognitive, emotional, creative, and/or other types of effort and skills (Fawcett et al., 2008). Alternative terms include "achievement" leisure (Passmore & French, 2000) versus "relaxed" (Eccles & Barber, 1999) or "passive" leisure (Fawcett et al., 2008). This dimension ranges from leisure pursuits that are very demanding, challenging and difficult (e.g., elite athletics, chess competitions) to those that are "easy", casual, and relaxing (e.g., sunbathing, browsing social media sites).