
Articles

Exploring the Dimensions of Serious Leisure: “Love Me—Love My Dog!”

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This study examines the meaning of the serious leisure experience for American Kennel Club (AKC) activity participants. Particular attention is given to issues of the centrality of leisure participation as it relates to personal identification with the leisure pursuit and adopting a “dog person” lifestyle. This serious leisure pursuit differs from others previously examined because amateurs and professionals compete together. Hobbyists and amateurs support the formal AKC activity pursuit by fulfilling multiple club roles. This volunteer action serves to diversify the nature of the pursuit and supports intense levels of involvement. Costs and benefits associated with the pursuit are interpreted from a lifestyle orientation and serve to justify the intense time and monetary commitment invested by the participant.

KEYWORDS: *Serious leisure, dogs, AKC (American Kennel Club), identity*

Introduction

This study examined the leisure experience of serious leisure participants involved in American Kennel Club (AKC) activities and events. The study was developed from an interest in further examining dimensions of serious leisure and from an interest in pets and leisure. This is a descriptive study designed to examine the meaning of the leisure experience, explore issues of personal identification with the pursuit, especially the personal interpretation of costs and benefits associated with participation.

Pets as a form of serious leisure and in particular AKC activities have not been examined as serious leisure pursuits. Although AKC activities meet many of the characteristics of serious leisure, they also differ from the framework established by Stebbins (1992a). In AKC competition, amateurs and professionals compete in the same event and are held to the same professional standards for success. This is counter to the amateur and professional distinction made by Stebbins. In addition, the pursuit involves a relationship with one's dog(s) and this daily, on-going relationship blurs the boundaries between the leisure pursuit and the day to day relationship with the dog(s).

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the study was to describe the meanings associated with the serious leisure pursuit of AKC club membership and participation in AKC events. In addition, research suggests that participants in serious leisure pursuits and individuals with close human-pet relationships tend to identify strongly with these endeavors. Therefore, the secondary emphasis of this study was to examine factors related to personal identification with the pursuit.

Background & Theoretical Perspective

Social-psychological studies adopting a symbolic interactionist approach have been identified as important for capturing the subjective and complex nature of leisure (Henderson, 1991; Samdahl, 1988; Scott & Godbey, 1990; Shaw, 1985). The subjective nature of leisure has led researchers to consider the individual actor's attitudes and perceptions as defining elements. At the same time, leisure is not completely a subjective and idiosyncratic phenomenon (Kelly, 1987). Models that can simultaneously look at the social influences and the individual styles of leisure have been identified as uniquely adept at dealing with the subjective and multi-faceted character of leisure (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Mannell, 1980). According to Kelly,

The [research] models that incorporate elements of meaning from psychology and of social context from sociology seem best equipped to deal with the fullness of the [leisure] phenomenon that is both expressive and learned, done for its own sake and in response to social expectations, always an experience of the actor and more often than not an episode of social interaction (p. 14).

However, research that gives equitable consideration to both the internal and social factors is a challenge in social psychological research. Kelly (1987) suggested that in social analysis, studies have tended to consider either one side or the other of these two interacting factors. Symbolic interactionism provides a framework for viewing leisure behavior as a dialectical process of action in social contexts of shared symbols (Kelly, 1990). It, therefore, enables the study of social phenomenon in a way that has the potential to simultaneously consider the individual as an active interpreter of meaning, while at the same time recognizing that this meaning is influenced by the social context.

Beginning with a Blumer-Mead model of symbolic interactionism (see Schwandt, 1994), this study examines the AKC club participants as actors who are engaged in a complex and active process of meaning making. Meanings are socially constructed through communication with others. In the serious leisure subculture of AKC this means communication is guided, in part, by insider knowledge of the organization and of the subculture; what Stebbins (1992a) has termed the unique ethos.

Additionally, the study design is informed by psychological phenomenology (see Creswell, 1998) and gives special attention to individual experi-

ences that may differ from the group experience. Thus, study participants were asked to describe their experience in the AKC subculture as it represents serious leisure. These personal meanings are reviewed to assess the essence of experience. This study was designed to examine both the social and the personal and to follow Stebbins' (1993) suggestion that studies may examine interconnecting levels like the personal with the structural interactional. Stebbins further suggests that, "where a form of serious leisure has never been examined, open-ended, exploratory fieldwork consisting chiefly of wide-ranging observation and semi-structured interviews, is, [I believe] the most fruitful approach to take at the outset" (p. 26).

Supporting Literature

Presented here is a brief literature review of the research that has informed this study. The research is abbreviated in that the purpose is not to identify a singular launching point for this study but rather to identify in broad terms, the salient themes that comprise the conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Since the primary focus of this research was to explore AKC participation as a serious leisure pursuit, this topic is given the most attention. Also briefly reviewed is research that addresses personal identification with pets and leisure.

Serious leisure. Stebbins (1993) offered the following "shorthand" definition of serious leisure. Serious leisure is the "systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (p. 23). Stebbins' research provides a taxonomic method for classifying individuals for whom leisure is a central life interest. Though he does identify certain psychological elements as characteristics of serious leisure and offers rich ethnographic descriptions of particular pursuits (Stebbins, 1979, 1992a, 1992b), he has concentrated his analysis on the larger sociological relationship, situating serious leisure participants as a group in terms of their relationship to societal structures (i.e., public-amateur-professional system).

Stebbins (1992a) identified six defining characteristics of serious leisure: (a) there is an occasional need to persevere, (b) there is a tendency for participants to have personal careers, (c) participation requires significant personal effort based on special knowledge, training, or skill, (d) durable benefits are realized from participation (e.g., self-actualization, self-expression, enhancement of self-image, and social interaction and sense of belonging), (e) a unique ethos surrounds the pursuit, and (f) participants tend to identify strongly with their chosen pursuit.

In terms of a larger societal perspective Stebbins (1992a, 1992b) recognized that serious leisure participants (hobbyists and amateurs) rest on the margin between the dabbler and the professional. The hobbyist and the amateur are far more serious, time involved, and regimented than dabblers; but participation is not yet at the level of the professional. Here Stebbins

distinguished between hobbyists and amateurs. Hobbyists, like amateurs, are individuals with lasting serious commitment to a particular pursuit; but hobbyists, unlike amateurs, have no professional counterpart. Professionals have direct influence and in fact "set the standards" in their pursuits. The amateur faces the challenge of competing at the standards of paid professionals but faces the constraint of only giving part-time, non-work resources to the pursuit. The amateur and the hobbyist are alike in that their serious leisure pursuits place them in a role of ambiguity. As Stebbins (1992a) explained, "there is an ambiguity among the role incumbents and in the wider community as to what these marginal people should do and how they should do it" (p. 376). Serious hobbyists and amateurs, according to Stebbins, rest at the margin between the general public and the professional. In addition, they are marginal to the institution of leisure, "they lack key institutional supports for their goals and for their personal and collective ways of reaching them" (p. 383).

Serious leisure participants take an intense interest in their pursuit that sets them apart from those who dabble in the activity. At the same time they are set apart from the professional. Stebbins (1992b) argued that this marginality results in an ambiguous role that manifests itself in the tensions and resultant time constraints and negotiations an individual must make to maintain the level of commitment he or she desires.

Leisure & self-development. Stebbins (1992a) suggested that the benefits of serious leisure include self-actualization, self-development, and self-expression. The construct of the self is a complex and much explored phenomenon in psychological research. Common themes of leisure research utilizing conceptualizations of the self include Shamir's (1992) and Haggard and Williams' (1992a, 1992b) studies of identification and self-definition. These researchers suggested that one's leisure identity may motivate one to participate in specific activities and the activity may become a more salient dimension of identity as it serves the self-expression of one's abilities.

In addition to leisure activities, possessions have been associated with identity development. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Belk (1988) posited that "things" or possessions are expressions of one's self. Schlenker (1984) argued that individuals employ mechanisms such as the display of signs and symbols (e.g., displaying a bumper sticker "I love my Golden Retriever") to affirm their identity. Belk argued that things or possessions are an extension of the self and his definition is broad, encompassing the ownership of a dog.

Pets and self-development. Similar to the identity formation process described in the leisure research, researchers studying the pet-human relationship have found that owners extend themselves to their pets (Beck & Katcher, 1983). Some argue that the pet is actually part of one's identity that recalls the natural self. Narcissistic love, love of oneself, can acceptably be directed toward a pet. In discussing the social meanings of dogs in families, Veevers (1985) stated outright that dogs serve as symbolic extensions of the self suggesting that they are symbolic statements of personality and self-image.

Pets have been identified as influential components of improving one's overall quality of life and well being. Reports of the impact of pet ownership have addressed issues of well being including improved mood states (Beck & Katcher, 1983; Beck & Meyers, 1996), social benefits (Messent, 1983; Mugford & M'Comisky, 1975), and relaxation and stress reduction (Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1982; Katcher, 1983; Wilson, 1991).

Methods

Contact with two American Kennel Club local clubs was established through one of the researcher's participation in AKC activities. Her personal contacts allowed access to two clubs that are referred to as Club South and Club North. Club members were randomly selected and invited to participate. Club South, with a total of 33 members, is located in a small-sized university community and Club North, with a total of 75 members, encompassed an area of several small communities adjacent to a large metropolitan area. Sixteen members were originally contacted for participation, ten from Club South and six from Club North. Due to scheduling difficulties, for Club North, interviews were completed with five of the six members originally selected.

Each respondent participated in an in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interview conducted by one of the researchers. The interview format contained a list of topics related to serious leisure dimensions and personal identification. Each individual was asked questions related to the interview topic list but the exact wording was flexible, as was the order. In addition, the interviewers probed emergent themes formulating questions as the interview progressed. The interviews ranged in length from one and one half-hours to two hours.

One of the researchers is an active participant in AKC activities and the other had no previous experience with AKC. Therefore, the researcher without experience embarked upon gaining an emic perspective and completed a document review of official AKC publications and completed a series of ethnographic investigations of AKC training practices, classes, and competitive events. The purpose was to understand the formal and informal activity structure and discuss aspects of participation with the kennel club members. This fieldwork served as a form of triangulation and occurred after the initial interview phase. In addition, throughout the study, the researchers each used their unique perspectives to collaboratively interpret the study findings.

A Brief Synopsis of AKC Formal Structure

In order for the reader to appreciate the context of AKC activities and the participants in the study, the formal structure of AKC competition and breeding of AKC registered dogs is presented.

The AKC was founded about 110 years ago and is dedicated to the advancement of purebred dogs (Stifel, 1987). It operates the largest canine

registry in the United States for 139 breeds of purebred dogs, registering 1,277,039 individual dogs and 533,630 litters of puppies in 1995 (Mandeville, 1996). The AKC also serves as the governing body for clubs of the AKC. The clubs are locally organized and serve to support a community group of dog enthusiasts and to coordinate dog shows and other events under the auspices of the AKC.

The AKC oversees a range of dog events that are usually held on weekends and organized and run predominately by local club members (American Kennel Club, 1994). There are a variety of formats for competition and they vary based on the type of dog (e.g., sporting dogs) or a particular skill (e.g., tracking). Perhaps the most well known competition is the dog conformation show which was originally intended to improve the quality of purebred dogs by encouraging the breeding of the very best specimens. The goal in showing a dog is to achieve the title of champion by earning points at AKC competitions. The AKC publishes an annual point scale that indicates the number of points to be awarded at a particular show based on how many dogs of a certain breed competed in the show.

Two kinds of conformation shows are held, specialty and all-breed. In these competitions dogs are judged against a breed standard which is written and approved by a parent club of each breed. Classes are judged by AKC qualified judges who award championship points to the best non-champion male and female of each of the official breeds. One dog of each breed is chosen Best of Breed and that dog will advance to one of the seven Group rings. The Group and Best in Show wins are considered highly prestigious.

The AKC judges hold a high degree of formal power and are recognized experts. Dog owners may elect to show their own dogs or work with a professional or amateur handler who possesses skills in showing the dog. Long-standing club volunteers generally organize AKC events. These local clubs operate as formal nonprofit organizations utilizing a president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary organizational structure. Many of the clubs purchase or rent their own building for practice space and for conducting community education training classes.

Description of the Study Respondents

Respondents were randomly selected for participation based on their membership in one of two AKC clubs. To illuminate the characteristics of this sample, a post interview analysis of the subjects was completed. Years as a club member and as a competitor ranged from one to forty with most of the respondents reporting 10–15 years of participation. Five of the 15 interviewed were no longer competing although they still maintained active membership in the club and supported events or training classes. The majority of the subjects were between 40 and 50 years of age. Two respondents were estimated to be younger and three were older than this range. One participant resided in a care facility for older adults and was no longer living with a dog. At the time of the interviews, most respondents owned three to four

dogs. Five respondents owned more, ranging in number from nine to nineteen.

Data Analysis

The first round of analysis consisted of a thorough reading of the interview transcripts. This reading resulted in the identification of 14 initial topics comprised of both *a priori* and emergent themes that served as the beginning codes for data analysis. These codes were to be purely descriptive and identify sentences that reflected the topic (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Both researchers separately coded all transcripts. After this descriptive coding, it was determined that this original list was comprised of considerable overlap and resulted in low inter-rater reliability. This was attributed to emergent themes that went beyond the original topic list. Therefore, the codes were reduced to a list of six codes supported by a written definition. All transcripts were re-coded with this list of six descriptive category codes. Coding was completed separately by each researcher using six different ink colors to underline coded text. This process clarified ambiguity concerning where each researcher started and ended a given code and revealed interpretive nuances. This coding was then discussed focusing on rationale, dual-coding of particular sections, and mis-codes. This coding strategy yielded a 90% inter-rater reliability.

The highlighted transcripts were also used to discuss sections that went uncoded and to discuss whether important content had been overlooked. No readjustments were made. The final round of coding was interpretive and involved both researchers re-reading the highlighted text for broader patterns reflective of respondent personal meanings and to draw connections between coded segments.

Results

Participants were selected for this study based on the premise that involvement with AKC activities was or had been a predominant pursuit. Part of the analysis was exploratory with the purpose of describing how the respondents interpreted their AKC club experience and to document self-descriptions as they related to the pursuit. Additionally, the analysis was informed by and explored Stebbins' six characteristics of serious leisure.

Serious Involvement

The respondents were asked to describe how their interest developed, the amount of time, energy, and resources spent on their dogs and how they described their relationship with their dogs. There was no single cause or event that led to getting involved with dogs in a serious manner, in fact most respondents described it as something that "just evolved" or in the words of one respondent "it's a disease." One common pattern was being enrolled in a dog training class and realizing that they had a talent working with the

dog and owned a particularly fine specimen of a breed. These course instructor comments served as an invitation to visit shows and eventually join a local club.

Joining the club was a sign of embarking on a path to develop one's skills and interest. Joining a club was often the first step to serious involvement, however, the path and level of involvement was complex. Respondents stressed a view of themselves as learners and the club atmosphere served to enhance motivation and satisfaction with this learning.

I don't think there is any question that I got into dogs as a substitution for children. I had this wonderful dog and it was like having the brightest kid in the class. Then I got into water training and developing the test—it made me think about what the traits were. That was maybe the first step to removing my dog from a reflection of me and to another entity.

(Female, 2 Portuguese Water dogs, associate level of involvement)

Learning involved skills in dog handling but also the acquisition of knowledge of the history and standards for different breeds. On another level, learning involved understanding the complexity of the AKC formal rules and regulations. Meeting with club members and developing a circle of friends became a source of continuing education and success in competition was often attributed to these social contacts.

Dogs that do well are easily recognized within the local club, as competitive success becomes common knowledge. Success as a handler (showing someone else's dog) is another source of status within the regional dog subculture. Interestingly, however, some respondents also gain status from identification with roles supporting the club's competitive and educational goals. Each respondent described himself or herself as holding multiple roles within their club network. For example, one respondent began with training one dog, joined the club, entered the dog in an event, volunteered to assist at competitive events, and later assisted with training classes. These volunteer roles at competitive events could be more time intensive than competing at the events and many respondents did both. Teaching AKC training classes enhanced one's status as serious and knowledgeable. There is an educational component at shows and events also. AKC insiders are treated as experts often talking at length with spectators who have questions concerning a particular breed. For most of the respondents, joining national all-breed clubs led to affiliation with a phone network of club representatives who answer inquiries by "casual" dog owners desiring to learn more about the breed.

Formal status roles within dog clubs include being an event coordinator, serving as president or other executive level position in a club (with regional clubs having higher status) and being certified in some aspect of judging. Judging ranged in status from being able to certify dogs owned by individuals enrolled in community education obedience classes to the harder to achieve and more prestigious role of judge at AKC competitive events.

An important emergent theme was the number of roles both formal and informal that existed within the club and the AKC subculture. Although no

linear progression or specific time frame can be associated with adopting a particular level of involvement these descriptions serve to highlight the multiple roles, varying skill levels, and varying levels of intensity, that represent the meaning of “serious.”

We identified four categories of involvement represented in the local AKC subcultures.

Beginner—individuals just starting out in the sport of dogs whom have launched for the first time into formal event competition. They seek out the advice of other club members and actively take part in training and practice opportunities supported by the club. There also may be signs of differentiation—for example, electing to acquire a rare breed not reflected in the current local club membership. This affiliation with a rare breed then becomes a source of contact with members in other regional clubs.

Supporter—individuals who participate primarily because of their spouse's interest. Some individuals gave considerable amount of time to club activities, sought to enhance their own personal knowledge but opted to see themselves as supportive of a serious competitor and elected not to compete themselves. These individuals held insider knowledge and were viewed as knowledgeable particularly to outsiders. They were unique in that they supported the pursuit but did not regularly participate in competition.

Active Club Member—this broad category refers to an array of individuals who usually take more than one role, serving in formal leadership roles in the club, travelling to numerous competitions, organizing training classes, and actively pursuing a goal concerning their skills and career in dog activities.

Associate—individuals who have performed a number of different club roles, have gained a recognizable level of skill or success in competition, but were currently reducing their involvement with the club. They often had met with considerable success by AKC competitive standards but stressed now their daily connections with their pets. These respondents stressed benefits of living with a dog and were the most critical of the AKC subculture.

The sense of being serious about dogs was symbolically represented in personal possessions but it was also acquiring the insider knowledge of the AKC competitions and surrounding subculture. Clearly the endeavor was multi-dimensional. The combination of owning dogs, being a club member and a competitor was expressed in different roles and a number of interacting social worlds. All respondents were members of more than one club and traveled with friends to shows (some purposely purchasing a van to accommodate this socialization).

Stebbins (1992a, 1992b) conceived serious leisure as marginal in that it lacks key institutional supports for the hobbyists and amateurs intense level of participation. Furthermore, the amateur is distinct from the professional as the amateur has less time to commit to the pursuit. These constraints result in an ambiguity that leaves the skills and talents of the amateur and hobbyist unrecognized. However, in the AKC club context the multiple roles and complex nature of the subculture seems to compensate for the lack of

the clear professional-amateur-public taxonomy. Until recently, the lack of media coverage also left the professional handlers as an unrecognized and fairly obscure profession. Professionals earn championships faster by traveling constantly across the country in motor homes making a life of dog showing. The dependence of professionals on the AKC club members (amateurs and hobbyists) to hold events alters the concept of marginality.

The fact that these events involve competition between professional and amateur handlers may intensify the investment of amateurs and hobbyists. In the Stebbins' taxonomy there is a clear distinction between the professional and the amateur. In this context, they share the same institutionalized organizational structure that is dependent on the amateur and hobbyist volunteers. The key institutional supports are a shared domain of the professional, the amateur, and the hobbyist. With a really good dog, the amateur has the potential to out perform the professional. Therefore, the serious amateur and hobbyist may be less concerned with their marginality to leisure as an institution and more absorbed in the subculture of professionals and amateurs that their efforts sustain. Their efforts enable the institution, enable the professional, create multiple roles that serve the shared collective effort and, therefore, increase the intensity of their involvement.

Benefits

Self-reported benefits and self-development were closely intertwined. Benefits were the reason for continuing participation; they were the source of motivation and satisfaction. Benefits were accrued in relation to the respondents' views of themselves as skilled and knowledgeable about dogs and served to enhance the intensity of the relationship with their dog. Benefits were also derived from the social network of close friends that developed around the pursuit. Five categories of positive benefit were identified:

- (a) Dogs as a source of positive affect. Participation was enjoyable or "fun" in and of itself.
- (b) Participants gain and enhance their sense of companionship and appreciation for their relationship with their dogs.
- (c) Participation in AKC events results in an array of social benefits including developing close personal friends.
- (d) There are benefits associated with living with dogs on a daily basis. Dogs become part of daily routines including exercise, relaxation, companionship, and getting outdoors.
- (e) Competitive events provide an outlet for testing skills. Winning or doing well acknowledges and validates the owner's identification with dogs.

The competitive goals of AKC combined with an emotional attachment of liking dogs seemed to encourage owning three or more dogs. As one respondent described he now had four dogs because the preceding three had minor flaws that would keep them from being champions. Each subse-

quent dog was acquired to achieve a particular standard and when it became evident that it wasn't going to be achieved, another dog was purchased. Since dogs were described as family, and treating dogs humanely was an ethic shared by many within the subculture, getting rid of one dog to get another was not seen as an option.

Self-identification as a "Dog Person"

Identification with the pursuit was multi-faceted. The respondents self-referenced themselves as "dog people" who were associated strongly with dog images, their clubs, and the social network of "dog people."

The term "dog people" described two different groups, those who like dogs in general (compared to those who do not) and those who understand the serious training and breeding of dogs and the AKC subculture. Insider knowledge was reflected in the latter use of this term and was the more predominant use of the term. As one respondent explained, insider knowledge and camaraderie were essential because translating the pursuit to those outside the subculture was just too difficult.

Wherever I worked, I can't talk about dogs. People don't understand—and you can't sit there and explain it to them cause they—well, they've got their own lives. The rules are so complicated it seems like they [AKC] make them up as they go along. First thing people ask—people determine value by money. 'How much money do you make on them?' I don't make any. If I made money it wouldn't be any fun. Then I'd be worried about how much money I was making. I want to be independent. I can't talk to anybody except dog people. I can't say I got a leg this weekend—oh it was a qualifying score. They have no idea how long it took to do that. They have no concept of the work that went into it. They never will. Which is why there are dog people so everybody can gather around and pat each other on the back.

(Male, co-owner 16 malamutes, active level of involvement)

The respondents recognized their connections with those outside the subculture in one meaning of "dog person" but at the same time the second use of the term meant a connection of the shared intensity of the complex AKC world and being serious about dogs. Several respondents reported that although they attempted to minimize the use of symbols, work colleagues introduced them as a "dog person." Neighbors or co-workers sought out the "dog person" for advice with their own dog concerns. In this manner the intensity of their involvement was not marginalized but given credence.

Whenever my boss introduces me he makes it clear that I have an interest in dogs. Its kind of hand and hand with what I am.

(Male, 4 Norwegian Elkhounds, supporter level of involvement)

Centrality: Personal Gain or Personal Cost?

Respondents made choices concerning the pursuit that had major consequences both positive and negative. One of the characteristics of serious

leisure is perseverance and there were plenty of reports of putting up with spending a fair amount of money on a dog that turned out to have a major conformation defect. Financial cost was associated with a dog's bad habits (e.g., destroying furniture), expensive illnesses and surgeries, or long weekend drives to show destinations. It was difficult to untangle cost from perseverance (particularly as defined by Stebbins, 1992a) because the respondents' perspective defined each. Three main types of costs were identified, monetary, time constraint, and negative emotional experiences.

In general, all respondents recognized that living with a dog and participating in AKC activities was an expensive endeavor or one that could quickly become expensive. These costs were fueled in part by the competitive goals of AKC and emotional attachment to particular dogs. As one respondent who was also a breeder and lived with nine dogs responded, "my wife just can't bring herself to give up the puppies."

What the respondents clearly recognized as a cost was so contextualized and a part of their lives, they often dismissed it by identifying it as a cost but qualifying it as "this is what we do," or clarifying that "the dogs are family."

One of our older dogs started to bloat. She had produced a lot of puppies. She made us twenty to thirty thousand dollars. It was at night, I put on pants, slippers and rushed her to the emergency vet. I looked like a bum. They came out and said "she is an old dog, it will cost a lot of money." I said fine. 'About a thousand dollars.' I was getting mad; I just wanted them to do it. I was about to say, 'look, I'm a goddamn lawyer.' (Male, co-owner 16 Malamutes, active level of involvement)

The greatest cost was associated with living arrangements respondents incorporated into a "dog person" lifestyle. Living situations are designed to accommodate the dogs and travel to the shows is a priority. As one respondent clarified her meaning of lifestyle, "we think nothing of driving 1000–1500 miles in a weekend."

There are just the two of us and we have a 3000+ square foot house on about an acre of land here in the city plus we have six acres up north. We run the air conditioning from May 1st to October 1st. They have their own room that is carpeted, except the youngest that goes in a kennel and the oldest gets her own space. We have four vehicles, a station wagon, two pick-up trucks and a suburban. We trade our vehicle about every 18 months—we'll have approximately 40,000 miles on it every 18 months. (Female, 3 Old English Sheep dogs, active level of involvement)

This same lifestyle contextualization was evident in the descriptions of time constraint. For example, most individuals acknowledged it could be a hassle to get away but clarified their rationale. Some respondents believed that travel to national dog competitions substituted for vacations they used to take. Others severely curtailed any travel or visits that excluded their dogs.

Its very expensive to put them in a kennel, so I pretty much can't go anywhere that I can't take them with me. That eliminates going on trips and that sort of thing. If I didn't have dogs I would certainly have more money than I do. That

certainly is a big thing. Every time I bring up something my husband says, 'someday I'm going to sit down and show you what you're spending on those dogs'.
(Female, 3 Rottweilers, active level of involvement)

Emotional attachment to the dogs made it difficult to limit the amount of resources expended on the dogs. The personal identification as a dog person and the belief that dogs reflected who they were, their values, and their lifestyle seemed to further justify giving large amounts of time and money to their dogs and the leisure pursuit. One woman reported losing her job because her employer would not be flexible with her taking sick leave to care for her dogs. As she described the constraints and the impact her participation had caused at work and with her family, she explained:

Lot of people think you're crazy. It's like fine—I'm a package deal. Love me, love my dogs!
(Female, unemployed, 19 dogs, active level of involvement)

There were also emotional costs related to the political and competitive nature of the AKC subculture. All respondents commented on the political nature of the subculture and some of the active club members described trying to keep their distance from the negative side. The respondents discussed being disappointed with the way others within the subculture treated dogs or treated them in their formal roles as judge or event coordinator. For those at the associate level of involvement, this was often cause for distancing from the subculture and they quite literally downplayed the significance of the pursuit. They had raised and shown champion dogs, held officer positions in local and national clubs, developed private training seminars, but now valued the richness of the irrelationship with dogs that had grown out of participation. One respondent elected to own humane society dogs that had little chance of being adopted because she felt that she had the skills to manage and train the difficult or shy dogs.

Stebbins (1992a) interpreted benefits and costs from a social exchange framework. He argued that participation is assessed as a trade-off between costs and benefits and motivation to continue is sustained as long as there is a profit, that is, more rewards than costs. One respondent reflected that sentiment. Other respondents had a far less calculated view and their assessment was highly personal, variable, and subjective. For most, the strong identification in combination with belief in the value of the lifestyle would override any concern with cost. In essence, little cost-benefit analysis occurs because the endeavor represents "who they are."

Furthermore, the concept of exchange suggests a rational analysis. In the interviews, the respondents' reflections often led them to contrary statements that were left unresolved. One respondent had designed his house to accommodate his nine dogs, he had competed, and his wife and sons currently competed. He noted that the dogs were both a source of commonality and tension in the family.

I don't know maybe it has not helped [family togetherness]. My sons are both bachelors and they are so tuned into dogs . . . that I'm afraid its getting in the way of—or,—romance or whatever. My youngest son was involved with a young

lady, I thought she was a pretty nice young lady. Then one night at a party of some sort she was heard to say that she just did not want dogs in her kitchen . . . and that was the last time they saw each other. (Male, 7 Gordon Setters, 1 Irish Setter, 1 Sheltie, associate and supporter levels of involvement)

Stebbins reliance on exchange concepts for describing cost and benefits would suggest that individuals stay involved as long as rewards are present and the benefits outweigh the losses. However, this logic is prone to being a tautology and assumes that people do what they do because they get a reward for doing it, but says little about what rewards people will value (Hewitt, 1997). The respondents resisted singular cause and effect attributions. Seemingly incongruent aspects made sense when one understood the lifestyle of the "dog person." The connections to the club were strong even to the point where respondents at the supporter and associate level of involvement maintained their membership without competing, opting to support the pursuit and stay connected to the subculture.

Discussion and Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine the meanings and personal identification associated with the serious leisure pursuit of AKC events. The subculture was comprised of interactions at formal and informal levels, individuals participating at varying levels of involvement, and amateurs fulfilling multiple roles. The dynamic relationship between the pet owner and this serious leisure context expands common perceptions of the boundaries of a serious leisure pursuit, particularly as reflected in Stebbins' (1992a) description of marginality and the public-amateur-professional taxonomy. In the AKC context the amateurs fulfilled multiple volunteer roles and were instrumental in the formal social organization of the events. In this context the professionals were indeed dependent on the amateurs' willingness to fulfill multiple roles. These multiple roles intensify the amateur's time commitment to the pursuit. Local and regional clubs support skill development and advance the amateurs' competitive career. The club is a social unit comprised of friends and also serves a public education role by organizing community education classes that advance the care and training of dogs. In this community role, the amateur is treated as the dog expert.

Despite this public recognition it is still difficult for the amateur to translate the essence of the pursuit to the general public. The complexity of the AKC formal structure, the time and effort that goes into training the dog, and the amount of volunteer support extended to the club go unrecognized. This is the marginality Stebbins' (1992a) identified or as our respondents described it is why "a lot of people think we're crazy." Against this marginality, however, the amateurs and professionals share a sense of collegiality (albeit strained at times). The amateurs' multiple interacting roles and social worlds are all a part of being a "dog person," an insider to the complicated formal competitive AKC subculture.

The boundaries of the serious leisure pursuit extended into the everyday life of the amateur. The dogs existed as members of the family and were the

catalysts behind a number of lifestyle accommodations. This too was a component of strong identification with the pursuit. One's leisure identity becomes a core component of the lifestyle of the "dog person."

Overall, Stebbins' (1992a) emphasis on careers and the progressive development of skills were supported by this study. One unique finding was the identification of amateurs at the associate level of involvement. The character of their participation moved away from the competitive center of the pursuit, yet they maintained their membership in several clubs and fulfilled other social organizing roles. The associates, however, talked more about their relationship with their dogs than their connection to the social world. These individuals were self-described "dog people" but discussed how their knowledge, skills, and experience enriched the day to day existence with the dogs they currently owned. They took purposive action to disassociate with aspects of the pursuit yet the lifestyle accommodations and strong identification remained.

As identified by Stebbins' (1992a) amateurs often face constraints and pressures that challenge their continued participation. Quite often amateurs seek to devote additional time or resources to their pursuit. The respondents described this tension but also had difficulty separating benefits and costs. The meaning of perseverance, cost, and benefit were contextualized within the individual's leisure identity. This identity was for many, an integral component of his or her sense of self, including a reflection of values and lifestyle.

What sustains such intense levels of involvement? One dynamic evident in this study was the strong emotional tie to the animal and qualities inherent in that relationship. Leisure seemed to go beyond intrinsic satisfaction with an activity to include satisfaction derived from the expression of the relationship with the dog. In addition, there was a strong personal identification with the pursuit that developed as an extension of the self as learner, the social benefits of being with friends and the commitment to fulfilling the multiple roles associated with the pursuit.

This was a descriptive study focused on the personal meanings expressed by a randomly selected and small number of participants. Ethnographic observations served to validate the meanings represented by the respondent interviews. The personal meanings described were to some extent based on retrospective descriptions. Future research might study individuals with very similar patterns of participation and capture decisions about participation as they occur.

In addition, future research may raise the question of whether over-involvement can occur and at what point unconditional investment seems "fanatical," or represents the pursuit of hedonistic goals and an identity foreclosure. What distinguishes the adoption of a leisure identity that serves as an expressive and instrumental outlet from intensity that is beyond acceptable levels? The respondents in this study readily recognized this subjective boundary. With the definition of benefits a highly subjective assessment, it would be interesting in the future to further probe how limits are set on time and money investments.

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