

## The Social Nature of Leisure Involvement

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The involvement construct has been used to explain a variety of leisure-related phenomena. While these efforts have made valuable contributions toward furthering the field's understanding of leisure behavior and involvement in particular, many of these investigations have been limited by the measures used to operationalize the construct. Most research that has incorporated the construct in their investigations has been quantitative and has employed one of several standardized scales. Unfortunately, the performance of these scales has been inconsistent and has possibly raised more questions relating to construct validity than they have addressed. Thus, the purpose of this investigation was to develop an understanding of leisure involvement from a naturalistic perspective using several ethnographic research methods. Data were collected from campers attending an agricultural fair in central Pennsylvania and was used to address the primary research question, "Why do campers annually return to participate in the Fair?" and two sub-questions, "What is the focus of their involvement?" and "How is their involvement maintained?" Results indicated that the relationships informants shared with significant family and friends was the primary source of personal relevance and was identified as the most important element of their Fair experience. Additionally, the relationships and interactions with members of their immediate social worlds shaped what they perceived to be personally relevant. These results have implications for the way in which the construct is conceptualized and measured. Specifically, greater consideration of the social component of the leisure experience is warranted.

**KEYWORDS:** *Leisure involvement, commitment, social worlds, agricultural fair*

### Introduction

Selin and Howard's (1988) conceptual piece on ego involvement spurred considerable interest among leisure researchers. Since then, numerous investigations have appeared in the leisure literature examining the utility of the construct in a variety of contexts. For example, it has been proposed and found that involvement is positively related to product search behavior (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Jamrozy, Backman, & Backman, 1996; Ker-

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stetter & Kovich, 1997), the ability to differentiate between facilities and activity-related equipment (Bloch, Black, & Lichtenstein, 1989; Havitz, Dimanche, & Bogle, 1994; Kim, Scott, & Crompton, 1997), frequency of participation and purchase (Backman & Crompton, 1991; McCarville, Crompton, & Sell, 1993; McIntyre & Pigram, 1992), the size of consumers' awareness and evoked sets (Block et al., 1989, Celsi & Olson, 1988), and several sociodemographic variables (Madrigal, Havitz, & Howard, 1992; Obenour & Backman, 1995; Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000). While these efforts have made valuable contributions toward furthering our understanding of leisure behavior and involvement in particular, many of these investigations have been limited by the measures used to operationalize the construct. Most research on the construct has been quantitative and have employed one of several standardized scales (see Havitz & Dimanche, 1997, for review). Unfortunately, the performance of these scales has been inconsistent and has possibly raised more questions relating to construct validity than it has addressed. As suggested by Havitz and Dimanche (1999),

The methodological homogeneity of involvement research... must be challenged for at least two reasons. First, there is evidence of weakness in all instruments proposed and used to date. Inductive qualitative research, is needed to complement the current wave of deductive quantitative research... Second, qualitative techniques may also lead to improvements in our understanding of the relatively 'elusive' facets. (p. 272)

With this in mind, the purpose of this investigation was to develop an understanding of leisure involvement from a naturalistic perspective using several ethnographic research methods. Data were collected from campers attending an agricultural fair in central Pennsylvania and were used to address our primary research question, "Why do campers annually return to participate in the Fair?" and two sub-questions, "What is the focus of their involvement?" and "How is their involvement maintained?"

## Background Literature and Conceptual Framework

### *Enduring Involvement*

In the context of leisure involvement, most conceptual definitions and operations of the construct have been borrowed from the consumer behavior literature (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). While a number of definitions have been proposed (see Laaksonen, 1994), most have conceptualized involvement in terms of "personal relevance." In this sense, involvement reflects the degree to which a person devotes him or herself to an activity or associated product (Peter & Olson, 1987; Slama & Tashchiam, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Additionally, involvement refers to the strength or extent of the cognitive linkage between the self and stimulus object. This is indicated by expressions stressing the extent of an object's relatedness, connections or engagement to an individual's self concept, needs, and values as determinants of involvement.

There is general consensus that leisure involvement is best conceptualized as a multidimensional construct (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997; Kim et al., 1997; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; McIntyre, 1989). Dimensions receiving strongest support in the leisure literature include: (a) attraction, which refers to the perceived importance or interest in an activity or a product, and the pleasure or hedonic value derived from participation or use; (b) sign, which refers to the unspoken statements that purchase or participation conveys about the person; and (c) centrality to lifestyle, which encompasses both social contexts such as friends and families centered around activities, and the central role of the activity in the context of an individual's life.

A construct related to involvement that has also assisted leisure researchers in understanding the enduring nature of the leisure experience is commitment. From a sociological perspective, the commitment construct has been used to explain consistent behavior. Drawing from the work of Becker (1960) and Johnson (1973), Kim et al. (1997) defined commitment as "those personal and behavioral mechanisms that bind individuals to consistent patterns of leisure behavior" (p. 323). Becker also introduced the notion of "side bets" which are those costs and expectations associated with discontinuing a line of action. These costs may include the loss of friendships engendered through participation, the loss of financial investments, the loss of personal identity, and the absence of viable alternative leisure behaviors (Buchanan, 1985).

While efforts to refine our understanding of both the involvement and commitment constructs continue, current understanding suggests that involvement is an antecedent of commitment (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998). In particular, involvement primarily focuses on recreationists' emotional attachment to leisure activities whereas commitment, in the sociological sense, examines the structural elements external to the individual that bind them to the activity.

### *The Social Nature of Leisure Involvement*

One element external to the individual that has proven to be useful in understanding leisure behavior concerns the influence of the social environment. Consideration of the social influences on leisure behavior emerged in the early 1960s. Using primarily observational techniques, Burch (1969) found preliminary empirical support for the notion that recreation activities are often characterized by the group structure of participants, with different groups having different objectives and needs. Further theoretical development led to a "personal community hypothesis" of leisure; that participation in recreation is influenced by one's social circles of workmates, family, and friends (Burch, 1969). Subsequent investigations have used the hypothesis to demonstrate that individual variation in leisure behavior may be better explained by the type of social group with whom the individual has previously participated in the activity (Field & O'Leary, 1973; Field, 1976). In fact, Cheek and Burch (1976) maintain that leisure is fundamentally a group

phenomenon. The social organization of leisure is characterized by people interacting with others as a result of mutual tastes and out of a sense of belonging. According to Cheek (1971), the basis for approval in leisure occurs as a result of joint participation in activities that strengthen interpersonal relationships and generate intergroup solidarity.

Efforts to examine the effect of the social environment on individual leisure behavior have drawn from the literature on social worlds. Social worlds research has provided leisure researchers with an understanding of how social networks support and reaffirm leisure behaviors. Shibutani (1955) suggested that social worlds are distinct cultural groups where members of the group orient their behavior in an identifiable way. These cultural groups can emerge in just about any domain of life; sport, leisure, work, and religion (Strauss, 1978). Unruh (1979) also defined a social world as "an internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement" (p. 115). Synthesizing the work of several authors, Scott and Godbey (1992) noted that each social world represents a "unique scheme of life in which members share in a special set of meanings and in which various cultural elements—activities and events, conventions and practices, and specialized knowledge, technology, and language—are created and made meaningful by social world members and serve to set the social world apart from other social worlds" (p. 49).

In an extensive review of the literature on social worlds, Scott and Godbey (1992) identified several elements of the social worlds approach that were particularly pertinent for the current investigation. First, social world perspectives arise and are enacted through effective communication (Shibutani, 1955). That is, the generation, sharing, and dissemination of social world knowledge is dependent on common communication channels that traverse social strata and territorial boundaries (Scott & Godbey, 1992). Second, Scott and Godbey noted that social worlds tend to vary in size, shape, the amount of face-to-face interaction among members, permeability of boundaries, stability over time, and the degree of formal organization. Unruh (1980) has noted that local social worlds consist of "those categories of actors, organizations, events, and practices which are densely situated in geographical areas and are relatively small" (p. 286). Third, social worlds tend to be differentiated into smaller, more specific subworlds. Kling and Gerson (1978) noted that subworlds tend "to develop specialized concerns and interests within the larger community of common activities, which act to differentiate some members of the world from others" (p. 26). This segmentation may arise when spatial distinctions exist, when participants are divided in terms of ideology, when social worlds intersect with other social worlds, or when recruitment results in new types of members (Strauss, 1984). Strauss (1984) also suggested that for a distinct subworld to develop "there has to emerge a collective definition that certain activities are predominantly worth doing and 'we' are doing them" (p. 128). Fourth, people generally participate in many social worlds within their particular life spaces. Scott and God-

bey noted, for example, that the same individual may participate, at various levels of involvement, in social worlds related to their work environment, religious affiliation, parenthood, leisure pursuit, or even therapy-based support groups. Given the nebulous character of social worlds, members cannot reasonably be expected to be involved in all aspects of social world activity (Unruh, 1980). For this reason, participation in any given social world tends to be limited to various segments. Finally, members within any given social world possess orientations that serve as frames of references in evaluating the variety of social world activity around them. As noted by Bryan (1979), these orientations reflect knowledge, activity and setting preferences, attitudes toward consumption and competition, and the relationship of social world activity to the rest of one's life. Social world orientations, then, are fashioned by one's cumulative experiences inside and outside the particular social world (Scott & Godbey, 1992). Fine and Kleinman (1979) suggested that one's social world orientation may be a function of the extent to which the individual participates in groups with vertical or horizontal linkages. In this sense, vertical linkages exist through affiliation with nonlocal organizations, whereas horizontal linkages exist through "affiliations with other local organizations on the same level" (p. 14). People who participate in groups with constricted extraorganizational linkages tend to possess a social world perspective that is strongly local and provincial. Alternately, participation in groups with extensive vertical and horizontal linkages tends to encourage a cosmopolitan social world perspective (Merton, 1957).

### *Conceptual Orientation*

The conceptual framework guiding this investigation was grounded in symbolic interactionism. This perspective places emphasis on the importance of meaning and interpretation as essential human processes. People create shared meanings through their interactions and those meanings become their reality (Patton, 1990). Blumer (1969) articulated three major premises as fundamental to symbolic interactionism:

1. Human beings act toward stimuli on the basis of the meanings that these stimuli have for them;
2. The meanings attributed to stimuli arise out of social interactions individuals maintain with members of his or her social world; and
3. The meanings attributed to stimuli are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the individual in dealing with the stimuli he or she encounters.

In the leisure literature, examinations of involvement have almost exclusively utilized standardized scales developed by investigators operating within a falsificationist framework. These investigations have typically begun with a theoretical proposition that has usually been adapted from the social psychological and consumer behavior literatures followed by a means to test the theoretical proposition, and concluded with either theory confirmation

or disconfirmation. While the merits of this approach have been well documented (Chalmers, 1999), it appears as though we have reached a plateau from which only limited insight can be gained from further investigation that is cast in this theoretical and methodological mode (Bultena & Field, 1983). Other approaches may usefully add to our understanding of leisure behavior, in general, and warrant greater consideration.

Leisure involvement is said to provide insight into the meaning participants derive from their leisure experiences and the underlying motivations governing leisure behavior (Havitz & Dimanche, 1990; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; McIntyre, 1989). On the basis of this, inductive qualitative approaches should be useful given the variety of meanings people derive from their leisure experiences. Since meaning is often subject to both inter- and intra-personal differentiation (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997), attempts to define dimensions of leisure meaning *a priori* are likely to encounter problems. In addition, it has been suggested that many key meanings lie below the threshold of consciousness and can only be retrieved using indirect methods that overcome sensitivity barriers (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). With this in mind we have chosen to use several ethnographic approaches to address our research questions that we believe are better suited to the discovery of meaning than are survey-based techniques.

Ethnographic research offers an orientation to understanding the process and structure of a social setting. Spradley (1980) describes ethnography as "the study of both explicit and tacit cultural knowledge" (p. 8). Culture is defined as "the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior" (p. 6). Whereas explicit cultural knowledge can be communicated at a conscious level and with relative ease, tacit cultural knowledge remains largely outside of people's awareness. Spradley (1980) further posits that because so much of any culture consists of tacit knowledge, informants or interviewees often know things they cannot talk about or express consciously. Thus, the role of the ethnographer "is to make inferences about what people know by listening carefully to what they say [and] by observing their behavior" (p. 11). Consequently, ethnographers employ techniques that involve fieldwork techniques such as actual participation within the social setting, observation, and note taking.

Given that ego-attitudes are said to be the product of both personal and environmental elements (Sherif & Cantril, 1947), we attempted to gain an understanding of the social and cultural context that encapsulated informants' Fair experience. On the basis of Sherif and associates (Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) work, it was anticipated that the cultural context existent at the Fair would shape informants' perceptions of meaning derived from their Fair experiences.

### *Introduction to the Study Context and Purpose*

Informants in this investigation were campers attending a rural agricultural fair in central Pennsylvania. The Centre County Grange Encampment

and Fair dates back to 1873. Situated in Centre County in central Pennsylvania, the Fair began as a day-long picnic organized by several local Grange associations. Its primary purpose was to provide farmers and their families from around the region the opportunity for social interaction (Lathbury, 1999). Over the past 30 to 40 years, many Grange associations across the nation have dissolved in response to dwindling memberships arising from the decline in family-owned farm operations (Sansom, 2000). Consequently, the Centre County Grange Encampment and Fair remains the only encampment and fair event in the nation (Lathbury, 1999).

Today, in addition to thousands of casual visitors from around the country, the Fair attracts over 900 families primarily from around the region who annually camp for 10 days beginning the last week of August. For many of these campers, the 10 days at the Fair constitutes their primary vacation. The ethnic diversity of the families that camp at the Fair is strongly reflective of the original Grangers, namely, German, English, and Irish settlers. Many are, in fact, descendants of these original Grangers and maintain the exact tent site used by their ancestors. Most campers occupy sites that have been handed down to them by parents and grandparents. This familial network has helped to maintain the campers' cultural homogeneity.

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of leisure involvement from a naturalistic perspective using several ethnographic research methods. We attempted to gain an in-depth understanding of the unique cultural situation that exists at the Centre County Grange Encampment and Fair to better understand the context in which the experience occurred and address the research questions guiding the investigation.

Our primary research question explored reasons why campers attending the Fair return on an annual basis. The sub-questions, while supporting our primary research question, addressed more specific elements of the campers' experience. In the first sub-question we sought to identify the primary reason(s) underlying informants' involvement with the Fair. Is there a "key" element or attribute that binds them to the Fair? In the second sub-question, we explored campers' behavioral involvement with the Fair. How do campers maintain their involvement with the Fair year after year?

## Methods

I collected data in two phases.<sup>1</sup> In the first phase I employed several on-site field research techniques and in the second phase I employed in-depth interviews off-site in informants' homes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) along with Denzin (1970, 1978) have suggested that using multiple sources and varying the methods of data collection (i.e., *source* and *method triangulation*) considerably improves the probability that findings and interpretations will be credible.

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<sup>1</sup>Data were collected by the first author.

### *On-Site Fieldwork*

Throughout the summer of 2000, I collected data from a variety of sources to better understand the history of the Grange Fair and the context in which informants' leisure experiences occurred. First, in the latter part of May and June, I conducted informal conversations with Fair administrators. Also, in June and July I attended the monthly meetings of the Fair Association. Finally, I attended the Fair on several days and camped with one informant on one evening. During my time at the Fair, I spoke informally with carnival operators, Fair volunteers, vendors, exhibitors of agricultural produce and livestock, various tenters, and casual visitors. In so doing I occupied the role as participant observer. Data collected through participant observation is said to be especially useful for developing a contextual understanding of both the physical and social environment that encapsulates informants' experiences and meanings (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1978). These data were transcribed into field notes (Spradley, 1980; Strauss, 1978).

Finally, several days before the Grange Fair and during the Fair, the *Centre Daily Times* (Centre County's local newspaper) ran regular features on the Fair. These articles helped me to better understand both the history and the physical and social organization of the Fair. Also, several publications provided by the Fair Association were collected. These publications featured advertisements by sponsors, rules governing behavior for tenters and recreational vehicle owners, standards of entry and eligibility for exhibit entrants, a brief history of the Fair, a detailed schedule of events, and fairground maps.

### *Sampling*

In the second phase interviews were conducted to further explore aspects of informants' Fair experiences. I employed several characteristics of purposeful sampling. Given that the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of leisure involvement from a naturalistic perspective, I thought it was important to obtain a sample of individuals who had been making the decision to return to the Fair for an extended period of time and, therefore, could potentially share more about their experiences. Using the logic of intensity sampling (Patton, 1990), I sought excellent or rich examples (e.g., highly involved participants), but not necessarily unusual cases. To assist with this objective, I contacted the tenting secretary of the Grange Association. I requested from her a list of tenters who reside in Centre County, were over the age of 55, and who had had an association with the Fair in excess of 30 years and might be interested in participating in the study. She provided me with a list 42 names. From this list, I randomly selected informants to participate in in-depth interviews lasting approximately two hours. A total of 19 interviews were conducted: nine with husband and wife couples, and 10 with individuals. Informants' ages ranged between 55 and 87 years. All informants had been camping at the Fair for over 30 years and most had begun tenting in their early childhood. While data saturation was achieved by the thirteenth interview, additional interviews were



conducted because we were unsure of the impact of interviewing couples as opposed to individuals. No substantive differences, however, were observed in the data between couples and individuals.

### *In-Depth Interviews*

All interviews were semi-structured and employed a photo-elicitation technique. Prior to the interviews, I instructed informants to collect six to eight images that were representative of what their Fair experience meant to them. This technique is useful for evoking thoughts, reactions, and feelings from informants and also gives the interview a concrete point of reference (Denzin, 1989). Several authors have advocated the use of the photo-elicitation technique as a part of in-depth interviewing. Denzin (1989) noted that the use of photographs in an interviewing context makes both the interviewer and respondent collaborators in the discovery process. Harper (1984) also noted that "a phenomenological sense is gained as the informant explains what the objects in the photograph mean, where they have come from, and what may be missing" (p. 21).

The interviews generally began with discussions of the photos and then evolved without structure depending on the informant. Informants varied considerably in terms of the number of images they brought to the interview, ranging between zero and in excess of 60. In general, most informants brought approximately 20 images to each interview. Some informants also brought along items or self-constructed objects or images to assist with the expression of what the Fair meant to them. All data was analyzed using Atlas/ti® software. The Atlas/ti® software is a "workbench" for the qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual,<sup>2</sup> graphical, and audio data. The software offers tools to manage, extract, compare, explore and reassemble meaningful bits of information from large volumes of data.

Finally, after conducting the interviews I identified two key informants (i.e., one couple and an individual informant) who appeared particularly knowledgeable and articulate and with whom I had developed comfortable discourse (Patton, 1990). During their interviews they proved to be particularly useful in helping me understand what was happening during the Fair and provided articulate descriptions of why they and others return to the Fair. These informants were used to verify my interpretations of their interviews as well as my emerging hypotheses regarding why tenters return. Both informants had minor questions concerning how I went about analyzing the data. They also had made corrections to their own transcripts where both the transcriber and I had made errors. Most errors concerned the pronunciation of people's names, towns or misinterpreting the nature of a particular relationship (e.g., cousin rather than sister). Both informants confirmed that my interpretations were accurate and representative. While my discussion

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<sup>2</sup>Only textual data were analyzed in this investigation.

with these informants falls short of a comprehensive member check described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), on the basis of these discussions, I felt that the accuracy of my interpretations was credible and was true of both the key informant and other informants interviewed.

### *Data Analysis*

The first step in the process of formal data analysis began with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each transcript in addition to my field notes and notes in my reflexive journals was read line-by-line (Dey, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While reading I would label key words, sentences or paragraphs that stood out to me. Guiding me in this process were my research questions. With these questions in mind, I would identify phenomena that I perceived would help me address the questions and label it accordingly. Labels were usually between one and three words in length and would reflect the phenomena to which they were assigned. Where possible, informants' own labels for their experiences and phenomena were used in the labeling process (Boas, 1943; Patton, 1990).

To make sense of all the labels, the next step in the analysis involved assigning the labels into like or similar categories (Dey, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I generated a total of 27 labels. My intent was to categorize my labeled data bits in terms of their similarities and differences. Conceptually, I did this by grouping similar or related observations together; a process that I had been implicitly undertaking throughout open coding. I placed bits of data that seemed similar or related into separate piles, and then compiled the bits within each pile. Empirically, this was achieved by first printing a hard copy of my labels, their definitions and notes, and their associated bits of data. I then re-read this report (provided on command by the Atlas/ti® software) checking it for accuracy (i.e., the correct labeling of bits of data).

After reading through this report, I then began constructing a conceptual map (a feature that is provided by Atlas/ti®) illustrating how each of the labels was related to or different from one another. Dey (1993) noted that maps are particularly useful for analyzing relations between the labels we have used in our analysis. After a series of iterations that involved the splitting and splicing of several labels (Dey, 1993), I was able to produce two concise maps. Each map represented a single and conceptually distinct category that would help me address my research questions. These maps were acting as "piles" for my data bits where each pile was a distinct category. The criteria used to group the data labels was based on the label definitions which were born out of the data.

Finally, after completing my analysis, an independent investigator who was fluent with qualitative data analysis techniques was hired to conduct a confirmability audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data consisted of my reflexive journals, my interview notes, interview tapes, and the interview transcripts. Together, these materials comprised the audit trail that demonstrated how the data were collected, recorded, and analyzed. Given the volume of

data, rather than undertaking the onerous task of scrutinizing all data sources the auditor randomly selected three interviews, their accompanying tapes, my reflexive journals along with my label descriptions and their associated data bits,<sup>3</sup> my conceptual maps and commentary. I provided him with no information as to the process I had used to label and categorize the data. One week after I had given him all of the audit material we met to go over his thoughts concerning my analysis. Most of our discussion in this meeting focused on the labels I had generated and their relationships. He identified several bits of data that seemed out of place and noted several relations that I had omitted. His suggestions were incorporated into the final analysis.

### Results

Data analysis produced 27 labels. To illustrate the relationships among the labels within each category, conceptual maps were constructed for each category. The first category, *family*, is representative of the most compelling reason tenters return annually to the Fair (see Figure 1). Throughout the

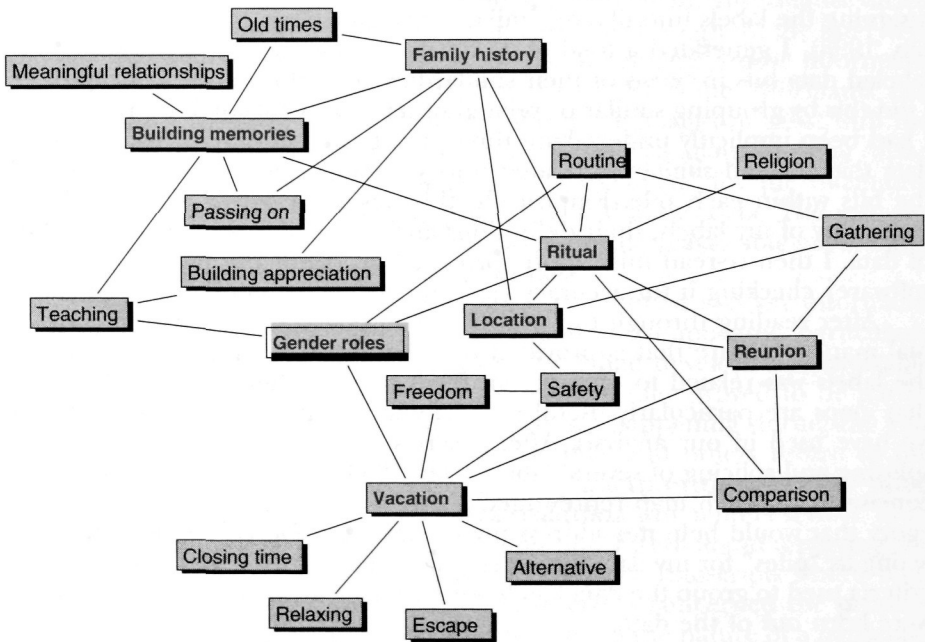


Figure 1. Conceptual Map for the Family Category

<sup>3</sup>This is a summary report provided by the Atlas/ti® software which includes all of my labels and assigned data bits. This summary report also made it unnecessary for him to read through all of the transcripts.

years, informants' association with the Fair had always and without exception been in the presence of close family. Informants were most often introduced to the Fair, either as a visitor or camper, at an early age by their parents. In the context of the Fair, the constant and persistent presence of family has meant that most experiences occur in the presence of other family members.

Several important labels were identified that hold particular significance for understanding the role of family in the context of informants' Fair experience. Family, in one way or another, permeated most of the labels generated in these analyses. Following is a discussion of the "key" labels for each category which are identified in bold font in Figures' 1 and 2 and italics in this discussion.

First, *family history* refers to informants' family ties to the Fair. All interviews were conducted with at least one informant having had parents who tented at the Fair. Consequently, much of the discussion throughout the interviews referred back to parents and grandparents and the experiences shared with them in years past. These discussions shed light on the length of these tenters' association with the Fair as well as their broad family network. Additionally, as a consequence of these historical family ties, informants held strong emotional attachments to their tent sites as evidenced in the following quotes<sup>4</sup>:

Yeah, his mother and us started. In fact she got the tent. . . they called her about the tent and I think we had two days to round stuff up and move. *The tent that you're in now, was your mother's tent did you say? Yes. She left it in your name? Yes.* There has been a tent in the "informant's last name" name since way back when. My grandpap got a tent way back when and they tented there. . . well it's still in the "informant's last name" name, which my uncle has it now. His daughter has it and it's still in the "informant's last name" name. It's been there for since way back when. But this tent here, we've had for 39 years. It was my mother's and my mother got it. *And the one you referred to, your*

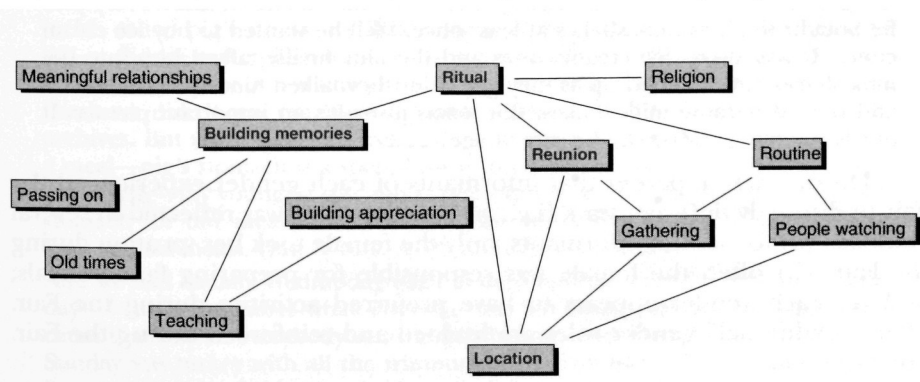


Figure 2. Conceptual Map for the Social Category

<sup>4</sup>The interviewer's comments are italicized. In instances where couples were interviewed, the female's dialogue is presented in brackets [ ].

*uncle's one, that was your grandfather's?* That was originally my grandpap's. (Mrs. F, 55 years of age)

[Now Bob's grandparents tented and his parents and he did and so did mine. My grandparents came from Bellefonte on the train to Center Hall.] *Okay. I've heard of folks doing that.* [They came to Bellefonte over on the train. Course, we're talking about 1880s or 90s.] (Mrs. H, 77 years of age)

*Were your grandparents involved in the Fair as well, or just your parents?* My grandfather had a tent and my dad's brother was on the Fair committee. And so he had a tent and when I was a kid, my grandfather's tent—we ate in. That was his immediate family, his children and their kids ate at this tent. And the other tent, which was my dad's brother's tent, was full of beds and all the kids slept in that tent and they ate in the other tent. (Mr. D, 71 years of age)

Second, informants' memories (i.e., *building memories*) of past experiences shared with family and friends were littered throughout all interviews. The central characters in these stories were always family and friends. These stories, perhaps embellished over the years, were retold during family gatherings at the Fair. As can be seen in the quote below, the Fair remains an important family experience where its full meaning appears to be only fully appreciated by the tenters themselves:

And we build a lot of memories of fun because Corrine, my daughter, was taking Cameron for a wagon ride and Grandpa crawled in too. So you just have lots and lots and lots. It's just—it's just memories. I went through photograph albums and I cut and I thought none of this tells everything. I have one picture that I really wanted in here and I didn't have because I called Marty and Laura who live in Centre Hall. And I said, "do you have an idea of when the picture was taken with Grandpa walking up along the tent row?" And Scott was on one side and Marty was on the other and they were probably old teenagers. I think they were probably still in high school. And he said Scott has it and boy was he mad. He wants it too. *And it just. . . captures?* Yes it did. It was just the whole thing of the Fair and he was taking them for milk shakes because every year he bought the kids milk shakes at least once. Well he wanted to buy ice cream cones. It was always ice cream cones and the kids finally talked him into the milk shakes and it ended up as they got older they talked him into milk shakes and then it became milk shakes. But it was just—it's an important picture. It just is the thing. (Mrs. N, 59 years of age)

Third, it was apparent that informants of each gender experienced the Fair in distinctly different ways (i.e., *gender roles*). This was reflected in several contexts; (a) for several informants, only the female took her vacation during the Fair; (b) often the female was responsible for preparing family meals; and (c) each gender appears to have preferred activities during the Fair. Many "traditional" gender roles are learned and reinforced during the Fair. For example:

*So you do a lot of cooking there still then?* [Yeah.] Yeah. [My daughter and I do. And this granddaughter likes to cook so that's no problem. And we take electric fry pans. We take electric cookers and. . .] You've got to visit all the. . . you've got to visit whichever ones you like. . . the stands. [Oh, yeah. But I can't say we have a favorite 'cause we don't eat out that much.] *You know a lot of the folks. . .*

*you're. . . most of them have given up on the cooking. They tell stories about how their mother used to cook a lot. You enjoy cooking at the Fair? You don't find that to be like work or anything like that, do you?* [No because we get it ready before as much as we can and take it out there. And then when you say about most of them don't, if there are only one or two people, you can go out to eat. But when you have 8 or 9 or 10, you can't do that every night.] (Mr. & Mrs. H, 78 and 77 years of age)

Its very common. You go in and there's 4 or 5 seniors there, women talking, relaxing and planning the next meal. It seems they keep planning the meals for the whole week, cooking. Three o'clock in the afternoon. Their son or grandson or granddaughter would bring in supplies or they'll have, they keep ahead of it. That's their job to keep it going. (Mr. M, 62 years of age)

My father rarely came when I was younger and we had the farm. Rarely came to Fair. He'd move mother in and bring her home. That was her vacation. Now he went hunting. He'd run out to the mountains out in the Allegheny's to hunting camp in hunting season and she then stayed home and did cattle milking. *He wasn't interested?* Not a lot. See he lived in the area and his family was not involved. They weren't big socializers his family. The "last name" sort of nasty fighters. [laughter] Might as well be honest. *He wasn't interested?* I think so and that way then he didn't feel guilty when he went off to hunting camp either. She got her week at Fair and he got his week in hunting camp. (Mrs. D, 69 years of age)

Fourth, some of the activities that informants engaged in during the Fair hold special meaning to them and are distinct from their other Grange experiences (i.e., *ritual*). Typically, these activities revolve around family and friends and are often long-held traditions. The family meal, for example, serves a strategic purpose to bring family members together. During these occasions, stories are told, gender roles are rehearsed, and family bonds are reinforced. For example:

[Well we have one meal that we really like and I don't know if you've heard of it. It's called pig's stomach.] *Yeah a couple of the folks have told me that one.* [We did. . . did we make pig's stomach on Sunday? Did we break down and do that?] Oh we have quite a few times. I'm trying to think if we had it this past year. [Yeah we did. It was our meal. I forget when we had it. I'll look back in the archives. But yeah, there are certain meals that we always have.] Course that's a meal—pig's stomach is a special meal to us. There are two of us especially in our family—my youngest son and myself on our birthdays, we always want pig's stomach for our meal. And you know the whole family gathers here and we have special meals. (Mr. & Mrs. A, 59 and 64 years of age)

And we had usually Wednesday was hot dogs and corn on the cob. And Thursday—I can't remember what Thursday was but Friday was always spaghetti because that's when everybody came in for the weekend. Saturday was ham potpie. Sunday was turkey with all the trimmings and they had—Dan eventually got a four burner stove with an oven in it and they cooked the turkey down there. And then Monday was usually leftovers or meatloaf. Tuesday was Swiss steak. Wednesday was pork chops and filling where you lay the filling down and then pork chops, filling, pork chops. And then, Thursday the last day, was like corn soup.] Chicken with corn soup. (Mr. & Mrs. F, 56 and 55 years of age)

Fifth, common throughout all informants' interviews was the theme of a *reunion*. This was noted as an important factor underlying their desire to return each year. Typically, the reunion of family and friends would occur both formally and informally at the informant's tent, throughout the fairgrounds, and even within the local Centre Hall community during the Fair. Reunions provided opportunities for informants to meet extended family, recount old stories, and update one another on their life experiences over the preceding 12 months. For example:

[Because some families do live away, but a lot of families do travel. . . and the same way with classes in our high school. They'll have class reunions on the Saturday and Sunday of the Fair because they are coming back to see their family and they don't come any other time. . . Well maybe they do but. . . If I see you now or somebody in May or June, I'll say well we'll see you at the Fair. We know that they are going to go to the Fair. We maybe won't see them like Bob says that. . .] Somebody you know that comes. [We'll say "well we'll see you at the Fair." They know what we're talking about and. . .] Well I know of at least three members of my class, my high school class, that I see at the Fair almost every year. And I don't see them the rest of the year. [And they will come to the tent.] (Mr. & Mrs. H, 78 and 77 years of age)

But we grew up right over the hill here in a farmhouse. Come Grange Fair time all the cousins and stuff like that would come to the house and the house was full of people. Everybody would take off to the Fair and that's what we did. [It was like a big family reunion was what it amounted to.] And it's. . . [So that everybody could get together.] (Mr. & Mrs. F, 55 and 56 years of age)

Okay well first of all I think that Grange Fair is one great big happy reunion. You know it's like a yearly reunion—like families have reunions. This is to me a great family reunion. . . (Mrs. P, 75 years of age)

Sixth, *location* was a label that consistently emerged throughout all informants' interviews. This label refers to the physical setting in several contexts. The location of the tent, fairground, and broader community serve as points of demarcation between the informants' personal world and other people, towns, and communities. In this sense, the tent and the fairground acted as a container for informants' Fair experience. Informants' tents, in particular, served as the "locus" of family gatherings and social events. Given the *family history* associated with each of the tents, long-time tenters are very familiar with the location of significant family and friends. As discussed above, informants also expressed an emotional attachment to the settings, as can be seen in the following quotes:

[The Fairground I know has much more meaning to Bob besides that. It was a place that was used by the community and when he was in high school they didn't have an auditorium. He graduated from a building out in the Fairgrounds. They had their graduation class night and class plays in what they called an auditorium out there.] Yeah we had just the four room schoolhouse where I went to high school. *This is Centre Hall?* In Centre Hall. We had no facilities for entertainment or for productions so we went to the auditorium

and I don't know if the picture is in here or not. It was a large building and we had our graduation out there and if we had a school operetta or a play, we had it out there 'cause we had just a four room schoolhouse and not an auditorium. So it was an integral part of the town, Grange Park, because we used it other than just at Grange Fair time. But I graduated there. We had our operettas there and plays there and we were allowed to use the building at no cost. (Mr. & Mrs. G, 84 and 78 years of age)

Then. . . [but I mean you stay at the same location year after year. So you know—I mean all the people around you, it's a reunion because every year. I mean that's the only time you see a lot of these people.] It is the only time you see someone once a year. [You get to know them and they become friends. And every year they're back there and next year you're back there.] (Mr. & Mrs. E, 65 and 62 years of age)

Finally, many informants regarded the 10 days at the Fair as a *vacation*. The perception of vacation occasionally differed along the lines gender with women more inclined than men to consider their Fair experience a vacation. For example:

*As children, what do you remember liking most about the Fair?* The vacation part. From the time when we were big enough to do anything, we worked all summer on the farm. We were busy as Sam Hill and we generally, that last week before the Fair, we done about everything we could do to get ready so that we could attend the Fair pretty near everyday we could. And that was just the highlight of the whole summer is going to the Fair because it was your vacation. (Mr. & Mrs. H, 78 and 77 years of age)

*Did you guys. . . now for you guys, was this your only vacation or did you have other vacations?* Well it was basically your vacation. [You're talking about vacations?] *Yeah.* [It was my vacation. I took off for Grange Fair. Now that's. . . I'm working for the bank, I only work about 20 hours a week. And of course I'm the low man on the totem pole and there is a girl—my superior who takes off for Grange Fair. But that's okay. In about two years, I'm going to retire so I can suffer through that.] Like I say, I was a machinist and I never took time off to go to the Fair. I was out there in the evenings and I would always come home here and go to work from home. I never stayed out but now that I'm retired, I get more of a chance to. But I always took my vacation during hunting season. So I never took vacation at the Fair. (Mr. & Mrs. A, 64 and 59 years of age)

Another major category, *social*, was also a prominent theme that emerged within the interviews (see Figure 2). While there was some overlap between the categories of *family* and *social* there remained distinct elements of the informants' experience. Like the importance ascribed to relationships between family members as opposed to those of friends, *social* is of slightly lesser importance to informants and in understanding why tenters return. While the relations among labels for *social* are similar to those reported for *family*, a distinguishing characteristic for this category concerned the activity of *people watching*. Most informants indicated that they enjoyed sitting out in front of their tent talking to strangers passing by and looking for their "Fair friends" that are only seen each year at the Fair (i.e., *people watching*). In fact,



several informants noted this was an attractive attribute concerning their tent's location. Being close to bathrooms or the grandstand meant that many other tenters had to pass by their tent, thereby ensuring that they are exposed more tenters and visitors. For example:

You walk a while and then you go back to your tent and set and talk to people going by. It's the way to the grandstand mainly and they have to go right by the tent to get to the grandstand. And at one time when we first got it, that back parking lot was the only parking lot. So 95% of the people who came to the Fair, came right through the opening between the two tents. The big opening. So you really had the ideal location to see people. You would see—I say you see more people setting there than you do when you're out walking the whole area. (Mr. E, 65 years of age)

The categories, *Family* and *Social* also served to address our two sub-questions examining the focus of tenters' involvement and how their involvement is maintained. In the first sub-question, we sought to identify the primary reason(s) underlying their involvement with the Fair. Informants' relationships with family and friends emerged as the most prominent reason underlying their involvement with the Fair. The importance of family and friends was interwoven throughout most of the labels for each of the categories.

In the second sub-question, we explored tenters' behavioral involvement while at the Fair. Informants' behavioral involvement with the Fair consists primarily of a variety of routines and rituals. Pertinent properties of these routines and rituals include (a) gathering formally and informally throughout the fairground (i.e., *gathering*), (b) reunions with friends and family within the fairground and surrounding community (i.e., *reunion*), (c) watching passers-by in the front of the tent for hours on end (i.e., *people watching*), (d) examining the exhibits and the variety of stores throughout the fairground (i.e., *vendors*), and (e) attending religious services on a Sunday. Additionally, *relaxing* (a property of *vacation*) was common among all informants.

## Discussion

The primary focus of this investigation was to develop an understanding of leisure involvement from a naturalistic perspective. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the reasons why tenters camping at an agricultural fair would return on an annual basis. These data illustrated that there were a variety of reasons why tenters returned each year. Informants noted, however, that the most important element or attribute associated with their Fair experience was the relationships they shared with significant family and friends.

This finding also helped to address the first sub-question. That is, was there a "key" element or attribute that bound informants to the Fair? As previously noted, the opportunity to experience these relationships in a familiar and intimate setting was identified as the most compelling reason for

their continued involvement. This finding is significant given that most conceptualizations of involvement assume that the activity itself is the most important element underlying an individual's association with an activity. Many activities, however, have a variety of associated behaviors and therefore many potential sources of personal relevance. While for these informants the most important element of their experience was their relationships with family and friends, they also identified other activities as being important because they served to support and embellish these relationships.

This finding also helped us to the second sub-question. "How did informants maintain their involvement with the Fair year after year?" Informants engaged in a variety of behaviors during their 10 days at the Fair. Some of these behaviors were long-held traditions that were rehearsed with varying regularity (e.g., daily meals, Sunday reunions, enjoying certain Fair foods, etc.). These behaviors often brought significant family and friends together, thereby enhancing their Fair experience.

In the context of leisure involvement, most conceptual definitions and operations of the construct have been borrowed from the consumer behavior literature. As noted earlier, dimensions receiving strongest support in the leisure literature include; attraction, sign, and centrality (see Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). The data reported and discussed in this paper offer limited support for these dimensions. First, it was evident in all of informants' interviews that the Fair was both important to them and an enjoyable experience (i.e., attraction). Primarily, informants viewed the Fair as an important opportunity for them to see significant family and friends. This social experience was viewed as the most enjoyable element of their Fair experience. A number of informants also viewed their Fair experience as a vacation and thus, an important break from their regular work or life routines.

For the dimension, centrality, there was limited support to suggest that the Fair occupied a central role within their lives. Previous research has demonstrated that, for those who score high on this dimension, much of their life revolves around their chosen leisure pursuit (McIntyre, 1989). The activity is such that it allows for year-round participation as well as for supporting activities (e.g., club membership, magazine subscription, equipment maintenance, etc.). Typically, respondents who score high on this dimension structure their lives so as to facilitate on-going involvement with the activity. For annual events such as the Grange Fair, this kind of involvement is more difficult to maintain. Most of the informants interviewed in this investigation did little in the way of advanced preparation beyond allocating the 10 days for the Fair. While they look forward to the Fair each year, they invest little else of their life in the event.

Social ties, such as those with families and friends, are also said to be a part of the centrality dimension (McIntyre, 1989). This conceptualization of social bonds is similar to that proposed by Becker (1960) and Buchanan (1985) in their discussion of side bets. For the informants investigated in this study, this was a strong component of their involvement with the Fair. Social ties were both the focus of their involvement as well as the agent that

maintained their involvement (e.g., shaping of attitudes, values, and beliefs). Two issues emerge from this finding. First, these results suggest that investigators using scales to measure centrality might need to consider separating the two components; centrality to lifestyle and social contexts. In fact, some researchers (Field & O'Leary, 1973; Stokowski, 1990) claim that leisure is most often a social rather than individual experience. Burch (1969), with his "personal communities hypothesis," was among the first to suggest that people select different recreation activities on the basis of the influence of family, friends and workmates. Given the importance attributed social forces on leisure behavior and Sherif and associates (Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) emphasis on the social environment in the development of ego involvement, it is surprising that greater emphasis on social contexts hasn't been forthcoming in the study of leisure involvement.

Second, the symbolic interactionist framework guiding this investigation suggests that the object of informants' involvement lies in the meaning they extract from the interactions with members of their local social world. While this is not to suggest that informants divorce themselves from broader social world systems during the Fair, it appears that the locus of this involvement remains within the confines of their tent. During my onsite fieldwork, it became evident that other subworlds existed throughout the fairground (e.g., social worlds based on type of agricultural interests, carnival operators, tenters vs. recreational vehicle owners, etc.) with whom informants regularly interacted. The focus of this investigation, however, was primarily concerned with the confined world existing within informants' tents. In the context of these subworlds, there existed a common understanding that relationships among family members were of significant importance. Subworlds differed, however, along the lines of family history and cherished traditions. To the outsider, many of these families appear identical with respect to their appearance and behavior. To the insider, these subtle differences (e.g., food preferences, traditions, etc.) shed light on the family's identity.

Work by Johnson (1991) on commitment to personal relationships also provides insight concerning the significance of informants' relationships with members of their social worlds and the role these relationships play in shaping informants' perceptions of personal relevance. Working within a symbolic interactionist framework, Johnson noted that commitment is a function of three processes; (a) personal commitment, the feeling that one wants to continue involvement, (b) moral commitment, the feeling that one ought to continue involvement, and (c) structural commitment, the feeling that one has to continue their involvement. In the context of these data and Johnson's framework, personal commitment was manifested in informants' discussions of the importance of their relationships and the people with whom they share these relationships. To a lesser degree, moral commitment emerged from, (a) informants' need for valuing consistency and stability (e.g., references to the unchanging nature of the Fair) in addition to (b) informants' own sense of obligation to maintain family tradition and history.

Finally, structural commitment, which is somewhat similar to Becker's (1960) notion of side bets, was most salient in informants' discussions of their tent site. These discussions typically indicated that they were somewhat obligated to return each year because Fair administrators only permit one year's absence before re-issuing the tent to another family on the waiting list. Another form of structural commitment, while not explicitly observed in these data, suggests that informants may also have been concerned about the reaction of other family members if they had decided to terminate their involvement.

Finally, for the third dimension of involvement, sign shares conceptual similarity with Greenwald's (1982) type of ego involvement, impression management. In the context of leisure behavior, investigators have attempted to measure the symbolic aspects of leisure participation where the activity is said to convey to others desired perceptions of the self. Manifestations of this type of involvement were most evident in female informants' descriptions of their tent and the effort that they input to maintain it (e.g., tent decorating contest and meticulous cleaning). For these informants, the presentation of their tent to other family and friends was reflected on their own sense of self.

Understanding the object of participants' involvement remains elusive. Mainline consumer research has focused on involvement with products. In leisure research, the attitude object generally switches to involvement with activities (e.g., travel, golf) or associated services and products (e.g., airlines, golf clubs). Although less often examined, brand level involvement may be equally salient (e.g., destination, site, and course). Recent conceptualizations of brand level involvement suggest that is best understood in terms of commitment, place attachment and loyalty. Researchers generally agree that while these constructs are conceptually distinct (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998; Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999), they also acknowledge that the constructs are closely related (Buchanan, 1985). In the context of the Grange Fair, levels of measurement become complex and illustrate the difficulty of applying consumer theory to leisure behavior. Ordinarily, involvement and the scales used to measure the construct are conceptualized at the product level; that is, the activity with which recreationists' are involved. For tenters camping at the Grange Fair, however, there are multiple activities to engage in and therefore the design of an index measuring involvement at the activity level would be very difficult. Existing literature suggests it would be more feasible to measure informants' involvement at the brand level; that is, the Grange Fair. On closer inspection, however, these data have illustrated that it is not the Fair per se that informants are involved with, it is what the Fair provides that is most compelling—it is the opportunity to share time and experiences with family and friends. This finding is significant given that if we were to employ one of the quantitative scales (e.g., Laurent and Kapferer's CIP scale), the wording of the involvement items would use the Grange Fair as the primary attitude object. It is likely that no reference to informants' families would be made. While the items in the scale are designed to measure various dimensions of involvement (e.g., centrality, sign,

attraction, etc.), little insight concerning the true nature of their involvement would be provided by the scale alone. Additionally, little insight would have been provided concerning the processes shaping informants' perceptions of personal relevance, namely, informants' interactions with their social worlds.

These findings also highlight several shortcomings associated with current survey research-based approaches to conceptualize and measure leisure involvement. First, current instrumentation provides only superficial insight as to why and how an activity is personally relevant. As suggested in the findings presented here, the activity is a context for a more compelling attitude object (e.g., significant relationships). Greater consideration of the context within which the experience occurs may aid in addressing this issue. Second, the conceptualization of risk in leisure behavior remains elusive. This dimension of involvement is featured in some measures of involvement (e.g., Laurent & Kapferer, 1985), but has not fared well in the leisure literature. While clearly evident in some activities (e.g., physical risk—rock climbing), less salient elements (e.g., social and psychological) may require different methods to elucidate its properties (e.g., indirect methods). Continued investigation is warranted given the potential significance of risk as a barrier to participation. Finally, all investigations of involvement published in the leisure literature have employed quantitative scales of one sort or another. This methodological homogeneity has limited our ability to move beyond our current understanding of the construct. It is recommended that a more pluralistic approach to research design is warranted as well as the synthesis of related literature (e.g., serious leisure, flow, leisure meaning).

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