Seeking Judgment Free Spaces: Poverty, Leisure, and Social Inclusion

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences and meanings of leisure for individuals living in poverty and who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. Results show that a key component for moving toward leisure that addresses our most challenging social ills rests with its power to create "judgment free spaces." Three themes emerged: (1) the significance of vibrant organizations where acceptance, not exposure, is fostered; (2) a need for increased opportunities to become, and remain, connected to the broader community and to choose how this connection is manifested; and (3) the importance of personal and private spaces that are both safe and appropriate. The paper concludes with a call to re-think the spaces where leisure occurs.

KEYWORDS: *Homeless, Community, Poverty, Leisure, Social Assistance, Social Support*

Over the last 20 years, we have seen the proliferation of poverty and homelessness in North America. Poverty is found in urban and rural areas and in affluent regions; no community is immune (Lee, 2000; Senate Standing Committee on Agriculture & Forestry, 2006). With the recent economic crises, poverty rates are growing, and news reports detailing "mortgage foreclosures, the squalid state of much social housing, and the growing ranks of those living on the streets are finally becoming topics of mainstream discussion" (Mair & Trussell, in press). At the same time, similar to other Western countries, in the last two decades social support programs in Canada were restructured—moving from welfare to work programs and shifting the onus of responsibility from social institutions to individual citizens (Chouinard & Crooks; Coulter, 2009; Gazso, 2007). Given the dramatic shifts in governance and support systems affecting those living in poverty, and the recent economic crises that have characterized the early twenty-first century, there is no better time to try to understand the impacts of these changes as well as to consider how they might be addressed.

Despite the growing prevalence of homelessness in North American society, relatively little research to date in the field of leisure studies has focused on those individuals and families who are homeless or are struggling to maintain a stable living environment. Notable exceptions are studies by Klitzing (2003; 2004), Dawson and Harrington (1996), and Tirone (2003/2004). Nonetheless, it is important to explore leisure's potential role in helping to address what Mills (1959) called "private troubles" and "public issues."

While leisure experiences may not solve the social ills of poverty and homelessness, they may help contribute to a higher quality of life. The Canadian Council on Social Development (a non-profit social policy and research organization) argued that access to recreation programming, particularly for youth, may be a fundamental component of addressing some of the challenges presented by living in poverty (CCSD, 2001). Yet those working in the field of poverty and homelessness would do well to pay even greater attention to our field and to see the role leisure can play in the lives of those experiencing these challenges. For instance, Klitzing's (2003; 2004) work showed leisure as a coping mechanism to help alleviate stress caused by poverty and homelessness. Tirone (2003/2004) revealed how recreation "reduced the level of stress … and helped [low-income] people to raise their level of skills" (p. 164). Dawson and Harrington (1996; see also Dawson, 2000) suggested leisure has a role to play in helping individuals who are homeless stave-off the effects of being increasingly marginalized. Leisure, in its very best sense, becomes a vehicle, a strategy for helping people link in to social life and can aid the goal of inclusion.

Therefore, the purpose of our study was to examine and understand the experiences and meanings of leisure for individuals living in poverty and who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. More specifically, we wanted to explore the role of community service organizations in these individuals' lives, and to assess how they can be more relevant and responsive to the needs of people who are socially marginalized. Thus, we followed Lee (2000) in seeking out the perspectives of recent immigrants, non-permanent residents, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, lone-parent families, women and single individuals

as they are more likely to experience poverty (see also Townson, 2000; Wallis & Kwok, 2008).

Our project was situated in the Region of Waterloo, an area in southern Ontario, Canada with a population of approximately 533,700 people (Region of Waterloo, 2009). The Region of Waterloo, made up of three urban municipalities and four rural townships, has a blend of manufacturing, service, agricultural, and high tech industries and is considered to be a relatively prosperous area. Indeed, in 2007 one of the urban municipalities won an international competition and was named the "Intelligent Community of the Year." Nonetheless, poverty and homelessness persist in this area. For instance, Skillen (2003) noted that almost one in five children in the Region of Waterloo lived in poverty. It was estimated that more than 2700 individuals accessed emergency shelters in the region in 2008 (Region of Waterloo, 2009). The Region of Waterloo also reported the success of its 2008 Affordable Housing Strategy, which created 1500 new units, and yet still described a shortfall of 3 780 affordable units in the area (Region of Waterloo, 2008).

It is important to note that there is no broadly accepted definition of poverty (CCSD, 2010) to which everyone adheres. Statistics Canada, for instance, uses the notion of the Low Income Cut Off (LICO) as an unofficial poverty line. Those living below the LICO are families spending a greater proportion (generally 20%) of their total income on food, shelter and clothing than the average family of the same size (CCSD). In designing our study, we were mindful of this difficulty of measurement, and so we worked with organizations whose mandate it was to work with people living in poverty, however defined. Measuring homelessness is equally challenging and yet many researchers have attempted to develop models that can give us at least a snapshot of the situation in a particular community. One of the most useful is Mah and DeSantis' (2000) categorization of visible and invisible homelessness. Their model was developed out of research undertaken in the same region where our study was held and so was also used to guide the original design of the project. In their work, "Literal homeless" included people who sleep in public places or emergency shelters. "Hidden homeless" was defined as people who live in illegal or temporary accommodations, and "imminent risk of being homeless" included those who live in unsafe, unaffordable, overcrowded, insecure and/or inappropriate housing.

In the next section, we set the stage for the study by describing major changes to the social support programs that occurred in the 1990s, and continue to frame issues of poverty and homelessness today. We also consider the relevant, albeit rather limited literature addressing issues of leisure in this area.

Changing Social Support Programs and Living under a Microscope

The rise of poverty rates in Canada are attributed to many complex and interrelated factors including: changing household structures (e.g., to lone parent or single person), the increasing number of part-time and low-wage employment opportunities, and the reduction of social security programs at all levels (Lee, 2000). Alarmingly, these complex factors may be exacerbated with the onset of the recent economic crises that have characterized the late-2000's and have devastated many families' lives.

In the province of Ontario, major changes to employment and other social support programs occurred in the 1990s. As a report by Drummond and Manning (2005; see also Reid & Golden, 2005) noted, the conservative government introduced "a radical overhaul" of the province's welfare system. Drummond and Manning argued the changes were drastic as eligibility requirements for welfare were tightened and benefits for people without disabilities were cut by 21.6% from 1995-2000. At the same time, as Coulter pointed out, "municipal grants were cut by 35%; the province went from building 6,000 units of affordable housing per year to zero; women's shelters and second stage housing and counseling faced substantial budgetary cutbacks" (2009, p. 30). Similar slashes to social support programs took place in not only Ontario, but across Canada as well as in the United States (Gazso, 2007; Nelson, 2005; Townson, 2000).

Despite changes toward a more liberal stance of leadership after the 2003 election, the current Ontario government has done little to undo these radical changes to social supports and, as Coulter (2009) has argued, "engages in rhetoric about the value of public services ... although in camouflaged and modified forms. In this way, neoliberalism is deepened and normalized" and discussion about "socioeconomic inequality is largely avoided" (p. 24). Indeed, the two major provincial support programs that were created during the conservative era remain intact today.

The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), housed within the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, was created in 1997 as part of the Social Assistance Reform Act. The Ontario Works Program (OW) provides short term support for people needing temporary assistance in their search for employment. Research indicates individuals subsiding on these programs do not have enough money to meet basic living requirements including food, rent, clothing, telephone services and public transportation (Beatty, 2005; Chouinard & Crooks, 2005; Khosla, 2008; Townson, 2000). With limited resources, the recipients have few resources for "extras" such as recreation and leisure activities.

The heightened level of surveillance and intrusive nature of the OW and ODSP programs are well documented. To apply and receive benefits from these programs, individuals are required to expose their private lives in a way that Mirchandani and Chan (2008) portrayed as "dehumanizing treatment" (p. 175) and Baker Collins (2005) described as "living under a giant microscope" (p. 22). For example, recipients are required to produce bank transcripts and each individual expense can come under scrutiny (Baker Collins). Participants from Khosla's (2008) study also expressed "the lack of respect and mistreatment by social workers and pointed out that they are now invariably treated as potential criminals" (p. 231).

Consequently, many individuals receiving social assistance face high levels of depression and shame. They also experience the de-habilitating effects of isolation and loneliness (Khosla, 2008). The stigma associated with accessing social supports comes from not only the support structures themselves, but also from the broader society and the feeling of being looked down upon by others (Baker Collins, 2005). One wonders, given these rather daunting social structures, about the role (or potential role) of leisure in this context. The next section explores leisure's role.

Poverty, Homelessness and Leisure Opportunities

Community-based social service organizations are instrumental to those who live in poverty and their daily survival. Resources they seek include the use of food and clothing banks, food co-ops, shelters, support services, settlement/cultural services, and counseling (Baker Collins, 2005; Williamson et al., 2006). Individuals and families may also seek out opportunities for recreation programs and services. An important aspect in the accessibility of these services is that they are low-cost or free and in a close geographical proximity to their place of residence (Khosla, 2008; Williamson et al.).

Leisure researchers have illustrated the many barriers for those who have a low-income and the difficulties they experience when accessing municipal recreation resources (see for example, Frisby & Millar, 2002; Reid & Golden, 2005). Budget cutbacks, fiscal constraints, and political pressure have contributed to a model of municipal programming where programs must pay for themselves (e.g., with high user fees) and thereby are reflective of the private, for-profit sector. Subsidized programs are offered, however, they tend to be shorter in duration, have a lower quality of programming and have fewer openings (Khosla, 2008; Williamson et al., 2006). One often overlooked barrier to participation includes requiring participants to publicly declare or prove their low income status in order to be eligible for subsidies. Further, potential participants face other issues including limited access to telephone or web registration systems, cost of transportation, lack of childcare options, and fears of going out in unsafe neighborhoods (Frisby & Hoeber, 2002; Havitz, Samdahl, & Morden, 2004; Khosla; Reid & Golden, 2005; Tirone 2003/2004). Moreover, as Khosla argued, the few subsidized initiatives in low-income neighborhoods tend to focus on crime prevention for young men and often exclude young women. The author also pointed out how difficult it is to find public spaces where women can meet informally, as cut-backs to funding has resulted in a decline in drop-in programs with a focus on private room rentals that facilitate revenue generation.

The stigma experienced by low-income participants in public recreation programs was also emphasized by several researchers. Many low-income participants feel unwelcome when they enter a community center and experience degrading treatment by some of the staff and other participants (Dawson, 2000; Frisby & Hoeber, 2002; Reid & Golden, 2005). Moreover, many of the community recreation workers (both government and non-profit) who seek to make a difference in the lives of those who are socially marginalized are often low-paid, part-time, and temporary workers themselves.

Although there is limited research on individuals who are homeless and their leisure experiences, we can garner a sense of the potential significance of these experiences in their lives. For example, Klitzing (2003; 2004) revealed how women living in a homeless shelter in the United States used leisure as a coping strategy and as a means of relaxation. The author argued the women "lived with chronic stress both prior to arriving at the shelter and while living there" (2003, p. 173). Many of the women had been physically or sexually abused, had disabilities, health problems, had previously been wards of the state, had parents who were addicts and/or were addicts themselves, and had children at an early age (Klitz-

ing, 2004). In coping with their stress and helping them relax, leisure was used as a diversionary activity (e.g., journaling, listening to music, reading, playing computers, walking, or bowling), as a means of getting away (leaving the shelter or going outside to the porch or to the privacy of their bedrooms), and as social support (either in leisure activities or interacting with people in leisure spaces or environments). The importance of finding alone time away from the other shelter residents was also highlighted.

In their research on recreation programming in emergency homeless shelters in Canada, Dawson and Harrington (1996) found:

> the motivations for providing recreation to the homeless in shelters were nu-
> merous, but the most frequently mentioned included: to improve self-esteem;
> to get people to socialize with others and to get out into the community; to
> relax and reduce stress; to use time productively; and, to simply have fun
> (p. 429).

Perhaps surprisingly, while most of the shelters in their research project provided recreation programming, a small number received funding for these programs. In a follow-up analysis, Harrington and Dawson (1997) argued the therapeutic power of recreation programming, despite limited funding and personnel, could help combat demoralization and assist individuals who are homeless reintegrate with the broader community. As the authors claimed, "it is evident that considerable research remains to be carried out in the area of recreation and homelessness" (1996, p. 431). Thus, the goal of our project was to explore the experiences and meanings of leisure for those living in poverty and who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless, and more specifically, to understand the role of community service organizations in these individuals' lives.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

General concepts or principles of feminism provided the guiding framework for this study. Feminism is a philosophical and theoretical framework that embodies "aspects of equity, empowerment, and social change for women and men" (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 13). Moreover, feminism goes beyond the description and documentation of inequalities, and rather, advocates for social change. Similar to Parry and Shinew (2004), our feminist framework "embraced emotions, values, personal beliefs, empathy, multiple realities and voices, politics, personal and lived experiences, and motivations" (p. 297). We believed that feminist principles would best illuminate the diverse experiences of women and men living in poverty and who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless, while minimizing the further oppression that our research may have on those who are already marginalized.

With the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on the subjective experiences of the participants, an inductive qualitative approach was appropriate. Specifically, the guiding principles of grounded theory were used to inform and emphasize a systematic gathering and analyzing of the data, while allowing for creativity and openness to emerging concepts and themes. A grounded theory

design is open-ended allowing for the development of emerging themes that are co-constructed by the participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretations of those experiences (Cresswell, 2003).We were guided by Charmaz's (2005; 2006) constructivist approach to grounded theory. In a constructivist framework, "We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Consistent with our feminist theoretical framework, a constructivist grounded theory approach emphasizes the interactive nature of the researcher-participant relationship in the creation of knowledge.

Project Design

Interviews. As the nature of the research was exploratory, we used insights from relevant literature in this area (e.g., Falvo, 2003; Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005) as well as the outcomes of an earlier study by Reid and Golden (2005) to develop a list of points for discussion that would guide our qualitative interviews. While the conversations were wide-ranging, participants were asked questions related to:

- their daily schedules (e.g., Can you tell me what a typical day looks like for you including activities in and away from the home?)
- housing (e.g., What is your current living situation? What types of places have you lived in over the last 5 to 10 years?)
- leisure activities and the meanings attached to them (e.g., What leisure activities do you enjoy? What is so important/ meaningful about them?)
- barriers to engaging in social and/or leisure activities as well as accessing support systems (e.g., What barriers/ difficulties do you experience as a result of being on social assistance/unemployed/working poor? Are there any other services the organization could provide?)
- notions of productivity (e.g., What do you think society values as being a productive member? What do you think is a productive member?)
- support networks – family structures, programs, and friends (e.g., Who do you turn to for support and/or do you have anyone?)

Our partners. We partnered with three social service organizations in the Region of Waterloo. Working with these three organizations gave us the chance to speak with a diverse range of individuals and to gather perspectives accounting for Lee's (2000) contention that recent immigrants, non-permanent residents, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, lone-parent families, women and single individuals were most likely to experience poverty. In addition, we attended to Mah and DeSantis' (2000) "homeless continuum," and sought out individuals living in shelters as well as those who were at imminent risk of being homeless and/or living in conditions that were unsafe, unaffordable, overcrowded, insecure, and/or inappropriate.

The first organization we worked with was a local non-profit group (House of Friendship) with offices in three community centers operated by the local mu-

nicipal government. The three centers are located in what were considered to be "high-risk" neighborhoods and offered programs and services such as: food and clothing distribution, English as a second language, after-school programs, summer playgrounds, women's support groups, and outreach workers. Most participants recruited from this organization were currently living in subsidized housing that was not necessarily safe nor meeting their needs (e.g., no hot water or heat, a family of four in a small apartment). Second, we worked with the local YWCA to identify participants living in a 45-unit apartment building operated as supportive housing. It soon became clear many of the women came to the apartment building from women's shelters. This building was unique in that it provided support services on site (e.g., a social worker, counselors, and leisure programs) as well as highly subsidized residences for longer term occupancy. The third organization was a local Social Planning Council. This organization works closely with local shelters and so linked us with participants who were literally homeless at the time of the study.

The participants. Working with the organizations allowed us to interview a wide-ranging group of individuals. In most cases, the individuals were identified by staff working at the organizations. Workers within each organization asked individuals who were currently using their programs and services if they would like to be involved in the study. If the individual expressed an interest, the organization would then forward us his or her contact information to arrange a potential interview. All individuals who we contacted agreed to participate in the study. Participants were interviewed in locations of their choice (i.e., their homes, the community center, the homeless shelter).

As a result of the openness of the interview process, our conversations were somewhat unstructured and ranged from 30 minutes to more than two hours in duration. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' verbal consent. In total, we interviewed 18 individuals, 4 males and 14 females – 10 participants were from the House of Friendship (three to four participants from each community center), 4 participants from the YWCA, and 4 participants from the homeless shelter. While not all participants told us their age, it is possible to say that their ages ranged from early 20s to about 50 years old. All but three participants had children, either living with them at home (11 participants), in the care of family or social services (two participants), or as grown adults (two participants). Nine of the participants were single parents.

Four participants were homeless, living in a local shelter, and were looking for affordable and safe housing at the time of the interviews. All others were living in some form of assisted housing in the Region. All but three participants stated that they relied on social assistance income (e.g., Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Payments, Human Resources and Social Development Canada training programs, and/or Employment Insurance). Two participants who were not on some form of social assistance were single mothers and self-identified as "working poor." Half of the participants were immigrants or refugees and came from countries including Iraq, Somalia, South Africa, Syria, Jamaica, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Poland. More than half of the participants described having to deal with some

form of abuse from their past and many expressed ongoing struggles with mental health issues and/or addictions.

Data analysis. As outlined by Charmaz (2006), the strategies of memoing, coding, comparative method, and theoretical sampling procedures provided the guiding principles for analysis. To facilitate the organization, analysis, and storage of data, we used the QSR NVivo software package. The software assisted in the retrieval and organization of data throughout the analytical process; however, it was an organizational tool only, not an analytical resource (Strauss, 1987).

Data analysis occurred in three stages. First, both researchers assessed the interview transcripts individually to obtain a general sense of the information and make reflective notes on each transcript's overall meaning, as well as begin the early stages of the coding process (Cresswell, 2003). Once this first stage was completed, we met to discuss the initial analysis, to combine our insights, and to determine key themes as we began focused coding procedures (Charmaz, 2006). For example, some of these themes captured the context of leisure experiences and meanings, while others focused on notions of self-worth as allied with productivity, the importance of support systems, dimensions of stigma, barriers and access to resources, and significant "life events" that altered the course of participants' lives. The final phase of analysis included theoretical coding (Charmaz), which involved identifying possible relationships between categories. The process of initial, focused, and theoretical coding was not a linear process, rather it involved working collaboratively to discard, modify, and re-work the various categories.

To establish trustworthiness, the techniques of reflexive journaling and memoing were used in the documentation of the "chain of co-interpretations" and conceptual development of the study (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Member checking was also used in three follow up meetings that were held with each of the organizations (Cresswell, 2003). The tentative findings were discussed in some depth as the staff verified the accuracy of our interpretations, and additional insights were garnered that helped contextualize the findings. The men and women who were interviewed were also invited to attend these meetings, however, only a few were in attendance. In addition, participants' quotations are presented verbatim so the reader can make their own judgments regarding trustworthiness as well as share the experiences and assess the meanings revealed in the study (Cresswell; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle).

Findings

The analysis led to the development of three main themes, which reflect this diverse group of participants' experiences: (1) the significance of vibrant organizations as spaces where acceptance, not exposure, is fostered; (2) a need for increased opportunities to become, and remain, connected with the broader community and to choose how this connection is manifested; and (3) the importance of finding personal and private spaces that are both safe and appropriate. What emerged as a major, overarching theme was the participants' need to find what we called, "judgment free spaces." These three main themes and the major, overarching theme are discussed in the following sections.

Vibrant and Accepting Organizations

The first main theme revealed the significance of vibrant and accepting organizations. Vibrant and accepting organizations provided the participants with the time to heal or to integrate into a new community. An important aspect of the organizations' services was that they provided elements of safety and basic resources necessary for the participants' very survival. As Barb, who had fled from her abusive husband explained, initially, the most important services at the center for her included: "The food bank and clothing drive. We've gotten a lot of nice pieces [furniture] here because when we moved here … I tell you we had nothing. I left all my furniture." These sentiments were echoed by Jana, a woman who was homeless and seeking shelter, and Rashida, a political refugee who was trying to feed her family:

> Oh yeah, they've been excellent! Like, they gave me a certificate to get clothes at St. Vincent. It's a used clothing store. And once I get an apartment they'll give me a certificate for furniture. Like used furniture. But it's something right, because I've got no furniture. They help you out that way too … It's hard when you don't have a place to go to. Like, I'm glad I got this place here.

> When we need food … we buy $20 … I have to spend no more than $20. Because that money for my bills, rent, for the electricity. So, it's good. They help the people. One month at a time … food.

Yet, one of the difficulties in accessing these basic resources was the ability to overcome the stigma attached to it. Although these participants needed the assistance, it was a humbling experience to seek it out. As Wendy explained, it was a difficult thing to do: "I try to do everything myself. Which I am trying to make myself realize that it's not such a stigma to actually reach out for the help sometimes. And that's an adjustment. It's been a long time coming." A new immigrant to Canada, Ghita, also expressed how difficult it was for her at first:

> I was pregnant and I want a car seat. He [case worker] said "Okay, go ask community center" and that embarrassed me because … usually I don't ask any person. I want to make everything or I buy everything. I'm embarrassed to come, but the cost alone … money I don't have it. When I came here, a lady said "Hi, how are you? We are meeting here monthly if you want to come!" I said "okay"! So I went there and met many person and they very kindly say "Many people need many things. Why are you embarrassed?" Day after day, I'm feeling comfortable at the community center as our home.

Ghita's comment also revealed how the staff within the organization played a vital role in this sense of connection and outreach. This sentiment was echoed by the majority of the participants as the nature of their rapport with staff helped define the quality of the participants' experiences. For example, Sarah said: "Jill in the office. She and I have a really good relationship. I probably talk to her more than I talk to my therapist. She always makes time for me. It's so nice to know there is somebody there, and now they have somebody here working at night too."

As the participants' basic needs were met (i.e., shelter, food, clothing), and they developed relationships with the staff, they talked more frequently about their leisure experiences. That is, the participants' initial connection with the organization was to seek out survival resources and through time they developed a strong rapport of trust with the staff at the organization. This connection then appeared to continue to grow as staff members invited participants to join their leisure programs, or as the participants themselves sought out opportunities within the organization. An important aspect of leisure opportunities was the affordability of the programs and the financial accommodations the organizations would make for participants. For example, Barb explained,

> They're very flexible. I remember when Jill [her daughter] joined the summer program and they were saying something about $25. I didn't have it because we had just moved and social services was giving me a hard time. And I paid them [community center staff] in installments until I got the $25 together and that was no problem for them. And it worked out fine. They said "no problem."

Many of the participants talked about the social connections they made while participating in leisure programs. For many of them, this was their primary source of companionship and social interaction. As Alicia said, "I enjoy it because I find that I like being around with different people just talking about different things. So, yeah I enjoy it. Just being able to put pictures and making them look pretty [scrapbooking activity] and joking around with everybody else."

Yet, for some of the participants, the courage to participate in some of the programs took time as their past experiences made them cautious about new opportunities and attuned to the risk of meeting new people:

> For the first couple of years, I didn't want to … I was too afraid to participate and I still don't necessarily like the discussion ones. I won't come to those. (Jan)

> The first year, when I first moved in here, I didn't participate in much of anything, just because I think I was very cautious. I had to see the lay of the land. Who does what? Where? Who were the bullies, who were the meek ones, who were the gossips, who are … so you learn that. I like to … I like my privacy. I like to keep myself protected from those kind of things. (Tasha)

Participants were also aware that those with whom they engaged in the programs were their close neighbors (sometimes living in the same building). The notion of not revealing themselves too much, and maintaining a sense of privacy for their personal lives was clearly evident:

> Well, my neighbors involved with the center … we go around almost like an outreach. Talking about the community center, talking about the youth stuff. As for friends wise? … Going over to someone's house? … not really. I don't like too many people in the community invading my space. I don't want to be walking down the street and hear some kid saying something about me because they overheard their parents or bring it back to my kids. I just don't want that! (Yolanda)

The need to feel connected, yet not exposed by the organization and its programs was important. That is, participants expressed difficulty with revealing themselves in front of others; as revealing oneself in this manner could result in judgment. Indeed, several participants stated they would not attend programs if they felt vulnerable. As Jan explained, leisure programs involving activity (e.g., crafts, gardening, barbeques), rather than traditional support groups that involved primarily "talking," were a suitable outlet for her: "You are doing, rather than talking. You can joke or laugh … its not serious. I went through a year and a half of intense therapy everyday. I don't want to do that with people that I'm living around." Thus, leisure programs provided a safe and valuable resource for the participants' to feel connected to an organization, yet to avoid feeling vulnerable and exposed.

Connecting to the Broader Community

The second theme captures the participants' need for increased opportunities to become, and remain, connected to the broader community in ways of their own choosing. Their relation with the organizations (i.e., community centers, supportive housing, and homeless shelter) was seen as a great support for them. However, the participants also identified a desire to feel connected to the broader community, and in ways that made them comfortable. That is, feelings of being connected to individuals beyond those that they lived with (i.e., in the same building) or beside (i.e., in the same neighborhood) was essential for their well-being. Leisure became an important vehicle in creating these social interactions. The desire to be connected to others was best exemplified by Jan's comment:

> There was a 'learn about hiking' [workshop]. So I thought, "Well maybe if I go to that, if I can get myself to that, maybe I'll meet someone." So I went to that and it was just sort of things that you need to know about hiking. I made a complete fool of myself because we … he [the instructor] asked "What kind of hiking had we done?" For me it was just around town because I don't have a car, so I said, "I was a street walker." And the whole class just died laughing. But I didn't mean it that way. So the next time we were doing a meet to go on a hike. So we just met at the library … and this lady drove by and she said, "You were at the hiking thing?" I says "Yeah." She says "Well come up in the car." So we just kind of connected, so then I had a way to get to these different places. Because otherwise if you don't have a car, you can't get to where you hike.

Jan's comment also revealed the constraints expressed by the participants as they described trying to share leisure activities with others who had more plentiful resources. In many ways, these barriers (e.g., transportation, finances) reinforced their separation from the broader community, and at times, made it difficult to sustain these social relations.

Many participants expressed the importance of finding social networks formed by people who could understand and empathize with them; something to help combat their feeling of being judged as an outsider in society. That is, significant to their emotional well-being was connecting with people "like them" who could

understand their history and "life experiences." Participants often used leisure as a vehicle to provide these shared experiences. For example, Sarah described a group of women she spent time with on a monthly basis:

> There are four of us in our group … the group I was in was called "We want our voices." So I did that last year from May to September and that one was for women who had been sexually abused, but it wasn't a group where you [necessarily] came and told your story. It was a group where today the topic was … boundaries. We talked about that and then we did an art craft. It was to make our lives better. There was four of us but it was great being just four of us because we bonded … we were just so similar.

The importance of connecting with people who could understand and empathize was also echoed by Jim and Taneem. Informal religious and cultural gatherings were central to their social relations in the broader community:

> I belong to a Christians men's group. So we get together once a week to read the Bible and pray for each other and stuff.

> We have a Somali community here in Waterloo. Like about, 1,000 people who came from the same country we came from. And we contact them, we mingle with them, we talk to them on the phone. We see them in person sometimes, and we also have a Somali-Canadian Association.

Likewise, volunteering was seen as an enjoyable means for spending time with others. As Wendy explained, "It's simply something to do. It's enjoyable because you're interacting with the other volunteers. It's not strenuous! So it's more of a social fun kind of time and you are just doing something!"

It was clear, too, that many of the participants also felt anxiety as they tried to deal with the potential failure of these community connections. Heightened feelings of vulnerability, and being hurt, yet once again, were commonly cited. Consequently, this overriding fear caused many of the participants to avoid potential social connections, even though they repeatedly talked about feeling "lonely" throughout the interviews:

> She's a nice friend to have. [In reference to another woman in the building.] But other than that I don't have any … I don't have a really good close girl-friend that I depend on … that I count on, that I know that I can say anything to or talk about anything or just call up because I feel like crying. I don't have any circle of friends. I guess I've been burned so many times, I don't really trust people very much anymore. (Tasha)

For others, trepidation was evident when they talked about connecting with the broader community, as it would reinforce feelings of being judged for not being "working members" of society. As Jan revealed, being on a disability program created feelings of worthlessness and became a constraint to participation in leisure programs outside of her supportive housing unit:

I felt worthless because I wasn't working, but knew that I couldn't work. I felt pretty worthless, because as soon as you meet someone, which is hard for me to do, "Well what do you do?" And that was really hard because when I first started hiking, I would then just spiral into feeling really bad, so then it was hard to go back the next time because I was afraid I was going to be asked that. My identity felt like it was wrapped up in that.

Judgment, stigma and dominant societal assumptions about notions of productivity and the significance of work created an obstacle to overcome when trying to bridge social connections with the broader community. Jan further explained how she talked about her volunteering commitment in way that created a façade but would allow her to be accepted:

When I started volunteering at the library, you know just shelving books, and then I felt that at least I could sort of pretend I was working. And of course it was wonderful to actually be able to say I work at the library. I didn't have to tell them only 6 hours a week. It was like I was worthless. It was a double whammy because I had a hard time being around people. I'm much better now, but back then I was just … I'd rather hide in a closet than face people. It was really bad.

Thus, many of the participants expressed the need for increased opportunities to become, and remain, connected to the community. However, the participants had to negotiate many constraints such as resources, lack of trust and vulnerability, and feelings of being judged due to stigma and societal notions of productivity.

Finding Personal and Private Spaces

The third theme captured the importance of having personal and private spaces that were emotionally safe and appropriate. Favorite activities such as listening to music, watching television, and computer games were cited often. Moreover, participants expressed how many of these activities provided a numbing/ escape experience from reality, while for others these activities had particular significance in their lives. For Tasha, who had a long history of mental health issues, listening to music was a form of escape. She explained,

Every Friday and Saturday night I had my music blaring and I was dancing around in my living room, or just playing on the computer and the music is on so I'm sitting there dancing in my chair. So those are the things I do on a daily basis. I just try to block out and that's how I get through my days.

For others, listening to music in the privacy of their own home had particular meaning. That is, some of the participants believed that listening to music provided a healing tool and was a source of strength and recovery. For Sarah, who experienced high levels of anxiety in public places, there was one song that held special meaning for her and she believed that it was helping her deal with her trauma of childhood sexual abuse:

How do you deal with some of your daily stressors? How do you cope with those feelings?

Listening to music, watching TV, reading. Coming home and going on-line and downloading music, spending that time downloading music, and listening to that.

That's your leisure?

It is. But there's also healing in there too. Playing songs that I played back when I was a teenager, they hold memories in them. That's my leisure. I would like more in my life. I definitely would. (During the interview Sarah played the song by the artist "Kina" called "Girl from the Gutter" and sang the lyrics out loud with intense passion.)

As one father who was a new immigrant expressed it, finding his own private leisure time was an important outlet for him. For most of the interview, he talked about how difficult life was for his family after they immigrated to Canada. For example, he expressed difficulty in finding safe and affordable housing, learning a new language, and being highly educated yet unable to find a suitable job. However, bright moments of leisure were found within these difficult times. As Hamza explained, "Most of the time … if I have the time … I sit on the Internet and grab some information. This is my favorite activity!"

It was clear, too, that personal and private spaces did not necessarily have to be found or created in the private home setting. Public spaces, particularly for those who were homeless, also provided an important venue where individuals found a personal and private context for their leisure. For example, Jim, a man who was homeless, found in the public park a moment for solitude and reflection:

I actually went to the park yesterday. Just a lovely property and I just sat under a tree. There's a creek that goes by. Just relax for a couple … the trees blowing in the wind a little bit. I actually thought of my late wife … memories I have of her.

In personal and private spaces in the home setting, participants were also able to enhance feelings of social connection to the broader community. Wendy talked about how the Internet helped her deal with some of her most difficult times and provided a much needed social outlet:

Because you know at 2 a.m. in the morning you can't call anyone at home but you can turn on the computer and there is someone there. Sometimes the pain [she has fibromyalgia] is so bad you can't sleep. If you called your friends at 2 a.m. in the morning and they gotta get up in the morning, they're not going to be too impressed! So, that has helped a lot because you can always turn it on and talk to someone. I've made some really good friends on the Internet.

Thus, Wendy was able to feel connected through technology from the safety of her own home. For others, such as Jan, there was a need to leave home to feel connected and to help overcome feelings of anxiety and isolation:

I used to be terrified to go out. Many, many years of therapy and medication. But if I start staying at home it's harder to push myself to continue. I love to

walk, so I'll walk through Waterloo Park. Take a book and sit at Tim Horton's [coffee and donut shop]. The more I get out, the better I can deal with things.

Jan revealed how important the use of public and community spaces was for overcoming or dealing with her illness, but in a way that included her own personal and private space within it.

Seeking Judgment Free Spaces

As the analysis progressed, it became evident that embedded within each of the three main themes was the notion of judgment free spaces. Throughout the interviews, there was an overall sense from participants that they felt a need to find spaces where they felt safe, connected, and accepted without judgment. The major overarching theme of "seeking judgment free spaces" reflects the participants' underlying desire to find such spaces.

This sense of judgment free spaces was related to the initial finding that participants sought out organizations that could help them meet their basic survival needs, and then later assist them with their leisure experiences. For the participants, the stigma of using such resources and asking for help was a difficult barrier to overcome. Yet, staff who created a space and context that was judgment free enhanced the participants' trust and comfort in seeking help and making connections with others.

The notion of judgment free spaces also developed from the second theme and analysis of the participants' comments related to connecting to the broader community. Although participants sought opportunities to feel connected, the stigma and judgment that came with being recipients of social assistance and/or a newcomer to Canada was often too difficult to negotiate, and failure to make these social connections heightened feelings of vulnerability and issues of trust. Thus, strategies were used such as finding those who could understand and empathize in order to be with people in the community who helped them feel comfortable with who they are. Nonetheless, participants also described trying to create an identity in the community that would help them "fit in" with dominant societal expectations.

Linked to the third theme, the use of private spaces, found within the public context (i.e., public parks, coffee shop) and the use of public spaces, found within the private context (i.e., the Internet) were also used to help facilitate the sense of connection. However, paramount to this finding was the participants' need to find personal and private spaces where they felt safe, in control and relatively free of judgment.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine and understand the experiences and meanings of leisure for individuals living in poverty, and who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless, and to consider their perspectives in light of relevant research in our field. The analysis of the experiences and meanings of leisure for these individuals indicates that leisure plays a significant role in their lives. It was evident that leisure helped the participants cope with daily stressors caused

both by past and present circumstances. This finding echoes previous studies that examined the connection between low-income or homeless individuals and coping with stress (e.g., Bowling, 2002/2003; Klitzing 2003; 2004). It also reflects the need for low-cost or free opportunities for those with limited means (e.g., Frisby & Hoeber, 2002; Frisby & Millar, 2002; Khosla, 2008; Tirone 2003/2004).

In addition, however, the findings also help to broaden our understanding of the leisure needs for individuals living in poverty as they emphasize that much more than free or subsidized programs are required to facilitate positive leisure experiences. In short, results show that a key component for moving toward leisure that addresses our most challenging social ills rests with its power to create *judgment free spaces* in both public and private contexts.

Seeking judgment free spaces emphasizes the participants' desire to have a sense of an ordinary life and feel connected to the community, but in a way that facilitated their *power to be private*. As we have seen, leisure can play a role in building this power and sense of connection. For instance, many participants felt exposed, judged and vulnerable when participating in social assistance programs. Thus, they were seeking leisure opportunities that would be respectful of their need for privacy while providing a compassionate and vital link to community. These experiences could be found in vibrant and accepting community centers, within the broader community, and within the context of being alone. Moreover, the relationship with the organizations' staff played an integral role in helping them not only succeed in the center and programs, but also laid the foundation to make successful linkages in the broader community.

It is clear, too, that an important aspect of judgment free spaces was feeling accepted, yet not exposed by the organizations and broader community. The power to be private and defining the parameters of who and what they talked about was an important attribute. A sense of control and dignity in one's own life, and the freedom to share one's "life events" on one's own terms was instrumental to meaningful leisure experiences and overall emotional well-being.

Seeking judgment free spaces also reveals the role of community service organizations in these individuals' lives and, in particular, how they can be more relevant and responsive to the needs of people who are socially marginalized. Program implications for this study suggest the use of a more holistic approach to service provision for those living in poverty. Participants originally sought the organization's help for basic resources such as clothing, shelter, and food. As these needs were met, a trusting and respectful relationship formed with staff, which facilitated the participants' leisure opportunities both within the organization and the broader community. Thus, the findings emphasize the importance of staff in creating a space that is welcoming and accepting for the participants. Therefore, we recommend "sensitivity to poverty" and "anti-oppression" training for all recreation staff (managers and part-time) to help create a shared level of understanding and compassionate environment.

Moreover, the findings from this study set the stage for the challenge to re-envision leisure spaces. As participants wanted judgment free spaces, it became clear that the use of public and private spaces for leisure are not mutually-exclusive, rather these spaces may be integrated and coexisting. Appropriate and accepting

public spaces were found within private leisure contexts (e.g., the Internet) and private spaces were created within public spaces (e.g., going for a walk in the park alone). The opportunity to be on their own, yet within the sphere of the social world (whether virtual or real), provided a valuable healing tool and vital link to community. Bowling (2002/2003) stated, "substantial involvement in isolating leisure contexts limits their personal and social interactions, and hence, their opportunities for growth and development" (p. 21). Yet, as the participants in this study revealed, finding private spaces (and leisure activities) that facilitate a sense of privacy, reflection, strength and recovery can also be instrumental to their well-being.

These findings also have implications for the broader world of poverty and homelessness research and policy. An immediate and important focus on meeting basic needs often limits the extent to which those concerned with addressing issues of poverty and homelessness (from policy-makers to academics) are willing to consider or acknowledge the important role of leisure. Leisure, unfortunately, is often an afterthought and the concern to provide judgment free spaces is likely an unrealized aspect of social policy formation and program provision. Nonetheless, those working in these areas need to attend to the participants' "desire for normalcy" (Dawson, 2000, p. 104).

The themes that emerged from this study lead us to broader questions and opportunities for future research regarding how we conceptualize leisure and what role it can or should play in helping to foster a broader societal conversation about what needs to change in regards to poverty and marginalization. For example, how can we advocate to build inclusive leisure spaces where this conversation can be fostered and more holistic needs met (e.g., the provision of recreation programs alongside shelter, food, clothing, and training programs)? Moreover, while paid employment is often deemed the most 'productive' realm of social life, if we look beyond the market and economics, it is in the realm of leisure where the greatest opportunities for social understanding, sharing and fostering a sense of belonging take place. These are essential steps for any individual, and may be especially important for those who are homeless and who live in poverty. That is, their avenues for both leisure and social engagements are increasingly blocked or narrowed as a result of the lack of financial resources and social stigma leading to marginalization.

Finally, this study has made it clear that if leisure really is to be 'a driver' in the integration and development of communities, we need to hear the thoughts, insights, and advice of individuals who are often outside the scope of traditional leisure programming and planning. As our study was limited to the experiences of selected participants, clearly it will be important in future research to capture the experiences and meanings of other individuals living in poverty and who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. Through their stories we may gain greater understanding of how leisure can help enhance quality of life during difficult times.

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