

**Introduction to the Special Issue on  
Qualitative Inquiries into Leisure in  
Later Life**

**Leisure and Aging Qualitative Research  
15 Years into the Third Millennium**

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In the first issue of the new millennium, the *Journal of Leisure Research* (JLR) published an article by Fran McGuire titled “What do we know? Not much: The state of leisure and aging research.” In that article, McGuire summarized almost 40 years of research about the topic, stating, “We probably ‘know’ that activity is in some sense good for people by contributing to the quality of life. However, for every article concluding one thing there seems to be a contradictory piece concluding something else. Our collection of bits and pieces of information still fails to give even a hint of a mosaic.” (McGuire, 2000, p. 7). McGuire provided a list of possible explanations for this state. Some explanations were structural (e.g., small number of scholars studying the topic, few collaborations, lack of funding), but many expressed direct criticism on the work done in the field including not asking the right questions and being “borrowers” of concepts developed in other disciplines rather than owners of unique contributions built around deep understanding of leisure and aging. He argued that the uniqueness of leisure may require development of original questions and models, and that “while the easy work in leisure and aging focused on understanding ideas... now is the time for deeper thought” (p. 99).

Much has transpired since this article was published. The number of scholars from various disciplines studying leisure and aging has dramatically increased, new and original concepts have developed, and exciting opportunities for dialogue among scholars, practitioners, and policy makers have formed. It seems that parallel to global demographic trends leading to the

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“greying” of many countries, there is a growing interest in the extent to which leisure activities and experiences can promote active and healthy aging. Simultaneously, the field of leisure studies has profoundly transformed. To gain deeper understanding of the lived experience of leisure, qualitative approaches are increasingly used in leisure studies and scholars constantly explore conversational, multivocal, and critical representations of research. “Rather than simplifying and reducing leisure experiences, leisure studies scholars seem to want to contextualize leisure experiences and treat them as a complex phenomenon” (Parry & Johnson, 2007, pg. 121).

Despite these trends, our knowledge related to how adults maintain involvement in the face of health declines, as well as their lived experiences of leisure during later life transitions, is still limited. In addition, there is a need to continuously monitor and update research to ensure that our programs targeting the aging population are diverse, pertinent, and meaningful. McGuire’s call for deeper thought is still relevant, and we still have to ask ourselves what do we know, and, more importantly, what do we *need to know* in order to provide the most relevant and comprehensive opportunities for older adults in our society.

To meet this challenge, the editorial board of *JLR* dedicated this special issue to leisure and aging research. The aim of this special issue is to present original and innovative ideas, concepts, and questions, as well as highlight research that addresses some of these relevant questions regarding leisure and aging. After a rigorous review process, five papers were selected for the special issue that represent contemporary top-quality research on this topic. Although the call for papers was not limited to qualitative research, most of the manuscripts submitted, and all the articles selected for publication, reported on qualitative inquiries into leisure in later life. Therefore, the special issue certainly reflects the shift toward more qualitative research in the field of leisure studies.

The first paper, by Rebecca Genoe, Toni Liechty, Hannah Marston, and Victoria Sutherland, presents a new qualitative methodology for studying issues related to leisure and aging. The authors suggest that as a growing number of seniors use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), online qualitative data collection may be an especially effective means for studying leisure in later life. Based on a study of older Canadians who participated in a multi-author blog, they explore the challenges and opportunities afforded by this method, and present a list of recommendations for other leisure researchers who plan to collect online qualitative data with older adults.

From New Zealand, Evonne Miller takes us into the world of long-term care with an ingenious qualitative method, *phenomenography*, which attempts to draw out contrasting experiences. Methodologically, this approach avoids presenting only the most prominent themes in qualitative analysis and treating diverging perspectives as negative cases, if they are treated at all. Rather, a focus group method seeks out and magnifies such differences. Accordingly, Miller demonstrates that even though some residents in long-term care facilities utilize leisure in a way that enhances their lives, another significant group bristles at the restrictiveness and the over-determination of their circumstances.

Susan Hutchinson and Karen Gallant present a community-based participatory research study that explores how senior centers may function as a “third places” that support aging in place. Involving some center members as part of the “research team,” their study addresses McGuire’s call for useful collaborations and better ties between research and practice. Indeed, the results point at new opportunities for meaningful engagement in later life. Reporting the findings using narrative description—in the form of exceptionally vivid vignettes—the article also describes the factors facilitating and inhibiting such prospects.

In her study of grandparents of adult grandchildren in Canada, Shannon Hebblethwaite explores the meaning of family leisure through classic in-depth interviews. Findings describe the importance of leisure in the *generativity* of aging individuals. This research contributes to our knowledge of leisure and aging by highlighting the need to examine leisure and aging issues from a family perspective, particularly noting the importance of collecting and analyzing data from more than one family member to gain a clearer understanding of the dynamics of the phenomenon being examined.

Aiming to respond to McGuire's call to research "through" ideas and not "about" ideas, the last paper goes back to a topic widely studied by leisure and aging scholars, namely, continuity and change in leisure. Using narrative analysis, Nuria Jaumot-Pascual, Maria-Jesus Montegudo, Douglas Kleiber, and Jaime Cuenca provide a thorough understanding of the impact of gender roles on the processes through which older adults develop meaningful leisure following major later life events.

We are grateful to the editors of *JLR* for this opportunity to facilitate a response to the McGuire's challenge registered in 2000. Addressing different research questions across diverse settings and cultural contexts, contributors to this issue have advanced our knowledge about leisure and aging. Yet, it is clear that many questions remain, and that the challenge to the leisure studies community is ongoing. Nonetheless, as each article used a different qualitative approach, this collection provides a promising demonstration of the usefulness of qualitative research in promoting profound understanding of the lived experience of leisure in later life.

## References

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