

## Gender Differences in Meaningful Leisure Following Major Later Life Events

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### Abstract

Using narrative analysis, 20 interviews with older adults in Northern Spain suggested that participants developed leisure involvements that kept them meaningfully engaged, though in different ways according to gender. Their leisure activities resulted from life-long involvement, but also stemmed from later life events—mainly retirement and widowhood—that allowed for change and *new* engagements. Meaningful activities were those that allowed the development of new skills and interests and reinforced relationships. This study revealed gender differences in the patterns of initiation and continuity of participants' involvement in meaningful leisure. While the women in the study tended to be more innovative after retirement and widowhood, the men tended to continue their participation in their life-long leisure activities. Incorporating a gender perspective was important for identifying the different processes through which older adults develop meaningful leisure.

**Keywords:** *Meaningful leisure, gender, narrative analysis, older adults, life transitions*

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In Spain, as in most other developed countries, older adults constitute the most rapidly growing part of the population (Special Eurobarometer, 2012). Extended lifespans are drawing increased attention to factors affecting the quality of later life, among which leisure plays a prominent role. In fact, for older Spanish adults, leisure has become one of the aspects of everyday life with a bigger impact on their well-being and quality of life than just about anything else (del Barrio Truchado & Sancho Castillejo, 2012; Fernández-Mayoralas et al., 2011).

More generally, there is ample correlational evidence that leisure activity plays a significant role in the successful aging of older adults (Adams, Leibbrandt, & Moon, 2011; Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2010; Rodríguez, Fernández, & Rojo, 2012). Leisure provides older adults with opportunities for maintaining physical and mental health (McAuley, Blissmer, Marquez, Jerome, Kramer, & Katula, 2000; Fernández Mayoralas et al., 2011), developing cognitive skills, improving self-esteem (Wahrendorf, Ribet, Zins, & Siegrist, 2008), and fostering self-expression and creativity (Kleiber & Nimrod, 2008; Nimrod, 2007). It also triggers positive emotional states associated with perceived freedom, competence, and social relatedness (Searle, Mahon, Iso-Ahola, Sdrolas, & van Dyck, 1995; Nimrod & Adoni, 2006; Van der Pas & Koopman-Boyden, 2010). But attachment to the activity as a source of meaning—rather than simply as a relaxing time filler—may be necessary to generate most of these benefits.

Our idea of “meaningful leisure” refers comprehensively to those forms of leisure (repertoires and activities) that work as sources of satisfaction and perceived well-being. Meaningful leisure’s value is explained by their experiential dimensions, that is, by the high personal significance that they have for the protagonist and their ability to enrich one’s social world through the exercise of autonomy, freedom, and creativity (See Cuenca, Kleiber, Monteagudo, Linde, & Jaumot-Pascual, 2014; Monteagudo, Kleiber, Cuenca, Bayón & Linde, 2014). While there are various ways in which leisure meanings have been examined, we chose to look at them combining a synchronic perspective (focused on the current repertoire of our interviewees) with a diachronic one that draws attention to their “leisure paths.” With this concept of meaningful leisure we designate the set of leisure experiences enjoyed by one person along his or her life, as forming a particular personal history, socially conditioned, marked by changes and continuity, and shaped by opportunities and constraints (Monteagudo & Cuenca, 2012).

Since such meaningful leisure is a changing and dynamic phenomenon that accompanies a person throughout life (Iso-Ahola, Jackson, & Dunn, 1994; Kleiber, 1999; Monteagudo & Cuenca, 2012), the study of meaning in older people’s leisure will inevitably address changes over time and emergence in response to important life events. Leisure researchers have paid considerable attention to the subject of life events—negative and positive, predictable and unpredictable—especially as leisure activities are used in the course of coping with and adjustment to those events (Hutchinson, 2007; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Jackson, 2005; Kleiber, 1999; Kleiber, Hutchinson & Williams, 2002). In later life, retirement and the loss of a spouse are among the most impactful events.

The changes in leisure accompanying such events are also significant sources of meaning and narrative reconstruction, however serious the activities are in themselves (Dupuis & Smale, 1995; Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008; Kleiber et al., 2002), and need to be taken into account if the role of leisure in older adulthood is to be fully addressed. However, it is important to recognize the extent to which the life events that affect leisure are gendered. When it comes to major life events in the transition to older adulthood, the relinquishing of work roles and the loss of a spouse are different experiences for men and women (Hurd, 1999; Lee & Bakk, 2001) around the world: the way these changes affect the meanings and benefits of leisure must be considered

separately for each. Thus, the purpose of this investigation was to determine if and how older men and women in Northern Spain constructed leisure meanings differently subsequent to various life events and challenges, particularly retirement and the loss of a spouse.

## Literature Review

### Leisure and Gender

Karla Henderson (2014) stated that leisure studies scholars need to examine their research topics and implications through a social justice lens, considering the incidence of several sources of inequality in leisure opportunities. Among these, we chose to focus on gender and its influence on how women and men experience leisure differently in the transition to older adulthood. In this study, addressing the question of “gender justice” (Aitchison, 2013) means to examine how leisure is shaped by “patriarchal views of the world where men tend to have privilege and access to power” (Henderson, 2014, p. 65), and thus we choose to pay special attention to women’s experiences and what makes them different to men’s.

In a review of the research on women and leisure, Shaw (1994) summarized three traditional approaches: (1) an emphasis on constraints to leisure, such as the *ethic of care* (cf. Gilligan, 1982); (2) participation differences in leisure activity that reflect and reproduce feminine stereotypes; and (3) women’s leisure as a potential locus for resistance to traditional gender roles where women can exercise choice, control, and self-determination.

Henderson and Allen (1991) provided “a review and an interpretive framework for examining the ‘ethic of care’ as it offers possibilities and constraints for the leisure of women” (p. 97). Following the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), they defined ethic of care as “an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, of taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone” (Henderson & Allen, 1991, p. 99). Because of the relational nature of women’s development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarulle, 1986), they tend to choose activities where social interaction is either the main activity or a requirement for activities such as volunteerism and community service to take place.

In terms of the types of activities older women and men get involved in during their leisure time, Rotolo and Wilson (2007) found that although there was little difference in the amount of time women and men of all ages volunteer, there were substantial differences in what they *do* as volunteers. They found that “men are more likely to occupy leadership positions than women. They are more likely to do maintenance work and teach or coach, while women are more likely to prepare and serve food or clothing, raise money, and ‘help out’ at events” (Rotolo & Wilson, 2007, p. 559). Along the same line, Manning (2010) found that older “women are more likely to be involved in volunteer behavior characterized as more caring, person-to-person tasks, compared to men, who are more likely to be involved in political or public leadership positions” (p. 128).

In this analysis of the leisure of women and men in the transition to older adulthood we give attention to all three of the areas identified by Shaw. The ethic of care, in particular, has a double role in both explaining the disadvantaged position of women in leisure participation and their selection of activities. The idea that leisure activities of women might prove a source of resistance to stereotypes (see also Shaw & Henderson, 2005 for a consideration of the “uneasy” association between feminist and constraints concepts) is represented in the work on widowhood by Lee and Bakk (2001) and Lopata (1973), which takes a more liberationist view on that particular transition in later life. But more needs to be said about gender differences in such role transitions.

### Life Events in the Transition to Older Adulthood for Women and Men

The personal historical, temporal aspects of leisure have been the object of much research in and outside of leisure studies. Central theories of aging have been formed around the question of activity being abandoned (disengagement theory), expanded (activity theory), or maintained (continuity theory). Continuity theory as developed by Robert Atchley (1999) has the most popular support among the three and the most empirical support in the leisure studies literature (See Kleiber & Genoe, 2011, for a review). However, it certainly depends on the activities considered, since many activities will eventually be abandoned as a result of loss of energy and physical capacity (see, for example, Janke, Davey, & Kleiber, 2006). In addition, life events, such as retirement and widowhood, will inevitably create discontinuities in behavior and experience; and they may also be used as turning points to change repertoires and begin new activities. There is a considerable body of work addressing continuity (Atchley, 1999, Kelly, 1999), substitution (Lefrancois, Leclerc, & Poulin, 1998; Rubinstein, Kilbride, & Nagy, 1992), and decline and abandonment (Gordon, Gaitz, & Scott, 1976; Iso-Ahola et al., 1994) of activities in retirees' involvement in leisure. Nimrod (2007) proposed a new classification for the different leisure behaviors upon retirement: expanders (those with larger number of activities at higher frequency), reducers (those with smaller numbers of activities at lower frequency), concentrators (those with the same or fewer activities at higher frequency), and diffusers (those with a larger number of activities at the same or lower frequency). An interesting finding in this study of particular relevance to the current investigation was that expanders had a relatively limited leisure repertoire prior to retirement.

Partly because of the greater evidence for continuity and disengagement in later life, there has been less written about innovation (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). As one exception, Thompson (1992) showed that there is a higher tendency to innovate after losing a spouse than after retirement, because the individual is looking for more social interaction to counteract feelings of loneliness. In a study of recently-retired and well-educated elders in the southeastern United States, Nimrod and Kleiber (2007) found that participants in the study embraced new activities that bore some resemblance to something they had done before ("self-preservation innovation") or very little ("self-reinvention innovation"). Continuity was reflected to some extent in the former category, but the changing circumstances of the activity provided new sources of meaning. Innovation is part of the changes of involvement in leisure activities of older adults, specifically in the initiation of new meaningful leisure and the motivations behind them.

Antonovsky and Sagy (1990) proposed that there are four main tasks for those living the retirement transition: active involvement, reevaluation of life satisfaction, re-evaluation of a worldview, and a sense of health maintenance. These authors argued that with retirement, "what one wants to do, in contrast to what work life has required one to do, becomes a more conspicuous option" (p. 364). There is now abundant literature examining the experience of retirement as one of the central tasks in the transition to older adulthood. Many of these studies confirm the impact of retirement on people's lives (Heo & Lee, 2010; Hoglund, Sadovsky, & Classie, 2009; Hurd, 1999; Weiss, 2005) as well as on their leisure (Kleiber, Bayón, & Cuenca, 2012; Kleiber & Linde, 2014).

It is important to note, however, that a sizable portion of these analyses employ a masculine perspective in which productive, wage-earning roles are valued over reproductive, typically non-wage-earning, roles such as that of the housewife. Research shows that older men are more likely to choose leisure activities that they are familiar with, even related or similar to those they developed in their careers prior to retirement (Genoe & Singleton, 2006). As Hurd (1999) asserted,

“the literature has tended to focus on the loss of work-related roles as a result of retirement” (p. 422). This androcentric approach needs to be balanced by paying attention to life events in general during the transition to older adulthood, including widowhood, because they affect both men and women albeit in different ways.

For women who have primarily had traditionally female roles, “Widowhood is ‘a form of retirement’” (Hurd, 1999, p. 422). As Lee and Bakk (2001) asserted, once women became widows, “they develop their own sense of personal identity and begin to live full lives” (p. 54). Lopata (1973) called this phenomenon “blossoming.” In the 40 plus years that have passed since the publication of Lopata’s book, the literature on widowhood has continued to show meaningful life changes for widows, including embracing learning and renewed engagement in enjoyable activities and the enjoyment of increased freedom (Lee & Bakk, 2001). As Cusack (1994) and Hurd pointed out, the conditions for widowhood that appear to be triggers for suddenly addressing the developmental tasks more commonly associated with retirement (cf. Antonovsky & Sagy, 1990) are that women (1) stayed home, (2) did gender-specific jobs (i.e., sewing and care giving professions) that traditionally did not require contractual relationships (i.e., self-employment and piecework), or (3) stayed married until older children no longer required their direct attention. Women who fulfill these criteria have arguably neglected their self-expression and may only come to address these developmental tasks when they become widows. Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, Green, and Autry’s work (2003/4) further highlighted the importance of life stage and an ethic of care in older adults’ leisure and found, “Changes were noted to have occurred over the women’s life course due to ethic of care issues surrounding child rearing and spousal care-giving and past constraints related to work/paid employment” (p. 216).

Women and men do not experience widowhood in the same way. Findings on widowers, rather, often go in the opposite direction of those noted above for widows. Men tend to experience more difficulties than women when confronting widowhood in older adulthood (Lee, DeMaris, Bavin, & Sullivan, 2001; Umberson, Wortman, & Kessler, 1992). Carr and Wortman (2005) further assert that widowhood has a more devastating effect on men’s lives, because, in their view, “men benefit more from marriage than women do and are therefore more adversely affected when the marriage ends. Available evidence indicates that married men benefit more than women from the instrumental support provided by their spouses” (p. 98). Women who have been in traditional gender roles and traditional marriages usually provided their husbands and families with more everyday support, such as cleaning, cooking, and family members’ care, than they received. Thus, when they die, their husbands stop receiving this support and suffer more compared to the women. Van den Hoonaard (2010) found that the American and Canadian widowers she interviewed expected to die before their wives and never constructed an idea of what life might be without their wives. Indeed, they had difficulty adapting to living alone. Unlike many women who learn to enjoy living alone, the widowers often found solitude unbearable, needing to get out of the house and be active.

While research suggests that meaningful leisure can have a central role in helping men cope with the retirement transition, by providing a sense of continuity in both activity engagement and important relationships (e.g., Kleiber & Nimrod, 2008; Nimrod & Janke, 2012), there is comparatively little literature about the potential influence of leisure in helping men cope with widowhood. At the same time we need a more complete understanding of women’s experience of the impact of both widowhood and retirement, as well as the way in which leisure is reconstructed and utilized in the adjustment process. Thus, we sought a more nuanced understanding of how meaningful leisure is affected by the experience of these significant life changes for both men and women.

## Methodology

### Methodological Framework

The involvement of an individual in meaningful leisure is a process that takes place through time and involves personal dispositions and choices, predictable and unexpected life events, and social circumstances. In this study, we look at the impact of vital events, such as retirement and widowhood, on involvement of men and women in meaningful leisure during the transition to older adulthood. We have chosen narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) as a useful approach to the analysis of the qualitative in-depth interviews conducted for this study. This analysis relates “events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16). In this case, the vital events are widowhood and retirement, and the plots are the participants’ transitions to older adulthood and their engagement in meaningful leisure that highlight the similarities and differences between women and men as they appear in the transition.

### Design of the Study and Data Collection Procedures

We used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to create an “in-depth understanding about how different cases provide insight into an issue” (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 239). The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The questions in the interviews were designed to help participants outline a narrative of leisure’s role in their lives as older adults, with the events around which changes in their meaningful leisure involvement happened as inflections points in their narratives. The questions focused on participants’ description of their meaningful leisure activities, the changes in their involvement in meaningful leisure (such as how they started their involvement in their leisure activities, and how they have evolved in the practice of it), the activity’s role in their life satisfaction, its relationship with other aspects of life, and its social environment. Maintaining gender balance among those interviewed provided the basis for the study’s gender comparisons.

**Sampling strategy.** The interviewees were selected using criterion sampling, based on their answers to a quantitative survey ( $n = 755$ ) (Cuenca et al., 2014) that they responded to when they were approached by members of the research team in public settings in rural and urban locales. The survey included questions about sociodemographic information, leisure involvement and subjective well-being. The criteria to be included as potential participants in the qualitative interviews, as assessed from their survey responses, were: (1) being between 61 and 75 years old, (2) living in the Basque Country, (3) being involved in at least one leisure activity that they themselves regarded as “especialmente significativa” (especially meaningful) in an open-ended question, (4) having expressed high levels of satisfaction with their especially meaningful leisure activity in a Likert-type scaled question, and (5) having expressed their willingness to be interviewed. Out of the 375 respondents who agreed to be interviewed, 37 fulfilled all the criteria. Further narrowing down was done according to the place of residence where potential interviewees lived, so that the three regions of the Basque Country were roughly equally represented, and also to ensure gender balance. This narrowing down by region and gender resulted in the selection of twenty people to be interviewed—10 men and 10 women. The face-to-face interviews were conducted by members of the research team and two trained assistants, and these mainly took place at the university. The process of qualitative data collection took place over the course of six months. The interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to one hour.

**Data analysis.** Adopting Polkinghorne’s (1995) approach to produce a storied narrative “to configure or compose the disparate data elements into a meaningful explanation” (p. 18),

we broke the data analysis into five discrete steps: (1) We began our analysis identifying the participants' meaningful leisure, and the events and actions that triggered the beginning and development of participants' involvement in their meaningful leisure, such as widowhood and retirement. (2) Once we had these events, we arranged them in chronological sequence. (3) We then narrowed down which elements were contributors to the participants' involvement in their meaningful leisure by refining the definition of the events so that differences could progressively be more precise, such as differentiating between activities that started and those that continued after retirement or widowhood. (4) We then looked for connections of cause and influence among the events and identified action elements by providing the "because of" and "in order to" reasons for which they were undertaken, such as gender specific constraints. (5) Finally, we wrote a narrative of the process of engagement in new meaningful leisure or its continuation, using quotes to illustrate our findings.

**Validity.** Following our methodological choice for the data analysis, we used Polkinghorne's (2007) framework for narrative research validity. As Polkinghorne (2007) stated,

The purpose of the validation process is to convince readers of the likelihood that the support for the claim is strong enough that the claim can serve as a basis for understanding of and action in the human realm. Narrative research issues claims about the meaning life events hold for people" (p. 476).

Thus, the validity of the findings presented relies on the force of the arguments made to support our claims.

Through our in-depth interviews, we collected "storied evidence." The goal of gathering this type of evidence is "not to determine if events actually happened but about the meaning experienced by people whether or not the events are accurately described" (p. 479). Thus, we are not looking to establish *historical truth*, rather *narrative truths* about the meanings of experiences by the people who lived them.

We have contended with the validity threats that Polkinghorne described (2007, p. 480–482) in the following ways:

- (a) To address the limits of language to capture the complexity and depth of experienced meaning (which in this case was two-fold due to the bilingual nature of the study) we have engaged fully bilingual researchers who mediated meanings between languages.
- (b) To address the limits of reflection to bring notice to the layers of meaning that are present outside of awareness, we engaged four different researchers, two females and two males; two from Spain, one from the U.S., and one binational. This brought different types of awareness to the analysis and allowed the team to check assumptions that colored the different layers of understanding of the data.
- (c) and (d) To address the resistance of people because of social desirability to reveal fully the entire complexities of the felt meanings of which they are aware, and the complexity caused by the fact that texts are often a co-creation of the interviewer and participant, we created an atmosphere of trust in the interviews by having an open, listening attitude and by attending to their responses, independently of their content. We hoped that this would help interviewees feel comfortable and empowered so that they would share the complexity of their experiences with us, as they were the ones with the knowledge that we were interested in gathering.



**Limitations of the study.** The main limitation of the study is that the participants who responded to the quantitative survey were approached in various public settings (e.g., malls, libraries, senior centers, and town squares) in urban and rural settings and were willing and open to participating in an interview. This resulted in the inclusion of a relatively active older population with enough health and energy to access these settings, as well as those more inclined to talk further about the issues studied, and the exclusion of a less active population who may not participate in such public settings, such as those who are homebound. In addition, the focus on those with especially meaningful leisure activities and high levels of satisfaction with them, further limits the generalizability of the study's findings to a highly involved and active older population. Thus generalization, even to other older people in Northern Spain should be done cautiously; but we look now to findings that would be suggestive of patterns and experiences that may nevertheless be found in other populations.

## Findings

The interviews in this study revealed not only that gender impacts how older people experience retirement and widowhood but also that these vital events affect the maintenance and development of meaningful leisure differently for men and women. The following tables contain a summary of the most relevant characteristics of the 20 interviewees. We highlight employment status, profession, marital status, and leisure activities.

Two of the columns in the Participant Summary Tables (Tables 1 and 2) reveal prominent differences between women and men in our sample: employment status and marital status. All men are retired, while women present a much broader variety of employment statuses, including self-employed, retired, and housewife. Most men are married (seven) or remarried (one), while most women are unmarried, being either single (two) or widowed (five). These differences made it apparent to us that taking a gender perspective was a critically important step toward understanding the influence of vital events on older people's leisure. In the following analysis, we show how these gender differences manifested in different leisure meanings for women and men, and are reflected in five main themes: (1) widowhood, (2) retirement, (3) ethic of care, (4) innovation, and (5) leadership development. These five themes illuminate leisure's dynamic evolution (tendency toward continuity or change in leisure activities and experience), highlighting the importance of one's lived history into and through older adulthood and the impact of gender on these processes.

For most of the participants in this study, retirement and widowhood seemed to act as triggers for re-evaluation and revision of personal goals and preferences, including their involvement in leisure activity. As it is evident when comparing the tables, whereas widowhood was more common among the women of the sample (five women vs. two men) and retirement among male interviewees (all 10 males vs. 6 women), both types of life events affect both women and men. Nevertheless, even with such a small sample it was apparent that gender colors the way life events are experienced and dealt with, and thus the women and men in the study showed different meanings around these events and faced them in different ways.

### Widowhood

The loss of a spouse is inevitably a traumatic event for both men and women. However, in the case of the widows in the study, the loss of their husbands eventually triggered reactions more commonly associated with retirement than with bereavement, such as causing them to reconsider their life choices and sources of satisfaction. Such was the case with Blanca, a retired seamstress who enjoys writing, and Paz, a housewife who enjoys traveling.



**Table 1***Participant Summary Table: Women*

	Pseudo- nym	Age	Employ- ment status	Profession	Marital status	Care provider and of whom	Meaningful/Main leisure activity	Other important leisure activities
1	Alicia	66	Retired	Waitress Home care aide	Widow (at young age)	Yes Grandchildren	<i>Physical activity</i> (swimming, bicycle)	
2	Blanca	75	Retired	Seamstress	Widow (at older age)	Yes Members of organization	<i>Writing</i>	Volunteering, president of a non- profit organization
3	Feli	64	Retired	Administra- tion	Single	Yes Parents, sister, members of organization	<i>Volunteering</i> (sewing, organizing events) Nonprofit board member	Singing in a choir, museums, taking courses, church
4	Josune	62	Self- employed/ business owner	English teacher	Married	No	<i>Traveling and associated activities</i> (museums, food, meeting people)	Crafts, reading, sudokus, and crosswords, movies, gardening
5	Miren	74	Housewife	Housewife	Widow (at older age)	Yes Grandchildren	<i>Physical activity</i> (ballroom and regional dance, tai chi)	Crafts, volunteering, computers, theatre
6	Olga	64	Retired	Accounting and Finance	Widow (at retirement)	Yes Grandchildren	<i>Learning and taking courses</i>	The arts (opera, cinema, music, museums, art, literature), traveling
7	Paz	75	Housewife	Seamstress	Widow	Yes Grandchildren son	<i>Traveling</i>	Reading, socializing, museums, walking, playing cards
8	Silvia	68	Housewife	Housewife	Married	Yes Grandchildren mother	<i>Taking care of grandchildren</i>	Movies, going to the beach, theatre, traveling, sewing, and knitting
9	Teresa	62	Retired	Human resources	Married	Yes Grandchildren	<i>Learning and taking courses</i>	The arts (opera, art, music), traveling
10	Virginia	70	Retired	Low-skilled worker	Single	No	<i>Taking courses</i>	The arts (Theatre, opera, cinema), exercise, skiing, reading

I became a widow and it weighed me down. ... If I stay home, what do I do here?! Dead?! Dead alive! I have to do something. Someone told me about this center that was about to open and that they needed people to start a board to run it. So I got together a few people who I thought were prepared to do that. I often say that if my husband rose from the dead he would say: 'You were waiting for me to die to get into all these activities.' (Blanca)

My life has changed since I became a widow. It's been a radical change. It was 11 years ago, and I've had to get used to a different lifestyle. Afterwards I started traveling with friends and doing things. (Paz)

For the women in the study, the activities they chose to do seemed to reflect a desire to "move on" after they have had the chance to grieve the loss. Exercise was one of the most common activities initiated by the women interviewed (3 of 10 women) (see "Meaning/Main leisure activity" and "Other Important Leisure Activities" columns in Table 1), but the majority of the group also began involvement in learning activities, where they were taking courses, visiting museums, and attending concerts and plays (5 of 10 women). Three also got involved in volunteering activities in civic organizations, with two of them also developing leadership skills with an orientation to help others and work for the community.

**Table 2***Participant Summary Table: Men*

	Pseudo nym	Age	Employment status	Profession	Marital status	Career related leisure and relationship	Meaningful/Main leisure activity	Other important leisure activities
1	Carlos	67	Retired	Industry	Widower	Yes Location of activity and companions	<i>Cooking</i>	Woodwork, puzzles
2	Damián	67	Retired	Pharmaceutical sales	Married	No	<i>Cooking</i> Member of gastronomic societies	Vegetable gardening, reading, theatre
3	Eneko	64	Retired	Draftsman	Married	Yes Content of leisure and location of activity	<i>Music, Choir Volunteering</i> (teaching and directing in a choir)	Painting, Pilates, museums
4	Gorka	67	Retired	Lathe operator Machinery repair person	Married	Yes Content of leisure	<i>Drawing and painting Volunteering</i> (teaching drawing)	Electronics, woodwork, video and photography, cinema, cooking
5	Hernán	67	Retired	History teacher	Married	Yes Content of leisure	<i>Traveling and related activities</i> (museums, gastronomy, socializing, art)	Obligation type activities (home maintenance, gardening)
6	Iñigo	67	Retired	Industry	Widower (recently)	No	<i>Photography</i>	Hunting, fishing, mushroom hunting, traveling, taking courses
7	Koldo	61	Retired	Lawyer	Married	No	<i>Taking language courses</i> , President of an nonprofit organization, Chess	Collecting coins, amateur radio enthusiast, traveling
8	Luis	68	Retired	Manager	Widower and remarried	No	<i>Music, Choir Volunteering</i> (teaching and directing people in the choir)	Traveling, church involvement, listening to music, conversations
9	Nicolás	66	Retired	Accountant Sales representative	Married	No	<i>Hiking and mushroom hunting</i> Playing cards	Swimming, watching soccer
10	Ramón	67	Retired	Sales representative	Married	Yes Companions	<i>Playing cards</i>	Watching soccer and other sports, political party involvement

In contrast, the two widowers in the study perceived the loss of their wives as an event that continued to weigh on them, even after some time. Carlos, a retired industry worker who enjoys cooking, talked about losing his wife as an event that still influenced his outlook on life, even three years after the loss of his wife.

I realized that when you are doing something that you enjoy, your mind is blank and you are not thinking of anything. Because I am alone, my wife passed away three years ago, I have had a really difficult time.

However, it should be noted that while all women in the study already had time to grieve the loss of their spouses and make the transition in their lives when the interviews were conducted, one of the men, Iñigo, was still a recent widower. This meant that he was still grieving and consequently still had a mostly negative outlook on life in general and leisure in particular.

## Retirement

Retirement showed a somewhat different pattern. The men and women in the study all experienced retirement as a positive development *in the end*, a time of new possibilities, with opportunity to devote time to themselves and what satisfies them; but the difficulties in making the transition in the short term were as notable for a couple of the women working outside the home as is commonly the case with men. It forced them to give up what arguably was their main source of social status and recognition in the public space as is reflected in Olga's (a retired accountant who enjoys taking courses) comment:

You're losing the status you have at work, the friendships, the relationships, the contacts... I experienced it as a loss, so I had to manage it. For a few months I did a little bit of psychotherapy. When I stopped it at the end of that year, I had already turned my feelings about my retirement around.

Olga's case is also interesting because she experienced both widowhood and retirement within months. Although she was clearly devastated by the loss of her husband, having the opportunity to take care of him during his last months was a rewarding experience of reciprocation that allowed her to grieve in a serene fashion. However, as we have seen in her comment above, the loss of her job was experienced as a dramatic loss of status and social recognition.

Another three women in our sample, who had retired from paying jobs, were more clearly in an ambiguous space where they had to recreate their personal and social identity apart from previous responsibilities (work, family, and other), when their earlier family roles had hindered the formation and the cultivation of personal interests and preferences that might have been reconstructed for the transition. Blanca, a retired seamstress who enjoys writing, is a good example of this recreation of identities.

I would like to live much longer to do all the things that I have not been able to do before. Why was that not possible? Because of a lack of resources... I have always enjoyed poetry. I don't know why. Even as a child, with my father... I could not [write] before becoming a widow because I was too busy with my seamstress work. I had no time. I often had to stay up until four in the morning to finish an urgent job. How do I get my inspiration for my poetry? I don't even know, because it comes out of here and I write it, it's my day to day, my feelings, whatever occurs to me, and I am happy, very happy.

These women's experiences suggest reconstructive innovation without losing the continuity of the interests that they had earlier in their lives.

For the men in the sample, however, retirement seemed to afford the opportunity to expand their dedication to activities that they were able to cultivate in earlier stages of their life. Such is the case of Eneko, a retired draftsman who in his leisure time sings, directs, and teaches in a choir, and, as an extension and reconstruction of his drafting skills, paints.

I sang in two choral groups before retiring [but] I did not have time to paint. When I retired I had all the time. I got organized and now it's different. And painting... it's something that when I am painting I forget about everything.

## Ethic of Care

Regardless of other role changes, the women in the study continued in their roles as caregivers, thereby limiting their leisure time and options. We found that, with all but two of the women interviewed, family responsibilities such as the care of children, grandchildren or older relatives clearly superseded their own leisure needs or preferences, even after retirement and the

loss of a spouse when those events occurred (See "Care Provider and of Whom" column in Table 1). These older women continued in the gendered roles that they had before, which was especially the case for care giving, even for non-family members. They indicated that their own and their families' expectations of their providing care for family members limited their involvement in meaningful leisure. Silvia, a housewife who mostly dedicated her time to caring for family, and Alicia, a retired waitress and home aide who exercised in her leisure time, are examples of the limitations care giving imposes on their leisure time.

I have my mother living with me. She is old, 94 years old, so I take care of her ... [and] it does keep me from doing other things ... The entire family is at the beach since morning, and I go in the afternoon. I used to go in the morning with them, but now I can't. (Silvia)

If we distribute our free time, we can do lots of things. Psychologically, you help yourself by helping others. If I didn't do that, I wouldn't have incentives. I would feel really bad if I saw my daughter working day and night. It does not occur to me to go have fun if one of my children is not doing well. I cannot do it. I can't help it. (Alicia)

Significantly, those women who found themselves liberated from some of the care-giving roles they had previously occupied, due to widowhood and the reduction of other family-related care-giving duties, were the ones who seemed inclined to innovate by starting new leisure activities.

### **Innovation**

When the women in the study became widows or retirees, they reconsidered their priorities and decided to start getting involved in new leisure interests. Six of the 10 women started new leisure activities after retirement or widowhood. In five of the six initiator cases, the focus of the activities was on self-improvement (e.g., exercise, taking courses, and writing). Such are the cases of Teresa, a retired human resources professional who enjoys taking courses, and of Alicia, a retired waitress who enjoys exercising.

I did the undergraduate program, then a postgraduate program on religions, and then I have done three courses on enjoying the arts. I was very clear about it. I wanted to do something related my personal development. (Teresa)

I go exercise almost every day. Between the bicycle and swimming, I do two hours, because I need it. I do not feel well when I stop doing it. .... At 66, I have to take care of myself, otherwise, I will just be an old lady. I will age, but I would like to age with grace. (Alicia)

For two of the women, the focus of their new meaningful leisure activities was on the community (e.g., civic involvement). In Feli's case (a retired administrator whose most meaningful leisure activity is volunteering) below, she mentioned her desire to help others and to make them feel better through community work.

Every Wednesday we have a crafts class in the seniors' center. Some paint, some sew, everyone does whatever they want, and we help. The other day I was with the neighborhood association people, because I am the association's secretary. I help with whatever is necessary.

By contrast, only three men had started new leisure activities that they regarded as meaningful, while the rest continued or re-established activities they had started in previous stages of

life. Such was the case for Luis (a retired college-educated professional) who had always dedicated his leisure to music and Nicolas (a retired accountant and sales representative) who had a long-standing affinity for heading to the mountains in his leisure time.

[When I was] nine years old, my mother sent my sister and me to learn music theory... From there on, I have gotten into all the musical activities there were and always looked to be there... I have always been surrounded by music... Music has always been in my life and the lives of those around me. (Luis)

I have always gone to the mountains. What happens is that after retiring I have had more time. I have been going since I was young. It has always been with my group of friends more than with family. We started when we were twelve years old. (Nicolas)

For most of the men who continued previous leisure activities, these activities were work-related (five out of seven), whether the nature of the activity itself was related to previous professional work, or it just took place at or near the work site, or it involved past co-workers (see "Career Related Leisure & Relationship" column in Table 2). Eneko (the retired draftsman) started a choir in his place of work.

The owner of the factory fancied a choir 18 years ago, and I was the one who drove the idea. I was in the maintenance department, and I was in touch with the entire company; and one day the secretaries of the company told me: 'Listen, you sing in a choir. Why don't we start one here?' They were the ones that followed, and it continues to this day.

For men, while there was some experimentation with new activities, the main change in their leisure involvement was one of increased intensity or amount of time dedicated to their existing leisure activities, though some embraced new roles in the ongoing activities, such as teaching others. Eneko, for example, continued his participation in his two choral groups and his painting without having to choose to focus on one or the other, and even started teaching and directing in one of the choral groups. For Damian, a retired pharmaceutical sales representative whose most meaningful leisure activity is cooking, retirement meant the ability to spend more time cooking, which is his most meaningful leisure activity:

I have been a member of two well-known gastronomic societies for many years. Before retiring, the first priority was my job. I have four kids. I was out and about all day. Then I did not cook as much at home. Now I cook more.

The reasons the men chose to participate, stop, or substitute their leisure activities appeared to be mostly centered on the individual's preferences or personal situation, as we see in the case of Ramon, a retired sales representative who enjoys playing cards.

My wife has never enjoyed playing cards. It is enough that she indulges me by letting me play every afternoon without frowning at me.

This fact contrasted to some extent with women's consideration of their relationships when stopping or limiting their leisure involvement, as was true of Silvia in the example earlier on, where her duties toward caring for her mother limited her ability to participate in the family's beach time.

## Leadership Development

Half of the men interviewed for the study developed leader or teacher roles after retirement in activities they had been involved in for many years, thanks to the high level of knowledge and skills associated with their especially meaningful leisure activity. As Gorka, a retired lathe operator whose meaningful leisure activity was drawing and painting, recounted about his own experience:

I used to be a participant only in the senior center, and I have been an active member [that way] for many years. Now I am teaching drawing and painting to three students. The youngest one is seventy. I am teaching them the techniques that I know.

There was some contrast, however, between the women and the men in the study in terms of leadership development. The two female leaders in the sample, Blanca and Feli, appeared to have somewhat more of a community orientation in their leadership. For these two women, meaningful leisure leadership was less about their skills in an activity as about bringing together their care-giving skills with more recently developed organizational skills. The leadership focus of the two women was on running the organizations for older adults where they spent a good portion of their leisure time. Their roles in these organizations were as members of the boards of directors (one of them as president), and providing support to the organization through gendered activities such as helping in members' care, organizing trips and events, and sewing, as we can see in Feli's case (the retired administrator we met earlier).

The other day I was able to spend time with people [from the neighborhood association]. I am the secretary. I help with anything: sewing, [for example,] we are dressing this year's giants [larger-than-life papier mâché human figures used in parades during yearly towns' fairs]; we are making their clothes. (Feli)

## Discussion

Interpreting the findings of this study must be done with due consideration of the limitations of the sample studied and the methods used as noted earlier. In addition to the methodological limitations, we need to consider others, such as the problems with interpreting the "confounds" of retirement and widowhood with gender in determining meaningful leisure. At the same time, considering them collectively in context offers a depth of detail and insight about the different meanings of life events according to gender that a quantitative approach would have been unlikely to do.

In this study, women's experiences with leisure in later adulthood mirrored the findings of Gibson and associates (2003/4). Their current life stage, which involved widowhood, retirement, and/or children leaving the parents' home, opened up more leisure time because of a reduction of previous familial duties. At the same time, in spite of this, an ethic of care still constrained their leisure time.

In line with Carr and Wortman's (2005) findings, widowhood seemed to have a more limiting effect on men's than on women's lives among study participants. As noted above, after grieving the passing of their husbands, the five widows in this study tended to live widowhood as an opportunity for a fresh start, which in terms of their leisure lives meant getting involved in new leisure opportunities. However, we did not find this kind of expression in the two widowers in the study; the transition to widowhood continued to weigh on them without opening up the opportunity for a fresh start. Although the lack of forward movement for Inigo may have been

attributable to the fact that the death of his wife occurred three months prior to the interview, for Carlos it had been three years, and still he appeared to be floundering. While earlier research (e.g., Iso-ahola et al., 1994) in the United States showed the most common domains of new activity among women to be exercise, indoor activities and hobbies, in the current study the new activities were slightly different. As we have seen in the findings, exercise was one of the most common activities initiated by the women interviewed, but an even larger portion of the group also began involvement in learning activities, such as participation in courses and cultural activities. They also got involved in civic organizations through which they developed leadership skills with an orientation to help others and work for the community. This type of involvement is more consistent with findings from more contemporary research in the United States (e.g., Liechty, Yarnal, & Kerstetter, 2012), indicating that others' needs may be tended to at the same time gender expectations are challenged, and in Israel (Nimrod, 2008) where volunteering is one of the activities most often taken up by later life innovators.

Iso-Ahola et al. (1994) asserted, "the tendency to seek novelty through new leisure activities declines with advancing life stages, whereas the tendency to maintain stability through old and familiar leisure activities increases with life stages" (p. 243; See also Janke et al., 2008; Nimrod, 2007). Men in this study approximated this pattern, perceiving retirement as an opportunity to continue with familiar activities albeit with greater intensity and regularity and slightly different roles; relatively few of the male participants in this study initiated new activities subsequent to retirement. They especially tended to continue activities they enjoyed in the past or returned to old activities they had abandoned.

The findings based on the women in this investigation depart from what has been found in previous research. Even though women's choices of activities continued to be defined and somewhat constrained by an ethic of care and long-standing domestic responsibilities, they were likely to use retirement, and especially the loss of a spouse, as triggers for change (cf. Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). In the case of half of women in the study, the conditions that Cusack (1994) and Hurd (1999) pointed out for widowhood being a trigger for suddenly addressing developmental tasks were fulfilled. The female participants in this study had mostly worked at home in earlier periods of their adulthood, or did gender-typical jobs, such as that of a seamstress, that traditionally did not require contractual relationships. They also did not become widows until later in life, when older children no longer required their direct attention. Thus, the factors that were constraining to their self-expression, namely the intensity of daily care for their husbands and children, decreased. After becoming widows, five women in our study reorganized their 'hierarchy of personal goals' (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1990, p. 364) by becoming actively involved in projects and re-engaging in activities that they were not able to engage in earlier in life due mostly to gender role expectations and/or economic hardship. With questions such as Blanca's "what have I done until now?" they appeared to re-evaluate their life satisfaction and world view, while trying to take advantage of the time they had left, by reprioritizing activities and goals.

For the women in the study who had had careers, like Olga and Teresa, their process appeared to be more similar to that of men, where retirement plays a key role in triggering developmental tasks (cf. Gibson et al., 2003/4; Weiss, 2005). But, as we have seen, most of the women in our study tended to add more leisure activities to their repertoire rather than to eliminate them or just continue with what little they had done in the past. Thus, it can be stated that, in general terms, women in the sample tended to innovate more than men in later life. Using Nimrod's (2007) classification, the women in this study would fall into the "expanders" group, because they added new leisure activities and practiced them at a higher frequency. Nimrod (2007) also



found that expanders had a relatively limited leisure repertoire prior to retirement, which was the case for women in this study who had their leisure repertoires limited by their fulfillment of traditional female roles of caregivers. In contrast, most of the men in this study would fall into the “concentrators” group, because they continued participation in the same or fewer leisure activities, but at a higher frequency. Men in this study were able to continue their life-long participation in leisure activities, with the difference that they had more time for them after retirement. The differences between the findings of this study and Nimrod’s study may be attributed to the rather particular population examined in her study (recent retirees) and to the different cultural and social context of the two studies. Further research, preferably across life phases and in various ethnic, cultural and national contexts, is clearly warranted.

Our findings about this topic also fit into the two archetypes of innovation described by Nimrod and Kleiber (2007): self-reinvention innovation and self-preservation innovation. The first one is characterized by the selection of “new activities that had nothing in common with the person’s history” (p. 10). The second is characterized by the selection of “activities that were consistent with old interests, skills, and/or relationships” (p. 10). In the current study, we found that most of the women tended to be of the self-reinvention innovation type, often choosing new leisure activities in their retirement and/or widowhood, while men tended to fall into the self-preservation innovation category, choosing to continue the leisure activities they engaged in before retirement and were consistent with previous experiences, albeit with some new role responsibilities, such as teaching others. Consistent with Genoe and Singleton’s (2006) findings, men tended to engage in leisure activities that were related to their professional worlds before retirement, such as Eneko’s founding of a choir in the company where he worked, or Gorka’s passion for drawing and painting after a career with a strong design component. These differences could be explained by the diverging constraints in relation to leisure along the lifespan for women and men. Women have typically experienced constraints related to gender expectations and the ethic of care that have affected their opportunities to explore and enjoy leisure (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Shaw, 1994). When these constraints diminish or disappear, their desire to embrace this stage in life as one of opportunity may lead them to look for and start new and meaningful leisure practices, as was the case with most of the women in this study.

It is important to note that Nimrod and Kleiber (2007) did not divide the innovation archetypes along gender lines. We theorize that gender differences do apply to the findings of this study due to cultural and historical factors that shaped the lives of the study’s participants and defined different life paths for these women and men of Northern Spain. While all men had professional paths before retirement, most of the women in this study either did not have careers outside of the home (Miren, Paz, and Silvia) or had gendered careers, such as that of seamstress or home health aide (Blanca and Alicia). In the case of the women who had careers (Olga, Teresa), they followed patterns that are more similar to the study’s men, by continuing activities that they had done earlier in life or that were related. Consequently, these women would follow patterns of self-preservation innovation. In addition to having had careers, these women are younger (64 and 62) than most of those who have not had careers outside of the home or had gendered jobs (mostly in their 70s). This may have had an influence on the different patterns they show because of the rapid societal changes Spain went through during the lifetimes of these women, which allowed those who were a little younger to get an education and to live in environments with slightly less defined gender expectations.

In a similar fashion to what Thompson (1992) found around the higher tendency to innovate after losing a spouse than after retirement, female participants in our study who lost their

spouses openly expressed their desire to engage in new activities and to socialize outside their usual environments to counter their feelings of loneliness. In fact, all widows who managed to positively adapt to this vital event, including one man (who remarried), engaged in new meaningful leisure. However, this desire did not surface with the same force in the men in this study who lost their spouses. They tended to be more content with continuing their involvement in their life-long leisure activities without expanding into new social arrangements.

With respect to volunteerism we found that our participants followed patterns similar to those described by Rotolo and Wilson (2007) and Manning (2010). As in their studies of volunteer work, women in our study tended to participate in volunteering that involves caring and relating to others, while men tended to participate in volunteering that was related to their occupational history through leadership or through teaching. The suggestion is that, at least for the women in the study, caring for others is a valued activity that is a continuation of the skills they typically developed earlier in life and does not require the development of new skills. Such was the case for Blanca and Feli, whose volunteering and leadership hinged on their helping roles around caretaking and other gendered activities. For men, teaching was a new activity where they use specialized skills they have learned in their careers and in their life-long leisure activities. Such was the case for Eneko, Gorka, and Luis, who were teaching skills (like singing and painting) that they have acquired through participation in their past leisure activities. This difference highlights that, even in their volunteering and leadership, women and men's experiences are likely to be quite different in later life leisure.

## Conclusion

A possible explanation for the different findings between our study and that of Iso-Ahola et al. (1994) is the fact that their study surveyed the general population, while our study focused on older adults who were selected as highly engaged in leisure activities. While this may have biased the sample toward those preferring more change and innovation after retirement, for example, it would not account for the gender differences in such.

There is the prevalent idea within the leisure studies research community that vital events, such as widowhood or retirement, become inflexion points in the life and leisure styles of older adults. These may act as true engines of change, especially for opening up toward leisure, particularly for women. However, the results of this study show that what really enables women to cultivate leisure in later life is not their status as widows or retirees, but their liberation from gender role responsibilities that have heretofore defined their lives.

The Spanish women of the older generation have had very limited access to opportunities, power, and resources throughout their lifetimes due to social expectations according to gender. For the authors, it is a matter of social justice and respect toward these women to describe and value their experiences in scholarly work. Let us learn from their experiences to reduce social inequalities now and in the future.

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