

# **Metaphor Analysis: Connecting Leisure to Practice**

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to examine the usefulness of metaphor analysis in teaching entry-level leisure concepts. Metaphor is seen as a common component of every day language and a natural way for humans to categorize their world. Therefore, metaphor analysis provides students with a method for contextualizing abstract concepts associated with the leisure experience. The literature related to metaphor and metaphor analysis as a pedagogical tool are reviewed and practical applications to leisure studies are discussed.*

*Keywords:* metaphor, pedagogy, leisure and practice

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What is leisure? How does it differ from play or recreation? What are the salient characteristics of the leisure state? Most academic degree programs providing instruction in leisure studies attempt to provide answers to these questions. Students dutifully memorize this information, largely because of the likelihood that it will appear on an exam. However, students may be asking themselves (and sometimes their instructors) why does it matter? Answering this type of question presents a more difficult, although critical task, because it is what ultimately matters most to practice.

Understanding leisure concepts and making them relevant to leisure practice is critical if we believe that this knowledge is what makes the field unique. Many educators address leisure concepts, particularly their definitions, in introductory foundations courses; in addition, considerable time may be spent on presenting models or definitions of leisure, recreation, play and related terms at the beginning of other “techniques” oriented courses. But for many, leisure is perceived as a highly personalized, abstract, and even

esoteric concept, open to individual interpretation. So where is the common ground of leisure that connects leisure services, including practitioners, researchers, academicians, and students? And how can educators assist students in locating this common ground?

Connecting leisure concepts to practice requires not only an understanding of accepted definitions, but also a perspective on the continuous evolution of our understanding of leisure as a complex human behavior. This is difficult for both students and educators, first, because of the abstract nature of the concepts and second, because there is little common understanding within and among groups of academicians, practitioners, and students regarding knowledge of leisure and its relationship to practice (Parr, 1996). The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of metaphor and metaphoric criticism and analysis as a means of assisting future leisure professionals in linking concepts of leisure to practice.

### **Background Literature**

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase with a "concrete" meaning is used in place of a more "abstract" word or phrase to suggest a likeness between them. For instance, sport metaphors are commonly used and easily recognized in everyday speech. Several examples include: The "race" is not always to the swift; let's "kick" around this idea for awhile; and he really "struck out" that time. By taking a concrete object or event which many people have experienced or have a general knowledge of and comparing it to an abstract idea or concept, the abstract becomes more tangible but reified within the context of the comparison. Furthermore, the use of a simile promotes an equivalent cognitive response by comparing objects, activities, or ideas often using the terms "like" or "as" (e.g., "as free as a bird"; "like a rock"; and "as pretty as a picture").

Historically, metaphors have been recognized as a hindrance to clarity because of their tendency to limit interpretation and ultimately confuse and over-simplify complex ideas and issues. Foss (1989), provided a brief summary of the history of metaphoric criticism stating that for centuries metaphors were seen as "decoration" and that when viewed as such were treated as "extraordinary rather than ordinary language" (p.187). Furthermore, because of this decorative label, philosophers interested in promoting the "rational" language of pure science rejected the use of metaphors in communicating complex ideas. When acknowledging the use of metaphor as unavoidable, philosophers viewed such use as requiring clearly stated rules.

In general, these rules reinforced the idea that metaphor should be used sparingly and if used, should not suggest an exaggeration. For the most part, these early scholars recognized the importance of avoiding hyperbole when using metaphor because if exaggerated, listeners may either be given a false understanding through the analogy or they may reject the idea outright, due to the comparison's ridiculous nature. These rules for the use of metaphor suggest that these early scholars held a belief in the power of metaphor to sway the uninformed. This continues to be evident today in the power of advertising that often is based upon metaphors of power and status. However, in rejecting

metaphor as a means to communicate complex ideas they may also have rejected a useful and powerful tool for exploring the ways in which humans establish their perspectives and ideas. This rejection of metaphor may indeed be a very denial of how we grasp and understand the world around us.

Lakoff (1987) suggested that studies of the mind (i.e., cognitive science) have allowed us to recognize a basic error in the traditional view of how humans reason and attribute meaning. He labeled this traditional view of reason as the "objectivist" perspective. The objectivist view extends back to the ancient Greeks and states that humans conceptualize the world through objective categories that are created using abstract reasoning that transcends the physical limitations of the human being. In other words, to the objectivist these categories are obvious and true and go beyond the limitations of human experience. However, our expanded understanding of how humans reason and attribute meaning is rooted in the idea that we can not separate our minds from our bodies; that we have bodies with the capacity to experience and that we create reason from our experiences. Lakoff stated: "Human reason is not an instantiation of transcendental reason; it grows out of the nature of the organism and all that contributes to its individual and collective experience: its genetic inheritance, the nature of the environment it lives in, the way it functions in that environment, the nature of its social functioning, and the like" (1987, p. xv).

What this re-connection of mind and body suggests is that our reasoning and assignment of meaning cannot be taken out of the context of our subjective experiences. We define leisure from our experiences of the act of leisure. Leisure is rooted in activity, time, and space. We derive meaning and we determine markers of the category we define as the "leisure state" from other valued markers of our own and others' personal experiences. Practitioners, in the defining of leisure, (i.e., students, researchers, service providers, and scholars) give status to characteristics associated with valued experiences which are seen as similar or akin to the leisure experience (e.g., developing expertise, health promotion, peak experiences, etc.). In making these associations, practitioners reify our "professional" definitions of leisure, making them the preferred definitions without necessarily thinking about how this process may enhance or limit our practice. We suggest that metaphor analysis can help students to recognize how humans define and refine our categories through the context of our experiences. In doing this, we hope to help them recognize the responsibilities associated with the defining of leisure and the provision of leisure services.

### *An Expanded View of Metaphor*

Over the past couple of decades, several fields including psychology and education have found metaphor and metaphorical analysis to show promise as a means of enhancing communication and for advancing critical theory. For instance, Wubbolding (1991) stated, "metaphors are keys which unlock a storehouse of ideas" (p. ix) in describing the importance of the use of metaphors in helping clients in reality therapy

assign meaning to their experiences and increase understanding of their responsibilities. Again, this is possible because metaphors are commonly found in our everyday language, thought, and behavior, and the conceptual systems we use to make sense of our actions are generally metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

It is difficult to communicate abstract ideas without metaphor. However, as touched on previously, an underlying assumption of this expanded view is that we cannot actually know "reality" in any objective way; reality is subjective. The implication is that each of us creates or constructs our own personal reality through our use of symbols (e.g., language); and that metaphor is a basic way to enable the description of our personal reality as categorical (Foss, 1989). In other words, whatever symbols or language we select as the means through which to view reality, that view treats our personal reality as a category, thus creating it and making it an object for us to examine.

However, if this idea of constructing reality and more importantly the lack of a clear connection to an underlying reality is taken to an extreme, as it is in a strong view of social constructionism, a rather useless solipsistic exercise could result. It is not our intent to convey such a perspective, but rather to forward a view of leisure theory that promotes and clarifies the interaction of the person and the social environment in the exploration of the definitions of leisure from the perspective of cognitive, social psychology (see Ellis & Witt, 1991; Iso-Ahola, 1980; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). The implications for leisure will be discussed more fully in a later section of the paper.

### *Metaphor as a Pedagogical Tool*

Metaphor analysis has been discussed in the teacher education literature as a way for students to develop critical thinking skills (Ivie, 1996), enhance reflection on practice, and to examine the assumptions inherent in the metaphors they find useful to describe teaching and learning processes (Francis, 1995; Griffiths & Tann, 1992; Morrison, 1996). As previously stated, metaphor analysis is based on the assumption that individuals construct images, or mental models, based on previous experiences. These images then serve as implicit theories, or "the subconscious assumptions on which practice is based" (Johnston, 1992, p. 125). According to Stofflett (1996), ". . . practicing teachers come to teacher education with years of experience as both learners and instructors and that these experiences have been translated into a framework through which teacher education instruction is interpreted" (p. 578). An individual's previous experience, in this case with teaching and learning, shapes the kind of teacher the individual will become, and what they take away from their own teacher education courses.

Engaging students in a reflective process is one of the techniques available to facilitate a connection between the classroom and practical situations. Much has been written about reflective practice and the development of critical thinking skills both within the leisure literature (see Kivel & Yaffe, 1999 for a review of literature related to critical thinking) and outside the leisure literature (see Schon's work related to reflective practice, 1983, 1987). Through reflection, students are asked to clarify their actions, examine

why they acted as they did, and to explore the meaning behind their actions and the words they use to describe them. However, Griffiths and Tann (1992) found their students were unable to get past analyzing "contradictions between their conception of their own theories and their perception of their own practice. The focus rarely extended to contradictions within their own theories, because their theories were never challenged or compared to those of other people" (p. 74). Morrison (1996) also criticized what he called reflection-in-action (an immediate response to a specific circumstance) and reflection-on-action (reflection that occurs after the fact in a more formalized fashion). According to Morrison, these types of reflection do not address the political and social context that gives rise to the specific actions taken or the accepted standard to which students compare their actions.

Metaphor analysis appears to be a productive way to overcome some of the difficulties encountered in the reflective process. Because the language we use represents our images, or mental models, making the metaphor explicit and then deconstructing it can assist students in becoming aware of their implicit theories about the way the world works. For example, Parker (1995), in his education foundations course, expanded the traditional "What's your educational philosophy?" paper to include the identification of a metaphor for teaching. In addition, students were asked to compare their metaphor with the articulated philosophy of the education department. Parker noted that this assignment assisted his students in making connections between their own philosophies and the beliefs of others. Francis (1995) asked her students to write a paragraph completing the thought: "teaching is like...". Groups of students then analyzed the metaphors for connections to beliefs about teaching. One of the surprising results of these discussions was the discrepancy between the students' "professed theories of teaching and theories in use" (p. 238). Using metaphor analysis, the students were able to recognize these inconsistencies and then generate alternative possibilities. Griffiths and Tann (1992) concluded in a review of the metaphor literature in teacher education that "the notion of image, as it relates to metaphors, can be a powerful way into the expressions of meanings and the organizing ideas which underpin our way of thinking about teaching and learning" (p. 75).

However, the reflective process and the development and analysis of metaphors is not necessarily an easy task for students to accomplish, nor is it always deemed valuable by students. Bullough and Stokes (1994) concluded from the results of their study that the students who were less "linguistically inclined" tended to find the process difficult and not very valuable. In addition, these students had very little professional experience compared to other students. Stofflett concurred that this difficulty may be related to a lack of professional experience as the students in her study with more teaching experience found the process easier and a more effective learning tool than those students with little experience.

While the application of metaphor analysis can take many forms, (e.g., writing assignments, journals, discussions, etc.) the goal is to assist students in uncovering their implicit theories of practice; theories based on personal experience. To be effective, the

process should start with a focus on developing explicit images of self for each student. What are the pertinent images, significant events, or life-long attitudes and values that contribute to the student's life history? From there, students develop a metaphor that fits their understanding of the concept of interest. Through reflection on their chosen metaphor and comparisons to practical actions and to theoretical perspectives, students analyze and refine their metaphors.

A metaphor for an abstract concept implies common attributes between them, but it does not imply that both share all of the same attributes. For example, using the word "cherry" to describe Santa's nose is taken to mean his nose is round and red (common attributes), but not necessarily sweet tasting or containing pits (uncommon attributes). This results in one set of common attributes and two sets of uncommon attributes (one for the metaphor object and one for the comparison object). It is important to analyze both what is being said about the concepts through the common attributes and just as important to examine what is not being said, by looking at the uncommon attributes. In other words, which attributes are left out when we use a particular metaphor? Finally, students can begin to question what privileges or constraints are inherent in the assumptions implied by their metaphors using the context of their life histories.

### **Applications in Leisure**

Iso-Ahola (1980) described the interactionist perspective as engendering the following: "Leisure behavior is not only affected by personal experiences and social influences through subjective definition, but it also modifies these two factors, while this in turn gives rise to change or maintenance of one's subjective definition" (p. 186). He goes on to state that interactionism as a theoretical framework proposes a "causal relationship" between "the antecedents and consequences of leisure behavior," and that this is important for the following three reasons: "First, it acknowledges that an individual is continually changing in the changing world. Second, it accepts the principle that change is a result of interaction between personal experiences and social influences. Finally, it stresses the role of human beings as cognitive performers, rather than assuming that leisure behavior is determined by stimulus-response contingencies" (Iso-Ahola, 1980, p. 186).

Iso-Ahola (1980) suggests that an individual's subjective definition of leisure is affected by the situation/social influences on his or her leisure and the personal experiences he or she brings to her present experience. The result of the interaction of these key factors is leisure behavior, and this behavior in turn, is further affected by the personal and social influences acting upon and within the individual. This involves a dynamic, ongoing process that represents an individual's leisure experience at any given time. Iso-Ahola's theoretical framework further suggests that individuals use information from the environment as well as from personal experience to act and to find meaning in action. In turn, this action and its meaning serves as the basis of an individual's next leisure experience. In addition, one might use the same framework to think about the process by which a leisure studies student develops his or her own personal perspective on leisure and its definition.

Students enter college with a subjective definition of leisure formed from their own personal experience. That personal experience includes, as Lakoff (1987) and Iso-Ahola (1980) suggested, everything from their genetic makeup to their socioeconomic status. Furthermore, their pre-formed subjective definitions of leisure will continue to evolve and be affected by what they learn in their leisure studies classes. The challenge is to provide students with opportunities to reflect upon this process of personal development; to increase their understanding of how their own definitions of leisure have been influenced by their personal histories as well as how they (through their practice as leisure service providers) will influence other people's subjective definitions of leisure.

When students enter leisure studies programs, their instruction traditionally begins with defining leisure as not only activity and time but also as a state of mind. This beginning marks a dangerous point in the intellectual development of the novice leisure professional. Students, when confronted with this lack of "concreteness" in definitions, sometimes will develop the erroneous view that leisure is always a subjective experience and therefore, cannot be known. At worst, this perspective could develop into a sort of leisure nihilism, where the student believes that leisure concepts are useless and not founded on any objective reality. The danger is that, at this point, a student might let go of his or her leadership responsibilities including the conceptualization of leisure based on current research and other scholarly contributions to his or her profession. Our leisure categories have essentially exposed the student to the idea that they cannot be responsible for the subjective leisure of others. The ambiguities associated with our common conceptualization of leisure give the student the clear message that leisure is all things to all people. Furthermore, they can not possibly program for everyone's subjective idea of leisure, so they may as well program for what they perceive as a "benefit" of leisure, or what they can "sell" to a mass market as leisure, or any number of other justifications associated with practice.

We are suggesting here that by taking students through the process of metaphor analysis, an instructor will expose them to the ambiguities of defining leisure while providing them with a method for intellectually managing those ambiguities. For example, if a student begins defining leisure as too individualized to be meaningful, metaphor analysis will provide him or her with a means to create boundaries using the cultural context of their own leisure experiences. This process helps students to recognize the development of their own definition of leisure; a definition that is similar to the definitions of others who have grown up under similar circumstances. Furthermore, the student will grasp a broader view of the defining of leisure as a state of mind influenced by both personal history and social influences, recognizing the potential influence of leisure programming on the subjective definition of leisure for participants.

This process of metaphor analysis involves the examination of the common metaphors associated with the definitions of leisure and how personal contexts might alter the meaning of these metaphors. For instance, consider two common metaphors that could be seen as reflecting time as it relates to a leisure experience: First, "I lost track of the

time” could reflect a flow or transcendent leisure state. However, for an older adult this metaphor could represent the onset of dementia and trigger fear rather than the emotions generally associated with leisure. Likewise, “it was time well spent” could reflect the idea of recreation as worthwhile or a “good investment.” However, this category could be threatening to an individual who enjoys a controversial form of leisure. Examining common metaphors exposes leisure not as an “objective” thing that can be measured by a clock but rather a “subjective” experience of what makes “time” leisure. However, at the same time these metaphors give the student a context from which to discuss the personal and social influences affecting an individual’s perception of leisure as time.

The exercise in Table 1 challenges students to analyze common metaphors related to leisure experience, what the metaphor says about leisure, and what it doesn’t say. Students can also benefit by developing or selecting their own metaphors for leisure that reflect their understanding of the concept. Ideally, the process of metaphor analysis could be incorporated across a curriculum. In a foundations class, students can write their “leisure life histories” and a description of their last “leisure episode,” including details of who, what, where, and when, identifying the attributes of the episode that defined it as leisure and any enjoyable elements of the episode. From these images, the students can develop metaphors for leisure. The leisure metaphors can then be analyzed and updated in relation to content in other courses with the addition of metaphors for leisure programmer, leader, administrator, etc. They can also reflect on the fit of their metaphor to other client groups and leisure contexts.

Students’ personal metaphors for leisure concepts can also serve as a basis for the introduction of “textbook” theories and models of leisure concepts. Because students have formalized their implicit notions of leisure concepts through metaphor analysis, (essentially having laid the groundwork), they may be more receptive to discussions of “theory.” Without this groundwork, students often question the relevance of yet another esoteric discussion of the meaning or definition of leisure.

## Conclusion

This paper reviewed the importance of providing a context for the introduction of theory-related leisure concepts. It suggests that metaphors, which are common in every day language, may serve as a useful conceptual framework for contextualizing what to most students seem to be esoteric and irrelevant discussions. Through the process of questioning metaphors associated with descriptions of leisure, as well as creating new metaphors based upon their expanding understanding, students help to further contextualize leisure theory for themselves and their profession.

Furthermore, metaphor is viewed as a basic way in which humans categorize the world in which they live. This idea fits into an interactionist perspective of the defining of the subjective leisure experience. In other words, individuals experience leisure from the context of their bodies and their personal histories, from this perspective they create meaning and decide upon future leisure behavior. It is important that leisure profession-



als recognize the importance of their clients' individualized perspectives yet not use this notion to evade the responsibilities associated with programming.

TABLE 1

*An Example Student Exercise*

**Metaphors: Exploring the Characteristics of Leisure**

*Directions:* The following "characteristics" are, in various ways, identified with leisure. Examples are provided of metaphors that may be helpful in explaining the meaning associated with each of the leisure characteristics. Take a few minutes to read through this list and then choose one or two characteristics that are meaningful to your leisure and explain the meaning of one or both metaphors in relation to your leisure experience.

Choice:

I'm like a kid in a candy store. It's the lesser of two evils.

Belonging or association with others:

No man is an island. I find it hard to come out of my shell.

Accomplishment:

I know this like the back of my hand. Winning is number one.

Doing for others:

What goes around, comes around. I'm paying my debt to society.

Freedom:

I'm all tied up. I'm as free as a bird.

Fun:

We had a blast. All work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy.

*Possible questions for processing the metaphor exercise:*

1. Was it easy to identify with the leisure characteristics? Why or why not? Identify where these characteristics come from: your textbook, your personal experience of leisure, other sources?

2. Please share how one of the metaphors helped you to "personalize" a particular leisure characteristic. Did it trigger a memory of one of your leisure experiences? Describe how the metaphor may be a reflection of one or more of your attitudes or values associated with leisure?

In what ways do the metaphors help a person to understand the characteristics of leisure better? Explain ways in which the metaphor might limit or mislead someone concerning the meaning of the identified characteristics of leisure.

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