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The functions of leisure in later life: bridging individual- and community-level perspectives

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Abstract

Leisure participation in older age has principally been researched from individual-level theoretical perspectives that view leisure as reflecting adaptations to ageing-related losses and change. Recent orientations to later-life leisure participation, such as innovation theory, emphasise positive developmental aspects and uses of older individuals' leisure pursuits, driven by personal agency. Moreover, the potential of later-life leisure activities to contribute to community is conceptualised in social capital theory perspectives that bridge individual- and community-level functions of leisure participation. This paper presents findings from qualitative thematic analysis of oral histories on leisure conducted with 58 persons aged 60 and over in rural south-west England, to examine the personal uses and functions of their leisure occupations in older age, and the role that these activities play in connecting older individuals to their communities. While participants described lifetime patterns of leisure characterised by a core set of activities and interests, later life was a period of leisure transitions in which they actively used new and continuing pastimes to adapt to changing personal circumstances, abilities and aspirations. The findings also demonstrate how participants' leisure activities – ranging from avidly pursued hobbies to formal volunteering – served individual adaptive and developmental purposes, and were a means of fostering social connectivity and contributing to rural community life. Implications of these findings are discussed in regard to leisure theory, policy and practice. This paper adds to the literature on ageing and leisure by identifying the benefits of examining older persons' leisure participation from a combined conceptual perspective that can elucidate its functions at both the micro- and meso-levels of society.

Keywords: leisure theory; ageing innovation; social capital; civic engagement

Introduction

The availability of opportunities and resources to support older adults' engagement in fulfilling and beneficial leisure pursuits is directly influenced by perspectives on later life as formulated in theories of ageing (Kleiber and Genoe, 2012). These theoretical framings both explicitly and implicitly underpin the development of policy and practice in the area of leisure and ageing, and have evolved over time in parallel

with trends in both gerontology and leisure studies. Current gerontological perspectives on leisure in later life are strongly oriented around the health and wellbeing effects of activities that satisfy a range of social and psychological needs in ageing individuals. Reflecting this, the impact of hobbies, volunteerism and other leisure pastimes on cognitive, physical and psychological health in older age continues to be a growing research focus (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 2013; Cuenca *et al.*, 2014; Sörman *et al.*, 2014; Chao, 2016; Paggi *et al.*, 2016; Litwin *et al.*, 2017; Ryu and Heo, 2017; Zhu *et al.*, 2017; Henning *et al.*, 2021).

Gerontologists have long been interested in the topic of leisure, with early descriptive studies focused on how older people ‘fill or kill’ their spare time (Bucke, 1961; Cowgill and Baulch, 1962). These first investigations into discretionary time activities in later life mirrored the prevailing gerontological concern with older people’s disengagement from previous roles and associated responsibilities, and the perceived need to fill the resulting activity gap (Havighurst, 1961; Kleemeier, 1964). Since then, a broad range of theoretical approaches have informed gerontological research on leisure, with successive frameworks focusing on the individual- and community-level functions of older people’s leisure engagement (Kleiber and Genoe, 2012). However, despite growing evidence of the inter-related uses of leisure in older age for both adaptation to ageing-related changes and as an asset for creating community cohesion, micro- (individual) and meso- (community) level theoretical traditions have largely remained separate. This paper aims to bridge the principal theoretical perspectives addressing both these functions as reflected in the accounts of the leisure activities and interests among a sample of community-dwelling persons aged 60 and over in rural south-west England. It considers how these various conceptual and theoretical framings can be applied to the findings, and in doing so confirms how leisure in later life serves subjectively driven aims and broader uses by the community. Moreover, it demonstrates how a wider conceptual lens can be applied to capture these dual purposes of older people’s leisure and the implications for policy and practice of this expanded perspective.

Theoretical perspectives in leisure and ageing research

Contemporary studies of leisure in later life within the social and behavioural sciences have principally examined its role as a source of identity, adjustment and wellbeing with an emphasis on how leisure is used by older adults to maintain, develop or actualise valued aspects of the self. Informed by gerontological perspectives such as continuity theory (Atchley, 1989), lifespan development theory (Levinson, 1978), and theories of behavioural and socio-emotional selectivity (Baltes and Carstensen, 1996), these investigations have focused on the persistence and adaptation of earlier patterns of leisure activities into older age, highlighting processes of accommodation to age-associated psychosocial and physical changes.

Qualitative research on later-life leisure underpinned by these psychosocial theories and typically employing in-depth semi-structured interviews (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2002; Cheng *et al.*, 2016; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019) has contributed to what is known about how leisure and its meanings are used by older adults as part of personal strategies for successful ageing. More rarely, and relevant to the present study,

qualitative biographical methods such as oral history have been used to examine processes of and influences on continuity and change in later-life leisure within the context of an individual's lifecourse (Genoe and Singleton, 2006; Colley *et al.*, 2017).

Cross-sectional quantitative studies (e.g. Iso-Ahola *et al.*, 1994; Sivan, 2002; Minhat *et al.*, 2013) and longitudinal investigations (e.g. Strain *et al.*, 2002; Agahi *et al.*, 2006; Janke *et al.*, 2006; Finkel *et al.*, 2018) conducted from these theoretical perspectives across diverse populations and groups have collectively evidenced a significant association between current and previous levels of engagement in similar leisure areas into older age accompanied by an overall decline in participation throughout later life, particularly in physically demanding activities and activities outside the home. These quantitative studies have likewise identified a range of characteristics and circumstances that predict changes in patterns of leisure participation, including health and functional status-related factors, leisure companionship and sociodemographic attributes (age, gender, education, socioeconomic status and living situation) posited as affording differential availability of and access to leisure opportunities and resources.

While such theoretical perspectives address older individuals' capacity to adapt and adjust to ageing, the significance of personal agency and meaning-making in effecting changes to one's leisure repertoire with ageing is highlighted in Nimrod and Kleiber's (2007) innovation theory which views the adoption of new leisure activities in later life as a means for re-fashioning and re-inventing important elements of the self. To date, research using this theoretical framework has been dominated by qualitative investigations that have variously explored triggers, facilitators, constraints, contexts and outcomes of leisure innovation in later life (Nimrod, 2016). Examples include studies by Campbell and Yang (2011) and Liechty *et al.* (2012) – in China and the United States of America (USA), respectively – of retirement-aged women's leisure choices that examined their motivations for taking up novel pursuits, among them taking advantage of previously unavailable opportunities, additional resources and increased personal freedom, as well as effecting intentional life changes. Gender differences in adopting new leisure activities have been explored, for example, in a qualitative investigation of leisure innovation among older adults in northern Spain (Jaumot-Pascual *et al.*, 2016). Findings from this study indicated that starting new activities was more prevalent among older women than their male counterparts, which the researchers attributed to lifecourse discontinuity in women's opportunities for participating in meaningful leisure pursuits due to gender role responsibilities. To date, quantitative studies have principally tested various tenets of innovation theory, producing mixed findings across different populations regarding the prevalence, types, predictors and benefits of the phenomenon of leisure innovation among older adults (e.g. Nimrod *et al.*, 2009; Cuenca *et al.*, 2014; Earl *et al.*, 2015; Nimrod, 2016).

Among the latest sociological frameworks to be employed in research on leisure in later life is social capital theory. While other variants of the theory exist (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), Putnam's (1993) functionalist perspective on social capital has been the most influential to date in studies of ageing and leisure. Emphasising 'an individual's ties of social connection, trust and reciprocity generated in the interaction between individual and collective life' (Nyqvist *et al.*, 2013: 394),

the increasing focus on leisure in later life as a means for producing social capital has paralleled gerontological interest since the mid-2000s on the civic engagement of older people (Morrow-Howell and Freedman, 2006–2007). This interest has been driven by the dual aims of promoting the health and wellbeing of an active ageing population, and harnessing the contributions of older people's time, skills and expertise as a source of societal capital and resource for community cohesion (Hennessy, 2010). Retirement and other role changes in later life typically mean that individuals are no longer contributing and connecting through work and other previous occupational arenas, and their leisure is thus viewed as a potential community asset.

Social capital theory has gained traction in the area of leisure studies (e.g. Glover, 2004; Glover and Hemingway, 2005; van Ingen and van Eijck, 2009), with a shift in focus 'toward the roles of leisure forms and practices in enhancing social capital and active citizenship' (Glover and Hemingway, 2005: 387). This growing application of social capital theory has been correspondingly reflected in studies of leisure in later life, with particular attention to the potential and limitations of older adults' leisure participation for producing connections and exchanges within and across social groups – respectively 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital.

Examples from the gerontological literature include an ethnographic study by Casado-Diaz (2009) that examined the role of leisure pursuits in the generation of social capital among British retirees to the Costa Blanca in Spain. Findings from this research demonstrated the importance of leisure activities as a vehicle for assimilation and mutual assistance through creating social ties, and instrumental and emotional support among older British expatriates. The social capital perspective similarly frames the qualitative study by Son *et al.* (2010) of an international leisure club for women aged 50 and over, indicating the social support and practical assistance generated for individual members and for the wider community through the uses of these older women's leisure. Also notable here for its relevance to the purpose of this paper is a qualitative investigation by Sweeney and Zorotovich (2020) of leisure in a retirement community in the south-eastern USA. This research combines perspectives from continuity theory and social capital theory to illustrate the individual adaptive uses of leisure in facilitating the successful transition to retirement, as well as generating social capital through connections to community.

Quantitative studies explicitly employing a social capital perspective on later-life leisure, on the other hand, have focused on topics around the relationship of older individuals' social capital resources with leisure participation (e.g. Yu *et al.*, 2018; Huang and Li, 2019) and with volunteering (e.g. Warburton and Stirling, 2007), as well as their participation in social, civic and community activities compared to that of other age groups (Hodgkin, 2012). Taken together, these investigations demonstrate the reciprocal association of an individual's social capital and leisure engagement, and the significant contributions to community of older adults' participation in leisure activities.

Following this brief overview of the main theoretical orientations to older people's leisure, the remainder of this paper will demonstrate the applicability of both individual-level and community-level theoretical frameworks to the leisure accounts of a sample of community-resident older adults in the United Kingdom

(UK), and suggest the potential utility of a combined perspective to the discretionary time activities of older adults.

Design and methods

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of older persons' leisure activities over the lifecourse that was conducted as part of a larger investigation of their participation in rural community life in selected areas of the UK (the Grey and Pleasant Land project, 2009–2012) (Hennessy *et al.*, 2014). Oral histories on leisure were collected from 58 white British persons (35 women, 23 men) aged 60–90 to examine patterns of and influences on leisure participation from a lifecourse perspective. Following Hedges' (1986) technique of 'personal leisure histories', this method was used to capture the ways in which significant changes in life circumstances over time affected patterns of leisure engagement (Veal, 2018). Interviewees included individuals living in rural areas in south-west England in one of the project's six study sites (north Cornwall). Thirty-three of these individuals were recruited from a sample frame of households identified from the Census as containing at least one person aged 60 or over, which was used for a survey that was part of the larger project. The additional 25 participants were recruited via convenience snowball sampling from community organisations and an older people's club in the study site area.

Ethical approval for the study was secured through the Faculty of Health Research Ethics Sub-Committee at the University of Plymouth. Information about the study was distributed through community organisations and by local volunteers in the study area. Participating individuals were provided in advance with information sheets further detailing the nature and aims of the research, and assuring data confidentiality and anonymity in the presentation of the study findings. An informal combined capacity and consent process was employed by the interviewers to determine the ability of individuals to participate in the research and to obtain written informed consent (Cherubini and Gasperini, 2017), and arrangements were made for conducting the interview in their preferred location.

Data were collected through face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured oral history interviews that were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was designed to elicit discussion regarding leisure experiences, including the types and extent of activities participated in and influences on these activities at different lifestages from childhood through older age. While leisure has frequently been a topic of oral histories conducted by social historians (*e.g.* Schweitzer, 1992; Langheimer, 1995), retrospective life-history methods have only seldom been used by social scientists as a means of collecting data for empirical research on leisure over time due to concerns about validity (Trapp-Fallon, 2003; Snelgrove and Havitz, 2010). Nonetheless, Hedges' (1986) exploratory study concluded that individuals had sufficient powers of recall to justify the retrospective investigation of personal leisure histories, and Sedgley *et al.* (2006) emphasise the value of biographical research methods such as oral history for studying leisure, through their ability to capture social, cultural and historical contexts of leisure. The interview prompts served as cues for guiding the interview, but were adaptable in nature. The schedule was piloted with two older rural residents local to the study area, and

minor amendments in the wording and order of the prompts were made accordingly. The interviews were all conducted in the respondents' home setting and lasted an average of one hour.

Data analysis

The transcribed material was analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006) focusing on lifecourse continuities and discontinuities in leisure participation and interests and interviewees' perspectives on leisure transitions with ageing. The analysis involved an initial immersive process of familiarisation with the data through multiple iterative readings of the transcripts to identify patterns of meaning. To ensure the validity and reliability of the coding process, two researchers independently performed this step to generate initial codes before conferring to organise and refine the codes into themes and sub-themes, and to adjudicate any differences in coding. The principal themes emerging from this process were: the influence of on-time and off-time life events, gender role norms in leisure, and differential access to leisure opportunities due to material circumstances and geographic location.

Following this initial analysis, the literature was reviewed to relate the identified themes to relevant theoretical constructs and frameworks around leisure and ageing. That is, rather than deriving an exploratory model from the findings, they are considered in relation to previous research and theories of leisure in later life, as well as underlining the specific conceptual distinctions of this study. This approach reflects the assertion by Heinz *et al.* (2016: S51) that 'Oral history provides researchers opportunities to assess narratives and compare them to existing theories of aging'. From our theoretically informed analysis, the following themes were developed: continuity of leisure interests, health and social role triggers for change, adaptive strategies, leisure innovation, and community connectivity through leisure. While the oral histories captured accounts of the interviewees' 'leisure lives' across their various lifestages, the findings from these analyses presented here focus on their leisure experiences in older age within the context of their lifetime leisure.

Findings

Continuity of interests

A wide-ranging and sometimes extensive repertoire of leisure pursuits in older age were reported by the study participants. The interviewees typically described a core set of activities and interests that characterised their lifetime patterns of leisure, as illustrated in the following comments:

There's painting. I've been very keen on painting. You might take painting also as a passion. So all those things of youth like walking and so on, and painting, they all continue with me. (Male, sixties)

One of the things I've always loved is driving ... driven miles and miles and miles, up North Yorkshire and the moors and the dales and so on ... the other thing I've always done is stamp collecting actually. (Male, seventies)

I enjoy cooking if there's people that are going to eat it and enjoy it that's been my main ... lasting hobby. (Female, seventies)

These reported long-term activities encompassed the full spectrum of leisure forms categorised by Stebbins (2007) as 'serious', 'casual' and 'project-based' in that they involved varying degrees of skill, knowledge, seriousness of pursuit and frequency of undertaking. Moreover, they were invariably described as being engaged in for purposes of personal enjoyment, satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment or self-expression.

For many of these older adults, their enduring hobbies, pastimes or preferred ways of spending their free time were nostalgically recalled as having roots in their childhood or other earlier life period and often mirroring the leisure interests and activities of a family member or other significant figure. For example, a 64-year-old woman who continued to be intently interested in the theatre and now attended performances with younger family members remarked:

That was another leisure thing, my mother was mad keen on Shakespeare and we used to go to the theatre several times a year from a very early age ... So I've grown up with Shakespeare.

Similarly, a man in his early seventies, whose lifelong leisure interests revolved around fishing, explained how these had originated in his days at boarding school:

I loved boarding school ... We were particularly lucky because we had a big lake to fish and swim in ... The one thing that I always did was fish.

As such, these ongoing pursuits were often described as being closely tied up with the older individual's views of continuity of self, in accord with findings from other research that leisure activities evoking nostalgia are significantly connected with adults' personal identity and life satisfaction (Cheng *et al.*, 2016; Cho *et al.*, 2019; Cho, 2020).

While interviewees identified substantial continuity in their central leisure pursuits across various lifestages, they generally characterised later life as a period of marked leisure transition. Major life events – including the health and social role changes accompanying older age – have been affirmed as junctures in the life-course when, as Roberts (2015: 259) put it, 'leisure patterns unfreeze and are reconstituted'. The patterns of continuity and change that emerged from the interviewees' lifetime leisure accounts broadly fit the 'core and balance' model developed by Kelly (1983). This perspective holds that adults have a core of leisure that persists through the lifecourse with a shifting set of other discretionary time pursuits that are balanced with changes in social roles, self-identity, aims and opportunities at particular lifestages (Kelly *et al.*, 1986) – in this case, older age. In line with this view, the leisure patterns described by these older adults reflected adaptive continuity of previous leisure pursuits and interests within the context of their present life circumstances.

Adaptive continuity and triggers for change in later-life leisure

Health and functional capacity triggers

The strategies employed by older adults to accommodate to changes in health and functioning in later life include reducing, relinquishing or replacing previous leisure pursuits – particularly those requiring significant physical exertion – with less-demanding activities (Iso-Ahola *et al.*, 1994; Zimmer *et al.*, 1997; Duke *et al.*, 2002; Nimrod *et al.*, 2009). Consistent with this, the interviewees commonly mentioned changes in personal health and wellbeing or energy levels as triggers associated with leisure adaptation, and described how they had adjusted to chronic illness and functional limitations by cutting down on, giving up or substituting less-taxing activities for previous pastimes. A 67-year-old man, for example, explained how the long-term effects of his lifestyle and occupational history had resulted in having to alter the level of his leisure involvement with his large vegetable garden:

I do less gardening because I'm not so fit as I used to be. I suffer with breathlessness so I can't do as much gardening. It's smoking and drinking – old age and dusty – occupational dust – working in buildings all my life and then the quarry ... I still like to do the beans.

Another interviewee similarly reported how, at age 80, he had given up his prize possession that had been the basis of his principal leisure pursuit:

I had a fishing boat all my life for hobby fishing. I developed a stomach hernia through lifting and carrying things all my life and I had to have a major operation ... [My doctor] said, 'What do you do for leisure?' and I told him and he said 'Give up boating.' We [he and his wife] now play indoor bowls with a club.

The man had subsequently produced a satisfactory solution for carrying on with his passion – albeit in modified form – by turning over his boat to his nephews who were also keen anglers and occasionally accompanying them on their fishing trips. He had also added a new less-strenuous activity that he could enjoy with his wife to his stock of leisure pastimes. In this instance, this individual had successfully drawn on existing social resources for continued leisure involvement, a strategy identified by Hutchison and Nimrod (2012) as one way in which older persons with chronic health conditions maintain leisure engagement.

In the case of couples, as the following interviewees' comments highlight, changes in the physical capacity and levels of leisure participation of one partner could sometimes also significantly affect the leisure activities of the other:

I now can't walk very far ... because my knees start to complain ... Dancing, we [she and her husband] used to dance. We used to do folk dancing and barn dancing but we can't do that now and that actually is quite a regret. (Female, sixties)

We learnt [horse riding] indoors then. I then got to just start rising trot. [My wife] had to have her arm done. I don't think she would like it if I carried on and she couldn't do it so I decided, no. (Male, seventies)

Thus, the findings offered cases of how the continuity of dyadic leisure – carried out with a significant other or friend – could be reciprocally affected by health changes in later life of one of the pair. This has implications in light of Chang's (2017) findings on the potential of the social support received and provided by leisure to mitigate stress in older adults, and the results from the research of Zimmer *et al.* (1997) that older individuals affected by a chronic health condition who had fewer social resources were least likely to replace a leisure activity that they have had to give up.

Social role triggers

Changes in social roles, *e.g.* with retirement or widowhood, are 'points of inflection in the lives of older adults' (Jaumot-Pascual *et al.*, 2018) that were another major trigger for leisure adaptation in older age. With a shift in role obligations and expectations, interviewees often described the new-found opportunity for having some 'me time' or experiencing leisure on their own terms and in line with their own – not others' – interests and preferences. Among men, the formal cessation of job responsibilities typically marked the freedom to devote more time to desired leisure pursuits, as expressed by one 70-year-old interviewee:

[Sailing] that was another thing I could do since I was 60. But as I say before we just never had the time. I was flat out trying to earn a living, keeping your head above water.

These men's reports of the effect of retirement on their leisure participation reflect Genoe and Singleton's (2006) findings on older men's lifecourse leisure experiences and the marked transition from the 'noses to the grindstone' years of working life to post-retirement.

Women similarly described a shift from family duties and work outside the home to having greater scope of opportunity for indulging their leisure activities and interests. One 75-year-old woman, for example, who had been the lifelong carer of her disabled daughter had, with advancing age, finally felt able to hand over some her care-giving responsibilities to a paid care worker. She remarked on the effect that no longer having to be exclusively in the role of full-time care-giver to a family member had had on her ability to pursue leisure pastimes: 'I can do something either out in the garden or whatever I want, and I can be at that for four hours if I want.'

For some older women, the experience of being on their own after the loss of their marital partner afforded them a new latitude of choice about leisure activities which previously may have been determined by their spouse's preferences and interests, or the assumptions about what form a couple's leisure should take following the husband's retirement (Mason, 1988). As one 69-year-old woman who had been widowed commented:

My husband used to play golf ... I played with him but I haven't played since. I didn't play very much at all. I just had a set of golf clubs and I went round on the nine-hole course sometimes.

Another widow in her seventies described her use of leisure to try out possible interests and ways of meeting other people following her husband's death:

One of the things [I did] was to learn to play bridge, which I thought would have been nice for me as I was on my own then. I did play-reading, then I went to a folk group.

Other changes, including resuming care-giving roles due to health problems of a family member or grandparental duties, could pose constraints on interviewees' leisure participation or expectations for leisure in older age. As a woman in her seventies remarked:

Things have changed here now because we've got the grandchildren. I fully intended going [to play bowls] but never got round to it ... Both parents work so, you know, a telephone call and I go to the school.

These findings accord with the interpretation by Jaumot-Pascual *et al.* (2018) of gender differences in older adults' leisure as reflecting the ethic of care associated with women's traditional gender role that often circumscribes their leisure prospects.

Leisure innovation and the adoption of new leisure activities

Consistent with innovation theory (Nimrod and Kleiber, 2007), for many interviewees new leisure activities provided opportunities for personal growth, the renewal of previous interests and reinvention of themselves. For the study participants who described having grown up in materially deprived circumstances or in rural areas where choices for leisure were limited, for example, their leisure pursuits in later life often reflected the chance to make up for the previous lack of resources or opportunities to realise keenly held interests. One 75-year-old man, for instance, explained that despite being a eager reader as a child 'we were a working-class family so we had no books'. His current leisure pastime developed out of a desire to fulfil his lifelong love of books: 'I collect books, got quite a few here. Antiquarian-type books. Old *Illustrated London News*, arts journals.' Thus, in later life this individual was able to pursue an enduring interest that expressed a significant aspect of his identity – as a bookworm and bibliophile – through his hobby of book collecting.

Gendered leisure innovation

Among both the older men and women in this study, there was evidence of processes of activity expansion, reduction, concentration and diffusion in the selection of new leisure activities (Nimrod, 2007). However, distinct differences by gender in the adoption of new leisure pursuits in later life as identified in a number of earlier studies were also demonstrated in this research (e.g. Liechty *et al.*, 2012; Liechty and Genoe, 2013; Jaumot-Pascual *et al.*, 2016). As found by Genoe and Singleton (2006), for instance, numerous examples emerged from the data of men taking up leisure pastimes that mirrored aspects of previous work activities, allowing

them to preserve and transform some valued aspect of the self. One man in his mid-seventies, for example, explained how his current pastime of making large-scale model car replicas had its roots in his personal work history:

[I took up this modelling at 70] having started life as an engineer. Going back to when I started, garages ... had their own machine shop. They had to make a lot of the parts ... So my early background was in engineering, and I thought it would be interesting to do this as a hobby.

Another man, describing his very full leisure programme upon retirement, demonstrated how at age 72 he was using new leisure activities to construct a version of his former working life in adapting to his fully retired status:

Following proper retirement, I became busy. I became a member of the U3A [University of the Third Age]. I'm membership secretary of the U3A. I then joined various classes – Spanish, science, history. I was also the show secretary for the regional Agricultural Show. I am also an active Freemason.

The need to structure the day with activities perceived as work-like was particularly strongly felt by another man in his early seventies:

I couldn't ever imagine not doing stuff, sitting at home and reading a book ... I have to get up and have a day, I have to have a business day, whatever it might be. Whether it's sailing a boat or being part of [the local history society] or RNLI [Royal National Lifeboat Institution], whatever.

Thus, for these men, new leisure activities afforded opportunities for affirmation of their previous work identities (Liechty and Genoe, 2013).

In contrast to men's orientation to pursuits that often reflected aspects of their past work patterns or interests, women's accounts frequently featured an expression of autonomous self-interest as an impetus for adopting new leisure pursuits. For example, one 69-year-old woman described how following her phased retirement from work she deliberately took up a hobby that satisfied her self-identified need for intellectual stimulation:

A few years ago I did a course in crystal healing ... I've got two friends that I do it on ... I've just got lots of crystals. They're a fascinating thing to study actually because on the course you do a lot of geology and all that sort of thing. It's quite interesting. Well, I felt I needed to do something for my brain so that was brain work as well. Because you have to learn all about them.

Moreover, women's choices for new leisure pastimes in later life were also often described as closely related to their desire to engage in some activity that was self-governed and not dependent on 'fitting in' with the preferences or expectations of others. This is demonstrated in the remarks of an interviewee in her seventies:

I was a WI [Women's Institute] member for quite a few years ... I was president of that for a bit. It was just that I thought, I'm going out of duty rather than love. I mean some of the things were really interesting but some of the things I'd think, gosh this is pathetic. And they sat round, chat, chat, chat, and never did anything ... So I thought no, I'll give that one up.

This decision allowed her to take up a new activity – weekly choir singing – that she described as being more aligned to her core interests. Thus, as found by Gibson *et al.* (2003) in their study of retirement-aged women's leisure, a defining feature in the adoption of new leisure practices for many female interviewees was their ability to exercise freedom of choice in how to spend their spare time.

Leisure innovation for personal growth and enjoyment

Among the motivations described by the interviewees who reported having taken up new leisure activities after age 60, self-expression, pleasure and learning were frequently mentioned motivations for these additions to their leisure repertoires. As revealed in studies of later-life leisure innovation (e.g. Fisher and Specht, 1999; Yarnal *et al.*, 2008; Reynolds, 2010), the impulse for playful experimentation, fun and creativity figured prominently in the accounts of these interviewees:

I have taken up gardening. I decided I wanted to play. I bought myself a little digger. You know one of these excavator things, which is at the back. I have a hillside out the back. It [landscaping] has actually got a ten-year plan but I shall never get anywhere close to it, to terrace out a pathway up this hillside. I have only done about 50 yards. So I taught myself how to use the digger. Great fun, gardening. (Male, sixties)

I've taken up the hobby of cardmaking. I do quite a lot of those. I made nearly all the Christmas and the birthday cards. So it's just a leisure thing and it's creative and I like creating things. (Female, seventies)

I've joined the garden club. I'm not a very good gardener, but I love it. I love creating gardens. I know nothing about plants, what they're called or anything. But if I see something I have a job not to buy it. (Female, seventies)

These reports reflect the sense conveyed by many of these 'leisure innovators' that the life changes experienced in older age had provided a window of opportunity for self-expression and enjoyment that they had not had in earlier years due to work and family responsibilities. The implications of this focus on the possibilities for leisure in later life is relevant to Nimrod's (2008) findings that post-retirement innovators experienced significantly higher life satisfaction than non-innovators who had not taken up any new leisure activities after ceasing work. As well, it is suggestive of evidence that older individuals who report 'internal innovation' (Nimrod and Rotem, 2012) in relation to leisure – that is learning or acquiring a new ability, skill or insights – experience more benefits from the activity than those who were motivated by other considerations.

Leisure innovation as evidence of productive ageing

In describing their leisure repertoires and addition of new leisure pursuits in later life, some of the interviewees emphasised the intensity of their engagement with multiple activities in the community. This is highlighted in one 80-year-old man's account of his and his wife's involvement:

We join most things here. We are in the gardening club and as of last November I am involved in the photographic club which we have just started in the village ... There is a luncheon club which my wife cooks for, one of six. I go because I take her up there and then there are two of us men who put out the chairs and tables for them. We also pick up one or two people who haven't got transport ... I also took up bell ringing, so I ring the bells for the church here ... Well apart from that we both do short mat bowling. We do Sunday afternoon 2.00 till 4.30ish short mat bowling up here, of which I helped form this club here.

Efforts by this couple to signal their status as 'active agers' were also evident in the description by a woman in her mid-sixties of her extensive volunteering commitments:

I've been a Parish Councillor for ten years and now I'm Chair of the Parish Council. School governor for ten years now and then four years as Chair of the governors, so that takes up time ... And then with the ceramics and glass group which we have about 80–90 members, I've been on the committee for that. But I've just left that as I had too many things to do.

However, as in Wharton's (2020) study of women's participation in outdoor adventure activities as a means of negotiating the ageing process and setting themselves apart from other women in their age group, this interviewee went on to distinguish her leisure activities from those of other 'older people':

I haven't joined any [local older people's social club] yet. I think I'm a bit too bossy for that crowd ... I haven't had a perm yet or anything like that. I haven't changed actually.

Thus, part of the identity work involved in leisure innovation (and continuity) among these older adults was defending oneself against age stereotyping through reinforcing one's image as engaged in pastimes appropriate to a productive ageing lifestyle (Dionigi, 2006; Marhánková, 2011). Within the rural locations in which this study was conducted, this could be accomplished through presenting oneself in a visible role in community settings in which one positioned oneself as a participant or provider – rather than the beneficiary – of these activities.

Community connectivity and social capital generation

In addition to serving purposes of personal adaptation to ageing-related change, individuals' leisure engagement could and did also function as a means of generating connections to rural community and beyond. This is illustrated in an 86-year-old man's account of the hobby that he and his wife took up at the time of his retirement:

We started making these miniature [dolls'] houses ... we went mad, we went to exhibitions everywhere ... After a few years we joined the Cornwall dolls' house group ... I became chairman for eight years. We decided one year to hold an exhibition for the public. There were about 40-odd exhibits there, all of which they had made themselves.

Another interviewee in her eighties who, after an early divorce had been a single mother with four children, explained how her leisure had been circumscribed over the years by the need to work to support her family. She described how as an avid home baker and cook she had used these interests to become connected with community causes once she was able to retire from formal work:

Well, we're always involved, my friend and I with various things ... baking cakes and that. We do the cake stalls, make jams, marmalade, chutneys, pickles ... for any charity what's going. We give, we don't ask for nothing back, we give everything and yet we still buy back. We've been doing it for years.

In many instances, interviewees described their civic engagement in later life as having evolved organically from a particular longstanding leisure interest. A woman in her mid-sixties, for example, explained how her lifelong love of spending time in the company of children had grown into more formal volunteering involvement assisting at the local primary school in her community:

I just love kids, I really enjoy them. I do breakfast club in the school on Wednesdays ... about half a dozen children turn up. They have cereal, hot chocolate, toast and we chat then I take them up to school for five to nine. I am a school governor as well and I used, before we had our present head teacher, used to go in more than once a week and hear children reading.

Similarly, one individual in his seventies explained how his hobby of woodturning had expanded over time to encompass related voluntary work with the wider community, including intergenerational groups:

We have competitions. They give you a brief and we are told what you've got to make, so you make it. We have demonstrations by professional turners and we now have our own training programme. We get scouts in twice a year. We get money from the Woodturning Club of Great Britain, we get money from them to train scouts for what we call young training days.

In contrast to the larger-scale efforts towards community contributions of such interviewees, we also found examples among those with physical frailties and who were less mobile, of sustained engagement with causes for community benefit. During the interview with one woman in her seventies, for example, she pointed out the huge jigsaw puzzle that she was in the middle of completing on her dining room table. She explained that she gets the puzzles sent to her by local charity shops and completes them to make sure all the pieces are there, before returning them to

the charity shop for sale. Another woman in her eighties similarly described her involvement on behalf of the local older people's social group:

I collect when they have a jumble sale. I've got all those glasses. I've just washed all those, ready for the next sale they do. And it helps when they go for trips or have a dinner.

These examples are consistent with the notion of the 'miniaturization of satisfaction' among homebound frail older adults (Rubenstein *et al.*, 1995) who use available materials at hand and scaled-down activities within their immediate environments to contribute to a sense of wellbeing, in this case keeping themselves connected with the larger community. They are also indicative of the concept of Stewart *et al.* (2015: 750) of 'civic socialising' which may go some way towards interpreting these results through their view of the significance of older people's presence and interactions in local neighbourhood venues as a means of 'authentication of themselves as individuals and as community members'. While no longer able to maintain a presence by being physically 'out and about' in the community, these individuals nonetheless continued some level of interest in and engagement and exchange with community life through such efforts. Thus, these older individuals' leisure activities, even on a smaller scale, can be seen as having functions at both the level of the individual and the community.

The leisure pursuits identified by the interviewees as generating contributions to their neighbourhood or larger community can be subsumed under the categories of activities that Wiles and Jayasinha (2013: 94), in their study of older New Zealanders, have characterised as 'the varied and active ways older people are involved in and contribute to place'. These included a range of forms of volunteering, activism, advocacy on behalf of others and the nurturing of relationships with other community members, that Heley and Jones (2013) view as producing or maintaining community ties and rural community cohesion and identity.

This is highlighted by a woman in her sixties who described the deliberate effort that she and her husband had made to establish themselves in their new rural community where they had moved upon his retirement. Both keen lifelong gardeners, they had joined the local garden club to make social contacts through their shared leisure pastime, but the potential of their involvement to cultivate wider community capital can be seen in her following remark:

I chaired a garden club meeting yesterday and said 'Who would be prepared to take on keeping an ear to the ground and find out if anyone has had an accident or needs support or whatever?' You know people in a community do keep an ear and eye on what is going on with the rest of the people.

These 'bonding' and 'bridging' activities reflect the social capital perspective described in the introductory section of this paper, but which has to date only recently been explicitly applied in research on later-life leisure participation, and principally in relation to formal volunteering (Morrow-Howell *et al.*, 2014).

Discussion

The interviewees in our sample reported leisure participation consistent with the tenets of several theories related to leisure and ageing. The multiple subjective functions of leisure for the ageing individual are summarised by de Araujo and da Rocha (2019: 716) as providing ‘well-being, fun, social connectedness, identity (re)construction and learning’. Leisure in later life has similarly been characterised as affording opportunities for ‘being, becoming and belonging’ (Dupuis and Alzheimer, 2008: 91). These uses of leisure have typically been considered through the lenses of theories focusing on adaptation to ageing-related changes and losses, and the associated need to recover, reaffirm, express and extend important elements of social identity and personal agency in later life. At the same time, many of the leisure activities described by these older study participants are also compatible with theoretical perspectives related to human capital. For example, for many older men in particular, creating a structure to the day with a schedule of leisure pursuits that reinforced their sense of self-worth through accustomed roles and responsibilities was a means of providing continuity of identity after retirement. Their participation in various activities in the community also facilitated social networks and contributions of time, effort and skills, whether or not this was the principal aim of this use of their leisure time or would be described by the participants as meeting some understood threshold as ‘volunteering’. Thus, the accounts of many of these older adults clearly indicated the dual functions of their leisure activities at both the individual and the community levels.

Among leisure theorists the status of volunteering as ‘leisure’ (and *vice versa*) is contested with key questions revolving around the individual’s motivation for engaging in the activity and the extent of formality and obligations involved in the arrangement with beneficiaries (Nichols *et al.*, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2016). Nonetheless, the findings of this study provided numerous examples of older individuals participating in leisure pastimes that were undertaken for personal purposes but also simultaneously served to enhance community ties and social reciprocities. These activities ranged from formal, long-term involvement with charitable and other organisations and bodies, to more ‘episodic’ (Macduff, 1991) or looser forms of voluntary participation for community benefit (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003). Nichols *et al.* (2015) have noted the trend in leisure research which posits volunteering as a reflexive biographical process such that ‘present day volunteering is entrenched in the active (re-) design of individualized biographies, identities, and lifestyles’ (Hustinx *et al.*, 2010: 426, quoted in Nichols *et al.*, 2015). As such, the volunteering described by the interviewees in our study typically relates to both of these proposed individual- and community-level functions of leisure.

Increasingly, examples are emerging in the gerontological literature that highlight these dual functions. The qualitative study of Choi *et al.* (2018) on older women’s participation in senior softball teams in North Carolina (USA), for instance, identifies the twin functions of facilitating social connections and community-building both on and off the team. Although this research was framed by socioemotional selectivity theory focusing on the individual adaptive benefits offered through engagement in these activities, the study findings on the generation

of social networks highlight clear overlap with the social capital perspective on leisure. These findings serve to underscore Arai and Pedlar's (2003: 185) call for the need to move beyond individualism in leisure theory through developing a perspective that 'can provide spaces for the social self and civic engagement to emerge'. The emergence of this broader perspective is apparent, for example, in Sweeney and Zorotovich's (2020) study of the dual functions of leisure in a US retirement community described earlier in this paper that explicitly employs both micro- and meso-level theories.

Kleiber and Genoe further suggest these intertwined purposes of later-life leisure:

Civic engagement may play an important role in identity creation and maintenance for older adults. Having opportunities to volunteer or contribute to community in other ways may provide new or continuously meaningful roles that have an impact on older adults' identities. (Kleiber and Genoe, 2012: 56)

This view is supported by Wiles and Jayasinha's (2013) previously mentioned study of the contributions that older people make to their communities in an urban suburb and a rural setting in New Zealand. Their findings underscore the multiple subjective functions served by formal and informal discretionary time involvement and efforts of older individuals. These include enhanced self-worth, increased social connections and perceived sense of community belonging, as well as the belief 'that their activities increased social interaction and social cohesiveness in their communities' (Wiles and Jayasinha, 2013: 100), distinct indicators of social capital generation.

The present study likewise addresses the gap identified by Martinson and Minkler (2006) in understanding how civic engagement is experienced by older individuals. As they point out, not all older persons are similarly resourced, capable or inclined to take on formal volunteering or other roles associated with the 'productive ageing' ethos underlying the contemporary drive towards later-life civic engagement. Rather, as shown by the study by Yoshida *et al.* (2008) of the community involvement of older immigrants and refugees in diverse urban areas in the USA, this encompasses a range of forms including helping, giving, leading, influencing and participating that are often not recognised under the categories of 'volunteering' or 'community service'. In line with this broader perspective, our research advances an asset-based view of older people's discretionary time activities, through surfacing some of the more subtle contributions to rural community life made through their leisure pastimes.

The increased association between leisure and wellbeing across later life, with the influence of leisure occupation being greatest among the older old, has been demonstrated by Nimrod and Shrira (2016) using data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe. They point out the paradox that while leisure can be a potent resource for resilience in older age, increasing age brings a 'greater number of constraints to the beneficial use of leisure' (Nimrod and Shrira, 2016: 106), with many retirees needing assistance with maintaining leisure. As shown in the present study, the subjective benefits of leisure engagement are realised at a range of scales and through participation in formal and informal, group

and solo activities. The role of hobbies, for example, has been highlighted in analyses of Dutch national population survey data by Toepoel (2013) as a key pathway for social connectedness for older people – as well as for younger people. This finding is supported by the present study that affirms the perceived satisfactions and benefits of involvement with hobbies, some newly adopted or some pursued across an individual's lifetime. We also observed how these pursuits frequently functioned as avenues to create social links, exchanges and resources for the wider community.

Conclusion

Bringing together individual- and community-level theoretical perspectives on older adults' leisure participation has implications for ageing research, policy and practice. The findings of this study confirm the value of a range of psychosocial theories on ageing to explain well-recognised changes in individuals' leisure behaviour, leisure meanings and the life transitions that act to precipitate these changes in older age (Nimrod and Janke, 2012). They also illustrate the connectivity and contributions to the wider community engendered by older individuals' leisure involvement as increasingly conceptualised by social capital theory. In line with Warburton and Stirling's (2007) analysis of the combined strength of two theories – social capital theory and sociostructural resources theory – to explain study data on older persons' volunteering, the current study highlights the prospects of an expanded theoretical approach to more adequately capture the personal and group benefits of the functions of later-life leisure. It is proposed that the use of such a multi-theoretical perspective has the potential to add value to gerontological investigations on ageing and leisure that to date has been largely unrealised from single-theory perspectives.

The implications of such a wider theoretical lens for leisure practice (and policy) on older adults is suggested by Rod-Welch (2010: 63): 'Theory helps to guide leisure providers in their leisure programming for older adults as it is based on data which in turn improves the care of older adults'. For example, the contemporary drive to enlist older people's participation in volunteering as part of fostering societal capital would benefit from a recognition that their engagement can be supported in a variety of forms and scale appropriate to individuals' capacities and preferences. A combined theoretical perspective would serve to underpin leisure policy and practice supporting meaningful occupation that enhances later-life health, wellbeing and positive identity, and connects older individuals to the broader community through personally valued leisure activities and pastimes. Moreover, it would emphasise a strengths-based orientation to the functions of older people's discretionary time pursuits and their potential contributions to community capital ranging from informal neighbourly exchanges through more formal involvement of their time, skills and knowledge in community activities.

Although these conclusions are based on findings from older adults living in the community, their applicability to residential care settings is also suggested, *e.g.* by Wiersma and Dupuis' (2002) study of community-access recreation programmes for care home residents. The demonstrated potential for such programmes to maintain residents' identity, wellbeing, and connections and contributions to community – both within the residential facility and with the outside community

(Wiersma and Chesser, 2012) – is accommodated by the broader theoretical framing suggested by the current study. Policy makers and practitioners are therefore advised to consider how such an approach could be used to maximise their aims for realising the benefits of older persons' leisure participation.

An additional contribution of this work has been to indicate the value of a life-course perspective on leisure as employed in this study which highlighted the early origins and development of lifetime leisure interests among many older adults. This suggests, for example, the potential of intergenerational leisure programming engaging older adults and children or young persons around different leisure activities of mutual interest. One such initiative, as described by Becker and Zacharias (2013), illustrates a range of reciprocal benefits to older volunteers and children who participate. Moreover, intergenerational leisure programmes would provide significant opportunities for early education about the importance of our 'leisure lives' at all ages, and their relevance to personal wellbeing and community life.

Limitations of this research include that the lifecourse leisure narratives of the rural white British older persons in this study may not be reflective of older individuals living in other rural settings in the UK. Furthermore, the semi-structured questions that guided the personal leisure histories were designed to capture information about the types and extent of the interviewees' leisure engagement and influences on these activities across successive lifestages. The evidence for the dual functions of leisure activities was identified after reviewing the transcripts, and did not result from questions informed by the broader theoretical perspective that is the principal recommendation of this paper. Had the interview questions been derived from this expanded lens, the narratives might have yielded further detail and insight into the individual- and societal-level functions of older persons' leisure. Finally, this research was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which emerging studies have demonstrated has had a significant effect on older people's leisure and recreational activities (Rivera-Torres *et al.*, 2021). The applicability of this paper's findings to the post-COVID landscape of leisure in later life is a subject for future research.

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