Serious leisure and people with intellectual disabilities: benefits and opportunities

Ian Patterson & Shane Pegg

To cite this article: Ian Patterson & Shane Pegg (2009) Serious leisure and people with intellectual disabilities: benefits and opportunities, Leisure Studies, 28:4, 387-402, DOI: 10.1080/02614360903071688

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360903071688

Published online: 24 Sep 2009.
Serious leisure and people with intellectual disabilities: benefits and opportunities

Ian Patterson* and Shane Pegg

School of Tourism, the University of Queensland, Ipswich Campus, 4305 Queensland, Australia

(Received 15 December 2008; final version received 10 May 2009)

Can people with intellectual disabilities use serious leisure activities in a similar context to people without disabilities as a substitute for their paid work? In the past, western societies have tended to devalue people with disabilities, and as a consequence they were less likely to have valued social roles through paid work. However, for many people with disabilities, serious leisure should be valued as it encourages active participation in either formal group structures, or informal networks of devotees, for the sharing of common leisure interests as an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer. This study has used a qualitative methodology incorporating semi-structured interviews with a small purposive sample of adults with disabilities who were living independently in the community. They were selected as prospective respondents by key staff in several disability service agencies in Brisbane, Australia, because of their successful participation in community-based leisure activities that were classified as ‘serious’. The results of this study found that people with disabilities have the ability to participate in serious leisure activities and to successfully engage at such a level so as to enable them to develop increased levels of confidence, skills and self-esteem.

Keywords: serious leisure; people with disabilities; benefits; leisure skills; self-esteem

Introduction

In the past, western societies have tended to devalue people with disabilities and as a result, these individuals were less likely to be accepted and have valued social roles in their community (McGill, 1996). Negative stereotypes such as being regarded as: a dependent person, an object of charity, an object of ridicule and pity, a menace or an object of dread were commonly expressed in the literature of that time (Wolfensberger, 1986). This dominant view that people with disabilities were seen as helpless victims was based on their functional limitations, and as a result needed to be effectively excluded from mainstream society (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). This became known as the ‘functional limitations’ perspective on disability which supported the view that people with disabilities were a ‘problem’ and in need of ‘cure or care’ (Oliver, 1983). Strong advocates for the human rights of people with disabilities soon emerged. Bengt Nirje (1969) was credited with the first comprehensive definition of what is

*Email: ian.patterson@uq.edu.au
I. Patterson and S. Pegg

now known today as ‘Normalization’, and Wolf Wolfensberger spearheaded the Normalization reform movement in the USA, and then in Canada. In his writings, Wolfensberger was a strong critic of the devaluation of people with disabilities by society, and used a more positive term ‘Social Role Valorisation’ to describe how people with disabilities should be treated (Wolfensberger, 1983). In his seminal book ‘The Principle of Normalization in Human Services’ (1972), he argued that people with disabilities should be accorded positive, and not negative social roles and life conditions that would help to increase their life skills and competencies.

However, for the majority of people with intellectual disabilities, this change in status and role has not effectively occurred, with many still being placed into a dependent and negatively devalued role by society. This constant rejection has served to discourage people with intellectual disabilities and for many it has resulted in a consequential detachment from the labour market as most have not been able to find work in open employment (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). As such, economic rationalists have argued that people with disabilities have been a continual financial drain on society’s resources and, because many are reliant on some form of government support, they need to be regarded as non-contributing citizens (Dirita, Parameter, & Stancliffe, 2008).

To add insult to injury, many people with disabilities have had to spend an inordinate amount of time concentrating on their basic survival needs, such as determining their accommodation requirements based on their level of independence, as well as constantly employing care support staff who ‘continually come and go’ in their lives. This constant shifting of relationships and life changes has resulted in feelings of enormous instability and insecurity (McGill, 1996). Because of the emphasis of public policy on providing for basic survival needs, government and community-based services have generally ignored the provision of leisure in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. However, a lower perceived life satisfaction rating among older people with intellectual disabilities has been associated with unfulfilled leisure preferences (Hawkins, 1993).

This situation has occurred despite the fact that a number of leisure researchers have found that leisure is as an important part of the lives of all people, with or without disabilities (Pegg & Compton, 2004; Stumbo & Pegg, 2004). Several studies in particular have shown that leisure and sporting experiences contribute to the quality of life of people with disabilities, helping to make their lives more bearable, relieving tensions, and building and maintaining relationships with family and friends (Dattilo, 2002; Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). McGill (1996) further stated that leisure helps to describe how people view themselves, ‘… through our leisure involvements we have gained a stronger sense of who we are and have strengthened our sense of belonging’ (p. 7).

Leisure has been widely recognised as playing an important means of enhancing an individual’s quality of life, helping to make life more bearable, to relieve tensions, increase self-esteem, enhance physical health and fitness; provide enhanced opportunities for learning, skill development, risk taking, to reduce the risk of illness, and to build and maintain social relationships and networks (Aitchison, 2003; Dattilo, 1994; Driver et al., 1991; Galambos, Lee, Rahn, & Williams, 1994; Prescott, 1994). Supporting such a notion, Shank, Coyle, Boyd, and Kinney (1996) believe that recreation, leisure and play will enhance the quality of life as well as to ‘… improve and maintain physical and psychological health and well-being of people with disabilities’ (p. 190).
A definition of intellectual disability
At present, there is considerable confusion in this area, often as a result of the variety of terms used to refer to intellectual disability. However, people with an intellectual disability are generally referred to as having significantly lower than average intellectual ability and deficits in social and adaptive functioning. That is, limitations in such areas as communication, social, daily living or movement skills. Three commonly used clinical definitions of intellectual disability have been proposed by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the American Psychiatric Association (DSM III-R) and the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR). Intellectual disability, or mental retardation as it is often known, as defined by these organisations refers to:

A condition of arrested or incomplete development of the mind, which is especially characterised by impairment of skills manifested during the developmental period, which contribute to the overall level of intelligence, i.e. cognitive, language, motor and social abilities. (World Health Organization, 1992)

Significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, accompanied by significant deficits or impairments in adaptive functioning, with onset before the age of 18. (DSM III-R, 1987)

Substantial limitations in present functioning. It is characterised by significantly subaverage intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with related limitations in two or more of the following applicable adaptive skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work. Mental retardation manifests before age 18. (AAMR, 1992)

In summary, intellectual disability has been characterised by evident limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive conduct, the latter expressed as it relates to conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills.

Aims of the study
The aim of this study is to investigate whether serious leisure activities provide opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to practice, or gain training in work skills in a non-threatening and enjoyable environment. In addition, we will explore the importance of serious leisure in developing the competencies of people with intellectual disabilities, so as to provide them with similar benefits that are achieved through open employment. That is to develop social networks and to meet new friends, increase levels of self-esteem and to gain respect and self-pride.

Work and people with disabilities
As the result of a number of humanistic changes over the last 20 years that have recognised an individual’s dignity and worth, governments in most western countries have legislated to enforce the rights of people with disabilities to open employment as part of a broader suite of Human Rights Reforms. For example, in Australia, the Disability Services Act and the Disability Discrimination Act (1992); and in the USA, the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004) and the Workplace Investment Act supported the inclusion of people with disabilities into meaningful employment (Smits, 2004). In England, ‘Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century White Paper’ was
influential in emphasising the need to place people with disabilities at the centre of planning services so as to improve their quality of life (Department of Health, 2001). In the introduction, ‘Valuing People’ begins by stating that, ‘People with learning disabilities are among the most vulnerable and socially excluded in our society. Very few have jobs, live in their own homes or have choice over who cares for them’ (p. 2). In recent years, the British National Service Framework has supported this ideology, and has continually advocated for the importance of employment as the best strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion among all disadvantaged groups of working age, such as people with disabilities (Lock, Jordan, Bryan, & Maxim, 2005).

However, in many countries this workplace legislation has been problematic, often creating a schism between the government’s attempt to improve opportunities, and what has actually occurred in practice. In Canada, for example, politicians have frequently advocated the need for reduced, rather than increased levels of funding for people with disabilities based on the justification that these individuals need to find their own personal support networks to solve such problems as poverty and unemployment (Chouinard & Crooks, 2005).

For all the ‘toing and froing’ on such issues, there is little doubt that the opportunity to work and be paid a fair wage is important for the dignity and self-worth of all people. However, in reality, paid employment for people with disabilities as a proportion of the wider community is not increasing, and in Australia, for example, it has been estimated that only 53.2% of people with a disability participate in the workforce, compared to 80.6% of those without a disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). In the UK, there is an estimated 6.6 million ‘long term’ people with disabilities of working age (Woolnough, 2001), whom are seven times more likely than their non-disabled counterparts to be unemployed and claiming welfare benefits (Weston, 2002).

Aitchison (2003) argued that one alternative to this worrying trend is the option to consider leisure activities as a possible substitute for paid employment for people with intellectual disabilities. In presenting this argument, Aitchison took the view that non-work was often the norm for many people with severe impairments, resulting in, ‘leisure taking on a greater significance as a potential vehicle through which to enhance self esteem’ (2003, p. 956). Therefore, if people with disabilities are continually denied access to the open workplace, alternative approaches such as placing greater emphasis and funding on the provision of leisure experiences need to be more seriously investigated by policy-makers and practitioners alike.

Casual leisure and people with disabilities
Leisure has been classified as either casual or serious (Stebbins, 1982, 1992). Stebbins (1996, p. 5) defined casual leisure as, ‘immediate intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training for its enjoyment’. For example, casual forms of leisure usually involve people going to see their favourite football team, watch television, or talk with their friends. Serious leisure on the other hand is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3)

In the past, the majority of leisure programmes that were mainly offered in institutional settings for people with intellectual disabilities have been based around
engagement in casual rather than serious leisure. This was because of the unfounded belief that people with disabilities did not have the necessary skills and competencies to develop more positive and meaningful leisure identities (McGill, 1996). Zijlstra and Vlaskamp (2005) interviewed 160 people with profound intellectual disabilities (PIMD) in seven residential facilities in the Netherlands over a one-month time period in 2003. Although the results were not readily generalisable because of the research methods used, the study found nevertheless, that these individuals only spent four hours or less in leisure activities per weekend and for the most part, these activities were passive in nature such as watching television or lying on a waterbed. The researchers concluded that leisure time for people with profound intellectual disabilities consisted to a large degree of ‘killing’ time, instead of enjoying ‘quality’ time.

In another study (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005) investigated the leisure and recreation activities of a cohort of 34 students aged 16 years and older, who were attending a special secondary school for students with mild intellectual disability. The students and their parents identified that their leisure activities were mainly solitary and passive in nature. The researchers further concluded that the school focused on a ‘skill deficit model’ or on the limitations of having a disability, rather than what the students could do.

This has been referred to as the discourse of ‘sameness’ that has been implemented by many community-based agencies to help conceal the diversity or differences that exist within the group (Fullagar & Owler, 1998). As a result, all people participated in the same leisure activity, went on the same outing, ate the same food and were deliberately segregated from the rest of society. The tendency of care staff was to identify the disability first and the person second, and as a result people with intellectual disabilities often felt as though they were lacking, were not normal and considered to be less valued as human beings. Such treatment more often than not created feelings of:

… low self-worth which was often manifest in a huge variety of negative behaviours, from a lack of motivation to, to overt dependence on staff, and repeated instances of aggression or passivity … such people became ‘behaviour problems’ that needed to be ‘modified’. (Fullagar & Owler, 1998, pp. 445–446)

This form of segregation has resulted in many people with disabilities being kept at the earliest, or exploration stage of their leisure identity development and worse still, many have been restricted to this level for their entire lives. This was because there was little recognition of the need to encourage people with disabilities to experience the full range of leisure experiences over an extended period of time.

**Serious leisure and people with disabilities**

Stebbins (1982, 1992) used the term ‘serious leisure’ to describe the activities of a small segment of people who become increasingly involved in different types of leisure. Despite not making a living from them, these activities tend to become ‘central life interests’. That is, those parts of a person’s total life in which they invest a large amount of energy in positive physical, intellectual and emotional states (Dubin, 1992). While undertaking a review of people’s leisure engagement, Stebbins concluded that amateurism, hobbyist pursuits and/or career volunteering are central life interests that are so powerful they can rival work as a central life
interest. The consequence for some is that they launch themselves on a, ‘career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience’ (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3).

Importantly, serious leisure has also been suggested as a purposeful means of helping people with disabilities to regain, or indeed to re-establish positive feelings of dignity and self-esteem and to contribute to their social inclusion in community settings (Patterson, 1996, 2000, 2001). Patterson (1996, 2000) forged a direct link between disability and serious leisure by explaining how the latter can serve as a non-paying substitute for work for people whose disabilities force them into unemployment. In serious leisure, he observed, these people can find many of the same positive benefits they once found in their jobs. Patterson (2001) further argued that we must build our leisure education programmes for people with intellectual disabilities around serious leisure activities.

Several other researchers (Aitchison, 2003; Kleiber, 1996; Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1998) have contended that the beneficial qualities of serious leisure may have a greater flow-on effect on people with disabilities than other identifiable groups within the community. Based on his research on people with spinal cord injuries, Kleiber (1996, p. 13) suggested that serious leisure activities could become an important element in the rehabilitation process for people with disabilities by, ‘… reconnecting with the self that was temporarily “lost” or in setting a new direction for a new self’. Roker et al. (1998) highlighted the contribution that young people with disabilities made to their communities by focusing on their participation in volunteering and campaigning. The researchers concluded that these experiences were very positive for each individual, and identified a number of benefits. These included an increased level of self-confidence, a growing sense of agency, an improvement in personal and social skills, an increased social network, an increased sense of structure and the development of practical and work skills.

Therefore, it can be hypothesised that for many people with disabilities who have large amounts of free time at their disposal, their engagement in serious leisure activities can have similar outcomes to those achieved through involvement in work-like activities. That is, serious leisure activities are challenging and generally valued, as well as providing a well-defined status system and a new set of colleagues. In addition, serious leisure pursuits have been found to encourage formal groups of devotees, as well as informal networks through which all people can share their common interests. This in itself is of importance as Bedini (2000) noted the social acceptance for individuals with disabilities is crucial when participating in inclusive leisure experiences, and concluded that the leisure context was extremely important when overcoming negative attitudes and stigmas.

Stebbins (2000) suggested that people with disabilities who seek to develop their serious leisure experiences need greater assistance than others, as they may never have been exposed to these types of serious leisure activities, nor do they have the confidence to participate in complex and challenging activities in the early stages (Niyazi, 1996). Thus, this study seeks to explore these issues in greater detail.

**Methods**

**Sample selection**

A number of community-based agencies that specialise in leisure support programmes for people with disabilities in Brisbane, Australia, were approached by
the first author to provide access to any suitable clients that they knew of, who participate in serious leisure activities, and were willing to be interviewed for the purposes of the study. Three of the agencies provided the names and contact details of several clients with disabilities who were interested. In all, a total of 10 clients who were in the mild and moderate range of intellectual disability were interviewed in relation to their participation in a serious leisure activity. Mild intellectual disability refers to individuals with IQ in the range 50–70, who can acquire practical skills and functional reading and arithmetic abilities with special education, and who can be guided towards social conformity. Moderate intellectual disability refers to individuals with IQ in the range 35–49, who can learn simple communication, elementary health and safety habits, and simple manual skills, but cannot progress in functional reading or arithmetic (World Health Organization, ICIDH Classification of Intellectual Impairments, 1992).

Written permission to be interviewed was obtained from the client or his or her parents, and the interviews were conducted in the client’s home, or at a supported leisure agency. To protect the client’s anonymity, actual names were not used in this study, with pseudonyms being allocated to report the results.

Difficulties in interviewing people with intellectual disabilities

Malik, Ashton-Schaeffer, and Kleiber (1991) concluded that very few people with intellectual disabilities have the reading and writing skills to complete a questionnaire by themselves. In spite of this, Atkinson (1983) was one of the first researchers to demonstrate that people with an intellectual disability can contribute to research and are quite capable of being interviewed and to comment on their lifestyle. Sigelman et al. (1983) reported that interviews are a potentially viable method of data collection among people with a mild to moderate disability, even though some limitations still exist. Finlay and Lyons (2001) reviewed a number of methodological issues with the interviewing process for people with intellectual disability, and offered several suggestions to help overcome some of the difficulties described. Based on their recommendations, a semi-structured interview schedule that included a number of open-ended questions was designed to guide the interviewing process. In addition, the subjects who were selected for this study were diagnosed by the staff from the community agency as having mild to moderate levels of intellectual disability, and as a result, were found to have the ability to understand the questions and to communicate answers to the researcher.

The interview schedule was pilot-tested with three individuals with intellectual disability to ensure that the questions were easy to understand. After undertaking this process, several individuals stated that they had difficulty answering questions related to temporal concepts such as ‘How long have you participated in the activity?’ Questions related to time or that required a judgment of frequency or degree have been found to be problematic for many people with disabilities (Malik et al., 1991; Dattilo, Hoge, & Malley, 1996). As a result, feedback from parents when ascertaining significant events in the participants’ lives was used as a means of helping to more accurately document details of time, frequency and duration of involvement in serious leisure activities. This was a methodology that has also been suggested by Booth and Booth (1994).

Before the interview process began, two respondents admitted that they had reading problems and were slow learners, two were diagnosed with mild epilepsy and one
person reported that he had a hearing problem. One person with a disability stuttered and because of this, the interviewer slowed down his delivery of the questions in an effort to allow the respondent more time to consider the question that was posed and then to wait for a reply. Overall, all respondents were found to have adequate communication skills and to understood the questions that were asked.

**Construction of the interview schedule**

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to collect the data for this study. This versatile and flexible method is essentially a two-way conversation between an interviewer and a respondent (Mason, 2002; Zikmund, 2003). Importantly, ‘the interview guide provides topics or subject areas so the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will clarify and illuminate that particular subject’ (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002, p. 185). A total of 20 open-ended questions were developed with each based on the serious leisure concept as outlined by Stebbins (1992). These questions were designed to be simple in structure and easy to understand. They inquired about when the person first became interested in the leisure activity; who helped the person to become interested in the activity; when did the activity start to become important to them; how long had the person participated in the activity; how often did the person do the activity; had the person make any new friends or acquaintances from the activity; whether the person now belonged to a formal group or association; did the person meet regularly with other group members; what problems or barriers were faced in continuing the activity; what did the person enjoy most about the activity; and had the person set any goals for the future.

**Analysis of data**

The interviews generally took between 20 and 30 minutes to complete, with brief answers from respondents being the norm. Interview responses were recorded verbatim by the principal researcher directly onto the interview schedule, as generally the responses were only relatively brief and saturation was soon reached in regard to the data that were collected. In terms of analysing the raw data collected for the purposes of this study, an inductive analysis strategy was considered to be the most appropriate means due to the fact that patterns, themes and categories, ‘... emerge out of the data rather than being decided prior to data collection and analysis’ (Quinn-Patton, 1987, p. 150). Particular steps that were used involved looking for patterns, checking emergent themes, interrelating themes, interpreting the meaning of themes and providing quotes from the original data that support the themes (Creswell, 2008; Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002).

Throughout the analysis phase, a process of circular reduction was used to constantly return to the base data to ensure accuracy, and through this process, themes that emerged provided a deeper insight to help understand the issues being explored (Neuman, 2003). Henderson (1991) referred to this stage as the discovery and interpretation stage, as it was during this procedure that it was necessary for the researchers to seek out possible new classifications, develop concepts and search for patterns that would later enable domain construction. These categories, in turn, became, ‘the organizing tools which allow us to sort out the heap of bits to relevant characteristics’ (Dey, 1993, p. 40).
Discussion of results
A total of 10 people (six males, four females) with intellectual disabilities were inter-
viewed for the purposes of this study. Their ages ranged from 19 years to 57 years
with half of those interviewed being aged between 20 and 29 years.

Major themes that emerged
The five major themes that were identified from the data in this study were the impor-
tance of serious leisure; the positive benefits of serious leisure; making new friends;
joining a serious leisure association and volunteering as a serious leisure activity.

The importance of serious leisure
The level of engagement in the following leisure activities indicated the importance
that serious leisure played in the lives of these individuals. The majority of respondents
reported that they had participated in their activity for at least two years, with several
indicating engagement for up to 15 years. Many had been involved in her chosen
leisure activity for 15 years, whereas four had participated from 7 to 10 years, with a
further two for approximately two years, and one respondent for only 14 weeks. One
person in the study was unsure on this issue. The most committed participant was Nora
who stated that she trained three times a week for athletics, as well as attending three
gym sessions and two pool sessions over the same time frame. In addition, every morn-
ing she either went for a seven-kilometre walk or a five-kilometre run. Robert reported
that he played lawn bowls twice a week, while study participants that chose tennis,
guitar playing and ten-pin bowling practiced at least once a week. One respondent,
Peter, indicated that he could only afford to attend lessons once a fortnight for voice
training (singing) because it was too expensive to go weekly. He noted, however, that
if he had the financial means, he would attend on a more frequent basis.

The range of leisure activities was found to be quite diverse and with two
respondents participating in each of the following leisure activities – lawn bowls,
ten-pin bowling, track and field athletics, while one respondent participated in each of
the following – tennis, guitar playing, singing and volunteering. Seven of the 10
participants lived at home with their parents and siblings. Three older people lived
independently in community housing. Seven out of the 10 participants were
employed on a part-time basis. One person worked at a sheltered workshop while
the remainder worked on a part-time casual basis, ranging from 3 to 10 hours of
paid work a week in unskilled jobs such as cleaners, collecting trolleys, unpacking
vans, photocopying, etc. Of the three individuals who reported that they were unem-
ployed, two were undertaking volunteer work on a part-time basis in the community,
while the remaining female participant spent most of her time training at the elite
level of athletic competition.

The results of this study also show that being committed and having the ability to
persevere over a long period of time are important for each individual in terms of
developing the skills and abilities deemed necessary for achieving success in serious
leisure. McGill (1996) had previously argued that people with disabilities were not
seen as having the ability to persever so as to develop positive and meaningful leisure
identities. However, this study found that 5 of the 10 respondents (50%) had in fact
participated in their chosen sport and leisure activity for an extended period of time
(between 7 and 15 years), with one individual, Nora, representing her country at the
highest level possible which was deemed to be very important to her. Nora stated that athletics had taken the place of work in her life. Part of the reason for this was being because of the rigorous nature of the training schedule that she was engaged in. This demonstrates that when given the appropriate encouragement, people with intellectual disabilities have the necessary determination and perseverance to commit to serious leisure activities over an extended period of time.

The positive benefits of serious leisure

Both Judith and Robert commented that they loved the public acknowledgement of their successful involvement in serious leisure. Judith stated, ‘I enjoy winning and standing on the dais and getting a medal gives you the greatest lift and the whole crowd is there for you’. Bruce stated that he loved everything about playing the guitar as it made him feel really happy. Robert enjoyed the recognition he received from his success at lawn bowls and to look for his name in the local newspaper. He commented on the importance of, ‘The recognition as people read my name in the paper and Mum and Dad talk about it a lot. Bowls makes me feel really good about myself when I play well’. Peter is a 26-year-old man with a learning disability and mild epilepsy. He lives at home with his parents and one younger brother. He is passionate about pursuing a professional career in singing. He has been interested in singing ever since leaving school and has been singing as a hobby for seven years. He also pays for private singing lessons of 40 minutes duration once a fortnight. Singing quickly changed from being a casual to a serious leisure activity for him when his singing teacher asked him to join a community singing group ‘Studio 22’ that she organised. The group sings regularly at different retirement villages and nursing homes, and Peter often performs solo guest spots using a backing CD, and loves the opportunity presented from time-to-time by his involvement with this group to sing contemporary ballads. These serious leisure experiences have helped him to increase his self-confidence to the stage where he now wanted to sing in front of larger audiences. Peter also expressed the great pleasure he derives from hearing and seeing the reactions from the audience to his singing as he expresses:

I love the reaction of people when they hear me singing as it makes me excited inside. I enjoy doing it and being out there and giving people pleasure and happiness. Singing makes me feel good about myself because when I am out there I feel great.

Therefore, as argued by Devine and Lashua (2002), it is very important to gain people’s respect (recognition, feeling good about one-self, positive reactions) and derive a sense of personal pride (standing on a dais, receiving trophies and medals) through involvement in their serious leisure experience. In fact, social acceptance in the leisure context was found to be an extremely important motive for most respondents involved in this study. For example, Robert enjoyed the recognition of other people seeing his name in the paper for success in lawn bowls, while for others – winning, standing on the dais, and receiving a trophy, was seen as a source of great pride and accomplishment through their engagement in serious leisure. Aitchison (2003) is a strong advocate of the importance of leisure in the lives of people and its value in terms of increasing self-esteem, confidence and psychological well-being of people with disabilities in particular. This view was supported by Iso-Ahola, LaVerde, and Graefe (1988) who contended that successful leisure experiences
elevated an individual’s sense of competence and self-belief to a state which generally leads to significant increases in levels of self-esteem. A finding exemplified by one study respondent, Peter, who reported that he gained a stronger sense of ‘who he is’ through his singing and this had, in turn, strengthened his sense of personal worth and belonging (McGill, 1996).

**Making new friends**

All respondents stated that they had made at least one friend from their serious leisure activity. Several stated that they had made lots of friends, while Nora mentioned that she had met mainly able-bodied friends through athletics. One of the respondents in this study, Robert is a 42-year-old man with a moderate intellectual disability. His principal serious leisure interest is lawn bowls which he started playing 10 years ago in an open ability setting. He has progressed his involvement in the sport to the point where he has twice won the A Grade Singles; the Club Four’s and represented his club at State and District games. He stated that, ‘I love to play the game as it is not rough like football and [I] don’t get hurt’. He also stated that he liked playing lawn bowls because it requires a lot of patience and skill, and he loves meeting new people. Robert further expressed how success at sport had encouraged his successful inclusion with able-bodied people in lawn bowls:

> I had met a lot of people through lawn bowls who are aged in their 70’s and this has made a big difference to my confidence. My disability is not a problem to them and all the men talk to me normally.

Mary also discussed the importance of making friends through her sport when she said:

> I met a lovely a lot of people at the Masters Games in Dunedin, New Zealand. Unfortunately I can’t write back because of my poor spelling but people still call me from all over the world and it has opened up new avenues for me.

This quote illuminates that serious leisure has also been shown to help people with disabilities develop new social networks and to provide a direct conduit for making new friends and acquaintances. This supports the research findings of Prescott (1994) who stated that positive leisure experiences were important for the individual in that they provided opportunities for making new friends and for strengthening the bonds between friends and acquaintances. Mahon, Mactavish, and Bockstael (2000) also reported that family members and caregivers had suggested that the degree to which an individual with an intellectual disability had mastered social skills had, ‘… a tremendous impact on the extent to which an individual is socially integrated and the nature of the social integration’ (p. 34). Supporting such an argument, Robert’s mother stated that his enduring involvement in bowls had made a big difference to his self-confidence, as most members at the Bowls Club talked to him and accepted him as an equal, rather than focus on his disability and what constraints that brought with it. Thus, Robert’s success at lawn bowls had enabled him to become accepted by other able-bodied members of his club and this, in turn, had helped to increase self-confidence in other aspects of his life. Such an outcome is consistent with the view held by Dattilo (2002) who concluded that leisure builds and maintains friendly relationships for both people with, and without disabilities.
Joining a serious leisure association

Joining a leisure-based association was seen to be important for those interviewed in terms of establishing a sense of belonging and a network of friends. Most of the respondents stated that they had joined an association that was related to their specific leisure activity, and regularly received newsletters from their associations. Two others stated that they regularly read the notice board at their sporting club while only one participant who played the guitar had not joined an association as yet.

The advantages of belonging to an association were also evident from the study findings. Developing new interests through membership in respective associations gave them direct access to the association newsletters. This helped to educate people with intellectual disabilities through the reading of interesting articles, and gathering information about their favourite leisure or sport activity. Stebbins (1998) stressed the importance of the need to educate and/or train people with disabilities, so as to interest them in one or more serious leisure activities, and to begin the process of supporting them to participate and to achieve greater success in their preferred activity.

Volunteering as a serious leisure activity

Fiona is a 25-year-old woman with mild intellectual disability and autism, and was the only member of the sample group to choose volunteering as her serious leisure activity. She lived at home with her mother, and has worked as a volunteer at a large supermarket close to where she lives for the last two years. She became interested in volunteering when her Dad found an article in the local newspaper and encouraged her to apply at the local supermarket. This has involved mainly courtesy work in a booth at the entrance helping people with enquiries, sorting out problems and doing shopping for people with special needs. Fiona stated that volunteering had helped her to gain the necessary confidence to interact and deal with people in a work-like setting. She discussed the skills she has gained by working in a local supermarket:

I love getting to know lots of people; it has given me the confidence to talk to them and to help them find things at the supermarket. It is helped me to develop confidence to get a job. I have learnt to manage my time better, to be punctual to work, taking and giving instructions and showing people around the supermarket developed my confidence.

As this response suggests, Fiona felt that she had developed a number of diverse work skills through her voluntary position. These she considered included time management skills and punctuality, taking instructions, meeting people and then guiding them around the workplace. Her main goal for the future is to stay in her present role until a better position came along, with the hope of eventually gaining work as a florist. It was clear that Fiona was keen to use the skills she had developed in her volunteer capacity in a full-time paid work situation and that the volunteer experience had also given her the confidence needed to pursue this goal. In the interim, however, she had successfully applied for part-time paid position in a Real Estate Agency and now worked four afternoons a week as a general office help.

Ultimately, in the case of Fiona, her volunteer work at a large supermarket helped to provide her with the confidence to practice work skills necessary to gain part-time paid employment. This supports the findings of Roker et al. (1998) who concluded that volunteering and campaigning helped young people with disabilities to increase their self-confidence, personal and social skills, develop a social network, a sense of structure,
and to develop their practical and work skills. This line of argument was supported by
the findings of Miller et al. (2002) who found that the volunteer experience for many
people with disabilities resulted in greater pride, skill development, generalisation,
empowerment and increases in social interaction and professional development.

Conclusion
The results of this exploratory study have lent support to the theoretical propositions
that have been developed previously by Stebbins (2000) and Patterson (1996, 2000)
about the importance of serious leisure activities in the lives of people with disabili-
ties. This study has shown that serious leisure engagement has assisted a diverse group
of individuals with intellectual disability to gain the necessary confidence to commu-
nicate with a range of people, and to assist each of them to develop new skills that
provided them with a sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, dignity and pride which,
in turn, had facilitated their social inclusion in community settings.

Although many people with disabilities may never work in open employment, seri-
ous leisure has been shown to increase their social competencies and provided many
with similar individual benefits that can be achieved through open employment. Be-
because of these findings, government agencies need to be cognisant of the impor-
tance of serious leisure so as to develop policy and programmes that support the
employment of trained leisure educators to work in association with counsellors in a
range of rehabilitation settings.

Based on the findings from this study, the benefits of serious leisure for people
with disabilities can be summarised as providing a challenge and requiring commit-
ment that are valued by society; giving a range of positive benefits to the individual
similar to that derived from work; helping to create a positive role identity; generating
a formal and informal network of friends and colleagues; achieving something to be
proud of; and helping to achieve positive feelings of self-confidence. More and more,
people with disabilities are seeking out positive life experiences not grounded in some
level of dependency. To this end, serious leisure may be a suitable conduit for many
to develop the skills and confidence to engage in independent decision-making and
goal-setting activities that serve to improve their overall quality of life and, most
importantly, their own sense of self-worth. Stebbins (1992, p. 133) concluded by stat-
ing that serious leisure is an important antidote to, ‘… the dreary state of unemploy-
ment’. However, serious leisure demands consistent effort, devotion and the
occasional need to persevere that may be shunned by some people with disabilities as
being too difficult or time consuming. However, this study has documented the stories
of several people with intellectual disabilities who are successfully participating in
serious leisure pursuits in a variety of community recreation settings. Future studies
still need to be conducted with larger samples of people with intellectual disabilities
to hear their ‘stories’ and to verify the findings of this study. In this way, researchers
will be able to promote appropriate role models of people with intellectually disability
who have been socially as well as physically accepted and included in the community,
through their successful participation in serious leisure activities.

Notes on contributors
Ian Patterson is an associate professor in the School of Tourism, Faculty of Business,
Economics and Law at the University of Queensland. His research interests have centred on
the social-psychological needs of older people who undertake physical activity and adventure tourism programmes. He is also interested in researching the leisure needs of people with disability especially in regard to serious leisure. He is presently an editor of Annals of Leisure Research.

Shane Pegg is a senior lecturer in the School of Tourism, Faculty of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Queensland. He has an ongoing and active involvement in research related to the effective management of tourism events, satisfaction with volunteer engagement in community events, as well the investigation of the key motivators for engagement of young adults in sport tourism.

References


Chouinard, V., & Crooks, V.A. (2005). Because they have all the power and I have none!: State restructuring of income and employment support and disabled women’s lives in Ontario, Canada. Disability and Society, 20, 19–32.


I. Patterson and S. Pegg


Woollnough, R. (2001). They see the disability not the person. Guardian, November 26. www.guardian.co.uk/archive/article/0.4273.4307123.00.html

