Editorial: Leisure and Wellbeing

Louise Mansfield, Norma Daykin & Tess Kay

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Introduction

The aim of this special issue is to encourage critical theoretical and methodological reflection on the broad topic of leisure and wellbeing. Ideas about wellbeing have come to the fore in recent years, in complex academic, policy and cultural debates about conceptualising and measuring wellbeing as a way of monitoring social progress and guiding public policy, typically in advanced democracies of the world (Dolan et al., 2011). These debates draw on longer standing philosophical, sociological, psychological and economic perspectives on the good life (Vernon, 2014; O'Neill, 2006). Historically, wellbeing research has reflected two perspectives: the eudaimonic perspective, which emphasises positive psychological functioning and human flourishing, and the hedonic perspective emphasising happiness, positive affect and satisfaction with life. Yet, depending on which discipline or policy perspective is being taken there remain broad, overlapping and blurred definitions of wellbeing (Forgeard et al., 2011). While most contemporary research claims wellbeing is

multidimensional in character and associated with how well we feel we are doing as individuals, communities and societies, there is no single agreed definition. Wellbeing is variously linked to positive and negative affect, satisfaction with life, quality of life, happiness, personal growth and flourishing, capability, self-acceptance, positive relationships and autonomy (Dodge et al., 2012).

Wellbeing is a term used synonymously with a wide range of concepts including self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination, resilience, quality of life, mood enhancement, positive mental health, life satisfaction, and worthwhileness (Huppert, 2017). Alongside the contested conceptual and theoretical terrain of wellbeing is a diverse array of approaches and tools for measuring wellbeing, typically dominated by the use of various scales to elucidate the strength and value of constituent parts in a multidimensional framework. The wider developments in wellbeing theories and methods are reflected in identifiable theoretical and methodological trajectories in the broad scholarly field of leisure studies as well as in publications in the journal *Leisure Studies.* Far from being linear trajectories of academic thought, these directions have contested intellectual, social, political and economic tenets and implications. The multiple and contested meanings and measures of wellbeing are significant for a critical leisure studies academy seeking to articulate the complex socio-cultural, personal, political and policy relevance of leisure for wellbeing, as we illustrate below.

Theoretical and methodological trajectories on wellbeing in leisure studies

Scholars have long recognized the connections and potential relationships between leisure, and wellbeing, though in varied terminology. There is no scope in this paper to provide a full

review of literature on wellbeing and leisure, and others have done so in a rigorous and systematic way (e.g. Gibson, 2018; Niu et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is not our intention to provide a detailed account of scholarly work on the value of cultural activities in which leisure and perspectives on wellbeing can be positioned. The literature is vast, certainly worth exploring and provides excellent discussion of the problem of, for example, narrow political attention being paid to the instrumental value of cultural activities (e.g. for social and economic gain) at the expense of an understanding of the deeper (wellbeing) meanings of engagement for people's lives and identities (e.g. Holden, 2006). However, an overview of theoretical trajectories in the broad discipline of leisure studies provides some context about the academic traditions, current policy implications and potential future research connected to wellbeing and leisure. The distinct character of leisure studies, as an expansive assemblage of researchers engaging with leisure from a range of disciplinary and ontological perspectives, is reflected in the diverse ways in which wellbeing has been articulated, theorised and researched in the field. Broadly and historically, leisure has been viewed as an antidote to alienated labour and as a route towards a well lived life. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the potential for the extensive and eclectic range of leisure practices to evoke good feelings in people when they engage in them, the interplay between leisure and wellbeing has been variously expressed as life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, happiness, quality of life, wellness and as a whole host of positive emotional experiences (Gibson, 2018). Wellbeing then takes on different meanings in relation to diverse leisure forms and the contexts in which they take place (Daykin et al., 2017). The wellbeing connotations of leisure are a central point of debate in histories of leisure which have articulated the class and gender-based contestation in participation, provision and prohibition of leisure during the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Clarke and Critcher, 2016; Hargreaves, 2002). In more contemporary writings, issues of leisure and life satisfaction and quality of life have perhaps the longest tradition of

academic theorising since the 1970s. Overall evaluations of life (life satisfaction) have informed perspectives on leisure since Ray's (1979) study linking higher life satisfaction to leisure activity in older people. During the early 1980s leisure and meaning in life were connected with reference to quality of life by illustrations of the way leisure experiences evoke intrinsic positive feelings of motivation, enjoyment and freedom (Neulinger, 1982). Perspectives on psychological wellbeing and leisure emerged in the 1980s drawing on Ryff's (1989) framework for understanding wellbeing as personal growth, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, self-determination, and a sense of purpose in life. Additional and specific dimensions of wellbeing have been explored beyond these broad theoretical frameworks, including in studies of leisure and spiritual and emotional wellbeing (see Gibson, 2018). Most recent developments in wellbeing theory emerged during the 2000s to consider subjective wellbeing. Typically, it is Diener's (1994) definition of subjective wellbeing that is used to articulate that people evaluate their lives through cognitive appraisal of satisfaction in relation to the affect (pleasantness of mood/emotion) that such appraisals evoke. In this conceptual mode, leisure has been found variously to enhance mood and conjure a range of positive emotions (Niu et al., 2018). In policy terms, subjective wellbeing has been dominated by measures of happiness and life satisfaction; in the UK, for example, subjective wellbeing has been ascribed a particular multidimensional definition and measure, in the domain of personal wellbeing, referring to self-reported answers to questions about life satisfaction, happiness, worthwhileness and anxiety (Austin, 2016). These questions are asked in annual population surveys and used as a dominant indicator of wellbeing at national and local levels, including analysis of the contribution of leisure engagement to wellbeing (Hicks et al., 2013).

Developments in theories of wellbeing broadly, and in leisure studies specifically, reflect a parallel evolution of methods for measuring wellbeing. Such methods have followed a rather predictable pattern of measurement monopolised by the use of various self-report questions on items considered to represent the constituent parts of wellbeing and constructed into concomitant wellbeing scales. Such measures reflect established epistemological foundations in behavioural science aspects of gerontology, psychology, economics and political science that have dominated theoretical developments and recent monitoring of, and advocacy for, subjective wellbeing indicators to inform public policy which are becoming established by governments around the world (Oman and Taylor, 2018). Despite the capacity for secondary analysis of large scale datasets on wellbeing to make associations between wellbeing and any other reported measure on a survey, such methods are limited in offering robust evidence for advancing knowledge about leisure and wellbeing and informing public policy decisions in the leisure sectors. Such approaches to measuring wellbeing miss the crucially important situated character of the leisure experience – the context (Rojek, 2005; Pahl, 2003). Leisure forms and practices afford people wellbeing experiences created in time and space, and in connection with the cultural and physical environment and embodied and sensual experiences that characterise leisure. Answers to wellbeing questions which evaluate a past experience or predict a future one and which are correlated with data about leisure practices, or used in econometric modelling of the value of leisure to wellbeing, provide only a partial picture of the instrumental impact of leisure on wellbeing. Moreover, the established dominance of such measures can serve to reinforce existing positive assertions about selected cultural and leisure activities which have value for wellbeing and should receive investment (Oman and Taylor, 2018). The intrinsic wellbeing value of leisure really only materialises when experiential aspects are explored that account for the pleasures, purpose and meaning in leisure (Testoni et al., 2018). Such knowledge is more likely to be built through qualitative and mixed

methods approaches. For us, more diverse and creative methods are also central to informing an understanding of the interconnections between personal experience and complex and contested interrelationships and dynamics that shape the contribution of leisure to wellbeing.

Leisure Studies itself has a strong track record of publishing papers on leisure activities within different methodological traditions and highlighting multiple domains of wellbeing such as in fitness culture (e.g. Frew & Mcgillivray, 2005; Mansfield, 2011), sport (Gratton & Tice, 1989) and gardening (Bhatti & Church, 2000). The journal has also included focused studies illustrating the complexities and nuances of leisure and wellbeing such as explorations of leisure, retirement and life satisfaction (Nimrod, 2007), community gardening, social support, worthwhileness, and escapism (Kingsley et al., 2009), and wellbeing and social capital amongst middle and older age females (Son et al., 2010). Wellbeing has also been examined in relation to social conditions and experiences including locality and political and religious rallies (Murphy, 2003), work (Bryce and Haworth, 2002; Haworth, 2003), unemployment (Scanlan, Bundy, & Matthews, 2011) and rural living (Warner-Smith and Brown, 2002). In the cultural sector currently, research on wellbeing and leisure has begun to link cultural engagement with personal benefits as well as impacts on social groups and on wider society (Daykin, 2019; Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Fujiwara et al., 2014). Such work has explored a wide range of leisure-type activities including music and singing (Vella-Burrows, 2014, Daykin et al., 2016); museum attendance (Chatterjee et al. 2017; Fujiwara, 2013); and community participation in arts and sports (Renton et al. 2012; (Daykin et al., 2010; Mansfield et al., 2015, 2018, 2019, Fancourt & Steptoe, 2018).

The publication of John Haworth's (2003) collection on 'Leisure and Wellbeing' based on an invitational Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) seminar series on work, employment, leisure and wellbeing was perhaps a notable moment representing scholarly recognition of the significance of critical leisure studies to wellbeing theory and wellbeing policy in the UK. Haworth (2003) emphasized that while the relationship between leisure and positive or optimal experience was already an established field of enquiry, there had been little opportunity for debate about linking such research and policy agendas focused on the concept of wellbeing. The collection provided a forum for discussing a need for evaluative social science research on work, leisure and wellbeing to inform policy. It also emphasized the need to understand the processes and contexts relevant to the work-leisure relationship that could facilitate positive wellbeing for diverse individuals, communities and societies. Notably, Howarth (2003: 320) argued that "the concept of wellbeing needs 'unpacking'" and alongside a call for more rigorous studies of wellbeing in *Leisure Studies*, identified also "a need for more imaginative theorising on the nature of wellbeing". Such theoretical imaginations and their policy recognition were and remain largely dominated by psychological conceptualisations of wellbeing and also by a focus on subjective wellbeing. Since the publication of Haworth's (2003) special issue, and despite the more extensive critiques and debates about cultural value, a more critically focused leisure studies perspective has not fully emerged in contemporary academic and policy discussions of wellbeing despite the fact that leisure practices, the spaces and places in which they take place, and the complex social interactions that characterise them have significant implications for what we mean by wellbeing, how we measure or evaluate it and the implications of what we know about wellbeing for policy decisions about peoples' lives. Whilst limited in number, scope and global relevance, recent *Leisure Studies* articles have bought more critical theoretical perspectives to the wellbeing agenda examining, for example, happiness, freedom,

ritual and play in mass bike riding (Williams, 2018), positive emotions, meaningful social relationships and quality of life in amateur choral singing, and wellbeing enhancement through the development of a sense of belonging in migrant groups taking part in dance (Peperkamp, 2018) and football (Stone, 2018). Despite the contemporary and worldwide policy receptiveness and emerging research on leisure and wellbeing, theoretical understanding of such potentially interconnected and complementary intellectual and applied work remains underdeveloped. There is a need to understand more fully the relationships between leisure and wellbeing, including the underlying processes and mechanisms that shape personal and societal impacts and the political and policy implications of a critical leisure studies-informed approach to wellbeing theories, personal experiences and policy goals. The intention of this special issue is to respond to this need and the collection reflects the potential of diverse perspectives for doing so.

To date, much of the evidence base for policy and decision making about wellbeing has been informed by the methods and theories of behavioural science and quantitative research. There is limited high-quality research on leisure and wellbeing that draws on the social sciences to build knowledge about the rich, diverse and complex wellbeing experiences associated with leisure activities. Research studies have tended to focus on positive outcomes of cultural participation, rather than the complex and nuanced, sometimes negative, aspects of leisure. The circumstances that frame people's engagement with leisure, their experiences, leisure pursuits and preferences can all help to explain wellbeing, or the lack of it. Wellbeing, in turn, can influence our opportunities, activities, engagement and our ability to benefit from leisure in our everyday lives. So, the conclusions we reach about the impact of leisure, about who is doing well and badly through engagement, in which circumstances and to what extent, depend on our understandings of the social dynamics of leisure as well as how we define, measure and evaluate wellbeing in leisure contexts. This special issue provides an

opportunity for scholars to engage in critical dialogue about leisure and wellbeing and to consider the contribution of research to national and local policy and practice objectives focused on promoting wellbeing in which leisure is, or might be, a central feature, including in public health and social care, communities and housing, education, the environment, work, international development, (social) justice, and culture, media and sport. This is timely in light of the international policy attention being paid to wellbeing, in research and knowledge exchange initiatives such as the World Happiness Report (https://worldhappiness.report/) and increasing worldwide attention to wellbeing policy and funding Governments around the world. A critical leisure studies research agenda on wellbeing is judicious and germane in emerging deliberations about the cultural diversity of the meaning and making of wellbeing and debates about appropriate and efficacious methods for making sense of wellbeing, identifying wellbeing policy goals and allocating wellbeing budgets worldwide.

About this special issue on leisure and wellbeing

In this special issue we include eleven articles from a variety of disciplinary foundations that engage in critical examinations of leisure and wellbeing and variously inform the ongoing theoretical and methodological discussions we have outlined above. The papers selected cover issues and reflect debate on conceptualising, measuring and experiencing wellbeing in leisure, ensuring a critical focus on the politics of wellbeing as well as drawing in international perspectives. Our contributors discuss issues connected to subjective wellbeing in leisure policy and practice, focusing on themes such as identity, leisure, happiness, spirituality, difference, and cultural diversity in the leisure sphere. There are nine research articles representing diverse empirical approaches to advancing knowledge about wellbeing and leisure. We also include two research notes or shorter discussion pieces drawing attention to theoretical, methodological and conceptual ideas on leisure and wellbeing.

Susan **Oman** (2019) leads the collection in a critical discussion of subjective wellbeing for policy making in the UK. She discusses the selection of evidence for policy making about wellbeing, suggesting that quantitative statistical evidence still dominates analysis and policy decisions despite the availability of qualitative evidence, such as the 34, 000 free text responses to Office of National Statistics surveys on wellbeing, representing what people think about their wellbeing in the UK. One consequence of this, for Oman, is that the significance of leisure to peoples' wellbeing is side-lined or completely ignored. She argues that leisure is more important to peoples' wellbeing than is articulated in UK ONS reporting, Parliamentary debate and the media because of the influence of 'selective traditions' in the evidence-base, policy response and representation of wellbeing in UK politics.

As well as addressing methodology and the relationship between evidence and policy, the special issues is concerned with contemporary theoretical deliberations about wellbeing in leisure contexts. To this end, **Houge-Mackenzie and Hodges**' (2019) study of adventure recreation offers a conceptual framework for understanding how adventure promotes eudaimonic aspects of subjective wellbeing, drawing on psychological models and theories. The authors propose that adventure satisfies multiple and overlapping psychological needs for autonomy, competence, relatedness and beneficence, and the significance of this type of meaning-making has policy and practice implications beyond adventure recreation for schooling, public health and urban and rural planning.

Three papers in the collection focus in different ways on population groups who represent unheard voices in wellbeing research, and illustrate the diversity and complexity of the relationships between identity, leisure practices and wellbeing; issues we have argued are central to understanding the leisure-wellbeing nexus. **Cook** (2019) presents a case study of

the role of urban woodlands and forests in enhancing wellbeing in people living with dementia. Based in Scotland (UK), the small-scale interview study illustrates the potential for active use of woodlands and forest settings in the implementation of meaningful activity serving to create feelings of self-worth, autonomy and positive identity through sensory experiences in nature. Such activities offer an alternative to traditional day care services and potentially provide a place for wellbeing enhancement not afforded in such established service provision for those living with dementia. In her study of everyday leisure for women in Turkey, **Demirbas** (2019) interrogates the dominant (English) language conceptualisation of leisure, at the same time illustrating its gendered dimensions and connections of women's wellbeing. For her, the focus on leisure as 'free time activities' is limited in understanding women's leisure lives in Turkey. The women in her study engage with leisure in a somewhat different ontological sphere in practices that are not simply undertaken in 'free time' but are embedded in everyday life. These women experience leisure in overlapping modes including in relief from boredom, as sites for recuperation, pleasure and self-fulfilment and thus as routes to enhanced subjective wellbeing. Informing debates about how we understand leisure and wellbeing, Demirbas argues for more sociologically and qualitatively informed research on wellbeing that will allow better understanding of local meaning(s) and practices of leisure for wellbeing within everyday cultural processes that can also be relevant in a global perspective.

For **Cain, Isvandity and Lakhahi** (2019), participatory music-making within communities from immigrant backgrounds in Brisbane, Australia embraces a way of life that is shared intergenerationally and has wellbeing benefits. Hence positive social, emotional, and mental wellbeing experiences were reported by participants, reflecting both hedonic and eudemonic definitions of wellbeing linked with participation in traditional music leisure practices. For

these authors, whilst music-making may include increased longing for home prompted by emotional memories, and feelings of separation and despair, the dominant feeling evoked through taking part was that of a deep sense of personal meaning as well as a sense of belonging and connection to a minority cultural group. Again, the significance of examining and presenting the deeper meaning of leisure in peoples' lives is writ large in Cain et al's work.

The idea of cultural difference and diversity in wellbeing and leisure perspectives is central to the scholarship in this special issue. **Wheaton, Waiti, Cosgriff and Burrows** (2019) offer a critical exploration of the extant literature on wellbeing and coastal bluespace, emphasising difference and diversity in experience according to the intersections of space/place, ethnicity, culture and socio-economic status. Challenging Eurocentric interpretations of wellbeing and bluespace the authors bring a Maori worldview to their discussion and illustrate the significance of their multicultural research team for understanding the complexities of wellbeing and coastal spaces. In **Fox and McDermott's** (2019) analysis of wellbeing in a Hawaiian cultural context, the traditional Native Hawaiian text, the Kumulipo provides the central point of discussion for rethinking culture, wellbeing and Western leisure practices. Avoiding a simplistic comparison between Western and subaltern perspectives on leisure and wellbeing the authors argue there is an alternative worldview of wellbeing in Hawaiian culture defined by the indigenous conceptualisations about relationship between healing, wellness, strength, sovereignty, kinship and the oceans and the shore. Relational and place-based lived-experience are central to wellbeing in Hawaiian culture and shape wellbeing experiences of pleasure, tranquillity, relaxation, care, voyaging and restoration. Such culturally centred understandings reflect a need to consider wellbeing in a dynamic pluriverse of concepts. This requires an open dialogue in advancing knowledge about the place and

status of leisure in different community and cultural contexts. Exploring experiences and understandings of happiness and leisure in China, **Liu and Da** (2019) use drawings made by college students to represent when, where, why and with whom they feel happy and in relation to which activities. Illustrating the value of using a more creative method for exploring wellbeing than has been considered in established methodological trajectories, the study reveals that students' happiest moments are closely related to leisure time, leisure space and leisure practices. Furthermore, relaxation, tranquillity, achievement, autonomy, relatedness and interest are identified as significant mechanisms bringing happiness through leisure for Chinese students. Yet our collection does not exclude studies using more established methods in wellbeing research and indeed we are not denying the importance of such methodological approaches. In this vein, **Kono, Ito and Gui** (2019) analyse data from a cross-sectional survey conducted in Japan and Canada to examine relationships between serious leisure participation and eudaimonic wellbeing focusing on meaning in life. In the Japanese respondents who were committed to taking part in leisure pursuits there was a significant positive effect of these on meaning in life, mediated through a sense of perseverance, personal effort and the promotion of a strong sense of individuality. The notion of serious leisure connected participants with a sense of a life worth living, *ikigai* in Japanese. Cross national differences were found in the study in relation to serious leisure and meaning in life. For the Canadian respondents, there was a perception that the level of effort required for serious leisure may increase self-criticism and may therefore not enhance wellbeing and positive self-identity.

The two research notes in our special issue provide brief critical commentaries on conceptual and methodological approaches to understanding leisure and wellbeing. **Heitzman** (2019) brings together and explores two decades of research on leisure and spiritual wellbeing in a

review that discusses varying conceptualisations, and measurements in the extant literature and equally diverse research findings. Heitzman brings to the fore the complex relationships between leisure and spiritual wellbeing highlighting that leisure practices can both enhance and detract from a positive spiritual wellbeing experience. A future research agenda for leisure and spiritual wellbeing is suggested to include more clearly defined conceptualisations, and a balance of quantitative and qualitative approaches to knowledge production. **Hartman, Barcelona, Trauntvein and Hall** (2019) illustrate how psychosocial factors predict leisure time physical activity of university students in the USA. Their analysis of survey data found that planning, prioritisation and autonomy are positively associated with leisure time physical activity and wellbeing. Barriers such as access to facilities, time, finances and resources, as well as beliefs, including academically-orientated views of personal growth, can limit or negatively connect leisure time physical activity with wellbeing. The authors argue that university health promotion policies need to focus on student wellbeing through the development of a culture of learning and growth which is not limited to academic and professional skills and knowledge but is inclusive of a lifelong strategy for physical activity and wellbeing in the student population.

The significance of critical leisure studies to wellbeing

While researchers, scholars and policy makers increasingly recognise the importance of leisure for wellbeing, the debates and decision making has focused on theories and methods from behavioural science and quantitative evidence generation. Less attention has been paid to in-depth qualitative studies or mixed methods and multidisciplinary approaches to developing theoretical and methodological frameworks for understanding the connections between leisure and wellbeing. The papers in this issue adopt a wide range of methodologies

and draw on diverse social science approaches to offer rich data about complex wellbeing experiences in many different leisure contexts and with reference to an array of leisure practices. They also offer critical theoretical and methodological reflection, indicating directions for future research in this emergent field. This is timely because, however defined or culturally embedded, leisure provides exceptionally diverse opportunities for people to engage in preferred activities or lived experiences that are meaningful and enjoyable to them. These activities can be undertaken individually or collectively, and they can be contemplative and restful as well as invigorating and sociable. Such variety endows leisure with special capacities to allow people to feel positive wellbeing through experiences that best suit their particular characteristics, circumstances and life stage. Yet this very breadth also poses challenges for both understanding leisure and wellbeing and developing knowledge about what forms of leisure can contribute to wellbeing for whom and in what circumstances. Notwithstanding significant and ongoing debates about the conceptualisation of leisure, this collection of papers on leisure and wellbeing reminds us of the importance of critically exploring the complex and negotiated meaning, place and status of leisure in peoples' everyday lives. Questions remain about the ways that diversity, social context and leisure intertwine to potentially affect the fundamental nature of wellbeing in terms of how it is constructed and deconstructed, how much or how little wellbeing people have and especially the issue of wellbeing for people living in difficult, often impoverished, circumstances in which wellbeing may not exist at all or even be a priority or in which wellbeing is gained through potentially harmful, dangerous or illegal leisure practices. Such critical issues reinforce the challenge of ensuring that the international momentum behind recognising, valuing, measuring and promoting wellbeing does not impose overly homogeneous approaches in our attempts to advance our understanding of leisure and wellbeing.

Leisure studies scholars who adopt critical perspectives are well placed to advance knowledge of wellbeing through critical engagement with methodological and theoretical issues and with attention to rigorous high-quality empirical work. Further research is needed to understand the personal and collective processes and mechanisms through which improvements in wellbeing may occur through leisure and under which circumstances leisure contributes a destructive influence on wellbeing. This will increase understanding about how diverse leisure domains can address wellbeing inequalities, inform policy and decision making, promote opportunities and maximise access to positive wellbeing experiences for diverse groups of people living in different local and global circumstances across the life course.

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