Participant Observation in the Recreation Setting

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Participant observation of the social-psychological context for sport-group membership is reported as a non-intrusive way to examine an hypothesis that group members' behaviors toward each other would be inconsistent with their espoused purposes of positive social relations. The research plan defined membership parameters, characteristic phenomena, and models of social systems, balancing subjective and objective perspectives. Data, including participant and direct observations, personal accounts, and attendance records were analyzed. The group experience was not inconsistent with the purpose of demonstrating friendship and other humanistic values. Participant observation was useful for studying this context of recreation participation and could be valuable in leisure study related to lifecycle, family, and peer-group concepts and in developing grounded theory associated with freedom, expressiveness, meaning and motivation in leisure.

KEYWORDS: Competition-cooperation, field study, social system, sport group, subjective leisure experience.

Introduction

Interest in the significance of leisure research has been accompanied by recommendations to incorporate social factors as functions in examining leisure participatory decisions or outcomes (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Kelly, 1978b; 1983a; O'Leary, Field, & Schreuder, 1974; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975; Young & Smith, 1979). Receiving support is the notion of studying the social-psychological context of leisure (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Zuanek, 1982) as, for example, social roles (Kaplan, 1979; Kelly 1978a, 1983b; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975), as attitudes (Becker, 1978; Murphy, 1975), as values (Herberlein & Shelby, 1977; Johnston & Katz, 1957) as social group or network.

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may be seen as a useful application of ethnographic method in that the culture of the sport group can be revisited by others (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) through rational "elucidation of the intersubjective and contextual processes" (Rossi, 1983, p. 226) emergent in everyday activity. Findings about the subjective experience of recreational sport-group participation can contribute to social psychological theory testing and development in the field (Howe, 1984).

Application of participant observation. The participant observer method has already been utilized in such places as tourist locales (Buck, 1978), public houses (Smith, 1985), and parks (O'Leary, 1976) and in nightclubs, pool halls, and other settings where the recreation experience was incidental to the study. In particular, this is a plausible way to examine the phases of recreation experience (Hammit, 1980) or a model of recreation behavior (e.g., Driver, 1975), comparing conceptualizations across situations or time.

Since this is a method that is enhanced when information is acquired across a variety of settings (Geotz & LeCompte, 1984), its usefulness in lifestyle, family, and peer-group questions associated with leisure is implied. Application of participant observer methodology seems to be a reasonable way to broaden the database on the social implication of recreation and to begin to envision the recreational experience as the participant knows it.

Bias. Usually, bias is a major concern associated with participant observation. This includes bias of the researcher, especially as the role of participant develops; that of informants or others who maintain use of impermeable fronts or harbor deceptive purposes which may be unobserved by the researcher; and that of non-generalizable data which places strict limitations on conclusions to be made by the researcher (Donmoyer, 1985; Douglas, 1976; Naroll, 1962). A different way to understand bias, however, is to recall an explanation offered by Douglas (1976) who explained that the weaknes of bias inherent in controlled investigations was based on methods originating with the natural sciences which confine knowledge of human experience to the outward manifestations. Reason, he suggested, is the substance of experience; behavior, alone, is one of many possible forms that reason takes. He related the metaphor of the cave in which "Plato presented the ideas of people in everyday life as being like the shadows cast on the walls of a cave. We see the shadows, but cannot directly see the realities, the things which cast the shadows" (p. 22). Participant observation is a method in which the researcher seeks knowledge of both the outward manifestation and the insight of reason (Bryan, 1966).

Limitations. Numerous limitations can be cited in using the participant observer method, but they are not necessarily prohibitive. Even though this method provides data on only a small number of individuals, thus limiting the generalizability of findings, its principal contribution is in the fact that far more data are made available than would result from a survey or experimental study. The amount of data can be a disadvantage, overwhelming the investigator if sufficient and appropriate procedures are not employed.
to organize and reduce data from the start (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1984a, 1984b). Use of this method means that the researcher is the decision-maker throughout the entire investigation and is responsible for the quality of the data; there is no way to rely upon statistical significance and error estimates to lend credibility to results (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Distinguishing underlying themes, configurations, and relations to theory may not be easy at first, and they can appear to change due to the quality of emergence that surrounds participant observation (Bulmer, 1983a). Ethical consideration of the investigator’s role is also a concern because of the investigator’s influence on some social settings regardless of whether an overt or covert identity is used (Bulmer, 1983a).

Advantages. A number of points can be identified which make use of participant observation an attractive option. Most important, however, is the idea that it is an unobtrusive way to acquire information about recreation participation in its naturalistic setting and form. Wherever the researcher can go, the study can be conducted. This method works well in situations that are difficult to anticipate since success with it depends on the investigator’s ability to follow the situation, creating a structured and systematic process that corresponds to the setting being experienced (Denzin, 1978). Over time, different features of the analysis continue to evolve or mature as novel interpretations emerge from the rich data resources or are prompted by consideration of new theoretical conceptualizations (Bulmer, 1983a). It is a method that can link into other studies by suggesting propositions to be studied and variables to examine, as well as draw from conclusions realized in a variety of philosophical, empirical, or cultural sources (Denzin, 1978). Perhaps its main worth to the field of practice is in the information derived for understanding how to conceptualize the effect of the intersubjective experiences in recreation for which there is no adequate evaluative structure.

The Problem Investigated

Recreation-league sports. Sport has been described as a microdrama of the American lifestyle (Cooley, 1902; Sage, 1978). Competitive activity is representation of, and experience in, the values and social system which, on a larger scale, typify this country (Kelly, 1982; Mead, 1934; Nixon, 1976; Sage, 1978). Leading the list of American values is success (Burns, 1976). In organized sport, success is usually identified with winning, and winning is the driving force that binds team members together as their common purpose (Nixon, 1976). However, unless the team is winning (Rosenfield, Stephan, & Lucken, 1981), highly competitive sports may actually mitigate against quality interpersonal behavior (Ellis, 1973;Iso-Ahola, 1980; Mead, 1934; C. W. Sherif, 1976). Stone (1984) focused on the “sharply organized social structures [of sports situations] which rarely permit the influence of interpersonal relationships” (p. 8). His observation was that the structure and strategy demanded for team performances superceded needs on a personal level so players were compelled to act out universally expected roles, sacrificing personal need for the good of the team. Kelly (1983b), too, identified possible limits on expression resulting from institutional roles inherent in socially structured experience. Based on small group experiments, Turner, Hogg, Turner, and Smith (1984) confirmed the notion that losers try harder, concluding that, in situations where group members had a high degree of choice about practice and were highly committed to the group, defeat only served to bind them closer together. To Turner et al., it seemed to be a case of justifying personal effort and interest by working harder to “pull together” for improved corporate performance and personal reputation. C. W. Sherif (1976) described various ways that frustration in goal-attainment caused restructuring of group beliefs, values, norms, or behaviors in order to avoid defeat. According to her, restructuring was associated with splintering of relations and lack-of-confidence in each other and the group. Thus, it is puzzling to consider why so many people return to the playing fields and courts if “having a good time” depends on competitive success.

Subject of the study. A local recreation-league softball team was selected as a source for studying firsthand why people play recreational, competitive sports. Preliminary investigation revealed that participating membership extended beyond the team proper and included eleven men and seven women who identified themselves as the “old timers” of the league. Their ages ranged from 26 to 49, a team average of at least eight years more than other teams in the league. The group was comprised of several small-business entrepreneurs and university faculty and staff, two skilled laborers, four graduate students, and three, educated but unemployed, mothers. During games, men were distinguished by field-centered player roles and women by gallery-centered supporter roles. At other times, members were not visibly grouped by gender. Children of group members were usually present at group functions but were not interacting members of the group. Throughout the eight-week playing season, this group gathered regularly for sport and social purposes, including practices, games, tournaments, planning meetings, after-game socials, and dinner.

Participant observer role. The participant observer’s objective was to become a functional group member, directly experiencing the social process and system controlling member behavior. Data useful to the study of sport-participation were the participant’s subjective experience, observational data, and interview responses which were recorded during the playing season.

Reasons for belonging. Persons reported belonging to this sport group for the fun of it—for the caring and good feelings shared. Only several members had been acquainted beforehand, but enough other persons with similar interests were located to organize the group. Together, these people espoused the purpose of demonstrating that they could express friendship as well as play the game of softball, according to its rules, in a way that represented a moral approach to life. It seemed odd to hear these sentiments.
coming from adults whose expected purposes for playing softball would have been proving themselves successful in competition.

Counterbalancing Stone's (1984) consideration of the institutional nature of sport situations were the apparent expressive purposes stated by group members. Maine (1984) elaborated Stone's analysis, explaining that the situation in which sport players actually interact is far more complex than the simplistic conditions which govern regulations and training. Judging by their avowed purpose, the group selected for study would not necessarily be fulfilling universal role expectations at the expense of personal need-satisfaction. Thus, the proposition was adopted that "distinct groups vary in purpose, composition, and structure as individuals vary" (Fuhriman, Drescher, & Burlingame, 1984, p. 430).

**Hypothesis.** Two levels of specificity were planned in this study. The first level, that of general purpose, was grounded in a research objective: to examine the feasibility of using participant observation as a field-study method in recreation research. Use of an objective such as this is proper in directing exploratory investigations. In reference to the particular setting being investigated, however, it was possible to formulate a specific hypothesis which would help focus research activity (see Geotz & LeCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1984a). Thus, it was hypothesized that an incongruence would be observed between group members' espoused theories of cooperative relationship and their actual behaviors toward each other. This was an examination of Argyris and Schon's (1980) thesis of effective practice in which they posited the idea that effectiveness in associations with others relates to the degree of correspondence that exists between what is stated as an intention or belief and what is actually done. Additional questions were expected to emerge during the process of being a participant observer that would provide a form of "abductive" or progressive inquiry (Denzin, 1978, p. 109), a value Becker (1970) and others (e.g., Campbell, 1970; Geotz & LeCompte, 1984) suggest for participant observation.

Following is a report of the study as a case in point. The methodology is first reported with a rationale for the research plan developed. Subsequent to the general information about the plan are details about conduct of the two-phase study. A section on findings and conclusions reports data about the social system and results of the study, and discussion about the implications of the investigation concludes the article.

**Method**

**The Research Plan**

**Organization.** The research plan was designed to incorporate Becker's (1970) four-part model: (1) defining parameters of the subject (in this case the group) being studied, (2) discovering characteristic phenomena, (3) creating models of social systems, and (4) systematically rechecking/revising models. Achieving the thesis of a well-structured participant observation study by adequate representation of both subjective and objective factors (Bruyn, 1966; Denzin, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c) served as the fundamental goal to be accomplished. To accommodate both the model of organization and the goal of balanced perspective, two essential phases were planned: subjective adequacy and objective adequacy.

**Participant observation.** During the season, participant observation included two game-nights every week (14 total) each followed by a group meeting and social gathering at a local restaurant; two weekend tournaments; and three player-hosted parties. Learning that members also frequented the sponsor's place of business and two other locations (a computer center and a library), provided added means for casual meetings. Since this was a community-sponsored recreation program, the investigator acted in the role of citizen with equal right to access (Bulmer, 1983b; Homan, 1980). By attending and participating in the style of female members, the participant observer engaged in the same environmental context which other members engaged.

**Data collection and internal validation.** Acquiring and verifying evidence involved participation in every group function, recording data immediately after a function, quoting members to the greatest extent possible in the written record to reduce chance of bias, and periodically reviewing findings with two confederates (one male and one female) who were group members and willing to keep the study confidential. The two informants were selected based on their having credible reputations (Becker, 1970; Geotz & LeCompte, 1984), being trusted friends (Douglas, 1976), and being central members of the group who ought to be well-informed (Campbell, 1970; Geotz & LeCompte, 1984). Scheduled meetings were held once a week with informants. The practice of meeting with them together and separately at alternate weeks was developed as a check on reliability. An added session was taken to verify the intersubjective experience: other members were called upon to confirm interpretations both during the study, through informal conversation, and at the end of the study when five members formally reviewed the documentation of their group experience (e.g., Bruyn, 1966; Douglas, 1976; C. W. Sherif, 1976).

**Data quality.** Small group research has been criticized because there often exists confusion about the unit of measurement (Burlingame, Fuhriman, & Drescher, 1984; Fuhriman, Drescher, & Burlingame, 1984) and ambiguity of variable concepts (Fuhriman, et al., 1984). In this study, participant observation methodology was implemented to inform the investigator about what was made significant by members in the process and the nature of the social system emerging from interaction. Three unit-levels were specified for observation and analysis (Burlingame et al., 1984), employing multiple methods of data acquisition. The individual or subjective level was assessed directly through the investigator-as-participant with recording of significant subjective and intersubjective events; the relational group was assessed as significant patterns, using observations of physical location and interaction networks to complement the diary record which journalistic report the flow of events; and the collective group was assessed as significant phenomena which included identification and interpretation of ritual, routine, and verbal and non-verbal symbols appearing in the diary and observational records. Unit analysis was performed separately then integrated as functions of interims data reduction and post-study analysis when the investigation was completed (Miles & Huberman, 1984a, 1984b).

**Reliability.** Reliability was approached through careful documentation of methods and decisions; repeated observations and field experience to ensure accuracy of methods; and documentation of the role of the participant-investigator and choice of relationship with, the informants (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

**Intersubjective reliability.** Examination of self-evidence met Spiegelberg's (1975)
criteria as a way of clarifying how “coherent patterns of intersubjective communication or experience and meaning” are intuited (Rossi, 1985, p. 85). Criteria included: multiple, direct observations, subjective accounts of informants and other members, and subjective evidence of consensus, not merely confirmation, with informants (Spiegler, 1979, p. 129).

**External validity.** Reducing limitations of selectivity and sample size was achieved by a multi-method approach which generated data that could be interpreted as representing the same concept in several ways. Use of multiple-methods accomplished a kind of conceptual triangulation to facilitate and validate concept discrimination and convergence where repeated evidence, similar findings, and supportive information from varied sources lends strength to convictions evolving during analysis (e.g., Campbell and Fiske, 1959; Denzin, 1978; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; C.W. Sherif, 1976).

**Definition of concepts.** Prior to implementing the research plan, concepts were defined, drawing from social-psychological literature to maintain concept clarity during interim and post-study analysis.

**Group:** “a social unit consisting of two or more individuals who have formed role and status relationships with one another and who have a set of values or norms applying to their behavior, at least in matters of consequence to their relationship” (C.W. Sherif, 1976, p. 82).

**Role:** “characteristic patterns of give-and-take among persons and the mutual expectations associated with them” (p. 83).

**Status:** “social power associated with members’ rank positions in the group” (p. 83).

**Social norm:** “customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, fashions, and all other criteria of conduct (which are standardized as a consequence of interaction)” (M. Sherif, 1972, p. 320).

**Member:** “one who competes for status and conforms to group customs” (C.W. Sherif, 1976, p. 89).

**Social system:** “consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to ‘optimization of gratification’ and whose relation to their situations, including to each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols” (Parsons, 1972, p. 170).

**Positive social relations:** “attraction ... grows into liking, affection, or love, which, if mutual, forms the bond relating ... one to another” (C.W. Sherif, 1976, p. 64).

**First Phase of the Investigation**

**Subjective adequacy.** The first phase entailed becoming a group member. By simply being there, the investigator “worn her way in” (Douglas, 1976, p. 168) in an “artless” fashion (Bulmer, 1983a, p. 197). Membership included experiencing subjectively the time, place, social circumstances, language, intimacy, and consensus as a member of the group, fundamental components of the subjective experience according to Bruyn (1966, pp. 180-185, 206-219).

**Developing style.** During this period, the researcher experienced the process of becoming a member of the sport group and devised systems to keep accurate records of data and how they were obtained. Bruyn (1966) emphasized the need to establish a structured approach in applying procedures and recording personal and observational data so the process could be replicated to determine reliability. Also im-

portant to Bruyn was success in characterizing the world being studied to reveal the contextual persona in a style that was shaped by being “at home” with the culture under study. Bruyn associated style with apprehension of meaning which broadened the sense that could be gained from systematic approaches alone.

**Field data.** Seldom were field notes recorded. Based on the idea that overt recording could affect subjects’ behavior (Douglas, 1976), the skill of recall for later recording was developed as an appropriate alternative strategy (Denzin, 1978). Data were recorded in a diary immediately following each function and reported such information as the time, conditions, sequence of activity, verbatim record of conversations to a large extent, patterns or breaks in patterns, apparent effects of time on the group, and the participants observer’s subjective experience (see Bruyn, 1966; Denzin, 1978). Completing each account required a minimum of four to five hours work.

**Subjective data.** A first-person narrative formed the main source of data record. This technique was helpful in revealing patterns, associations, meaning, and underlying concepts (Ramos, 1979). In the documentation process, member identities were retained [names changed to provide privacy] to portray the situation naturally (Stone, 1984), metaphors and analogies were employed to convey meaning subjectively (Bruyn, 1966), and episodes were recorded trying to “remain a scientist with the insights of a Shakespearean dramatist” (p. 253). Report-style in the first person has also been viewed as a means of “evoking the setting” for the reader (Douglas, 1976, p. 126) by using the language, ideas, and expressions of the subjects (p. 125). Garfinkel (1984) referred to a documentary method of interpretation which treated an actual occurrence as “a document of a pre-supposed underlying pattern derived from individual documentary evidences ... [of] what is known” (p. 78).

**Observational data.** Simple observation methods, time sampling and physical location observation, were combined in order to acquire, directly, objective data over which the investigator had no control (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). Meaning was not the chief expectation prompting use of these unobtrusive assessments, rather, patterns of behavior were sought (Webb et al., 1966). Repetition of physical location observations, or time-sampling (Denzin, 1978), was considered necessary to overcome the limitations of selective behavior that could be expected in single-setting observation (Webb et al., 1966). A workable system for standardizing observation technique and record keeping was developed out of trial and error experience to control the biases of tiredness, boredom, learning, or personal involvement that inheres with human observation (Webb et al., 1966). Observations were routinely and systematically conducted at each regularly scheduled league game without the knowledge of team members.

**Assessment of physical location** (see Denzin, 1978; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Webb et al., 1966) of group members occurred at two different times and was planned to create two different sets of records. The first set of observations was made in the fourth or fifth inning when the team was at bat. There were several strategies involved in selecting this time: it was often clear to members whether the team was winning or losing at this point in the game, player positions were less constrained at bat than when in the field; and, if either team had a ten-run lead in the fifth inning, the game would end, preventing later observations. Records indicated who sat or stood where, both at or near the bench and in the bleachers, noting members’ names on diagrams of the field and surrounding area. Comparisons were made with previous records and analyzed for emergent patterns (see Miles & Huberman, 1984a, 1984b).

The second set of observations focused on social interaction patterns which
were recorded while members walked from the playing field to an informally designated meeting point in the parking lot. The investigator positioned herself at the outer perimeter of the gathered group to observe who stood with whom and the nature of the messages shared during the brief planning session about where the group would gather to socialize. Interaction in deciding about social plans was brief, three to five minutes most of the time. Data were recorded in two ways. Names of members were recorded diagrammatically to show physical location in relation to other group members while decisions were made about social plans for the evening. Records were also kept as informal sociograms showing direction and intention of interaction. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) indicated that field investigators frequently develop systems of recording interaction data based on experience and the level of sophistication both needed and possible. Focusing on the communication performed (e.g., asking, informing, listening, representing) helped reveal the process for giving and gaining information (Faulk & Alexander, 1978) and patterns of interpersonal relationship that could translate for comparison to other situations.

Second Phase of the Investigation

Objective adequacy. After the participant role with the group had become regularized, balance was achieved between the subjective and the objective perspectives. In this phase, objectivity was gained by using existing social theory as a template against which to understand patterns, observing members in other social situations, and being conscious of errors that could lead to distorted interpretations (Bruyn, 1966). At this time it was essential to differentiate between the investigator’s feelings as a participant and the observations made as an investigator. Striving for balance and truth were constant parameters which guided every judgment.

Role of researcher-observer. Achieving a balanced perspective centered on the understanding that meaning in life is a prime mover that drives people to act (Klinger, 1977, p. 314). Meaning of this leisure experience, in the constitutive symbolic interaction sense, was a social construction without which communication, or any social collaboration, would be impossible (e.g., Denzin, 1984; Faulk & Alexander, 1978; Mead, 1934; Rossi, 1983). Therefore, it was necessary to pursue a phenomenism which maintained [sense change] that the observable is the ongoing reality of the sociological object” (Bulmer, 1983a, p. 183). In other words the researcher was to become socialized to the point that boundaries between “knower and known” no longer exist (p. 187). Bruyn (1966) required that the researcher “be able to study the culture on its own terms” (p. 123), describing the ideal objectivity as being that of the subject without bias of the scientist’s point of view, a true phenomenological knowledge.

Objective approaches. Data were extracted from secondary sources (Campbell, 1970; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; C. W. Sherif, 1976). Thus, attendance records, team-play statistics, and direct answers to questions were used as sources of information, too. These combined to provide a different kind of database, one intended to balance, in Bruyn’s (1966) terms, the more subjective oral history of the written diary and to complement the direct-observation record.

Data analysis. Analysis and interpretation focused on how social systems were constructed, roles were elaborated, and significant phenomena evolved. As per Bruyn’s (1966) system, data were frequently analyzed, searching for themes suggesting social-psychological or social theory that lent meaning to the feelings, words, or actions experienced by group members. While this approach can be judged as subjective, and therefore possibly biased, its worth has been declared as a justification for scientific procedure (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Howe, 1989), one which is enhanced when after repeated trials, a conclusion holds up (Becker, 1970; Bruyn, 1966; Miles & Huberman, 1984a).

A variety of methods were employed for summarizing data, locating patterns, tracing conceptual links, and adjusting or refocusing models. The acts of “comparing, contrasting, aggregating, and ordering constituted the processes” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 169) for on-going organization of the large amount of data produced (Bruyn, 1966; Miles & Huberman, 1984a, 1984b; Norris, 1981). Using methods such as these was a way of taking the mystery out of the interpretation process (Miles & Huberman, 1984a). To some extent this may be seen as “playing with the data,” but it was done to accomplish what Miles and Huberman called maintaining “skepticism” by trying to disconfirm earlier models (p. 216).

Findings and Conclusions

Findings reported here are limited to those which relate to demonstrating the participant observation method as a means of scientifically (Howe, 1985) producing a view of reality known to participants in recreation-league sport groups. The focus is mainly on the process of interaction and cognitive interpretation since it is by those means that reality both emerges for, and is known to, group members. Findings are reported about membership status, roles, development of significant phenomena and associated meanings, leadership systems and conclusions drawn.

Membership. Membership status in the group was a criterion for subjective adequacy in the participant role. Principal evidence was what the investigator and others were willing to go out of their ways to do or not do in order to be recognized as related to the group and experience positive social relations with other members. Being accepted and knowing when one is accepted required knowledge of what this group considered important.

“On the third evening of tagging along, I had my first indication of being judged to be part of the group. We were heading for the cars after the finish of the game when Vance, who had elected with Ellen, his wife, to host the group at their home that evening, approached me, head down. "Uhh, I’m sorry, we forgot to ask you to come over to our house tonight for the party. Uhh, I don’t even know what your name is. Well, anyway, I noticed you’ve been coming to our games and going over to the CEO [restaurant where the group usually gathered after games], so I, uhuh, we’d like you to come to our place tonight. . . . I mean if you haven’t got other plans.”

Until the invitation had been formally extended, the feeling of being an outsider prohibited all thought of following members into the privacy of Vance and Ellen’s home. Bulmer’s (1983a) notion of marginality or simply the wisdom of “employing [sense changed] the anonymous etiquette of public life” (p. 199) may have been associated with the inner feeling experienced, but the concept of social openings and barriers introduced by Goffman (1959) and referred to by Bruyn (1966) seemed to be a more accurate interpretation. There existed a system of formal structures used by the group to maintain control, limiting non- or marginal members’ access to events or information which was meant for members.
It was observed that members were persons who performed valued roles for the group (e.g., attended, played positions, cheered players on, acted as mentors to others, or were allowed to nurture others by providing for their personal or social needs). These persons experienced no obvious barriers; they seemed to be free to initiate ideas or conversation, express opinions that were designed to persuade the group, and physically lead others into some kind of action.

Persons with marginal status (such as Ernie, Lonny, Ginny, Fay, Lynne, Shirl, children of members, and the investigator at first) were more often called upon to provide information, had to wait to be invited to join the group for some events, were shown the way, were led but not accompanied, and seldom were important enough to be accommodated or to be listened to as conversation initiators.

With Vance’s invitation, the investigator observed the formality that existed and received acknowledgement that loyalty in attending games had made an impression. Following that incident, membership benefits and responsibilities such as the following accrued.

It was comforting tonight to have a seat saved at the CEO, to hear Bill’s greeting, “How ya doin’ lady?—Saved this seat riche for yououn’!” to see faces familiar with strangers, and to be enjoyed in the CEO, and to find that events in my life were remembered by Bill, Woody, and Beagle. It was satisfying to be able to respond by listening to Willie’s concerns about his relationship with Sharon, sharing the joking during Ed’s colorful review of game stats, and trying to be helpful to Ellen who is struggling with an increasingly dependent in-law.

Roles. Roles were not distinguishable at first. Being immersed in the group, naive to others’ expectations and unfamiliar with the significance of some of their activity and conversation, made the investigator-as-participant feel uneasy at first. Repeated contact and sincere interest suggested by Douglas (1976) gave the investigator opportunity to learn. Using a symbolic interaction interpretation: it was only after interacting with the others, in some cases repeatedly, that the investigator sensed what was expected for her and knew enough about others to expect certain things of them (e.g., Newcomb, 1972). Early diary comments indicated reactions to persons and conditions but not the ability to interact with others in any meaningful way.

I felt relaxed with several people tonight—it seemed alright to enjoy their company or respond in some friendly fashion. Others, however, make me feel ill at ease—almost as if they are examining me. Beagle and Jenny were especially distant, and so was Sandy. All I felt I could do was smile a little at them. Others didn’t even seem to notice me, and I felt the notice by Woody because of his accosting me in the parking lot after the first game. His startling statement and question: “I saw you writing while we were playing—What were you doing?” caught me off guard. He may still be considering that I might be a spy for another team. I really feel distrusted.

Significant phenomena. Later diary records contained evidence that the investigator understood implications of what was going on around her and had a sense of her obligation to the group. The social system was becoming knowable as expectations, beliefs, norms, and values in the minds of members and in the mind of the investigator. An example of understanding can be interpreted from the following account.

Things fell into place early tonight. The men and two of the children were engaged in their usual warm-up on the sidelines. Watching them, I imagined them setting the stage for a great illusion—like the Harlem Globetrotters whose casualness and joking only makes their ballplaying skill even more unexpected. I am beginning to wonder if our team hasn’t worked to develop the appearance of lackadaisical attitudes to throw the other teams off-guard.

In the bleachers, we discussed some of the festivities the men had started to observe. This conversation made it clear that the players were serious about their roles. It began as we laughed at Bear who held up the Dopey cup [water cup with Dopey dwaf decal the absence of which had cost us our only season loss] for us to see. Ellen then chuckled, swore us all to secrecy, and revealed that Vance had worn white tennis shorts the night of that loss, and, since then, he would wear only his ratty cutoffs. She said they were now so filthy they could stand up to bat without him. Jude chimed in with the observation that Angelo had his white handkerchief, but Ernie hadn’t worn his special pants. Someone else mentioned that every player had managed to wear the team tee shirt. We convinced ourselves that we were ready to win, especially when we won “home team” [designation] at the toss. There was a sense of unity tonight, one that we were displaying for ourselves and the world to admire like a strutting peacock proudly ruffling his plumed finery.

Goals. Goal orientation was established by discussion and negotiation. The primary goal was not only that of playing the league schedule of games, but also having fun playing them to the best of members’ abilities. Associated with the goal of playing and playing well was a goal of demonstrating ties with spouses and friends. Members also sought socializing opportunities, time they could spend with each other informally as a group, enjoying each other and sharing interests, especially softball.

Leadership. Goal-oriented leadership emerged during the first few evenings as people tried to find out what ought to be done and then how to do it. Adjustments were brought about by the influence of members who made suggestions or simply took over with others following their leads. Consideration of each person’s desires as they became known finally emerged into three primary goal-interests. Routines of leader and followership developed in response to goal-orientations that represented expressive and instrumental needs. As Rees and Segal report (1984), sport groups function in stressful conditions, and, depending on the formal status of members, certain leadership expectations are manifested to ensure team success. Structures of the leadership subsystem were clarified. Figure 1, using data acquired by integrating the observed patterns of physical location and interaction with abductive information derived about roles being performed. Whyte’s (1974) statement that the “position in the informal group means power to influence the actions of the group” (p. 242) seemed to be true as the structural relationships were analyzed.

Each sub-system functioned systematically to perform an expected set of tasks. For example, the Sport Sub-system was responsible for team organ-
**Figure 1.** Three Leadership Sub-Systems: Sport, Social, and Support, Showing Members in Role-Status Relationships.

Key:  
--- one-way communication  
↔️ shared communication  
↔️ bi-directional communication

A counterpart to the Sport Sub-system, the Support Sub-system was responsible for team support, such as activities like playing cards, watching games, and attending team meetings. Support was provided by members who were not part of the main team but were considered part of the larger community. Support was crucial for maintaining team spirit and providing a sense of camaraderie.

The Social Sub-system was responsible for organizing social events and activities, such as parties, dinners, and other social gatherings. Members of this sub-system were typically those who lived near the field and provided a place for team members to socialize outside of practice and games.

The Sport Sub-system, as the name suggests, was responsible for the actual sport of baseball. Members of this sub-system were the players themselves, along with the support staff like the coach and the manager. The Sport Sub-system was the heart of the team, determining the actual performance on the field.

The Support Sub-system, on the other hand, was the backbone of the team, providing the necessary support behind the scenes. Members of this sub-system were the ones who organized and ran the team's social events, as well as providing support to the players and the team as a whole.

Each sub-system was connected to the others through communication channels. One-way communication was used for sending information from one sub-system to another, while shared communication was used for双向交流。The Sport Sub-system was linked to the Social Sub-system through shared communication, allowing the team to plan and execute social events. Similarly, the Sport Sub-system was linked to the Support Sub-system through one-way communication, allowing the team to receive support from outside sources.

Overall, the three sub-systems worked together to create a cohesive team, with each sub-system playing a crucial role in the team's success.
and even supporters once in a while, were upset with their personal performance or an official's call during a game. What was witnessed was a momentary withdrawal from the group while the individual struggled to accept what had happened. Without fail, these periods of struggle were associated with a strong demonstration of support from group members, encouraging the person to forgiving and to rejoin the group. No one ever lacked this support, and some personal struggles with the philosophy of playing for fun were great as the team neared the end of the league season with a 13-1 record. It was concluded that there was no contradiction between what members espoused as their reasons for forming this sport group and how they behaved in private and in public with each other.

Players who erred or batted out were not castigated, nor were supporters, whose attention was so centered within the action on the field that they forgot themselves long enough to let loose usually restrained screams of agony or delight.

Meaning in sport-group membership. At the personal level, membership meant opportunity "to create friendship and—to love by a willingness to share [themselves] more completely." In addition, there was a group significance to membership. Members reported that "the game represented life;" it gave them a chance "to set the record straight—to do it right; to be a living example of how people should and can act with one another."

Conversations overheard replicated answers to questions: that members came to be with each other, to have fun. It seemed appropriate to believe that the activities engaged in by this sport group were a way of expressing relationship with others. This is a familiar sentiment in some conceptualizations of recreation usage (e.g., Burch, 1969; Check & Burch, 1976; Dot- tavo, O'Leary, & Ko, 1978; Gross, 1961; Kelly, 1982), and supports Kelly's (1983b) belief that the leisure experience facilitates relationships among people.

At the conclusion of the study, five members were requested to review the documentation of their group experience. However, out of respect to the trust given to the investigator as a member, findings were first shared with Woody who was looked upon as the protector of the group. With his assurance that the document would not violate the open trust shared by members, copies were provided to the other four readers during an end-of-season meeting. This was seen as a consideration due to the group, knowing they would have wanted it handled this way.

While there is no assurance that subjects will be as much or less honest, seeing the results of a study of themselves, than would be the case if they were simply subjects being queried by survey, the fact that all of the five reviewers reported they could find no fault with the analysis and findings was a way of lending support to the idea that the research method produced valid information (Douglas, 1976). In fact:

When he finished with his reading, Rod looked up, sighed deeply, and reported that he felt he "just relived the whole season, and, maybe better than if it had been in pictures." Then Judi smiled in her reflective way and added, "It was a good time, wasn't it? . . ."

Discussion

Motives for membership. Reasons for engaging in recreation-league sports can only be hypothesized due to the sample size of one and the accompanying setting limitations. Lack of support for the hypothesized finding that negative social relations would be observed through member behavior toward each other prompted questions about a range of psychological-topical purposes in sport participation. In particular, perhaps there is a contextual difference created among persons who engage in sport for social reasons versus that arising out of psychological needs not including social benefits as desired personal goals. Mead (1934) and others (e.g., Rossi, 1983) have defined the small group as the juncture of psychological and social.

It is the context in which an individual negotiates self-definition and understanding of the experienced environment that links the person to others. In the negotiation process, compromise is invited, yet little seems to be known about shared motives of group altruism or member egoism and how the recreative group process is experienced or facilitated.

Opportunity for freedom. Freedom and expressiveness were identified as constrained in some analyses of sport participation. Members of this sport group claimed feeling different from other groups in the league. While this may have been a statement reflecting a high degree of group solidarity, it may also have indicated a real difference in values. These members were serious about their commitment, a point discussed by Harrow (1984). They worked hard at maintaining their identity in conformity with their beliefs. Symbols of this were their downscale tee-shirts; failure only once to control an outburst against a felt misjudgment; maintaining the "no-sub" rule even when tournament competition was beyond their ability to win without added help; and, even after losing a game, every member went to the social gathering. Their complex design of Sport Subsystem leadership, unique set of norms and beliefs, and multiple goalettions with leadership sub-systems lead to inquiring whether expressive freedom exists, and is desired, generally among sport-groups. Self-constituive freedom in leisure is a subject of interest identified by Harper (1983), and, following Strauss' (1982) reasoning, to the extent that participants in the social worlds of sports are denied satisfaction of personal needs, perhaps sport sub-worlds are necessary outlets that have not been recognized for their social-psychological significance.

Meaningful memories. Meaning in life has been linked to attachment to things which are endowed with significance (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The memories of significant experiences created in the process of group activity may be collectibles in much the same way, but how the recreation experience relates to such a notion requires elaboration.

Effects of being with others. Composition of the recreative group has been measured principally in nominal grouping (friends, associates, family) with little information gained about the explanatory power of the interactive leisure experience on pre-group associations and relationships emergent in the group process and on other variables of consequence (Allen & Donnelly,
1983; Dottavio, O’Leary, & Koth, 1978). Membership also needs to be examined further from the perspective that, if the group extends beyond those persons who are obviously engaging in an activity, what is the effect within the group and in creating the group’s history.

Feasibility of using participant observer method. The participant observer method was found to be a feasible way to study social and social-psychological concepts associated with sport-group participation. A number of specific reasons led to this conclusion. For example, the reward of seeing concepts emerge in interaction and to continue to be dramatized was encouraging. The researcher felt reassured when explanatory interpretations held up over time as well as when interpretations appeared to be improved by more fit alternatives. It was the immediacy of feedback made possible in the direct experience that was valuable. Also of importance was the capability to adjust research activities to correspond to the emerging situation. The flexibility of the method lent itself to the experience of group process since changes in the group situation, whether due to maturation or to impinging events, prompted new questions or required altered application of planned methodology. The most worthwhile finding in regard to the methodology, however, was the fact that, when the data collection phase ended at the close of the playing season, many conclusions had been considered and verified. This was satisfying because final analysis was engaged in with greater confidence.

Not all aspects of the experience were considered beneficial at the time, however. The threat of a “blown cover” was particularly uncomfortable during the first few nights of being with the group. Also discomforting was the continual self-testing required of the investigator to ensure sincerity in the developing relationships and to determine the validity of objectives and subjectively achieved knowledge. It was not the acts of reflection that were difficult, but the feeling of responsibility to control bias which might occur at the personal level.

This was a time-consuming research method for the limited generalization possible. On-site involvement alone amounted to approximately 150 hours. This did not include data recording, meetings with informants and other group members, or time spent analyzing findings during the study period. It also does not reflect the time invested before and after the playing season which was comparable to that necessary for research in general. Conversely, the amount of data and field-tested insights that have been accumulated for this one group will provide bases for review and new interpretations that may be of assistance in extending this line of research. Valuable sensitization was accomplished by acquiring in-depth knowledge about the reality of a single recreation experience through the eyes of a single group of participants.

Approaching the reality of leisure experience. The knowledge made available from this type of approach is what Berger (1981) referred to as a microsociology of knowledge. It is naturalistically grounded interpretation (Denzin, 1984). In contrast to the abstracted information used in macro-sociology, its main value is in the opportunity to clarify social meanings through regularities observed in everyday experience (Rossi, 1983). There is no reason to believe from this study of sport-group experience that, as suggested by Howe (1984, 1985), the qualitative approach may bring leisure scholarship closer to knowing the meaning that is personally relevant in participation for some people.

References


Degree and Range of Recreation Specialization: Toward a Typology of Boating Related Activities

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This paper extends previous specialization research by using the concept to compare individuals who participate in different boating activities and sub-activities. Analyses were based on a statewide random survey of Maryland boaters. The sample was first differentiated into motor and sailboaters. Within each boating activity, three subactivities were identified and the following hierarchy proposed: dayboaters (least specialized activity), overnight cruisers and racers (most specialized activity). It was hypothesized that the overall degree of specialization would increase, while the range of specialization would decrease as one progressed through the hierarchy. The data generally followed the predicted pattern for degree of specialization. The highest mean scores on a specialization index were reported by sail racers, while the sail dayboaters and motor dayboaters reported the lowest average scores. Range of specialization was examined by comparing the standard deviations on the specialization index for motorboaters and sailboaters and for the three sub-activities. Results failed to support the predicted decrease in the length of the continuum.

Keywords: Boating subactivities, degree of specialization, range of specialization

Introduction

Recognizing the diversity of experience outcomes desired by recreationists, researchers have emphasized the importance of differentiating users into homogeneous and meaningful subgroups. Various typologies have been developed to classify participants who are engaged in different recreation activities (Brockler, 1969; London, Crandall, & Fitzibbons, 1977; Clark & Stankey, 1979), as well as those participating in a single activity (Hendee, Caton, Marlow, & Brocker, 1968; Stankey, 1974; Shelby, 1980). A typology that has the potential for examining both between- and within-activity differences is Bryan's (1979) concept of recreation specialization.

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