



A Message from the Journal Advisor: Culture and Leisure: Reflections from an Anthropologist

During the first half of the twentieth century several prominent anthropologists suggested that leisure might be a fertile arena for innovation and creativity. Bronislaw Malinowski (1931), for example, referred to leisure and recreation as “creative elements in culture” and suggested that “...the vanguard of progress is often found in works of leisure” (p. 643). Alfred L. Kroeber (1948) hypothesized that important inventions, such as the bicycle, the automobile, and perhaps even the bow and arrow, might have been developed in recreational contexts with their utilitarian qualities recognized only later. Roger Keesing (1960) described leisure as a context for cultural innovation and creativity. He claimed that the literature on cultural dynamics suggested that recreational behavior is “...notably open to innovation and cross-cultural transfer” (p. 131). Keesing urged anthropologists to engage in a systematic analysis of leisure and recreation because he felt that it would lead to important understandings of culture change.

Franz Boas, regarded by many as the founder of American anthropology (Holloway, 1997; Pinker, 2002), and V. Gordon Childe, a well-known British archaeologist, proposed an even more important role for leisure in the dynamics of culture. They believed that the shift from a food collecting way of life to the adoption of sedentary agriculture provided an increase in the food supply that, in turn, permitted increased leisure, a larger population, and the rise of craft specialization. Craft specialists could then use their increased leisure to develop tools that would improve agriculture and, therefore, provide even more food and leisure (Boas, 1940; Childe, 1951). Thus, leisure was critical to the process of cumulative cultural development. The “surplus theory” was important in anthropological thinking about cultural evolution from the 1930’s through the mid-1950. In the 1950’s and later, however, new evidence showed that food collectors typically have abundant free time, a generally dependable and nutritious diet, and that they rarely utilize leisure time for invention or creative activity. Indeed, cross-cultural comparative research suggests that any relationship between free time availability and culture change is weak, at best (Chick & Shen, 2011) and that people may alter their behavior patterns in order to maintain a relatively constant amount of unobligated time (Rubin, Flowers, & Gross, 1986).

The relationship of leisure to culture change and elaboration is one of two primary research orientations taken by anthropologists when they have engaged the

phenomenon. The other is to question if, and how, leisure may help people adapt to prevailing conditions in their particular ecological and social environments. Rubin, Flowers, and Gross (1986), for example, showed that members of four Amazonian horticulturalist and food gathering societies adjusted to prevailing ecological conditions by altering the active-passive dimension of their leisure. Specifically, members of the two groups in relatively poorer environments did not work more hours but, instead, spent more of their time in passive leisure, thereby decreasing their caloric needs. In more recent research, Reyes-Garca and her colleagues (2009) showed that social leisure has a positive association with subjective wellbeing, that is, happiness, among members of 13 Tsimane' hunter-farmer villages in the Bolivian Amazon. Solitary leisure, on the other hand, has either no, or a negative, association with subjective wellbeing.

The research cited above deals exclusively with the relationship of leisure to other aspects of culture. Leisure as a phenomenon, in and of itself, however, has attracted little direct attention from anthropologists. Indeed, anthropologists infrequently use the word "leisure" since many regard it as a manifestation of Western industrial society. Additionally, relatively few languages have single terms that translate more or less directly into English as "leisure" (Chick, 1998). In Mandarin, for example, the term *Xiu xian* has a meaning very similar to the English word *leisure*. However, it is composed of not one but two characters (休閒 in traditional Chinese) and may be a relatively recent addition to the lexicon although the concepts involved are ancient (Liu *et al.*, 2008). Circumlocutions, such as "free time" (e.g., *Freizeit* in German, *tempo libero* in Italian) are used in many languages while some appear to lack even the concept of leisure (Chick, 1998). However, anthropologists, linguists, and others have devoted little formal study to how leisure is either conceptualized or communicated in various languages.

Leisure clearly overlaps or is part of what anthropologists commonly term *expressive culture*: a category that includes art, music, festival, literature, dance, performance, play, games, sport, and other symbolic productions. Anthropologists have directed substantial research attention to expressive culture although most of it has been devoted to art in its various forms. Play, games, sport, and other recreations have attracted less, but still significant, interest. Indeed, in one of the earliest cross-cultural comparative studies, Tylor (1879) compared the Indian game of *pachisi* with the Aztec game *patolli* and, on the basis of superficial similarities between them, claimed that they provided evidence of contact between Asia and the new world.

Tylor was almost certainly wrong but one must only consider the rapid diffusion of soccer, rock and roll music, or Mickey Mouse to recognize that expressive forms can result in often explosive culture change. Kroeber (1944) reviewed historical instances of cultural florescence, that is, "the frequent habit of societies to develop their cultures to their highest levels spasmodically: especially in their intellectual and aesthetic aspects" (p. 5). These cultural florescences, according

to Kroeber, are often in expressive domains such as sculpture, painting, drama, literature, and music (he did not discuss leisure, specifically). While Kroeber regarded his monumental work as unsuccessful because he failed to find any universal patterns of cultural florescence, it nevertheless may be that expressive culture, including leisure, is a nexus for invention, innovation, and change. It would be wise, therefore, for anthropologists and others with interests in culture and creativity to heed Keesing's (1960) advice and engage leisure as a research subject.

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