**When leisure is a central value for elderly people: a reading from narrative research**

**Cuando el ocio es un valor central para las personas mayores: un análisis desde la investigación narrativa**

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**Abstract**

Through narrative research, this article analyses elderly people´s leisure in Spain, from the experiential paradigm and a ambination of sincronic and diachronic perspective, which seeks to know the evolution of leisure across lifespan and the impact of past leisure in the current leisure styles. The analysis of the particular case of a 71 years old woman, for whom leisure becomes a central element in her life after her widowhood, contributes to know the psychosocial factors and processes that make leisure a source of well-being and vital engagement among elderly people.

**Keywords**: Elderly people, leisure experiences, leisure in the life ciclye, narrative research, successful ageing.

**Resumen**

Este artículo analiza el ocio de las personas mayores en España a través de la investigación narrativa. Desde el paradigma del ocio experiencial y una perspectiva que combina una mirada sincrónica con la diacrónica, se busca conocer la evolución del ocio a lo largo de la vida y el impacto del ocio pasado en los estilos de ocio actuales de las personas mayores. El análisis del caso particular de una mujer de 71 años, para quien el ocio se convierte en un valor central en su vida tras la viudedad, contribuye a conocer los factores y procesos psicosociales que hacen del ocio una fuente de bienestar y compromiso vital para las personas mayores.

**Palabras clave**: Personas mayores, experiencias de ocio, ocio a lo largo de la vida, investigación narrativa, envejecimiento satisfactorio.

**INTRODUCTION**

Abundant literature highlights the importance of leisure during the later stages of life for its contribution to active and successful ageing. Some research highlights its relevance as a resilience factor in the face of traumatic life events (Jaumot-Pascual, Monteagudo, Kleiber, & Cuenca, 2018; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; López & Morata, 2015); others highlight its role as a promoter of physical and mental health, well-being and quality of life (Fernández-Ballesteros, Bustillos, Huici, & Ribera Casado, 2016; Rojo Pérez, & Fernández-Mayoralas, 2011). There are also numerous studies that highlight the potential of leisure as a dynamiser of the social world of older people and the importance of participatory processes to promote the inclusion of this group in social, political, economic, etc. life (Pinazo-Hernandis, 2011). (Pinazo-Hernandis, Torregrosa, Jiménez-Martí, & Blanco).

A contemporary understanding of leisure cannot ignore its experiential nature; in such a way that, if the aim is to discern what elements and/or processes make leisure an ally of successful ageing, it is unavoidable to know its particular value, the meanings it entails, the benefits it brings, the more or less central weight it acquires in comparison with other spheres of life, etc. All of this, from a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of leisure that is not satisfied with:

- a synchronic vision of it, without taking into account its dynamic nature, by virtue of which the past can be the key to understanding the present and both past and present are essential to understanding the leisure decisions adopted in the immediate future,

- an intrapersonal vision, which explores the person as the protagonist of the experience, but outside his or her social, socio-economic and cultural world, without a permanent dialogue with the environment, as well as with the agents and circumstances that shape it,

- a simplistic and unproblematic understanding of leisure, which does not recognise the differential role that this phenomenon can play in people's lives and, therefore, its impact on successful ageing, and which seeks to understand the leisure of older people, under the assumption that it is a homogeneous group and that all its leisure practices have the same attraction and provide the same benefits.

For this reason, this text delves into the reality of older people's leisure and their leisure itineraries in order to understand the dynamic evolution of leisure and its links with past and present life circumstances.

This study is part of a broader and more ambitious research project which, with a mixed methodological design, sought to understand the impact of leisure for older people (61-75 years old) living in Spain on their processes of satisfactory ageing, with the perception of well-being being one of the main indicators of this. Through the analysis of a particular case selected for this work, that of a 71-year-old woman who is part of the aforementioned research and for whom leisure is a central element in her current lifestyle, the aim is to provide answers to the following questions:

What factors make leisure central to older people's lives? Are all leisure experiences equally meaningful? Is there any relationship between current leisure and leisure history already experienced earlier in life? Is leisure an arena for resilience to ageing? A strategy to delay the impact or consequences of ageing? Can it be a way to resist stereotypes that pervade the social imaginary about what an older person can, should, will or should want to do with their leisure?

Given the experiential focus of this work and the need to explore new avenues of analysis to better understand leisure experiences within the life cycle framework, narrative research has been chosen as a method of study. For Connelly & Clandinin (1990, p. 6), narrative research is "the study of the ways in which human beings experience the world". It is a specific form of research, grounded in the qualitative paradigm, which is a process of gathering information through the narratives that people tell about their lives (Sparker & Devis, 2008). Narratives have a dual nature, personal and social, as constructs that take shape through interactions between people, based on existing narratives in a culture (Sparker & Devis, 2008). Hence, studying a person's leisure allows us to understand not only the meanings and personal narratives constructed around leisure, but also the social traces that lie in these narratives. In short, it means recognising that subjectivity always involves an unavoidable social dimension.

**METHOD**

***Participants***

This article is based on the results obtained in the qualitative phase of the general study mentioned above. More specifically, from one of the interviews conducted with a total of 20 people, including Blanca, the protagonist of this work. Blanca's case is paradigmatic for several reasons. Firstly, because leisure is an essential pillar of her current lifestyle, with one particularly significant activity standing out in her wide repertoire: writing poetry; secondly, her story allows, like a good puzzle, to identify and bring together central elements in her leisure history that could have a notable weight in the understanding of her leisure in later stages of life; thirdly, widowhood constitutes in Blanca's life a turning point, which recalls the impact already demonstrated in previous research (Jaumot-Pascual, Monteagudo, Kleiber & Cuenca, 2018) of certain life events (widowhood) on the leisure of older people.

*Research technique: the semi-structured in-depth interview*

Aware that leisure experiences are socialised through active constructions of meanings that give value and coherence to "that which shapes the experience", the interviews seek to achieve a "deep understanding of the different cases studied, shedding some light on a problem" (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark and Morales, 2007, p. 239).

The questions focus on the description of the most meaningful leisure practices, the experiences and benefits they bring, the changes experienced in their participation in major life events, the evolution of their meaningful activities throughout their lives, the contribution of meaningful leisure and their current repertoire to their satisfaction with leisure and life, the relationship of their leisure to other aspects of their lives and the social world linked to leisure.

***Procedure***

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers involved. The data collection process took place over a six-month period during the qualitative phase, while the estimated interview time ranged between 60 and 90 minutes. Most of the interviews were conducted in places chosen by the interviewees (Retiree´s Homes[[1]](#footnote-1), cafés or at home). In Blanca’s case, the interview lasted around 90 minutes and was conducted at the Retiree's Home, where she carries out management tasks.

***Data analysis***

The analysis of information gathered from interviews is organised around three clearly differentiated moments. Firstly, individual narratives are drawn up. In this phase, the interviews are transcribed and the key issues, the main theme and main tensions emerging from the area under consideration identified. The provisional texts are drafted in which the narratives are re-written and reinterpreted, based on the words of the actual people interviewed. Secondly, the texts are revised followed by category identification, taking into account both the questions to which the study seeks to find answers and also the key issues detected previously which are now are associated with the thematic categories created. This is when any thematic links between cases are identified and any specific issues or problems detected – these must be properly contextualised. Thirdly, the review phase of the individual narratives and the interpretations given by researchers on the part of the individuals interviewed gets underway. This is, therefore, the phase in which feedback and approval by the protagonists is gathered, and from this moment onwards, the definitive report is then, drafted as the fruits of the work undertaken during previous phases and in which the capacity for narrative research to deal with the objectives set out is explained.

**RESULTS**

Blanca is 71 years old at the time of the interview and lives in a municipality in the metropolitan area of Bilbao (Basque Country, Spain). Widowed for many years, with children and grandchildren, she carries out many voluntary tasks, some of them in positions of responsibility. She currently enjoys a wide range of leisure activities. However, among her activities, Blanca highlights writing, and more specifically, poetry, as her most valued and significant practice.

From the beginning of the conversation, she exudes a vitality, enthusiasm and desire to make the most of the opportunities that life offers her during this late stage of her life. She constantly underlines this eagerness to do everything that she was unable to do in previous periods and contextualises to justify it a childhood, lived during the Spanish civil war and characterised by the scarcity of resources and opportunities in all areas of life. A restless personality from an early age, Blanca remembers with nostalgia the few times her father could take her to see plays. Reading books was also an incipient practice, as desirable as it was unusual in her childhood.

The obligation to work marked her childhood, but especially Blanca's youth and adult life. Married when she was still very young, she enjoyed an initial period in which her life, her timetable and tasks revolved around those of her husband. During this period, still without children or daughters and without work, reading became her main ally, but she soon began her training and dedication to sewing. Sewing became her main activity and her home her living space of reference. With the arrival of her children, she was forced to combine her role as wife, mother and dressmaker for years, until, for health reasons, she had to abandon sewing as a livelihood. She started some activities to combat the inactivity to which she was not accustomed. It was then, while still relatively young, that her husband died.

Widowhood was a turning point in Blanca's life. The loss of her husband forced her to take the reins, rethink things and organise herself differently, seeking, as a first step, to spend as little time at home as possible.

"If I stay at home, what am I doing here? Dead? Dead alive! I have to prepare something".

In this circumstance, she decides to change her life and start a new one:

"Blanca, you have lived one life up to this point. Now you're going to start a new one. And I did. I started another life again.

In this new scenario, someone she knew told her that there was a centre in her area, a home for retired people, which was looking to renew its Board with volunteers. Without giving it much thought, she took on the management of the Pensioners' Home and dedicated herself to this task for thirteen consecutive years, combining this work with other activities, such as a choir, volunteering in various NGOs, etc.). It is in this context, under the shelter of the activities that she herself promotes at the Centre for the elderly (theatre performances, cultural competitions, etc.), that she recovers her forgotten interest in theatre, acting and, above all, discovers her passion for writing. Writing poetry became an essential part of his life. He feels that it fulfils him and gives meaning to his life.

"I'm in bed. I turn off the light and the sentences come to me by themselves. I turn the light on again and I write. I can't sleep, and I go on, another sentence comes to me... So, the last thing I've done, I did it in one night".

Writing is a source of satisfaction for Blanca, which allows her to be happy in many moments. She recognises that what she writes is not important; however, she believes that this does not detract from the value of her poetry. She feels that for her it is something relevant and that it makes her feel that she is "worth something". Nor has her lack of education been an insurmountable limitation. With the support of her children and grandchildren, she refines her poetry, for which, at the time of the interview, she had already received several prizes. These prizes are very important to Blanca, as they give her enormous satisfaction and ratify her merits. Her passion for writing also brings her a pleasant feeling of improvement, self-improvement and the desire to continue learning, which for her is one of the keys that gives meaning to her existence.

"I remember that I was very shy when I was a child. At school, I had to answer the teachers because I was shy. How is it possible that my life has changed so much for me? I don't know ... but I am a different person. That's why I say that life is school".

She stresses that she is an ambitious woman, in terms of knowledge: "I want to know more than I can"; "training is good until the end of your life because you always have something to learn". She also reveals that she has a knack for leadership, an ability that has been very useful in her work at the Pensioners' Centre. She is not afraid of making decisions, nor is she afraid of talking to public institutions when it comes to requesting answers to meet the needs of the elderly. Nor does it shy away from the challenge of creativity. Quite the opposite, in fact. Blanca finds in the Centre a space and an opportunity to give free rein to her imagination and creativity. However, Blanca remarks that her leisure time, what she really "does for herself" is writing poetry. An action hardly comparable to anything else she does and without which she would feel frankly "sad and empty".

She is deeply satisfied with the new life she has managed to forge, after her widowhood, characterised by autonomy and the possibility of doing what she really wants to do.

“He encontrado otra historia, otra vida; me he hecho otra vida. En la vida, … me ha tocado estar sola y viuda y, mira, … yo quiero mi autonomía para mí sola, hacer lo que a mí me gusta, tener tiempo para lo que yo quiera”.

After becoming a widow, Blanca has built a new way of life, in which she combines many activities that not only keep her busy, but also fill her with life and give her life meaning. And although she does not give them all the same meaning, she is not prepared to give up any of them. She insists that, in any case, "I would like more time to do more things"; "life has to be lived actively, not sitting on the sofa"; "I don't plan to rest, because if you rest, you're dead".

Blanca tells her life story and her experiences with leisure in this last stage of life, with a mixture of pride, satisfaction and surprise that is evident in one of the most significant phrases of the interview:

"I often say that if my husband were to raise his head he would say: 'You were waiting for me to leave so you could get involved in all this'."

**DISCUSSION**

The analysis of Blanca's current leisure and the history of leisure that precedes it through narrative research demonstrates the advantages of incorporating this technique for a holistic understanding of leisure experiences in later stages of life. The review of the narratives through which she constructs and socialises her life trajectory reveals the central role that leisure plays in her current lifestyle and the deep connections that it maintains with the leisure already lived in previous stages.

***Leisure as a new source of meaning in life after widowhood***

As we have already seen, opportunities for leisure and the cultivation of interests were certainly limited during Blanca's childhood and youth, both marked by a post-war context. Later, during her adult life, leisure reappears at different times: when she is already married, before the arrival of her children and before she starts working at home, as a dressmaker, through reading; and later, when she starts to participate in activities in the neighbourhood where she lives (parish choir, etc.), when she is forced to give up sewing for health reasons. However, in both periods, leisure emerges as a residual element, as a means of combating loneliness, first, and inactivity, later.

Therefore, although the foundations of this centrality go back to earlier periods of Blanca's life, leisure becomes, de facto, the new backbone of her existence in the period in which Blanca becomes a widow. Widowhood inaugurates a new stage in which leisure ends up becoming her main element of meaning in life. It begins to unfold its "resilient" potential (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; López & Morata, 2015), as a measure to cope with traumatic life situations and ends up revealing itself as an agent of change, a promoter of new identities and lifestyles.

Widowhood imposes itself and brings with it the need to make urgent decisions to safeguard well-being and the meaning of existence in Blanca. Perhaps the most important decision, judging by the benefits it brings her, is the reconstruction of her lifestyle and the search for ways to occupy inert time, keeping active through leisure.

There is in her way of proceeding a desire for a certain activism that finds a response in leisure. However, it could be said that time modulates this desire and the meaning of the activities initiated just to be active, turning them, perhaps against all odds for Blanca, into spaces for empowerment (thanks to increased autonomy, perception of competence, self-esteem, leadership and social recognition) and the reconstruction of a new identity, in which leisure acts as the main referent. The discovery of writing, and more specifically, of poetry, as a passion in Blanca's life is the best example of this creative awakening which, perhaps without the stimulus and opportunities provided by her work at the Pensioner´s Home, would not have been possible.

Widowhood as a turning point and a break with their previous way of life, paves the way for identity renewal through innovative behaviours, "Self reinventation innovation", through leisure. This has already been observed as a common phenomenon after traumatic events such as widowhood (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007).

***Particularly significant leisure experiences***

It is clear from Blanca's testimony, however, that not all the activities that make up her current leisure repertoire contribute equally to the achievement of such benefits. Writing poetry has a special value for her that denotes its high degree of significance. So much so that she goes so far as to state that writing poetry is a particularly intimate activity; in fact, the only activity she does "for herself", as opposed to the rest of her activities which, when interpreted as voluntary work, have meaning insofar as they "benefit or help to improve the lives of other people".

Writing provides Blanca with multiple opportunities for learning and improving her knowledge. Motives that emerge constantly in her narrative, to which writing seems to respond in a double sense: as an inexhaustible source of enjoyment and also as a permanent framework for new challenges that maintain Blanca's interest in this activity. It could be said, in this sense, that the attributes and opportunities that an activity provides for the progressive acquisition of skills and continuous improvement can be important for the activity to be meaningful.

In any case, and even taking into account this centrality of poetry in Blanca's current leisure time, it cannot be ignored that, for her, each and every one of the activities that make up her current repertoire contribute to Blanca's feeling of satisfaction with her leisure time and with the new life she has managed to forge, after her widowhood.

***Leisure in later life: a form of resistance?***

The recognition of the political nature of leisure, as well as the proliferation of studies that consider it an ideal space for resistance are relatively recent (Auster, 2001; Dionigi, 2002; Lewis & Johnson, 2011; Therlault, 2014). There is consensus around the idea that leisure, as an environment that involves large doses of freedom and self-expression, can encourage resistance behaviours, aimed at changing social norms and the ways in which power is exercised (Shaw, 2001). There is also a growing body of research that applies the concept of resistance to the phenomenon of ageing, in order to explain the strategies that older people use in their leisure time to confront social stereotypes, as well as the situations of discrimination and exclusion that these generate (Genoe, 2010; Hurd, 1999).

The concept of resilience to ageing permeates Blanca's discourse. The importance she attaches to staying active, physically and mentally, always ready to continue learning, indicates, a priori, a desire to resist the stereotype of ageing as a period dominated by disengagement, inactivity and lack of productivity. However, more than a resistance to these beliefs that dominate the social imaginary, their activism seems to respond, moreover, to a desire to differentiate themselves from those of their age who respond to this stereotype and who, therefore, can be considered "older". Paradoxically, by denying her belonging to the stereotype, Blanca accepts and reaffirms her existence in people other than herself.

In the same vein, their desire to contribute to community life and their interpretation of their voluntary activities in terms of work reveal a certain resistance to the idea of non-productivity with which older people are associated. As other research has shown, the sense of responsibility with which some older people dress up their leisure time, especially their volunteering activities, responds to the desire to feel socially useful and thus mitigate the preconceived but widespread idea of older people as an unsustainable burden for contemporary societies (Mansvelt, 1997; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Ory, Hoffman, Hawkins, Sanner & Mockenhaupt, 2003; Warbuton, Paynter & Petriwskyj, 2007).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Narrative research is confirmed as a valid tool for advancing in the knowledge of the leisure experiences of older people, delving into the connections that these experiences have with the life and leisure trajectories already lived. Firstly, because it recognises the active role that people play in the construction of their narratives, assuming that these constructions are, in themselves, a relevant source of information, as they incorporate accents, nuances and meanings that would go unnoticed through other techniques. Secondly, narrative research is exceptionally useful for deploying a complex and holistic view of leisure throughout life, in which the person is in constant dialogue with his or her social, political, economic, family, educational, etc. context to explore the opportunities and barriers that he or she has to face in his or her leisure. Thus, the indispensable social dimension of leisure experiences, their conditions of possibility and their impacts are confirmed.

Blanca's case shows that leisure can become a central value in the lives of older people, a source of satisfaction, well-being and meaning in life. Although the individual is ultimately responsible for choosing whether or not to choose this centrality, the case study illustrates the impact of personal factors (personality, life attitude, leisure history) and social factors (economic and political situation, family support and social context). Among the external factors, the impact of widowhood as a trigger for changes in lifestyle and leisure is confirmed.

Any temptation to homogenise older people's leisure time has to take into account that not all leisure experiences are equally meaningful to them. Some practices have a special appeal and their practice is in itself a reward. Blanca's story suggests that the nature and attributes of activities make some activities particularly likely to be meaningful. A priori, those that provide their practitioners with opportunities for the progressive acquisition of skills and improvement in their performance, thus contributing to continuity decisions and to the positive development of their protagonist in multiple facets. Moreover, leisure for older people emerges as a potential area of resistance, not only to the stereotypes that dominate the social image of ageing, but also to the ageing process itself, as leisure is perceived as an effective strategy to slow down the impacts of ageing on older people.

The emerging leisure itinerary contributes to understanding the impact of leisure already experienced - and also of leisure that never took place - on current leisure. Thus, investing in leisure from an early age is to invest in people's wellbeing, in their happiness and development, favouring the maximum deployment of their potential. However, this affirmation should not feed false determinisms, according to which forms of meaningful leisure cannot be enjoyed in old age if this area has not been cultivated in earlier stages. The case of Blanca confirms that it is possible and that, even in situations of leisure deficits, change and innovation, suitably seasoned with elements of support from the environment, can provide opportunities for a full and satisfactory leisure, promoting development and vital meaning.

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1. Public of private equipment, created to provide entertainment, social relations and, in general, the development of its partners and user, retired people (in Spain, people older than 65 years old). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)