



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

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**ABSTRACT:** Through narrative research, this article analyses elderly people's leisure in Spain, from the experiential paradigm and a combination of synchronic and diachronic perspective, which seeks to know the evolution of leisure across the 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 knowing the psychosocial factors and processes that make leisure a source of well-being and vital engagement among elderly people.

**Keywords:** Elderly people, leisure experiences, lifelong leisure, narrative research, successful ageing.

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

**RESUME:** 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

### *Leisure and older people*

There is consensus that leisure is an essential ingredient for active, satisfying, and healthy aging (Adams et al., 2011; Duay & Bryan, 2006; Iwasaki, 2008). Iwasaki & Smale (1998) demonstrate that leisure participation is related to multiple benefits that positively impact physical health, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction. Other studies highlight the role of leisure as an engine of vital meaning among the elderly, promoting "engaged lifestyles", which are essential in processes of satisfactory aging (Iwasaki, 2008). This is so when leisure fosters involvement and emotional attachment with meaningful activities that generate meaning and favors the maintenance or creation of close social relationships (Adams et al., 2011; Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

Studies from Psychology and Gerontology have explored the impact of the type of leisure activities performed on the perception of health and well-being, highlighting informal social activities, hobbies and training activities (Adams et al., 2011; Chang et al. 2014; Nimrod, 2008); likewise, the incidence of social support, especially that of the family and circle of friends (Chang et al., 2014), barriers (Gibson & Singleton, 2012) or health status (Janke et al., 2008) have been studied as variables involved in the perception of benefits derived from leisure among older people. However, few studies take into account the value placed on leisure activities. But more and more authors stress that in order to understand the relationship between leisure and well-being, it is necessary to know the value that the person attaches to these aspects (Adams et al., 2011; Cuenca-Amigo et al., 2016). Other studies analyze the role of gender, age, income level, education, marital status, with special attention to retirement and widowhood, as promoting or inhibiting factors of participation, enjoyment and perception of benefits through leisure in later stages of life (Adams et al., 2011; Hutchison & Nimrod, 2012; Jaumot-Pascual et al., 2018; Lennarston & Silverstein, 2001).

Gender is one of the factors that best discriminates the leisure behaviors of the elderly (Lardiés-Bosque et al. 2013; Pinazo-Hernandis et al., 2019). Gender differences can be seen both in the time spent participating in leisure and in the type of leisure activities selected (Agahi & Parker, 2008). Regarding the type of practices, women tend to choose activities where social interaction is either the main activity or a requirement for activities such as volunteerism and community service to take place (Jaumot-Pascual et al., 2016), whereas men prefer solitary activities, such as gardening and hobby activities (Agahi & Parker, 2008).

The literature shows that leisure can play a key role in more or less traumatic life events, such as retirement or widowhood, due to its resilience (Hutchinson et al., 2003; Kleiber et al., 2012). Respect to the widowhood, it is well known that women and men do not experience widowhood in the same way. Men tend to experience more difficulties than women when confronting widowhood in older adulthood (Lee et al., 2001). For women who have primarily had traditionally female roles, "widowhood is 'a form of retirement'" (Hurd, 1999, p. 422). As Lee & Bakk (2001) affirmed, once women became widows, "they develop their own sense of personal identity and begin to live full lives" (p. 54). Lopata (1973) called this phenomenon "blossoming."

### *Leisure from the experiential paradigm*

A contemporary understanding of leisure cannot ignore its experiential nature (Cuenca, 2014; Tinsley & Tinsley, 1986); in such a way that, if the aim is to discern what elements and/or processes make leisure an ally of successful ageing (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007), 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) 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: b) 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: c) 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 an older people's leisure and her leisure itinerary in order to understand the centrality of leisure in her life story, as well as the dynamic evolution of her leisure, considering possible links with her past and present life circumstances. The main questions we would like to answer are the following ones:

What factors make leisure central to the life of the older person under study? Are all her leisure experiences equally significant? Is there any relationship between her current leisure and the history of leisure already experienced in earlier stages of life? Is leisure for her an area of resilience to aging and a way of resisting the stereotypes about what an older person can, should, will or should want to do with her leisure?

### **Methodology**

Given the exploratory nature and experiential focus of this work, as well as the need to discover new avenues of analysis to better understanding leisure experiences within the life cycle framework, narrative research has been chosen as a method of study. For Connelly & Clandinin (1990), narrative research is "the study of the ways in which human beings experience the world" (p. 6). 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.

### ***Participants***

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.

In fact, this article is based on the results obtained in the qualitative phase of the mentioned general study. More specifically, from one of the interviews conducted with a total of 20 people, including Blanca, a 71-year-old woman, who is the protagonist of this work. 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.

Blanca's case has been chosen for this analysis from the perspective of narrative research because it is paradigmatic in several aspects: all of them, central to the aims of this article. 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 et al., 2018) of certain life events (widowhood) on the leisure of older people. In short, Blanca's case is particularly well suited to learn more about why and how leisure takes center stage in the lives of many older people.

### ***Instruments***

Aware that leisure experiences are socialised through active constructions of meanings that give value and coherence to "that which shapes the experience", the interview technique seek to achieve a "deep understanding of the different cases studied, shedding some light on a problem" (Creswell et al., 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 University of Deusto Research Ethics Committee provided ethical approval for the study and a written informed consent was obtained from participant. Aspects such as the recruitment of the people of the sample, applied informed consent procedures of participation, confidential and anonymous management of personal data and interaction with people were all suitably addressed from an ethical standpoint.

In Blanca's case, the interview lasted around 90 minutes and was conducted at the Retiree's Home, where she carried out management tasks, with the support of a Board of Directors. The interview was recorded with the informed consent of the interviewee and transcribed by one of the researchers involved.

### ***Data Analysis***

The analysis of information gathered from interviews is organised around three clearly differentiated moments (Polkinghorne, 2007). 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 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's leisure in the different life stages*

From the beginning of the conversation, Blanca 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."

### *Widowhood as a turning point: a new life around leisure*

In this new scenario, someone tells her that there is a centre in her area, a home for retired people, which is looking to renew its Board with volunteers. Without giving it much thought, she takes on the management of the Pensioners' Home and dedicates herself to this task for thirteen consecutive years, combining this work with other activities, such as a choir or volunteering in various NGOs. 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 problems 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.

"I have found another story, another life; I have made another life for myself. In life, ... I have had to be alone and widowed and, look, ... now I want my autonomy for myself, to do what I like, to have time for what I want".

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 neighborhood 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 et al., 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 reinvention 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 (Cuenca Amigo et al., 2014). 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 (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Stebbins, 2017).

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 (Garrido et al, 2021). 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 et al., 2003; Warbuton et al., 2007).

### ***Conclusion***

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 (Caride, 2012; Nimrod, 2007).

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 (Jaumot-Pascual et al. 2018; Kleiber et al., 2002).

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, focusing on the results, leisure for older people can emerge 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 (Genoe, 2010; Hurd, 1999).

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 (Allin, 2015; Brown et al., 2015; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, this statement should not lead one to think that it is not possible to enjoy meaningful leisure 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. The main limitation of the present study has to do with its exploratory nature, focusing on a single case. Therefore, further research is needed in order to fully comprehend leisure role and relevance in late stages of life.

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