

# Leisure Activities and Gender in Adult Life

Hyunsook Kang, Ph.D., Gina Causin, Ph.D., Mary Olle, Ph.D.  
School of Human Sciences

## Introduction

The positive relationship between leisure activities and health among older adults continues to find much support in recent research and to generate popular interest as well as more empirical investigation (Benjamins, 2004; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2005). Of a variety of measures of leisure activities, leisure activities are most solidly linked with physical and functional health indices in later life.

The mechanisms by which health is positively affected by leisure activities are unclear; however, several explanations have been considered including: formation of good health habits encouraged by leisure activities, reduction of stress from working, and the benefits of social support and connectedness to a community with common values. With the call to more fully explicate the theoretical basis for the leisure activities and health connection to life satisfaction, the present study used a social capital perspective as a lens with which to consider the impact of leisure activities and health on life satisfaction in later life.

Leisure Activities is defined as the interests or events in which individuals engage during discretionary time (e.g., Kelly, Steinkamp, & Kelly, 1986). Sample leisure activities include spending time with family, doing hobbies, reading, watching T.V, playing with pet, doing volunteer work, and doing spiritual activities (Strain, Grabusic, Searle, & Dunn, 2002). Leisure has been considered an important factor to sustain socio-emotional health and self-concept, especially for aging adults (Hendricks & Cutler, 2003). For example, leisure activities provide benefits such as personal growth and development for older people (Dorfman & Kolarik, 2005).

In addition, since leisure activities are often conducted within social relationships, older individuals who engage in more leisure activities are likely to be less isolated (Silverstein & Lennartsson, 2001). Greater life satisfaction is associated with better health and more activities (Jang, Haley, & Graves, 2004) and specifically more leisure activities (Hendricks & Cutler, 2003). In addition, religious activities involvement is highly associated with new life adjustment (Patterson, 1996). Despite these findings, little attention had been given to studies of leisure activities among widowed adults.

It is possible that there are important variations in the leisure activities of older adults. Leisure might serve different purposes for each age group, so they engage in different activities. For older adults, leisure activities have a buffering effect against the impact of declining health (e.g., Patterson, 1996) and depression. In contrast, Siegenthaler and O'Dell (2000) noted that elderly see leisure activities as opportunities to explore the self and engage in decision making. In a study of leisure activities, Patterson (1996) found that old-older adults engaged in more in-home based/sedentary activities (e.g., listening to music, reading, raising plants), while young-old adults engaged in more outdoor activities (e.g., travel, sports).

In sum, prior research indicates that leisure is meaningful to the lives of older adults. It has important benefits, such reducing the effects of stressful life events. However, less is known about the differences in leisure among two groups of older adults. The goal of this study is to examine leisure differences between gender.

## Research Question

Thus, the present study addressed the following research question:

Are there group differences between female adults and male adults in frequency of leisure activities?

## Method

**Sample:** Secondary data analysis derived from AARP telephone survey (Montenegro, 2013).

Age: adults age 40-69 ( $n=440$ )

Sex: (203 male, 237 female)

### Measures:

**Demographics. Demographics** (e.g., education, income, race, age, sex, marital status) were assessed via single-item questions.

**Leisure Activities.** Leisure activities were assessed via single item questions on frequency of leisure behaviors (1="never", 4="often").

Sample item: "For each of these activities, please check whether it is something you do often, occasionally, not very often, or never":

Spend time with family	Gardening	
Socialize with friends	Exercise or play sports	Do something
Spend time on hobbies	Eating outside	Travel
Do something cultural or educational	Play with pets	religious

## Results

To address the research question, a MANOVA was conducted. The MANOVA revealed a significant main effect; there were leisure differences between the two groups.

Univariate follow-up tests revealed that the older female group more frequently (a) visited family, (b) engaged in hobbies, (c) eating outside, (d) do something religious. There were no group differences in doing cultural or education, travel, socialize with friends. However, male older adults more enjoyed the play with pets, gardening, exercise than female older adults. Thus, there is a gender differences in engaging in leisure activities in later life.

Table 1. Mean Differences on Leisure Activities Between Two Groups.

Activities	Female Adults	Male Adults	F value
Spend time with family	1.65	1.48	4.44*
Socialize with friends	1.89	1.84	.05*
Spend time on hobbies	2.16	2.00	2.80
Eating outside	1.89	1.57	12.85**
Travel	1.50	1.24	13.18**
Exercise or play sports	2.50	2.69	2.98*
Play with pets	2.26	2.57	5.39*
Gardening	2.97	3.05	7.54**
Do something religious	2.19	1.91	7.23**
Do something cultural or education	2.44	2.45	.03

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings indicated that female older adults had higher leisure rates than male older individuals. Given that studies have shown that female adults have more free time, and enjoy diverse activities (e.g., Dorfman & Kolarik, 2005), our findings are consistent with previous research findings. It is possible to assume that male older adults engage more frequently in leisure events that were not assessed (e.g., senior cruises, dances, hunting, community classes). Therefore, this study might not reflect their total leisure rates.

Alternatively, female older adults might actually engage in more leisure. They might be motivated to use leisure to deal with the stress of declining health and depression. This interpretation is consistent with life-course theory (McGoldrick & Walsh, 2004).

Further research is needed to clarify demographic differences (e.g., ethnicity, education, income) and leisure among older adults. In addition, research can identify resources (e.g., time), limitations (e.g., housing, transportation) and benefits of leisure associated with older adults.

## References

- Dorfman, L., & Kolarik, D. C. (2005). Leisure and the retired professor: *Educational Gerontology*, 31(5), 343-361.
- Hendricks, J. & Cutler, S. J. (2003). Leisure and structure of our life worlds. *Aging and Society*, 10, 85-94.
- Jang, Y., Haley, W. E., & Graves, A. M. (2004). The role of social engagement in late satisfaction: Its significance among older individuals with disease and disability. *The Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 23(3), 266-278.
- Kelly, J. R., Steinkamp, M. W., & Kelly, J. E. (1986). Later life leisure: How they play in Peoria. *The Gerontologist*, 26, 513-537.
- Lamme, S., Dykstra, P. A., & van Groenou, M. B. (1996). Rebuilding the network: New relationships in widowhood. *Personal Relationships*, 3, 337-349.
- Lee, C. D., & Bakk, L. (2001). Later-life transitions into widowhood. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 35(3), 51-63.
- Lopata, H. Z. (1996). *Current widowhood: Myths and realities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McGoldrick, M., & Walsh, F. (2004). *Living beyond loss: Death in the family* (2nd). New York, NY: W W Norton & Co.
- Montenegro, X. (2003). *Lifestyles, dating and romance: A study of midlife singles*. Washington, DC: American Association of Retired Persons Publications.
- Patterson, I. (1996). Participation in leisure activities by older adults after a stressful life event: The loss of a spouse. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 42, 123-142.
- Pellman, J. (1992). Widowhood in elderly women: Exploring its relationship to community integration, hassles, stress, social support, and social support seeking. *Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 35(4), 253-264.
- Rowe, J. W. (1997). The new gerontology. *Science*, 278, 367.
- Siegenthaler, K. L., & O'Dell, I. (2000). Leisure attitude, leisure satisfaction, and perceived freedom in leisure within family dyads. *Leisure Sciences*, 22, 281-296.
- Silverstein, M., & Lennartsson, C. (2001). Does engagement with life enhance survival of elderly people in Sweden? The role of social and leisure activities. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Science*, 56B(6), S335-S342.
- Strain, L. A., Grabusic, C. C., Searle, M. S., & Dunn, N. J. (2002). Continuing and ceasing leisure activities in later life: A longitudinal study. *The Gerontologist*, 42, 217-223.