Building resilience to stress through leisure activities : a qualitative analysis

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Abstract

Stress is prevalent in modern society and coping strategies largely determine wellbeing. A qualitative investigation of leisure as a positive coping response to stress was undertaken using a resilience-based perspective. This approach enabled a focus on competencies and strengths in the stress-leisure-coping process, contributing to the sparse literature in this area. In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of eight participants. From a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three overall themes emerged: leisure as a buffer of stress; generating positive emotion from leisure; and benefits of leisure for coping with stress with subthemes of leisure as a means to facilitate work-life balance, social relationships, leisure as self-determined and psychosocial resource development. The findings demonstrate how leisure facilitates a sense of resilience and its preventative functions. The results are discussed in relation to relevant theoretical propositions concerning the role of positive emotion in coping and the accrual of meaningful resources.

Keywords: coping, leisure, positive emotion, resilience, stress

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Introduction

In modern society stress is pervasive and has a major influence on health and life quality (Lundberg & Cooper, 2010). The World Health Organization predicts that stress-related illnesses will be the second leading cause of disabilities by 2020 (Sothmann, 2006). Similarly, stress has been shown to be associated with a range of physical and psychological conditions such as heart disease and depression (Lundberg, 2009). However, it is generally acknowledged that it is not only stress but how an individual copes with stress that determines physical and psychological wellbeing (Elo, Ervasti, Kuosma, & Mattila, 2008). Coping refers to the means by which a person manages internal and/or external pressures that are perceived to be demanding and it is a key topic for research and theory on wellbeing (Folkman, & Moskowitz, 2004).

Leisure as a coping resource

This study views leisure using a free-time perspective, referencing enjoyable activities that arise during free-time (Kleiber, 2004). A further distinction concerns casual and serious leisure; casual implying short-lived intrinsically motivated activity (for example watching TV, listening to music), and serious, referring to activity which requires investment over the long-term to obtain skills, knowledge, and meaning (Stebbins, 2006). Within recent years, a growing body of research has focussed on identifying how leisure can help to counteract stress and facilitate coping (e.g., Iwasaki et al., 2014; Trenberth & Dewe, 2005). Early research focussed on identifying particular leisure activities that promoted coping with stressors. Caltabiano (1994) analysed 83 leisure activities and concluded that active outdoor sports helped to reduce stress among males, whereas cultural hobbies helped to reduce stress among females.

Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) reported that it is the underpinning psychosocial functions of leisure rather than the specific activity that is important, and they produced a hierarchical model of leisure coping. They proposed that engagement in leisure pursuits can be an effective way to help cope with everyday stress and improve wellbeing. Within this model, coping is divided into leisure beliefs and leisure strategies. Leisure beliefs are generalised coping styles accumulated through engagement in leisure, and leisure strategies are intentional situation-based cognitions or behaviours for coping with stress. Some empirical research supports this model (e.g., Iwasaki, Mactavish, & MacKay, 2005; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002). Using ~~a~~ the qualitative approach ~~of content~~of content analysis, Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, and Dattilo (2003) produced supporting evidence, reporting that leisure offered escapism from everyday life, enabled participants to feel they belong via shared activities, and promoted positive mood as an outcome of enjoyable leisure engagement.

Leisure coping and psychological wellbeing

The increasing prominence of positive psychology has encouraged research on how positive events such as leisure can promote coping with stress and promote and protect psychological wellbeing (Carruthers & Hood, 2007; Hood & Carruthers, 2007; Iwasaki, 2006). While positive psychology originated in humanistic psychology in the 1950s, the recent movement of positive psychology emerged at the millennium in a review paper by Seligman and Csziksmentihalyi (2000). Positive psychology aims to redress the balance within psychology from the emphasis on pathology to examine ways of promoting health by maximising strengths, creating positive organisations and societies. For example, positive psychology approaches to stress have focussed on individuals who cope well with stress (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). Current conceptualisations of wellbeing in the literature have originated in positive psychology.

In qualitative studies using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), participation in leisure activities was shown to have positive value in providing social support and promoting wellbeing in cancer treatment (Shannon & Bourque, 2006) and the presence of leisure coping strategies ~~were found to be effective~~ differentiated individuals who coped well with cancer from those who did less well (Link, Robbins, Mancuso, & Charlson, 2004). Reynolds and Lim (2007) using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) showed how creative art-making had a positive effect on living with cancer. Grafanaki, Pearson, Cini, Godula, McKenzie, Nason, and Anderegg (2005) using content analysis found that leisure engagement helped promote balance in life amongst health professionals, enhanced work performance, and facilitated meaningful relationships.

In a qualitative study on posttraumatic growth utilising grounded theory, Chun and Lee (2010) found leisure provided opportunities to find personal strengths and abilities, facilitated companionship and meaningful relationships, helped participants make sense of traumatic experiences and find meaning in everyday life, and generated positive emotions. Folkman (2008) highlighted the importance of positive emotions for coping with stress, as they help sustain coping effort, provide respite from stress, and are associated with the use of adaptive coping. Kleiber et al. (2002) suggest that leisure can generate positive emotion, implying an important role for leisure in facilitating adaptive coping and promoting health (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000).

The theoretical literatures on stress and leisure have begun to explore in different ways how leisure as a coping resource helps facilitate wellbeing. Traditionally, theory has focussed on how leisure coping helps to regulate distress and minimise negative outcomes of distressing life events (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). This emphasis contrasts with the approach of Kleiber et al. (2002) who suggest leisure coping relates to wellbeing as a self-protective coping device, serving a variety of functions: buffering against negative life

events, as a distraction from stress, or by generating optimism and hope for the future and is consistent with positive psychology. It is an example of important progress using this perspective. Hood and Carruthers (2002) in a review of coping skills theory have identified a range of positive resources in addition to the normal coping styles that individuals can utilise to help cope with stress. This includes leisure coping and in later papers they outline a leisure and well-being model that can be applied by therapeutic recreation services and that embody the paradigm shift from focusing on deficiencies to focusing on strengths to improve wellbeing (Carruthers & Hood, 2007; Hood & Carruthers, 2007). In this model, they argue that recreational leisure activities provides social support and develops valuable capacities in individuals such as positive emotions essential for wellbeing. They categorise the ways that individuals can be helped to enjoy leisure more and in doing so increase their wellbeing.

Iwasaki et al. (2005) in a review of the therapeutic benefits of leisure suggested that leisure coping promotes wellbeing by facilitating resilience in response to stress. Iwasaki ~~et al.~~ (2006) in a longitudinal general population study found that leisure coping is a proactive coping strategy which enables individuals to recover from stress, facilitate life balance, and regain the required resources to tackle demands. Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from adversity and involves reacting in an adaptive manner to stressful situations (Masten, 2009), and is a core component of psychological wellbeing (Ryff & Singer, 2003). However, there is currently no theoretical framework to explain how leisure coping promotes resilience and wellbeing.

Resilience-based perspective

To explore how leisure coping can facilitate wellbeing, the present study adopts a resilience-based perspective, which entails a focus on protective factors and competencies in the stress-coping process (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Relevant theory will be considered when making sense of the findings, such as the previously discussed work of Kleiber et al. (2002)

and Iwasaki and Mannell (2000). The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) will also be considered to begin to examine whether this may provide a theoretical framework or at least some theoretical insights to help explain leisure coping further. The broaden-and-build theory suggests that traditional models of emotion are best suited to describing negative emotions. Negative emotion represents the behavioural avoidance system, which triggers escape behaviour in stressful situations. Conversely, positive emotion is a feature of the behavioural facilitation system which facilitates approach behaviour (Watson, Weise, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999). For example in response to a threatening situation, thinking momentarily becomes narrower, focused on coping and th~~ere~~ is narrowing ~~which~~then ~~-~~allows quick decisive action such as escape. This is beneficial in difficult situations.

These links between thoughts and actions are called action tendencies and Frederickson (2001) argues that while they describe behaviour generating negative emotion well they are not so applicable in situations involving positive emotions. Instead, she postulates that when positive emotions are experienced, the momentary thought-action repertoire actually broadens. This is exemplified by emotions such as joy which generates a wide range of thoughts and possible actions from the wish to play, be sociable and share with others, be creative and so on. These broadened mindsets are argued to be indirectly beneficial in that they build new personal positive resources. Crucially she demonstrates that the physical, intellectual, psychological and social resources outlast the transient positive emotional experiences which generated them. In these ways positive emotional experiences are thought to be transformatory. The experience of the positive emotion broadens the momentary thought-action repertoire and this builds personal resources which can transform the individual. It is described as working in an upward spiral. These new resources can then be used in the long term to maintain and promote individual wellbeing. Thus coping is proposed to be a key influence with regards to building resilience as positive emotions which will

result from successful coping are suggested to elicit development of more durable coping resources. A growth in coping resources is thought to enhance functioning in response to stress and adversity (Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008). This is the first study to use a resilience-based approach to explore how leisure relates to the management of stress and psychological wellbeing, contextualising the results within existing theory.

The present study

The aims of the present study are to explore in depth how and why leisure engagement can positively contribute to wellbeing in relation to stress and foster resilience. The focus is on individuals who regularly incorporate some form of leisure activity into their lives. In contrast to previous research, the focus is not on individuals who are experiencing some form of pathology (e.g., Hutchinson et al. 2003). The orientation of the present study is consistent with the emphasis in positive psychology on trying to understand the factors that promote optimal functioning in healthy individuals. Such knowledge can also be useful to complement existing knowledge of how to promote wellbeing in individuals who are suffering (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2007).

Thematic analysis (TA) was utilised for the study as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). While many researchers have traditionally categorised TA as a tool to use across different qualitative analyses (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2000), as presented by Braun and Clark, TA is a method that provides flexibility in that it operates without any assumptions being made about theory or epistemology and it can incorporate theoretical complexity and interpretation in the analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) yet still assure methodological rigour. This is relevant as the aim was to utilise our knowledge from previous research of different perspectives on leisure and coping and its relationship with stress, emotions and resilience in data interpretation and to assess the applicability of Frederickson's theory to explaining participants' experiences.

Method

A university ethics committee approved the research. Interviews were conducted in a naturalistic setting chosen by the participant, such as home or work. Participants were provided with information about the study and asked for their consent. Interviews were tape recorded and lasted approximately one hour and were followed by debriefing.

Participants

A convenience sample of eight participants who participated in leisure pursuits was recruited via adverts placed around the university and snowballing. The adverts stated that it was a study exploring the use of leisure for managing stress, and that only people who regularly engaged in leisure pursuits were eligible to take part. The sample consisted of three males and five females with a mean age of 39.75 years (range 25-64), and all were white British. The only inclusion criterion for the study was that participants regularly engaged in leisure pursuits as part of their lifestyle. The researchers attempted to recruit equal numbers of males and females; however, it was considered advantageous to include a fairly wide age range in order to achieve a more general understanding of the role of leisure for individuals who choose to participate regularly in leisure activities. Two were postgraduate students, two were retired, and four were in full-time employment. Three participants were married with children, and all bar one were currently in relationships.

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule consisting of a limited number of open-ended questions was developed to collect data in a free, narrative style. The questions covered the meaning of leisure to the participant, the importance of leisure in everyday life, benefits that have resulted from leisure engagement, and the importance of leisure for building a life outside of work or study. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. A pilot study

was carried out initially to assess the suitability of the interview schedule and amendments were made before data collection commenced.

Data analysis

Using guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006), six phases of analysis were followed (familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, defining and naming coded features, validating, producing the report with supporting quotes). While these are described sequentially, the analysis involves an iterative process of continual movement through the phases checking against the data. The first phase involved familiarisation with the data, by reading each transcript several times. From this, initial codes were generated and written on the left margin of the first transcript. Next themes were identified and noted in the right margin. The third stage involved reviewing the themes and checking them initially against the coded data extracts to ensure that coherent patterns are represented in the data with reanalysis if necessary. Once this stage of review has been achieved the themes were grouped into thematic maps. These were then reviewed against the full transcript to judge whether they accurately represented the meaning of the data. These initial themes were subsequently grouped into major themes based on common features. Each theme was reviewed and clearly defined and named. Up until this stage of the analysis the coding had been predominantly semantic, that is based on the surface meaning of the data but at this stage, latent analysis was specifically incorporated. Latent analysis begins to interpret the data to identify underlying assumptions, ideas, conceptualisations that may provide a deeper meaning (Braun & Clark, (2006). This allowed incorporation of theoretical knowledge. The major themes were thoroughly reviewed in comparison with the transcript, and supporting quotes were included to confirm each theme was sufficiently grounded in the data. Themes that did not meet this criterion were discarded.

This process was replicated for each transcript. Major themes for each transcript were compared and synthesised into an overall set of master themes which represented the experience of the participants comprehensively. The master themes were thoroughly checked against the interview transcripts to confirm they sufficiently represented the experience of the participants. Subthemes were generated from commonalities among the initial themes, and reflect lower order features of the master themes. A research colleague not involved in the study verified the resultant themes. Pseudonyms were given to each participant.

Quality

Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie's (1999) criteria were used as a guide to assure quality. Accordingly, participants, methods, and procedures are described in detail and self-reflexivity is practiced. The data is presented in a coherent manner and each theme is supported by excerpts of the data. A research colleague checked the findings, and a reflexive journal was used as an aid to the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reflexive journal acted as a decision trail which helped to limit misinterpretation and ensure the data was analysed in a faithful and exhaustive manner.

Reflexivity

Within Braun and Clark's model of analysis it is recognised that the researcher's perspective inevitably affects the analysis (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). To facilitate transparency, the researchers present their personal perspective concerning the research topic (Elliott et al. 1999). The researchers' interpretative framework have been influenced by knowledge of positive psychology theory and leisure coping, and a positive expectation regarding the effectiveness of leisure for stress, from using leisure activities to deal with stress. To promote awareness whilst analysing the data, preconceptions were recorded and interview questions were removed to focus purely on respondents' testimonies.

Results

Contextualising leisure activities

In all interviews, respondents reported participating in various leisure activities, from casual to serious activity, thus ensuring an appropriate sample. Casual leisure included relatively short-lived intrinsically rewarding activities, such as watching films or listening to music. Serious leisure included activities systematically pursued long-term in order to acquire skills, knowledge, and experience. Examples were group-based activities including playing badminton, netball, playing in a band, and individual pursuits such as exercise and volunteering. This distinction between casual and serious leisure is conceptually similar to Stebbins (2006). Three major themes emerged from the analysis concerning the role of leisure engagement and coping with stress and wellbeing: leisure as a buffer of stress; **generating positive emotion from leisure;** ~~leisure and emotion;~~ and ~~psychosocial implications of leisure engagement.~~ benefits of leisure for coping with stress.

Theme one: Leisure as a buffer of stress

This theme was defined as leisure engagement providing a distraction, a respite, and an escape from the stress encountered in life. When experiencing stress, participants turned to leisure such as going for a run or going to the gym. This provided an activity where participants could focus on something other than their current problems and offered a welcome respite when feeling stressed. Engagement in casual leisure was effective in lessening the impact of stress including daily frustrations and work demands.

> If I have a stressful week at work I would go for a run. That's really good because it allows me to totally forget about the week, clears my mind~~.~~ . My job's very demanding cognitively. I have to work at a very advanced level... and when you are working that intently it can be quite demanding, quite stressful. So in that respect it's very good to do an activity that takes you away and relieves the stress, relieves the pressure. (Paul)

For chronic and transitional stress, leisure helped to buffer against some of the associated effects. Marc was recovering from the recent break-up of a long-term relationship, and experienced cognitive and emotional fallout as a result, often experiencing intrusive thoughts from the past. Engagement in serious leisure, notably playing regularly in a band, focussed his mind on something constructive, and was perceived as restorative for wellbeing.

> When I'm playing with my band it's a way of getting away from stress. It helps to conquer the stress. That's what it means to me. It helps me forget about the things you've been getting worked up about all week and you can just go and find something that you enjoy and do it…that sometimes helps your mind focus on something different to the problems that you've got…they give a respite almost. They give a break, where I'm not having these things going round in my head. (Marc)

Ruminating was a common response to work stress; participants often felt that they could not 'shut off' from thinking about demands when away from work. Leisure engagement enabled participants to 'enter a separate cognitive space' where they felt absorbed in their activities and were temporarily free from ruminative thinking. This was constructive as it challenged the tendency to worry about problems, and participants felt calmer and rejuvenated afterwards:

> Running does that for me; I stop thinking about current problems and focus on the present and the activity I'm doing. I think that in effect helps to clear my mind, although I'm not voluntarily doing it. That's good because a lot of my stress is in the future; it's me thinking of what I've got to do. It doesn't really cause me anxiety, it's more kind of worry, it's more 'oh god how am I going to do this? How am I going to achieve that?'… I suppose in my leisure time I worry about how I'm going to meet objectives, so working in my leisure time. (Paul)

Leisure engagement in this sense was similar to "flow" whereby participants felt absorbed in the activity which helped to clear their mind of worry and stem rumination.

Theme two: Generating positive emotion from leisure

Leisure was consistently referred to as an activity that generated positive emotions, such as interest, enthusiasm, enjoyment, excitement, awe, and joy. When feeling despondent in response to stress, such as after a difficult day at work, participants reported that participating in their leisure activities raised their mood. For example, John specified that leisure, "gives you an up in the spectrum of the week". The relationship between positive emotions and leisure participation was complex and multi-faceted. Positive emotions not only resulted from leisure but also promoted participation. For the group-based activity of badminton, John identified that having an initial interest acted as a motivator, that he experienced enjoyment from taking part, he felt physically fitter and happier afterward, and as a result he has an increased interest and a greater desire to continue the leisure activity:

> It (badminton) was something I enjoyed doing when I was younger so I thought I'd go back to it as an exercise to improve my fitness...and on the first day of doing it I didn't have the fitness to do very well at it. I felt tired. I thought 'my god this is terrible', but as I persisted, met people, and was encouraged I began to develop the fitness and...it also made you feel good and interested in what you were doing at the same time. (John)

Such findings highlight the complex interplay of positive emotions with leisure participation; positive affect being a potential influence, a sustainer of effort, and a consequence. Specifically, it appears that positive emotions had a broadening effect on participants, helping to encourage and sustain leisure participation.

A relationship between positive emotion, leisure engagement, stress and pressure, and negative emotion was very evident. Pressure and stress seemed to, "take energy away" and influence negative emotion, such as tiredness, cynicism, anxiety, frustration, and distress:

> I'd been working all year. Really busy, really stressful and then I finish work and come to the summer. I've been very negative. Thinking 'oh I've done all that work and I don't have any friends, any fun'. I need people to share activities with and I've been feeling really negative, cynical, quite bitter, really kind of reassessing things in my life. (Paul)

Such negativity appeared to generate further negativity. Marc referred to feeling in a vicious circle with regards to stress in the sense he was in a demanding weekly routine which he struggled to meet. The routine took a lot of his resources and left him feeling exhausted and consequently more stressed:

> I just think everything caught up with me, lack of sleep, this, that, the other, and I was at a point where I was losing the plot. I felt really dangerously unwell and things got on top to a degree where you just feel terrible. You can't help it though. That feeds onto something else, which feeds onto something else, and then you've got this vicious circle syndrome going on. It's hard, hard to deal with. (Marc)

Rebecca seemed to be in a vicious circle concerning work stress; in response to increased workload she would work harder to meet the demand and ignore other important aspects of her life. This behaviour would leave her feeling frustrated yet the anxiety of not meeting demands reinforced the stress. In response to escalating and chronic stress, participants would withdraw into themselves, as emphasised by John:

> Probably at the weekend after all the work I would do nothing or as little as possible, except the things that I wanted to do, which is not very good because it makes you rather selfish and antisocial, but you were so tired you felt as though you needed some space for yourself to get over things. (John)

Withdrawal is an example of an avoidant coping strategy, and cyclical exposure to stress and negative emotions over time led to participants feeling less psychologically healthy, as Rebecca said, "no sense of enjoyment, not socialising, very tense, and not particularly

happy". Such stress led Rebecca to question the point of her work endeavours if she was always stressed and unhappy. In contrast, leisure engagement was a way to get energy back that stress and negative emotion had depleted. Leisure was seen as the antithesis to stress, "there are no real demands, no expectations, no pressure, no need to perform, and no goal. Rather, you can just relax and enjoy, and enjoyment is the achievement, the goal" (Catherine). Catherine specified that leisure engagement is a way to, "balance the negative stress out and re-feed you with energy" and positive emotions. Thus, leisure was an effective way to protect against stress by generating positive emotions which helped to cultivate feelings of coping.

Theme three: Benefits of leisure for coping with stress

It was clear that participants derived significant benefits from their leisure engagement for their lifestyle, stress experience, and wellbeing. This emerged as a master theme with subthemes of leisure as a means to facilitate work-life balance; social relationships; leisure as self-determined and providing a sense of control; and development of psychosocial resources.

Leisure as a means to facilitate work-life balance

When discussing their busy lives, participants referred to the challenges of establishing a healthy balance with regards to competing responsibilities, particularly from work. Participants struggled with creating a balance, and simultaneously emphasised the importance of establishing a balance for wellbeing and contentment in life:

> It (life) should be a balance between physical activity, mental activity, emotional rewards really which for me come from a variety of social interactions with my family and friends…I think you need all those things to some extent every day to achieve a healthy balance in your life, to keep you healthy and your mind alert. (Sue)

A healthy balance was subjectively determined, as was the amount of leisure necessary for achieving it. Leisure participation was seen as important for achieving balance, and

Rebecca highlighted how having more leisure in her life in the past enabled her to feel more relaxed and open to new experiences due to having more of a healthy balance. Feeling relaxed also attracted more people into her life as she came across as less tense and defensive:

> I felt more open to new experiences, more open to new people and more relaxed in myself. I didn't think so much. I didn't have that constant worry or think about the next step or what's going to happen next or what if, what if, what if all the time. I didn't have the same worry cos I was more relaxed and when you're more relaxed you can take others in; you can relax with other people as well. (Rebecca)

Respondents who lacked balance were aware of this, yet often felt powerless to remedy the situation and felt as though they were 'trapped' and stuck in a routine. This was particularly the case for lacking a social network:

> It's just extending the social side. I want balance in my life. I feel the social side is part of the jigsaw that's not there at the moment, and it's a pretty big part as well. I'm someone who needs socialising and I miss it, it's important to me… I'm doing a lot of the physical, building up my health through exercise and de-stressing, but it's the lack of a social life which is really stressful, really causing me a lot stress. (Paul)

Leisure engagement was seen as constructive to facilitate balance; however, a necessary condition for changing circumstances was a sense of determination and persistence despite potential obstacles. This was highlighted by Dawn who, in the recent past, focussed heavily on work and neglected other areas in her life. Dawn felt as though she had a shortage of meaningful relationships, and her self-esteem and self-confidence suffered. Consciously focussing on changing the circumstances and joining a group-based leisure activity provided the necessary stimulus to catalyse a change in wellbeing:

> There was a time last summer when I would cry every weekend and I was very close to packing up and going home. I was fine during the week when at work, but at the

> weekend when I felt as if I didn't have any enjoyable time to have the balance I felt as if I couldn't cope. I'm glad now I dug my heels in and went 'no it's about me making a change, it's about me going out there and meeting people and doing that myself', which took a lot of strength I think…Mental health-wise I feel much better. (Dawn)

Possessing determination to persist and overcome difficulties are aspects of psychological resilience, which is defined as a process of adaptation to adversity, consisting of persistence and the ability to 'bounce back' to a previous level of competence (Garmezy, 1993). While participants did not specifically mention resilience, resilient qualities emerged as important to catalyse changes in adverse circumstances for participants, and resilience was important for managing stress in a general sense and for achieving work-life balance. Catherine discussed how she bounces back quite quickly from stress, which she attributes to being active and positive:

> I can get quite stressed and think 'oh I'm not going to be able to do this', but I still have a lot of energy. I do see myself being quite active and I do surprise myself with being able to bounce back quite fast. I think 'oh I'm going to be inactive for a long time now' (after a stressful event), but I do bounce back quite fast and I'm ready for a new challenge. (Catherine)

Group-based leisure as a means of promoting social relationships

Engagement in group-based leisure cultivated feelings of belonging and acceptance, and was instrumental for transitions which negatively impacted social networks, for example, retirement or moving to a new geographical area for work. Retirement was referred to as an experience where 'you suddenly lose your purpose' and feel 'disconnected from everybody'. Group-based leisure enabled the development of friendship, to feel part of a group, and accepted among people with shared interests. Such outcomes were significant in combating the isolation and loss of purpose that can come with retirement:

> When a change happens in your life, such as retirement, it puts a lot of stress on your life because all of a sudden instead of working long days or long hours, you're like an isolated person stuck on an island. You are the only person for miles around you and it's very difficult at that point to see what your purpose is because your purpose has gone, you've finished work. And work has been your purpose for so long in that sense, so you think 'what am I going to do? I've got all the time in the world and nothing to do in it' and so leisure pursuits, particularly if they are social, take you away from that potential isolation or like water going down a plug, you know, getting worse and worse and a vicious circle. (John)

When moving to a new area, group-based leisure did not offer the sense of purpose it did for retirement. Retirement created a greater sense of emptiness than did moving to a new area, so the benefits of leisure were felt to a greater extent as the activity addressed more features of their lifestyle. For example, in comparison for those moving to a new area, work still gave some sense of meaning whereas this was missing in retirement and leisure helped to fill this void. For those moving to a new area, similarly to retirement leisure facilitated a sense of belonging as highlighted by Dawn:

> When I felt unhappy I would look at other people that had a network and I would think 'why can't I have that down here? Is there something wrong with me?' Now I have that network I no longer feel that way. (Dawn)

For chronic stress and unavoidable difficulties such as long-term illness of family members, friendships developed through group-based leisure were an important source of social support, perspective, and understanding. Knowing that such support existed which could be accessed if needed also generated feelings of reassurance:

> When my partner had cancer I could not escape from stress then. It was impossible to do. It was nice having people to talk to about it because you didn't feel alone, but you

could not escape. It was always there in your mind, always at the forefront that you had to do something. And you didn't even know what to do, but you couldn't leave it. But because you could talk to other people, and because people were your age they also had problems and equally as bad, you came to realise that these were not just your problems, they affected everybody at some point in a similar magnitude, and it's possible to get over them as a result. And it (stress) lessens a little bit. (John)

The significance of leisure-based support was emphasised by respondents who, in response to a transition, had not successfully found a suitable context for social interaction and/or struggled to form social relations due to heavy pressure from new careers. Participants felt socially isolated, negative, and the absence of meaningful social relations was felt profoundly. Social relations were viewed as the 'missing piece of the jigsaw' and participants suggested they would feel stronger and more able to cope if they belonged to a group:

I feel I can't socialise with people, trapped. I see crowds of people chatting, laughing and I can't get in there somehow because I don't know them. I need to have a group I belong to. I can't socialise with work colleagues because they don't socialise... I find it very difficult. I feel I'm working far too much and that I haven't got much leisure time. I feel trapped and I can't do the things I really want to do, and I think a lot of people feel like that. (Paul)

These findings emphasise the importance of group-based leisure for developing social relations and managing stress.

Self-determined leisure providing a sense of control

Respondents liked the freedom to choose leisure activities in their own time and whether to participate or not. Importantly, respondents felt that they made the rules and could tackle the

leisure activities when ready to, which was framed as a desirable contrast to work and other obligations which participants could not necessarily control:

> Leisure's the opposite to work because you haven't got the demands forcing you to do something. In my view it's an activity where you have the choice of participating or not, and of participating as much as you wish to. There's no compulsion. Also, it's your own time so although you can't remove yourself from the demands at work, what it does is take you out of the context of work into a context more under your… control. I think that's a big point to it, it's something more under your control. (John)

Leisure thus gave a sense of perceived control and autonomy, and having the freedom and time and using this constructively was empowering for coping with the uncertainty of work and other obligations. This sense of control is in contrast to the experience of stress which frequently occurs when events seem out of control.

Leisure engagement as a way to develop psychosocial resources

Leisure engagement was associated with a host of interrelated psychosocial resources, which resulted mainly through involvement in serious leisure activity. Specifically, leisure provided a sense of hope for the future and acted as a cognitive-motivational resource. For Marc leisure engagement provided a focus, a way of dealing with negativity, and the 'strength to move forwards in a positive direction' whilst recovering from the stress of a relationship break-up:

> It feels like an uphill battle at the moment. In time I'll get through it, I just got to get to where I feel I need to be. And leisure helps you get to where you want to be, forget your stress, forget your troubles. And it also promotes positive mood as well. It helps you feel good about something, feel excited that you've got this to do or that you're part of this group now…don't get me wrong, there are days when negativity breeds negativity

and it’s the worst form to be in, it’s horrible, but just the light at the end of the tunnel, and having that strength to move forward. (Marc)

Leisure engagement enabled John to feel more positive and hopeful about the future in response to retirement:

You get self-esteem. You think 'I can do this'. After a few months of saying 'I can do this' and liking what you're doing, it doesn't matter what people say. It's more than mastery, it’s rebuilding confidence in yourself and when you've retired you suffer a loss of confidence because you've been cast adrift. You cast yourself adrift. That’s why the confidence nosedives. It’s not because you don't feel wanted or anything, it's because you've actually taken the decision to leave work and ended up with nothing. (John)

Such hopefulness was informed by a sense of purpose and meaning, which challenged the feeling of a loss of purpose as a consequence of retirement. Voluntary work was a source of meaning for Sue where she could make a contribution, "gain satisfaction, experience, and help others in need". Such purpose and meaning enabled participants to feel better about themselves and his/her current circumstances, thus enhancing self-esteem.

Leisure provided a context conducive to self-development as well as renewal and recovery (as discussed in theme one). This was evident from the finding that participants learned meaningful life skills. John reported that he now applied principles of what he termed ‘self-correction’ to coping with difficulties in life, and Sue learned a more constructive approach for dealing with stress. Such life skills helped to inform self-improvement and confidence in handling problems:

In badminton the one thing to do if you want to become a better player is self-correction…it’s not being over-critical, it's more like estimation and you estimate distances. You might be wildly out to start with, but you can gradually creep towards

> the centre by adjusting the way you estimate. It's like a process, and you can apply that to life. You can say 'ok this time I didn't do it, next time I can. I can learn' (John)
>
> Yoga and tai-chi help me stay fitter and have a calm approach to dealing with problems. All this about living in the moment and to not spend your life worrying about today, but enjoy the time you're in, you can apply that to everything. (Sue)

Self-improvement was furthermore evident from the development of physical fitness and psychological determination through ongoing commitment to leisure pursuits. In addition to developing meaningful skills, leisure engagement encouraged a broadening of participants' social networks. This provided a source of social support for difficulties (as discussed in social relationships) and had many 'spin-off effects' which cultivated a sense of psychological wellbeing:

> It's (confidence) building up over time because I'm getting out of my comfort zone, meeting new people. I'm building a base, building a platform from which to meet new people and do new things. But you don't know these people, and the first time you meet them when you're not feeling that great about yourself, when you're exhausted, but benefits in terms of being out of your comfort zone, doing things that you might be a bit frightened of, but you've got support around you. (Marc)

Psychosocial resources developed over time in complex and multifaceted processes, with positive outcomes gradually building up and 'feeding off' one another in an upwards trajectory, akin to a virtuous circle. Positive emotions were involved throughout, and this process gradually facilitated self-belief, feelings of competence, and a sense of purpose and meaning:

> It's a combination of things because one thing knocks onto the other, and it all feeds in and makes you feel good, happier, stronger and more competent because in a job very often you can feel under-valued and feel that you lose competence. You're not able to do

things because of resource problems, and they're bringing new things in for you to tackle that you've got little experience with. In a leisure sense it's different because you can time the things you do, the new things that come along. You can do them when you're ready to tackle them, and you've got more of a chance of saying 'well I've done my best, it worked out. I feel good, I feel competent in solving that now. I can do that'. (John)

Discussion

Leisure activities appeared to be useful in coping with the stress the sample reported encountering in everyday life, thus further confirming the validity of the sample. Participants discussed various types of stress including daily frustrations or hassles, work demands, chronic stress, and major transitions. Everyday hassles involved frustrations with busy daily routines. Work problems were short-lived as well as longer in duration and typically involved issues with meeting demands and managing heavy workloads. Chronic stress concerned problems that were long lasting and did not have easy resolutions, for example, the ill health of a family member. Major transitions and life changes were demanding and included the break-up of a long-term relationship, beginning a new career in a new geographical area, and retirement. Research indicates that for chronic stress, work stress, and transitions, there is a risk of developing maladaptive coping behaviour due to the demands placed on our coping resources (Carr, 2004). Daily frustrations are a risk factor for a range of clinical problems as they can cumulatively impact on wellbeing (Lazarus, 2006).

Leisure engagement was a constructive way of coping with stress, acting as a source of distraction and escape from daily hassles, and offering respite in response to the associated effects of longer term stress. For chronic, work-related, and transitional stress, leisure engagement facilitated adjustment by helping to create balance in life, offered a sense of perceived control, and provided a context within which to develop social relations, particularly with group-based leisure activities. Group-based leisure provided a context and a

sense of belonging, which was meaningful for coping with transitions which had a negative impact on existing social networks. Leisure engagement was associated with the development of psychosocial resources which helped to cultivate a sense of resilience over time in respondents, enabling them to cope gradually with complex and challenging stressors. Resources included hope, the learning of meaningful life skills, and an enhanced social network. Resilience can be assumed from the way respondents felt more purposeful, more self-confident, competent, and with increased self-esteem. Such resources were particularly important for negotiating transitional and chronic stress. Emotions emerged as central to leisure engagement and stress. Specifically, emotions were integral to taking up leisure pursuits and the coping process, with negative emotion acting in tandem with stress to deplete resources, whereas positive emotion acted in tandem with leisure engagement to promote resources.

The current analysis provides support for aspects of Iwasaki and Mannell's (2000) leisure coping model. In particular, the way leisure activities provided a distraction and respite is conceptually similar to leisure palliative coping (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000), which involves attempts to create a psychological 'break' from stress. Engaging in leisure activity to distract from the pressures of current demands and to lessen the impact of chronic stress provided a self-protective function consistent with the findings of Kleiber et al. (2002). Engaging in leisure activity also seemed to facilitate a sense of flow and absorption which helped to challenge issues such as rumination as a function of ongoing stress. Flow represents a state of complete single-mindedness which cultivates a sense of feeling energised, and is an innately positive experience, helping to facilitate positive affect and psychological wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Flow explains how leisure served as distraction and respite for the respondents.

The findings concerning palliative coping also support Kleiber et al.'s (2002) proposition that leisure buffers the impact of stress by providing a diversionary activity. Also, leisure-based friendships were an important means of social support which facilitated a sense of belonging and acceptance. Such findings are consistent with the notion of leisure companionship described by Iwasaki and Mannell (2000), in that participants sought companionship for coping with stress. Research indicates that social support helps to buffer adverse health effects of stress, and the absence of a suitable support network is a risk factor for poor adjustment (Cutrona & Russell, 1987), as evident among the respondents. Also, awareness that social support existed was conducive to increasing wellbeing, which fits with existing literature indicating that perceived social support is influential in buffering the negative effects of stress (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

The findings also offer some support for leisure autonomy beliefs of Iwasaki and Mannell (2000), as leisure was an important source of autonomy and perceived control which contrasted with the lack of perceived control at work. Research has consistently demonstrated that having a degree of perceived control when under stress helps to minimise negative outcomes (Rosenbaum, White, & Gervino, 2012) and it may be that this control can come from leisure activities if it cannot be achieved at work.

Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) described leisure mood enhancement as a coping strategy, and the findings offer support for this, in that leisure was engaged in to 'feel better' in response to stress. However, the current study discovered a complex role of emotion with regards to leisure engagement and stress. Not only was positive emotion an outcome of leisure engagement, but also acted as a 'breather' from stress and a 'restorer' of depleted emotional and psychological resources as a function of exposure to negative emotion and stress.

There also appeared to be a central facilitative role of positive emotion with regards to psychosocial resources. Positive affect is a component of the behavioural facilitation system which influences approach behaviour for situations and activities which have the potential for pleasure and reward (Watson et al., 1999). Research suggests that positive emotions encourage broadening in thought and behaviour, leading to increased activity (Fredrickson, 2001), as was evident for the respondents in this study. Such findings are consistent with Fredrickson who demonstrated that activities which promote positive emotions help to 'undo' or lessen the negative effects of stress by providing psychological respite from stress experiences (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000). Kleiber et al. (2002) discuss how leisure activities can help to generate positively-toned emotions which lessen stress by acting as 'breathers' from stress and 'sustainers' of coping effort.

Kleiber et al. (2002) also suggested that positively-toned emotions as a function of leisure can act to facilitate a sense of hope and optimism as resources for dealing with stress. Hope represents an individual's beliefs that they can devise pathways to achieve meaningful goals (Snyder, 2002). Leisure gave participants such a sense of direction and a way forward to reaching goals including rebuilding confidence for retirement, or returning 'back to normal' after a relationship break-up. Such findings are consistent with the suggestions of Kleiber et al. (2002) that leisure can act as a restorative experience which helps offer hope for the future.

Additionally, the findings regarding positive emotion are consistent with the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). In particular, positive emotions appeared to have a broadening effect on behaviour, leading to leisure engagement and persistence in leisure activity. With regards to stress and coping, participants became more resilient and able to cope over time in response to complex stressors through developing psychosocial resources

such as self-belief, feelings of competence, and a sense of purpose and meaning, and positive emotion had an active role in this process.. .. Such resources have been shown to moderate the impact of stress on wellbeing (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). This experience of resource building via leisure engagement among the respondents can be interpreted to represent the building function of the broaden-and-build theory.

- Figure 1here -

Figure 1 demonstrates how psychosocial resources developed over time for respondents using the broaden-and-build theory as a guiding framework. Specifically, in response to chronic and transitional stress respondents made an active decision to take up leisure activity. Personal resilient qualities (such as determination) and positive emotion in the form of interest in the leisure pursuit encouraged leisure engagement. Leisure engagement in turn led to experience of positive emotion and broadened thought and action. According to participants, a cycle of leisure engagement, experience of positive emotion, and a broadening of thought and action repertoires occurred. Broadening of thought and action included, for example, developing skills and competency in the leisure pursuit as a result of the positive emotion. Over time, continued engagement in the leisure activity influenced a virtuous circle of developing psychosocial resources which enabled participants to feel more resilient in coping over time with chronic and transitional stress.

In contrast to the building function of positive emotion, consistent with the broaden-and-build theory experience of escalating and chronic stress appeared to promote negative emotions. Cyclical exposure to stress and negative emotion had a cumulative impact on the health of respondents, and participants would cope by using strategies such as withdrawal. Withdrawal is an avoidant coping strategy, associated with anxiety, depression, and lower levels of wellbeing (Stewart, Betson, Lam, Marshall, Lee, & Wong, 1997). The reasons for this relationship are because the individual expends emotional resources on experiencing

symptoms (worry, anger, distress) rather than on ways to tackle situations. Avoiding the practicalities of problems prevent them being dealt with. The relationship between withdrawal, escalating or chronic stress, and negative emotion is unsurprising given the function of negative affect as a component of the avoidance-oriented behavioural system is to trigger avoidance to protect an individual from situations which could cause pain, danger, or discomfort (Watson et al. 1999). Leisure, on the other hand, provided a constructive outlet for coping with stress which enabled participants to introduce a greater balance to their lives. Such findings are consistent with Grafanaki et al. (2005) who conceptualised leisure as a fundamental means of establishing balance in life and improving performance in other domains including work and personal relationships.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that the participants were all ~~in~~at different stages in life, with some participants in full-time employment, some retired, and others postgraduate students. Although this added variety to the findings, it is possible that depth was sacrificed for breadth to an extent, and a richer, more detailed understanding could have resulted from a focus on, for example, specific life stages such as retirement. Also, an issue that remains difficult to fully comprehend is the role of emotion~~—~~. The findings indicate that emotions were central to leisure engagement, coping, and psychosocial resources; yet, it is not fully clear from the findings whether it is the intensity, duration, or frequency of positive emotion that is responsible for facilitating the adaptive benefits of positive emotion in the coping process. This ambiguity concerning the role of emotions is a noted problem in the stress and coping literature (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000), and further research is necessary to clarify this.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that not only was leisure engagement the antithesis to stress, but was also associated with the development of meaningful resources to cope with challenging and

complex stressors. Using a resilience-based perspective enabled insight into psychological mechanisms responsible for developing growth and competency over time in response to difficult stressors. The current study provides qualitative evidence for the assumptions of the broaden-and-build theory and offers strong support for applying a resilience-based perspective to comprehend the benefits of leisure coping. The results explain how broaden-and-build processes inform resilience which has important implications for lowering stress. The broaden-and-build theory is an empirically supported framework which is useful for future research to consider when studying resilience-based processes and adaptive properties of positive emotion with regards to positive coping such as leisure. Based on the experience of the participants, the study provides support for the need to further understand the preventative role of leisure, as such experiences point the way to using leisure not only to relieve the pressure associated with a stressor, but also to use leisure more instrumentally in developing resources that facilitate resilience and wellbeing~~,~~. The study was significant in demonstrating the importance of positive affect in the coping process and in suggesting some of the ways leisure engagement serves as an important coping resource.

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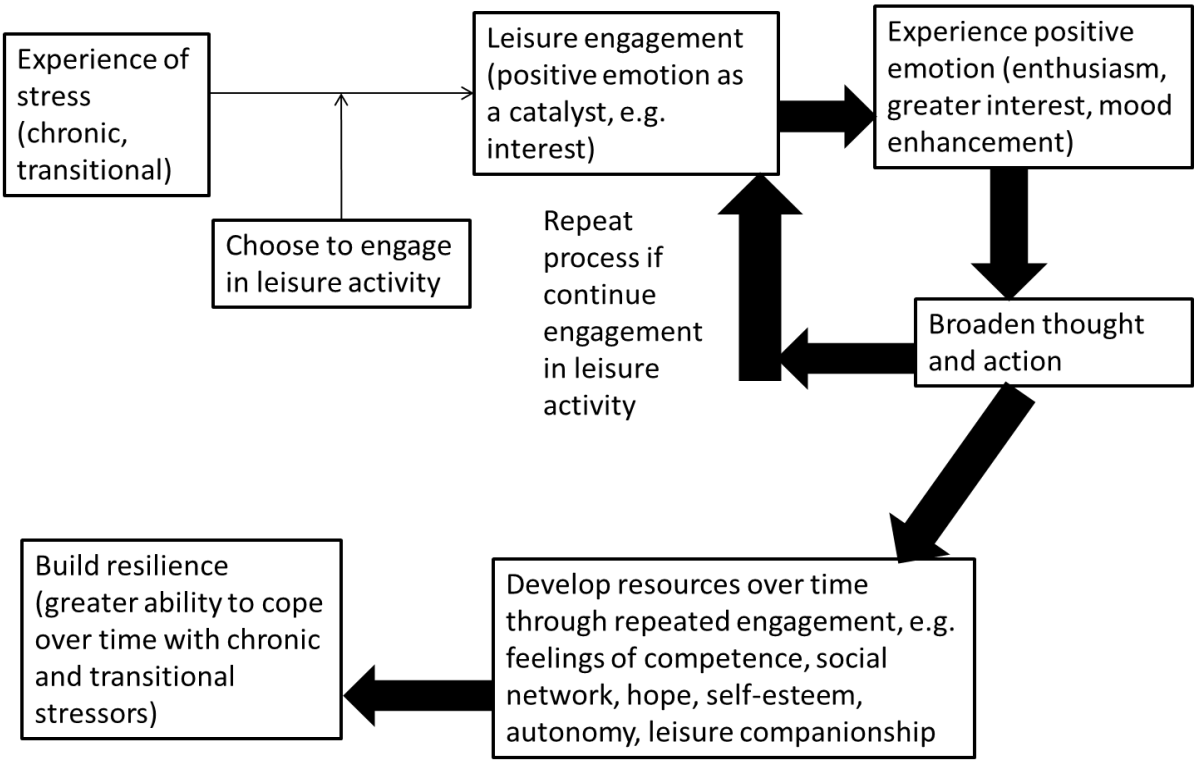

Figure 1.The hypothesised relationship between stress, leisure, emotion and resilience over time demonstrating the broaden-and-build mechanisms.