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Leisure Reflections No. 42: Getting the Big Picture of Leisure

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There is plenty of talk these days about getting the 'big picture' of some event, trend, problem or situation. And, typically, that talk is also about the lack of a big picture on such matters. In fact, this kind of discussion is now so common that one major dictionary — *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.) – considers it an established idea (not colloquial) defining it as the 'entire perspective on a situation or issue'.

The need for big-picture thinking in intellectual circles is well recognized, at least as suggested by the lengthy list of articles and books on the subject found in Google Scholar (search term: 'big picture thinking'). These offerings are there for good reason. For, as historians Cunningham and Williams (1993, p. 407) have pointed out:

> …big pictures are, of course, thoroughly out of fashion at the moment; those committed to specialist research find them simplistic and insufficiently complex and nuanced, while postmodernists regard them as simply impossible. But however specialist we may be in our research, however scornful of the immaturity of grand narratives, it is not so easy to escape from dependence – acknowledged or not – on a big picture. When we define our research as part of the history of science, we implicitly invoke a big picture of that history to give identity and meaning to our specialism.

Naomi Ellemers (2013, p. 1) describes this same (lamentable) orientation in contemporary social psychology.

> During the past 20 years, practices in social psychology have drifted toward the publication of brief research reports as the main outlet for empirical findings, resulting in an exponential increase of the number of publications in our field. Recent developments questioning the reliability of these findings have increased the focus on (methodological) details and have prompted efforts to establish the robustness of isolated phenomena. Both types of developments carry the danger of impeding rather than promoting progress in the field. We can only build a cumulative knowledge base when we succeed in connecting these dots. Developing and examining broader theories about psychological processes and their implications can help connect different insights and elucidate their further

implications in a way that can be used and understood within and beyond the boundaries of our discipline.

And Richard Rosenfeld (2011, p. 1) holds that 'm*icroanalysis holds sway over macroanalysis in contemporary criminology. All of criminology would be better off if greater attention were devoted to the big picture — the relationship between crime and the interplay of institutions in the social systems of whole societies'.* The preceding paragraph suggests that a lack of big-picture thinking is a critical problem in modern research, even while a big-picture kind of debate rages on a far more general level about the primacy of micro versus macro and agency versus structure as preferred analytic stances in the social sciences. Jonathan Turner (2005) reviews the many attempts to resolve this debate. But all are very general, he maintains, leaving out of consideration important specifics that could explain how these two poles are interrelated.

Context and the Big Picture

So big picture thinking is, it seems, a sort of necessary evil in the social sciences in an age of rampant narrow specialization, where the latter proclivity seriously limits our full understanding of the subject being considered. Note that small-picture analysis is not, in contextual terms, necessarily micro or macro, agency or structural — it may fall at any point on the scale. Rather its distinctive feature is its narrow focus.

The word *context* is my preferred summary term for the micro-macro/agency-structure levels of phenomena. It includes a variety of collective formations, many of which unfortunately are commonly given short shrift in the diversity of abstract arguments about context. These formations include the social worlds, formal organizations, social institutions, spatial arrangements, social movements, and global postmodern tribes that characterize modern social life (discussed in Stebbins, 2016).

Context can be fruitfully studied on three levels: micro, meso and macro. The term 'meso structure' was coined by David Maines (1982) to identify the intermediate field of interaction lying between the micro sphere of agency, emotions, beliefs, immediate social interaction and so on and the macro sphere of such all-encompassing, broad-ranging abstractions as community, society, culture, social-class, social trends and the large-scale organizations. On the meso-structural level, human (micro-level) interaction continues to be discernible in interpersonal relationships, small groups, social networks, social worlds and lifestyles.

Context in Leisure Studies

Turner's own answers to the micro-macro/agency-structure question come close to the aims of this edition of Leisure Reflections: to understand leisure we must recognize that the domain of leisure also consists of these three levels. Over the years *homo otiosus* has created a wide variety of arrangements (e.g., organizations, social worlds, subcultures) to meet his leisure needs and interests. Furthermore, there is considerable 'embeddedness' (Turner's term) in these arrangements. For example, leisure participants fit into their surrounding social worlds, they form organizations some of which may spawn national or international federations, and they go

in for activities that reflect certain values of the day (e.g., the modern interest in adventure, physical fitness, individuality).

By contrast, certain other meso and macro level phenomena have been much more fully examined. In leisure studies they include statements about leisure trends (e.g., Rojek, Blackshaw), historical changes in leisure (e.g., Spracklen, Cross, Gelber), and cultural practices as leisure (e.g., Chick, Rojek, Roberts). Some of the social problems generated from time to time by the search for leisure can be conceived of in contextual terms, among them inequality of leisure opportunity, deviant leisure, unhealthy leisure practices and annoying leisure activities.

Moreover, Turner (2005) mentions that human action 'can be constrained'. Thus, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural leisure constraints fit in this contextual analysis in distinctive ways. Leisure constraints inhibit choice of or participation in particular leisure activities. Structural constraints are associated with, for example, race, gender, religion, social class and the availability of financial resources. Interpersonal constraints spring up in, for instance, dyadic, interactive and small-group situations. The intrapersonal variety is evident in, among others, belief, attitude and psychological conflict.

The first two categories of constraints – intrapersonal and interpersonal – would not commonly stir much interest among the scholars caught up in the micro-micro/agency-structure debate, whereas the third category — structural constraints — most certainly would. The intrapersonal constraints are bodily conditions and psychological states such as attitudes and personality that discourage taking up particular leisure activities. At the interpersonal level constraints emerge in social interaction, typically that occurring within family and friendship circles. Such processes as coach's favouritism, scheduling of rehearsals and screening of group members are included under this heading.

Facilitators as Context

According to Raymore (2002) facilitators to leisure are 'factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived or experienced by individuals to enable or promote the formation of leisure preferences and to encourage or enhance participation' (p. 39). This definition is an adaptation of Jackson's (1997) definition of constraint, where facilitator is seen (by Raymore) as its antonym. Nevertheless, the two are not polar opposites, since facilitation is not necessarily achieved by overcoming one or more constraints or even achieved because of their absence. Writing on the relationship of facilitators and constraints to leisure motivation, Raymore argued that 'the facilitator is the condition itself, not the process through which that condition energizes or motivates behavior leading to (i.e., facilitating) or limiting (i.e., constraining) participation' (pp. 43-44). Raymore wrote on facilitation, because he believed that the popularity of constraints as an object of research was creating an imbalance relative to their importance in a full explanation of leisure participation.

In this conceptualisation facilitators may be regarded as resources for leisure activities. Furthermore, as with constraints, facilitators may be intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural. Raymore theorized that intrapersonal facilitators are individual characteristics, traits, and beliefs that enable or promote the development of leisure preferences and that encourage or enhance

leisure participation. The interpersonal facilitators, which originate in other people or groups of people, have similar effects. It is likewise with structural facilitators; they are found in social and physical institutions, organisations, and belief systems.

Inherited characteristics constitute an important class of intrapersonal facilitators. For example, being endowed with exceptional muscular strength, vocal clarity or facial beauty enhances success in rugby, operatic singing or fashion modeling, respectively. Knowing the coach, being a member of an outstanding musical group or working in an electronics shop may facilitate on an interpersonal basis getting invited to join a football team, experiencing top honors in a chamber music context, or having access at discounted prices to computer equipment. Structurally, an individual's participation in a leisure activity may be facilitated by membership in an amateur science society or fishing club with exclusive use of a private pond or by adherence to a religion that allows the faithful access to a retreat.

Be that as it may, I am arguing here that both are types of context. Furthermore, this distinction can be fuzzy, especially when constraint and context refer to the same condition or situation. And speaking of conceptual fuzziness we also find leisure facilitators, where it can happen that one person's facilitator is another's constraint. (e.g., favouritism by a team's coach, bias in a jury at an art show).

Contextual analysis of the kind set out in this article is therefore, in light of its relative absence, unavoidable. Someone must connect the dots. Yet, the vagueness of the theoretic work carried out in the name of micro-macro/agency-structure analysis has not, I suspect, endeared itself to small-picture, mainstream social scientists. Leisure studies has its share of small-picture specialists and scholars who confine their theory and research to either the macro or the micro pole.

Nevertheless, small picture, specialized research can do its part. Authors here should contextualize the subjects they are writing about or, if this has already been done, refer their readers to the appropriate sources. For example, I have routinely asked my students writing about a serious pursuit to provide a chapter or section of a chapter bearing on its history. Since much of social life has its meso and macro background, we should in our specialized studies of it point out how and where our work fits in this context. That would enlarge the small picture while still retaining its detail. It would also give an aperçu of the bigger picture forming its background. Interestingly, the amateur, hobbyist and volunteer participants in my ethnographic research and that of others have shown a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the micro, meso and macro contexts of their passion. We should pay attention to this understanding, even in our more specialized research projects.

Conclusion: Contextual Study in the Lay and Scientific Communities

The previously-mentioned list of entries on the big picture found in Google Scholar suggests that the lay public also finds this point of view to be foreign. An equally long list exists in Google Chrome, albeit one aimed predominantly at organizational and managerial efficiency and somewhat more infrequently, at creativity. So might we ask the question: is big picture thinking an uncommon orientation, whether in the social sciences or in the wider lay community?

To the extent that the version of contextual study presented here is seen by the lay community as esoteric and consequently unimportant, or at least incomprehensible, money and time devoted to it could well be difficult to justify. In parallel, it might be argued by granting agencies and university administrators that such an interest is merely intellectual fun and games, and that these two scarce resources should therefore be channeled elsewhere. Some lay and scientific people may remember the days of opacity (approximately 1945 to 1975) that grew from functionalist thought, and see contextualization as more of the same. In any case, widespread unfamiliarity with and unfathomability of the contextual approach inside and outside the social sciences is bound to hinder its adoption as a legitimate and needed extension of social theory, research and policy. In all three spheres many will still say to the suggestion that we theorize and conduct research with contextualization in mind: 'why bother'?

In fact, leisure studies has benefited substantially from this supposedly offbeat interest, for by studying the constraints to leisure, we have brought scrutiny of its pursuit to the wider world of micro-to-macro context. An important contribution here has been to introduce to the agency/structure debate a conceptual avenue along which to examine some of the missing details of contextualization. These are needed to understand the seemingly arcane workings of context and thereby grasp a deeper than heretofore understanding of human social life. This is no small achievement. But, if we are to have a more complete explanation of leisure activities, we also need recognition of certain specifics like constraints *and* facilitators as they operate on the different levels of context. Otherwise the approach is too vague:

There is nothing inherently contradictory about these two positions, since human action can be constrained without being determined, while structures can be reconstituted by acts of individuals. But, simply saying this does not explain anything; and when the agency-structure question is conflated with the micro-macro issues, theories are typically rather vague (Turner, 2005, p. 406).

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Forthcoming
Leisure Reflections No. 43
On 'Leisure's Commonsense Images'