Self-Determination and Leisure Experiences of Women Living in Two Group Homes

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This phenomenological case study examined the leisure experiences of five women with intellectual disabilities (ages 44–60) in two group homes. Using participant observation, artifacts, and semistructured interviews, the nature of the women’s leisure experiences were understood within the conceptual framework of self-determination. Five staff members were also interviewed to further contextualize the women’s leisure experiences. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes: leisure at home, leisure in the community, and leisure with family and friends. Leisure was experienced differently in each group home, largely due to staff-created input into leisure choices. In one group home, leisure was supervised; in the other, independent leisure was encouraged. The study highlights the importance of promoting self-determined leisure for those approaching retirement age.

Life satisfaction relates to leisure activity (Hawkins, 1993). Historically, persons with intellectual disabilities have been discouraged from making choices regarding personal leisure (Polloway, Smith, Patton, & Smith, 1996). It is not surprising, then, that the leisure of persons with intellectual disabilities has been described as “grey, monotonous, and confined without much sense of freedom” (Nirje, 1972, p. 18). Living arrangements can negatively influence the demonstration of self-determined skills for persons with disabilities (Stancliffe, 2001). People with intellectual disabilities who live in supervised group home settings may be in particular danger of losing opportunities for choice in their leisure activities.

A group home is a home resembling a family dwelling for approximately 3–6 individuals with intellectual disabilities who often receive 24 hr staff to manage their daily living, but it is important to note that the group homes described in this study provided a higher level of supervision.

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the home and support the people residing within the home (Duvdevany, Ben-Zur, & Ambar, 2002). Opportunities for spontaneous and varied leisure for people living in group homes can be influenced by a number of factors. Individuals spend much of their leisure time with peers who also have disabilities, thus limiting their leisure networks and access to leisure resources (Glausier, Whorton, & Knight, 1995; Hayden, Soulen, Schleien, & Tabourne, 1996; Mahon & Martens, 1996). In addition, 24 hr staff supervision can result in planned activities to the exclusion of leisure time. Time is something to be filled to keep people busy rather than an opportunity to teach skills that can lead to independent and self-determined leisure (Stancliffe, 1997). Furthermore, planned activities can detract from opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to express choice (Hoge & Dattilo, 1995).

The negative impact of systems that can impinge on time, resources, and networks can be countered. Group home size (i.e., number of residents) has been found to influence self-determination. Smaller homes have been associated with more choice making (Stancliffe, 1997; Tossebro, 1995); however, this finding has not been consistently reported (Hatton, Emerson, Robertson, Henderson, & Cooper, 1996; Perry & Felce, 2005; Stancliffe & Lakin, 1998). Moreover, research has shown that a common characteristic of self-determined environments is an “impetus person,” one who has “a philosophy, and the accompanying motivation, to see self-determination enhancing practices implemented [within an environment]” (Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004, p. 34).

Expressions of choice may be further discouraged when there are insufficient staff members to accommodate individual leisure pursuits (Pedlar, Haworth, Hutchinson, Taylor, & Dunn, 1999). This results in all members living in one group home and going to the movies even if one person preferred to go shopping. Interestingly, it has been demonstrated that lack of staff can increase opportunities for choice making in residential settings. When support staff is absent for long periods, choice making increases because staff are unavailable to supervise or “guide” the decision-making process (Stancliffe, 1997). Stancliffe, Abery, and Smith (2000) found that semi-independent environments (i.e., staffed only 3–11 hr per week) were more favorable for developing skills, attitudes, and knowledge to support self-determined behaviors than were fully supported group home settings.

Even when there is awareness on behalf of support staff of the importance of choice making for persons with intellectual disabilities, there may be a lack of awareness and understanding of the skills required to make choices. Moreover, the creativity, awareness, and patience from support staff when attending to choice-making behaviors may be lost to the household duties to be completed on a particular shift. For group home staff, it is more time efficient to complete tasks themselves (e.g., meals, evening schedules) than provide an environment that promotes choice making and independence of those living in the group home (Kishi, Teelucksingh, Zollers, Park-Lee, & Meyer, 1988; Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, & Heath, 2001; Stancliffe, Abery, & Smith, 2000). All too often, others take responsibility for determining when, where, and how leisure is experienced, thereby removing the essence of the leisure experience (Stancliffe, 1997). Finally, it has been found that caregivers who make choices for persons with disabilities based on their own assumptions of what the person may prefer, may be doing so
against the preferences of those they are supporting (Martin, Woods, Sylvester, & Gardner, 2005).

Research has demonstrated that people with intellectual disabilities are capable of making choices in many contextual settings (Parsons, Reid, Reynolds, & Bumgarner, 1990; Parsons & Reid, 1990; Realon, Favell, & Lowerre, 1990) and desire increased opportunities to express choice in their leisure activities (Benz & McAllister, 1990). Leisure, by definition, assumes choice in activities. Leisure refers to nonwork hours that are used in accordance to one’s own impulses and judgment and is flexible, spontaneous, self-determined, and choice-related (Parker, 1981). Moreover, leisure provides diversion, relaxation, and a broadening of activities apart from the obligations of family work and other social roles (Arnold, 1978). For the purpose of this study, leisure included activities that took place outside of vocational responsibilities and were not preplanned (i.e., time was not purposely set aside to engage in the activity), such as watching television, doing crafts, visiting with friends, playing games, listening to music, baking, and going for coffee.

**Conceptual Framework**

Self-determination as a conceptual framework facilitates our understanding of the leisure experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities. Self-determination is a life-long developmental process that means “... to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life, and to make choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996, p. 24). Self-determination refers to the capacity and right to exert control over our lives (Wehmeyer, 2004).

Self-determination for persons with intellectual disabilities cannot be discussed without acknowledging how the social context can facilitate or debilitate functioning and life satisfaction. Intellectual disability is a state of functioning an individual experiences within particular immediate environments (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Within one’s environment, the ability to function may be increased or decreased with the presence of contextual factors such as supports, technologies, policies, and social attitudes.

According to Wehmeyer and Sands (1996), four characteristics must be met for behavior to be considered self-determined: (a) the individual acted autonomously, (b) the behaviors were self-regulated, (c) the person initiated the events/behavior in a psychologically empowered manner, and (d) the person acted in a self-realizing manner. Autonomy means that a person is able and free to make decisions without coercion. Self-regulated behavior enables individuals to evaluate their environments and their options of response for coping within their environments and deciding how to act, respond, and change plans as necessary. Psychological empowerment means that one believes personal control is possible over circumstances that are personally important and possesses the skills to reach the desired outcome(s) if the skills are executed. Self-realized people use the knowledge of themselves, their strengths, and weaknesses to reach a desired outcome. This set of attitudes (psychological empowerment and self-realization) and abilities (behavioral autonomy and self-regulation) must be present for an individual to be self-determined (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996).
To have control over one’s life requires a supportive and accessible environment. Choice-making is fundamental to self-determination (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996). Presenting options and teaching choice making in the decision-making process is an apparent and necessary prerequisite for self-determination among individuals with intellectual disabilities (Davis & Burton, 1991). The success of self-determination requires a bidirectional approach: self-determination skills must be taught to persons with disabilities, while service providers must provide opportunities for choice making and recognition of these behaviors by honoring the choices of persons with disabilities (Wood, Fowler, Uphold, & Test, 2005).

For self-determination to be expressed, Wehmeyer and Sands (1996) suggest the following skills are essential: choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-observation, evaluation and reinforcement, internal locus of control, positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy, self-awareness, and self-knowledge. Environments that support the development and use of these skills are ones that can sustain self-determination.

If self-determination is a valued aspect of life satisfaction, how is this construct translated into supervised community living settings for persons with disabilities? In 1995, Wall and Dattilo summarized seven strategies aimed at engaging adults with intellectual disabilities in self-determined leisure related behaviors. The strategies included goal setting, a team approach, and expression of individual preference, creating a responsive environment, providing opportunities for acting on preferences, responding positively to self-determined behaviors, and finally teaching skills of self-determination. For these seven strategies to be implemented, a supportive and flexible environment is required.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to understand the opportunities women with intellectual disabilities living in two group homes have with respect to their leisure. More specifically, the objectives of the study were to learn more about (a) how women with intellectual disabilities experienced leisure and (b) the opportunities they had to provide input into their leisure experiences.

**Method**

To examine the leisure experiences of women with intellectual disabilities, an intrinsic case study approach that was informed by ethnographic methodology was undertaken (Creswell, 1998). Ethnography is a description of a cultural or social group with the aim of bringing meaning to their day-to-day ways of life (Creswell, 1998). Culture can be understood to be the behaviors and ideas that characterize a group (Fetterman, 1998) and is gained through participant observation, field notes, and interviews with the individuals who construct social realities in field settings (Denzin, 1997). Ethnography is well suited to the research question as structure and function guide social organization. Structure refers to the configuration of the group and function refers to the patterns of social relations, both of which operate within group homes settings to moderate the behavior of those residing within.

For the purpose of this study, leisure was the phenomenon of interest. The lived leisure experiences of women with disabilities were gathered through observations and interviews to gain an understanding of the essence of these every day
experiences (Morse & Field, 1995). Two cases (i.e., group homes) were used to explore the phenomenon of leisure. An intrinsic case study approach was appropriate for this study as the phenomenon of interest (leisure) was examined within and around their rich natural neighborhood contexts (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). The group homes were in different neighborhoods, were overseen by different agencies, employed separate staff, and had different people residing in them. Thus, commonalities shared and variances discovered between the group homes were considered to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of leisure for women with intellectual disabilities.

A criterion sampling strategy was used, meaning that each case (i.e., group home) met outlined criteria (Creswell, 1998). Each case matched the definition of a group home. Other criteria included (a) the group home routine provided opportunities for after work and weekend leisure each week (which the residents paid for from their work earnings or savings provided by social service support); (b) each home staffed a “programmer,” hired specifically to support leisure activities of the residents (which the authors recognize may not be typical of all group homes but was a requirement of the housing organization overseeing the group homes within this urban setting); (c) the housemates attended vocational programs (ranged from recreational skill development to community work experience); (d) communication in the home was primarily verbal (e.g., augmented communication systems were not required); (e) the staff personnel were paid and had a minimum of 2 years experience working with people with intellectual disabilities; and (f) the housemates were women with intellectual disabilities. The two group homes, or “cases” will be referred to as Elm Home and Cairn Home (pseudonyms).

The group homes, their staff, and residents were recruited from a moderately sized city via formal letters of invitation to the Executive Directors of the overseeing agencies in accordance with approved ethics guidelines set out by the host universities of the investigators. The two group homes were the only homes in the urban setting that met the outlined criteria. Informed consent of the staff and housemates were secured via signed consent forms. The women gave verbal assent in the presence of a staff member.

Participants

The perspectives of 5 women with intellectual disabilities (hereafter referred to as “the women”) were sought as were the perspectives of 5 support staff of the group homes, thereby giving context to the leisure opportunities. The women did not have secondary impairments. Women were specifically chosen to participate in this study as the leisure participation patterns of women differ from those of men due to personal preference, opportunities available, societal approval, household duties and child care responsibilities, past experiences, and perceptions of leisure (Searle & Brayley, 2000). A homogenous sample would provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The women from Elm Home were two women with intellectual disabilities, one 44 years of age and the other 45 years of age. They had lived at the Elm Home 19 and 7 years, respectively, and both saw family bimonthly. The other three women who lived at Elm Home were not deemed suitable for the study due to
concerns about their ability to communicate. The two staff from Elm Home included a 32-year-old male who had been employed at the home for 9 years. He completed grade 12 and had 2 training certificates in rehabilitation. The second staff member was a part-time 22-year-old nursing student hired as a part-time recreation support staff for two and one-half years (referred to as a “Programmer”).

The 3 women from Cairn Home were 60, 55, and 50 years old and had lived together in the same home for 26 years. Two of the women saw family members weekly and the third, monthly. The other two women who resided at Cairn home were not deemed suitable for the study. Three staff personnel participated from Cairn Home. One was a 37-year-old house manager who had worked in rehabilitation settings for 15 years. She had a rehabilitation certificate from a local college and possessed 6 additional training certificates related to rehabilitation. The second house manager was 51 years old and had worked at the home for 6 years, completed grade 12, and had 2 training certificates in rehabilitation. The third staff member was 27 years old and worked part-time for 4 years at Cairn Home. She had a university degree related to human rights and well as 2 training certificates in rehabilitation.

All of the women lived with their families before entering a group home setting. Their average age when entering a group home was 30 years with a range of 24–38 years.

Data Collection

Women with intellectual disabilities and their support staff from the 2 group homes were observed and interviewed over a 10-week period. Five face-to-face semistructured interviews were conducted with staff, and each woman was interviewed three times (approximately 15–20 min each time) in addition to active interviews that were embedded in leisure outings. The brevity of the interviews expressed the extent to which the women were willing to engage in a dialogue on a single topic. The first author spent approximately 5 hr per week at each group home in the role of leisure “volunteer.”

When collaborating with people with intellectual disabilities on the nature of their lived experiences, several considerations must be taken into account. These considerations include acquiescence (Heal & Sigelman, 1995; Matikka & Vesala, 1997), understanding abstract constructs (Antaki & Rapley, 1996; Morris, Niederbuhl, & Mahr, 1993; Sigelman, Budd, Winer, Schoenrock, & Martin, 1982), recalling personal experiences (Michel, Gordon, Ornstein, & Simpson, 2000), communicating meaning about what they are thinking and feeling (Kernan & Sabsay, 1989), and giving informed consent (Knox, Mok, & Parmenter, 2000). Due to the nature of the participants, several data collection strategies were implemented to address these considerations (Mactavish, Lutfiyya, & Mahon, 2000).

Interview strategies were developed to address potential acquiescence, inability to understand abstract constructs, difficulty recalling past experiences, and expressing what the women were thinking and feeling. These included (a) gaining informed consent through verbal discussions in the presence of house managers, (b) using terminology familiar to the participants, (c) conducting semistructured interviews to prevent acquiescence, (d) presenting ideas one at a time (rephrasing when required), (e) triangulating data, (f) providing flexible interview times, (g)
providing examples from the environment to clarify meaning, and (h) interviewing participants in the immediate setting to enhance recall ability. Interviews, observations, and artifacts were all gathered to gain an understanding of leisure experiences. Although several strategies were implemented, it was difficult to gather verbal information from the women. Their responses were brief and infrequent. A great deal of their communication was done through body language. As a result, the carefully detailed field notes, participant observations, and staff interviews provided the primary data sources for the women’s leisure experiences.

**Interviews.** Two interview techniques were used, semistructured face-to-face interviews and active interviewing. In the semistructured interviews, the first author asked predetermined questions and probed the participants’ responses (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Active interviewing is spontaneous yet directed by the investigator within the loose parameters set out by the purpose of the study. The active interviews were informal and conversation-like as questions were asked in the immediate leisure environment. For example, while at the library, the interviewer asked questions regarding personal interests, book selection, enjoyment of activity, eliminating the need to recall experiences for a later discussion (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Active interviews proved to be more effective than the semistructured interviews in capturing the women’s thoughts and feelings and diminished the tendency to acquiesce to what they thought the interviewer wanted them to say. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Sample semistructured questions included, “What do you do when you get home from work?” “What do you do when you have a day off work?” and “Tell me something that may stop you from enjoying your free time.”

Staff participated in semistructured face-to-face interviews at the end of the 10-week data collection period. Sample questions included, “What factors influence the free time activities of the women?” “What opportunities are afforded the women to make choice about they spend their free time?” and “What meaning do the women take from their leisure experiences?”

**Participant Observations.** Because the women’s interviews did not provide long narrative responses, the field notes generated from participant observation were the primary data source. In the role of “volunteer,” the first investigator participated in home-based leisure time and attended leisure events in the community with the participants and staff listening to what they said, observing what they did, and asking questions if and when appropriate (Kernan & Sabsay, 1989). The researcher did not directly influence the type, quality, or quantity of leisure experiences of the women. Because of the time spent in the home by the first author, the descriptions of the women’s experiences were rich, deep, and authentic, particularly as they were triangulated with other data sources (interviews, artifacts). Observations were both audio recorded and transcribed as field notes as well as written out.

**Artifacts.** To understand the activities of each group home, notes from the daily log book kept by staff were gathered. The log books were used by staff to record daily happenings, community outings, planned activities, future activities, and significant behaviors of those residing in the home. In addition, photographs that both the women and the first investigator took during the women’s leisure
experiences and of their personal surroundings (e.g., their bedrooms) were gathered. Photos were used to elicit discussion during active interviewing and reflect on leisure experiences. As with the other interviews, the resulting transcribed interviews became part of the written data (Denzin, 1994).

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the quality of an investigation and its findings that make it noteworthy to its audiences (Schwandt, 1997). It is the ability of a naturalistic researcher to support the findings through verification (truth value), transferability (use of rich descriptions to consider applicability of findings to other contexts), validation (Do the results answer the research question?), and confirmability (Are the results free of investigator bias?; Meadows & Morse, 2001). Strategies such as prolonged engagement in the field, observation, and triangulation (the use of multiple methods, sources and investigators) brought trustworthiness to the findings of the study (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Other strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings included clearly defining the cases, developing a research design that was consistent with the case study approach, member checking the results of the analysis with the women and staff, multiple coder checks, and a carefully recorded audit trail. Naturalistic transferability of the findings is based on the degree to which the reader can apply the findings to other contexts given similarities in environments, participants, and circumstances and was enhanced by providing descriptions of the group homes and the participants.

**Data Analysis**

The patterns and experiences within each group home were discovered by thoroughly examining the information gathered in interview texts, field notes, and artifacts. The notes from the daily log book were read to gain an understanding of common events within the home and the lives of the women. Significant occurrences in the home and community were highlighted (e.g., phone calls to/from family and friends, visitors to the home, activities during the course of a day) and provided context for the interviews and returned the coders to the setting. An inductive thematic analysis typical of phenomenology was conducted on the interview data (Creswell, 1998). To isolate the thematic statements, a line-by-line analysis was carried out whereby particularly revealing phrases were highlighted and coded with meaningful labels (van Manen, 1997). The essential or invariant themes or those that give fundamental meaning to the phenomenon were then determined (Wolcott, 2001). The transcripts from the photograph conversations were used to provide supporting evidence to the themes.

**Results**

Three themes developed from the analysis of data that described the women’s experiences of leisure: (a) leisure at home, (b) leisure in the community, and (c) leisure with family and friends. The themes were similar in that the women of both homes participated in leisure in all contexts; however, each home environ-
ment provided distinctly different leisure experiences as illustrated in the sub-
themes even though the staffing policies and administrative structures of the
homes were similar (see Table 1). The statements about what was observed are
taken from the recorded field notes. When quotes are used, pseudonyms are used
to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

The uniqueness of the experiences in each home appeared to be determined
by opportunities for the women to provide input into their leisure experiences.
The leisure experiences for the women of Elm Home were defined, in large part,
by supervised scheduled events in the home. The daily management of the group
home (e.g., laundry, meals) appeared to take precedence over both opportunities
for leisure experiences and the women’s input into the nature of their leisure expe-
riences. In contrast, the women of Cairn Home experienced opportunities for
input into spontaneous leisure at home as well as in the community and more
often than Elm Home, chose their own leisure activities and were not bound by
supervised, scheduled events in the home. Even when staff support was required
to successfully engage in an activity, the type and amount of support was usually
determined by the women. The leisure experience of the women who resided in
each group home will be discussed in turn.

**Elm Home**

Leisure at home was both self-directed and staff-initiated, but always supervised.
Leisure in the community such as shopping and going to the library was also
supervised as staff members were always present during outings. The women
spent time with family and friends during their leisure (i.e., home visits); however,
these get-togethers were not self-initiated but organized by staff members.

**Leisure at Home**

Staff most often guided home leisure activities. Activities included watching tele-
vision, playing games, and exploring personal interests such as baking and crafts;
however, staff chose which programs to watch on television, staff directed the
women to play games during leisure, and staff determined the women’s involve-
ment in baking and crafts.

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Supervised, Self-Directed Leisure. Self-directed leisure experiences at home were predominantly a shared experience, with little opportunity to explore personal interests, and were supervised by staff. The self-directed leisure activity observed most often was watching television. The women were not observed doing crafts, games, or listening to music.

Although one of the women had a television in her room, she was always observed to watch television in the presence of the staff. Although watching television was selected by the women, the program selection was determined by the staff in a manner that gave the perception of input from the women. A staff member reported, “Basically, [you] just open the TV Guide and [they] point to something and you just basically watch whatever the hell you want to anyways cause [they] think that’s what it is.”

The other housemate also experienced leisure under the watchful and directive eye of staff members. The field notes indicated that if she was out of sight from staff, they questioned her whereabouts. The staff were observed to call her name, seek her out, and check on her when she was not in their presence.

Supervised, Directed Leisure. There were times when the women required support to successfully participate in leisure activities, either for safety reasons (e.g., using the stove) or because the women did not possess the complete range of skills required to complete the activity (e.g., following a recipe). One woman particularly enjoyed baking at home and often perused cookbooks and their photos to choose recipes that matched her culinary tastes. Upon learning of her interest in cookbooks, she was asked, “How often do you bake?” She responded, “Not often enough!” When asked if she baked the treats she selected from the cookbook, she responded, “No, the staff does.” Curious as to why she did not assist in creating the culinary delights she desired so much, a staff member indicated, some staff “can’t handle it” because it is time consuming to help her.

Even though the women enjoyed the product of the baking, they did not benefit from the process of baking. Baking is a sequential activity with discrete steps, therefore very well-suited to the expression of the tenets of self-determined behavior. Baking involves decision making, planning, responding appropriately to the task requirements, and achieving a desired outcome.

The staff often selected the activities in which the women would participate. One woman was told, “Go downstairs and see if you can find a board game. Bring it up and we’ll play a game.” The woman went downstairs to choose a board game. She returned with Yahtzee. The staff person took the game out of the box, set out the dice, the shaker, and the score pad. Once they were ready to play, the staff person explained, “Just shake the dice in the cup and roll them onto the table.” Within three rounds of the game, the staff person assumed the woman’s turn as she was not rolling the dice to his liking; he indicated it was too loud.

This experience was significant for two reasons. First, the woman’s leisure time was staff directed rather than self-directed. Thus, without opportunities to exercise self-determined behaviors (e.g., decision making and problem solving) a reliance on staff to determine her leisure may result. Second, the time and effort
to teach skills for leisure would have permitted active participation rather than passive observation.

**Leisure in the Community**

There was a policy at Elm Home that required each woman to participate in a weekly community outing. Although by definition these activities would be considered recreational rather than leisure, they are included because of the assumption that the women would have poor quality leisure experiences otherwise. “It’s a lot easier [for the women] to sit at home,” according to a staff member.

**Supervised Outings.** The daily log book indicated that community outings included “banking,” “going for a walk,” and “shopping.” One outing was a shopping trip to a craft fair. It was observed that the money for potential purchases was taken from the “petty cash” account for the house (the women were not given their own money to manage) and the money was held in the staff member’s purse. Purchases were selected by the women, but the potential purchase was checked three times by the staff person before “permission” to purchase was granted and the money was given to the women. The change from the purchase was returned to the staff person who then carried the purchases. Although the women were free to make purchases with their own money, they did not handle their own money or take responsibility for the safe keeping of their purchases, perhaps a way for the staff to “protect” the women from potential loss. Opportunities to learn to budget, handle money, interact with sales persons, and enjoy carrying the purchases were overlooked as important skills to meaningful shopping.

One of the women enjoyed going to the library and looking through cookbooks. As she could not read, her selections were based on the photos contained within. On the day observed, desserts cookbooks were her desired selection. The staff person took the books from the shelf and asked, “Do you want this one?” Although the woman was provided with the opportunity to indicate if she liked the selected book, the opportunity to teach library skills for independent future leisure and simply linger over the books as a form of leisure did not occur.

Although the recommendation for the women to experience community outings twice per week was developed with good intentions, it prevented the women from contributing to independent leisure experiences. The program staff person stated,

It was difficult for the girls to pick their own activities because the office didn’t want them to be doing the same thing all of the time (e.g., go out for coffee) because [the supervisor] would say we weren’t integrating them into the community. Therefore, even if they were asked what they wanted to do, they really had no control over it because staff would get into trouble for letting the [women] do the same activity all of the time, even though it was their choice to do so. . . . It’s all about appearances, even if the [women] are miserable. The office always says, “They’re adults, let them decide” but really they have no say. . . . It’s very sad, they would be much happier if the rules were
set out for them based on how much happiness it can bring them, not what’s socially acceptable.

**Leisure With Family and Friends**

Both women had family who lived in the city, and both women identified their mothers as their closest family member. The time the women spent with their families was meaningful as they often spoke of time spent with loved ones. Both women spent at least one weekend per month with their mothers, as well as holidays.

*Awaiting a Connection With Others.* The visits with family were scheduled on the weekends and were the only times the women connected with their family. The women were not observed to initiate phone calls to connect with family members. There was only one logged phone call in the daily log book over the 10-week period. Any opportunities to talk on the phone with family appeared to be initiated by family members or staff. It was difficult to determine why the women did not use the phone (lack of desire, lack of knowledge, off limits).

Staff were aware of the meaningful relationships the women had with their mothers, yet used these opportunities to connect with family as a form of behavior management. One resident recounted that when she yelled at a staff member because she was upset during a community outing, the staff person said she could not go to her mother’s for a visit. The woman stated. “... if she had trouble with me I couldn’t go and if it happens again where I go somewhere and I act up they have to cancel my visits.”

**Cairn Home**

For the women of Cairn Home, leisure at home included self-directed activities with and without the support of staff, such as watching television, making crafts, listening to music, baking, and pet care. The degree of support provided by the staff was gauged by the individual abilities and desires of each woman. The women experienced self-initiated leisure in the community and they determined with whom, what, and when. The women went independently for coffee and joined friends. Community leisure was supported if the environment was unfamiliar or if transportation was needed. The women initiated contact with family and friends during their leisure by telephone or by walking to family and friends’ homes.

**Leisure at Home**

The women experienced leisure at home in a spontaneous and independent manner. As for Elm Home, when the women required support, it was to engage in activities that were unfamiliar to them or presented safety issues such as baking or cooking. In Cairn home, however, rather than the staff doing the activity for the women, the staff identified next steps in an activity when a recipe needed to be
followed, provided needed resources such as locating ingredients, or oversaw the safe use of kitchen appliances as the women completed the tasks for themselves.

**Independent Self-Directed Leisure.** Leisure at home consisted of spontaneous and independent self-directed leisure activities such as watching television, creating a pleasing home environment (e.g., decorating their bedrooms), exploring hobbies and personal interests, and spending time with the house pet. These activities were considered spontaneous and self-directed because the women initiated these activities without external influence.

Watching television was an activity in which all women in the home participated during their leisure, and the activity was not monitored by staff. Programs were not selected according to the house schedule or staff interest, and the women chose programs they preferred to watch. The remote control had colored stickers on it, strategically placed by staff on the power button and the channel-up and channel-down buttons to facilitate independent operation of the television.

The women enjoyed leisure time in their bedrooms and created spaces that reflected their interests and personalities. One of the women’s bedrooms was decorated with pictures of her boyfriend and family. Her bed was lined with stuffed animals, and her movies and CD collection were organized as she liked. She enjoyed listening to music and had her own CD player in her room. An excerpt from the field notes about one of the other women’s bedrooms stated, “Very colorful, lots of pictures, artwork she has done herself, stuffed animals, pictures of her family and Dan [her boyfriend]. Everything is neatly organized. She loves color!”

In speaking with the staff, it was clear they respected the right of the women to have control over their rooms and they could possess items that did not have to be shared with others (e.g., CDs).

Leisure time was also spent in hobbies. One of the women enjoyed beading and had a dedicated space for her hobby. She chose when to bead, what to make, and what design to use. At the time of the study she was preparing to sell her jewelry at an upcoming craft sale. Within the context of the conceptual framework, the significance of this leisure activity becomes clear. The woman’s choice to make crafts during leisure allowed her to exercise skills of (a) decision making (deciding what crafts to make), (b) problem solving (determining when and where to create beadwork), (c) goal setting (identifying how much time was available and how many items were needed for the sale), and (d) self-evaluation and outcome expectancy (recognizing that by applying her skills of beading, she would achieve her desired outcome). The staff supported the women’s hobbies as the women indicated that staff would purchase Christmas and birthday gifts for the women that contributed to their interests, hobbies, or collections.

**Staff Supported, Self-Directed Leisure.** The women were observed to assist with menu planning, preparing the meals, and baking. These activities required staff support at times, but it was clear that the women were active participants while baking and cooking and that staff recognized their contributions. Statements in the daily log book included, “Ina and I [staff person] made supper together,” “Ina and I [staff person] made cookies,” and “Beth and I [staff person] made a nice chicken supper together.” Staff always recognized the women’s contribution
during the activity, indicating that women were actively engaged and learning daily leisure skills.

**Leisure in the Community**

The nature of the women’s community leisure experience depended on the proximity of the setting to the group home. If a desired location was within walking distance, the women experienced leisure independently and spontaneously. Leisure was supported by staff when the activity posed potential safety risks, when the environment was unfamiliar to the women, or if the location was too far from the house to walk.

**Independent Outings.** A staff person indicated that “[the women] talk about being out in the community [because] being part of the community is important to them.” A typical independent leisure experience in the community was a trip to the local donut shop, which was five blocks away from the group home. This independent and spontaneous leisure activity was possible because the staff spent weeks teaching the women the skills required. One of the staff recalled,

> At first . . . we all went together and she was the leader and pushing the button to cross the street so . . . that we knew she knew what to do. After that . . . I wouldn’t cross the street with her. She would cross the street by herself and I would . . . be on the other side watching to make sure she would be okay. And then we just let her go.

Although staff could appreciate that the women had a desire to experience self-directed leisure in the community, they were not without reservations. “It’s like when you have to finally let your kids walk to school by themselves . . . sometimes you have to go hide behind parked cars!” Although anxious, staff supported the women and provided them with an opportunity to learn the skills required to experience autonomous leisure outings. The opportunity to actively engage in this leisure experience was attainable because (a) staff trusted the women to use good judgment, (b) staff recognized the value in experiencing community leisure, and (c) staff realized the importance for the women to experience autonomous leisure.

**Accompanied Outings.** At times, the women required support in the community. Most often the support was in the form of transportation to a desired shopping location. A staff person described a typical shopping outing as one where the women would go to one store, split up to shop independently, then meet up again:

> Usually if I have some shopping I have to do for myself I’ll say “I’m going to do some shopping, you guys can go and look around.” Or maybe Ruby [housemate] and I are going to look for something to buy and I’ll say “Ruby and I are going to the clothing department, you guys can go look at whatever you want.”

When it came time to pay at the checkout, staff “coached” the women through the process but did not interfere. The staff indicated in word and action that choice and independence in the shopping experience were important.
Leisure With Family and Friends

Leisure was experienced through connections with family and friends. The proximity and availability of family members played a key role in determining the frequency and nature of these experiences (face-to-face contact or telephone calls).

**Connecting With Others.** The importance of the women developing and nurturing independent relationships with others was eloquently expressed by one of the staff members. “Any strong relationships they have with another person are more important . . . than going out to a movie with the group. They have a strong identity as a group as well. Those leisure activities just don’t have the same importance. The individual time seems to be more important.”

Connecting with family was recognized as an important leisure outlet. The telephone was used on a regular basis; the phone was free to use whenever they chose. If required, the women would ask the staff for assistance with dialing. If a friend or family member lived in close proximity to the group home, the women were able to experience leisure face-to-face with the individual. “Beth goes to see [her niece] once or twice a week . . . sometimes for just 10 minutes or she’ll stay and have a visit, kind of depending on what her niece is doing.”

**Discussion**

It is important to note that the homes selected for this study were not chosen based on their dichotomous contexts. The authors did not intend to pursue a “poor practices versus best practices” scenario. The authors were surprised by the stark differences in the homes. The unique social contexts within each group home, one that facilitated self-determined leisure and one that was less successful in doing so, differentially influenced the leisure experiences of the women in each home. Elm Home adopted a service-provision philosophy in which the women were viewed as “clients” that had to be cared for and their affairs had to be managed (Polloway et al., 1996). The opportunities for the women to develop and experience self-determined behaviors were staff directed and repetitive. This was in contrast to the leisure experiences of the women who lived at Cairn Home. In Cairn Home, the women were the focal point in the home and the activities in the home and the activities of the staff were based on teaching the skills required for independent, spontaneous, and choice based leisure. The staff completed the duties required to manage the home in conjunction with the leisure interests of the women (e.g., making meals and baking), regarding their roles as roles mentors and facilitators.

Although all of the women experienced leisure at home, in the community, and with friends and family, the Cairn Home staff members encouraged self-determined leisure by supporting personal choice, decision making, autonomy, and spontaneity in their leisure, which are the tenets of leisure as defined by Parker (1981). When support was required, it was individualized and faded back as the women became more skilled and confident in newly acquired skills. It is also important to note that the staff in Cairn Home recognized the risks that were presented when the women were engaged in self-determined leisure. These risks of safety, failure, and disappointment were not only experienced by the women, but were inherent to the staff as well. The staff were willing to sacrifice their
profession based solely on their judgment, perception, and expectations they held of the women.

In contrast, although the women of Elm Home experienced leisure at home, in the community, and with friends and family, it was often policy driven, which decreased the opportunity for individual choice, spontaneity, and autonomy. The support provided by staff was instrumental to the success, but the staff did not encourage increasing independence by structuring the environment (i.e., provide opportunities to make choices, acknowledge self-determined behaviors) or teaching skills that would enhance the opportunity for self-determined leisure.

Polloway and colleagues (1996) suggested that people with disabilities have few opportunities to learn the skills that enable them to become self-determined, particularly if supports are based on the service delivery paradigm in which the daily activities and routine for individuals with intellectual disabilities are programmed by a staff member. When programming is in place, there is no need for adults with intellectual disabilities to exercise self-determination because there is no “room” to do so (Hoge & Dattilo, 1995; Kishi et al., 1988). When one programs leisure, it ceases to be leisure and becomes a different experience whereby one must adhere to structure, rules, and expectations established by others (Parker, 1981). When leisure is lost, so are opportunities for choice making and personal expression.

A further barrier to developing self-determined leisure behaviors are the lack of awareness and understanding by service providers (Kishi et al., 1988). Lack of patience when attending to choice-making behaviors has also been cited as a constraint (Smith et al., 2001). Within Cairn Home, skills were being developed to exercise self-determined leisure behaviors, where this was not happening to the same extent in Elm Home. Cairn Home staff clearly engaged the women in processes of choice and decision making.

In Elm Home, due to the need to meet the responsibilities of the home and the policies of the agency, staff had difficulty incorporating strategies to support self-determined behavior. In contrast, a number of the strategies outlined by Wall and Dattilo (1995) were observed to be in use at Cairn Home. The experiences of the women would suggest that the implementation of strategies to facilitate self-determined leisure may be possible within group home settings with similar support systems. The strategies observed in Cairn Home included (a) encouragement of choice and set goals for autonomous leisure, (b) all staff members committed to independent leisure, (c) individual preferences were determined, (d) the staff were responsive to the women’s desires, (e) opportunities were created to act on the leisure choices, (f) the staff recognized and acknowledged self-regulated leisure, and (g) the staff taught skills for self-determined leisure.

The nature of the leisure experiences of the women of Elm Home may have been attributable to support staff underestimating the ability of persons with intellectual abilities to achieve their goals. Thus, staff perceptions and expectations regarding the abilities of the women, and perhaps persons with disabilities in general, had a great impact on the overall life experiences of the women in the home. In addition, the staff at Elm Home had fewer educational certifications than their cohorts at Cairn Home. This could be a reflection of the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of the staff, or an indication of the mandate and beliefs of the agency as a whole. Administrative bodies that support self-determination may be more cog-
nizant to provide training to staff to aid in their understanding of self-determined theory and practices (Karvonen et al., 2004). The additional professional development may have better prepared the Cairn Home staff to support autonomous, self-regulated, active, and meaningful leisure (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996). Kishi et al. (1988) and Neumayer and Bleasdale (1996) identified the impact of organization and agency administration on the leisure experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities. They reported that policy can impact staff’s interpretation of their roles, which can lead to an underestimation of the ability of persons with intellectual disabilities to achieve independent leisure goals. In Elm Home, the actions of the staff interfered with the women’s opportunities to exercise self-determination. The finding lends support for Stancliffe’s work (1997) that suggested that the less interference individuals with intellectual disabilities experience from staff, the more opportunities for self-determined behaviors will exist.

Over 30 years ago Nirje (1972) argued that for persons with intellectual disabilities to experience and freely choose leisure activities, they must develop self-confidence through authentic experiences within the community. Furthermore, these authentic experiences must not occur solely in the presence of other individuals with intellectual disabilities (Glausier et al., 1995; Hayden et al., 1996; Mahon & Martens, 1996). It would appear that although we understand this concept from a policy point of view (e.g., weekly integrated leisure experiences), implementation of the policy remains challenging.

This study contributes to the literature by addressing a limitation of the current body of research identified by Stancliffe (2001). This study examines the specific features of living environments of the same type (i.e., two group homes) as opposed to examining differences between different types of living environments (i.e., group home versus institution, group home versus semi-independent apartment dwelling). The implications of this study, however, cannot be directly applied to other group homes. The findings do suggest that the differences in the leisure experiences of the women in the two group homes may have been influenced by several characteristics in their environments. Policy development is needed to protect agencies, employees, and the individuals receiving support. Policies need to be person centered with practices for operationalization identified for front line workers. Implicit with person-centered policy is consultation with the people who receive the support to ensure their best interests are being taken into consideration. Staff should be encouraged and receive acknowledgment for attaining additional education to support their job roles. Programs that reinforce the rights of people with disabilities speak to the importance of self-determination and of quality of life, and provide beneficial strategies that can be implemented within group home settings (e.g., Bodnar & Coffin, 2001).

In addition to providing educational opportunities for staff, people with intellectual disabilities should also receive guidance to learn the skills required for self-determined leisure. In doing so, they may identify and seize opportunities available to them as well. Furthermore, they may be more sensitive to opportunities that are not provided or are removed from their environment thereby asking service providers to be accountable for their actions.

Finally, the development of leisure skills will have a direct impact on the quality of life for persons with intellectual disabilities as they retire from their places of work. This is the first generation of people who will reach retirement age
from supported employment placements. It is imperative that leisure skill development begins early in life and be maintained. Waiting until retirement may be too late and perpetuate limited and infrequent leisure experiences (Glausier et al., 1995).

**References**


