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# Retirees' Leisure: Activities, Benefits, and their Contribution to Life Satisfaction

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**ABSTRACT** *This article examines the structures of leisure activities and leisure benefits of individuals who have recently retired. It also explores the contribution of leisure activities and benefits to a higher life satisfaction at this phase of life. The study is based on in-person quantitative interviews with 383 retirees in an Israeli national sample survey. Results indicate that there are 13 factors of leisure activities and five factors of leisure benefits, all of which are interrelated. Six of the activity factors contribute significantly to retirees' life satisfaction (high culture and 'dolce-vita', free out of home activities, spirituality and enrichment, popular culture, following generation, and independent home activities). The only leisure benefit that indicates a significant influence on life satisfaction is essentiality. The results of this study support and clarify the Activity Theory, and enhance understanding of the role of leisure in achieving a high level of life satisfaction, which is equivalent to a successful adaptation to retirement.*

**KEYWORDS:** *retirement, activities, leisure benefits, life satisfaction, activity theory*

## Introduction

Retirement, perhaps more than anything else, represents the transition from middle age to old age. Therefore, a successful adaptation to retirement should be considered as the first step towards successful aging, and special attention should be given to the transition process. Although many studies have tried to explain successful aging, and have attempted to understand the contribution of leisure to this process, most of them did not distinguish between the retirement phase and other stages of advanced age (e.g. Kelly, 1987; Chiriboga & Pierce, 1993). Moreover, the main focus of those studies was the association between the behavioral aspect of leisure and life satisfaction at advanced age. Most studies did not examine leisure benefits

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and their contribution to life satisfaction at this age (e.g. Fernandez-Ballesteros *et al.*, 2001; Hall & Havens, 2002).

This article focuses on how leisure can contribute to a better life satisfaction at the retirement phase of life. The study examined not only the behavioral aspect of leisure, but also the psychological aspect (i.e. leisure benefits), and the interrelationship between the two. The sample included 383 retirees, who had retired in the past five years, in an Israeli national sample survey. By understanding what generated a higher life satisfaction after retiring, which could be equated to a better adaptation to retirement, the study was able to arrive at some practical conclusions that might help retirees to cope with the difficulties that characterize the transition period.

## Literature Review

In the gerontology literature, the term *successful aging* has received a great deal of theoretical and empirical attention during the past few decades. Despite this fact, the scientific community has not yet agreed on the interpretation of 'successful aging'. Torres (1999) identified four groups of definitions for this term: (1) maximizing self-potential and reaching a high level of physical, social, and psychological well-being; (2) possessing the capability of adapting to changes that occur in later life; (3) possessing capabilities similar to those of younger people; and (4) managing to remain productive.

The literature dealing with successful aging usually examines the relationships between good physical, cognitive and personal functioning, and the various factors explaining them (socio-demographics, behavior, and physiology). It relates to old age as a period in which the individual is physically, cognitively and mentally challenged. A successful confrontation with these challenges is defined not only as the absence of physical or mental illness, but also as an improvement of various dimensions of one's psychological well-being, such as: self-acceptance, sense of control, good inter-personal relationships, a sense of having a goal in life, personal growth and relative independence (Ryff *et al.*, 1998).

The aspect of psychological well-being that received most of the researchers' attention was life satisfaction. In order to measure life satisfaction, many of the studies used the Life Satisfaction Index (LSI) questionnaire. The LSI was planned by Neugarten *et al.* (1961), and was designed especially for older adults living within the community. It was comprised of 20 statements concerning various dimensions of subjective life satisfaction at an advanced age, including: enjoyment of daily activities, perceiving life as meaningful, a sense of success in achieving principal life goals, positive self-image, optimism, and general happiness. Gerontologists refer to this tool as a sensitive and accurate tool, which is quite successful in exploring the differences between different social groups (Andrews & Inglehart, 1979; Herzog & Rodgers, 1981). The LSI test is somewhat problematic. Shmotkin (1998) argues that a bias in the test results might occur due to the high level of exposure, the fear that respondents' statements might reach a large public, and social desirability. However, studies have shown that controlling individual differences in the realm of social desirability does not enhance the validity of the measures (McCrae, 1986; Kozma & Stones, 1987; Diener *et al.*, 1991).

The role of leisure in achieving better well-being at an advanced age was first defined in the *Activity Theory* (Havighurst, 1963), which argued that in order to preserve psychological well-being at old age, it is important to maintain a high level of involvement in activities. The Activity Theory stated that 'successful aging means the maintenance, as far and as long as possible, of activities and attitudes of middle age', and that people 'should find substitutes for the activities which they had to give up, e.g. work – if they were forced to retire, clubs and associations, friends and loved ones whom they had lost by death' (p. 309). More recently, the *Continuity Theory* (Atchley, 1989, 1993) tried to explain elderly people's inclination towards continuity. It argued that individuals wish to maintain stability in the same roles they had engaged in during their life course, even though their progressing in age may impose some obstacles in the availability of those roles. According to the Continuity Theory, remaining involved and active is an adaptive instrument that helps elderly people to preserve continuity.

The Activity Theory has played a central role in gerontology, popularizing the idea that active involvement generates happiness. A huge mass of studies support this theory, all indicating how a high level of involvement in activities contributes to elderly people's well-being. These studies may be divided into three groups. The first group examined how participation in leisure activities contributed to psychological well-being at a *macro level*. This group used general measures, such as the number of activities a person was involved in, and the number of hours a day dedicated to leisure activities, etc. (e.g. Kelly, 1987; Mishra, 1992; Chiriboga & Pierce, 1993; Riddick & Stewart, 1994; Shmanske, 1997; Fernandez-Ballesteros *et al.*, 2001; Hall & Havens, 2002).

The second group of studies examined how participation in a specific leisure activity contributed to older participants' well-being, and may thus be described as *micro level* studies. Examples of this group may be found in Cooper and Thomas' (2002) study of dancing. Yau and Packer's (2002) study of T'ai Chi and in Heliker *et al.*'s (2000) study of gardening. The third group of studies used a *midway level*, i.e. examining the effect of certain groups of activities on elderly people's well-being. The researcher was usually the one who divided the activities into groups; therefore different divisions were made in different studies, in accordance with the purpose of each specific study. An example of the latter may be the studies that divided activities into three groups: informal, formal, and solitary activities (e.g. Litwin, 2001; Ritchey *et al.*, 2001). Another example may be the division of activities into two groups: outdoor and indoor activities (Lomerantz *et al.*, 1988), or yet another example: dividing activities according to the level of involvement in them (Mannell, 1993).

Whereas the relationship between activity and psychological well-being among older adults has been continuously studied, much less attention has been given to the relationship between the activity benefits, which represent the psychological aspect of leisure activities, and psychological well-being at advanced age. Only a few of the studies mentioned above have tried to explain the relationship between behavior and well-being by means of leisure benefits. For instance: the finding that *high investment* activities contribute to elderly people's well-being more than *low investment* activities was explained by the high frequency of *flow* experience that accompany high involvement activities (Mannell, 1993); the contribution of

dancing to well-being was explained by its social benefits and by its influence on the elderly person's self-image (Cooper & Thomas, 2002); and T'ai Chi contributed to older people's well-being through both physical strength and mental calmness (Yau & Packer, 2002).

A salient tool to measure leisure benefits is the scale that was developed by Kelly (1978). This scale included 20 statements concerning a specific activity, which expressed various reasons for participating in it. In a study conducted among people aged 40 and over (Kelly *et al.*, 1986) the respondents were asked to choose two activities that were the most meaningful to them, and to rank each statement regarding each one of those activities. Factor analysis revealed seven types of leisure benefits: 'companionship in the activity', 'strengthening primary relationships', 'competence and skill-development', 'expression and personal development', 'health and exercise', 'meeting role expectations', and 'general enjoyment'. The first five factors were found to be significant (role expectations were seldom rated as important, and enjoyment almost always was). The leading two were 'primary relations' and 'expression'. Albeit some different tendencies, these findings were found to be consistent in various age and gender groups.

In a different study based on the same dataset (Kelly *et al.*, 1987), the relationship between different activity groups and life satisfaction was examined. Despite the availability of data on the subject, the relationship between leisure benefits and life satisfaction was not examined, nor the relationship between activity types and activity benefits. In addition, like many other studies that investigated patterns of leisure at the third age, there was no reference to a specific phase in one's life course, only to age. No division was made between elderly people who have already retired and those who were still working, nor was there any separation between other factors, such as retirement and physical disability.

## The Present Study

The study was planned to answer the following questions:

1. What is the structure of leisure activities among those who have recently retired?
2. What is the structure of their leisure benefits?
3. What are the associations between leisure activities and leisure benefits?
4. How do leisure activities and leisure benefits contribute to life satisfaction at this phase?

By focusing on the first years following retirement, which may be viewed as the first step towards advanced age, the present study aims to explore the role of leisure in achieving a better adaptation to retirement as a first step towards successful aging.

## Method

This study adopted a quantitative approach by employing in-person interviews among recently retired individuals, and explored the relationships between three groups of variables: leisure activities, leisure benefits, and life satisfaction.

Regarding leisure activities, the study employed the *midway level* mentioned earlier, i.e. examining the effect of groups of activities on elderly people's well-being. A non-interfering approach was implemented. The researcher was not the one who divided the activities into groups. Instead, it was determined by the correlations that were found between the activities by means of participation data. The same approach was implemented for leisure benefits. This approach was implemented by using factor analysis. The main advantage of factor analysis is that it is data driven, and not influenced by any specific research questions (e.g. Mannell, 1993; Litwin, 2001).

### *Sample*

The study was based on a national sample survey, consisting of 383 independent Jewish retirees, age 50 and over, who had retired in the past five years. Respondents who had retired but were still working full-time were screened, due to the assumption that their lifestyle had not significantly changed. Retirees who were still working part-time or occasionally were included in the sample, due to the assumptions that (a) their lifestyle had changed since retirement; and (b) leisure played a more significant role in their new lifestyle.

### *Data Collection*

Interviews with retirees who had recently retired were conducted between May and August 2002. Respondents' screening and interview appointment setting was done by phone, and interviews took place at the respondents' homes. Closed questions on the respondent's leisure participation, leisure benefits, life satisfaction, and background factors (including socio-demographic characteristics as well as health perception, work status, and personal history) were asked by well-trained, age 40 and over, experienced female interviewers. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, ranging from 30 to 75 minutes.

### *Measurement*

*Leisure activities.* The interview included a list of 41 activities, and a scale of 11 degrees of participation frequency, from 0 (never) to 10 (more than four hours a day). Respondents were asked to mention at what frequency they participated in each activity. In addition, the participants were asked whether there were any other activities, not mentioned in the list, in which they participated. In that case, they were asked to describe those activities, and report the frequency of participation in them. Only 10% of the sample mentioned additional activities, each of which were cited by one to two respondents. In most cases those could be ascribed to activities in the list (e.g. 'gardening' to 'physical activity', 'baby-sitting for my grandchild' to 'meeting grandchildren', etc.).

*Leisure benefits.* Respondents were asked to choose the three activities that they enjoyed most, and to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a list of 20 statements regarding each activity, on a scale of 1 (not at all/not relevant) to 5 (very

much). The list of statements represented different leisure benefits resulting from participation. The tool used was Kelly's scale of leisure benefits (1978). This scale was translated into Hebrew by the author. The translation was validated by three professional translators who re-translated it into English. The outcome of their re-translation was the exact same wording that had been originally used.

*Life satisfaction.* A LSI questionnaire (Neugarten *et al.*, 1961) was used to examine respondents' life satisfaction. This test was translated into Hebrew and validated by Shmotkin (1991). It consisted of 20 statements regarding different aspects of life satisfaction at advanced age. Respondents were asked to report whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement.

*Background questionnaire.* Since life satisfaction may be affected by many factors, the interview included a long background questionnaire. The variables examined were: age, gender, education, marital status, number of children and whether they were living at home, number of members in the household, household income, spouse's occupation, religious orientation, origin (by place of birth of the respondent and his/her father), residency area (by phone area codes), and the size of the city/town of residency. Three questions examined health status: health perception, perception of physical competence to participate in different leisure activities, and whether the respondent had suffered from a severe illness during the past two years (a more objective measure). Other questions examined work history, present work status, retirement duration, and retirement pattern (early retirement, late retirement, or at official retirement age; whether forced or by respondent's own choice). Several more questions checked personal history such as: date of immigration to Israel, personal connection to holocaust (survivor or a close relative of survivor), and occurrences of extreme difficulties in the past two years, such as spouse's or other family member's illness, death or divorce.

### *Data Analysis*

Factor analysis was used to identify structures of leisure activities and leisure benefits. The first factor analysis was conducted on leisure activities, using a rotation method of Quartimax with Kaiser normalization. The second factor analysis was conducted on the combined scores that each benefit statement received regarding the three favorite activities. In this analysis, a rotation method of Varimax with Kaiser normalization was used. In both analyses, the extraction method used was principal components. Factors were determined by using an eigenvalue of 1 and above. Activities were presented in a factor only if their factor loading was above 0.4. This level of factor loading is usually the default. It ensures that only variables with higher loading scores are emphasized, and that the factors are easy to understand.

The association between leisure activities and leisure benefits was examined by a correlation matrix between the activities and the benefits factor scores. Life satisfaction was measured by scoring 1 point for an 'agree' answer to a positive statement and for a 'disagree' answer to a negative statement. Other answers were scored with zero points, so that the maximum score was 20 points. In order to

explain how leisure activities and leisure benefits contributed to life satisfaction, the association between life satisfaction and all the factor scores was examined. Since life satisfaction may also be affected by background factors, as aforementioned, the first step of the analysis was to examine the relationship between different background variables and life satisfaction by a one-way ANOVA test. Variables that showed significant differences in life satisfaction were entered into step-wise regression, together with the factor scores. A significant level of 95% was used for all statistical tests.

## Results

### *Sample Characteristics*

The sample ( $N = 383$ ) included retirees ranging in age from 50 to 85. Most of them (72%) were 60–69 years old, and the mean was 64.3 years. Fifty-eight percent were female. Seventy-eight percent were married. Seventy percent did not have children living at home. Forty-nine percent had at least some post secondary education. Forty percent had a relatively high income (over 8000 NIS a month per household). Fifty-two percent classified themselves as secular. Seventy-one percent were not born in Israel, and only 10% had immigrated to Israel after 1970. Five percent were Holocaust survivors.

In terms of health, 64% perceived their health as 'good' or 'very good', and 67% classified themselves as competent to participate in most (or any) leisure activities that they desired. Fourteen percent reported coping with a severe illness during the past two years, and 9% perceived their health as 'bad' or 'terrible'. Six percent coped with their spouse's illness, and 10% had dealt with illnesses of other family members during the past two years. Two percent were widowed, and 12% had lost other family members (mostly parents) during the past two years.

Seventy-four percent worked full-time before retiring. Forty-six percent retired before official retirement age; half of them had done so by their own choice. Fifteen percent retired after the official retirement age, and 20% were still working part-time or occasionally.

### *The Structure of Leisure Activities*

Factor analysis on leisure participation data indicated that there were 13 activity factors. Most activities were included in one of the factors, with the exception of volunteering and meetings with relatives. The percentage of variance explained by the factors was 60.3%. The internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) of each factor is indicated in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha for all those factors together was 0.731. Factor labels came from the author's interpretation of the common characteristics of the correlated data (all or most of them). In some cases, the labels came from the activities that had the highest factor loading.

Three of the factors identified were associated with culture and enrichment: high culture and 'dolce-vita', popular culture, and spirituality and enrichment. The high culture and 'dolce-vita' factor contained the largest number of activities, and included cultural activities such as: theater, cinema, art exhibitions and classical

Table 1. Factor structure of leisure activities

Activity factor	Activities included in the factor	Factor loading
High culture and 'dolce-vita' (alpha = 0.725)	Theater	0.762
	Cinema	0.760
	Art exhibitions	0.667
	Classical music concerts	0.603
	Vacations abroad	0.577
	Restaurants and cafés	0.561
	Lectures	0.563
	Books	0.419
	Classes	0.419
	Popular culture (alpha = 0.662)	Popular music concerts
Entertainment shows		0.674
Sing-along		0.569
Dance shows		0.532
Spirituality and enrichment (alpha = 0.306)	TV	-0.673
	Religious activities	0.593
	Studies	0.585
	Radio	-0.466
Following generation (alpha = 0.843)	Children	0.915
	Grandchildren	0.914
Newspapers (alpha = 0.617)	Local newspapers	0.820
	Magazines	0.719
	Daily newspapers	0.572
Free outdoor activities (alpha = 0.435)	Shopping	0.723
	Day travels	0.477
	Physical activity	0.452
	Recorded TV programs	0.449
	Computer (alpha = 0.668)	Computer games
Internet		0.761
Hangout (alpha = 0.228)	Sport events	0.720
	Friends	0.439
Forever young (alpha = 0.309)	Rented films	0.636
	Pubs and clubs	0.609
Origin family (alpha = 0.051)	Parents	0.791
	Siblings	0.588
Independent home activities (alpha = 0.389)	Hobbies	0.758
	Listening to music at home	0.569
	Neighbors	Visiting neighbors
Table games (alpha = 0.108)		Table games
		Countryside vacations

Cronbach's alpha for all these items together = 0.731.

music concerts; other activities identified with 'dolce-vita' were: vacations abroad, restaurants and cafés; lectures, classes and books. Except for book reading, all the activities incorporated in that factor were out of home. In most cases these activities were also quite structured (had a clear frame of time, place and format). Popular culture was also a factor that included out of home cultural activities, but those generally perceived as 'lighter' and 'simpler', such as popular music concerts or entertainment shows. The spirituality and enrichment factor included four activities: studies, religious activities, watching television and listening to the radio. The two former activities were positively correlated within the factor, whereas the two latter indicated a negative correlation. This means that participants who tended to watch a lot of television and listen to a lot of radio tended not to study and participate in religious activities, and *visa versa*.

Two of the factors identified were familial factors: origin family, which included meetings with the origin family of the respondents and their spouses (parents and siblings), and following generation, which involved meetings with the family members generated by the respondents (children and grandchildren). Two more factors were identified as social factors: neighbors, which involved one activity only – meeting with neighbors; and hangout, which included two activities: sport events and meeting with friends. These two activities' correlation may be explained by the fact that attending sport events in Israel is also a social event, usually engaged in with the participant's friends.

Three other factors were associated with indoor activities: newspapers, which included reading daily newspapers, local newspapers and magazines; computer, which covered internet and computer games; and independent home activities, which involved hobbies and listening to music. The factor free out of home activities included activities that were usually devoid of a formal framework, such as shopping and day travels. That factor also included physical activities, which could be indoor or outdoor, structured or independent. Watching recorded TV programs was an exception within that factor, since it was clearly an indoor activity. The factor table games, so named after the main activity it contained, was also associated with countryside vacations. A possible explanation for that association could be the tendency to play more table games while on vacation: on the beach, in hotel lobbies, etc. The last factor was labeled forever young, since it included activities that in Israel are associated with youngsters' lifestyles: pubs, clubs, and watching rented video films. Most of the attendees of these activities in Israel are under 30 years old, and retirees' participation rates in them are extremely low (fewer than 5%).

### *The Structure of Leisure Benefits*

The factor analysis conducted on the leisure benefits data revealed five benefit factors, as presented in Table 2. The percentage of variance explained by those factors was 57.9%. The internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) of each factor is indicated in the table. Cronbach's alpha for all the factors together was 0.791.

The essentiality factor corresponded with two of the factors identified by Kelly *et al.* (1987): 'meeting role expectations' and 'competence and skill-development'. It also included a sense of gratification in helping others, and a sense of belonging. The attempt to identify a common theme in the statements articulated in that factor

Table 2. Factor structure of leisure benefits

Benefit factor	Statements included in the factor	Factor loading
Essentiality (alpha = 0.771)	I'm expected to by my family	0.823
	I'm expected to by my friends	0.764
	It's a duty	0.746
	I like being of help to others	0.732
	I feel I belong	0.684
	I like the contest	0.663
	I like developing a skill	0.551
Growth (alpha = 0.624)	It's restful	0.746
	I grow as a person	0.712
	It's exciting	0.681
	I feel relaxed	0.675
	It's my self-expression	0.543
Challenge (alpha = 0.545)	I like it	0.659
	It's active exercise	0.641
	I like doing it well	0.616
	It's healthful	0.410
Companionship (alpha = 0.386)	I enjoy the companions	0.929
	It strengthens relationships	0.927
Work-like (alpha = 0.288)	It's different from my work	-0.788
	It's similar to my work	0.601

Cronbach's alpha for all these items together = 0.791

generated the idea of essentiality: participating because it was important. The main characteristic of the factor was the feeling that taking part in the activity was essential and important both to the participants (contest and skill-development) as well as to their social environment (family, friends and beneficiaries).

The growth factor corresponded to the factor 'expression and personal development' which was identified before. Since it incorporated general statements, even contradictory ones ('exciting' vs. 'restful'), the main statements, which awarded the factor its label, were: 'I grow as a person' and 'It's my self-expression'.

The challenge factor received its name from the main statements in it, which had to do with being active and exhibiting a good performance ('I like it' was a general statement, and 'It's healthful' had a low factor loading). The statements in this factor were scattered between three different factors in the study of Kelly *et al.* (1987): 'contest and skill-development', 'health and exercise', and 'general enjoyment'. Apparently, Israeli retirees not only view participation in physical activities as a health-preserving act, but also as a pleasurable challenge.

The companionship factor was divided in the study of Kelly *et al.* (1987) into two separate factors: 'companionship within the activity' and 'strengthening primary relationships'. Those two benefits were strongly associated in the Israeli sample.

The statements included in the work-like factor were dispersed among other factors in the Kelly *et al.* study (1987). In the present study, work-like was a benefit in itself, which contained two statements that were complete opposites: one was correlated to it in an extremely positive sense, whereas the other revealed a strong negative correlation. It is possible that the emergence of this factor was due to the respondents having only recently retired, and whose minds were occupied with the question of whether their leisure activities were similar to or different from their work.

### *The Association between Leisure Activities and Leisure Benefits*

The association between leisure activity factors and leisure benefit factors was examined by a correlation matrix between the participation factor scores and the benefit factors scores. The matrix, presented in Table 3, shows that almost all activity factors, except for free out of home activities, hangout and origin family, revealed a significant correlation with at least one benefit factor. Essentiality showed positive correlations with the largest number of activity factors: popular culture, following generation, forever young and neighbors. It revealed a negative correlation with high culture and 'dolce-vita' and with computer. Growth proved to have a positive correlation with independent home activities, and a negative correlation with neighbors and newspapers. Challenge showed a positive correlation with spirituality and enrichment, independent home activities and table games. Compan-

Table 3. Correlations between leisure activities and leisure benefits factors

Activity factor	Benefit factor				
	Essentiality	Growth	Challenge	Companion	Work-like
High culture and 'dolce-vita'	-0.148*	0.089	-0.003	-0.130*	0.048
Popular culture	0.168*	-0.018	0.053	0.058	0.098
Spirituality and enrichment	0.079	0.031	0.144*	-0.046	0.066
Following generation	0.148*	-0.007	0.087	0.053	-0.004
Newspapers	0.077	-0.116*	-0.038	0.010	-0.027
Free out of home activities	0.067	-0.030	0.020	0.025	0.054
Computer	-0.130*	0.070	0.046	-0.069	-0.056
Hangout	0.076	0.054	-0.076	0.057	-0.084
Forever young	0.134*	0.081	-0.079	-0.015	-0.001
Origin family	0.030	-0.037	0.028	-0.006	-0.024
Independent Home activities	0.083	0.154*	0.137*	-0.007	0.052
Neighbors	0.106*	-0.105*	-0.042	0.027	0.014
Table games	0.097	-0.056	0.113*	0.028	0.019

\* $p < 0.05$ .

ionship was found to have a negative correlation with high culture and ‘dolce-vita’. Work-like did not show a significant correlation with any of the activity factors.

Most of the correlations were quite understandable. It is clear why people who study or play table games experience challenge more than others; why frequent meetings with children and grandchildren are correlated with a sense of essentiality; or how spending many hours a day developing hobbies might benefit a person with a sense of growth. Less clear is the absence of some correlations that one might expect, such as a positive correlation between free out of home activities and challenge. This might result from the fact that the activity with the highest factor loading in this factor was shopping. Another missing correlation was a positive association between companionship and familial factors, hangout, and neighbors. A possible explanation for that might be that the participants experienced social benefits from many activities, including such in which the relationship was, at least theoretically, secondary to them.

#### *The Contribution of Leisure Activities and Leisure Benefits to Life Satisfaction at the Early Phase of Retirement*

Life satisfaction scores ranged from 0 to 20, with a mean of 12.53, and a standard deviation of 4.2. In order to examine how leisure activities and leisure benefits

Table 4. Step-wise regression analysis of respondents’ background, leisure activities, and leisure benefits with life satisfaction scores

Variable	Un-standardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient $\beta$
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	
Constant	9.602	0.485	
High culture and ‘dolce-vita’	1.070	0.194	0.260*
Health	1.947	0.382	0.226*
Free out of home activities	0.635	0.177	0.153*
Spirituality and enrichment	0.649	0.173	0.159*
Marital status	1.347	0.449	0.135**
Essentiality	0.514	0.182	0.125**
Spouse’s illness	-2.149	0.745	-0.123**
Income	0.944	0.404	0.114***
Popular culture	0.412	0.176	0.100***
Following generation	0.404	0.178	0.097***
Retirement type	0.797	0.367	0.094***
Independent home activities	0.357	0.177	0.085***

Note:  $R^2 = 0.374$ ,  $F$  score = 17.798.

Since all variables concerning health were significant to life satisfaction, health perception – the one that showed the highest differentiation – was chosen.

Dummy codes. Health: 1 = good (very good + good), 0 = not good (‘so and so’ + bad + terrible). Marital status: 1 = married, 0 = single (bachelor + divorced + widower). Retirement type: 1 = by respondents own choice, 0 = forced.

\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

contribute to life satisfaction, all factor scores were entered into a step-wise regression, together with background variables that showed significant differences in life satisfaction. The overall regression model accounted for 37.4% of the variance in life satisfaction. The results are presented in Table 4.

Results indicated that leisure was a dominant factor in explaining life satisfaction at an early retirement phase. The influence of leisure was even stronger than background characteristics such as health or income. This may be concluded both from the number of leisure factors, and from the influence hierarchy. High culture and 'dolce-vita' was the most significant predictor of life satisfaction, followed by five additional activities factors, including: free out of home activities, spirituality and enrichment, popular culture, following generation, and independent home activities. The only leisure benefit that indicated a significant influence on life satisfaction was essentiality.

Background factors that showed significant correlations to life satisfaction were: health, family status, spouse's illness, income, and type of retirement. Good health, having a spouse, a high income and retirement by respondent's own choice revealed a positive correlation to life satisfaction, whereas spouse's illness showed a negative correlation.

## Conclusions

The study presents a clear picture of leisure at the early phase of retirement. By implementing a non-interfering approach, simple and understandable structures were found: those of leisure activities and those of leisure benefits. Moreover, while former studies have examined leisure contribution to retirees' well-being via one aspect only, the present study incorporated two aspects: the behavioral aspect (i.e. activity patterns of recently retired individuals) and the psychological aspect (leisure benefits). This combination produced a detailed understanding of the role of leisure after retirement, and may serve as a basis for several arguments regarding the contribution of leisure to well-being at this specific phase of life.

The fact that the leisure benefits found in this study were different from those in the study by Kelly *et al.* (1986) may be explained by the differences in period and culture, but mostly by the differences in the samples of the two studies. While the previous study examined individuals aged 40 and over, the present study examined those who had recently retired. This focus enabled a deeper understanding of that distinctive period of transition to what may be considered a phase of leisure. This period requires a major adaptation to the enormous increase in available free time. The study provides not only a description of what recent retirees are engaged in, but also shows how they benefit from their activities and achieve a better well-being, which may be considered as a better adaptation to retirement.

The recent retirees' distinctive characteristics were expressed in the structure of their leisure benefits, mainly in two benefits that were unique only to them: essentiality and work-like. Essentiality was the most important leisure benefit during the early phase of retirement. It had positive correlations with the largest number of activity factors, and was the only leisure benefit that revealed a significant contribution to life satisfaction.

These findings indirectly support 'Continuity Theory' (Atchley, 1989, 1993). Retiring from work, and the transition from the role of 'producer' to a role of 'non producer', pose a threat to the sense of 'essentiality'. If that feeling could be preserved by leisure activities, the sense of 'essentiality' would continue to prevail, and hence, a central component in the retiree's self-perception would be protected. This would contribute to retirees' life satisfaction, and assist them in adapting to this new phase in their lives. It does not make a difference whether or not their retirement activities were similar to their previous careers before retiring (work-like benefit was not significant to well-being), as long as the sense of 'essentiality' was preserved.

The fact that only essentiality revealed a significant contribution to life satisfaction provides an important clarification to the *Activity Theory* (Havighurst, 1963). The Activity Theory argues that in order to preserve psychological well-being at advanced age, it is important to maintain high level of involvement in activities. The findings of the present study suggest that it is important to maintain a high level of involvement in activities that are positively correlated to the benefit of essentiality, and, hence, to life satisfaction.

Another clarification has to do with the types of activities. The fact that not all activity factors showed a significant contribution to life satisfaction demands the narrowing of the Activity Theory to specific activity areas, when addressing individuals who have recently retired. The findings of the present study may lead to the conclusion that it is only important to maintain a high level of involvement in specific activities that contribute to life satisfaction. Correspondingly, it is not important to preserve involvement in activities that do not contribute to life satisfaction.

Notwithstanding these clarifications, the findings confirm the positive association between activity and psychological well-being, and thus strongly support the validity of the Activity Theory at the retirement phase. Moreover, the findings show that at this phase, leisure is even more important than many other factors, including background factors, such as: poor health, low income or absence of spouse, which might have a negative influence on one's psychological well-being. These findings are consistent with existing studies (see Kelly *et al.*, 1987; Fernandez-Ballesteros *et al.*, 2001), and they suggest that leisure has a significant compensating capability. By practicing an enriching and fulfilling leisure, retirees can reach a high level of life satisfaction, even if they are subject to conditions that may threaten their well-being.

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