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Building resilience to stress through leisure activities: A qualitative analysis

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Abstract

Stress is prevalent in modern society and coping strategies largely determine wellbeing. A qualitative investigation of leisure as a positive coping response to stress was undertaken using a resilience-based perspective. This approach enabled a focus on competencies and strengths in the stress-leisure-coping process, contributing to the sparse literature in this area. In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of eight participants. From a thematic analysis three overall themes emerged: leisure as a buffer of stress, the relationship between negative and positive emotions and leisure, and benefits of leisure for coping with stress. The findings demonstrate how leisure facilitates a sense of resilience and its preventative functions. The results are discussed in relation to relevant theoretical propositions concerning the role of positive emotion in coping. In particular, the broaden-and-build theory provided a meaningful framework for suggesting how leisure and positive emotions acted in tandem to develop psychosocial resources over time.

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

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Introduction

In modern society stress is pervasive, having a major influence on health and life quality (Lundberg & Cooper, 2010). The World Health Organization predicts that stress-related illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, will be the second leading cause of disabilities by 2020 (Sothmann, 2006). However, it is not only stress but also how an individual copes with stress that determines physical and psychological wellbeing (Elo, Ervasti, Kuosma, & Mattila, 2008). Coping refers to the ways an individual manages internal and/or external pressures that are perceived to be demanding and is a key topic for research on wellbeing (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Historically, stress research has focussed mainly on the psychological coping styles that individuals use when stressed (Elo et al., 2008). This exploratory study on which this paper is based adopts a different approach by examining whether leisure activities play a role in managing stress.

Leisure as a coping resource

This study views leisure using a free-time perspective, referencing to enjoyable activities that arise during free-time (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002). There is an emerging body of research examining how leisure helps to counteract stress and facilitate coping (e.g., Iwasaki et al., 2014). This study will contribute to this body of research. Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) reported that it is the underpinning psychosocial functions of leisure, rather than any specific activity, that is important for coping with stress. They produced a hierarchical model of leisure coping, within which, coping is divided into leisure beliefs and leisure strategies. Leisure beliefs are generalised coping styles accumulated through engagement in leisure, and leisure strategies are intentional situation-based cognitions or behaviours for coping with stress. Some empirical research supports this model (e.g., Iwasaki, Mactavish, & MacKay, 2005; Kleiber et al., 2002).

Leisure coping and psychological wellbeing

The emergence of positive psychology has encouraged research on how positive events, including leisure, promote coping and wellbeing (e.g., Iwasaki, 2006). Positive psychology aims to redress the balance within psychology from the emphasis on pathology to examine ways of promoting health. For example, positive psychology approaches to stress have focussed on individuals who cope well with stress (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

Leisure activities seem to offer a way of coping positively with stress in daily life. In a qualitative study, Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, and Dattilo (2003) discovered leisure offered escapism from everyday life, encouraged belonging through shared activities, and promoted positive mood. Using content analysis, Grafanaki, Pearson, Cini, Godula, McKenzie, Nason, and Anderegg (2005) found that leisure engagement facilitated balance in life, work performance, positive emotion, and meaningful relationships among health professionals.

Folkman (2008) highlighted the importance of positive emotions for coping with stress, as they help sustain coping effort, provide respite from stress, and are associated with the use of adaptive coping. Kleiber et al. (2002) suggest that leisure can generate positive emotion, implying an important role for leisure in facilitating adaptive coping and promoting health (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000).

Research on stress and leisure has begun to explore leisure as a coping resource to facilitate wellbeing. Traditionally, research has focussed on how leisure coping helps to regulate distress and minimise negative outcomes of distressing life events (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). However, Kleiber et al. (2002) suggest leisure coping relates to wellbeing as a self-protective coping device by buffering against negative life events, as a distraction from stress, and by generating optimism and hope for the future. This is consistent with positive psychology.

In reviewing coping skills theory Hood and Carruthers (2002) identified a range of positive resources in addition to the commonly reported emotion-focussed, problem-focussed and avoidant coping styles that individuals can utilise to help them cope with stress, including leisure coping. They suggest that coping styles such as active coping, acceptance, positive reframing, and planning help to decrease negative demands in response to stress. Positive resources, including recreational leisure activities, are available assets that can increase the ability to cope. Hood and Carruthers (2002) argue that recreational leisure activities provide social support and develop valuable capacities such as positive emotions essential for wellbeing. Iwasaki et al. (2005) when reviewing the therapeutic benefits of leisure suggested that leisure coping promotes wellbeing by facilitating resilience in response to stress. In a longitudinal general population study Iwasaki (2006) found that leisure coping is a proactive coping strategy that enables individuals to recover from stress, facilitate life balance, and regain the required resources to tackle demands. Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from adversity and involves reacting in an adaptive manner to stressful situations (Masten, 2009). It is a core component of psychological wellbeing (Ryff & Singer, 2003). However, an empirically supported theoretical framework to explain how leisure coping promotes resilience and wellbeing is lacking.

Resilience-based perspective

To explore how leisure coping can facilitate wellbeing the present study adopts a resilience-based perspective, which entails a focus on protective factors and competencies in the stress-coping process. Relevant theory such as the previously discussed work of Kleiber et al. (2002) and Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) will inform the analysis of the results. The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) will be examined to see whether this could provide the missing empirically supported theoretical framework or at least some theoretical insights to explain leisure coping further.

The broaden-and-build theory suggests that traditional models of emotion are best suited to describing negative emotions. Negative emotion represents the behavioural avoidance system, which triggers escape behaviour in stressful situations. For example, in response to a threatening situation thinking momentarily becomes narrower, focussed on coping, and promotes quick decisive action such as escape. While this can be beneficial in difficult situations, it encourages vigilant attention to the environment, which can be an added stressor (Watson, Weise, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999). Conversely, positive emotion is a feature of the behavioural facilitation system, facilitating approach behaviour. Elliott and Thrash (2010) suggest there are individual differences in approach/avoidance behaviour that result in different cognitive attitudes to the environment and stressful occurrences. The avoidant individual adopts a 'glass half empty' perspective making them expect the worst which is inherently stressful, while the individual with a higher level of approach tendencies adopts a 'glass half full' perspective that results in them being more likely to conceptualise and approach stressful situations as a challenge to overcome.

These links between thoughts and actions are called action tendencies and Frederickson (2001) argues that while they effectively describe behaviour generating negative emotion they are not so applicable in situations involving positive emotions. Instead, she postulates that when positive emotions are experienced, the momentary thought-action repertoire broadens. This is exemplified by emotions including joy, which generate a wide range of thoughts and possible actions including the wish to play, be sociable and share with others, and be creative. These broadened mind-sets are argued to be indirectly beneficial in that they build new personal resources. Crucially Frederickson demonstrates that the physical, intellectual, psychological, and social resources outlast the transient positive emotional experiences that generate them. In these ways, positive emotional experiences are thought to be transformatory. Experience of positive emotion broadens the momentary thought-action

repertoire and this builds personal resources, which can transform the individual. This broadening process is described as working in an upward spiral. This can be conceptualised as building psychological resilience as these new resources can be used in the long term to maintain and promote wellbeing. For example, coping successfully with a stressful situation generates positive emotions and broadens individuals' thought-action repertoires, thereby creating additional coping resources to enhance functioning in response to future demands (Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008).

Despite the support received for the broaden-and-build theory, several limitations exist. Firstly, Fredrickson and colleagues (e.g., Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000) gathered evidence for the role of positive emotions from research carried out in experimental settings. A concern with this is that such settings do not necessarily indicate how positive emotions occur and/or the ways people build resources in everyday life contexts, including leisure contexts. Indeed, the broaden-and-build theory has only received minimal attention in terms of its applicability to a leisure context and for explaining the potentially constructive role of leisure for everyday life. One exception is that Mitas, Qian, Yarnal, and Kerstetter (2011) found evidence for broadening and building processes in the ways that a leisure context encouraged participants to become more open with other leisure group members and over time participants built valuable resources including close friendships, a sense of optimism, and social connections.

Other important limitations are that the broaden-and-build theory has been mainly investigated among undergraduate students and mainly through quantitative as opposed to qualitative methods. A reliance on quantitative methods means that participants' personal interpretations of experiences are excluded and a more comprehensive understanding of the ways positive emotions function within the broaden-and-build process is restricted (Mitas et al. 2011). However, research has begun to investigate principles of the broaden-and-build

theory using qualitative approaches with promising conclusions. For example, Graungaard, Anderson, and Skov (2011) explored coping behaviour among parents with children who had severe disabilities. A qualitative approach contributed further understanding of the ways personal resources and positive emotions interact to sustain coping in the face of stress. The current study is the first to use a resilience-based approach to contextualise the results when exploring how leisure relates to the management of stress and psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, this study will examine how the broaden-and-build theory applies to the direct experience of individuals who regularly experience leisure in everyday life, thereby addressing noteworthy limitations of previous research in this area.

The present study

The present study explores in depth the ways leisure engagement can positively contribute to wellbeing in relation to stress and foster resilience. The focus is on individuals who regularly incorporate leisure activity into their lives. In contrast to previous research (e.g., Hutchinson et al. 2003) the focus is not on individuals experiencing pathology, but, consistent with positive psychology, is on understanding the factors that promote optimal functioning in healthy individuals.

Thematic analysis (TA) was utilised, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). While many researchers have traditionally categorised TA as a tool to use across different qualitative analyses (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2000), TA provides flexibility as it operates without any assumptions being made about epistemology and it can incorporate theoretical complexity and interpretation in the analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) yet still assure methodological rigour. This is relevant as the aim was to utilise our knowledge from previous research of different perspectives on leisure and coping and its relationship with stress, emotions, and resilience in data interpretation and to assess the applicability of Frederickson's (2001) theory to explain participants' experiences.

Method

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

Participants

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

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule with a limited number of open-ended questions was developed to collect data in a free, narrative style. The interview began by asking participants to describe their leisure activities. Questions covered the meaning of leisure, including its function and importance in participants' lives, the advantages of leisure engagement, its use for stress, and whether it enabled building a life outside of work or study. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. A pilot study was conducted to assess the suitability of the interview schedule and necessary amendments were made.

Data analysis

Using guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006), six phases of analysis were followed (familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, defining and naming coded features, validating, producing the report with supporting quotes). While these are described sequentially, the analysis involves an iterative process of continual movement through the phases checking against the data. The first phase involved familiarisation with the data, by reading each transcript several times. From this, initial codes were generated and written in the left margin of each transcript. Next, themes were identified and noted in the right margin. The third stage involved reviewing the themes and checking them against the initial codes to ensure coherent patterns were represented in the data, with re-analysis undertaken if necessary. Once this stage was completed, the themes were grouped into thematic maps, which were reviewed against the transcripts to ensure they were grounded in the data. Initial themes were subsequently grouped into major themes based on common features.

Each theme was reviewed and clearly defined. Up until this stage, coding had been predominantly semantic and based on the surface meaning of the data. Latent analysis was subsequently incorporated. Latent analysis begins to interpret the data to identify underlying assumptions, ideas, and conceptualisations that may provide a deeper meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed incorporation of theoretical knowledge. Major themes were thoroughly reviewed in comparison with each transcript and supporting quotes were included to ensure themes were sufficiently grounded in the data. Themes that did not meet this criterion were discarded.

This process was replicated for each transcript. Major themes for each transcript were synthesised into an overall set of master themes that comprehensively represented the experience of the participants. Sub-themes were generated from commonalities among the initial themes and reflect lower order features of the master themes. Further coding, amendments to the details of themes, and reassessment of thematic patterns continued until

theoretical saturation was reached. A research colleague not involved in the study verified the results. Pseudonyms were given to each participant.

Quality

Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie's (1999) criteria were used as a guide to assure quality. Accordingly, participants, methods, and procedures are thoroughly described and self-reflexivity is practiced. The data is presented in a coherent manner and each theme is supported with data excerpts. Theoretical saturation (the point at which no further recurring themes emerged from analysis) was achieved after eight interviews. A research colleague checked the findings and a reflexive journal was used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This acted as a decision trail to limit misinterpretation and ensure the data was analysed in a faithful and exhaustive manner.

Reflexivity

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

Results

Contextualising leisure activities

All respondents reported participating in leisure activities, from relatively short-lived intrinsically rewarding activities, such as watching films or listening to music to activities systematically pursued long-term to acquire skills, knowledge, and experience. Examples

include group-based activities such as playing badminton and netball, and playing in a band, and individual pursuits such as exercise and volunteering. All participants spontaneously discussed leisure as a way of coping with the stress of work or relationships. The motivations behind leisure pursuits were complex, with an activity being pursued for several reasons related both to coping beliefs and related strategies. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: leisure as a buffer of stress; the relationship between negative and positive emotions and leisure; and the benefits of leisure for coping with stress.

Theme one: Leisure as a buffer of stress

Leisure engagement provided a distraction, a respite, and an escape from daily stress. Here the activity was the distraction and participants anticipated the feelings of wellbeing that would follow from its completion. Activities were further sub-divided into solitary and more social pursuits. Distraction from rumination was a coping strategy that applied to both but in slightly different ways.

Solitary strategies

When experiencing stress, participants turned to leisure such as going for a run, a solitary activity. This provided an activity where participants could focus on something other than their current problems and offered a welcome respite. As described by Paul:

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

Here the distraction is about changing focus from the complex stressful situation to an activity focusing on physical bodily sensations and the positive emotions that physical exercise can generate both physiologically and psychologically. Traditionally the importance

of social support for coping with stress is emphasised but sometimes other people are the stressors so time alone can be rejuvenating.

If I feel anxious about something, I'll go for a run because there's just something about getting rid of that excess energy...I cannot handle spending too much time around people that don't give me space. For the past month, because I've had so many things to do, I was starting to lose it...because I was stressed with not having time away so there is a large part of me that has to have that...time where no one is talking to me at all and just leave me alone to relax. (Dawn)

Social activities

For dealing with chronic and transitional stress, engaging with others in leisure pursuits acted as a distraction and a buffer. Marc was recovering from the recent break-up of a long-term relationship, and experienced cognitive and emotional fallout as a result, often experiencing intrusive thoughts from the past. Playing regularly in a band with others focussed his mind on something constructive, provided companionship and was perceived as restoring his wellbeing:

When I'm playing with my band it's a way of getting away from stress. It helps to conquer the stress. That's what it means to me. It helps me forget about the things you've been getting worked up about all week and you can just go and find something that you enjoy and do it...that sometimes helps your mind focus on something different to the problems that you've got...they give a respite almost. (Marc)

Distraction from rumination

Ruminating was a common response to work stress. Participants like Paul often felt they could not "shut off" from thinking about demands when away from work. Leisure engagement enabled participants to, as Marc expressed it, 'enter a separate cognitive space'

where they felt absorbed in their activities and were temporarily free from the ruminative thinking frequently associated with stress. In Marc's case these were communal activities in his band but for others it happened in solitary pursuits. Leisure buffering against the tendency to ruminate when under stress was constructive as participants felt calmer and rejuvenated afterwards, as emphasised by Paul in his solitary pursuit:

Running does that for me; I stop thinking about current problems and focus on the present and the activity I'm doing. I think that in effect helps to clear my mind. (Paul)

Leisure engagement in this sense was similar to 'flow' whereby participants felt absorbed in the activity, which helped to clear their mind of worry and prevented rumination. Getz (2007) used the term liminal space to describe this sort of time out experience reported by our participants as a cognitive space and suggest that it provides a useful transition between activities.

Theme two: The relationship between negative and positive emotions and leisure

Negative and positive emotions were closely inter-related in the discussion of stress and leisure coping, making them difficult to separate, although the relationship between stress and the generation of negative emotion emerged as a significant sub-theme. Leisure was consistently referred to as an activity that generated positive emotions, such as interest, enthusiasm, enjoyment, excitement, awe, and joy. When feeling despondent in response to stress, such as after a difficult day at work, partaking in leisure activities raised participants' mood. For example, John specified that leisure, 'gives you an up in the spectrum of the week'. The relationships between positive and negative emotions and leisure participation were sometimes complex and multi-faceted. Leisure participation counteracted the negative emotions associated with experiencing stress and produced positive emotions that promoted future participation in such activities. For the group-based activity of badminton, John identified that having an initial interest acted as a motivator, that he experienced enjoyment,

felt physically fitter and happier from taking part, and consequently had more interest and desire to continue:

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

Such findings highlight the complex interplay of emotions with leisure participation; positive emotion being an influence, a sustainer of effort, and a consequence of participation. The perceived benefits of leisure participation helped to overcome any associated negative feelings such as those related to being unfit initially. Participants gained in fitness and in increased social interaction, all of which are beneficial for future health. Specifically, it appears that positive emotions had a broadening effect on participants, helping to sustain leisure participation. Even in solitary pursuits, the feel good factor associated with participation maintained motivation.

Stress and the generation of negative emotion

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

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

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

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

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

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

Withdrawal is an example of an avoidant coping strategy, and participants felt less psychologically healthy from cyclical exposure to stress and negative emotions over time; as Rebecca said, 'no sense of enjoyment, not socialising, very tense, and not particularly happy'. Such stress encouraged Rebecca to question the point of her work endeavours if she was always stressed and unhappy. In contrast, leisure engagement was a way to recover energy that stress and negative emotion had depleted. Leisure was seen as the antithesis to stress, 'there are no real demands, no expectations, no pressure, no need to perform, and no goal.

Rather, you can just relax and enjoy, and enjoyment is the achievement, the goal' (Catherine). Catherine specified that leisure engagement is a way to 'balance the negative stress out and re-feed you with energy and positive emotions'. Thus, leisure offered effective protection against stress by generating positive emotions, which helped to cultivate feelings of being able to cope. The challenge is how to motivate individuals to undertake leisure pursuits when they are in these negative cycles.

Theme three: Benefits of leisure for coping with stress

The benefits participants derived from leisure engagement for their lifestyle, stress management, and wellbeing emerged as a master theme. Sub-themes were leisure as a means to facilitate work-life balance; group-based leisure promoting social relationships; leisure as self-determined and providing a sense of control; and development of psychosocial resources.

Leisure as a means to facilitate work-life balance

When discussing their busy lives, participants discussed the challenges of establishing a healthy balance with regard to competing responsibilities, particularly from work.

Participants struggled with creating a balance, and simultaneously emphasised the importance of establishing a balance for wellbeing and contentment:

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

A healthy balance was subjectively determined, as was the amount of leisure necessary for achieving it. Rebecca highlighted how having more leisure in her life in the past enabled her to feel more relaxed and open to new experiences. Feeling relaxed also attracted more people into her life as she came across as less tense and defensive:

I felt more open to new experiences, more open to new people and more relaxed in

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

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

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

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

There was a time last summer when I...was very close to packing up and going home. I was fine during the week when at work, but at the weekend when I felt as if I didn't have any enjoyable time to have the balance I felt as if I couldn't cope. I'm glad now I dug my heels in and went 'no it's about me making a change, it's about me going out there and meeting people and doing that myself', which took a lot of strength I think...Mental

health-wise I feel much better. (Dawn)

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

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

(Catherine)

Group-based leisure as a means of promoting social relationships

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

When a change happens...such as retirement, it puts a lot of stress on your life because all of a sudden instead of working long days or long hours, you're like an isolated person stuck on an island. You are the only person for miles around you and it's very difficult at

that point to see what your purpose is because your purpose has gone, you've finished work. And work has been your purpose for so long in that sense, so you think 'what am I going to do? I've got all the time in the world and nothing to do in it' and so leisure pursuits, particularly if they are social, take you away from that potential isolation or like water going down a plug, you know, getting worse and worse and a vicious circle.

(John)

Leisure served different functions for retirees compared with those relocating to a new area. Retirement created a greater sense of emptiness than did relocating, so the benefits of leisure were felt to a greater extent as the activity gave a sense of meaning and structure to the week. For those relocating to a new area, work still provided this meaning and structure. However, for those moving to a new area, leisure facilitated a sense of belonging which was similar to the retirement situation as highlighted by Dawn:

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

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

When my partner had cancer I could not escape from stress then. It was impossible to do. It was nice having people to talk to about it because you didn't feel alone, but you could not escape. It was always there in your mind, always at the forefront that you had to do something. And you didn't even know what to do, but you couldn't leave it. But because you could talk to other people, and because people were your age they also had

problems and equally as bad, you came to realise that these were not just your problems, they affected everybody at some point in a similar magnitude, and it's possible to get over them as a result. And it [stress] lessens. (John)

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

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

These findings emphasise the importance of group-based leisure for developing social relations and a feeling of belonging that help in managing stress.

Self-determined leisure providing a sense of control

Respondents valued the freedom to choose leisure activities in their own time and, importantly, felt that they made the rules in their leisure, which provided a desirable contrast to work and other obligations that participants could not necessarily control:

Leisure's the opposite to work because you haven't got the demands forcing you to do something. In my view it's an activity where you have the choice of participating or not, and of participating as much as you wish to. There's no compulsion. Also, it's your own time so although you can't remove yourself from the demands at work, what it does is

take you out of the context of work into a context more under your... control. I think that's a big point to it, it's something more under your control. (John)

Leisure thus gave a sense of perceived control and autonomy. This sense of control is in contrast to the experience of stress that frequently occurs when events seem out of control as exemplified by participants who felt they had no time for leisure activities because of work pressures.

Leisure engagement as a way to develop psychosocial resources

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

It feels like an uphill battle at the moment. In time I'll get through it, I just got to get to where I feel I need to be. And leisure helps you get to where you want to be, forget your stress, forget your troubles. And it also promotes positive mood as well. It helps you feel good about something, feel excited that you've got this to do or that you're part of this group now... don't get me wrong, there are days when negativity breeds negativity and it's the worst form to be in, it's horrible, but just the light at the end of the tunnel, and having that strength to move forward. (Marc)

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

You get self-esteem. You think 'I can do this'. After a few months of saying 'I can do this' and liking what you're doing, it doesn't matter what people say. It's more than mastery, it's rebuilding confidence in yourself and when you've retired you suffer a loss

of confidence because you've been cast adrift. You cast yourself adrift. That's why the confidence nosedives. It's not because you don't feel wanted or anything, it's because you've actually taken the decision to leave work and ended up with nothing. (John)

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

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

In badminton the one thing to do if you want to become a better player is self-correction...it's not being over-critical, it's more like estimation and you estimate distances. You might be wildly out to start with, but you can gradually creep towards the centre by adjusting the way you estimate. It's like a process, and you can apply that to life. You can say 'ok this time I didn't do it, next time I can. I can learn'. (John)

Yoga and tai-chi help me stay fitter and have a calm approach to dealing with problems. All this about living in the moment and to not spend your life worrying about today, but enjoy the time you're in, you can apply that to everything. (Sue)

Self-improvement was furthermore evident from the development of physical fitness and psychological determination through ongoing commitment to leisure pursuits. In addition to

developing meaningful skills, leisure engagement broadened participants' social networks. This provided a source of social support for difficulties and had many 'spin-off effects' that promoted psychological wellbeing:

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

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

It's a combination of things because one thing knocks onto the other, and it all feeds in and makes you feel good, happier, stronger and more competent because in a job very often you can feel under-valued and feel that you lose competence. You're not able to do things because of resource problems, and they're [managers at work] bringing new things in for you to tackle that you've got little experience with. In a leisure sense it's different because you can time the things you do, the new things that come along. You can do them when you're ready to tackle them, and you've got more of a chance of saying 'well I've done my best, it worked out. I feel good, I feel competent in solving that now. I can do that'. (John)

Discussion

For all respondents, leisure activities were useful in coping with the stress encountered in everyday life. Participants discussed various types of stress, including daily hassles, work demands, chronic stress, and major life transitions. The three main themes; leisure as a buffer of stress, the relationship between negative and positive emotions and leisure, and the benefits of leisure for coping with stress, indicate that leisure engagement is a constructive way of coping with stress, offering a source of distraction and escape from daily hassles, and respite in response to the associated effects of longer term stress. While much of the literature emphasises the importance of leisure for providing social support (Grafanaki et al. 2005; Hutchinson et al. 2003), in this study solitary pursuits, such as running by oneself, seemed equally effective at providing respite from stress and the associated rumination. It is important to be aware that there are individual differences in preferred coping styles and that the presence of others can engender stress, so time alone undertaking activities can be as health promoting as more social activities are. This is not often recognised in the literature.

For chronic, work-related, and transitional stress, leisure engagement in group activities facilitated adjustment by helping to create balance in life, offering a sense of perceived control, a structure to daily living, and a context for developing social relations. This is particularly important for coping with transitions where existing social networks are lost. Leisure-based friendships are an important means of social support facilitating a sense of belonging and acceptance. Such findings are consistent with the notion of leisure companionship described by Iwasaki and Mannell (2000). Research indicates that social support helps to buffer adverse health effects of stress (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). Awareness that social support existed improved wellbeing, which fits with existing literature indicating that perceived social support is influential in buffering the negative effects of stress (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

That both solitary pursuits and group activities provide respite from stressful rumination is an interesting finding. The absorption in activities reported by participants appears to represent the state of flow as described by Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) that is associated with engendering positive emotion and psychological wellbeing. These links between the experience of flow and improved coping with stress are an important contribution in terms of building explanatory models. In this way, engaging in leisure activities involves additional cognitive activity, which provides mental respite from stress. These findings provide support for aspects of Iwasaki and Mannell's (2000) leisure coping model. In particular, leisure activities providing a distraction and respite is conceptually similar to leisure and palliative coping (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000), which involves attempts to create a psychological 'break' from stress and is self-protective, as Kleiber et al. (2002) found.

Emotions emerged as central to leisure engagement. Negative emotions acted in tandem with stress to deplete resources, whereas positive emotions occurred alongside leisure engagement and increased resources. Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) described this leisure mood enhancement as a coping strategy and this was found in the study on which this paper is based. However, the current study suggests a more complex role of emotion in leisure engagement and stress. Positive emotion is an outcome of leisure engagement, but additionally positive emotion acts as a 'breather' from stress and a 'restorer' of emotional and psychological resources depleted by negative emotion and stress. Participants are clear that stress engenders negative emotions in their lives and vicious cycles of negative emotions can develop. They report that participation in leisure activities breaks this cycle by producing positive emotional experiences and recharging their batteries. This supports Fredrickson who demonstrated that activities that promote positive emotions help to 'undo' or lessen the

negative effects of stress by providing psychological respite from stress experiences (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Kleiber et al. 2002).

Kleiber et al. (2002) suggested that positively-toned emotions as a function of leisure can facilitate a sense of hope and optimism as resources for dealing with stress. Hope represents an individual's beliefs that they can devise pathways to achieve meaningful goals (Snyder, 2002). Here, leisure gave participants a sense of direction and a way forward to their goals including rebuilding confidence in retirement, or returning 'back to normal' after a relationship break-up.

The sense of meaning and purpose participants attributed as outcomes of leisure engagement is consistent with research by Iwasaki, Messina, Shank, and Coyle (2015) who found in a qualitative study that leisure activities enabled individuals to feel they were meaningfully engaged in life through the strength, calmness, inspiration, and greater depth to life that leisure participation afforded. Iwasaki (2008, 2016) identified ways that leisure contributes to meaning-making, notably via the cultivation of positive emotions, self-worth, social connections, sense of identity, and learning and development, which were all associated with leisure engagement by the participants in this study. Similarly, Newman, Tay, and Diener (2014), from a comprehensive review of literature on leisure and wellbeing, suggest that meaning-making through leisure is intrinsically linked with positive emotions, and that meaning-making is a vital link from leisure to subjective wellbeing. Indeed, Newman et al. (2014) report that through meaningful leisure engagement, individuals experience positive emotion which in turn helps to promote growth, ability to cope with stress, and ultimately a sense of resilience. Carruthers and Hood (2007) claim that through partaking in purposeful leisure activities, individuals can develop personal capacities and resources relevant to creating a sense of meaning and achieving personal growth, such as physical capability, problem-solving, and competence. Ultimately, the belief that life has

meaning, in addition to being engaged in productive activities that are perceived as meaningful, is a significant resource for wellbeing (Seligman, 2002) which occurred for the participants in this study through leisure engagement.

The results also provide some evidence for Iwasaki and Mannell's (2000) leisure autonomy beliefs, as leisure provided autonomy and control, contrasting with the lack of perceived control at work. Research consistently demonstrates that having a degree of perceived control when stressed helps to minimise negative outcomes (Rosenbaum, White, & Gervino, 2012). Control coming from leisure activities is an important finding for individuals who cannot easily change their working situation.

These findings on positive emotion are consistent with the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). Positive emotions appear to have a broadening effect on behaviour, leading to leisure engagement, persistence in leisure activity and the development of psychosocial resources. These help to cultivate a sense of resilience in respondents, enabling them to cope with complex and challenging stressors. Resources identified by participants include hope, the learning of meaningful life skills, having an enhanced social network, enhanced self-belief, more confidence, feelings of competence, and a sense of purpose and meaning.

- Figure 1 here -

The building function of the broaden-and-build theory can provide some theoretical underpinning for the observed relationships between leisure and stress as demonstrated in Figure 1. Specifically, in response to chronic and transitional stress respondents make a decision to engage in leisure activity. In this way, the leisure activity is an initial coping response to stress. Personal resilient qualities (such as determination) and positive emotion in the form of interest in the leisure pursuit encourage engagement. Leisure engagement in turn leads to the experience of positive emotion and broadened thought and action. Broadening

for the participants consisted of opening up and expanding their social circles and developing skills and competency in the leisure pursuit. According to participants, a cycle of leisure engagement, experiencing positive emotions, reduction of negative emotional arousal associated with stress, and a broadening of thought and action repertoires occurs. Over time through continued engagement in the leisure activity, a virtuous circle develops with psychosocial resources increasing, enabling participants to feel more resilient when coping with stress. In this way leisure engagement is conceptualised as a very positive way of coping with stress as it brings both short-term (positive emotions) and longer-term health benefits (greater resilience).

It appears that cyclical exposure to stress and negative emotions had a cumulative impact on psychological health and participants coped by using strategies including withdrawal. Withdrawal is an avoidant strategy, associated with anxiety, depression, and lower wellbeing (Stewart, Betson, Lam, Marshall, Lee, & Wong, 1997). Withdrawal prevents problems being dealt with and emotional energy is spent on feeling anxious. The finding that withdrawal escalates stress and negative emotion is unsurprising given that negative affect, as a component of the avoidance-oriented behavioural system, triggers avoidance to protect an individual from situations that could cause pain, danger, or discomfort (Watson et al. 1999). Leisure, conversely, provides a constructive outlet for coping with stress and enabled participants to achieve a better life balance as Grafanaki et al. (2005) also found.

However, there is evidence in this study that individuals who have previously pursued regular leisure pursuits can still be trapped in negative thinking cycles when they are stressed. These instances challenge the broaden-and-build theory, as according to the theory the virtuous cycle of leisure engagement should have increased their coping resources, with leisure as an additional coping resource, and ensured increased resilience to stress. The model needs to be able to account for these tipping points when the upward spiral towards

increased wellbeing is disrupted. More research is necessary to understand the motivational factors that play a crucial part in determining whether health-enhancing activities are pursued in the face of stress and negative emotional cycles. Here individual differences in coping and emotional style may play a part and these do not appear in the model. Understanding these motivational influences and incorporating them into the model would make it more useful for leisure researchers and practitioners. Future studies need to examine this further.

Conclusion

Although evidence exists for how broaden-and-build processes plausibly interact with positive emotions through leisure engagement, as noted in the literature review, research in support of the broaden-and-build theory is predominantly laboratory-based and empirical work by Fredrickson and colleagues has not examined whether broaden-and-build processes occur in leisure contexts. The results of the current study provide evidence that broadening and building processes are congruent with participants' experience of leisure engagement and that leisure participation is a context for broadening and building processes. In particular, evidence emerged that broadening occurred for the participants in the form of developing skills and competency and opening up to make social connections, which facilitated the development (building) of social connections over time. This finding is consistent with Mitas et al. (2011). The current study, therefore, adds to knowledge on the broaden-and-build theory by providing evidence that broaden-and-build processes occur through leisure engagement and also emphasises the significance of social relationships in broadening and building processes that have been under-explored in research by Fredrickson and colleagues.

The broadening experience of developing skills and opening up to social connections not only led to further positive emotions and created social connections over time, but also informed the building of resources such as hope and meaning-making. Participants reported that such resources were invaluable for coping in times of adversity. As discussed in the

literature review, positive emotions have been consistently linked with leisure through the work of Iwasaki, Kleiber, Mannell, and others. The current study, however, builds on this work by suggesting that positive emotions acted in tandem with leisure engagement to facilitate more durable resources over time, including social connections, close friendships, self-esteem, meaning-making, and hopefulness. These resources are examples of the upward spiral that perpetuates broadening and building processes with positive emotions, even amidst hardship.

Such findings indicate that the relationship between positive emotions and these resources is accounted for by the broadening and building processes that Carruthers and Hood (2007) suggested with regards to leisure and its potentially constructive role for wellbeing, but did not examine. Without the broadening and building processes that were discovered in the current study, the positive emotions characteristic of leisure engagement may only have been viewed as transitory moments of enjoyment, rather than foundational aspects of meaningful resources for coping with stress. However, the broaden-and build theory does appear to imply that virtuous circles of leisure engagement should thus be self-perpetuating and we know this is not the case. Individuals when very stressed frequently withdraw from leisure pursuits. As mentioned previously the theory needs to be able to account for the role of motivational factors that result in interruptions to the virtuous circle or failure to engage.

The findings indicate that emotions are central to leisure engagement, coping, and building psychosocial resources. However, it is not clear whether it is the intensity, duration, or frequency of positive emotion that is responsible for facilitating the adaptive benefits of positive emotion in the coping process. This ambiguity concerning the role of emotions is a noted problem in the stress and coping literature (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000), and further research is necessary.

A limitation of the study is that a convenience sample was used although they all engaged in leisure pursuits regularly and presented a spread of ages. A concern from using convenience sampling is that there was notable variation in the sample, such as the participants partaking in different leisure pursuits and having different occupations. Although this added variety to the findings, it may have sacrificed depth for breadth and future studies could address this. An amendment would be to use purposive sampling and to focus on a single leisure pursuit. It is anticipated that this would add further depth to the explanations and insights provided by the respondents.

Overall, the current study provides qualitative evidence for the assumptions of the broaden-and-build theory and offers strong support for applying a resilience-based perspective to comprehend the benefits of leisure coping while identifying some deficiencies in the model. The results explain how broaden-and-build processes may develop resilience and wellbeing by fostering the creation of psychosocial resources. The study was significant in demonstrating the importance of positive emotion in the coping process and in uncovering some of the ways leisure engagement serves as an important coping resource.

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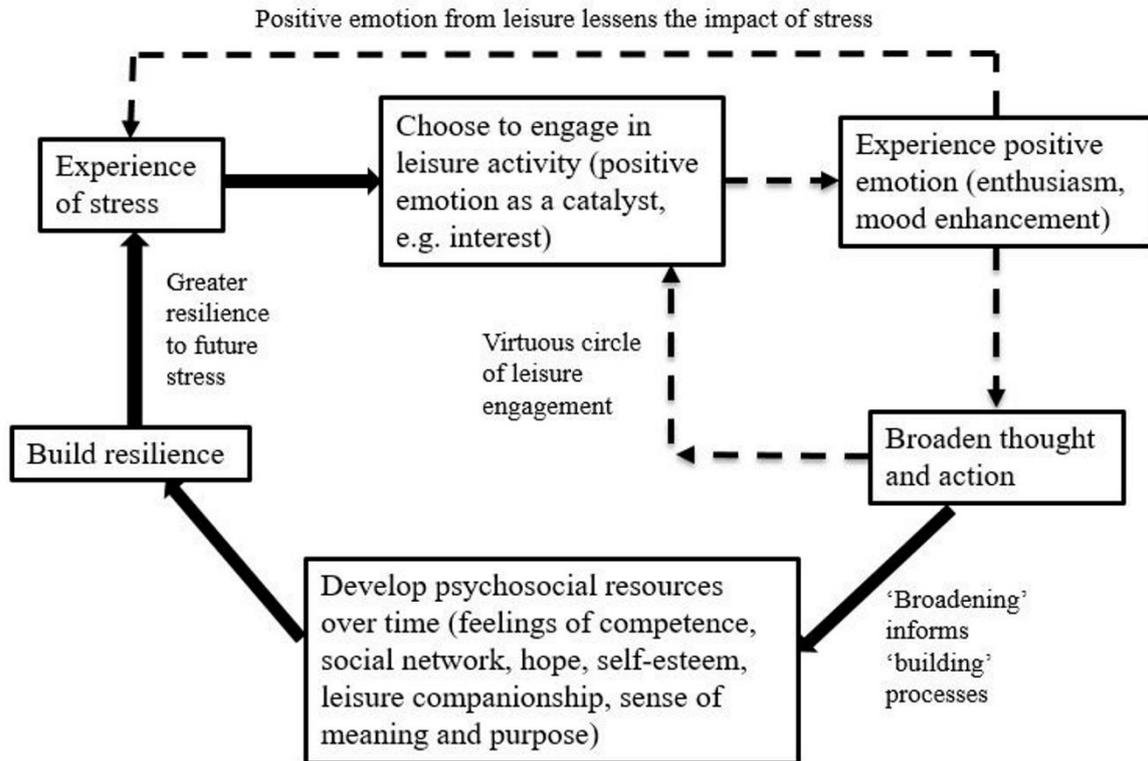


Figure 1. The hypothesized relationship between stress, leisure, positive emotion, and resilience over time demonstrating the broaden-and-build mechanisms