

It's time to play a bit: mid-age rural women's leisure and well-being

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INTRODUCTION

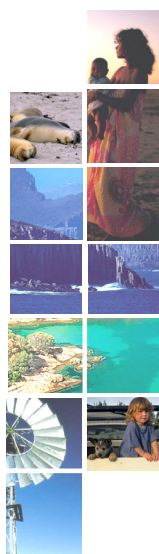
In this paper, we focus on links between women's leisure and well-being. Leisure is seen to provide opportunities for women to relax and recuperate from the stresses and fatigue of everyday responsibilities, to offer opportunities to express individuality and to be creative, and to provide an important context for social networks to be established and maintained (Deem, 1986; Green, Hebron and Woodward, 1990; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw and Freysinger, 1996; Wimbush and Talbot, 1988). Access to leisure time and the opportunity to be involved in freely chosen leisure activities contribute to the individual health and well-being of both men and women (Caltibiano, 1995; Coleman and Iso-Ahola, 1993; Iwaski and Smale, 1998).

Patterns of leisure activity in Australia are often highly traditional, and differentiated according to gender, class, age, ethnic background, and geographical location (Brown and Rowe, 1998). While women generally have had less access to leisure than men, this has been particularly the case for housewives and mothers due to ideologies of the family centred on the economic resources of the male breadwinner and capitalist production. Life stage issues also affect women's leisure opportunities and experiences (Wearing, 1998). A growing body of research is also taking into account the gendered nature of place, suggesting that women's experiences of leisure may differ depending on where they occur and the relationship which women have with those particular "places" (Deem, 1996; Mowl and Towner, 1995; Scraton and Watson, 1998). Wearing contends that space is "inextricably implicated in social relationships and one's sense of self" (1998:141). It is clear that leisure is influenced not only by work and family considerations but is also circumscribed by the "complex mosaic" (Mowl and Turner, 1995) of power relations and social networks which construct and are constructed by the places women inhabit.

While there is a growing body of research documenting the multiple roles of rural women and the (undervalued) contribution these women make to their families, communities and the economy (Alston, 1998) there is a need for further research into the impact which these and other changes are having on women's leisure, health and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

The research reported here arises from a broader study of women, leisure and health which is designed to examine the role and meaning of leisure in the lives of Australian women, with particular reference to geographical location; and also to examine leisure patterns, aspirations and health consequences of leisure choices in two



cohorts/generations of Australian women. In this paper we focus on information provided by the mid-age rural women in these studies.

Participants were recruited through the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (Women's Health Australia – WHA) project which is funded by the national Australian Department of Health and Ageing Care Services, and is planned to track women's health for twenty years or more. A large sample of over 40,000 women in three age cohorts ("young", "mid-age" and "older") was randomly chosen from the Australian population, via the national health insurance system (Medicare).

The main part of the WHA study involves mail surveys every three years. At the time of the baseline survey in 1996, the women were aged 18–23 (young women), 45–50 (mid-age women), and 70–75 (older women). The aim of the project is to consider biological, psychological, social and lifestyle factors (including time use) and their relationship to women's physical health and emotional well-being, as well as examining the use of, and satisfaction with, health care services.

The stratified random sample for the main study over-sampled women from rural and remote areas, to ensure adequate representation to deal with the variety of health issues that rural women confront, particularly in relation to access to services. The sample has excellent representation of women from all parts of Australia. Further details of the survey and recruitment methods have been reported elsewhere (Brown et al, 1998).

Quantitative data from the main WHA study are used to contextualise the investigation discussed here. Qualitative information was derived in the first instance from a focus group with mid-age women in a small country town, and subsequently from time diaries completed by 10 mid-age rural women and their male partners, followed by in-depth telephone interviews.

While acknowledging the specific issues which may impact on the leisure of Indigenous women, or women from non-English speaking backgrounds, a discussion of issues of ethnicity and gender is beyond the scope of this paper.

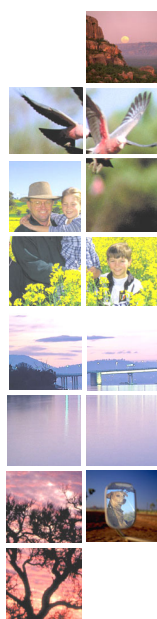
Physical and mental health scores used in the WHA study are calculated using the well-validated 36-item Medical Outcomes Study Short-Form Health profile (Ware et al, 1994), known as the SF-36. The physical component score (PCS) assesses the extent to which the person's quality of life is affected by physical problems or pain, while the mental component score (MCS) assesses the effects of emotional distress or disruption on quality of life.

TIME FOR LEISURE

The WHA survey questionnaire included the following question:

How happy are you with the amount of time spent in active leisure and passive leisure?

A significant number of women were clearly unhappy with the amount of time available for leisure. While the concept of leisure was self-defined by participants, only about 35% of middle-aged women in the study reported being happy with time available for active leisure (Brown and Brown, 1999). The data also indicated that



satisfaction with leisure is strongly associated with both physical and mental health (Brown and Brown, 1999).

Figure 1 Physical health score (PCS) by satisfaction with time for leisure

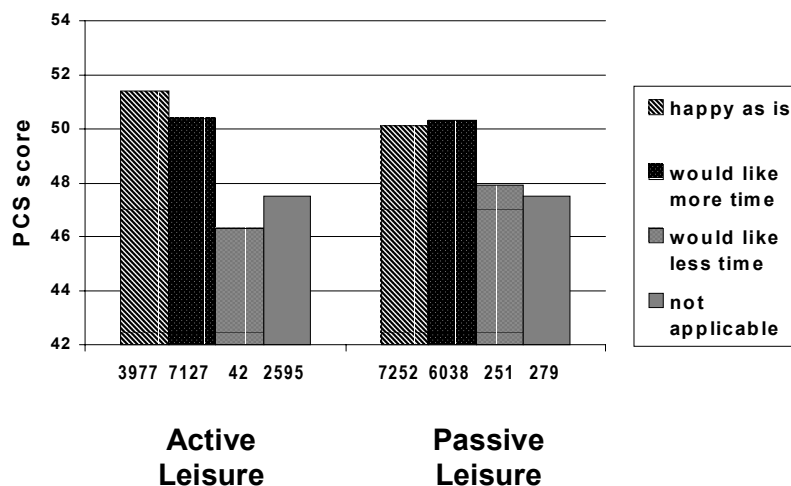
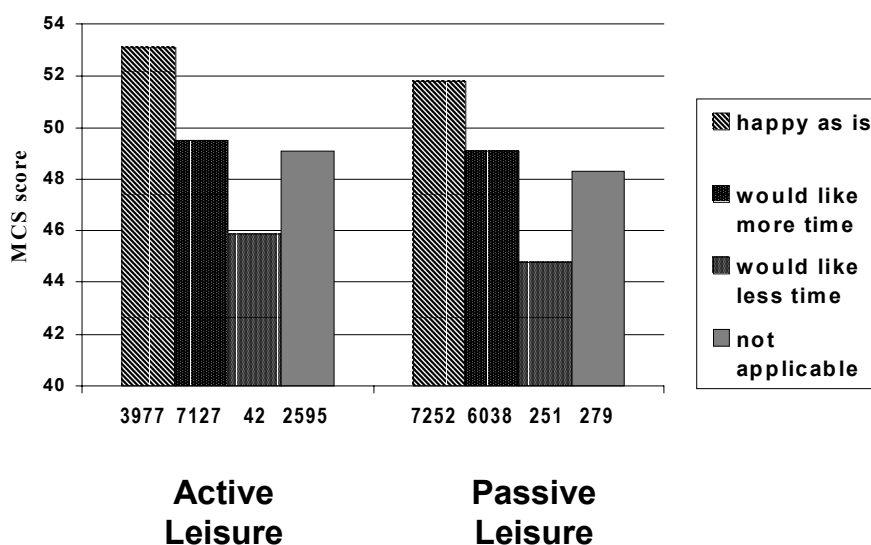


Figure 2 Mental health score (MCS) by satisfaction with time for leisure



Such data draw attention to the need to understand better the forces that enable and constrain women's access to leisure opportunities. While recognising that there are constraints on mid-age rural women's leisure (Warner-Smith and Brown, 2002), we also acknowledge that women are active agents who, within a context of structural forces, nevertheless make choices and negotiate options which enrich their lives. We therefore also focus here on the question: How do rural lifestyle factors enhance and/or facilitate women's leisure experiences?



CONSTRAINTS ON RURAL WOMEN'S LEISURE

Financial constraints

Income inequality between rural and urban women is demonstrated in WHA data which show that mid-age women living in households with a gross income of \$120–\$499 per week include 23 per cent of urban women, 33 per cent of women in large rural areas, and 36 per cent of women in small rural areas. Those whose income is derived from social security benefits (government pension or allowance) include 12 per cent of urban women compared to about 18 per cent of women in rural areas. Mid-age rural women were more likely to say it was difficult or impossible to manage on the income available to them (46%) than urban women (41%).

Thus one of the women who was interviewed, and who had opted to send her children away to boarding school, could comment:

I'd like a bit more (leisure) and just a bit less pressure (but) financially I just can't.

Others also commented on money worries:

The banks are unforgiving – they used not to be – and that doesn't help.

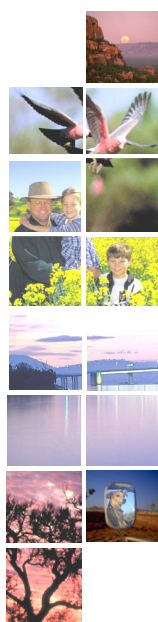
I'd love to be able to do a lot more things. Money is the overriding factor. I'd like to be able to go to Ireland, or just be able to go to WA. It's just not available.

One of the problems which exacerbate financial difficulties is the relatively poor employment opportunities for women living in rural areas, who are often required to undertake paid work to supplement the farm income (Alston, 1995).

Distance barriers

Leisure participation statistics reveal strong gender differentiation, with Australian women being far more likely than men to attend "cultural" events and to visit libraries and art galleries. However, Sydney residents have higher attendance rates at such venues than people in other areas of New South Wales (ABS, 1999). When they were asked about constraints on their leisure, many of the respondents in this study lamented the lack of theatre in rural areas, but the women in the focus group in a small town were particularly disadvantaged in that they didn't even have a cinema, and had to be content with occasional movie screenings at the local club.

One respondent commented that when she did "go to town" she would in effect "binge", and sit through four movies while she was there. Another likened it to an addiction, suggesting that her well-being was jeopardised if she wasn't able to get to the theatre at least once a year. For her, there were both push and pull factors: leisure was not only "time out" but also "getting out", removing herself physically from the town. Commonly, the women would go down to a concert in Sydney on a bus tour but it was not only the physical distance which was a constraint, but also the cost of travelling to the city, and for some mid-age women there were still additional ties of family and paid work. Despite these myriad pressures, they were persistent in pursuing their leisure interests, demonstrating resistance to gendered constraints and obligations.



I love the country but I do miss the theatre and music... It is very expensive and you've got to, like, where I would do it every fortnight, I can now only do it twice a year.

Family transience

WHA data confirm the earlier fragmentation of many rural Australian families compared to those in the city, particularly as children move away to go to school, college or university. There is "increasing evidence that young adults are rejecting the farm as a way of life (and parents are reluctant to force them into it)" (Teather, 1998:216).

Whereas around 22 per cent of mid-age WHA women in urban areas said that a child or family member had left home in the previous year, this applied to about 29 per cent of rural women. While motherhood may represent a constraint on women's leisure (Wimbush, 1988, Wearing, 1998), it is also a potential site of pleasure, resistance and – as children get older – of social support. They may accept that their children have to leave, but they yearn for them and sending a child away to school may be "one of the hardest decisions". For rural women then, time with their children often means a long journey. They also understand that children may need to remain in the metropolitan areas where there is work.

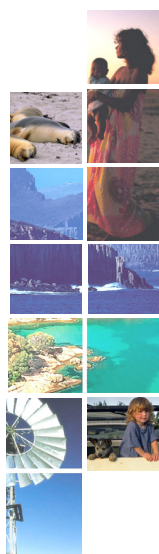
Declining populations represent not only the fragmentation of individual families but of whole communities. A school, for example, serves as a meeting place and focal point for the community, often being the location for women's leisure activities, such as craft classes and clubs. The closure of a school can damage the social fabric of a small town (Haslam McKenzie, 2000).

The politics of difference

Recent research has demonstrated that social capital makes an important contribution to health, which is at least as influential as the contribution of human capital attributes such as gender and social class. Significant dimensions of social capital include involvement or exclusion from formal and informal networks; friends to rely on when ill; control over one's own life; and trust (Rose, 2000). Yet isolation is a major problem for many rural women, not only in terms of physical isolation, but also psychological, emotional and cultural isolation (Haslam McKenzie, 2000:83–84).

About a third of rural WHA women said that they always had someone with whom they could share their most private fears and worries, but over 11 per cent never had anyone in whom they could confide. The figures were similar for available help if women were confined to bed and reflect the family fragmentation discussed earlier. In this context also, an important difference between rural and urban women is the greater access to health and ancillary services and the lower costs of such services for women in urban areas (Bryson and Warner-Smith, 1998b; Young et al, 2000).

Yet another woman felt that, as a single parent and a newcomer, she had been excluded from the social networks. Women who are "deviant" in some way may be excluded from such social connections and the company of other women (Teather, 1992), and thus to the relationality in which many women find pleasurable leisure experiences (Deem, 1986; Green, 1998; Wearing, 1998; Wimbush, 1988).



But I found, being a single mum here, probably a lot of years, I didn't have that. I didn't go to pubs, so... and I didn't have anyone to go out with. So I had no leisure activities, other than sport, to engage in. Um, except to take the children ... But women, women's prestige or identity is often tied up in a partnership. And if you don't have that, you're often not included in the normal social activities of the community.

ADVANTAGES OF RURALITY FOR WOMEN'S LEISURE

The interviews with the small group of ten women living in rural and remote areas were examined in an attempt to identify the characteristics of a "leisurely lifestyle". This approach was taken when the health status of nine members of this group was shown to be above average. While the mean summary physical health score (PCS) for mid-age women in large rural towns was 49.7, and for women in small rural areas was 49.3, the mean for the interview group was significantly higher at 54.6. Similarly, the mean mental health summary score (MCS) of the interview group was 57.6, compared to 50.7 and 51.1. These differences raise the question of why the small group is healthier than the general cohort, and what contribution their leisure may play. While the following discussion is speculative, it may raise issues which are worthy of further investigation.

Keeping in touch

Isolation has been identified as a disadvantage for rural women, but our respondents showed how they found strategies to reduce their isolation, such as relying on videos of favourite operas in lieu of live productions. Listening to the radio was a popular strategy.

I listen to the ABC, not music, usually talk shows. It keeps you in touch and you get to hear other people's opinions. I don't need the company, but it is company in a way.

I listen to talkback radio... it's essential... I like to know what's going on. I always have the radio on, I take the transistor out into the garden.

They also saw the space which comes with isolation as making a positive contribution to their well-being, and two respondents mentioned that their move to a rural area had enhanced their leisure.

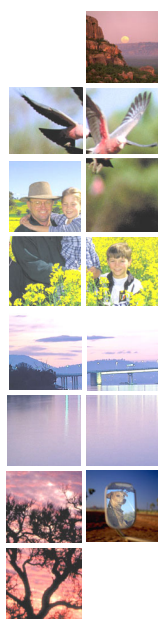
I consider myself to be pretty healthy. If I've had a hard day I go out into the garden, or ride my horse and the stress goes away. I get back on track. If I had to live in an apartment in the city I would find that very difficult. I need that space.

Being in control

Most of the respondents asserted that they were in some way in control of their own lifestyle, either through running their own business, doing part-time paid work where they could choose their hours, or doing voluntary work or studying.

I do a lot... prison visiting, counselling, meals on wheels, work with the church... I look after my grandson, but I can choose not to do any of these things.

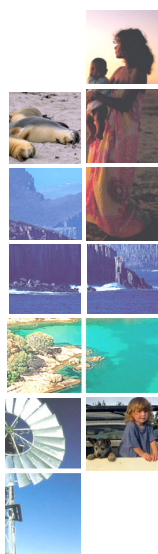
I work my life around what I want to do. I should be in the office now, doing paperwork... but I'm sitting in the sunshine, reading the paper and looking at the view... I feel half guilty, half very lucky. I accommodate work to my leisure.



Although those who were farmers felt the constraints of the physical tie to the farm and the economic pressures, they also perceived a blurring of their work and their leisure.

... with some corporate women, there's so much pressure. We have similar pressure and need to make more time for leisure, but here in the rural setting, and working together (with husband), the very action of what you're doing, even with the heifers, there's some leisure in that. It's stressful, but it's our own stress.

While being in control featured strongly in the lives of these healthy women, they were also objectively very "busy", not only in paid work, voluntary work, working for themselves or in the family business, caring for elderly parents, caring for grandchildren, and so on, but also in the range of their (other) leisure interests. Walking and gardening were particularly popular, but they also participated in activities such as playing and coaching sport, going on holidays, doing craft work, engaging in cultural events and performances, entertaining, doing yoga, visiting friends, as well as more passive pursuits such as reading, watching television, photography, sewing, and telephoning children and other relatives.



Occupying multiple roles

WHA data from the main study have shown that the healthiest mid-age women are those with three or more social roles (Lee and Powers, 2002). The WHA women who were interviewed in this substudy were all women in a long term relationship, and had partners who also agreed to be interviewed. It is therefore not surprising that one part of the picture that emerged showed strong, mutually enhancing relationships in a rural context in which, as noted above, work and leisure were often blurred.

Our typical weekend is pretty hectic. My husband looks after 12 properties in this area. He spends a lot of time going around the district visiting the properties. I often go with him... that's work, but it's also leisure because I'm spending time with him. We also do a lot of entertaining... the country lifestyle...

Dempsey has argued that the dominant male culture and men's greater economic power in small Australian towns not only work to marginalise and exclude women from a wide range of leisure experiences, but also to exploit women's work in the service of men's leisure (1992). However, the women in the interview group also showed how the reverse could be true.

Whatever we do, we do together... He doesn't belong to (my) drama group, but he's our "roadie". He helps with the arts council. He mashed potatoes for 300 people the other night!

Living a "lovely (leisurely) life"

Several respondents specifically articulated a rosy picture of a leisurely life, although their answers betrayed an awareness of the stereotypes of the slowness of the rural lifestyle, and the contrast with the alleged vibrancy and stimulation of the city. This may also be seen as a lifecourse caricature in which staid middle aged women are positioned against the vitality of youth. It was also certainly true that most of the women contrasted their present lifestyle with the time when they had children at home, and they had been under a great more time pressure. Whatever the reason, there was a defensiveness underlying some of the responses.



I think I have a wonderful life. Some people might think it's boring, but I like it.

It sounds so boring to other people, but I have a lovely life.

Some also saw this time of their life as offering the potential to do new things, or things they had always wanted to do. One characterised this as her time for "taking a splash in the ocean", while another said she "felt entitled at 50+ to leisure time", and a third commented "I feel like my life's all leisure at the moment". A fourth said:

When the kids leave home it's time to play a bit. It's a good time of life.

CONCLUSION

While it's becoming a truism to point to the diversity in women's lifestyles, it's clear from what the women in these sub-studies have said about their lives, that the complex intersections of gender, generation and geography are implicated in women's well-being.

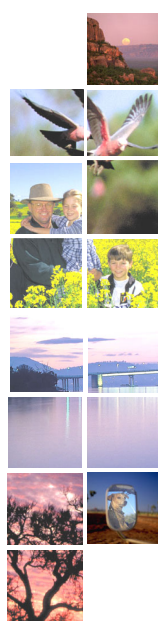
The culture of the small Australian town has traditionally privileged men's leisure preferences and experiences and in many respects, mid-age rural women stand in contrast to women in urban areas.

It is apparent that the leisure choices of our respondents are undertaken within a framework of constraints which are both explicit, such as time in paid/unpaid work, restricted discretionary income and access to facilities and programs, and implicit, such as cultural expectations of appropriate behaviour for one's age and gender. Physically and metaphorically they inhabit an ageing, conservative social space. Nevertheless, our study also demonstrates mid-age women's capacity to resist gendered constraints. Our respondents struggle to undertake the journey to a concert in a distant city, they create leisure "spaces" for themselves to sit in the sun and admire the view, and they take their radio with them to "keep in touch".

Certainly there are constraints associated with the leisure of women in rural communities, and the impact of economic restructuring, isolation, conservative gender expectations, and family fragmentation cannot be underestimated. Lifestage is also implicated in the pressures women feel as partners, mothers and carers: contemporary women in midlife may experience a sense of freedom, particularly when their children leave home. However, it is equally clear that it is erroneous to position all women as victims of structural constraints. The lives of the small group of women who were interviewed point to their capacity to make choices and negotiations which optimise their well-being.

RECOMMENDATION

Initiatives to improve the health of rural people should take a broad social approach to the concept of health, recognising the importance of leisure time and choice in promoting positive well-being.

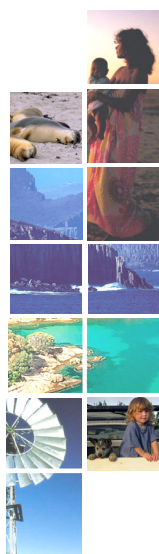


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PRESENTERS

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