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Leisure Participation and Well-being of Immigrant Women in Canada

Melinda J. Suto

Introduction: Migration across international borders is an identifying feature of 21st century globalization. Employment is an important criterion of integration, however, its prominence has deflected attention from other complex issues, namely how health is influenced by participation through cultural, social, and community occupations. Research on leisure participation has identified its positive impact on the well-being of various populations facing occupational disruptions, thus leisure participation and its potential role in the well-being of ‘immigrant women’ during the occupational disruption and transition of resettlement is worthy of research.

Objectives: This study examined participation in leisure occupations for migrant women in the process of resettlement and experiencing changed environments. The research question was: How does the process of resettlement in Canada influence the ways women understand and participate in leisure?

Methodology: This study was framed by ethnographic and critical theory perspectives. Data were collected from 14 migrant women in Canada through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically.

Findings: The first theme, Orchestrating the Day, illustrates occupational transitions and offers a necessary context for understanding the second theme, Socializing is the Key to Leisure. Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and a transactional perspective of action helped to interpret the findings.

Conclusion: The participants’ daily occupations helped to reveal what constitutes leisure and how leisure fits within their lives. Many women defined leisure broadly as whatever supported their physical and emotional health.

Keywords: Bourdieu, Environment, Globalization, Leisure, Occupational transition, Women

Migration across international borders is an identifying feature of 21st century globalization. Integration forms part of the immigrant experience and employment facilitates successful settlement. Unquestionably immigrants and society reap the benefits of employment, however, the emphasis on work as the defining integration criterion is problematic. It has deflected attention from the more complex issues of integration, namely participation in society through cultural, social, political and community occupations and its impact on health. A broader focus is relevant to immigrants who, upon immigration, are healthier on average than Canadians but lose this ‘healthy immigrant effect’ after
The resettlement process involves a number of changes that may compromise women's health (Meadows, Thurston, & Melton, 2001). Living in a new environment and learning English present challenges for many women that, coupled with a loss of customary supports and a change in roles, may lead to health problems.

Research on leisure participation has identified its positive impact on the well-being of various populations facing occupational disruptions including women with breast cancer and people with spinal cord injury (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). Thus leisure participation and its potential role in the well-being of migrant women during the occupational disruption and transition of resettlement is a worthy topic of research. This qualitative research sought to examine participation in leisure occupations for migrant women in the process of resettlement and experiencing changed environments from those with which they were familiar. The research question was: How does the process of resettlement in Canada influence the ways women understand and participate in leisure?

Leisure and ‘Immigrant Women’

Leisure has been defined and analyzed through its dimensions: discretionary time, observable activity, subjective experience and context (Jackson & Burton, 1999; Primeau, 2003). The subjective experience of leisure has been conceptualized to include qualities such as enjoyment, fun, choice, lack of constraint, and intrinsic motivation (Tinsley, Hinson, Tinsley, & Holt, 1993). Despite its pervasive use in research and practice, this perspective of leisure is problematic. It is based on ethnocentric Western constructs and the uncritical application to people whose language has no equivalent word has resulted in framing their experiences within the researchers’ definition of leisure (Iwasaki, Nishino, Onda, & Bowling, 2007). As an alternative, the strategy of using a life-story approach to glean leisure-like pursuits has been proposed to counter the imposition of others’ leisure perspectives. This strategy contests the notion that leisure is a universal concept and may be useful for conducting and appraising research with migrant women who live in Western countries. Findings from the most relevant leisure studies of migrant women are offered here to situate the present study.

Empirical research about leisure participation and its meaning for migrant women remains scarce. Juni’s (2000) study of South American immigrants, in the US for at least 7 years, examined links between resettlement experiences, leisure participation and social interaction. She found that middle-income, English-speaking migrants appreciated leisure as relaxation and free time and acculturated through participation with native English speakers in activities outside the home. Highlighting the effects of income, working class immigrants with fewer English skills perceived leisure as unproductive and wasting time, and chose to spend discretionary time with Spanish-speaking family and friends.

Rublee and Shaw’s (1991) study of Latin American refugee women in Halifax Canada identified factors that positively influenced integration. Drawing on a small sample (N<sub>C</sub>30) of married women with children, who had immigrated within the past 2 years, the researchers sought to understand leisure by asking questions about work, family and the home environment. The findings identified the climate, limited English and unemployment as contributing to reduced leisure participation compared to their home countries where leisure occurred through socializing with friends and family rather than pursuing specific hobbies or pastimes.

Tirone and Shaw (1997) compared the meaning of leisure for 10 migrant women from India, who lived in Halifax between 5 and 22 years, to dominant North American conceptualizations of leisure. They interviewed women, asking what aspects of their lives gave them “a sense of satisfaction, fulfillment, relaxation and enjoyment” (p. 231). Among the findings were the importance and connection to family, employment and friendships and little interest in private
time to pursue leisure; this differs from North American leisure discourse that associates women's time alone with opportunities for satisfying leisure.

Caldwell (2005) categorized health-related leisure research as: prevention/health promotion, transcendence of negative life events, and use of leisure to cope with stress. Given that resettlement is associated with stress, Iwasaki and Mannell's (2000) proposed leisure coping strategies are relevant to the circumstances of migrant women. These included providing temporary relief from stress through engagement in leisure activities that distract ('palliative coping'); initiating a leisure activity that is likely to change one's outlook ('mood enhancement'); and socializing with other people through various leisure activities ('leisure companionship'). Leisure companionship was a common experience recounted in the literature reviewed above that involved leisure participation and migrant women.

In this article, single quotes have been used initially to identify ‘immigrant women’ as a contested term that is code for a particular imposed form of immigrant identity; it is not used to define all female immigrants (Guruge & Collins, 2008). For example, although literally accurate, it is unlikely that the term immigrant woman would be applied to an indigenous Welsh woman who immigrated to Canada. It is more likely to be used to identify women of colour, who are from the (albeit majority) ‘developing world,’ and whose religious affiliation is non-Christian. The term immigrant women signifies the ‘other.’ Use of that term can be traced back to representations in popular media, academic research, and Canadian government policies that form interlocking discourses that reflect hegemony (Bannerji, 1993). Migrant and immigrant are qualifiers that have been used interchangeably in the literature. To avoid reproducing the oppressive meaning associated with immigrant women, migrant is the preferred term that has been used where possible herein.

**Methodology**

**Study design**

Ethnographic traditions and critical social theory perspectives formed the methodological framework for this qualitative research. The aim of ethnography is to identify a group of people who share similar life circumstances and characteristics, attend closely to the context of their lives and interpret the meaning of their actions through the process of writing a thick description (Geertz, 1973). This approach directed the researcher to obtain in-depth descriptions of daily lives and to draw upon historical, political, economic, spatial and other parameters that uncover the complexity of occupations (Atkinson & Delamont, 2008; Hocking, 2009). Sociologist Dorothy Smith's (1999) work offered further methodological guidance with her contention that the standpoint of women's everyday worlds is a valid place from which to commence research.

This study used critical theory perspectives drawn from Kincheloe and McLaren's (2000) work in this area and Bourdieu's (1991) elaboration of human capital. Kincheloe and McLaren defined critical social theory broadly, identifying its concern “in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (p. 281). Taking a critical perspective can reveal how difference is conceptualized and reified in practices, for example ‘immigrant woman,’ and for the benefit of whom.

Bourdieu's (1991) concepts of habitus, dispositions, fields and their role in producing human capital (economic, social, linguistic, and cultural) were central to the methodology. These concepts created an analytic framework and contributed to understanding the transactional nature of occupation that Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry (2006) conceptualized. The transactional phenomenon can be found by examining the interplay of internalized ways of being and doing (habitus),
the relationship of previous social positions to current actions (dispositions toward habitus), and the physical and social spaces where lives are lived (fields or contexts). Bourdieu’s theory has aimed to avoid a structure-agency dualism while incorporating both features into a dynamic framework.

Participants and recruitment
The purposeful recruitment strategy for this study sought women who had immigrated to Canada and were actively pursuing integration into Canadian society. Additional inclusion criteria were: between ages 20 to 55 years, married with children who lived at home, having immigrated after age 19, and feeling comfortable speaking English. These inclusion criteria were consistent with the profile of immigrants arriving to Canada within the past 2 decades; for example, a high level of education for women was typical. Most participants were recruited through a non-profit community resettlement agency; other participants were recruited through a refugee and immigrant services agency, and snowball sampling. The sample size was determined after recognizing that data from the later interviews had not revealed much new but had confirmed earlier information (Sandelowski, 1995). Participants gave written consent before data collection began and pseudonyms were assigned to assure anonymity. This study was approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

Data collection
Semi-structured interviewing was the primary data collection strategy and each participant engaged in a 1–2 hour interview that occurred in a location of her choosing. Typically the researcher was invited into participants’ homes; other locations included a community centre, coffee shop and university office. Interview questions included: From the activities that you have described, which ones if any would you call leisure? and, How would you describe leisure? and, Would you describe how leisure fits into how you assess your health? An activity log formed the second data collection strategy but only three women recorded their activities over a 1–2 day period. Other participants provided similar data within the interviews. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher or a professional transcriptionist. Each participant was offered a copy of her transcribed interview; few took up this option. Field notes that captured the researcher’s thoughts and feelings were audiotaped after each interview, transcribed and became part of the data.

Data analysis
The approach and process of data analysis was influenced by ethnographers who conduct educational and health care research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). One principle used from these writings was to analyze unstructured data inductively and also to acknowledge the role that sensitizing concepts play in choosing the lens through which the researcher attends to and interprets data. Thus sensitizing concepts included a subjective, temporal, contextual and activity view of leisure (Suto, 1998) and an idea that leisure participation could influence health during occupational disruption and transition. Data analysis began with the researcher transcribing the interviews or listening to those that were professionally transcribed. This was followed by summarizing each interview to identify key topics and nascent themes. Then each interview was marked up using descriptive, low-level codes and from these codes data were categorized across the sample. The work of developing final themes was augmented by iterations of this process rather than a single linear process.

Reflexivity
The reflexive process began with uncovering the motivation for conducting this study (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Early in the research, the researcher documented her beliefs, knowledge and experiences with leisure. She identified frustration with the tacit use of leisure within occupational therapy, its commodification and relatively low status compared to work within capitalist societies, and its potential for wellness. She wondered how leisure was understood, if at all, by immigrants in Canada and leisure’s value
compared to obtaining employment and settling one’s family. A full explication of the researcher’s perspectives was helpful during the interviews and contributed to the data analysis.

Another aspect of reflexivity was an examination of the researcher’s immigrant experience in Canada. The researcher’s initial discomfort with having an easy resettlement later prompted discussions with participants about the environmental constraints such as language, employment and family responsibilities that influenced the different outcomes. The researcher questioned how being an English-speaking American of European ethnic heritage, and having a university position, was influencing the ongoing research relationships and her understanding of the data. Her position as a well-educated immigrant woman provided initial points of connection with the participants and facilitated disclosure, including experiences of racism. It is unknown whether further disclosure was curtailed due to an expectation that the researcher would not understand.

Lastly, despite problematizing leisure, the researcher missed an important insight about watching television because she saw it as an enjoyable free-time activity when in fact many participants chose it to improve their English. The researcher’s periodic questioning of such tacit ways of (mis)understanding leisure strengthened the data analysis. This window into the reflexive process offers readers information to use when assessing the rigour of the research findings.

Findings

The participant sample comprised 14 highly-educated women who immigrated to Canada, were beyond the initial acclimatization process, and pursuing integration through formal resettlement activities. Nine participants were recruited from a community resettlement agency and a refugee and immigrant services organization; five other participants heard about the study from friends or saw the advertisement. Additional demographic data appear in Table 1. The themes Orchestrating the Day and Socializing is the Key to Leisure are presented here; the theme Compromised Careers was addressed elsewhere (Suto, 2009). Orchestrating the Day describes what the participants did routinely: the occupations involved caring for children, maintaining a household, and doing wage work or preparing to obtain employment. What differentiated these participants’ lives from Canadian-born women in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Age at time of research</th>
<th>Arrival in Canada</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>PhD + two master’s degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>BA + other courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maira</td>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fereshteh</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>BEd + other courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ling</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1 year of university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svetlana</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>MSc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin-sung</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mila</td>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuela</td>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>BEd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

similar circumstances were the new environments that framed immigrants’ everyday activities in Canada, the meanings they ascribed to their new doing, and their engagement in specific resettlement occupations. Another difference was the time that migrants spent in language classes and related resettlement pursuits. Thus, a description of these pursuits, and the new routines that were developed, provide a necessary context for understanding how resettlement influences women’s participation in leisure.

**Orchestrating the day**

Orchestrating (Primeau, 1998) evokes an image of a symphony conductor who directs individual musicians to achieve a harmonious sound and in each description of daily life, the women saw themselves as organizers or conductors. Similar to other heterosexual-led households in Canada, the women took primary responsibility for cooking, cleaning, shopping, caring for their children and scheduling family activities. Fulfilling these roles typically lessened the participants’ opportunities for leisure and they felt pressured by limited discretionary time despite some help from their husbands. Maria, mother of three young children, captured the flavour of daily life thus: “We’re rushing all the time. Busy, busy, busy.” After Maria dropped off her children and husband at three different locations, Maria’s youngest child accompanied her to work, where she taught part-time at two pre-schools. Maria’s responsibilities, which started at 7:00 a.m. and ended at 9:00 p.m. when her children went to bed, included helping her husband manage a café.

It’s something new that we’ve tried. We sometimes go crazy with that. We’re trying to make it and when I finish [work] sometimes he phones me and says, ‘Well, I need this and this.’ So I have to go and shop for those things because we don’t have nobody that is helping us. It’s just he and me. So if he’s in the café, then I’m out. If I’m in there, he’s able to work on jewelry repairs, he’s a jeweller. That’s his original occupation and he likes it. So he puts something there [in the café], some jewelry.

The time that Svetlana and most participants spent in resettlement activities added a layer of complexity to their daily responsibilities and diminished unencumbered time that unemployment or part-time work might offer. Svetlana’s detailed day (see Table 2) illustrated the routines of someone who had been in Canada a short time, was unemployed, and enrolled in English classes. Referring to time required for learning Svetlana stated: “It will be about 11:00 and then I start to do my homework because if I want to do all my homework it took 2, 3 hours sometimes because it’s serious work.” Similarly, Fereshteh attended a resettlement program 3 hours weekly and language classes two mornings a week, often doing homework late into the night.

Grocery shopping is a routine occupation that can affirm one’s sense of identity and competence or prompt feelings of doubt and frustration about one’s abilities. Store location, food selection and company affected how the participants felt about this occupation. Shopping provided women opportunities to socialize with friends, usually in their first language. Conversely, shopping required extra time because of distance and unfamiliarity with stores where suitable food was available. Vignettes from Chin-sung and Dolores illustrated other ways that context shaped women’s shopping experiences. Chin-sung lived on Vancouver’s west side where Chinese languages are often spoken in stores but not in large supermarkets. Shopping was easy and enjoyable because she and a Mandarin-speaking friend bought groceries in a nearby municipality where Chinese-Canadians are the majority. She stated: “Sometimes in the T and T, we need to speak English but in Yao Han we do not need; we do not speak English.”

In contrast Dolores described shopping in Vancouver as a trial and error experience; Mexican foods were available but the brands and quality were different. With some exasperation Dolores recounted how shopping has changed.

You can never believe what is so difficult. And you don’t know what is right for you. In your country you go to a store because your
Mom go to the store and you learn from your Mom and friends, and you do it. But here you have nothing. You go out and you only go, ‘OK, just take the food because, you know, I can’t believe that I can’t do this!’ Yes and you lost time and you prepare and sometimes it’s no good. You feel frustrated about it.

Thus a responsibility that was fulfilled easily in a known environment had become, and for many migrants remained, unexpectedly challenging. Previously routine interactions with children’s teachers, health care providers, and neighbours that required tacit knowledge were changed by time, place, language and expectations. These changes necessitated new ways to orchestrate the day and influenced how participants engaged in leisure occupations.

**Socializing is the key to leisure**

Participants’ leisure definitions and perspectives provided a useful frame for comprehending the significance of Socializing is the Key to Leisure. Participants drew on experiences in their country of origin and observations of how Canadians defined, valued and participated in leisure in order to understand it in their current lives. Their definition of leisure was drawn primarily from activity and temporal parameters, that is, as what one did in free time or the ‘empty hours.’ Choice and free time were prerequisites for leisure participation which included socializing,
walking, reading (in their first language and English), listening to music, playing sports, using electronic media (e.g., Skype, email), visiting the library and making handcrafts.

Leisure experiences within one's country of origin underlined how different environments influenced access to these types of activities. For example, Maira described downhill skiing as an inexpensive group activity in the former Yugoslavia and similarly, Svetlana explained that theatre and symphony concerts were state-subsidized in Ukraine. In contrast, these activities were expensive in metropolitan Vancouver. Some women were perplexed that Canadians viewed potentially dangerous sports and also activities without tangible outcomes as leisure. Ling identified canoeing and hiking as very far from her idea of leisure but observed that "in Canada, many people do things without any purpose. They just enjoy it." This comment highlighted the subjective element of leisure that is defined by a participant, rather than the activity itself forming the definition. For this sample, relaxation and its relationship to their well-being were defining features of leisure. Women described taking care of themselves through leisure and reducing feelings of stress associated with resettlement circumstances such as being unemployed. They also spoke of using leisure to cope with depression, anxiety and loneliness. Graciela's view compared the importance of context (family) to the activity.

I think that leisure could be any activity that gives you a support in your emotional and mental health. For example, I think to make some sports, swimming and to share with your family is giving you good emotional health, yes? This is for us, a leisure and gives you relaxation, you can do extra.

Socializing was the main thread binding women's descriptions of leisure activities that elicited intense feelings of pleasure, relaxation and enjoyment for them. The heightened role that family played as the primary leisure group was traced to shared language and the absence of extended family in Canada for all but two participants. Women were most comfortable engaging in leisure with people who shared their first language. The forms that leisure took included watching videos and playing games with children as well as talking with extended family back home, through the computer. The role that friends played in a single leisure context varied, as Maira recounted.

Coffee is like [an] institution. It's not just drinking coffee, it's getting together talking. Sometimes it makes fun, [other times] it's like you don't have to go to counselor or psychiatrist if you're upset. You just get together for coffee with few of your friends and you talk... I think it's a need to share: when I'm depressed, when I'm sad, when I feel how terribly I miss my country and my previous life. It really helps if you share with somebody who is in the same situation. We sit together, we tell jokes.

Faced with the challenge of speaking English comfortably and extensive family responsibilities to be enacted in new environments, it was unsurprising that women socialized mainly with linguistic compatriots as a means and form of leisure. Some friends have been like family to women as they recompose their lives in a different environment. The choice to socialize this way facilitated leisure participation as well as social support and other benefits to the participants' well-being and yet, it limited one form of integration to Canadian society. This theme provided an explanation of participants' resistance to disruption in their leisure occupations which they clearly valued. These women created alternative ways to enjoy leisure and enhance their well-being through socializing when it was no longer feasible to participate in the preferred leisure activities from an earlier time and place. The opportunity to resume or recreate leisure occupations within a different context was evident in going out for coffee and was also reflected in an example of leisure that Fereshteh provided.

Or talk to your husband, for me relax and talk and read a poem. It is the thing that...
sometimes we did in our country at night 
when the children came to the kitchen; listen 
to the music, read the poem or talk about 
books…As a leisure, I prefer to have free 
time in my apartment, talk to my husband 
about day-to-day, different things. Because 
he is very, he has a very high quality thing to 
say sometimes.

Discussion

Findings from small qualitative studies answer 
questions that may have previously received little 
attention and, in doing so, they contribute to 
understanding lives lived. These findings have a 
potential for greater impact when they are 
situated within theoretical perspectives that pro-
vide additional interpretive frames. The discus-
sion begins by defining key elements in 
Bourdieu’s (1991) work on capital and then using 
these to examine the two themes created from the 
present study of migrant women and their leisure 
participation. The findings are then considered 
briefly in light of the Deweyan-inspired transac-
tional perspective that Dickie et al. (2006) 
explicated. The discussion concludes by asserting 
that the socializing theme reflected a ‘protective 
factor’ of leisure (Caldwell, 2005) and influenced 
migrant women’s well-being.

Bourdieu’s capital

The following definition of capital and the 
subsequent discussion situates the findings 
beyond the lives of 14 migrant women. Capital 
refers to resources that take different forms and 
are accessible in varying amounts to groups or 
individuals (Bourdieu, 1998). Economic capital is 
identified through income, bank accounts, real 
estate, and purchasing power. Cultural capital 
comprises an individual’s qualifications and skills; 
importantly it also means knowing implicitly how 
things function in society, having information and 
using it to take appropriate action. Linguistic 
capital is part of cultural capital because the use 
of language skills is needed to take action in 
various fields; how people speak may locate them 
in social positions of greater or lesser power. 
Thompson (1991) defined linguistic capital as “the capacity to produce expressions à propos, for 
a particular market” (p. 18). Social capital refers 
to the benefits arising from social networks 
whereby individuals and groups share information 
and cooperate, building relationships that are 
reciprocal.

Orchestrating the Day required the use of linguist-
ic and cultural capital to navigate family com-
munity interactions in English. Occupations 
occurred through relations with school teachers, 
doctors, shop clerks and parents of children’s playmates i.e., people outside the migrant wo-
man’s family and linguistic group. For example, 
language skills (linguistic capital) and knowledge 
of acceptable ways to supervise children’s play 
cultural capital) were necessary for communicat-
ing to her child’s playmates’ parents that she is a 
trustworthy adult, capable of safeguarding chil-
dren. A mother’s credibility could be questioned if 
she spoke English with difficulty or with a strong 
accent. Situations like this occur in public spaces 
and may be understood as sites where the struggle 
to regain linguistic capital is played out in the 
guise of everyday mothering activities.

English language skills were necessary for many 
of the activities that women orchestrated in their 
daily lives and these included grocery shopping 
for the family. This routine activity created 
possibilities for misunderstandings about pro-
ducts but also offered possibilities for socializing. 
Although diminished linguistic capital may have 
functioned as a sanction or limitation to grocery 
shopping, migrant women subverted this disad-
vantage by trading on intact linguistic and 
economic capital. The earlier example of Chin-
sung shopping in a nearby municipality high-
lighted these forms of capital i.e., she had the 
transportation and the income to buy groceries in 
the language of her choice. In these ways, Chins-
ung’s actions reflected the dynamic nature of 
capital and how it may be negotiated within 
different settings.

Linguistic capital was applicable to the migrant 
women who participated in resettlement pro-
grams, where the development of English
language skills was emphasized. The activities within these programs required a significant time commitment, as did the English classes that many of them also attended. The impact on diminished free time for leisure activities and other endeavors may be understood as a trade-off for the potential increases in linguistic, social, cultural and economic capital as they learned more about Canadian society. At first glance it may have seemed that these women were in social positions which, through their lack of English proficiency and its implications, situated them as passive recipients of services. A closer examination revealed the interplay between being a learner who is seeking knowledge and experiences, and being a purveyor of cultural capital in the form of information shared with other migrant women. The type of information exchanged was more personal and experiential and involved how to do some of the mundane things that comprise Canadian life, compared to the equally useful information disseminated by resettlement facilitators. In this way, the participants may be viewed as having used their available linguistic capital to help others, in settings where their changed social position may have fewer negative consequences.

The theme Socializing is the Key to Leisure highlighted the importance of relationships and the social aspects figure prominently in leisure literature. Drawing on linguistic capital, migrant women emailed extended family, visited friends and engaged in numerous leisure occupations, often indicating that the specific occupation was secondary to the social relationships that it sustained. It is understandable that some of the presumed qualities of leisure, such as relaxation and fun, are more likely to be experienced if one participates in one’s first language. Emotional support can be an indirect benefit of socializing, as evidenced by Maira’s description of the ‘Bosnian women’s club,’ which referred to get-togethers over coffee. In terms of social capital, this theme emphasized the bonding capital that comes from maintaining ‘strong ties’ with more homogeneous groups versus the bridging capital that can be negotiated across ‘weak ties’ i.e., connections with heterogeneous groups (see Granovetter, 1982; Lin, 2001).

Limited economic capital, from the downward mobility of compromised careers (Suto, 2009), offered some explanation of socializing as leisure; potentially the costs are low. Despite the cultural capital to engage in many leisure occupations, especially commodified ones such as sports, theatre, and travel, these were not options for many migrant women. Their restricted economic resources precluded those options and often surplus funds were needed for educational and career pursuits for themselves and their families.

**Transactional perspective of occupation**

Dickie and colleagues (2006) rejected the individualism that situates persons as autonomous agents who initiate ‘self-actions’ and also discarded the interactive explanatory theory of action wherein one entity acts upon another in a causal manner. Instead, Dickie et al. proposed a transactional perspective of action drawing upon Dewey’s guiding principle of holism, which posits a perpetual unity ‘of persons and their worlds’ (p. 88). One feature of this perspective emphasized the subtle difference between context as separate from occupation, a sort of container or reified object in which action occurs, and the strong relational nature of “context through which they [persons] live” (Dickie et al., 2006, p. 88). Rather than occupation being a mediator between persons and contexts, occupation has been viewed as the linchpin that forms the “transaction joining person and situation” (p. 90).

How does a transactional perspective aid in understanding leisure participation for migrant women? It allows one to view the occupations that constitute the orchestrated day as having meaning derived from participation prior to immigration and bridging migrant women to their present lives. Socializing is a dynamic conduit to leisure, at times facilitating participation and contributing to meaning making. The traditional dichotomization of leisure – solitary or social, passive or active, creative or routine – failed to capture the doing through ever-changing
social worlds. Thus that approach provides limited insights to understanding leisure participation for scholars or health care practitioners such as occupational therapists and recreational therapists.

Leisure’s protective factors
Writing from a health promotion and leisure studies perspective, Caldwell (2005) identified a number of “protective factors of leisure” (p. 17) across the research literature that are applicable to the well-being of migrant women. Among these factors were: “benefits of personally meaningful and/or intrinsically interesting activity derived in leisure; [the] need for social support, friendships, and social acceptance in leisure [and] feeling relaxed, disengaging from stress, being distracted from negative life events through leisure” (p. 17).

The experience of relaxation arising from leisure participation, in its many forms, was consistent within the research sample. Participants spoke about stress arising from unemployment and loneliness, both of which were lessened through engaging in leisure occupations. The emotional support, camaraderie and ease of communication reflected in Socializing as a Key to Leisure lends support to this proposed protective ‘factor.’

Notwithstanding the differences between leisure as a broad concept and exercise as a recreational or leisure practice, the following study findings offer insights to consider. Khanam and Costarelli (2008) conducted a pilot study that aimed to develop better health promotion strategies for overweight Bangladeshi women living in the UK, focusing on the role of beliefs and attitudes. Based on data obtained from in-person questionnaires, the researchers concluded that religious and cultural beliefs strongly influenced the “general lack of motivation of the subjects to take exercise in order to improve their health” (p. 29).

Specifically, the researchers cited lack of support from husbands, disapproval of fast walking in public, and features of Western-style gymnasiums e.g., noise, unwanted images on televisions, as constraints to exercise for migrant women. These kinds of exercise constraints, and the explanation for them, might apply to leisure participation for some migrant women; further study with larger sample sizes is warranted. Interestingly, participants in Khanam and Costarelli’s study cited swimming as a preferred exercise but clarified that it was not viewed as exercise but rather as an enjoyable daily activity (read: occupation), shared by a community of women in their home country. Future studies that examine leisure participation in the context of health promotion may produce findings that implicate ‘culture’ but would be wise to first identify and analyze the beliefs and attitudes supporting those concepts.

Limitations
The limitations of this research are a sample size of 14 coupled with the use of single interviews; the geographic location of the study; and a participant age range that was primarily in the 30’s and 40s. Further, there was the lack of opportunity for participant input to the developing themes and final analysis. Fourteen participants are considered a modest size for this qualitative research design; however maximum variation sampling and an increase to, for instance, a cohort of 20 could have elicited more diversity of leisure experiences. Furthermore, there are three reasons why the quality of the data may have been improved by conducting second interviews with all participants. First, additional interviews would have allowed the development of additional questions based on initial analysis of each participant’s initial interview. Second, a subsequent interview may have facilitated participants’ further reflection and elaboration on the topic with the researcher. Third, research participants may have developed greater trust in the process and interest in the topic, which could positively influence the depth of the data that were shared.

Numerous resettlement programs and language training services are offered in the metropolitan Vancouver area that may affect the experiences that women in this sample discussed. As well, there are informal social supports available, particularly for individuals who are members of ethnic and cultural groups that are well-represented in this area. Further, the accessibility of services in urban areas that most participants could use,
such as schools, libraries, and recreational venues, differs from rural or remote areas of the province. The age range of participants met the aim of conducting research with women of working age, however, recruiting more women in their 20’s would have created a more balanced sample. The inclusion criteria of age, working status and having young children at home precluded gathering the perspectives of older migrant women who move to Canada to be reunited with their adult children. Brown (2008) identified this group of women as potentially experiencing occupational deprivation due to the combination of changes in environments, role expectations and lessened opportunities for English (or French) language acquisition after moving to Canada. The study findings are not intended to be transferable to migrant women who were not part of this purposeful sample and did not meet the inclusion criteria, e.g., spoken English skills and heterosexual orientation. Moreover, the findings are less applicable to women who, for various reasons, experience restrictions in activities that occur outside their home environment or those that are more physically demanding.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand leisure participation as experienced by migrant women and began with the assumption that their experiences would differ from those of Canadian-born women for reasons of context rather than cultural identity. The daily occupations that participants described reveal what constitutes leisure, which often involves socializing, and how leisure fits within their lives. Interestingly, many women described leisure as whatever supported their physical, emotional and even spiritual health. Leisure occupations that migrant women defined as stress-reducing and enjoyable helped them put their lives in perspective and decreased negative mood states that diminished their well-being. This broad definition offers a caution for researchers who are considering a narrow activity or time-based definition of leisure. Such a definition is unlikely to further a nuanced understanding of leisure, in part because it would be a poor fit with the transactional perspective that Dickie et al. (2006) proposed and that is consistent with Bourdieu’s use of capital to understand contexts and actions that people take. The themes support a shift away from the traditional emphasis in occupational science on the individual and toward a holistic relational perspective. Further research aimed at examining leisure occupations would benefit from applying a transactional perspective both to deepen the understanding and to assess the utility of this framework.

REFERENCES


