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Eudaimonia in Action: Leisure in the Lives of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Leisure is a domain in life that allows for rest, relaxation, development and engagement of the individual. Drawing on a phenomenological study among persons with intellectual disabilities in Kerala, the paper explores the nature of their leisure experiences. The findings reveal that leisure for the participants is not a discrete activity or time slot but a deeply embedded, relational, and purposive aspect of everyday life. By drawing on the narratives and leisure routines of the participants, the paper argues that participants' leisure experiences are characterized by meaning-making, emotional connection, and the pursuit of self-affirmation, even within constraint.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, leisure, eudaimonia, participative research

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INTRODUCTION

Leisure is an integral aspect of human life, contributing to individual well-being, personal growth, social interaction and quality of life. While leisure, which manifests as rest, relaxation, and rejuvenation, complements 'work time' by giving balance to everyday life, it also serves many other functions. Leisure time is unique in that it is an elucidation of who we are and what we value. It is also, in its existence, a tool as well as an indicator of freedom and well-being in our lives. Because of these reasons, leisure emerges as a potent litmus for the quality of life of a person. And the study of leisure becomes a study of capabilities, functioning and freedoms a person possesses.

What is leisure?

Leisure is a multifaceted concept shaped by diverse disciplinary, cultural, and historical understandings. Traditionally defined as free time from work (Dumazedier, 1974; Best, 2010), leisure has been closely linked to industrial rhythms, with theories like Compensation (Wilensky, 1960) and Spillover (Staines, 1980) explaining how work influences leisure behaviours. Beyond this structural framing, leisure has also been conceived as a subjective state of mind marked by freedom, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation (Shaw, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Studies have repeatedly emphasized pleasure, relaxation, and psychological satisfaction as defining characteristics of leisure (Mobily, 1989; Karr & Lashua, 2004). Yet, leisure is not just defined by internal states or temporal availability—it is also deeply personal and meaning-rich.

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Researchers argue that leisure gains its value not from the activity itself but from the meanings individuals assign to it, which are shaped by personal, cultural, and contextual factors (Kelly, 2000; Veal & Lynch, 2002). At the same time, leisure is socially embedded and often constrained by gender, class, time, and access to resources (Kaplan, 1975; Raisborough, 2007; Parr & Lashua, 2010). These multiple lenses, leisure as time, as experience, as meaning, and as a socially constructed activity, highlight its complexity as a site of both personal fulfilment and social negotiation, and its importance as a phenomenon to be studied to reveal the quality of an individual's life.

Leisure and persons with disabilities

The intersection of leisure and disability reveals critical insights into how inclusion, identity, and power operate within recreational spaces. Scholars have long noted that leisure, often idealized as a domain of freedom and self-expression, can in fact reproduce exclusionary norms for persons with disabilities. Aitchison (2003) critiques the normative construction of leisure spaces as able-bodied and able-minded, arguing that leisure studies have historically marginalized disabled voices by framing disability as deviance rather than diversity. She highlights how spatial, attitudinal, and institutional barriers persist in leisure contexts, from inaccessible facilities to subtle social exclusions. Similarly, Roulstone and Barnes (2005) emphasize that leisure opportunities for persons with disabilities are not only constrained by the physical environment but also shaped by economic and policy structures that limit autonomy and access. Rather than assuming leisure is universally accessible, critical disability scholars urge a reframing of leisure as a site where inclusion must be actively negotiated, and where lived experiences of persons with disabilities must shape both theory and practice.

Concerning persons with intellectual disabilities, these dynamics become even more constricting. In a logocentric world, where verbal affluence and ability for complex cognitive processing mediate a person's access to work and leisure, persons with intellectual disabilities have been especially excluded from mainstream practice as well as narratives of both work and leisure. Even when leisure has been made available, several trends have been found to mar the leisure experience of persons with intellectual disabilities. Studies such as those by Rogers et al. (1998) revealed that while older adults with intellectual disabilities associated leisure with life satisfaction, their participation was often passive and controlled by caregivers, lacking self-determination. Later research (Reynolds, 2002; Buttimer & Tierney, 2005; Molden & Tøssebro, 2009; Odegård, 2009) consistently found that individuals with intellectual disabilities face more significant barriers to leisure—ranging from financial and transport limitations to attitudinal biases—than their non-disabled peers. Their leisure is often passive, solitary, or mediated through caregivers (Solish, Perry & Minnes, 2010), limiting their agency in leisure.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on a phenomenological study that looked into the lives of adults with intellectual disabilities in the state of Kerala. Guided by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology, the study sought to uncover both the essence of leisure as experienced by individuals and the socio-structural factors shaping those experiences. Seventeen adults with intellectual disabilities participated in the study, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, residential setting, and socio-economic background. Participants ranged in age from young adulthood to middle age and came from both institutional and community settings across Kerala, India. Many had mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and were able to communicate with varying levels of support. Data was gathered through in-depth, conversational interviews conducted in naturalistic, familiar environments to foster comfort and authenticity. Drawing activities and informal interactions were used as warm-up tools and supplementary methods to facilitate expression. The research also involved interviews with support staff, family members, and peers to triangulate perspectives and deepen contextual understanding. The study enquired into the nature of leisure experiences; the challenges faced in accessing leisure and the benefits of leisure in the lives of the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the leisure experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities, foregrounding their subjective accounts of joy, meaning, and participation. Through rich qualitative data gathered from 17 participants across varied institutional and family contexts, the trends in the experience of leisure in the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities could be drawn out. These findings reveal that leisure was not merely a discrete category of time or activity, but a deeply relational, situated, and adaptive phenomenon that reflects the participants' ways of being and becoming in the world. And this engagement moved beyond the hedonistic framework that emphasized pleasure to a eudaimonic framework, which involved a diverse range of emotions and ways of being.

The context of leisure

The environments in which persons with intellectual disabilities live—whether institutional or familial—often impose significant constraints on their leisure. In institutional settings, leisure was typically shaped by concerns of manageability and available resources rather than individual choice or preference. Activities were preselected by caregivers or coordinators, limiting opportunities for self-directed engagement or the development of personal interests. Passive leisure activities such as watching television or listening to music dominated, with little room for participation in skill-building or expressive forms of leisure. Even when such activities are offered, there was often no consideration of individual aptitude or enthusiasm, making leisure a routine to comply with rather than a meaningful pursuit.

In home settings, while there was be more flexibility, leisure remained largely unstructured and incidental. It was often squeezed into leftover time and space rather than being treated as a dedicated domain for growth or expression. Only a few individuals had access to consistent and supported leisure pursuits that allow them to cultivate interests over time. Overall, both institutional and home environments tended to overlook the importance of leisure as a right and a site for autonomy, creativity, and fulfilment, highlighting a broader systemic neglect of the emotional and developmental needs of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Simple joys

The theme of simple pleasures emerged strongly in the lives of participants, revealing how everyday routines and small joys are deeply meaningful and serve as vital sources of leisure. Participants found joy in acts as humble as preparing tiffin, riding a bus independently or helping a fellow inmate. These ordinary actions were imbued with pride, autonomy, and creativity, showing how leisure is seamlessly woven into daily life. Rather than being tied to grand experiences or structured activities, leisure was experienced through moments that offered a sense of self-worth, freedom, and personal expression. This redefinition of leisure challenges mainstream notions, emphasizing the richness of simple, habitual, or relational experiences.

Laila, an inmate in an institution for persons with disabilities talked about how she would find time during the chore to help the caretaker in collecting cashews to enjoy the wind and scenery from a nearby hill. Amir a 21-year-old man who lived with his parents, talks about how he enjoyed outings with his father to the nearby bakery and barber shop. These excerpts highlight the significance of simple everyday experiences in the lives of the participants.

Adaptability in everyday life

For many participants, so, leisure did not occur in distinct, demarcated times but was embedded in everyday rhythms. The structural constraints—such as restricted mobility, institutional routines, or family control—meant that participants could not always access conventional forms of leisure. However, rather than experiencing deprivation alone, participants exhibited remarkable adaptability. They made do with what was available, crafting small acts of enjoyment in between routines of caregiving, domestic chores, and institutional tasks. An illustrative example of this is the case of Ummu. Ummu loves dressing up and collecting ornaments. However, she had very little access to the outdoors other than her trips to the school where she studied. Ummu, therefore, would carry multiple sets of jewellery to her school and, between each period, would change her earrings, bangles and necklace, much to the delight of her classmates. This small

but authentic expression of agency shows how, through small acts of adaptation, persons with intellectual disabilities nudge and shape the world around them.

Responsibility as leisure

In the narratives of participants, a clear boundary between work and leisure was often absent. Domestic and caregiving tasks—usually perceived as labor, were often described as enjoyable, even fulfilling. Laila relished washing plates and explained it in terms of its contribution to others' wellbeing. Sinoj found joy in folding clothes, and Sreeni in helping at the temple. These experiences underline a key insight: leisure for many participants was not defined by withdrawal from duty, but by engagement with it.

These findings challenge traditional dichotomies that view leisure as separate from labor. Participants found meaning and enjoyment in being useful, needed, and productive. This is especially significant given that many participants were excluded from formal employment. Their leisure, embedded in acts of care and domestic participation, became one of the few accessible arenas of social contribution and recognition.

Relatedness

Leisure was rarely solitary. Instead, it was inherently social, relational, and shared. Participants derived satisfaction from watching TV with family members, taking care of younger children, participating in communal prayer or music sessions, or simply sitting with others. In institutions, celebrations, song sessions, and group chores were narrated as occasions of joy and meaning. For instance, one participant expressed happiness in participating in broom-making sessions alongside others, even when the task was initially assigned to someone else.

Relatedness was a dominant theme, as seen in the joy participants derived from shared activities, caregiving roles, and collective rituals. Competence emerged through participants' pride in completing tasks, helping others, or engaging in artistic expression. Even non-verbal participants displayed strong affective responses to shared leisure—music evoked smiles, and familiar routines involving others brought visible calm. Participants' leisure was thus a mode of belonging. In many cases, it was through leisure that relationships were maintained and a community was experienced.

Eudaimonia and the Everyday Leisure

Eudaimonia, as distinct from fleeting pleasure (hedonia), is centered on meaning-making, self-realization, and the pursuit of what is deeply worthwhile (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Theories such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001), Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and the Serious Leisure Perspective (Stebbins, 2007) emphasize how intrinsically motivating leisure activities can yield rich dividends in areas such as mastery, creativity, and social connection. These theories underscore the idea that leisure is most fulfilling when it fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness, or when individuals become deeply immersed in purposeful, skill-based activities. Complementing these perspectives, the eudaimonic approach—rooted in Aristotelian philosophy and elaborated by scholars such as Waterman (1993), frames how leisure can be a pathway to flourishing, self-realization, and alignment with one's true values and life goals. Unlike hedonic leisure, which centers on short-term pleasure, eudaimonic leisure involves effort, engagement, and the pursuit of personally meaningful challenges.

For many participants in this study, leisure was less about discretionary time and more about embedded, often repetitive, activities that allowed them to express care, exercise responsibility, and maintain relationships. Structured responsibilities, domestic routines, and habitual engagements were not experienced as burdens, but as opportunities for moral agency and self-affirmation. Leisure emerged not as an isolated domain, but as a space where identity, dignity, and emotional vitality could unfold within the flow of daily life.

Several interwoven themes illustrate the eudaimonic nature of leisure in this context. First, participants derived meaning from *contribution and purpose*—whether through household tasks, caregiving roles, or

participation in collective routines. These activities, often overlooked by conventional leisure theory, provided clear roles and a sense of being needed. Second, acts of *altruism and relational care*—from nurturing plants to caring for siblings and peers—demonstrated how leisure was often a practice of ethical engagement, embedded in a logic of interdependence rather than individual reward.

In addition, leisure functioned as a vehicle for *self-expression and aesthetic agency*. Personal grooming, dancing, dressing up, or decorating hair were not trivial acts but meaningful performances of self that allowed participants to assert agency and cultivate joy. These acts challenged stereotypes of passivity and dependence, revealing rich inner lives and expressive capacities. Underlying many of these leisure practices was a profound *relationality*: a moral and emotional tether to others—humans, animals, or plants—that shaped how participants engaged with the world. Leisure, in this sense, was not solely a matter of personal enjoyment but a way of being-with-others, of sustaining care-based bonds, and of participating in the rhythm of shared life.

This reframing of leisure as relational and purposeful calls into question dominant definitions that separate leisure from responsibility, productivity, or necessity. Their leisure was not diminished by limitation but redefined through an ethics of adaptation, care, and embeddedness. These findings urge us to expand their understanding of leisure beyond choice-driven or consumption-based models to one that embraces leisure as *eudaimonia in action*, a process of flourishing within, rather than outside of, constraint.

CONCLUSION

The dominant discourse on leisure often rests on individualistic and consumption-oriented frameworks that emphasize autonomy, novelty, and freedom of choice. However, when viewed through the lens of persons with intellectual disabilities, leisure takes on a more complex and situated character—one that is often shaped by constraints but filled with meaning. The study revealed that leisure, for participants with intellectual disabilities, is not merely about recreation or escape but is deeply entangled with everyday life, emotional significance, and relational ethics. While structural limitations, such as restricted mobility, institutional programming, and familial gatekeeping, undoubtedly constrain the availability and range of leisure options, participants consistently found joy, purpose, and a sense of self within the bounds of what was accessible to them.

Despite these constraints, the participants' narratives revealed an enduring orientation toward connection, contribution, and emotional fulfilment, hallmarks of what scholars like Ryan and Deci (2001) and Keyes et al. (2002) define as *eudaimonic well-being*. By centring the lived experiences of persons with intellectual disability, we are called to reimagine leisure as a site of dignity, moral agency, and relational flourishing, where even the smallest acts can become vessels of joy, meaning, and becoming.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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