Moving beyond individualism in leisure theory: a critical analysis of concepts of community and social engagement

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In the latter years of the twentieth century, the social relevance of the leisure field diminished as consumption and individualism came to dominate leisure and recreation research and praxis across modern democratic nations. A consequence of this focus in leisure studies has been a neglect of community and the common good. Now, at the commencement of the twenty-first century, three interrelated crises become increasingly apparent – the crisis of identity or self, a social crisis, and a political crisis. If leisure studies is to contribute to an attempt to address these crises and rebuild community, how might this happen without returning to the norms, duties and traditional structures that have oppressed and marginalized citizens? In this paper the notion of social capital is used to examine community structures and their potential contribution to social cohesion, trust, mutuality, co-operation and openness. The challenge is to develop a concept of community that can provide spaces for the social self and civic engagement to emerge. The paper explores the role of leisure practices in this pursuit. Central to the discussion is Borgmann’s notion of focal practices – those pursuits which bring an engagement of mind and body and a centring power – and the way in which such practices create shared meaning and communities of celebration. Participation in communities of celebration entails people coming together in sports, festivals, hobbies, volunteering, and the arts, and finding in these leisure activities common and public goods. This communitarian conceptualization of leisure stands in stark contrast to the privatization of leisure that has become commonplace in recent decades.

Introduction

Within leisure research there has been a long-standing conundrum surrounding the ‘relevance’ question. This question forces us to confront the gradual shift away from the social and community goals of leisure that marked the reform movements associated with the emergence of the leisure and recreation field (Csikszentmihalyi and Kleiber, 1991; Deem, 1999; Duncan, 1991: Hunnicutt, 2000). The shift within individualism toward consumption and privatization has been the subject of debate among leisure scholars in many regions, for instance, in Europe (cf. Mommaas, 1997), the United Kingdom (cf. Coalter, 1997, 1998;
Rojek, 2001; Scraton and Bramham, 1995), the United States (cf. Hemmingway, 1995; Henderson, 1990), in Canada (cf. Shaw, 1997), and in Australia (cf. Veal, 1998; Wearing and Wearing, 1992). As well, it has been noted elsewhere, leisure scholars are recognizing the importance of expanding leisure discourse to other disciplines (Aitchison, 2000; Deem, 1999). Communitarian thought, based in social and political philosophy, offers one avenue for exploring potential theoretical development within leisure in many of the regions where its researchers and scholars base their work.

In North America, central to the thinking of the early twentieth century reformers such as Jacob Riis, Jane Addams, Joseph Lee and Luther Gulick, was a belief in the potential of recreation to enrich quality of life. They recognized the connection between democracy and recreation as a public good, and between recreation, play and broader social concerns (Duncan, 1991). Taking a position rooted in many of the ideals present in today’s communitarian thought, early reformers like Neva Leona Boyd stressed society’s responsibility to recognise and solve social problems. She and others sought to use settlement houses, like Hull House in Chicago, to deal with issues and problems within the context of community and collective responsibility. Further, there was a broader appeal to the notion of citizenship and the development of the social self. For example, Jacob Riis wrote that play was central to ‘teaching proper citizenship’ (Duncan, 1991, p. 334). From these early roots, broad structural changes across democratic capitalist countries occurred concomitantly with shifts in the notion of individualism. Public services in general, and the welfare state specifically, came under increasing attack in many Western nations (Wharf, 1992). Consequently, in the last decade of the twentieth century, shifts toward fiscal conservatism and privatization led to recreation and leisure adopting a reactive approach (Coalter, 2000; Goodale, 1991), which emphasizes individual choice and autonomy, and constrained attempts to develop a framework that moves beyond individualism. The focus on income generation and the ‘sale’ of the benefits of leisure has been accompanied by a shift away from leisure as central to the common good and to community. The consequence has been to restrict our perception of the social benefits of leisure as a practice to those that are reaped by the individual (e.g., individual health and well-being), and to de-emphasize the meaning of leisure to the community. In order that the ideas of community and the common good might be reintroduced to our understanding of leisure, it is necessary to adopt a macro perspective and to recognize the limitations that the overarching emphasis on individualism imposes. While this paper originates in Canada and no doubt reflects a North American perspective, the concerns it raises in relation to leisure, community and the common good are clearly not confined to North America. Leisure scholars elsewhere have stressed the same concerns (cf. Coalter, 1998; Henry, 1995; Murdock, 1994; Rojek, 2001; Veal, 1998).

A communitarian perspective

The social problems of the twenty-first century include three interrelated crises that are exacerbated by globalization. These are the crisis of identity or self; a social crisis in which alienation results from a loss of trust, intimacy and
relationships in society; and a political crisis as decision-making and power move increasingly to the global level (Brueggemann, 2002). As Sandel (1992) notes, globalization puts community at risk, which in turn threatens individual rights and freedoms. Solutions for these problems are not likely to be found in the individualism that has dominated Western society in recent decades. In fact, Green (1998) raises the concern that an ‘individualistic society’ emerges as postmodernism and post-structuralism become the new orthodoxies among feminists. This paper presents the communitarian view and attempts to draw our attention back to the centrality of the common good and community in leisure.

How we understand the nature of community differs according to the political theory and ideology we are committed to. Within capitalist theory, community is reduced to the idea of the traditional family as a ‘haven in a heartless world’ (Frazer and Lacey, 1993, p. 120). In liberal theory, the community, once seen as a social necessity, is sometimes reconstructed as a threat to individual autonomy, freedom and individual rights (Frazer and Lacey, 1993). In fact, one of the main criticisms of individualism is that it fails to acknowledge interdependence and obligations in society, a failing which communitarianism attempts to overcome.

For communitarians, community is the context of social relationships; it is not simply the utilitarian context for meeting private ends. In modern society we ‘carry on a balancing act between meeting our needs for intimacy and the impersonal demands of organisational society’ (Brueggemann, 2002, p. 117). Where social relations have become driven by competition, contracts and self-interest, the nature of trust and intimacy is compromised. As Brueggemann (2002) describes, ‘the fundamental premises on which North American society is based mitigate against the capacity of society to provide for a full social existence of intimate, close connections with others. While possessive individualism and ruthless self-interest provide us with freedom and opportunity, they leave little space beyond the self by which we can obtain social nurture’ (p. 118). For communitarians, the emphasis on trust, mutuality and cooperation is an attempt to ‘turn a self-defeating concern for individual liberty into a sustainable concern for collective liberty and social justice’ (Newton, 1997, p. 576).

The most prominent contributors to the communitarian perspective are Etzioni (1995, 1998), MacIntyre (1981), Sandel (1982, 1984), and Taylor (1989). Etzioni is sometimes identified as a ‘political communitarian’, the others as ‘philosophical communitarians’. All of these philosophical communitarians have important connections with England. MacIntyre, a Scotsman, was educated in England; Sandel, an American, received a D. Phil. at Oxford in 1981; Taylor, a Canadian, was for many years Professor of Political Philosophy at Oxford and while there developed his communitarian outlook. As well, the movement known as ‘radical communitarianism’ originated in England (Hughes, 1996; Jordan, 1989). A Burkean conservative version of communitarianism is espoused by the English philosopher, Scruton (1980, 2001).

Not unlike other social and political standpoints, there is no one definitive position that we understand to be communitarianism. Nevertheless there are significant defining views which virtually all communitarians accept. These include social justice as a foundation of community, equality, mutuality, stewardship and inclusion (Selznick, 1998). Communitarianism requires the
building of what Etzioni (1995) refers to as a responsive community; that is, ‘one whose moral standards reflect the basic human needs of all of its members’ (p. 13). Communitarians consider humans as essentially social beings and stress the political priority of cultural practices; they reaffirm the communal and mutually supportive aspects of human life (Frazer and Lacey, 1993). It is in this context that the collective values of reciprocity, solidarity and community are most apparent. Notions of community and the common good are, of course, deeply embedded in communitarian thought (Scott, 1995). Communitarianism – in its present form – arises in modern society as an alternative lens to unfettered individualism. It attempts to combine notions of individual rights and freedoms with collective responsibility and duty (Avineri and de-Shalit, 1992; Etzioni, 1991; Triandis, 1995) and proposes that we attend to the fostering of community and the development of collective well-being. Communitarians emphasise the value of a sort of leisure that brings people together around practices of shared meaning, what Borgmann (1992) has called ‘focal practices’. Focal practices such as hiking, woodworking and volunteering bring an engagement of mind and body, so that among a group of individuals ‘there is an immediate and centring power of the focal thing they are devoted to’ (Borgmann, 1992, p. 122). Here we would differentiate between focal practices such as singing in a choir versus listening to music recorded on a compact disk. In the choir the individual is engaged within a group to sing; that is, the individual is involved in both the means and the end of the leisure practice, and is part of a larger group or collective. With a compact disk, the tracks for the song were created by an artist in a studio, published and released through a music distributor. The individual then purchases the compact disk for use during her leisure time. Further, the individual often experiences the music as she drives a car, washes dishes at night, or sits by a fire reading a book. Here the means is separated from the end, and the individual from community.

Leisure practice

What is the primary motive for people engaged in leisure? As individuals pursue leisure in the context of the twenty-first century, there appear to be two major domains of thought. The first of these is based in notions of individualism and focuses on ‘leisure as consumption’, the second on ‘leisure as shared meaning’. Borgmann (1992) talks about the emergence in the nineteenth century of leisure as consumption:

This was the time when department stores, libraries and opera houses were erected as magnificent settings in which the public could gather and enjoy itself. But the people who filled these spaces had become silent, passive, and distracted. No longer actors and connoisseurs of public spectacles, they had begun to turn into recipients and consumers of commodities, produced for them by experts. (p. 41)

Leisure as consumption is inextricably linked to individualism (liberalism) and the exercise of individual rights and choice. In satisfying their individual interests, people engage in leisure with little concern for the broader social, political or environmental consequences of their actions. Important to note here is that in its original form, liberalism was grounded in a society committed to traditional
values and obligations (Spragens, 1998). In fact, the leading liberal theorists, from
the rise of liberalism in the 1600s, to the mid-1800s, did not endorse orienting a
democratic regime around a single goal or value such as liberty or equality. Instead, they envisaged a society characterized by greater prosperity, stability, civic friendship, intellectual progress, and moral advance. However, the problem, as Spragens (1998) notes, is that the liberalism or individualism of John Locke
was grounded in a context characterized by, if not constrained by, traditional
values and obligations. From its roots in England in the 1600s, individualism now
manifests itself differently across various modern democratic countries (e.g., the
UK, United States, Canada, Australia). Many authors equate individualism with
the liberalism Tocqueville described in his writing about the United States in the
early 1800s (Lipset, 1990). More recently, variations of individualism have been
reflected in policies based in conservative political ideologies embedded in
Reaganism and Thatcherism, as well as other ostensibly more liberal or left of
centre administrations in North America and Britain (Triandis, 1990). However,
despite these variations, there are central tenets that define modern forms of
individualism including an emphasis on the free-hand of the market and
\textit{laissez-faire} notions of government. Thus, the problem lies in the unfettered indi-
nidualism that arose as the social and historical context changed.

In line with the dominant ideology of individualism, leisure research has placed
individual choice and freedoms at the centre of leisure theories and models (e.g.,
leisure as free time, leisure as a right). The discussion of unencumbered
individualism in leisure theory has led us to stress the individual benefits, choice
and autonomy that arise from involvement – that is, independence rather than
interdependence is sought in leisure. Leisure as consumption is described in
various ways in the literature. The rise of conspicuous consumption in modern
society has been well documented and is generally not disputed (see Bell, 1976;
Deem, 1999; Veblen, 2001). As early as 1831, Tocqueville noted that in
democracies there are many persons whose wants are above their means, and who
in their consumption of art are very willing to take up with imperfect satisfaction
rather than abandon their desires. In \textit{Homo Ludens} Huizinga (1970) describes
how art (and play) is susceptible to the deleterious influences of modern
production. With photographic reproduction, art becomes property for the
masses and the ‘love of art bon ton’. Commenting on Veblen’s \textit{The Theory of the
Leisure Class} and conspicuous consumption, Rojek (1995) notes that ‘leisure is
therefore born out of the economic surplus generated by acquisitive culture’; as
the economy grows, ‘generalised conspicuous consumption is divorced from the
productive capabilities of the economy’ (p. 79). This, it is suggested, ultimately
threatens to destroy society.

In Western cities the majority of leisure and consumption is privatised and
occurs in private spaces. As Borgmann (1992) notes:

In leisure, individualism seems to be close to the extreme privacy Tocqueville foresaw
more than a century and a half ago. Here individualism throws one ‘back forever upon
himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his
own heart’ (Tocqueville). But we have artfully concealed the desolation of this solitude
behind the massive ostentation of the public realm and under the judicial elaboration
of privacy. (p. 44)
Consequently, the public realm is valued for its instrumentality; that is, as a public means for achieving private ends (Borgmann, 1992). Over time the element of closely linked individuals bound by shared norms and duties has declined, leaving the outward shell of collectivist institutions without societal commitment to their substance. Cooperation in society is reduced to rational calculation of costs and benefits, and largely occurs among individuals seeking mutual advantage (Avineri and de-Shalit, 1992; Triandis, 1995). In recounting Locke’s notion of the sovereignty of the individual, Borgmann (1992) raises the question, ‘how do we get from separate and autonomous individuals to an inclusive and binding commonwealth?’ (p. 38).

As developments in technology continue, Borgmann (1992) introduces the notion of the device paradigm to describe the impacts of technology on leisure. Technology has, at once, changed the nature of our leisure choices and divided the means from the ends. The presence of technology (e.g., a television set) in the house changes daily decisions. As Borgmann (1992) describes, ‘whether to read a book, or write a letter, or play a game, or tell stories, or go for a walk, or sit down to dinner, or watch television no longer really ranges over seven possibilities. The presence of television has compressed all alternatives to one whose subalternatives are contained in the question: What are we going to watch tonight?’ (p. 112). Technology also decreases the individual’s involvement in the creation of the leisure experience. Once people entertained one another by singing together; now they sit in front of a TV passively entertained. In the latter condition the device, in this case the television, is the means by which leisure is produced. The enjoyment – the commodity – that is delivered by the device is the end; and because the commodity is delivered without the engagement of the individual the means and ends are separated. By contrast, when people come together to engage, say, in singing for the sheer enjoyment of it, rather than practising so they may sing ‘better’, they are engaged in the means, which is also the end. Hence, the practice of leisure is the leisure experience, so that the end is inseparable from the means. Leisure practice here is described as communal leisure, as a community of people sharing and celebrating a focal practice, in this case singing, which is both created and preserved as a common or public good.

Borgmann’s (1992) analysis suggests an alternative understanding to leisure as consumption: ‘leisure as shared meaning’. The notion of the common good in communitarian thought is considered as the desired outcome of civic discourse (Scott, 1995). In this sense, leisure is not a commercial activity. It is not a good to be consumed; rather it is something that everyone shares. The leisure pursuit itself is the common good. Indeed, Borgmann (1992) has argued that as we ‘become conscious and confident of communal celebration’ so we ‘may achieve through citizenship what is unattainable through consumership’ (p. 141). Thus, cooperation is motivated by the common good and by shared interests.

As an outcome of excessive individualism, leisure is typified by consumption and individualistic pursuit for private ends. While passive leisure such as television watching has grown (Borgmann, 1992; Putnam, 2001) it appears that people find activities without personal interaction unsatisfying (Borgmann, 1992). As Borgmann (1992) notes, ‘the public realm of the late 20th century United States has become both hypertrophied and atrophied, both excessively
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developed in its sheer physical presence and devoid of intrinsic or final dignity, bereft of celebration and festivity’ (p. 42). For Borgmann the idea of a festive city and communal celebration are central to our ability to create vital communities. As he states, ‘the two sides of urban reality are the common reality of daily life and the festive reality of celebration. Daily city life is both sturdy and comprehensible with order, bounded spaces that are inhabited and traversed, vigorous and richly connected’ (Borgmann, 1992, p. 133).

Focal realism refers to the ‘encounters each of us has with things that of themselves have engaged mind and body and centred our lives. Commanding presence, continuity with the world, and centring power are signs of focal things’ (Borgmann, 1992, pp. 119–120). Thus, focal realism provides the starting point or centre for communal celebration. This notion of focal realism provides a way to address the concern raised by Deem (1999) that our current theories pertaining to marginalized groups emphasize what divides excluded groups, rather than what is able to unite them. Further, the features of celebration described by Borgmann resonate with the ideas of serious leisure in volunteerism, and in the hobbyist and amateur pursuits described by Stebbins (1996). As Borgmann (1992) describes it, ‘[t]he final realisation of public life happens . . . in festive celebration. Such celebrations need not and could not be designed and produced. They are alive in athletics, the arts and religion’ (p. 134).

Here, then, leisure as shared meaning is woven into and is inseparable from the practice of leisure in a community of celebration, whether that be in the ballpark, the theatre, or the temple, as people are engaged in creating and focussing on a public good. As a result of participation in these communities, the social self emerges. Focal realities cause individuals to ‘look up’ from self-interest to areas of shared meaning.

Connectedness and the nature of community

It has been said that in modern urban society – characterized by excessive individualism, Gesellschaft, and fragmentation – the absence of meaningful social ties among individuals, and vertical (or hierarchical) rather than horizontal associations can come to dominate and ultimately decimate the web of relationships that comprise community (Lamoureux et al., 1989). As Bellah et al. (1998) note, ‘[t]hose philosophical liberals who tend to reject the term community altogether see society as based on a social contract, establishing procedures of fairness, but otherwise being individuals free to serve their own interests’ (p. 17). Within a society that fails to acknowledge the relevance of interdependence and of cross-community relations, community is less likely to be open and inclusive.

This is not to imply that spatially-based, functional, or kin-based communities are not instrumental or that social cohesion and openness are secure in such communities. Just as the traditional family figures prominently in capitalist theory, so too has the family been identified as a core value by some communitarian scholars (see The Responsive Communitarian Platform, in Etzioni, 1998). As well, not unlike Gemeinschaft, or communities of circumstance (Friedman, 1992), where people come together in folk-like, small-scale, face-to-face groups such as the family, and the congregation (Bellah et al., 1998),
communitarian thought has on occasion sanctified the traditional family as foundational to communitarian values. The traditional family was an essential ingredient of community as a place of self-containment, close-knit relationships, thick trust (Newton, 1997) and kinship. However, this notion of community is fraught with difficulty, and is criticized by communitarians and liberals alike for being both sentimental and nostalgic (Bellah et al., 1998; Tam, 1998; Weiss, 1995). While, Gemeinschaft connotes the idea that there is consensus about values and goals, a ‘good community is one in which there is argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life. Community is not about silent consensus, but where the consensus can be challenged and changed – often gradually, sometimes radically – over time’ (Bellah et al., 1998, p. 16). For Habermas, community is the lifeworld, where ‘we communicate with others, deliberate, come to agreements about standards and norms, pursue in common an effort to create a valuable form of life – in short, the lifeworld is the world of community’ (in Bellah et al., 1998, p. 17). Similarly, communitarian scholars point out that community is more than a mere association; it is a unity in which the individuals are members. This membership is neither artificial nor instrumental, but rather has its own intrinsic value. The coming together of people around meaningful leisure is a potent illustration of community – community of celebration as described by Borgmann (1992).

For Friedman (1992) the urban community provides an important environment for choice and modern friendship. She states, ‘[b]oth modern friendship and the stereotypical urban community share an important feature which is either neglected or deliberately avoided in communitarian conceptions of human relationship. From a Liberal, or Enlightenment, or modernist standpoint, this feature would be characterized as voluntariness: those relationships are based partly on choice’ (Friedman, 1992, p. 113). Voluntary choice refers to ‘motivations arising out of one’s own needs, desires, interests, values, and attractions, in contrast to motivations arising from what is socially assigned, ascribed, expected or demanded’ (Friedman, 1992, p. 114). This distinction is important in light of the oppression and suppression that can go unchecked in the Gemeinschaft community.

Different community structures will give rise to different outcomes with respect to trust, mutuality and cooperation in society. The literature on social capital links network analysis to the discussion of values and ideology, and thus, provides a powerful construct for looking at the consequences or outcomes of the interrelationships among our social selves. Within a communitarian framework, social capital places an emphasis on cooperation and mutuality. With an emphasis on participation in civil society, Putnam (1995) defines social capital as the ‘features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’ (pp. 664–665). For authors such as Newton (1997), social capital constitutes ‘a force that helps to bind society together by transforming individuals from self-seeking and egocentric calculators, with little social conscience or sense of mutual obligation, into members of a community with shared interests, shared assumptions about social relations, and a sense of the common good’ (p. 576). Different communities
however, emphasise different outcomes, or consequences of social capital. Individualists, with their emphasis on vertical or Gesellschaft communities, tend to discuss social capital in terms of its function (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995). For example, Fukuyama (1995) emphasizes communities characterised by vertical relationships and Gesellschaft, and connects social capital to economic development and the motive for cooperation becomes the rational calculation of costs and benefits.

The basis of social capital lies in the formation of trust (Fukuyama, 1995; Newton, 1997; Putnam, 1993a,b, 1995). Inherent in the notion of trust is the expectation of reciprocity, a degree of uncertainty, and risk or vulnerability (Levi, 1996; Newton, 1997). As Newton (1997) notes:

[s]ocial capital focuses on those cultural values and attitudes that predispose citizens to cooperate, trust, understand and empathise with each other – to treat each other as fellow citizens, rather than as strangers, competitors, or potential enemies . . . Trust and reciprocity are crucial aspects of social capital (p. 576).

However, different community structures encompass different forms of trust. Thick trust is an essential ingredient of mechanical solidarity or Gemeinschaft societies and is generated by intensive daily contact between people. These types of societies breed thick forms of trust internally, but distrust of the wider society. However, thick trust is also created in total institutions such as churches, small sects, ghettos and minority communities, and to a more limited extent in consciousness-raising groups, self-help groups and mutual support groups. A weak form of thick trust may also be generated in voluntary communities and some aspects of new social movements (Newton, 1997). Thin trust – associated with organic solidarity, Gesellschaft, or looser forms of relationship – produces weak ties that ‘constitute a powerful and enduring basis for social integration in modern, large-scale society’ (Newton, 1997, p. 579). Particularly important to the development of thin trust are the overlapping and interlocking networks of voluntary associations. Abstract trust is the foundation of imaginary, empathic, or reflexive communities, that makes dealing with the ‘complexity, uncertainty, and risk’ of modern society more manageable (Newton, 1997, p. 580). National social movement organisations, mass media and education play a role in the creation of abstract trust; that is, the teaching the art of cooperation and an understanding of abstract ideas such as citizenship, trust, fairness, equality (Minkoff, 1997; Newton, 1997). In modern society abstract trust may be growing in importance given the nature, size, complexity, impersonal nature, fragmentation and speed of change that makes it difficult to depend on more personal forms of trust (Newton, 1997).

For communitarians, the emphasis has often been on the development of thick trust around focal realities and consequently, social cohesion within the community. More recent discussions of social cohesion and inclusive communities offer a broader understanding of community where cohesion and openness are conditions that can coexist. Openness begins to address Friedman’s (1992) concern that within communitarian thought community is often found and defined by geography or biology. In an open community with permeable boundaries there is room for people to choose, to engage in communities of
choice. Thus while, Gesellschaft communities are characterized by an absence of thick trust, Gemeinschaft communities or communities of circumstance are noted for their emphasis on thick trust (bonding social capital) at the expense of thin trust (bridging social capital). For a community to be first a community, and second open and inclusive, there must be a balance of thick and thin trust, and therefore, bonding and bridging social capital. This is the hallmark of the communitarian community. However, while trust is central to both social cohesion and openness, and the emphasis is on the creation of bonds, it is also important to look at the nature of openness from another perspective. For Frye (1995), community is not just the formation of consensus but also the co-existence of difference. As she states, community is not so much the building up of something, but the removal of the structures that separate us and the creation of space for people to come together. Thus, openness in community is the creation of space that provides alternatives to the structures (e.g., class, sexuality, race) that have traditionally confined and marginalized people. It is in this context that abstract trust becomes important, for the values of equality, fairness, and citizenship create spaces for individuals to act without demanding cohesion and trust to form around a specific idea or object.

Addressing the crises of the twenty-first century

Through leisure, shared meaning and communal practices the context is provided for addressing the three crises of the twenty-first century noted above: the crisis of identity, the social crisis and the political crisis. The central idea here is that through focal practices in leisure as shared meaning, thick, thin and abstract trust have the opportunity to form and create the communitarian community; that is, one that leads to social cohesion, openness and acceptance of difference, and engages people in the common good.

Addressing the crisis of identity: communitarianism and the social self

As Brueggemann (2002) noted, one of the main crises of the twenty-first century is a crisis of identity. Communities of choice and meaning play a large role in the development of the social self and identity. The social self is defined by factors such as age, sex, race, sexuality and class (Weiss, 1995). Thus, while some communitarians are concerned with the loss of traditional boundaries, feminist communitarians are concerned with the costs of those boundaries (Weiss, 1995). ‘The modern self may seek new communities whose norms and relationships stimulate and develop her identity and self-understanding more adequately than her unchosen community of origin, her original community of place’ (Friedman, 1992, p. 118). Against these structures, modern urban cities can provide freedom and opportunity for people to come together, realising their common identity, their self understanding and interests, possibly in work but especially in leisure. The communitarian discussion of identity and the social self reinforces and extends arguments made within the leisure studies literature pertaining to gender and leisure. Authors such as Green (1998) and Wearing (1995) argue that leisure contexts are crucial spaces for gendered identity construction, both in the adoption or resistance to traditional feminine identities. Communitarianism
expands this notion and enables us to focus on the way leisure permits the individual to develop her social and political identity beyond the confines of the traditional structures of gender, race, class and age to include the social and political values held within communities of interest or choice. These communities of choice and meaning are less apt to reinforce the political dimensions that are often reinforced in traditional structures.

For the communitarian, the individual is a ‘social self’ and cannot be extracted from the larger social context, or community. As a result of participation in community, the social self emerges as a broad range of social forces influence identity. For some communitarians the focus is on the family, community, nation (see MacIntyre, 1992; Sandel, 1992), and also on guilds and professions. As Friedman (1992) points out, it is the ‘social self’ in which self-identity occurs within social relationships defined by nurturing, caring, attachment and mutual interestedness; community ties; and historical context.

The social self emerges as the individual forms bonds of trust (thick, thin and abstract) with others. The crucial point here is that to be truly free, an individual must first care about the society in which he or she exists, for it is within that culture or society that the person is able to acquire and to maintain an identity (Taylor, 1992). For communitarians, the social self is developed within the institutions and associations which ‘require stability and continuity and frequently also support from society as a whole – almost always the moral support of being commonly recognised as important, but also frequently considerable material support’ (Taylor, 1992, p. 45). The institutions to which Taylor refers overlap with the domains of leisure as the ‘bearers of our culture’. They include museums, symphony orchestras, and newspapers. Thus, to live in a rich and healthy culture is to live in a complex and integrated society that not only welcomes but also is committed to supporting these institutions. It is in such a culture that one will find trust and reciprocity among citizens.

Addressing the social crisis: communitarianism, trust and reciprocity

At the heart of the social crisis is the following question: how do we construct a society that is inherently social and also promotes the development of various social groupings, individual identity and the social self? Liberalism views the social world as ‘a meeting place for individual wills’ in which individuals seek to express their own attitudes and preferences and achieve their own satisfactions (Weiss, 1995). Thus, self interest, the pinnacle of individualism, ‘forces individuals into a social setting and restricts how social that setting can be’ (Weiss, 1995, p. 171). Consequently, alienation resulting from a loss of trust, intimacy and relationships in society culminates in a social crisis.

Engagement in focal practices or serious leisure and celebration contributes to the broader notion of trust in society; mainly thick and thin trust. As Borgmann (1992) states, ‘the experience of kinship is encouraging because it lifts the sense of confinement that can overtake a focal concern’ (p. 122). While thick trust may form among the individuals engaged in the focal practice (e.g., the choir), groups or individuals engaged in other focal practices (e.g., hikers), are not rejected. Rather, thin trust may form between groups engaged in focal practices, as there is the ‘interlacing of communities of celebration that
provides for a community of communities rather than a society of sects’ (Borgmann, 1992, p. 141).

In addressing the social crisis, one has to be concerned not only with social cohesion (trust) but also with openness – which includes the ability to not only enter a community, but to also maintain a sense of identity once in it. As Weiss (1995) describes, ‘[o]ne of the questions with which feminist political theory concerns itself is how to resolve the tension, most felt by women, between care for and obligations to others and care for and obligations to one’s self . . . It is necessary to envision a society that grants each of us our individual dignity but does not allow us to lose sight of our connection to each other’ (p. 175). This suggests the importance of abstract trust in face-to-face communities and not just within large-scale social movements. Abstract trust enables the individual to enter a community and to maintain a separate identity – sharing a bond in relation to shared interests or values but not coming to complete consensus on all issues.

Addressing the political crisis: communitarianism and civic engagement

The modern political state professes to offer liberty and protection to the individual to pursue private ends. From a communitarian perspective, liberalism is the politics of individual rights (Weiss, 1995). Consequently, liberal democracy ‘is capable of fiercely resisting every assault on the individual – his privacy, his property, his interests, and his rights – but is far less effective in resisting assaults on community or justice or citizenship or participation (Barber, in Weiss, 1995, p. 178). As decision-making and power move increasingly to the global level a political crisis emerges as a concern for participatory democracy and social justice (Brueggemann, 2002). To what extent are communitarianism and focal practices able to overcome the political crisis? The answer to this question depends to a large extent on the ability to overcome two of the main challenges that are raised against the communitarian platform; both lie in the ability to address concerns of power and openness. Edwards and Foley (1997) ask whether people have unequal access to stocks of social capital? Access to social capital may be affected by one’s social location and is constrained by factors such as geographic and social isolation, lack of financial resources, and the inaccessibility of such everyday institutions as high schools or universities. Similarly, Friedman (1992) describes the ‘debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations’ which we ‘inherit’ from family, nation and so forth as enormously varied and troubling. Furthermore, as Friedman (1992) notes, ‘communitarian philosophy as a whole is a perilous ally for feminist theory. Communitarians invoke a model of community focused particularly on families, neighbourhoods, and nations. These sorts of communities have harboured social roles and structures which have been highly oppressive for women, as recent feminist critiques have shown’ (p. 103). Furthermore, many communities are characterized by ‘practices of exclusion and suppression of non-group members, especially outsiders defined by ethnicity and sexual orientation’ (Friedman, 1992, p. 106). Similar problems are evident in related concepts of community and social capital. These are not inherently benign conditions. For instance, a significant amount of civic engagement in North America is contributed by residents of gated
communities who volunteer in their closed neighbourhood associations. The *raison d’être* of these associations is the maintenance of ‘standards’ and homogeneity of the physical and social structure of the neighbourhood (*The Economist*, 2001). The social capital created in these settings is considerable but it is based on thick trust within the community and not the development of a network of associations linking the community to other communities; thus, there is social cohesion but not openness.

Sympathetic with these criticisms, communitarian commentators (cf. Tam, 1998) seek a resolution to such fragmentation and inequity. Frequently cited is Guttman’s (1992) discussion regarding cardinal principles defined by a constitution that need to be invoked to defend both individual and collective rights. Bellah *et al.* (1998) further argue that democratic communitarianism, rooted in *la vie associative*—the associational life and the common good, incorporates core values including ‘the value of complementary association’. This association depends on the diversity that flows from ‘varied social groupings: the family, the local community, the cultural or religious group, the economic enterprise, the trade union or profession, the nation-state’ (Bellah *et al.*, 1998, p. 18). In other words, the associational life depends in large part on civic engagement of one sort or another.

An implication of this is that leisure and other forms of life in the community are the vehicles for local level action and civic engagement (Arai, 2000; Hemingway, 1999; Pedlar, 1996; Wharf and McKenzie, 1998). Local action embodies social capital and trust, suggesting a reconnection between interpersonal relationships and the outcomes of participatory democracy, including a concern for social justice. In this regard, communitarianism argues for reconnecting the public and private spheres. This suggests a need for institutions and focal practices which mediate between the individual and the political sphere, lest the political order become detached from the realities of individual life. The role of public sector services remains critical in the creation of public spaces for ‘leisure as meaning’, leaving ‘leisure as consumption’ for the private sector. As Borgmann (1992) states, ‘[b]etween decay and commercial development, the city must find a way to secure these landmarks for communal celebration . . . through political action we must make sure that arts and athletics are given central and festive structures and locations in our communities, that they have the staff they need to set the stage for communal celebration’ (p. 138).

Voluntary associations provide a forum for communities of celebration that may be focused on volunteer, amateur and hobbyist pursuits. Through voluntary associations people are able to participate in focal practices, and move beyond individual benefits and experience, to form collective networks. For communitarians, voluntary associations and institutions play an important role in maintaining civil society and community. It is in the context of such dense networks that embody reciprocal social relations that social capital is most powerful (Putnam, 2001). Through voluntary associations, people can collectively engage in focal practices, such as trail building, bird watching, community gardening, or music-making. While thick trust is associated with primary forms of democracy involving direct political participation (e.g., New England town hall meetings) and cannot operate at the national political level
thin trust is linked to internal effects such as teaching civic virtues such as trust, compromise, reciprocity and the democratic skills of discussion and organisation, and the external effects created through multiple overlappings that create cross-cutting ties that bind society together (Edwards and Foley, 1997). Abstract trust is formed through new social movements which may form around focal practices and create a force that increases political knowledge, competency, interest, sophistication and activity.

Civic virtue expressed through involvement in local politics (Putnam, 2001) signals the fact that communitarian ideology, like individualism, favours representative democracy and participation in government and public life, but it adds to this the importance of participation in small communities, firms and clubs (Avineri and de-Shalit, 1992; Etzioni, 1995). Moreover, it recognises that the preservation of individual liberty depends on ‘the active maintenance of the institutions of civil society where citizens learn respect for others as well as self-respect . . . where we develop the skills of self-government as well as the habit of governing ourselves, and learn to serve others – not just self’ (Etzioni, 1995, p. 11). The emphasis here is not on ‘doing good’ as in the charity that underlies much of the voluntary sector; rather it is on the common good, a result of people participating together in a shared endeavour which they perceive to be meaningful. As Börgmann (1992) states, ‘civic membership is substantially and actually enacted in communal celebration. Here the rich are not helping the poor; they join them’ (pp. 142–143).

Conclusions
The dialogue on communitarianism, social capital and focal practices in leisure provide new avenues for understanding leisure and for directing leisure research in the future. First, certain of these ideas have particular relevance for leisure theory and suggest the centrality of focal practices to social well-being and democracy. In considering ways in which we may re-ignite collective endeavour and restore civic engagement, Putnam (2001) offers some key ideas in the context of the renewal of social capital. For instance, Putnam asks that we consider increasing participation in (rather than consumption and appreciation of) cultural activities, from group dancing to songfests, to community theatre, to rap festivals. He suggests we might also ‘discover new ways to use the arts as a vehicle for convening diverse groups of fellow citizens’ (Putnam, 2001, p. 411). As well, echoing thoughts that some leisure and recreation practitioners have voiced, Putnam draws our attention to the potential for countering the decline of social connectedness through civic engagement and social-capital creation among young people. Such action could engage today’s young citizens in focal practices that would move beyond individualism and allow for the re-emergence of the centrality of leisure to community and the common good.

Second, the notion of the social self within communitarianism enables us to broaden the notion of identity to include its social and political dimensions. Thus we may broaden our discourse on leisure and identity to a discussion of the ways leisure permits an individual to reinforce or resist social and political aspects of identity beyond the structural elements of gender and race, to incorporate also
values associated with sexuality, environmental ethics, hobbyist activities and spirituality in communities of choice and meaning.

Third, the return to community in leisure creates an impetus for leisure theory to address the importance of public spaces and collective endeavours (focal practices), and to confront the social and political crises in (post)modern democratic capitalist countries, including the issues of power and oppression that exist. A communitarian frame of reference points to ways in which we might revisit leisure theory and reaffirm the ethos of social relevance in which our field is rooted. If we more rigorously and vigorously expand empirical study beyond the individual (e.g., behaviours, attitudes, values) to examine the social consequences of actions and relationships, we may be able to reconnect leisure with the quality of community life, social engagement, and the achievement of the common good. Here we are not advocating wholesale replacement of the individual to some collective, homogenous interest. We are promoting a particular notion of communities that form over chosen focal practices, and can embrace Young’s (1995) politics of difference. In this sense, community simply is the creation of space for individuals to come together. As Frye (1995) describes the community to which she belongs she notes, ‘when I think about the actual activities and behaviours we do, what we mostly add up to is not building something, but just clearing space for something’ (p. 157). While there is not wholesale consensus on politics, ideas and values, when the context or space is created, community forms since individuals are no longer bound by the structures that previously separated them from each other (e.g., work, family, tradition). Individual actions and identity are not wholly shaped within that community as they were in ‘traditional communities’. Rather in the (post)modern world, individuals belong to a multitude of communities formed around a variety of focal practices. This network of networks enables each of us to continually re-create ourselves in the context of community. In leisure, focal practices bring people together, not around issues of power, but around appreciation. The appreciation is for the focal object, be it the wilderness, the fish, the environment, the pottery, or the music. It is with these sorts of responses that we may begin to more genuinely address the crisis of identity, the social crisis and political detachment, and return to community and the common good in leisure.

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