

Research Note

## Engaging Couples in Family Leisure Research

David Lamb  
Lincoln University

### Abstract

*This paper provides a preliminary report on an investigation of the nature of leisure activities and experiences for couples with young children (4 months-2 years). Participants for the research study were sought through contacts at a range of early childhood centres and antenatal groups within Christchurch. The emphasis of the study was on the impact the arrival of a 'new' child may have on the nature of leisure for all family members. The study focused on one specific group (new parents) within a defined area (Christchurch) and utilised an exploratory research technique (focus group method). The key findings of this research arose as themes, concerned with, the lack of time; the availability of time for leisure; parenting ideologies and realities; changing leisure patterns and changed meanings to leisure, all due to the significant life event, they had experienced.*

**Key words:** Focus group; family; leisure; parenthood

### Background

There has been a keen interest in family based research for a significant period of time (Orthner, 1998) However, it is only recently, that researchers have focused their efforts upon, how family life impacts on leisure. A number of leisure researchers have now demonstrated that family leisure has a crucial role to play in furthering the 'leisure studies' debate (Holmes & Epperson, 1984; Henderson, 1998; Kay, 1994; Shaw 1997 & Parry 2003). Leisure practitioners and researchers are only just beginning to realise the important role that leisure can play in family life (Kelly, 1994; Kay, 2003, 2000, 1998; Shaw, 1992, 1997). As a result, there has been a resurgence of interests in studies of families and their leisure. Kelly's (1997) analysis was instrumental in a number of leisure theorists taking up the challenge of family leisure research, with the production in 1997 of a special issue of the "Journal of Leisure Research" focusing entirely on the family and leisure. This is also, due in many ways to the use and adoption of more innovative research methods in family leisure research (Ellis & Witt, 1994; Kay, 2000; Shaw 2001; Zabriskie, 2001). However, there is still a substantial amount of research needed on all types of family forms and specific life events that impact upon family life and consequently the nature of family leisure (Zabriskie & McCormick, 1999).

Previous studies on family leisure have tended to focus their analysis exclusively on ascertaining the views of women's role in family leisure. I would argue, it is equally important to ascertain the views of significant others such as male partners.

Due to the time and resources available, this study focussed on one specific group, heterosexual couples and the arrival of their 'new' sibling. The findings of this study will add to the literature on family leisure and lead to a better understanding of the various

dimensions of family leisure, from both a male and female perspective at a critical time in their lives.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

Seven couples were selected randomly, from a number of antenatal groups and early childhood centres within the Christchurch region. Participants were at different stages of parenthood with their first child aged anywhere between 4 months and 2 years. Participants were aged between their early 20's to mid 30's. All were heterosexual couples. The individuals involved in the study were from a variety of backgrounds. Three of the couples could be described as working class, whereas two of the couples were middle class, with regards to occupational status and income. For the remaining two couples, one couple was presently unemployed and in the case of the other couple, both were in full time education. All the middle class couples worked full-time, but in the case of the working class couples, the male partners worked full time whereas, their female partners worked either on a part time or casual basis.

In terms of their ethnicity, some of the sample could be described as 'White Caucasian' some of whom were born in New Zealand and described themselves as 'Pakeha'. The unemployed couple, described themselves as 'Polynesian' and one of the working class couples, described themselves as 'Maori'. All of the couples lived within the geographical boundaries of Christchurch City Council and participants were recruited from different parts of this defined area.

### *Methodology*

The study adopted a qualitative approach using focus group methodology with two key purposes in mind, to firstly gain an insight into the research topic and secondly to provide data through interpretation between the research participants. The focus group method is under utilized, as a tool of research in the social sciences. Yet, the focus group method is an important gathering tool used for a range of purposes, but has only recently been adopted as a key method of research in the social sciences (Millard, 2006). This approach differs in a number of ways from quantitative methods, as it is essentially concerned with the social world from the 'eyes' of the actor/actress, in this case different members of the family. Close involvement with the research participants was necessary and in essence this type of research is inherently explorative (Bryman, 1984). Many of the research participants were recruited through a number of personal contacts arising from my own involvement with ante-natal classes and coffee mornings with the same group of expectant parents, post birth.

Also members of these groups encouraged their friends to take part in the study through personal contact, referred to by Kruger (1988), as the snowballing technique. I also recruited a number of participants following several meetings with antenatal groups throughout Christchurch, in negotiation with Christchurch Parents Centre North, Christchurch Parents Centre South and Plunket (Canterbury Branch)

During the focus group meetings, I actively encouraged interaction so participants could, as Kitzinger, (1994) notes, to re-evaluate and re-consider their own attitudes, understandings and specific experiences of the issues being discussed. Communication between the research participants was the key driver to encourage them to talk to one another, ask questions, exchange ideas and to comment on each others 'experiences' and points of view.

The questions and topics for discussion in the focus group were sourced from, a review of family based and leisure literature and from a number of informal meetings, I held with local parent's centre groups. The focus group discussions were recorded using a digital audio device and notes were also taken of the meeting by an experienced note taker. I acted as moderator during the discussions and actively encouraged all respondents, to take part

After listening to the recordings several times, they were then analysed using NVIVO qualitative analysis software, to identify the key themes that arose from the focus group discussion. As a result, the responses from the focus group participants were coded to into the key themes identified that emerged from the data and are presented here as the findings of the research.

### **Emerging Themes of the Research (Findings)**

#### ***Use of Time***

All couples reported that, since the birth of their child, 'time' had simply disappeared. Quality family time for many was difficult to access and determine. Lack of time in many cases had made them, more acutely aware of their use of time. Prioritising the use of available time was a common theme amongst research participants, as one male parent simply noted, "It's such a pity, but that's life".

#### ***Parenthood***

Many parents reported that ideologies about parenting were often very different to the experienced reality. Most of the couples, mentioned that the role of a parent was a wide and challenging one. They described parenting as a stressful and challenging experience, but also that it could be pleasurable and a lot of fun. Some parents felt undervalued by society and many commented that their employers completely misunderstood the demands, which being a parent had put on them.

Responsibilities of parenthood in coupled relationships impacted upon lifestyle in a number of different ways. One couple with a six month-old child had given up their training for triathlons. Like other couples, the couple described this as a compromise of becoming a 'new' parent. Nearly all couples said they took their parenting duties very seriously and valued the role and importance of parenting. Most couples were of the opinion, that parenting duties were serious and demanded a great deal of attention and time. Most of the mothers argued, that being a responsible parent was about caring and putting the needs of your child first and foremost. This prompted an interesting discussion about what the group thought was good parenting practice. The general summary of which, re-iterated quality family time from earlier discussions.

Some couples mourned the death of their leisure for a good cause - the needs of their child. Most participants were adamant that as parents, they had to prioritise their parenting duties, which meant their own life and leisure suffered. As a consequence, available time for leisure was worked around the needs of their child. Parents expressed that they had to work everything around their child. So, sometimes when parents made plans, circumstances beyond their control, meant change to well laid plans. This led to frustration, as planning time out for leisure or for oneself took a lot of energy and time. Forward planning to account for parental responsibilities was a useful strategy to plan 'couple time' without children. However, problems arose for some couples who had no support network of friends or family

to baby-sit their child. Without any established support network, going out as a couple in the evening was no longer possible.

Shortage of available time, post birth for most couples came as an unwelcome consequence and a shock. Most of these couples had not planned to have a child and had not realised how their time would be so taken up with their child. For a number of couples, the experience of parenthood was very full on, due to the demands of childcare, which they described as endless. Many found it difficult to make decisions, concerned with the welfare of their child, as the experience brought with it many unforeseen challenges. Making the right decisions about their child was difficult as many had no prior or personal experience of parenting. For many it was hard thinking about what to do next, as they did not expect parenting involved making, so many different decisions. The importance of family time was echoed by a number of couples, also as important, for their child's future development. Arranging couple time for some had seriously dented their own leisure pursuits as the needs of the baby came first.

### ***Our and 'Me' Time***

Couple time for most respondents since the birth of their child/children was now considered a luxury, rather than a divine 'right'. For many couples, time together without the child, rarely materialised. Any available time was now used for domestic and childcare responsibilities.

Many couples reported that their circle of friends had dwindled, since the birth of their child as they did not see their friends on a regular basis. Since childbirth, most of their friends were now connected with their ante natal group.

For many, members of their ante-natal group had become their best friends. They saw each other once every other week for an afternoon, for a good chat. For mothers, this time was very important as others involved in the group shared a mutual understanding about the frustrations and unpredictability of this new kind of lifestyle as a parent. Often couple time was planned but equally didn't materialise due to the demands of the child, particularly for those parents with younger children. Mothers reported feeling tired all the time, this had implications for the nature of leisure they now engaged in, which tended to be activities that could be easily organised in a relatively short space of time and often involved more passive forms of leisure, such as watching TV or going for a coffee with friends.

### ***New Challenges***

Free time for many couples was now a concept that many could not relate to. In order to have any meaning, most fathers associated time available as an antithesis to paid work. So although this time was work free, it was obligated to necessary duties associated with being a father in some cases. Time left over after work for other fathers meant helping the female partner with the child, but for others it meant involvement in the same leisure pursuits, as they engaged in, pre birth. Anytime time left over for mums, usually meant slumping out in front of the TV, once the child had been put to bed.

Mothers talked extensively about the merits and pitfalls of the many playgrounds they had visited. Playgrounds were considered a wonderful resource for family activity as they were free and readily available and frequented by all the mothers and their child, but only infrequently by the father and the child and if so, only at weekends. Most mothers had great difficulty relating to the concept of leisure, it was an idea that many could associate with on an individual basis pre birth, but post birth most of them noticed that personal leisure had

virtually disappeared. In essence, for many of the women free time was not really free, but primarily determined by the needs of their child and to a lesser extent, the needs of their partner.

### ***The Context of Personal and Family Leisure***

In terms of access and opportunity for leisure, some couples were more resourceful than others. In nearly all cases the males were more likely to continue their leisure habits post the birth of their child, but for females this was quite rare. In reality for many women, their own personal time was eaten up by the demands and challenges associated with mothering duties or allowing their male partner free time to engage in his leisure activity. The notion of freedom was a key element for the majority of the parents, when describing leisure, especially for mothers. For most parents leisure was about enjoyment, it did not really matter where and when leisure took place. An important distinction between family leisure and personal leisure emerged during the research.

For most participants, personal leisure was about what they did for themselves, whereas family leisure was different, as it meant their own personal time and space was limited. So a clear distinction between personal leisure and collective forms of leisure, such as family leisure emerged.

### **Family Leisure Research and the Future**

The literature on family leisure has been dominated by challenges faced by mothers as workers and providers of child care. There is a lack of research that links the wider context of the family to leisure and few researchers have considered the importance of leisure as a social activity. The satisfactions, outcomes and benefits of leisure for male and female parents require further investigation. Further study is needed on family leisure at different key life stages of family life. Future research dimensions of family leisure need to consider; the type of marital relationship, lifecycle stage, family inter relationships and conceptualisations (Keller et al, 1991).

In order to better understand family life, leisure researchers, firstly need to seek an explanation for the differences and similarities between men and women at the individual, inter-actional (relationships) and institutional (reward and sanctions) levels. The limited perspective we have on family life, has led to a lack of understanding of gendered roles, further compounded by a lack of research on male perspectives of family life and leisure in terms of their role, attitude and behaviour to it. This study has highlighted, that there is a large gap between what is known about family leisure and what we still need to know. In concluding, I would suggest a more interdisciplinary approach is required with a voice for all family members involved in the research.

### **References**

- Bryman, A. (1984). The debate about quantitative and qualitative research: a question of methods or epistemology. *British Journal of Sociology*, 5, 75-91.
- Ellis, G.A. & Witt, P.A. (1994). Perceived freedom in leisure and satisfaction: -exploring the factor structure of the perceived freedom components of the leisure diagnostic battery. *Leisure Sciences*, 16, 259 – 270.
- Kay, T. (2003). Leisure, gender and self in the analysis of family. *World Leisure Journal*, 45(4), 4-14.

- Kay, T. (2000). Leisure, gender and the family: the influence of social policy. *Journal of Leisure Sciences*, 19(4), 247-266.
- Kay, T. (1998). Having it all or doing it all? The construction of women's lifestyles in time crunched households. *Society and Leisure/Loisir et Societe*, 21, 435-454.
- Keller, J. Howe, C.Z. & Osgood, M.J. (1991). Leisure and the Family: A review of changes and their implications. In F. Humphrey & J. H. Humphrey (eds.) *Recreation, current selected research* (pp. 81-100). New York: AMS Press.
- Kelly, J.R. (1997). Changing issues in leisure-family research-again. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 29(1), 132-134.
- Kelly, J.R. (1994). Multiple dimensions of meaning in the domains of work, family and leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research* 26(3), 250-274.
- Kitzinger, J (1995). Introducing focus groups. *British Medical Journal*, 3(11), 299-302.
- Krueger, R.A. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). London: Sage.
- Millard, L.J. (2006). Focus Groups. In G.M. Breakwall, S. Hammond, and C. Fife- Shaw (eds.). *Research methods in psychology* (pp. 274 – 298). London: Sage
- Orthner, D.K. (1998). Strengthening today's families. a challenge to parks and recreation. *Parks and Recreation*, 33(3), 87-98.
- Parry, D.C. (2003). *Towards a 'Politics of Hope'*. *Advocating a sixth phase of feminist leisure research*, 26(1), 49-65.
- Shaw, S.M. (1997). Controversies and contradictions in family leisure: An analysis of conflicting paradigms. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 29, 98-112.
- Shaw, S.M. (1992). Dereifying family leisure: An examination of women's and men's everyday experiences and perceptions of family time. *Leisure Sciences*, 14, 271-286
- Zabriskie, R.B. (2001). Parent and child perspectives of involvement and satisfaction with family life. *Parks and Recreation*, 36(2), 30-43.
- Zabriskie, R.B. & McCormick, B. (1997). An examination of recreation and leisure contributions to family cohesion and adaptability. Abstract from the 1999 Symposium on Leisure Research, 6. Ashburn, VA: National Parks and Recreation Association.

#### **THE AUTHOR**

David Lamb is a senior lecturer at Lincoln University, New Zealand and is presently engaged in a major study of family life and leisure. The origins of this study, developed mainly from his experience as a 'new' parent and the impact this significant life event has had on his 'own' family life and leisure. Dave is now undertaking the second part of this research study and interviewing couples, individually and collectively on issues that arose during the focus group study.