

Understanding older women's leisure: The value of biographical research methods

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SUMMARY

The phenomenal growth in the number of older people in the western world is well documented, with the fastest growing group being those aged over 80 years, the majority of whom are women. Despite this demographic transformation, little research has sought to understand the meaning of tourism and leisure both for older people in general and specifically for women in the 'oldest old' phase. The research that does exist is typically quantitative and provides an essentialist view of leisure in old age, often failing to recognise the diversity of older people's experiences. In contrast, this paper aims to provide a more fine-grained discussion of older people's leisure. Drawn from the first author's doctoral study, it reports and considers a biographical interview with a seventy-nine year old woman in order to provide insight into how a person's history and the cultural, social and historical contexts of their life can determine their life choices. We conclude that it is not possible to study older people's leisure behaviour through 'snapshot' research (which isolates one moment in time); instead if we are to more fully understand how their leisure and tourism experiences are constructed, we must try to engage with the context from which those experiences emerged.

Key words:

older people; biographical research; ageing; critical research; older women

INTRODUCTION

The demographic transformation in relation to the growth in the numbers of older people in many regions of the world is dramatic. This is particularly the case in the developed world where improvements in medicine, diet and lifestyle are contributing to an increase in life expectancy. The United Nations (UN 2002) for example,

estimates that the number of older people in the developed world will quadruple over the next fifty years. Interestingly, the fastest growing group of older people are those in the 'oldest old' category, that is those aged 80 years or more (UN 2002). In the UK, for example, the proportion of people aged 85 and over

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increased from 0.7% in 1961 to 1.9% in 2002. Projections suggest a more rapid ageing of the population over the next thirty years as, by 2031, people aged over 85 will comprise 3.8% of the population (National statistics 2006). Within this group of 'oldest old', the majority are women who are still more likely to survive to each successive age than men (National statistics 2006).

Despite these dramatic demographic changes little research actually exists on the leisure and tourism behaviour of older people, particularly those in the 'oldest old' age bracket who are more likely to be women. In fact, arguably sociological enquiries in leisure tend to be largely concerned with sports participation amongst children and young adults (Heuser 2005). Whilst there are some exceptions to this (such as Grant 2001; Kwai-Sang Yau and Packer 2002; Abbas 2004), these remain very much on the margins of leisure studies.

There are a number of reasons for this dearth of research and some scholars argue that analyses of leisure in the context of paid work (which have dominated leisure research) have led to the assumption that older people not only disengage with leisure but are unable to find the same satisfactions in leisure as the working population (Walter and Maltby 1997).

In this scenario it is therefore not surprising that all too frequently research on later life leisure has tended to emphasise the obstacles to participation with disengagement, declining health, the loss of a partner, changing economic circumstances, lack of access to transport and feelings of insecurity all commonly cited as inhibiting factors. In addition, it has also been suggested that the emphasis in society on women's reproductive abilities, youthfulness and sexual attractiveness further explains why older women's leisure in particular has been neglected (Ginn and Arber 1998).

Indeed, older women have even been marginalised by feminist researchers whom, it has been suggested, have concentrated on issues affecting younger women such as childcare, reproduction and inequalities in the labour market rather than on older women's issues (Bernard and Mead 1993).

The research that does exist on older people in fields such as leisure and tourism studies and in gerontology has often been 'scientific' in its approach (for some exceptions, see Ryan 1995; Pritchard and Morgan 1997).

Many scholars suggest that this is a product of the youthfulness of gerontology, tourism and leisure as research fields and the subsequent attempts to legitimise these subject areas by emulating the hard sciences and by relying on quantitative research (Achenbaum 1997; Bramham and Henry 1986). Indeed Bramham and Henry (1986: 190) refer to leisure researchers as traditionally "defining themselves as detached scientists collecting and analysing objective information about leisure forms and practices." Such practices amongst leisure researchers - particularly in Britain and the USA - has led to a wealth of dispassionate data and surveys in which the subject is distanced from the analysis (a good example being the UK's General Household Survey).

Yet, such large scale, quantitative surveys tell us little about leisure behaviour - in this case older people's leisure - often grouping older people together in convenient age bands and providing little understanding of the diversity of leisure experience amongst older people (Peace 1990). Another problem with such surveys, as Victor (2002) points out, is that they are rarely devoted to topics of later life or older people and a survey of 10,000 adults will contain at best, 2,000 people aged 60 and over and as few as 100 individuals aged over 85; "This makes analysis of specific subgroups of the older population, such as married women aged 85 or older, very problematic" (2002: 55). In this scenario it is not surprising that much of the research on older people has been described as unchallenging and criticised for accepting a subordinate position for older people within society, often merely identifying the problems of disadvantage and inequality (Walker 1987).

Notwithstanding these criticisms and problems, there is increasing evidence that gerontology and leisure studies (although less so tourism studies) have begun to move away from positivism and empiricism to allow a more human face to emerge in research on older people by encouraging research methodologies that listen to the voices of older people themselves. Critical theory approaches to the study of old age in particular have led to qualitative research which gives older people a voice in the research process "taking on their [older people's] own perspectives as subjects rather than as objects of research" (Ginn and Arber 1995:3). Such research has greater potential to challenge traditional assumptions and stereotypes and emphasise the possibilities of the individual (Phillipson and Walker 1987).

In leisure studies we have also seen the emergence of research, which attempts to explain leisure behaviour by concentrating on small groups of 'real' people rather than large samples of the population (Veal 1997: 19). It is within such perspectives that this paper is firmly positioned, adopting as it does a biographical approach which focuses on the individual and allows personal narratives to emerge which demonstrate the complexities of people's everyday lives.

THE STUDY APPROACH

In light of the lack of research on older people (particularly women in the 'oldest old' phase who are growing in such numbers), this paper seeks to illustrate the potential of biographical research to furthering understanding of 'the personal meaning and value derived from ... leisure pursuits' (Heuser 2005: 45). In doing so, the paper discusses a biographical interview with one seventy-nine year old woman, Mary, in order to provide insight into how a person's history and the cultural, social and historical contexts of their life, can determine their life choices and the context in which their patterns of leisure emerge. The interview is one from a series of twelve semi-structured interviews and three biographical interviews with women aged seventy-five and over, living in Cardiff, which aimed to gain a deeper insight into the leisure of this under-researched group. By concentrating on such a narrow age cohort, the aim of the research was also to gain insight into the extent to which people's distinct worldviews, their interpretations and meanings of the world around them emerge as a result of shared structural and historical events, as well as events in their personal lives.

Whilst biographical research has been used in historical and anthropological research and by professionals working within the field of gerontology such as social workers and occupational therapists, the technique has rarely been used in the field of leisure and tourism (for one exception see Ladkin 1999 who used the technique to some extent in her study of hotel general managers in the UK, but this was more a 'work history' than 'life history'). This is an oversight because biographical research and its focus on the individual allows personal narratives to emerge which show the intricacies of people's everyday lives, often capturing their strength and resilience and thus offering the potential to challenge existing assumptions and dominant

narratives around certain groups in society (Bernard and Meade 1993; Thompson 1981).

A further advantage of biographical research is that it shifts the emphasis in research away from the formulation of 'grand narratives', towards more individual, in-depth insights into people's lives. The insider's or 'emic' perspective, which emerges from biographical research, thus places the subject at the centre of the research process rather than the researcher and allows the subject to highlight issues and agendas which are of significance to them (Thompson 1981). The decision to adopt a biographical approach in this research also recognises that, in order to understand and explore the lives of older people, specifically their leisure, it is necessary to explore what has gone before in order to identify the social, environmental and cultural contexts through which they have lived. After all, it is these factors, which influence an individual's life chances, outlook on life, social roles as well as opportunities for economic success and social mobility (Elder 1981; Wilson 2000).

Despite the clear advantages of the biographical research method, in giving voice and getting close to respondents, it does open up questions of reliability and subjectivity. Fischer (1983: 31), for example, argues that reliance on people's memories within the biographical approach is problematic for as "People fail to remember, they choose (consciously or not) to lie, or they recall or present only partially true information." Berger (1963: 56) also questions the reliability of biographical interviews maintaining that "as we remember the past, we reconstruct it in accordance with our present ideas of what is important and what is not."

However, as Veal (1997: 145) quite rightly observes, questionnaires and particularly quantitative data have similar problems of reliability, as what subjects say in questionnaires is also dependent on their powers of recall, their honesty as well as the format of the questions in the questionnaire. Thus information presented in numerical form, based on large numbers, does not represent immutable 'truth'. Indeed, as Veal (1997: 145) observes, "There has been very little research on the validity or accuracy of questionnaire data in leisure and tourism studies."

Hence we would argue that biographical research is no less 'reliable' than other forms of research methods,

and indeed the emphasis on the subject's own voice and experiences makes it more difficult for the researcher to misrepresent respondents. Indeed in this research to minimise any researcher bias, the participant (Mary) was shown both the pen portrait of her life as well as the analyses and invited to comment on these. In this sense the life story and analyses which have emerged have a shared ownership in that they have been shaped and guided by Mary to ensure that she was an equal participant in the research. In this respect the research also overcomes the criticism - levelled at much research on older people - that it treats them as passive participants.

THE STUDY

A pen portrait of Mary

Mary was born in Cardiff in 1927 and lived with her mother after her father left the family home and moved to Liverpool where he was to remarry. When Mary was five, her mother also remarried and went on to have two more children, Mary's stepsisters. Although Mary's stepfather was a full time civil servant, he did not earn a lot of money, hence the family lived in 'rooms' and had few material possessions. During the war, the family lost what few possessions they had after their house was 'bombed out'. After being re-housed by the council, the family found new accommodation on the other side of Cardiff meaning Mary, to her dismay, had to spend the last year of her schooling in a new school, catching a tram across Cardiff each day.

At 14 Mary left school and, found work as a live-in, trainee commis waitress, in one of the big hotels in the centre of Cardiff. Here she would do two shifts a day, 10 until 3 and then 5 until 10. Her free time was limited, but occasionally she would go to the cinema, sometimes to a dance, or to the Kardomah or one of the other Italian owned coffee shops in Cardiff. On her free day, she would go home to visit her mother. However, as the war took hold and blackouts became a necessity, most of Mary's activities with her friends had to cease. She also found that as a result of wartime food rationing, that the hotel could no longer get hold of the food or wine it needed to function and had to make Mary redundant.

After the war Mary, in order to resume her training as a commis waitress moved to Cornwall to seek live-in employment in a hotel. It was in Cornwall that Mary

married her husband, a lorry driver whose job was to deliver fish to Billingsgate in London. The couple managed to buy a house but struggled to cover costs due to the seasonal nature of both of their jobs. To help the couple's finances Mary began to offer bed and breakfast accommodation during the season, took on a part time job in a baker's shop as well as continuing to work in the hotel.

Mary divorced in her 40's and moved back to Cardiff, a place where she now knew very few people with the exception of her mother, stepfather and one sister. She managed to find full time work at the DHSS and set about trying to buy a house. Despite having £1800 from the house sale in Cornwall she was unable to find a bank that would give her, a single woman, a mortgage for the remaining £700. Eventually Mary got a mortgage from Cardiff Council to buy the house she still lives in today. Shortly after Mary's return to Cardiff, both her stepfather and mother became ill and Mary had to take on responsibility for their care outside her working hours. When her stepfather died, Mary's mother moved into Mary's own home for more closely monitored care. The pattern of full time work and in the evenings caring for her mother continued until Mary retired at the age of 63. Only 2 weeks later her mother died.

Her mother's death left Mary bereft, she had few friends, no purpose, no hobbies and no social life. However, six months after her mother's death, Mary decided to 'take herself in hand'. Today, Mary is a woman who has joined the University of the Third Age, undertaken a course in photography, another in herbal medicine, has been to Strasbourg to see the European parliament, been on a Saga trip to Arizona, does 2 half-days voluntary work in a local charity shop and another day at the museum archiving material. She plays skittles one evening a week with a group of women and attends a local pensioners club on Thursdays. She knows many people and has many friends. She feels liberated from many of the caring and financial worries she has always faced. "I'm free as a bird, freer than I've ever been in my life."

Leisure and financial insecurity

A constant and dominant theme in Mary's life story is financial hardship. As a child Mary describes great hardship after her father left the family. Although there was relief when her mother remarried and the family had access to a regular wage, it was not a large amount

of money particularly as there were two new children in the household, which Mary's mother bore with her stepfather. The importance of her stepfather's salary was therefore crucial to the family, especially as Mary explains, in the absence of social support systems: "there was nothing like there is today: you now go to the Social Security office and get your money, that wasn't available." Mary describes the family's situation in the following way "We weren't poverty stricken. We were poor but we weren't needy or poverty stricken."

When Mary left school at the age of fourteen and went to train as a live-in commis waitress, she left the relative security of her stepfather's 'regular' salary. From this date, she was expected to be financially independent of the family and Mary outlines her mother's words to her: "I'm not going to take any money off you: you have to do for yourself now. Save. Don't think you've got all this money." However, whilst she initially had a secure job, the onset of war made Mary's position extremely insecure. Eventually she was made redundant, had to move back into the family home and take up a number of shop jobs.

When Mary married she moved down to Cornwall with her husband and, once again, gained employment in a hotel. Yet again there was financial insecurity, a consequence of the seasonal nature of the tourism trade ("I worked eight months in the hotel, then I've got four months when I've got no money coming in"), the lower wages generally in Cornwall and her husband's lack of job security as a lorry driver. To supplement their income Mary would have to do bed and breakfast, as well as working in the hotel during the summer months.

After divorce, leaving Cornwall and returning to Cardiff, the financial insecurities increased. Despite finding a job with the DHSS and having £1,100 in the bank (her half share of the sale of the house in Cornwall), as a single woman, she was unable to get a mortgage from any bank to buy another house. Mary still expresses her dismay at this situation: "I said 'why not?' to the bank, you'll have £1,100 of my money, you can't go wrong, but they wouldn't." The bank did not give in and Mary was therefore forced to return to the family home and live with her parents. Eventually, Cardiff City Council, "one of the few councils that gave mortgages to unmarried women" lent her the £1,500 to buy a terraced house near her parents.

With her parents' declining health came the further financial pressure of never knowing if she would have to give up work to care full-time for her parents: "I never knew when I'd have to give up work to look after the parents... if I'd had to give up work, I wouldn't have got dole for six weeks and we were still paying the mortgage. I had money but couldn't use it. It was always at the back of my mind because there was many-a-day when I went to work and my mother was not well... it's not like today where you can get supplementary benefit, work was the most important thing because you want to have a roof over your head." These worries were to hang over Mary for many years, until her retirement.

The lack of money and financial pressures, which have faced Mary throughout her life, have clearly had an impact on her ability to engage with leisure. As a child she describes the simple leisure activities of hopscotch, marbles, whip and top, rat-tat-tinger in the street. The purchase of a 'wireless', an exciting and important part of the family's leisure, was only feasible after Mary's grandfather had sold the family piano. The church, visited every Sunday until she was sixteen, was one way in which Mary could extend her leisure opportunities. In particular, Mary talks of how she loved the Whitsun treat, which the church would organise once a year: "They'd hire a field somewhere and you'd have a day out with races and lemonade and buns."

As a child Mary never experienced holidays. Day trips to local seaside resorts, accessible by bus or train and no more than 20 miles from home, such as Barry or Porthcawl, were the nearest she got to a holiday. However, even these were rare events and, as Mary comments "you couldn't class that as a holiday as you'd call holidays today, but holidays were such before the war, it wasn't the done thing, only for those that were up on that higher social scale." On starting work in Cardiff, Mary explains how money continued to be limited, being unable to afford trips to the cinema for example, she describes how she would have a coffee occasionally in the Kardomah or one of the other Italian-owned cafes in Cardiff. Alternatively, "us young girls would all go out in a crowd and you'd perhaps walk up and down Queen Street in a crowd and then go home." Once a week she explains how she might go to a dance, but only "if you could afford it or if you had somebody that would take you at the weekends, you wouldn't go in the week."

When Mary was in her teenage years, the family eventually managed to afford a holiday to an aunt's house in Bournemouth. However paying for the train fare and accommodation was difficult, hence "We'd sleep in the garage, my father would go in with his sister, you'd split up always. My mother used to save, there would be coupons in Kardov flour and Brooke Bond Tea, a little stamp, and you had five shillings if you filled the card and five shillings for a hundred coupons that was towards the train fare to get to Bournemouth. You did all sorts of things because you couldn't do it out of your normal amount of money."

During married life, leisure still did not come easily for Mary. She talks of being able to afford a dance maybe once a week or occasionally a whist drive, but generally nights were spent in the house playing cards: "When we were married, you'd have to stay in... money was tight, you couldn't throw it about...we occupied ourselves, mostly with doing nothing I suppose." Despite lack of money severely curtailing Mary's leisure opportunities throughout her life, perhaps one of the biggest constraints on Mary's leisure, particularly after leaving Cornwall and returning to Cardiff, were the caring responsibilities she had for her parents. Mary describes how she would finish work and have to visit her mother and stepfather to check on them - "you'd go round there every night after you finished work to make sure they were both alright." After doing that, there was no time for any sort of leisure: "By the time I'd been round there and come back here and you start cooking, the night is gone." The only respite Mary had during this period was a week's holiday to the seaside resort of Barry with her niece.

When Mary's stepfather died, her mother moved into Mary's house and the caring responsibilities became even more intense: "You know if you've got somebody here on their own, unwell, you can't go out and leave them at night as well." In addition to the caring responsibilities the fact that Mary had been away from Cardiff for many years, meant that friendships, through which she might have been able to pursue leisure, were also difficult: "After being away for twenty years, you've lost contact with everybody and you just can't fit in again and in any case I just didn't have the time."

The dominance of this caring responsibility at the expense of any life or leisure of her own, perhaps explains why, when Mary's mother died, two weeks after Mary's retirement, she was overcome with a sense

of loss and emptiness: "It was traumatic... work was gone, my mother's gone, so what do I do? I'm lost." After a lifetime of work and caring Mary was confronted by the emptiness in her life: "I'd get up in the morning, have a cup of tea, go on the settee and go to sleep, perhaps go to the library and get a book, come back for lunch and fall asleep, wake up and get my dinner."

The socio-cultural context of Mary's leisure

To a large extent Mary's life today and her mores and values are the product of her past socio-cultural environment. For example her lifelong financial struggles and cautious approach to spending throughout her life are, in some ways, a result of her 1930's upbringing. She herself observes how in the 1930's, "Before the war, the two most important things you did with your money was you paid your rent and you paid your insurance for your husband in case anything happened to him; so all those things are stuck with you." She remembers how just before the Second World War, in 1937 "things were just coming back to normal after the First World War, there was work coming in, things were coming along nicely, those who hadn't worked for years were finding jobs so they were coming out of poverty" and then war arrived again, and with it, unemployment and renewed hardship. Indeed the arrival of the Second World War was to have a significant impact on Mary's life, from the loss of the family home after it was bombed, having to be rehoused, and having her final year in school at a new school: "I didn't like that." The war also led to redundancy for Mary from her first job at the hotel. Mary also witnessed the closure and internment of the Italian café owners, where she had enjoyed a weekly coffee with her friends from the hotel.

Not only did the struggles of her 1930's upbringing and war time experiences affect Mary's access to and lifelong attitudes towards money, so too did her experiences of living through a period in history when there was no social security safety net. Indeed, Mary refers to this characteristic of her life on a number of occasions - keen to contrast people's experiences of state support today with her early experiences. "It's not like today where you always do this or always do that. You always had to look out for yourself, it was up to you to see that you didn't get into difficulties, so although you had the money, you couldn't spend it..."

when I had a bit of money coming in, it had to last, so it was a way of life, you never spent what you had, you always kept some back for emergencies.”

The expectations and constraints placed upon Mary during her life have also at times been the consequence of being a woman. For example, she describes how, as a young girl working full time, she was allowed to go into cafés, but not into pubs. “You wouldn’t go to pubs. No, you didn’t drink; well you weren’t supposed to drink.” Mary also comments on the gender-based responsibilities and expectations that came with marriage: “When you were married, different cup of tea altogether. You’d go home and do a bit of housework and get tea ready for when his lord and master came home, before you went out to work at the hotel again.” Mary’s struggles in trying to gain a mortgage, as a single woman, were also gender-based and typical of society’s treatment of women during that period.

Rediscovering leisure

After the trauma of losing her mother and the sense of emptiness she experienced, it is remarkable how, after six weeks, Mary came to recognise how empty her life was and found the strength of resolve to change things: “I thought this is ridiculous, I can’t carry on like this, I’ve got to find something.” Thus Mary began a whole range of new activities from photography, herbal medicine, joining the University of the Third Age, taking a trip to the European Parliament and beginning voluntary work at both the museum and charity shop. At my last meeting with Mary, she had just returned from a Saga holiday to Arizona. Hence, there has been no continuity in leisure for Mary in later life. Against a background of minimal engagement in leisure, a lack of money and time, later life has freed her from the earlier constraints. Her mortgage has been paid and she is no longer living under the prospect of having to give up work to care full-time for her parents: “All these worries have gone.” Later life has signified a new beginning for Mary, a break with her earlier life and the once minimal opportunities to engage in leisure. Mary herself is only too aware of this transformation in her life. She explains how: “I’ve done more since then (retirement) than I’ve done in the thirty years before... It’s been the best part of my life, the retirement.” There is a new resolve in Mary to make up for lost time, a determination that nothing should

stand in her way: “I could do the house up, but what for? I’ve got no children to take it off me so, as long as I’ve got a cooker and a bed, that’s all I want.” For the first time in her life she has financial security: “I’ve got more money today than I had when I was working. It seems wrong somehow. It doesn’t seem right.” As she says: the constant budgeting and saving for a rainy day “is a way of life which is gone now... retirement has been an open door for me. It really, really has.”

CONCLUSION

Despite the large growth in the number of older women, particularly in the ‘oldest old’ phase of 75 years and above, little research has been undertaken to understand the lives of these women and particularly their leisure and tourism patterns. Yet the possible reasons that might have contributed to the lack of work in this area - such as the negative connotations around old age in western society and the assumption that older people disengage in leisure in later life - are clearly challenged by Mary’s experiences described in this paper. The research that does exist has often taken the form of large scale, quantitative surveys which have failed to capture, at first hand, the nuanced experiences of older people’s leisure. Such research has also tended to be pessimistic in its approach, focussing on the obstacles to older people’s leisure. What the study, which is reported here, is attempting to do is to capture the first-hand experiences of one seventy-nine year old woman in order to understand the characteristics of her current leisure activities and the biographical factors that have influenced these.

The picture that emerges is that of a woman with a strong engagement with leisure, who participates in a wide range of leisure activities and who gains immense satisfaction from them. Perhaps, more importantly, the study suggests that Mary’s leisure in later life is more fulfilling and less restricted than at any other previous phase in her life. The significance and meaning of Mary’s current leisure, as well as her strength and resilience in developing these activities, is particularly evident when placed against her personal and social biography, having been brought up in eras of shortage, depression and war. Indeed, much of her life is characterised by high levels of economic struggle, limited educational opportunity, caring and domestic responsibilities – all the result of both social and individual events. Against this background, it is clear

that leisure in later life has allowed her to access many opportunities not previously available.

This work has also shown how the biographical technique might usefully be applied to a wide range of other age groups in order to understand leisure in the context of personal history and at all life stages for, as Vincent (2003: 116) states “generational cultures are not static... they are constantly being made and remade.” In relation to later life, it would be interesting to study the leisure of younger social cohorts, particularly women who have had access to greater education, training, professional jobs and disposable income and the extent to which they can both challenge the cultural constraints of ageism and achieve the same levels of satisfaction with leisure

A further benefit of the biographical approach is the extent to which it allows the researcher to get close to respondents. Thus, whilst on the one hand the ethnographic characteristics of this approach might be time consuming, requiring the interviewer to spend long periods of time with her participants collecting many hours of tape-recorded material about peoples’ past experiences, the approach does allow the researcher to become close to participants – and even allows friendships to emerge from the process. In this sense the approach challenges the classic view of the researcher as a “dispassionate, distanced, objective, scientific observer” (Goodley 2004: 58). Moreover, there are also potential benefits to the participants of this research approach, allowing as it does participants to reminisce and revisit past events in their lives in somebody’s company, the approach in this sense can prove to be therapeutic (Cornwell and Gearing 1989; Thompson *et al.* 1990).

The closeness to respondents, which often emerges as a result of biographical research, does however raise questions of subjectivity in the researcher’s analysis of the life story. In turn this raises questions of whether somebody’s life story can and should be analysed at all. Booth and Booth (1994), for example, maintain that analysing a life story destroys the subjective realities of individuals by making the individual a subject of abstract social theory.

Mitroff and Kilman (1978) similarly argue that analysis of a life story takes ownership from the teller and places it in the hands of the theorist. Whilst accepting the difficulties surrounding the analysis of biographical

interviews, the belief shared by the authors is that, despite problems of subjectivity and ownership of a life story, some analysis is necessary. As Goodley, Lawthom, Clough and Moore (2004: 149) observe “without analysis there is no application to any theory” and analysis does allow the author to highlight the theoretical significance of a life story. The involvement of the subject themselves in the analysis, as in this research, can also ensure the participants do have a voice in the analysis and that the authentic meaning of the subjects voice is not lost (Plummer 1983: 11).

In providing just such insight, this study makes a contribution to attempts in society to foster and create alternative perspectives of later-life which emphasise its potential rather than its limitations. The work also highlights the great strength and resilience of older women thus supporting Bernard, Meade and Tinker’s (1993: 189) observation that “Older women bear the impact of an ageist and sexist society that forces many of them into poverty and dependence, yet conversely many live relatively satisfying lives and are far from passive victims.” At the same time, the research has also shown the potential of the biographical technique in understanding leisure and tourism activities in the context of personal history. Such an approach has great value in allowing researchers and participants to jointly explore the fine-grain of individuals’ everyday experiences; in this case, it has revealed the dramatic pattern of change in one woman’s life across eight decades - from years of struggle and restraint to a later life of sufficiency and opportunities to engage in fulfilling learning and leisure. Such is the potentially transformative power of leisure (and tourism) which quantitative analysis will invariably struggle to capture.

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Submitted: 10/20/2005

Accepted: 02/19/2006