Leisure studies and interpretive social inquiry

JOHN L. HEMINGWAY

Recreation Administration and Leisure Studies Program, Washington State University, USA

Empirically based research methods have been dominant in leisure studies' development, particularly in the social psychological study of leisure. Inadequate attention has been given to the epistemology underlying these methods. The empiricist rejection of questions about values and meanings, based on the unspoken influence of logical positivist epistemology, impovershes the study of leisure and indeed separates leisure inquiry from the phenomena it wishes to study. Through criticism of Neulinger's perceptual model of leisure and more directly of Iso-Ahola's extension of that model through the concept of optimal arousal, the shortcomings of empiricism are demonstrated and an interpretive alternative suggested. This alternative, hermeneutically-based depth interpretation more fully acknowledges the intersubjective creation of social meaning and the indeterminacy of the social world in which this occurs. Depth interpretation allows greater acknowledgment of human involvement in creating the social world and of the importance attached to establishing meaning in it.

Introduction

Leisure scholarship has in the past twenty years undergone significant transformation, propelled largely by methodological sophistication in the forms of increasingly refined data collection and analysis techniques. The current research literature offers highly technical studies of leisure activity, while graduate and (at better institutions) undergraduate education in leisure studies demands more serious attention to research methods and computer applications. These developments have been regarded as largely positive, as enabling leisure studies to assume a place among the traditional social sciences, from which, in fact, many leisure scholars have come and to which they continue to look for professional validation. The trend in leisure studies, particularly as the field has taken shape in North America, has thus been towards empirically grounded research, with "softer" and less "data-based" issues having been put aside.

Ironically, during the same period the traditional social sciences, among them political science, anthropology, and sociology, have become somewhat uncertain regarding their undivided devotion to empiricism (see Miller, 1972; Bernstein, 1978; the essays in Rabinow and Sullivan, eds, 1979; Gunnell, 1986; and Manicas, 1987). The debate over Thomas Kuhn's (1970) discussion of scientific change and the general philosophical discrediting of logical positivism have led to broader perspectives on the nature of social inquiry. Few traces of this ferment appear in leisure studies, however, so that the field continues to cleave to a surprisingly orthodox view of research programmes and professional education. At a time
Leisure studies and interpretive social inquiry

when continental thinking, particularly phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstructionism, has been making inroads elsewhere in social science thinking, leisure studies has remained largely untroubled by the challenges raised to empiricism.

One paradoxical result of this isolation is that leisure studies has in a fashion drifted away from direct encounters with leisure. A major element in the critique of traditional social science has been the degree to which it narrows the field of vision within which its research programmes take form. Borrowing a concept from Heidegger (1977), this narrowing of vision may be called “enframing”, that is, a particular technique frames the world in such a manner that what appears within the frame is assumed to be an absolute reality, irreducible and inalterable, incapable of appearing in any other fashion except through error. Exploring leisure through now dominant empiricist techniques - empiricist lenses, as it were - requires that leisure conform, or be made conformable, to these very techniques themselves. These are then assumed to have revealed some aspect of an absolute reality of leisure. Heidegger’s contention is that a particular technique both reveals and conceals the phenomenon under investigation, and does so at the same moment. To ask one question entails foregoing the ability to ask another. What we turn out not to know about leisure is thus at least partially a consequence of how leisure has been studied; these gaps in our knowledge can be filled only through an expansion of our understanding of what it is to do social inquiry into leisure. As one result of this expansion, we will find the phenomenon of leisure changing shape as it is regarded from different angles of vision. In the human sciences, a term chosen to indicate this broadening of perspective, what is studied and how it is studied stand in a dialectical or, if you will, hermeneutic relation, each shaping the other, so that human understanding is considerably more dynamic than the prevailing view of leisure inquiry acknowledges.

In the paper that follows, I will argue that this is the condition of the empiricist study of leisure, with the result not only that it has significantly lost touch with the experience of leisure, but also that in itself it cannot reestablish contact. The assumptions empiricism makes about human activity and the world in which it occurs prevent it from overcoming its limitations. Some other approach (or, more likely, approaches) must be taken to study leisure in a way that reveals more of its human fullness. I have chosen to develop this argument through a critique of Iso-Ahola’s extension of Neulinger’s perceptual model of leisure (see Iso-Ahola, 1979, 1980; Neulinger, 1980, 1981). In its combination of empiricist methods and social psychological concepts, Iso-Ahola’s work has justifiably been very influential in shaping leisure inquiry. For this reason it lends itself to the argument that such an approach obscures central aspects of the experience of leisure and, furthermore, that it rejects as unmeaning questions that become fundamental when leisure is approached from alternative angles.

Several preliminary points need to be made. First, Iso-Ahola’s work is not alone in being vulnerable to the criticisms made below. There are other scholars applying the same broad approach whose work could also be subjected to similar analysis (eg., R. Mannell, E. Weissinger, P. Witt, and D. Samdahl and S. Shaw in their earlier studies, as well as the proliferating literature on leisure constraints). In a sense, it is a mark of the sizeable contribution Iso-Ahola has made that his work is the focus of criticism here.
Second, there is obviously a legitimate role for empirically grounded research into leisure activity. With such findings we enlarge our reservoir of information about leisure. But the role of empirical findings is both less than and different from that generally presumed to apply within the field of leisure studies. To illustrate the nature of this “less than and different from” is one goal of this essay.

Third, it is important to be clear that there is a considerable range of social psychologies available to leisure inquiry. The debate between Gilligan (e.g., 1993) and Kohlberg (e.g., 1981), for example, illustrates the necessity of attending to the presuppositions underlying a social psychology, in this instance that there can be any universal model of moral development. There has been increasing recognition of the potential for bias in social psychological models as applied in leisure inquiry, particularly in the work of feminist scholars (see Henderson’s 1990 review essay and the references there; see also, e.g., Talbot 1979; Henderson et al., 1989; Hargreaves, 1992; Moi, 1987). Although this essay does not address the development of feminist grounded social psychologies directly, it does intersect with them insofar as it attempts to outline an alternative approach to revealing the meaning of leisure experience, both in terms of the strategies employed and the questions admitted as meaningful. The thrust is to indicate the degree to which leisure is in fact a multidimensional phenomenon, taking place against far richer horizons than previously dominant research models have acknowledged, whether these horizons be defined, for example, in gender, political, economic, or cultural terms. Seen in this light, a wider range of questions emerges as central to leisure inquiry. Recognizing the availability of alternative social psychologies, and thus rejecting the monism with which social psychology has been conceived in leisure studies (see Neulinger’s blithe “marriage announcement” for social psychology and leisure studies, 1980, p. 5), this essay focuses specifically on the implications of the assumptions underlying empiricist social psychology with the intent both of demonstrating their limitations and pointing one way beyond them.

A Critique of Empiricist Social Science

Reflecting the dominant trend in post-World War II social science, empiricism has been a prevalent force within leisure studies. Incorporated into the social psychological study of leisure, it has in fact made significant contributions to the field (see Ingham’s exhaustive review essay, 1986, 1987). The difficulty is that the grounding of the methods applied in the empiricist social psychological literature in specific conceptions of scientific activity, and of the world in which that activity is conducted, has gone unremarked. In what amounts to an act of faith, leisure studies has imported most of its methods from other more established disciplines, without examining the implications of their roots in logical positivist approaches to science. What discussion has occurred revolves not around the epistemological roots of the methods, but instead around their technical refinement. Methods, however, are intended to carry into practice a definite understanding of the way the world is shaped and how it is to be understood. They are not neutral tools, but rather bespeak definite antecedent conceptions. Once the logical positivist foundations of empiricist social science methods are uncovered, the appearance of
Leisure studies and interpretive social inquiry

their neutrality, essential to the claims made on their behalf, disappears and their epistemological justification becomes questionable.

Despite their undoubted differences on many points, logical positivist philosophies of science make at least three basic claims (see Broadbeck, 1968; Feigl and Brodbeck, 1953; Feigl, Sellars, and Lehrer, 1972; for collections of relevant discussions). First, there is said to be some irreducible world independent of human activity, but which may be known through human experience of it. Second, the aim of science is said to be the investigation of this irreducible world without the intrusion of any valuational or metaphysical presuppositions. If the world is knowable only through human experience of it, science is the organization of that experience into propositions according to strict rules excluding the "superstitions" of faith, the "emotions" of ethics, and so on. Social science thus becomes the exploration of the specifically human dimensions of the world so known. Third, the truth value of any proposition about human experience of the irreducible world so conceived rests on the methods by which the proposition may be tested. This is the "verification principle" that has been at the heart of many debates in the philosophy of inquiry. To this third point may be added the corollary that the mathematically based methods of the physical sciences are privileged insofar as they are regarded as most completely purged of valuation or metaphysical elements. Thus the development of social science has seen the rise of an empiricism applying mathematically grounded methods to test propositions about human experience, and this with the avowed aim of making nomological, that is, law-like, statements about a presumed world of irreducible social phenomena.

The logic of Neulinger's model of leisure, which Iso-Ahola wishes to extend, falls in the mainstream of the research framework shaped by such logical positivist principles. The proposition that the perception of freedom in leisure is at the heart of the experience of leisure (Neulinger, 1980, especially p. 6; see also 1982; cf. Witt and Ellis's comment that an "activity is leisure if it is perceived as leisure by the individual," 1985, p. 106) requires empirical validation. There is a link here with the logical positivist contention that phenomena must be verified through human experience of them and the doctrine that the meaning of any proposition about that experience lies in its means of verification. Here, the experience of leisure is reduced to its psychological elements, echoing Passmore's (1967) observation that in logical positivism, epistemology becomes psychology (p. 53). Such a psychology must be verifiable by propositions embodying the "assumption that regularity exists in what is to be studied" (Babbie, 1933, p. 18). Regularity itself is a statement of the probability with which various aggregate conditions will be associated with each other (p. 20). These aggregates are expressed as variables, defined as "logical groupings of attributes," which are further defined as descriptive "characteristics" (p. 21, emphasis added). In Kerlinger's (1973) formulation, a "good" (!) research problem entails the stipulation that it should at least "imply possibilities of empirical testing" (p. 18), entailing the use of "constructs" that have been "deliberately and consciously invented or adopted for a special scientific purpose", with variables defined as "symbols to which "numerals or values are assigned" (pp. 28–29). The upshot, to place Neulinger's model and Iso-Ahola's extension in the logical positivist framework, is that to validate the phenomenon of leisure, and the
nature of its regularity in human social experience, requires association with specific psychological experiences. The verification of this proposition must occur through the empirical measurement of "logically" ordered variables. Thus not only is leisure reduced to psychological constructs (i.e., as perceived freedom or optimal arousal), but these constructs must be created for the explicit purpose of measurement (cf. Babbie's characterization of science as a "logico-empirical" enterprise, 1983, p. 16; implications of this will be explored below).

Thus it is reasonable that both Neulinger and Iso-Ahola stress the importance of empiricist research methods. Indeed, Iso-Ahola begins his text with an overview of social science methodology (1980, parts 1–3). Although this attention to some of the issues raised here is an advance over the prevailing silence regarding them, Iso-Ahola's text generally echoes the usual practice in leisure studies, which has either passed over the implications of the three logical positivist claims summarized above or has leapt immediately to the third or methodological claim, overlooking its derivation from the prior two. This tendency to reduce inquiry to technique is inherent in the logical positivist heritage and is unfortunately prevalent in leisure studies. The importance of method, however, lies in the assumption that only through its proper application can anything be genuinely learned about the irreducible world of human social experience. This world then has priority over method, for without the assumption that some irreducible world is indeed accessible to human experience, method loses its point. To apply method in the spirit outlined above is necessarily to accept without question the model of the world on which empiricist method depends.

Yet recent discussions in the philosophy of social inquiry have most often and most vigorously denied just this model of an irreducible social world. The thrust of the criticism is summarized by Bernstein (1978), who argues that we should not mistake "historically conditioned social and political patterns for an unchangeable brute reality which is simply 'out there' to be confronted" (p. 106; emphasis added). The social world taken by empiricism (under the influence of logical positivism) to be irreducible is in fact historically shaped. Indeed, that leisure itself has become an object of social inquiry is testimony to a particular set of largely Western social and economic conditions. "Method", as Bernstein (1983) notes elsewhere, "is not innocent or neutral" (p. 45; cf. Taylor, 1967). Method itself, despite the claims made for its neutrality, presupposes certain understandings of the structure of society and societal processes, so that when in the quest for nomological statements one sets out anticipating social and political regularities by anticipating them in the methods applied, it can hardly be a surprise that one finds them in the end. Such regularities, however, are not necessarily the empirically demonstrable statements empiricist social science takes them to be. They might be no more (and no less) than reflections of the "entrenchment and uncritical acceptance of dominant models" of social and political reality (Bernstein, 1978, p. 62), reflections of the levels of consensus in societies, so that a social science which seeks empirically demonstrable regularities will in fact be most successful under historical conditions of high consensus. And it is, of course, precisely in such societies that empiricist social science developed and has flourished (see Manicas, 1987). The fact that alternative social psychologies asserting not commonality but difference have begun to
emerge insistently is testimony, perhaps, to the breakdown of social consensus in
the West, requiring corollary adjustments in the assumptions underlying social
inquiry. This is one way of viewing the importance of thinkers otherwise so
divergent as Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas.

Recent philosophy of inquiry has in fact experienced a shift of focus from iso-
lated facts, the collection of which was to provide the basis for testable proposi-
tions, through individual propositions themselves to a broadened concern for
the historical horizon against which inquiry is set (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 75–77).
The world can no longer be viewed in terms of such closed dichotomies as those
between fact and value, empirical and emotive, but only in terms of “the open-
ness of experience, language, and understanding” (p. 108; see also Rorty, 1979,
p. 315). Indeed, some of the most prominent founders of the empiricist view of
social science have stressed that they intended to present only logical reconstruc-
tions of the processes of social inquiry, and not accounts of the structure of the
social world (Hempel, 1965, p. 412; Feigl, 1969, pp. 17–18). In this notion of
“logical reconstruction” is a fatal flaw in empiricist social science’s claims, as
will be illustrated more fully below. Privileging the methods of physical science
in its search for an irreducible social world, empiricist social science treats the
social world as phenomenologically equivalent to the physical world. But it
simply is not, for the physical world is not self-referential, while this is the
essence of the social world. The social world has meaning for its participants,
meaning that forms the ground of human activity (Bernstein, 1978, pp. 138–39;
cf. Berlin, 1969). Human beings are self-interpreting beings whose interpreta-
tions of the world shape the world in which human beings act. The social world
has meaning for itself, meaning that forms the ground of human activity. If
human beings are self-defining, their knowledge of what they are and of their
circumstances alters both themselves and their circumstances in a way incon-
ceivable in the physical world. Meaning arises out of human efforts to under-
stand themselves and their world, efforts at achieving “a self-interpretation of
experiential meaning which is embedded in a stream of action”. Expressed dif-
frently, “that of which [human beings] are trying to find coherence is itself

For the reasons outlined above, we are, I think, entitled to reach the following
conclusions. First, there is no brute reality, as there must be if empiricism’s
claims are to hold, no irreducible world of which knowledge can be had because
the world in which human beings act is constituted by their self-interpretations
of the world. There are no social scientific facts independent of conceptual
schemes of the world. Second, this world is historically conditioned so that any
specific findings or interpretations must be temporally qualified. It is in a world
so constituted and so conditioned that human beings seek to find meaning,
whether in the routines of their daily lives or in the more arcane pursuits of
social inquiry, and in seeking meaning, change the world in which it occurs.

Meaning and Practices

Interpretation is the act of finding meaning. We must, however, avoid reduction-
ism in pursuing the meaning of human activity. A single object or act has little or
no meaning in itself. Meaning is a human phenomenon, so there must always be a subject for whom the meaning comes to be. Further, the meaning of an object or an act and the object or act in itself are separable in interpretation. A specific form of leisure activity, then, as with any social phenomenon, will have meaning that reaches beyond it (which renders simplistic taxonomic schemes trivial, as in Harré, 1990, and more complex ones nonetheless unsatisfactorily revealing of the manifold cultural, social, political, and economic dimensions underlying leisure, as in Shaw, 1985). Meaning occurs in a field of historical conditions, “in relation to other things” (Taylor, 1979, pp. 32–33), or, as Ricoeur (1981) suggests, meaning is “a cumulative, holistic process” (p. 212). Human beings are born into such fields, into historical traditions, that shape how human beings think, what they understand their actualities and possibilities to be. Heidegger (1962) calls this “thrownness”, by which he means we are thrown into a world that already exists and has its own momentum. Gadamer (1989, pp. 300–7) points out that we belong to a particular historical tradition before it belongs to us, or, as Taylor (1979) expresses it, “we are aware of the world through a ‘we’ before we are through an ‘I’” (p. 52). It is this historically defined field that human beings seek to interpret, to render meaningful, and in doing so both constitute their world and interact with the field to further and alter it. What interpretive social inquiry thus undertakes to study are these first order interpretations, both to record what they and their interrelations are (a legitimate work of empirical analysis) and, more importantly, to understand the nature and meaning of the world rising out of them.

The world into which human beings are thrown is composed of rule-governed social practices. These practices are present not in any abstract or irreducible sense, but emerge from how people act and speak about their acts, and thus both shape and are shaped by human engagement with the world. Following Searle's (1969, pp. 33–42) influential analysis, we may note two classes of rules, regulatory and constitutive. The former operate within a practice to direct activity; the latter define the practice itself. There are simply some actions, some language, without which a practice could not exist. To take an example from American baseball, while we might argue over the size of the strike zone, without the constitutive rule distinguishing between ball and strike, we could not play baseball. At the same time, except for metaphorical usage, the concept of ball and strike has no meaning outside of baseball. A more international example is the offside rule in football. Although we might dispute whether a player was on or offside, we could not play football without the distinction between them. Such constitutive rules form the boundary between the practice they create and the rest of the world; they create the conditions that permit the practice to exist, to be identified and studied. They are not, however, irreducible features of the world, given to experience “out there”. They are, rather, embodied in human activity and in human speech about their activity. In this way attention is focused on such activity and speech, for it is in them that meaning lies, and it is the aim of an interpretive study of leisure to elucidate the rule-governed practices giving rise to this meaning.

We must note in this regard that “implicit in these practices is a certain vision of the agent and his relation to others and to society” (Taylor, 1979, p. 47).
That is, the rules constituting social practices, and the language in which these are expressed, entail conceptions about the individual's place in society and define the range of societally sanctioned activity. Such rules and the practices they constitute are part of the historical field into which people are thrown. The very idea of a constitutive rule governing social action presupposes the presence of a historically defined intersubjective understanding of human interactions. This understanding at once enables such interactions and governs their working out in concrete social situations. To comprehend these social interactions, it is not sufficient to determine associations among manifest actions and antecedent conditions or subjective psychological states, say of perception. What is required is an interpretive exploration of the grounding of these actions in the "vision" of the individual and the individual's relation to society that underlies the relevant constitutive rules. Without such an interpretive exploration, we remain suspended only within the practices themselves, taking them as givens, as somehow part of an irreducible brute reality. We cannot then talk about their meaning, either as received or transmitted. Understanding this, and that on its own principles, empiricist analysis is unable to carry out the required interpretive exploration, we begin to break out of empiricism's enframing tendency toward a fuller comprehension of leisure's meaning as a form of human activity.

Intersubjectivity and the Ontological Ground of Interpretation

Earlier it was noted that constitutive rules presuppose an intersubjective understanding of social practices, leisure among them; the term "intersubjectivity" now requires discussion. Its existence allows the creation of a "common reference world" (Taylor, 1979, p. 51) in which human beings find meanings and from which they take guidance for their actions. Intersubjectivity is not a property of the individual, is neither consensus nor acceptance, which imply subjectively based properties the individual may shed at will. Intersubjectivity is instead "rooted in social practice" (p. 49) as both ground and result of shared social practices. Taylor suggests that "the meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, of mutual action" (p. 48). Intersubjectivity resides in the language people use to describe these "modes of social relations". Such language is neither private nor subjective. It is essentially social, representing what Bernstein (1978) calls "intersubjective interpretive schemes" (p. 141). Only through such schemes are human beings able to endow their experiences with meanings that transcend the merely subjective. In Ricoeur's (1981) phrase, the individual "has a world and not just a situation" (p. 201). Meaning arises not from the insular subjective situation, but by reference beyond the immediate to the intersubjectively constituted world in which the individual acts.

Focusing on the intersubjectivity of social practices, human beings are seen no longer as discrete individuals, but as members of a web of shared understandings existing in a shared language that creates the practices in which human beings engage. We are, as Bernstein (1983) notes in commenting on Gadamer's work,
“dialogical or conversational beings” (p. 162). The shared language that constitutes practices also becomes constitutive of social reality: “The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is” (Taylor, 1979, p. 45). Unless approached through the language of the practice, human action simply does not make sense, so that the language and the action together constitute the practice, and neither is meaningful without the other. The combination of language and practice builds the possibility for what Ricoeur (1981) calls “discourse”, which can be regarded as an event that takes place in and through the language of a particular practice. It is in discourse that the world of the practice comes to be, in which the insularity of the subjective situation is transcended and those individuals engaging in a practice can communicate to each other the meanings they attach to the practice.

This leads to a seemingly radical conclusion, namely, that the world as it confronts human beings is “essentially incomplete” (Bernstein, 1983, p. 123), requiring human action to complete it. This action is grounded in the interpretations human beings make of their world, in the to and fro movement from world to interpretation to action, and back to the world. The world, seen from the angle of interpretations, is constituted out of them as well. Here we have a truly hermeneutic process, strongly reminiscent of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation of texts. As with a text, the world emerges out of its interpretations, and these alter the emergent world. Thus hermeneutics, the process of interpretation, has a profoundly ontological aspect, rising out of human discourse. The language of empiricism, on the other hand, restricting itself “to what is purely physical or psychological”, necessarily omits the ontological grounds necessary to render physical and psychological concepts humanly meaningful (Bernstein, 1978, p. 66). These grounds are the interpretive rules constituting the practices we wish to understand: “Language,’ ‘ideas,’ and ‘concepts’ cannot be neatly separated from social relations; they are constitutive of these relations” (p. 67).

Any action, then, reaches beyond its immediacy to contribute to the construction of the world in which the individual acts. As Ricoeur (1981) writes, “The event is surpassed by its meaning . . .” (p. 201) in that the event moves beyond us to become a part of the social world on which we and others ground our interpretations. Any action has “propositional content” (p. 204), that is, it makes a statement regarding how we individually and collectively regard our world. Ricoeur locates the basis of the “dialectic of event and meaning” in this propositional content (pp. 204–5). The interpretation of the world that constitutes the event also gives it meaning. Since the sources of these interpretations lie in the tradition into which the individual is thrown, there is a certain structure to the interpretations, so that it is possible to see characteristic patterns in society. These form what Ricoeur calls the “noematic structure of action” (p. 205), which is itself an object of interpretation. We must, however, reify the noematic, or intellective, element, so that it comes somehow to be taken as existing independently of human beings. There is no “given” social or political reality that may be taken as residing outside the intersubjective understandings of human beings, a “reality” that may be taken as the object of a “correlational science of society and politics” and, we may add, of leisure (Bernstein, 1978, pp. 156–57; cf. Sellars, 1963, on the “myth of the given”). The reality governing
an action is interpretive: "Human action does not consist of two externally related separable parts an element of mental belief and an element of physical movement. Human action . . . is such that what we take to be an action, and even its proper description, is internally related to the interpretations that are intrinsically constitutive of it" (Bernstein, 1978, p. 62).

Depth Interpretation and the Study of Leisure

We have noted the shortcomings of empiricist social inquiry and have examined several aspects of human interpretive activity, through which human beings come both to understand and to shape the world in which they act. To understand is to interpret, to give meaning to something: "Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements . . . is formed and actualized" (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 164–65). What must occupy us next is how an interpretive, or hermeneutic, approach is able to expand our understanding of social phenomena, leisure included, in a way empiricist analysis is not.

This can be approached through a distinction Ricoeur (1981) makes between "surface-interpretation" and "depth-interpretation". Earlier in this essay I suggested that without interpretation we remain suspended in the social practices themselves without being able to explore their constitutive rules. This may be taken up in the present context by pointing out that if we insist on treating intersubjective practices as brute facts for empiricist analysis, we remain only on their surface, able to offer interpretations only of initial appearances. We thus surrender awareness of how such practices shape and are shaped by the underlying first order interpretations of the participants, or, as Taylor (1979) puts it, "we give up trying to define further just what these practices and institutions are, what the meanings are which they require and hence sustain" (p. 50). Empiricist analysis reduces meaning to measurement; what cannot be measured is in the strict empiricist sense unmeaning. But what is intersubjective resists measurement. It is in the language of the practices themselves. A focus on antecedent conditions and individual reports of perceptions is fertile soil for statistical analysis, but it falls short of capturing the content of practices grounded in intersubjective understandings. Taking aspects of such understandings in isolation disrupts the practices, treats them reductively, as brute facts or givens. But precisely this is rejected here. Practices are just that, practices, bundles of shared conceptions constituting the world in which human beings act. Resting content with such brute data and their correlations with subjectively defined psychological states leaves us far removed from being able to understand the nature and meaning of the practices in which they occur.

One response here has been to attempt the development of more general statements by assimilating a variety of empiricist findings under conceptual labels. This is what Bernstein (1978, p. 10) has termed "abstracted empiricism". It remains unsatisfactory because it serves only to conceal what is uncertainly known. Coupled with an insistence on the pre-eminence of a single correct body of methods in social inquiry, the result of abstracted empiricism is to limit us to only surface interpretation. To illustrate something of this, let me use here as an
example one of the more influential concepts elaborated out of the empiricist social psychological approach to leisure, namely, optimal arousal (see Iso-Ahola, 1980, for an extended discussion of this concept).

As an empiricist concept, optimal arousal is meant to aggregate a series of research findings that by themselves are scattered across disparate populations and settings. By raising the level at which these findings are stated, that is, by increasing the level of abstraction, it becomes possible to make more general statements about the nature of leisure in society. The very abstraction required to make these statements possible, however, keeps them at the level of surface interpretation. This is because these statements are logical propositions about a set of existential activities situated in a net of intersubjectively defined practices. Precisely because it focuses on logical relationships, the logic in question being supplied by measurement and not anything residing in what is measured, empiricist analysis is unable to separate out disparate existential meanings of the activity about which these statements of logical relationship are made.

Let us take two individuals and say about them that they each seek optimal arousal in their leisure activity. That is, we have two propositions, “A seeks optimal arousal in leisure activity” and “B seeks optimal arousal in leisure activity”. Empiricist analysis cannot distinguish between these two propositions other than to say that they are logically equivalent statements about two individuals. To function, empiricist analysis must in fact reduce idiosyncratic elements in A’s and B’s leisure activity to some conceptual common denominator, here taken as optimal arousal. But having discovered in some fashion, be it ever so methodologically rigorous, that in their free time people act as though seeking optimal arousal, and that our two individuals’ actions conform to this pattern, empiricist analysis is then finished with the matter. On its own principles, there is nothing more empiricist analysis may say.

The depth interpretation of leisure is just beginning, however, for it wants to know the specific content of A’s and B’s leisure activity, and how this unfolds our knowledge of the worlds in which they understand themselves to be living. Not limiting itself to merely logical relationships, depth interpretation seeks out the existential structures of these worlds as they are expressed in the practices that constitute them. Depth interpretation understands the actions of A and B as first order interpretations of their worlds, interpretations which themselves are to be given depth interpretation. Suppose that A chooses, after returning from numerous expeditions to the shopping mall, to consume mass quantities of cheap beer while watching television, whereas B reads good nonfiction, attends concerts, and is active in local charitable and civic affairs. Suppose further that both report this behaviour as optimally arousing, their preferred leisure activities. At this point, without violating its own tenets, empiricist analysis is unable to comment on the meanings of these divergent leisure patterns. Empiricist inquiry can say neither that the one leisure pattern is good, and the other bad, nor that the one is more desirable than the other. It cannot say that a society in which one or the other pattern prevails is healthier, or richer, or more humane, than another society in which a contrasting pattern holds. It can say only that these patterns exist and display certain characteristics. To do otherwise requires empiricist analysis to move beyond the examination of logical relationships
among propositions, and this it cannot do. What is at issue is the existential meaning and value of these patterns of leisure activity, and the principles of empiricist inquiry deny these can be inquired into meaningfully.

The depth interpretation of leisure, on the other hand, takes these issues as its primary focus. It requires an empirical description of leisure activity, but one that inquires into absence as well as presence. It asks what the actual pattern of leisure activity is in a given society and what this tells us about the intersubjective structure of this society. It asks what is missing and what these gaps suggest about this same intersubjective structure. What sorts of human beings do we find, and not find, and what places do they fill, and where are they absent, in the society’s practices? Asking such questions, depth interpretation develops an enriched image of the nature and quality of leisure, and of society as well. What can be said about a society, for example, in which passive, consumption-orientation leisure dominates, in which the economic value of the activity is largely determinative of its social value as leisure (cf. Linder, 1970)? From the empiricist perspective, such a pattern of leisure must be taken as a given reality. The questions whether this pattern is not in fact more reflective of a particular historical view of human activity generally, embodied in a set of intersubjective practices and understandings, and thus open to further historical development, do not arise, indeed, cannot arise insofar as empiricist inquiry remains within its own epistemological framework.

We are led here to the inherently conservative bias of empiricist social science. If, as is strongly arguable throughout western societies, a pattern of largely passive and consumption-oriented leisure exists, what can be said if in fact optimal arousal is taken to drive leisure activity? We are compelled to conclude, given the empiricist emphasis on logical relationships among propositions rather than on their existential content, that such leisure is arousing in at least some optimal degree, that the existent pattern of leisure has developed because it meets some psychological need for arousal. But this says no more than the existent pattern is because it is, or because it is identifiable given the favoured methodologies of empiricist social inquiry, with the further assumption that because it is, it is part of the given. Confronted with the world it describes, inattentive to what is not present to its methods, empiricist inquiry, here in its social psychological form, finds no alternative but to counsel acceptance of what appears to it as given: “Herein lies the challenge for social psychologists. The question is how to encourage people to set their standards and expectations without reference to the expectations and implications of the norms of others, how to get people to compare ‘downward’ socially rather than ‘upward.’ In short, how to induce or convince people to be satisfied with what they are and what they have now” (Iso-Ahola, 1980, p. 393; emphasis in original). The pernicious effects of such reasoning are clear despite disclaimers in footnotes. Such cold logic offers no comfort to those whose lives are marked more by the absence than by the presence of humane and civil conditions, nor does it provide any route out of the shallowness marking so much of contemporary leisure and perhaps life. Here surface interpretation becomes merely superficial.

Empiricist inquiry meets itself coming and going. Having set out to search for regularities in patterns of leisure activity, grounding its methods in the convic-
tion that such regularities exist, empiricist inquiry accepts its own statistical descriptions as evidence of the correctness of its original metaphysical presuppositions, while in fact claiming to discard such presuppositions altogether. Empiricist inquiry takes the methodologically presupposed as metaphysically given. Its elaborate methodological analyses are no more than variations on this theme, revealing as initial descriptions, concealing as surface interpretations of a human reality at once much deeper and more fluid than empiricism can allow.

Depth Interpretation and Horizontal Openness

How, then, does the practice of depth interpretation advance beyond the limitations of empiricism? It does so by opening itself to experience, rather than insisting experience accommodate to the demands of method. Empiricism requires that the phenomenological multidimensionality of human practices be reduced to the monodimensionality of a single approach to inquiry, with the partial result that whatever cannot be moulded to the needs of empiricist methods is excluded from analysis. This declaration that there is somehow a closed horizon against which human activity is to be investigated, a single foundation of knowledge, artificially enframes and thus narrows the world we inhabit. We become blinded to the interpretive and thus constitutive possibilities of our actions.

Depth interpretation, to the contrary, opens itself to the existence of an indeterminate horizon of human possibility. “A horizon”, writes Gadamer (1989), “is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further” (p. 245). Elsewhere he extends this same point to include both individuals and societies: “Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon” (p. 304). Human activity contributes to the openness of its horizons by being an element in their constitution, that is, by helping shape the horizons against which people act even as they are acting. We have seen earlier that there is an ontological element in hermeneutics. It is important to recognize that this is not a static, but rather a dynamic, conception of ontology. What is, changes, and one agent of this change is human interpretation of the social world and its practices. Since these practices are grounded in intersubjective understandings, they are not arbitrary. There is structure to human activity, but it is not an unalterably given or irreducible structure. Ricoeur (1981) writes of the “specific plurivocity” of human action, by which he means that human action “is a limited field of possible constructions” (p. 213). We are not at liberty to make of something anything we wish, but neither are we confined to a unitary closed horizon.

This openness to new possibilities of human meaning, of human practice, distinguishes depth interpretation. Its aim is not closure, the possibility of which it denies for no other reason than that human beings are creative, self-interpreting, and self-defining. An interpretive stance is therefore one that opens itself to the ongoing process of human beings constituting their world. Because the whole of human activity is never completed, it can never be taken in within a single
horizon. A practice may receive repeated new meanings as it opens up new references. A practice's references are constituted out of the practice, but in turn give the practice fresh meaning as they themselves unfold. Modern leisure, for example, may evolve out of release from work to a confirmation of a work-dominated society as it becomes more consumption-oriented and thus more economically driven. It is this that Ricoeur (1981) means when he suggests that to understand an action is to follow “its movement from sense to reference”, from what the action is to what its ground is in the intersubjective practices of a society (p. 218; see also p. 208). An interpretively meaningful action embedded in a practice is one that leads beyond itself, one whose importance goes beyond its immediate setting.

The horizon against which we must see human action is thus a moving one, propelled by the interpretive, constitutive activity of human beings striving to understand their world. The meaning their world has for them is manifested in their actions, and these simultaneously give content to the meaning. Meaning requires actions; without them, it remains abstract. In this context, human leisure activity takes on a deeper significance. Given that there is a volitional element to leisure activity, that in some degree leisure choices are conceived as free, leisure practices reflect the horizons against which people understand themselves to be acting. Leisure embodies the intersubjective understandings of what it is to be human, what possibilities are open to people. It is a window onto the larger structure of social practices, with which it is joined. Leisure becomes one of the arenas, perhaps, because of its volitional element, a primary arena, for the first order interpretive activity of people seeking to understand their world.

This is the stuff on which a depth interpretation of leisure operates. Working against closure, depth interpretation explores a “dialectic of experience” that, as Gadamer (1989) writes, “has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge, but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself” (p. 355). There is no single method or body of methods to depth interpretation, save that of the insight necessary to guide the asking of questions and the wise selection of means to answer them. In his Nichomachean Ethics Aristotle counsels us that wisdom lies in asking of something no more that it can give (at 1094b). The profundity of this remark has been obscured in the intervening millennia, and perhaps at no time more than during the past five decades or so of empiricist social research. What is open, indeterminate, self-constituting, and self-defining should not be forcibly closed off from the moving horizons against which it takes shape. The study of human activity is, as Taylor (1979, p. 68) notes, inseparable from the study of the options among which human beings must choose. Our inquiry should not close off either its options or disregard those of the people and societies we study. Our interpretations should reach beyond the leisure practices we examine to the web of practices making up society. In doing so, we will find the range of leisure's connections to society expanding; we will enlarge and enrich the horizons against which our inquiry takes place. We will achieve a fusion of horizons at once stimulating and challenging, stimulating because we will find ourselves asking questions in new ways, challenging because, as Bernstein (1983) writes, the “moral task” of those who practice depth interpretation, that is, hermeneutic inquiry, “is to defend the
openness of human conversation against all those temptations and real threats that seek closure” (p. 205; emphasis in original).

References


Leisure studies and interpretive social inquiry