Ways of Learning about Leisure Meanings

MICHAEL WATKINS

School of Leisure Studies
Griffith University
Nathan, Queensland, Australia

This article examines the epistemological claims made by four paradigms used to study leisure meanings: behaviorism, cognitivism, individual constructivism, and social constructivism. These paradigms represent diverse and contrasting theoretical explanations of how individuals gain knowledge about and give meaning to the phenomenon of leisure and of how these meanings differ and change. Analysis of each paradigm illustrates limitations in their capacity to explain how individuals learn about leisure and suggests the need for alternative explanations. Arguments are advanced in favor of an experientialist paradigm characterized by a research specialization called phenomenography as an additional and complementary theoretical approach to studying the multiple meanings of leisure.

Keywords leisure meanings, leisure experiences, behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, phenomenography

The purpose of this article is to frame the analysis of leisure meanings within the discourse of learning theory and to answer three questions:

1. How do individuals gain knowledge about and form a meaning of leisure?
2. How do individuals form different meanings of leisure?
3. How do individuals change their meanings of leisure?

These questions are based on two assumptions: Individuals form a meaning of leisure from knowledge learned about the phenomenon, and individuals have the capacity to learn different leisure meanings. Given the validity of these assumptions, it may be inferred that various accounts of leisure meanings reported in the literature correspond with different theoretical explanations of how individuals learn about leisure.

How individuals learn is an epistemological question in which attention is directed toward determining not only the nature and sources of knowledge but also the strengths and weaknesses of particular ways of knowing. To this end, four theoretical paradigms of learning are described in terms of their respective accounts of learning and then illustrated with examples drawn from research on leisure meanings. These paradigms are referred to as behaviorism, cognitivism, individual constructivism, and social constructivism (after Bower & Hilgard, 1981; Bredo, 1993; Marton & Booth, 1997; Reynolds, Sinatra, & Jetton, 1996).

Received 25 July 1999; accepted 14 January 2000.

The author wishes to thank Ference Marton from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and Ray Hibbins from Griffith University, Australia, for their insightful contributions during the preparation of the paper. A draft version of the paper was presented at the Fourth Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Leisure Studies, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, January, 1999.

Address correspondence to Michael Watkins, School of Leisure Studies, Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland 4111, Australia. E-mail: M.Watkins@mailbox.gu.edu.au
Particular reference is made to the viability of the epistemological assumptions or claims each paradigm makes in relation to the acquisition of knowledge and to their accounts of difference and change in knowledge. Thus, the central question guiding this review is How do individuals learn their meanings of leisure?

To foreshadow the answer to this question, I contend that the four paradigms provide only partial explanations of how people learn about leisure. This problem suggests the need to consider alternative explanations, and, subsequently, I present an additional paradigm of learning as a possible way forward. This paradigm is referred to as the experientialist paradigm and is characterized by a research specialization called phenomenography.

The approach adopted in this article contrasts with previous reviews that have typically focused on methodological aspects of studying leisure meanings (e.g., Burton, 1996; Ellis & Witt, 1991; Harper, 1981; Hemingway; 1995, Howe, 1990; Mammell, 1980; Mammell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). Although these reviews have made important and varying contributions toward analyzing the epistemological assumptions of methods used to study leisure, the present review aims to complement and extend this work by analyzing the epistemological claims of theories about how individuals learn to experience their meanings of leisure. Given the a priori status of human experience over the methods used to study experience, analysis of the formation of meanings as a learned experience represents a justified and as yet unreported approach toward clarifying some of the definitional issues surrounding the study of leisure.

In presenting the review, the reader’s attention is drawn to several limitations. First, although the paradigms represent major theoretical differences among various explanations of learning, they are in fact composed of several related theories that sometimes overlap with theories forming other paradigms. For example, some aspects of behaviorism are included in some cognitivist theories, and some aspects of cognitivism are present in some constructivist theories (cf. Cobb, 1994; Overskeid, 1995). In this review, overlap is acknowledged as evidence of the interrelatedness among paradigms and is dealt with by emphasizing their essential differences while simultaneously viewing their existence as a coalition of approaches that permit their respective epistemological foundations to be compared (after Shaw, 1998).

Second, the process of linking a particular study of leisure meanings to a particular paradigm requires the reviewer to interpret the theoretical basis of the study and to then allocate it to a relevant paradigm. In some cases, this is readily achieved where researchers have identified the theoretical basis of their work. This process is limited in many cases, however, given that much of the research on leisure meanings is either atheoretical or theoretically ambiguous in nature. In these situations, my approach has been to make an informed judgment about the theoretical orientation of a particular study, for example, by analyzing the researcher’s vocabulary and by contrasting the purpose and results of the study with similar and different studies.

A third limitation is that this review draws from Western intellectual traditions of knowledge and as a result excludes non-Western ideas. Hultsman (1995) and Ibrahim (1982), for example, have respectively offered Taoist and Islamic explanations and, in doing so, have suggested how culturally divergent perspectives of leisure are based on different views of intellectual thought. Although these and other explanations might provide a richer source of comparison, their inclusion is beyond the scope of this article.

The Behaviorist Paradigm of Learning

Behaviorism can be traced to the ideas of empirical philosophers such as Locke (1690/1995) and James Mill (1829) and to learning theories proposed by Thorndike (1931), Watson (1924), and Skinner (1957), among others. The common theme among these scholars is
that individuals acquire knowledge about a stimulus event through sensory experience gained from external information sources (e.g., from family, friends, or the media) and by associating the stimulus with a particular behavioral response. When behavior such as a verbal response is repeatedly reinforced, it may become habitual to the point that the verbal contents (i.e., the words) of the response infer meaning for the individual. Differences in meaning are subsequently operationalized as variations in the content of verbal habits and are attributed to different histories of reinforcement. Changes in meaning represent the acquisition of a modified set of verbal habits that enable individuals to comply with the demands of their environments.

Behaviorist theory has received limited empirical attention from leisure researchers, with the most notable contributions being made by Mobily (1989) and Mobily and Bedford (1993). On the basis of Noble’s (1952) theory of association, Mobily interpreted a meaning of leisure as the habit strength of words semantically associated with or used as synonyms for a given stimulus word (e.g., leisure, play, or work). Response words associated with leisure included fun, relaxing, sleeping, and TV, whereas work was related to terms such as hard, money, labor, and cleaning. Although not using the word leisure, a comparison of elderly male and female respondents’ verbal meanings of the word play in Mobily and Bedford’s study indicated some minor but insignificant differences.

Although the strength of the behaviorist paradigm appears to be its ability to elaborate the commonly held words used by individuals to denote leisure, behaviorist explanations suffer from several weaknesses. Most important, the claim that meanings are acquired from the environment and conditioned by external agents rejects the possibility that individuals can learn through conscious thought or insight (Bredo, 1993). In effect, individuals are portrayed as passive and compliant recipients who simply absorb ideas obtained from external sources and respond uncritically to them (Reynolds et al., 1996). This view therefore contrasts with alternative conceptions such as that individuals are independent and free-thinking agents capable of generating their own existentially relevant meanings of leisure.

Furthermore, the failure of behaviorism to attribute the formation of meanings to individuals’ cognitive capabilities raises the issue of whether behaviorism is capable of discerning anything other than broad and superficial differences in meanings. This issue is highlighted by the fact that the paradigm cannot account for the semantic meanings of the response words, nor for more deeply held psychological meanings (Bredo, 1993). Yet such information may be necessary to distinguish subtle qualitative variations that can turn the meaning of the word leisure into an evocation of pleasure and power on the one hand or of boredom and powerlessness on the other hand.

The contention that repeated and therefore stable histories of reinforcement are required to form verbal habits limits the capacity of the paradigm to explain how meanings might change in anything other than a kind of slow evolutionary process, and only then as determined by the influence of external agents. Although this may be how change operates, the idea of forming habits reduces the possibility that meanings can change in response to immediate short-term situational influences or that individuals are capable of knowing how to define novel or ambiguous situations. These situations might occur when individuals move into a new social group or when leisure is seen to overlap with other aspects of life such as in work and family situations.

Finally, the application of the paradigm is based on the assumption that stimulus words are used in everyday language and shared by all members of the community. However, a number of leisure scholars have pointed out that the word leisure does not appear in everyday language (e.g., Anderson, 1975; Burden, 1997), whereas others have questioned its appropriateness in relation to particular social groups such as women and some non-Anglo subcultures (e.g., Chick, 1998; Wearing & Wearing, 1988). This assumption further highlights limitations with using behaviorism to account for leisure meanings.
The Cognitivist Paradigm of Learning

Whereas behaviorists have claimed that knowledge is acquired from ideas obtained outside the individual, cognitive learning theorists have claimed that knowledge is acquired from within the mind (e.g., Bruner, 1960; Chomsky, 1957; Simon, 1957). Individuals then use this knowledge to help them make sense of phenomena that they initially take as being unstructured or undifferentiated (Bower & Hilgard, 1981). Although cognitivists conceptualize knowledge in different ways (e.g., as personality dispositions, dimensions of contrast, schemas, or rules), the contents of these mental representations are claimed to provide the basis for determining the meanings of a phenomenon. According to Markova (1991), this view is based on the rationalist philosophy of Plato and Descartes. Central to the ideas of these philosophers is the claim that knowledge exists as an innate and eternal set of universal forms or essences in the mind of a person, in the environment (i.e., in the minds or behaviors of other individuals), or in both. Differences in meaning can be realized in terms of individuals possessing higher or lower amounts of a particular disposition or a more or less developed set of dimensions, schemas, or rules and appear to be related to variations in individuals’ genetic characteristics. Changes in meaning represent the acquisition of a more universally accepted representation and attaining new knowledge by learning to apply the representation to recognize similar and dissimilar phenomena.

Leisure meanings research exemplifying the cognitivist approach includes Neulinger’s (1974) leisure paradigm, Iso-Ahola’s (1976, 1979) description of the influence of personality dispositions in forming leisure meanings, Mannell’s (1984) leisure as self-entertainment concept, Weissinger and Iso-Ahola’s (1984) exposition of intrinsic motivation, and Ellis and Witt’s (1986) Leisure Diagnostic Battery. Although it is somewhat harder to classify the epistemological bases of empirical studies conducted by Pierce (1980); Unger and Kern (1983); Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihalyi (1986); and Gunter (1987), these authors’ respective characterizations of leisure appear consistent with the cognitivist goal of locating a universal representation of leisure.

Iso-Ahola’s (1976, 1980) ideas are particularly relevant to consider as they provide an extensive exposition of a cognitivist explanation of leisure meanings and reflect the work of many earlier and contemporary leisure scholars. In proposing a theoretical basis for the definition of leisure, Iso-Ahola drew on the work of attribution theorists (e.g., H. Kelly, 1973) to suggest that individuals acquire knowledge about leisure on the basis of dispositional characteristics that they attribute to their own behavior or observe in other individuals’ behavior. Iso-Ahola (1980) also asserted that definitions of leisure situations are determined by a number of common dimensions that “hold true of people, situation and time” (p. 186) and, elsewhere, that some aspects of social behavior are “universal and enduring” (p. 20). For Iso-Ahola and many other cognitive researchers, these dispositions or dimensions are identified as perceived freedom of choice, intrinsic motivation, and perceived control or competence (cf. Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Thus, despite claiming to reject approaches that aim to discover the generalizable and static characteristics of human behavior, and while emphasizing the dialectical and changing nature of human beings, the essence of the cognitivist’s claim seems to be that leisure meanings are largely innate and fixed.

By emphasizing the importance of the mind, cognitivism appears to offer a more independent role for individuals with respect to learning about leisure meanings compared with behaviorism. Moreover, the success with which cognitivist researchers appear to have achieved consistency in terms of conceptualizing and operationalizing the common determinants of leisure situations adds credibility to their theoretical explanation. While acknowledging the significant body of knowledge built on these contributions, cognitive explanations of leisure meanings are subject to a number of criticisms.
By claiming to have identified the common determinants of leisure, cognitivism offers an explanation of the antecedents that causally determine situations to be recognized as leisure. However, this is not the same as defining the conceptual meaning of leisure experiences per se. Moreover, although cognitivism adopts the view that individuals can subjectively determine the meaning of particular situations, Dreyfuss (1972) pointed out that the paradigm presupposes a fixed way of defining these situations at their base structure. Consequently, it is difficult to understand how individuals can acquire their own unique representations or negotiate or redefine the contents of their representations. Thus, like the behaviorist, the cognitivist’s explanation is problematic because it too characterizes individuals as relatively compliant learners who take the meaning of leisure situations as being initially defined.

The cognitivist paradigm also fails to explain where representations acquire their initial semantic status. Put another way, if individuals obtain undifferentiated sense data in relation to a situation and then use an already acquired internal representation to confer meaning to that situation, then from where do the contents of the representation derive their original meaning? The basis of the cognitivist position suggests that the derivation of leisure dimensions emanates from phylogenetic coding, either through direct inheritance or through the absorption of ideas from other individuals and from there into the genes as naturally selected dispositions. Although this may be a valid claim, the explanation highlights the cognitivist’s propensity for ignoring the potential structuring influences of immediate personal and social contexts on meanings. Furthermore, the claim also suggests that meanings might have transhistorical properties that are independent of ongoing and broader cultural changes, a point that is disputed by those who contend that meanings are socially conditioned and historically situated (e.g., Hemingway, 1995; Rojek, 1995).

If the claim that meanings are genetically determined is taken seriously, then the cognitivist explanation of differences in meaning implies that definitions of leisure situations are largely invariant across human experience. More precisely, cognitivism can only logically account for differences in numerical or quantitative terms, such as how much of a situation is perceived to be like or unlike leisure or that members of one subgroup have higher or lower levels of a particular disposition compared with another subgroup. The problem with this explanation is that it offers a narrow conceptualization of difference by excluding the possibility that people can hold multiple representations of the same situation or that different representations might be described as being qualitatively dissimilar (cf. Freysinger, 1995).

To change the meaning of a given situation (e.g., from leisure to nonleisure), an individual would need to select an appropriate representation in order to come to a decision about the definition of that situation. How then do individuals know how to retrieve and apply the correct representation? Some scholars have pointed out that conceptualizing knowledge as a mental representation implies the need for a representation to handle the selection of representations of a situation (e.g., Reynolds et al., 1996; Costall & Still, 1991). However, this further implies the need for a representation to handle the representation that handles the selection of representations of situations, and so on, ad infinitum. This idea ultimately leads to the questionable proposition that humans come equipped with a homunculus, or a small human in the head, and that this entity operates the selection of an appropriate representation in much the same way as computers mindlessly process information according to preestablished operating instructions.

The Individual Constructivist Paradigm of Learning

In comparison with behaviorism and cognitivism, individual constructivism proposes that knowledge is not passively acquired from the outside world or implanted as an a priori
representation in the mind but is constructed by the mind’s ability to actively explore and develop its own meaningful accounts of phenomena. The source of knowledge is generated from individuals’ previous and concurrent interactions with their social and physical environments and through their ability to reason about and symbolically transform these interactions into personally constructed interpretations. Knowledge of a phenomenon is subsequently represented as a conceptual or symbolic interpretation that conveys meaning for the individual. Differences in meaning are characterized as different interpretations of the same phenomenon and are related to variations in individuals’ conceptual abilities. Changes in meaning are understood as the ability to develop more complex interpretations that fit with individuals’ changing needs.

The major theoretical contributions to this paradigm are found in Piaget’s (1983) genetic epistemology, von Glasersfeld’s (1995) radical constructivism, the Mead-Blumer theory of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), and George Kelly’s (1963) personal construct theory. The philosophical basis of the paradigm has been attributed to ideas of Hegel (Markova, 1991). It is worth mentioning some of Hegel’s key ideas as they help to elaborate the individual constructivist paradigm, or what is sometimes called cognitive constructivism, and to distinguish the paradigm from the traditional version of cognitivism presented earlier.

Both the Platonic-Cartesian and Hegelian frameworks are based on the idea of universals, although universals are theoretically treated in quite different ways. As described in the cognitivist paradigm, universals are static and eternal entities, generalizable across individuals, and serve as the basis for determining the meanings of a phenomenon. In comparison, Hegel described universals as dynamic entities that are a product of interactions between individuals; they can be both individually and collectively distributed, and they correspond with the direct conceptual definitions of a phenomenon. From this latter perspective, individuals learn about a phenomenon by comparing it to other phenomena, and there is no end point to development because they can learn new knowledge and consider the phenomenon from other conceptual perspectives. Thus, whereas the Platonic-Cartesian framework emphasizes learning as the process of discovering or recollecting eternal forms of knowledge that are ontologically independent of the learner, the Hegelian view stresses the development and agency of learners who ontologically evolve with changing forms of knowledge that they themselves can create (Markova, 1991).

Empirical support for an individual constructivist interpretation of leisure meanings appears in studies by Brook (1993); Lee, Datillo, and Howard (1994); Roadburg (1983); Samdahl (1992); and Shaw (1985). For example, Shaw postulated the definition of leisure as a mentalistic or subjective phenomenon that arises out of interaction and to be a function of individuals’ capacities to symbolically transform or modify their interpretations of these interactions. Shaw also asserted that meanings possess a dynamic quality for individuals in that they can be redefined, but they may also be shared and represent a stable configuration for both an individual and groups within a society. The results of Shaw’s study demonstrated that perceived choice, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, relaxation, and lack of evaluation were important dimensions defining leisure situations. Subgroup comparisons based on the family structure, age, employment, and occupational status of the study respondents indicated a high level of shared meaning.

By focusing on the individual’s role in making his or her own existentially relevant meanings, individual constructivism suggests a tenable theoretical account of the formation of meanings if one subscribes to the primacy of human agency over external or innately determined sources of knowledge. Some critics, however, have pointed out that if knowledge of a phenomenon is a product of an individual’s unique interpretation, then how is it possible for one individual to truly know what another individual means when engaged in the act
of communication (e.g., Gergen, 1995; Hardy & Taylor, 1997)? As suggested by Schwandt (1994), the logical extension of this idea is that meanings are solipsistic constructions belonging only to the individual constructor and cannot be intersubjectively shared (cf. Glancy, 1993, for a counterexample to this argument).

Relying on sociodemographic comparisons to determine differences in meaning as used in individual constructivist accounts of leisure is epistemologically inconsistent if one accepts the claim that individuals interpret and make sense out of their own unique experiences. Rojek’s (1995, p. 104) statement that “we cannot assume that all car workers and waitresses see the world in the same way” and Burton’s (1996) caution against the overuse of sociodemographic indices in leisure research highlight the nature of this problem for individual constructivist explanations.

Additionally, some scholars (e.g., Gergen, 1995; Ogborn, 1997) have contended that individual constructivism promotes the relativist position of democratizing different meanings such that one individual’s meanings are viewed as as good as any other and provides no basis for being able to critically compare different meanings (Schwandt, 1994). On this point, it is timely to recall the advice of the Greek philosopher Socrates in his deliberations on the matter of relativism. According to Socrates, relativist views are intellectually intolerable because they lead to a confusion of thought and are morally reprehensible because they provide no sense of direction as to what constitutes acceptable or useful ways to think about, in this context, the meanings of leisure (cited in Guthrie, 1956).

In regard to changes in meaning, individual constructivism claims that individuals continually redefine their definitions. However, the claim does not appear to be supported by empirical studies of leisure meanings, which in fact suggest a high degree of shared meaning. Marton and Booth (1997) argued that the problem is highlighted by the paradigm’s failure to show how individuals learn to develop more complex meanings while still operating with less developed meanings, if, as has been suggested, individuals do not have access to others’ constructions in the first place.

The Social Constructivist Paradigm of Learning

Social constructivists emphasize the making of knowledge by communities of individuals rather by individuals, as claimed by individual constructivists. Knowledge is viewed as a collaborative intersubjective construction and is appropriated by individuals from the socially organized practices of the group in which they participate (Cobb, 1994). Thus, knowledge or meaning is embedded in participatory forms of social practice and is subject to the structuring influences of historical processes and sociocultural beliefs that surround these practices. Differences in meaning are subsequently held to represent variations in social practice and reflect different normative beliefs held by different groups. Changes in meaning are associated with evolving social practices and indicate individuals increasing enculturation in these practices.

Scholars contributing to this paradigm include situated learning theorists (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), social constructionists (e.g., Gergen, 1995), feminist scholars (e.g., Gilligan, 1982), and sociocultural scholars of varying theoretical persuasions (e.g., Berger & Luckman, 1966; Foucault, 1974; Habermas, 1971). Schegloff (1991) identified Durkheim’s notion of the “collective conscience” as providing an important source of philosophical inspiration for this paradigm. This idea posits that social groups have cognitive properties that differ from those of its individual members and that these properties act to bind members together and reinforce social order.

constructed nature of leisure meanings. J. Kelly’s (1994, p. 91) assertion that “leisure actors have learned systems of meanings that reflect the dominant ideologies that serve class interests” is indicative of this approach. Studies of leisure meanings framed within this paradigm elaborate on the function of broader cultural processes (e.g., capitalism) and describe how these processes historically situate meanings (e.g., within an ideology of consumption). Moreover, they tend to focus on specific examples of social practices (e.g., power relationships among groups of individuals) in order to demonstrate how meanings are used to promote or resist sexism, ageism, or racism within these groups.

Empirical support for social constructivist explanations of leisure meanings exists in studies by Freysinger (1995), Rapoport and Rapoport (1975), and Wearing (1990). Freysinger’s study exemplifies the general tenets of the paradigm by locating leisure meanings within the socially constructed arena of age and gender and in practices of affiliation (e.g., interacting with others) and agency (self-determining forms of experience). Although Freysinger adopted the explicit stance of recognizing the existence of individual differences in meaning, the study described a single multidimensional model that depicted the commonality of leisure across the study sample. This depiction described leisure as an experience of change that was freely chosen and that provided feelings of relaxation, enjoyment, and rejuvenation.

Although the social constructivist paradigm has made important advances in understanding the historical and sociocultural qualities of leisure meanings, the paradigm has been subject to a number of criticisms. For example, individual meanings tend to disappear in favor of collective meanings, which, as Bredo (1993) suggested, fails to acknowledge that individuals can have meaning-making experiences in multiple and often conflicting communities. Ogborn (1997) contended that this problem is reinforced by the paradigm’s emphasis on the social making of meanings and its tendency to understate individual modeling, finding or interpreting metaphors of gaining knowledge. Although a collective may experience a change in the meaning of social practice, the claim that change occurs in a structuring process of normative beliefs assumes each individual sees these influences and responds to them in the same way as do others. This raises the idea of social determinism, a position that theoretically parallels the behaviorist’s contention that meaning is environmentally determined.

Problems with the Coalition of Paradigms

Although the respective paradigms provide different and competing explanations of how people learn about leisure, when viewed as a coalition of approaches each paradigm contributes a viable and important explanation for some particular aspect of meaning that is unaccounted for by other paradigms. Thus, behaviorism produces linguistic accounts of the everyday words used to denote leisure, and cognitivism identifies the common and underlying dispositional tendencies that cause situations to be represented as leisure. Individual constructivism, on the other hand, emphasizes individuals’ conceptual interpretations of the meaning of these situations, whereas social constructivism suggests how these meanings are historically and socioculturally structured. To rephrase Shaw’s (1998) contention, it is as if the coalition of paradigms serves as the background against which each respective paradigm can be foregrounded and understood in terms of its specific contribution.

However, treating the paradigms as a coalition of approaches highlights four common problems that appear to be fundamentally linked to resolving questions about leisure meanings. First, the nature of knowledge or the units of description conceptualized by each paradigm (i.e., as verbal habits, mental representations, conceptual interpretations, or social practices) do not focus on the phenomenon of leisure as experienced by individuals. Instead,
they focus on the researchers’ prescriptive theorizing about how people might experience leisure, for example, as forming habits, mental representations, and so on (cf. Sylvester, 1987). The extent to which one or another unit of description can be claimed as being any more or less viable is overshadowed by the absence of a theoretical explanation of learning about leisure that takes the individual’s life world experience as the primary unit of description.

Second, the coalition of paradigms is based on an outmoded dualistic conception of the individual–world relationship as indicated by their explanations as to the source of knowledge about leisure meanings (cf. Burton, 1996; Searle, 1992). Both cognitivism and individual constructivism are similar in that they claim knowledge is acquired from within the individual’s mind and thus they downplay the influence of the social world. Behaviorism and social constructivism do the opposite by claiming that knowledge is gained from the outside world, and subsequently they downplay the role of individuals’ mental processes. The implication of this view is that once individuals and the world are seen to exist as two separate realities, they cannot be philosophically reunited (Marton & Booth, 1997). Thus, the two dominant traditions in leisure meanings research—that leisure is subjectively determined or, alternatively, that leisure is socially constructed—commit their respective proponents to maintaining a philosophical dilemma that has remained unanswered since Socrates first grappled with the issue in the *Meno* some 2,500 years ago.

Third, although differences in meaning are theoretically attributed to variations in reinforcement histories, genetic inheritances, conceptual abilities, or normative beliefs, the subsumption of these factors to individuals’ sociodemographic status maintains the questionable proposition that all members of a particular subgroup share the same meanings of leisure. However, not only do sociodemographic variables turn out to be somewhat insensitive to predicting interindividual difference in meanings (e.g., Donald & Havighurst, 1959; Iso-Ahola, 1979; Kleiber, Caldwell, & Shaw, 1993; Shaw, 1985; Unger & Kerman, 1983), but they also fail to illuminate intraindividual differences.

The fourth and final problem concerns the ability of the paradigms to account for changes in meaning. The primary concern lies in the fact that different forms of knowledge represented by the paradigms (i.e., as habits, dispositions, interpretations, or social practices) can be difficult to change. Moreover, if individuals’ meanings are sociodemographically related, then this logically implies that individuals would have to change their sociodemographic status in order to change their meanings of leisure. Although individuals do experience change in their personal and social circumstances, the capacity of the paradigms to describe the dynamics of change is particularly problematic.

In summary, if the descriptions of the paradigms are accepted as a reasonable summation of their fundamental epistemological claims, limitations associated with these paradigms indicate the need for additional explanations that address four areas. These are theoretical explanations of leisure meanings that (a) incorporate an experientialist perspective, (b) adopt a nondualist view of the individual–world relationship, (c) are sensitive to individual and collective differences, and (d) are responsive to capturing the dynamics of change in meaning.

### The Potential Contribution of an Experientialist Paradigm

In response to perceived limitations with existing theoretical accounts of learning, phenomenography has been advocated as an alternative approach to explain learning (Marton, 1981, 1986, 1996; Marton & Svensson, 1979). Phenomenography was initially developed as a research specialization for mapping the qualitatively different ways that people experience the meaning of aspects of their world. More recent developments have seen the approach extended to incorporate a theoretical account of learning (cf. Marton & Booth, 1997) that is consistent with what is referred to in this article as the experientialist paradigm.
According to this paradigm, knowledge is viewed as an experience of the relationship formed between an individual and some aspect of his or her world (e.g., the phenomenon of leisure). The relationship is internal in the sense that it is established or constituted in the individual’s awareness as an individual–world relationship and conveys meaning for the individual. Philosophers such as A. N. Whitehead (1929) and Birch (1995) used the term internal relation to describe this relationship and claimed that when individuals take account of the relationship they have direct access to the feelings experienced in relation to that aspect; that is, they experience an internal relation. Internal relations can therefore be considered as the basic units of awareness or, in Whitehead’s language, as actual occasions of experience.

The source of an individual’s knowledge or experience of a phenomenon is gained through participating in the constitution of situations in which the phenomenon is present. This suggests that knowledge is acquired as Heidegger (1962) proposed, through being in the world, in which case individuals not only experience their own understandings of a phenomenon as argued by the cognitivists and individual constructivists, but also share others’ understandings as contended by the behaviorists and social constructivists. However, this is theoretically different from claiming that individuals discover an independent reality or construct a private reality within their own self or that they adopt behaviors or appropriate practices from an already established world. Consequently, the experientialist paradigm does not address how knowledge is gained from within the mind or how knowledge is gained from the world, but rather posits the existence of internal relations as part of the individual’s ongoing constitution of the world. By understanding the individual and the world as being internally related, the paradigm adopts a nondualist perspective of there being one world, the world as it is experienced by individuals. Free from dualism, the experientialist paradigm focuses on how individual–world relations differ and change (Marton, 1996).

In describing the nature of consciousness, Gurwitsch (1964, p. 4) advanced the idea that the object of attention or “that which engrosses the mind of the experiencing subject” stands to the fore of, and is embedded in, a background of contextual factors. These factors may alter over time and provide the object with its particular qualitative character. According to this idea, differences in awareness are understood as contextually related shifts in the figure–ground relationship. The experientialist paradigm draws on this idea to represent different meanings of a phenomenon as different ways of experiencing the individual–world relationship and of reflecting variations in both the content and the structure of the relationship at a particular point in time. The content of the relationship refers to the aspects or parts focal in the individual’s awareness of the phenomenon. Although individuals are not consciously aware of the different parts, they are argued to be aware of the wholelike quality of the experience that is formed by the parts. Thus, the content of the relationship translates into the literal meaning of the phenomenon; that is, what the phenomenon means to the individual. The structure of the relationship describes how the parts are understood, how the parts are related or temporally organized in awareness, and how the phenomenon is differentiated from its background context and from other phenomena (Svensson, as cited in Marton, 1986). This aspect of the relationship, then, refers to how the meaning is experienced or understood by the individual. By adding a structural component to the content of experience, the experientialist paradigm provides a theoretical framework in which to situate empirical descriptions of qualitative differences in individual–world relationships, both within the same individual and between different individuals. Such an approach is therefore argued to be sensitive to describing variations and to reduce the need to rely on sociodemographic variables as the primary method for determining differences in meaning.

At this point, it is timely to ask if the individual–world relationships constituted in awareness are relative to the knowledge of individuals such that there can exist an infinite
number of ways of experiencing a phenomenon, or whether such relationships are perhaps limited in number? The experientialist paradigm proposes that the number of ways of knowing about a phenomenon is potentially inexhaustible due to individuals’ ongoing constitution of the world, no matter how little or how much, from birth until death. However, the capacity of individuals to know about a phenomenon is also limited by two pragmatic conditions. The first is that individuals are constrained in their ability to be focally aware of all the possible ways of experiencing a phenomenon. Indeed, if individuals were aware of all there is to know about a phenomenon, then meaning would logically cease to exist as it is rendered from there being different ways of understanding the phenomenon. The second reason is that individuals share common social contexts and can therefore be expected to constitute similar experiences of phenomena that emerge from these contexts. Thus, the two seemingly contradictory conditions, difference and commonality in experience, are argued to restrict knowledge about phenomena to a limited but not finite number of meanings.

Given that meanings are limited, the experientialist paradigm makes the further claim that different experiences of these meanings can be understood as an interrelated and logically ordered continuum of experience. The justification for positing the interrelated nature of experience is based on the contention that different combinations of the same constituent parts appear in different experiences of the phenomenon (Marton, 1996). However, this does not mean that all individuals are capable of sharing exactly the same experiences. In other words, individuals within a given population cannot be expected to share a web of common meanings (cf. Hemingway, 1995), but, more accurately, they can be expected to share an experiential field of differentially constituted meanings. As argued by Marton and Booth (1997), this means that experiences can be ordered according to the increasing complexity with which different ways of experiencing the phenomenon can be defined as subsets of more or less inclusive or complex ways of being aware of the phenomenon. More complex experiences accord with the ability to simultaneously discern and hold in awareness more parts or more ways of experiencing the phenomenon. In contrast, less complex experiences are partial representations in which fewer parts or fewer ways of experiencing the phenomenon are discerned in awareness. However, the ordering of experience on a continuum implies more than simply determining the degree of complexity apparent in particular experiences. It also implies making value judgments about the relative worth of experience and stating what it is about complex experiences that make them more desirable than less complex experiences. Such judgments cannot rely on objective propositions of truthfulness, but need to be argued for using criteria that are relevant to the subjective context of the particular situation.

Subsequently, in response to questions about how individuals learn their meanings of leisure, the experientalist paradigm claims that learning occurs when individuals experience change in the content and structure of the internal relations formed between themselves and the phenomenon of leisure. Learning so described means that individuals have developed a capability for being able to hold more aspects of leisure or more ways of experiencing leisure in their awareness than they were capable of at some previous point in time. When viewed from this perspective, different ways of experiencing leisure correspond with changes in individuals’ ways of seeing the individual–world relationship. Inasmuch as these changes are seen by individuals against the background of their life worlds, changes in the meaning of leisure are held to be reflective of, and responsive to, changes in individuals’ life worlds in general. These changes may also be understood as layers of experience that indicate increasingly complex ways of experiencing leisure. Consequently, an empirical investigation of leisure meanings framed by the experientialist paradigm would seek to identify and describe a limited number of experiences. These descriptions would aim to define the meanings of the parts that form the experiences, illustrate the arrangement of parts in differing
patterns of temporal awareness, depict differing relations between leisure and other aspects of life, and demonstrate how leisure experiences are interrelated and ordered according to their complexity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the experientialist explanation of gaining knowledge about and giving meaning to leisure allows us to view individuals as bearers of different experiences rather than as behaviorist impersonators, bearers of mental representations, or individual or social actors as implied by each of the previously described paradigms. By focusing on the content and structure of experience, the experientialist paradigm draws from and complements the cognitivist’s and individual constructivist’s concern with the inner content of experience, as well as the behaviorist’s and social constructivist’s concern with the outer structuring of experience. However, it does so in a way that avoids separating people from the phenomenon and the context within which they and the phenomenon are situated. Finally, the experientialist paradigm complements the existing coalition of approach by providing an approach to generating descriptions of difference and change in leisure meanings that can be compared and contrasted in terms of their complexity of experience.

References


