Chapter 6
Leisure, Optimal Experience, and Psychological Selection: Cultural and Developmental Perspectives

Marta Bassi and Antonella Delle Fave

Introduction

The scientific literature on leisure has proposed different approaches to classify free time activities. However, there is a substantial convergence among authors in distinguishing between two broad typologies of leisure. The first typology refers to activities characterized by clear structure and rules, fostering engagement, fulfillment, and long-term commitment. It includes active leisure activities as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990); structured activities promoting concentration and effort toward goal achievement, as identified by Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihalyi (1986); and serious leisure activities (Stebbins, 2001, 2007) that foster participants' long-term acquisition of special skills, knowledge, and experience. The second typology of leisure comprises activities requiring low energy investment and promoting relaxation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), unstructured tasks that provide pleasure and fun without high demands (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Larson & Kleiber, 1993), and casual leisure activities, immediately enjoyable and rewarding, relatively short-lived, and requiring little or no specialist training (Stebbins, 2007).

Both types of leisure have been analyzed in relation to individuals' well-being and development. On the one hand, casual leisure has been shown to bring about benefits such as buffering immediate stress or the impact of negative life events and sustaining coping efforts (Calbabiano, 1994; Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Patterson & Coleman, 1996). On the other hand, the notion of serious leisure emphasizes the potential of free time activities in promoting long-term commitment and skill cultivation (Dilley & Scraton, 2010). More recently, within the framework of positive psychology, researchers have stressed the role of leisure

M. Bassi (✉) • A. Delle Fave
Dipartimento di Scienze Biomediche e Cliniche "Luigi Sacco",
Università degli Studi di Milano, Milan, Italy
e-mail: marta.bassi@unimi.it

T. Freire (ed.), *Positive Leisure Science: From Subjective Experience to Social Contexts*,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-5058-6_6,

as a resource to foster posttraumatic growth and the development of resilience among people experiencing negative life events such as the onset of disabilities (Chung & Lee, 2010; Iwasaki, Mactavish, & Mackay, 2005; Kleiber, 2004).

Leisure has been widely investigated as a source of positive and rewarding states of consciousness, such as flow, or optimal experience (see Chap. 8 by Perkins and Nakamura in this volume). Flow is characterized by involvement, concentration, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and high environmental challenges balanced with high personal skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The associated activities are likely to be preferentially selected and cultivated in the long term. This lifelong process, described as psychological selection (Csikszentmihalyi & Massimini, 1985; Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000), promotes identity and competence building through the identification and pursuit of a well-defined set of goals and interests which uniquely characterize each individual's differentiation and social integration patterns. Individual resources and potentials, together with cultural and environmental influences, come into play within this lifelong process (Delle Fave, 2007). At the individual level, optimal experience has to be contextualized in the theoretical framework of daily psychological selection (Delle Fave, Massimini, & Bassi, 2011; Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000). Psychological selection results from the individuals' differential investment of attention and resources on the information available in their environment. This process is influenced by the cultural context, as well as by predispositions, previous experiences and their appraisal, hierarchy of priorities, and values that individuals ceaselessly build and shape throughout their lives.

Within the leisure domain, the activities prominently fostering the onset of optimal experience belong to the typology of structured or serious leisure: They mainly include sports, arts, and hobbies, that is, activities sustaining skill development by virtue of the person's engagement in facing complex challenges, at the same time providing fulfillment and intrinsic rewards (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003a; Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). This chapter will focus on some of the major findings in the study of flow or optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) in the domain of leisure. Our specific aim is to highlight the role of leisure in individual development and in the process of psychological selection, taking into account its interplay with other daily life domains and with the cultural context.

Studying Optimal Experience in Leisure: Instruments and Procedures

Research on optimal experience in leisure activities can rely on a wide range of instruments, such as the *Flow State Scale* (FSS; Jackson & Marsh, 1996) described by Perkins and Nakamura in this volume (Chap. 8). Another single-administration instrument is the *Flow Questionnaire* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) designed to investigate

the occurrence of optimal experience and its psychological features. In its most widely used version (Delle Fave, 2007; Delle Fave et al., 2010), participants are first asked to read three quotations describing optimal experience, to report whether they have ever had similar experiences in their life, and – if they have – to list the activities or situations associated with it (also defined as optimal activities). Subsequently, participants are asked to select from their list the activity associated with the most intense and pervasive flow conditions and to describe the experience reported during this activity through 0–8 point scales investigating cognitive, affective, and motivational variables: involvement, clear-cut feedback from the activity, wish to do the activity, enjoyment, perception of clear goals, challenges, skills, focus of attention, excitement, and relaxation. All the answers to the open-ended questions are coded and included into broader functional categories, derived from previous studies (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Delle Fave & Massimini, 1991, 2004a). To evaluate the quality of experience during the selected optimal activities, mean scores are calculated for each variable. The individual and environmental conditions which contribute to the onset and maintenance of optimal experience are also investigated (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, & Delle Fave, 1988). The average quality of experience in the main daily activities, such as studying, work, family interactions, and being alone, is investigated as well. Data allow researchers to specifically identify the psychological and phenomenological components of optimal experience and to evaluate the daily opportunities for action participants perceive in their environment, the quality of experience associated with daily routine activities, and the quality of daily life from the subjective perspective.

In our research group, we usually administer Flow Questionnaire together with the Life Theme Questionnaire that provides information on participants' positive and negative life influences, present challenges, and future life goals. Life Theme Questionnaire also specifically investigates the role of family, education, and work in the promotion of individual development and well-being (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003a, 2004b). The two questionnaires together provide information on participants' quality of life, perceived determinants of individual history, goals and expectations, skill cultivation through selective allocation of psychic resources on optimal activities, and personal growth trajectories.

The quality of experience during free time activities can also be explored through online procedures such as the *Experience Sampling Method* (ESM). This procedure was developed by Csikszentmihalyi, Larson, and Prescott (1977). It investigates contextual and experiential aspects of daily life through online repeated self-reports that participants fill out during the real unfolding of daily events and situations. ESM therefore allows researchers to investigate subjective experience overcoming the problems related to the retrospective collection of information, such as distortions and rationalizations (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007; Larson & Delespaul, 1992). During a standard ESM session, participants carry for 1 week an electronic device sending random signals 6–8 times a day from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. They are asked to fill out a form at each signal reception. Questionnaires comprise open-ended as well as scaled questions. The former investigate the external context (activity, location, and companionship), the content of thought, as well as the desired

activities, places, and social interactions, if any. The quality of experience is assessed through Likert-type scales measuring the level of affective, cognitive, and motivational variables. Additional information is gathered about participants' evaluations of the level of personal satisfaction, short- and long-term importance of the activity, opportunities for action perceived in the situation (challenges), and personal abilities (skills) in facing such opportunities.

ESM data analyses can focus on the time budget (daily distribution of activities, locations, social contexts) and on the fluctuations of experience according to activities and social context. Data can also be used to draw inter- and intragroup comparisons, as well as longitudinal and cross-cultural investigations (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2004c, 2005a). In particular, since self-reports are repeatedly filled out, numeric values of each variable are transformed into *z*-scores before analysis, starting from the individual statistics for each participants. Thanks to the features of the ESM data, a model of analysis has been developed (Experience Fluctuation Model, EFM) that allowed researchers to investigate the relation between the perception of challenges and skills and the quality of experience (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, & Carli, 1987). The model, used in a broad range of studies, is built on the Cartesian plane and is divided into eight sectors called channels, in which channels 1, 3, 5, and 7 are centered upon the two main axes, starting from 90° and then proceeding clockwise; the others are positioned on the bisectors of the four right angles. Each channel corresponds to a particular ratio between the standardized values of challenges on the *y*-axis and those of skills on the *x*-axis. EFM allowed for the identification of a relation between the values of challenges and skills and the quality of experience. Across samples, a recurrent association emerged between specific experiential patterns and channels. In particular, when challenges and skills are perceived above mean (channel 2), optimal experience is reported. When challenges are above average and skills below it (channel 8), participants describe a state of anxiety. The perception of challenges below and skills above average (channel 4) corresponds to a state of relaxation. Finally, when the values of challenges and skills are perceived below average (channel 6), a state of apathy is reported.

Leisure and Optimal Experience: International Findings

We will start our brief overview on flow in leisure by showing general findings gathered through Flow Questionnaire and Life Theme Questionnaire in different cultures, among 870 adults and 248 adolescents. The adult group comprised 379 women and 491 men aged 15–78. Among them, 40.7% belonged to non-Western cultures (India, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Iran, Somalia, West and North Africa, Navajos, and Rom Gypsies), while 59.3% were Westerners (most of them from Italy). Participants represented a broad range of traditional and modern occupations, including farming, handicrafts, factory and office work, domestic tasks, nursing, teaching, and attending college. The adolescent group included 164 girls

Table 6.1 Percentage distribution across life domains of the optimal activities identified by adults and adolescents from various cultures

	Adults		Adolescents	
Categories	Optimal activities (%)	Selected optimal activities (%)	Optimal activities (%)	Selected optimal activities (%)
Productive activities	37.3	41.3	35.4	35.5
Leisure	45.0	42.3	43.8	44.2
Interactions	11.3	10.5	12.7	13.9
Introspection	6.5	6.0	8.1	6.4
N answers	1,604	736[a]	322	172[a]

[a]In the Flow Questionnaire, participants were invited to select, among their previously listed optimal activities, the one associated with the most pervasive flow experience. Therefore, *N* and percentages of participants and *N* and percentages of answers coincide

and 84 boys from Uganda, Nepal, Italy, and the Navajo Nation, all of them attending high school (Delle Fave et al., 2010).

A global overview of the international findings obtained through the Flow Questionnaire can help us identify some general trends as well as some cultural peculiarities. First of all, the majority of participants in both the adult and adolescent samples (84.6 and 69.4% respectively) reported optimal experience in their lives and associated it with one or more activities. As reported in Table 6.1, leisure (sport, hobbies, reading, relaxed leisure, and the use of media) and productive activities (work and study) largely predominated, both as activities overall associated with optimal experience and as activities specifically selected by the participants in relation to the most pervasive flow conditions.

This finding was recurrent across cultures, genders, and age groups, with no significant differences. However, some significant cultural differences were detected in the distribution of the selected optimal activities. In particular, free time activities were reported by a higher percentage of Western adult participants, while introspection (thinking, daydreaming, reflecting) was quoted by a higher percentage of non-Westerners. As regards adolescents, among Navajo and Italian adolescents, leisure prevailed as the most frequent opportunity for optimal experience, both within the general flow activity distribution and among the selected activities. On the contrary, Ugandan and Nepalese adolescents prominently quoted study in both cases. The participants' percentage distribution also differed across groups as regards introspection, more frequently reported by Ugandan and Nepalese adolescents than by Italian and Navajo ones. Statistical details on these differences can be found in Delle Fave et al. (2010).

We will now specifically focus on free time activities. Among the adult participants who selected them as opportunities for the most pervasive optimal experiences, over half quoted sports and hobbies, which are classified as structured or active leisure (Kleiber et al., 1986). In particular, 28.7% of these participants referred to sports and physical exercise, and 25.6% to arts, creative hobbies, and

games. Reading books and journals was selected by 28.8% of the participants, and more passive and relaxing activities such as resting, lying on the beach, enjoying holidays, going for a stroll, and listening to music by 10.7%. Only 20 participants (16 of them Westerners) selected watching TV, and only two Westerners quoted shopping and buying objects as opportunities for optimal experience (Delle Fave, Massimini, & Bassi, 2011), supporting the evidence that pursuing and achieving material goods do not foster per se well-being and optimal states (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

Analogous findings were detected among adolescents who selected free time activities as opportunities for pervasive flow. Structured leisure largely predominated, recruiting the answers of 70.4% of the participants; sport was quoted by 49.3% of the teenagers, and arts, hobbies, and games by 21.2% of them. Reading was reported by 25.4% of the participants. Only three adolescents selected unstructured leisure activities, and only one watching TV.

In the Flow Questionnaire, participants were subsequently invited to rate on 0–8 Likert-type scales the quality of experience associated with the selected optimal activities. This allows us for a more fine-grained investigation of selected leisure activities through the exploration of the features of flow during their performance and according to their structure.

Tables 6.2 and 6.3 show the psychological features of flow during the selected free time activities. Very few cross-cultural differences were detected in these features and only at a general level of analysis, namely, looking at the whole set of leisure activities regardless of their structured or unstructured nature. At this level, non-Western participants reported significant higher values of enjoyment ($Z = 3.1$, $p < .01$), concentration ($Z = 3.4$, $p < .001$), and control of the situation ($Z = 3.5$, $p < .001$). No cultural differences were detected in the features of flow within the subcategories of leisure activities (namely, structured vs. unstructured ones). Instead, differences were detected within the group of adult participants when flow was compared across typologies of leisure activities. Due to the low number of adolescents who associated optimal experience with relaxed leisure, this activity category was dropped from the analysis for this group of participants. In the adult sample, the distinction between structured and relaxed leisure was reflected in the features of the associated optimal experience. A nonparametric ANOVA comparison across activities with post hoc Scheffé test detected significant differences for several variables. The values of perceived challenges, skills, and enjoyment were significantly higher in sports and hobbies, which represent structured leisure ($F = 11.4, p < .0001$, $F = 4.6, p < .01$, and $F = 7.9, p < .0001$ respectively). Involvement scored highest during hobbies ($F = 5.3$, $p < .01$). According to the associated activities, the twofold role of leisure – as an opportunity for enjoyable engagement or for pleasant relaxation – clearly emerges from these findings. This evidence was confirmed among in both Western and non-Western participants, and it is consistent with the wide variety of data gathered in several studies to investigate optimal experience in leisure activities (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2004a, 2005a).

Table 6.2 The psychological features of optimal experience across leisure activities among adult participants from different cultures

	Sport	Hobbies	Reading	Relaxed leisure
	(*N* = 88)	(*N* = 79)	(*N* = 89)	(*N* = 33)
Variables	*M (sd)*	*M (sd)*	*M (sd)*	*M (sd)*
Involvement	6.6 (1.6)	7.4 (1.1)	6.6 (1.9)	6.7 (1.6)
Clear feedback	6.5 (1.5)	6.9 (2.0)	6.7 (1.8)	6.5 (2.2)
Wish doing the activity	7.3 (1.5)	7.4 (1.2)	7.4 (1.2)	7.2 (2.2)
Excitement	7.8 (0.6)	7.8 (0.6)	7.6 (0.8)	7.8 (0.8)
Enjoyment	7.4 (1.0)	7.6 (1.0)	6.6 (1.8)	6.9 (1.4)
Concentration	6.2 (2.0)	6.7 (2.1)	6.5 (1.8)	6.4 (2.2)
Relaxation	6.5 (2.2)	6.9 (1.9)	6.8 (2.0)	7.6 (1.2)
Clear goals	6.8 (1.7)	7.0 (1.8)	6.9 (1.9)	6.4 (2.6)
Control of situation	6.6 (1.6)	7.0 (1.8)	6.8 (1.7)	6.6 (2.2)
Challenges	6.7 (1.5)	6.8 (1.8)	5.3 (2.3)	5.7 (2.3)
Skills	6.4 (1.6)	7.0 (1.1)	6.1 (1.9)	6.0 (2.3)

N number of participants

Table 6.3 The psychological features of optimal experience across leisure activities among adolescents from different cultures

	Sport	Hobbies	Reading
	(*N* = 35)	(*N* = 15)	(*N* = 18)
Variables	*M (sd)*	*M (sd)*	*M (sd)*
Involvement	7.2 (1.5)	8.0 (0.0)	6.9 (1.3)
Clear feedback	6.5 (1.7)	6.7 (1.2)	5.4 (2.4)
Wish doing the activity	6.4 (2.2)	7.3 (1.4)	6.4 (2.2)
Excitement	6.8 (2.2)	7.1 (2.0)	7.1 (1.6)
Enjoyment	7.3 (1.2)	7.7 (1.0)	6.8 (2.1)
Concentration	5.5 (2.5)	6.9 (1.4)	5.9 (1.6)
Relaxation	4.8 (2.9)	5.5 (3.4)	4.1 (2.7)
Clear goals	6.3 (2.3)	7.3 (1.2)	6.8 (1.6)
Control of situation	6.9 (1.8)	6.9 (1.2)	6.0 (2.1)
Challenges	6.7 (2.1)	6.2 (2.8)	4.7 (2.5)
Skills	7.1 (1.8)	7.1 (1.4)	6.2 (1.7)

N number of participants

The Interplay Between Leisure and Work

According to Rojek (1995), the prominence of homo faber on homo ludens in Western societies entails the risk of considering leisure as either a source of compensation "replenishing the stultified energies of the worker" (p. 190) or a segregated domain centered on absolute freedom and choice. Both these approaches

Table 6.4 Leisure as selected optimal activity across professions

	Nurses	Craftsmen	White-collar workers	Cashiers
Categories	(*N*=30) (%)	(*N*=68) (%)	(*N*=50) (%)	(*N*=55) (%)
Productive activities	52.2	59.1	38	18.2
Leisure	24.8	36.4	54	74.5
Interactions	17.1	1.5	2	1.8
Introspection	5.9	3.0	6	5.4
Group *N*[a]	30	78	66	60
% Flow[b]	96.7	87.2	75.8	91.7

[a]Overall sample sizes
[b]Percentage of participants reporting optimal experience in their lives

generate unrealistic expectations of psychological fulfillment through leisure, in that leisure itself is a socially constructed domain, with its own rules, contents, and constraints. Parker (1997) proposed a broader approach, maintaining that the relationship between work and leisure is not homogeneous within a given society, but it depends on people's occupation. On this basis, he identified three patterns of work-leisure relationship. The *extension* pattern is typical of people involved in creative and autonomy-supporting jobs, and it derives from the spillover approach that posits mutual influences in terms of skill development and levels of satisfaction between different areas of life (Leiter & Durup, 1996; Staines, 1980). The *opposition* pattern applies to people enrolled in risky and damaging jobs, who compensate through leisure the frustrations and constraints of work. Finally, the *separation* pattern applies to the workers employed in neither particularly creative nor dangerous jobs, who perceive work and leisure as two independent life domains, with no mutual influences.

A confirmation of Parker's approach and of its impact on optimal activities has been highlighted among four different groups of workers. Results are shown in Table 6.4. In all groups, the majority of participants reported optimal experience in their lives. However, nurses and craftsman, who were involved in work activities offering opportunities for autonomy, creativity, and skill development, prominently associated flow with their job, thus supporting the extension pattern of work-leisure relationship. On the opposite, cashiers and blue-collar workers, employed in repetitive and low-challenge tasks, showed the prominence of the separation pattern: They mostly reported flow in leisure activities which were completely unrelated to their jobs.

A clear evidence of the extension pattern was detected in a study on optimal experience conducted among physicians and teachers, two categories of workers involved in highly challenging jobs, both at the technical and relational levels, and characterized by a great social relevance (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003a). Eighty percent of the physicians and all the teachers reported optimal experiences in their lives. Among physicians, work ranked first, followed by sports, hobbies, and the use of media (which prominently comprised reading and listening to music).

The activity most frequent quoted by teachers was reading, followed by hobbies (painting, drawing, creative writing, playing music), teaching, practicing sports, listening to music, and studying. Teachers' findings suggest that knowledge acquisition and exchange was an integral part of these participants' psychological selection, a means for pursuing personal development and growth in complexity at the psychological level. Besides work, they reported to preferentially devote their attention to activities allowing them to cultivate intellectual sources of enjoyment and provide them with the opportunity to transmit interest in knowledge to their pupils. Concerning selected optimal activities, leisure (including both structured and relaxed activities) was reported by 29.2% of the physicians and 21.3% of the teachers, with sport and hobbies accounting for 71 and 76% of the answers respectively. The use of media was reported by 14.6% of the physicians and 36.3% of the teachers. It mostly referred to reading books (86 and 83% of the answers respectively).

The psychological features of optimal experience were substantially overlapping in the work and leisure domains. Only one significant variation was detected in each sample. Physicians associated work with significantly lower values of relaxation than leisure, while teachers perceived significantly higher challenges in work than in leisure ($t = 2.8$, $p < .01$).

Engagement and Skill Development Among Sport Amateurs

As previously outlined, optimal experience has been widely investigated in both sport professionals and amateurs. Susan Jackson and her colleagues provided extensive evidence of the positive role of flow in promoting performance and skill development among professionals (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Jackson & Kimiecik, 2008; Jackson, Thomas, Marsh, & Smethurst, 2001). In the last two decades, several researchers have devoted their attention to the investigation of optimal experience among amateurs engaged in a wide range of sport activities (an overview of these studies is provided in Delle Fave et al., 2010).

In this section we will briefly refer to data gathered among amateur climbers in a peculiar condition, namely, an expedition on the Himalaya. Climbers' experience was thoroughly investigated in Csikszentmihalyi's early work (1975) through semi-structured interviews, and findings proved relevant in describing flow characteristics. In our study, six climbers repeatedly filled out ESM forms throughout the expedition, thus providing online self-reports of their experience fluctuations (Bassi & Delle Fave, 2010; Delle Fave et al., 2003a). In line with Csikszentmihalyi's findings, flow was the experience recurring most frequently during the expedition and, above all, during camp and climbing activities. The expedition presented structural characteristics that allowed for flow onset, in that high-altitude activities depend on the skills of the climber, and most of them offer challenges that are functional to practical outcomes, ultimately including personal survival (Ewert, 1994).

The climbers described the activities associated with optimal experience as highly engaging and simultaneously perceived competence in the task at hand.

Climbers chose to take part in the expedition mainly because they wanted to. In spite of the objective physical danger and of a severe weather emergency which occurred during the climbing period, participants joined the project till the end. This persistence was not related to any external material reward; rather, climbers received unique rewards intrinsic to the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Moreover, although bad weather conditions substantially undermined the expedition outcome and represented a risk for survival, the occurrence of experiences of anxiety among climbers was extremely low. In line with numerous studies (Benzi & Tamorri, 1988; Robinson, 1985), anxiety control was functional to survival in risky sports: If climbers are not able to master anxiety, they can lose control of the situation, fall into a crevice, or be unable to fully exploit their physical potential. Moreover, according to the dynamic development process intrinsic to optimal experience, the more the climbers faced expedition challenges, the more they sharpened their skills and subsequently looked for more complex challenges (Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000). Participants actually seemed to be susceptible to variations in challenges differently from other samples, for example, students (Delle Fave et al., 2003a). They described a globally negative experience in low-challenge conditions and a globally engaging and positive experience in situations characterized by the imbalance between high challenges and low personal skills. These findings were consistent with studies on climbers' personality, showing their boredom susceptibility and sensation seeking (Aşçi, Demirhan, & Dinç, 2007; Breivik, 1996; Egan & Stelmack, 2003).

These results highlight the pivotal role of challenge perception in promoting optimal experience in sports and – more broadly – in structured leisure. At the same time, they highlight the importance of training amateurs to match their skills with appropriate activity settings and adequate opportunities for action, avoiding unnecessary exposure to risk. Considering the growing abuse of physical exercise and its negative health outcomes, especially evident among inadequately trained people having a sedentary lifestyle, these aspects become of paramount importance for the promotion of well-being through leisure.

Complexity of Leisure and Adolescents' Development

Leisure activities represent an important part of Western adolescents' daily life. Despite school commitment, an increasing amount of free time has become available to the youth in the postindustrial world. Enjoying increasing freedom from adult controls, adolescents can discover the pleasure of self-regulated social experiences instead of facing the pressure of being socialized (Olivier, 2000). However, youth often misuse their free time in unstructured activities, providing not only short-term pleasure but also lack of meaning and disengagement (Larson, 2000; Verma & Larson, 2003).

Several studies have highlighted the paramount relevance of family, as the primary socialization environment, in promoting teenagers' skill development and engagement in serious leisure (Rathunde, 2001; Steca, Bassi, Caprara, & Delle Fave, 2011). In particular, the impact of family models on opportunities for flow in leisure during adolescence clearly emerged in a study comparing girls living in institutions because of severe family problems with girls living in intact families (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2000).

The administration of Flow Questionnaire to these adolescents highlighted some basic differences between the two groups regarding the complexity of the activities associated with optimal experience. Sports and hobbies were the most frequent category reported by the girls living at home (30% of the answers), followed by studying (18.6%), reading and interacting with peers (both with 15.7% of the answers), and listening to music (12.9%). The institutionalized adolescents reported socialization and peer interaction as the main sources of optimal experience (38.4% of the answers), followed by watching TV and listening to music (23.1%), and by sports and hobbies (12.8%).

The prominence of interactions with peers as occasions for optimal experience reported by girls living in institutions is a quite uncommon result in the studies on this topic. Cross-cultural research showed the two-sided effect of peer interactions on adolescents' quality of experience (Verma & Larson, 2003). Spending free time with peers provides fun, positive affect, and pleasure; it fosters the development of social competences, but it is often associated with low mobilization of personal skills. Our findings highlighted the relevance these relationships take on for adolescents deprived of stable family interactions. Peers played the role of advisors and models in the development of institutionalized girls, providing them with behavioral instructions, values, goals, and a meaning-making system not necessarily suited to the challenges and features of the adult life.

Moreover, besides socializing, the leisure activities quoted by the girls living in institution were characterized by a short-term relevance and a low level of complexity. These activities neither fostered the cultivation of specific skills nor the participants' integration in the cultural environment. They rather provided the adolescents with a way to escape a low-challenge and problematic context. For example, some of the institutionalized girls associated TV with optimal experience, while no girl living at home did. Several other studies (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Massimini, Delle Fave, & Borri Gaspardin, 1992) showed that watching TV is mainly associated with passiveness, disengagement, and low levels of affect and involvement. This result is therefore a marker of the low level and amount of challenges girls in institutions were exposed to in their daily environment. On the contrary, girls living at home associated optimal experience with both intellectually and physically creative and demanding activities. Sports, arts, learning, and reading share the common feature of a complex structure. Individuals can always find new and increasingly challenging opportunities for action in performing them, and they can subsequently improve related skills. This dynamic process toward complexity is a source of intrinsic reward by itself (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005a). At the same time, the involvement in these tasks ensures lifelong advantages in terms of individual development and social and professional integration.

Optimal Experience, Leisure, and Psychological Selection

Despite its potential in fostering development and a good quality of life, optimal experience shows an amoral character (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). It does not automatically bring about well-being and development; rather, its outcomes vary according to the features of the associated activities and their role within the value system of the individuals and of their social environment (Delle Fave, 2009).

As previously stated, optimal experience is a core component of the long-term process of psychological selection. However, the replication of flow activities alone does not guarantee positive consequences for the individual or society. More specifically, research has shown that people can associate flow with free time behaviors that can have a damaging impact on the self or others, such as gambling (Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, & Vitaro, 2006), drug abuse (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003b), stealing (Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003b), graffiti spraying (Rheinberg & Manig, 2003), addiction to Internet games (Chou & Ting, 2003), computer hacking (Voiskounsky & Smyslova, 2003), and pathological online shopping (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008). Therefore, other components have to be taken into account within psychological selection, such as meaning making (Singer, 2004) and the pursuit of self-actualization through activities that are not necessarily rewarding in the short term.

The interpretation of reality through the attribution of meanings to environmental and personal situations is a peculiar feature of human beings and communities (Emmons, 2005; Jablonka & Lamb, 2005). Within the framework of psychological selection, and taking into account the dimension of meaning, optimal experience can be considered both an antecedent and an outcome. Due to the psychological rewards provided by this condition, the associated activities will be preferentially replicated and cultivated in the long term, thus affecting both the developmental trajectory of the individuals – their psychological selection pattern – and their level of social integration and participation. On the other hand, through the dynamic features of the meaning-making process and the ceaseless interaction with the environment, activities previously ignored by the individual can become opportunities for optimal experience, sources of new meanings, or both (Delle Fave, 2009), and the amoral aspect of flow can be counterbalanced by individual and social resources that can intervene in steering behavior toward more constructive opportunities for action.

The long-term impact of leisure activities on psychological selection can be explored through the joint analysis of findings derived from Flow Questionnaire and Life Theme Questionnaire. More specifically, it is possible to detect whether a specific life domain or activity category (e.g., leisure) is recurrent within each participant's answers as an opportunity for flow in the Flow Questionnaire, and – at the same time – as a present challenge and a future goal in the Life Theme Questionnaire. We have labeled this recurrence as *congruence* of a domain with the process of psychological selection. This topic was investigated in the findings provided by the

Table 6.5 Percentage of adult and adolescent participants from different cultures identifying the same activity category as a flow-related activity, a present challenge, as well as a future goal in their answers to the Flow Questionnaire and the Life Theme Questionnaire

	Recurrence as flow activity/challenge/goal	
Activity categories	Adults	Adolescents
Productive activities	10.5	32.6
Relations	2.0	1.6
Leisure	–	–

international adult and adolescent samples described in the previous pages (Delle Fave et al., 2010). As shown in Table 6.5, congruence was detected for a limited percentage of participants in both the adult and adolescent groups as regards productive activities and relations, while none of the participants' congruence was found in relation to the domain of leisure.

Consistent with these results were the findings derived from a different international research project, the Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness Investigation (EHHI; Delle Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick, & Wissing, 2010). This project aimed at investigating perceived happiness and meaningfulness in different life domains among adult participants from seven different Western countries. Thanks to the mixed method approach used in the study, it was possible to evaluate the role participants attributed to the major life domains through both spontaneous answers to open-ended questions and through rating scales. Leisure ranked last in frequency of answers among the ten life domains quoted by participants when asked to define happiness in their own words, and it ranked eighth in answer frequency among the 11 domains participants freely quoted as the most meaningful ones in their lives. Similar findings were obtained in the ratings on 7-point scales participants provided of their perceived levels of happiness and meaningfulness in the main life domains. In particular, leisure ranked sixth in average values of happiness and meaningfulness out of the ten life domains evaluated through the scales.

Both the findings on congruence, derived from the Flow Questionnaire and the Life Theme Questionnaire, and the evidence obtained through the EHHI point to a specific feature of leisure, from the perspective of psychological selection. Compared with other life domains, leisure shows a higher potential for providing positive and gratifying experiences in the short term, but at the same time, it is not perceived as a relevant source of meaning and long-term investment. This feature was detected across cultures, age groups, and genders, and it held true of both structured and unstructured leisure.

Based on these findings, we could be tempted to conclude that people generally perceive leisure as meaningless fun and that they merely practice it to pursue short-term well-being and to enjoyably occupy the free time left by daily duties and commitments. Nevertheless, a huge bulk of literature can easily disconfirm this statement, in particular referring to structured activities promoting the development of competences and complexity at the psychological and behavioral levels. Nevertheless, the empirical

evidence of a disconnection between leisure and long-term goals and meanings requires attention from the theoretical, social, and interventional perspectives, and it calls for an effort to redefine leisure and its psychological and developmental roles.

Broadening Perspectives

In the light of the findings presented in this chapter, and in line with other studies (Kleiber, 2004), at the theoretical level it could be useful to define leisure more broadly in order to identify true growth opportunities in it. Meaningful activities such as good acts (e.g., volunteering, community service, socially useful activities) or good habits (e.g., regular exercise, various kinds of physical and mental trainings) can be considered leisure activities regardless of their short-term gratification (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005b; Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008). There are several meaningful pathways conducive to enjoyment in leisure and at the same time to personal growth in competences and behavior complexity (Delle Fave, 2009; Smith, Christopher, Delle Fave, & Bhawuk, 2002).

From a cultural perspective, the findings discussed in the previous pages highlighted the prominence of leisure as optimal activity among Western participants, compared with the prominence of introspection and free thinking among non-Westerners. This raises a crucial issue. Western societies presently emphasize performance more than experience, quantification of time and activities more than their quality. This is true of all life domains, including leisure. However, looking back at the Western history, the Latin term *otium*, rooted in the Aristotelian idea of *scholé*, was originally meant as an opportunity for self-cultivation and innovation (André, 1966). Ancient Greek and Roman societies considered daily duties and occupations as negatively juxtaposed to this optimal condition, labeling them as *ascholia* and *negotium*, respectively. Both Cicero and Seneca stressed the importance of finding a balance between contemplation and action in daily life. This approach was gradually replaced by a negative conceptualization of otium as idling, sloth, and meaningless inaction. Nevertheless, even though investing free time in structured activities helps avoid the consequences of apathy and time misuse, individuals should also actively discover the developmental resources of unstructured activities, such as reflecting, merging with the environment, observing reality and oneself, developing awareness of the present moment, and engaging in free, creative thoughts.

The lack of this training is evident in most studies conducted with ESM to explore the quality of daily experience. When finding themselves in an unstructured situation, individuals of any age most often report being uncomfortable and unable to tolerate such a condition of emptiness. The prominent strategy to escape this discomfort is to search for passive attention fillers, such as TV and online games (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005a). An alternative and developmentally relevant strategy, however, is represented by the appreciation and exploration of the potential for creativity and autonomy characterizing unstructured activities, as opportunities for

discovering new resources and self-determined motives, and for finding new meanings.

In particular, this aspect should be taken into account in the design of intervention programs in postindustrial countries, especially concerning children's and adolescents' education to manage free time. When lacking the support of material or virtual artifacts, Western youth are increasingly unable to structure their attention and to autonomously identify and generate opportunities for engagement and development. This psychological dependence on artifacts and externally structured environments is one of the heaviest tributes we are paying to material affluence and modernization.

References

Abuhamdeh, S., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations in the competitive context: An examination of person–situation interactions. *Journal of Personality, 77*, 1615–1635.

André, J. M. (1966). *L'otium dans la vie moral et intellectuelle romaine (des origines à l'époque augustéenne)* [Otium in the moral and intellectual life of Romans (from the origins to the Augustian age)]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Aşçi, F. H., Demirhan, G., & Dinç, S. (2007). Psychological profile of Turkish rock climbers: An examination of climbing experience and route difficulty. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 104*, 892–900.

Bassi, M., & Delle Fave, A. (2010). Impact of extreme weather conditions on high-altitude climbers' goals and quality of experience. *Journal of Leisure Research, 3*, 469–488.

Benzi, M., & Tamorri, S. (1988). Indagine psicologica su un gruppo di arrampicatori sportivi [Psychological investigation of a group of sport climbers]. *Movimento, 4*, 15–17.

Breivik, G. (1996). Personality, sensation seeking and risk taking among Everest climbers. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 27*, 308–320.

Bridges, E., & Florsheim, R. (2008). Hedonic and utilitarian shopping goals: The online experience. *Journal of Business Research, 61*, 309–314.

Calbabiano, M. L. (1994). Measuring the similarity among leisure activities based on a perceived stress-reduction benefit. *Leisure Studies, 13*, 17–31.

Chou, T., & Ting, C. (2003). The role of flow experience in cyber-game addiction. *Cyber Psychology, 6*, 663–675.

Chung, S., & Lee, Y. (2010). The role of stress in the experience of post-traumatic growth for people with spinal cord injury. *Journal of Leisure Research, 42*, 393–415.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow. The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). Activity, experience and personal growth. In J. Curtis & S. Russell (Eds.), *Physical activity in human experience: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 59–88). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, I. (Eds.). (1988). *Optimal experience. Psychological studies of flow in consciousness*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., Larson, R. W., & Prescott, S. (1977). The ecology of adolescent activity and experience. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 6*, 281–294.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Massimini, F. (1985). On the psychological selection of bio-cultural information. *New Ideas in Psychology, 3*, 115–138.

Delle Fave, A. (2007). Individual development and community empowerment: Suggestions from studies on optimal experience. In J. Haworth & G. Hart (Eds.), *Well-being. Individual, community, and social perspectives* (pp. 41–56). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Delle Fave, A. (2009). Optimal experience and meaning: which relationship? *Psychological Topics, 18*, 285–302.

Delle Fave, A., & Bassi, M. (2003). Italian adolescents and leisure: The role of engagement and optimal experience. In S. Verma & R. W. Larson (Eds.), *Examining adolescent leisure time across cultures: Developmental opportunities and risks. New directions in child and adolescent development* (pp. 79–93). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Delle Fave, A., Bassi, M., & Massimini, F. (2003a). Quality of experience and risk perception in high-altitude rock climbing. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 15*, 82–99.

Delle Fave, A., Bassi, M., & Massimini, F. (2003b). Coping with boundaries: The quality of daily experience of Rom nomads in Europe. *Psychology and Developing Societies, 15*, 87–102.

Delle Fave, A., Brdar, I., Freire, T., Vella-Brodrick, D. A., & Wissing, M. P. (2010). The investigation of eudaimonic happiness: Qualitative and quantitative findings. *Social Indicators Research*. doi:10.1007/s11205-010-9632-5.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (1991). Modernization and the quality of daily experience in a Southern Italy village. In N. Bleichrodt & P. J. D. Drenth (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 110–119). Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger B.V.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2000). Living at home or in institution: Adolescents' optimal experience and life theme. *Paideia. Cadernos de Psicologia e Educaçao, 19*, 55–66.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2003a). Optimal experience in work and leisure among teachers and physicians: Individual and bio-cultural implications. *Leisure Studies, 22*, 323–342.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2003b). Drug addiction: The paradox of mimetic optimal experience. In J. Henry (Ed.), *European positive psychology proceedings* (pp. 31–38). Leicester, UK: British Psychological Society.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2004a). The cross-cultural investigation of optimal experience. *Ricerche di Psicologia, 1*, 79–101.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2004b). Bringing subjectivity into focus: Optimal experiences, life themes and person-centered rehabilitation. In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 581–597). London: Wiley.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2004c). Parenthood and the quality of experience in daily life: A longitudinal study. *Social Indicators Research, 67*, 75–106.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2005a). The investigation of optimal experience and apathy: Developmental and psychosocial implications. *European Psychologist, 10*, 264–274.

Delle Fave, A., & Massimini, F. (2005b). The relevance of subjective wellbeing to social policies: Optimal experience and tailored intervention. In F. Huppert, B. Keverne, & N. Baylis (Eds.), *The science of wellbeing* (pp. 379–404). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Delle Fave, A., Massimini, F., & Bassi, M. (2011). *Psychological selection and optimal experience across cultures: Social empowerment through personal growth*. Dordrecht, NL: Springer.

Dilley, R. E., & Scraton, S. J. (2010). Women, climbing and serious leisure. *Leisure Studies, 29*, 125–141.

Egan, S., & Stelmack, R. (2003). A personality profile of Mount Everest climbers. *Personality and Individual Differences, 34*, 1491–1494.

Emmons, R. A. (2005). Striving for the sacred: Personal goals, life meaning, and religion. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*, 731–745.

Ewert, A. W. (1994). Playing the edge: Motivation and risk taking in a high-altitude wilderness like environment. *Environment and Behavior, 26*, 3–24.

Hektner, J. M., Schmidt, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2007). *Experience sampling method. Measuring the quality of everyday life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Iso-Ahola, S., & Park, C. (1996). Leisure-related social support and self-determination as buffers of stress-illness relationship. *Journal of Leisure Research, 28*, 169–187.

Iwasaki, Y., Mactavish, J., & Mackay, K. (2005). Building on strengths and resilience: Leisure as a stress survival strategy. *British Journal of Guidance & Counseling, 33*, 82–100.

Iwasaki, Y., & Mannell, R. (2000). Hierarchical dimensions of leisure stress coping. *Leisure Sciences, 22*, 163–181.

Jablonka, E., & Lamb, M. J. (2005). *Evolution in four dimensions. Genetic, epigenetic, behavioural and symbolic variations in the history of life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jackson, S. A., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). *Flow in sports: The keys to optimal experiences and performances*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Jackson, S. A., & Kimiecik, J. C. (2008). The flow perspective of optimal experience in sport and physical activity. In T. H. Horn (Ed.), *Advances in sport psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 377–399). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Jackson, S. A., & Marsh, H. W. (1996). Development and validation of a scale to measure optimal experience: The flow state scale. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 18*, 17–35.

Jackson, S. A., Thomas, P. R., Marsh, H. W., & Smethurst, C. J. (2001). Relationships between flow, self-concept, psychological skills, and performance. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 13*, 129–153.

Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1996). Further examining the American dream: Differential correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22*, 280–287.

Kleiber, D. (2004). *Negative events in the life cycle: Recreation and leisure as a counteraction*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Baptist University of Press.

Kleiber, D., Larson, R. W., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1986). The experience of leisure in adolescence. *Journal of Leisure Research, 18*, 169–176.

Kubey, R., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Television and the quality of life: How viewing shapes everyday experience*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Larson, R. W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist, 55*, 170–183.

Larson, R. W., & Delespaul, P. A. E. G. (1992). Analyzing experience sampling data: A guidebook for the perplexed. In M. de Vries (Ed.), *The experience of psychopathology – Investigating mental disorders in their natural settings* (pp. 58–78). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Larson, R. W., & Kleiber, D. (1993). Daily experience of adolescents. In P. Tolan & B. Cohler (Eds.), *Handbook of clinical research and practice with adolescents* (pp. 125–145). New York: Wiley.

Leiter, M., & Durup, M. (1996). Work, home, and in-between: A longitudinal study of spillover. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 32*, 29–47.

Massimini, F., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Carli, M. (1987). Optimal experience: A tool for psychiatric rehabilitation. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 175*, 545–549.

Massimini, F., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Delle Fave, A. (1988). Flow and biocultural evolution. In M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. Csikszentmihalyi (Eds.), *Optimal experience. Psychological studies of flow in consciousness* (pp. 60–81). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Massimini, F., & Delle Fave, A. (2000). Individual development in a bio-cultural perspective. *American Psychologist, 55*, 24–33.

Massimini, F., Delle Fave, A., & Borri Gaspardin, M. (1992). Televisione e qualità dell'esperienza soggettiva: l'integrazione tra dati qualitativi e qualitativi [Television and quality of subjective experience: integrating qualitative and quantitative data]. *Ikon, 24*, 5–29.

Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009). Flow theory and research. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 195–206). New York: Oxford University Press.

Olivier, G. (2000). Le ludique dans la formation sociale de l'homme: Une théorie critique du loisir [Playfulness in the social formation of man: A critical theory of Leisure]. *Loisir et société, 23*, 21–39.

Parker, S. (1997). Work and leisure futures: Trends and scenarios. In J. Haworth (Ed.), *Work, leisure, and well-being* (pp. 180–191). London: Routledge.

Patterson, I., & Coleman, D. (1996). The impact of stress on different leisure dimensions. *Journal of Applied Recreation Research, 21*, 243–263.

Peterson, C., Park, N., & Sweeney, P. J. (2008). Group well-being: Morale from a positive psychology perspective. *Applied Psychology, 57*, 19–36.

Rathunde, K. (2001). Family context and the development of undivided interest: A longitudinal study of family support and challenge and adolescents' quality of experience. *Applied Developmental Science, 5*, 158–171.

Rheinberg, F., & Manig, Y. (2003). Was macht Spaß am Graffiti-Sprayen? Eine induktive Anreizanalyse [What's entertaining about graffiti spraying? An inductive analysis on incentives]. *Report Psychologie, 28*, 222–234.

Robinson, D. W. (1985). Stress seeking: Selected behavioral characteristics of elite rock climbers. *Journal of Sport Psychology, 7*, 400–404.

Rojek, C. (1995). *Decentering leisure*. London: Sage.

Singer, J. A. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult life span: An introduction. *Journal of Personality, 72*, 438–459.

Smith, K. D., Christopher, J. C., Delle Fave, A., & Bhawuk, D. P. S. (2002). Post-Newtonian metatheories in the natural sciences and in cross-cultural psychology. In P. Boski, F. J. R. van de Vijver, & A. M. Chodynicka (Eds.), *New directions in cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 107–125). Warsaw, Poland: Wydawnictwo Intytutu Psychologii PAN.

Staines, G. (1980). Spillover versus compensation: A review of the literature on the relationship between work and nonwork. *Human Relations, 33*, 111–129.

Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *New directions in the theory and research of serious leisure*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen.

Stebbins, R. A. (2007). *Serious leisure: A perspective for our time*. London: Transaction Publishers.

Steca, P., Bassi, M., Caprara, G. V., & Delle Fave, A. (2011). Parents' self-efficacy beliefs and their children's psychosocial adaptation during adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 40*, 320–331.

Verma, S., & Larson, R. W. (Eds.). (2003). *Examining adolescent leisure time across cultures: Developmental opportunities and risks. New directions in child and adolescent development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Voiskounsky, A. E., & Smyslova, O. V. (2003). Flow-based model of computer hackers' motivation. *Cyber Psychology, 6*, 171–180.

Wanner, B., Ladouceur, R., Auclair, A. V., & Vitaro, F. (2006). Flow and dissociation: Examination of mean levels, cross-links, and links to emotional well-being across sports and recreational and pathological gambling. *Journal of Gambling Studies, 22*, 289–304.