

Not leisure needs, but human needs: The central role of emotions in leisure and sports experiences

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Abstract

This paper argues that at the heart of any satisfying leisure, tourism or sporting experience is the need for an emotional response to be provoked. Contrasting examples of people responses to visiting the death camp of Auschwitz, Disneyland Paris and a variety of sporting occasions are used for examining the subject of *optimal leisure experiences*. The wide and varied emotional experiences which these places or events aroused, are identified, compared and evaluated in relation to how they equate to personal satisfaction.

It must be stressed that using the site of Auschwitz is not done so in a reductive manner, where the site or experience is seen as the same as a theme park, or sporting occasion: to this would be to trivialise the act of genocide. Instead, it is used to illustrate how the strong emotions provoked in visitors, which ranged from anger, sadness and even despair, provided for a personally valued and satisfying heuristic experience.

This paper is based upon a mixture of primary and qualitative data, that has been gathered by the author over a number of years. The theme park visit involved an innovative form of data collection, with the use of heart rate monitors to record physiological changes, which were then compared with the psychological articulation of the type and strength of the emotions experienced.

This paper utilises a range of theories to examine the importance of emotional movement in a meeting human needs. In particular, Scitovsky's (1986) stimulation theory and Csikszentimihalyi (1992) *flow and optimal experience*, are examined the links between physical experiences and the cognitive interpretation of the events or situation. This is then examined as to how it relates to satisfaction and happiness.

The key conclusions are that a critical corollary of any satisfying leisure or sporting experience is the degree of emotional movement, or arousal experienced. By examining the human need for stimulation and emotional movement, it helps begin to explain the blurring of work and leisure in the developed world, together with the growth in what has been described as the *experiential economy* (Mintel, 2002).

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