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How to analyse the experience of serious leisure onstage: actors and spectators

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ABSTRACT

The practice of serious leisure engenders a deep sense of self-fulfilment, observable in artistic activities in general – and in theatre in particular. In relation to theatre, the serious leisure perspective suggests that this activity has an influence on the self, whether the individual is playing the role of actor or active spectator, but few studies have analysed the impact. Given the scarcity of empirical evidence and methodological references, in this paper we propose a qualitative methodological procedure to analyse the relations between theatre as serious leisure and the self. This procedure, besides showing the influence of theatre as serious leisure on actors and spectators, permits the assessment of intervention programmes.

RESUMEN

La práctica del ocio serio posibilita un profundo sentido de auto-realización, observable en las actividades artísticas en general, y en el teatro en particular. En relación con el teatro, la Perspectiva del Ocio Serio (SLP, por sus siglas en inglés) sugiere que esta actividad tiene una influencia en el sí mismo, tanto si el individuo pone en práctica el rol de actor o de espectador activo, pero pocos estudios han analizado el impacto. Dada la escasez de evidencias empíricas y referencias metodológicas, en este artículo se propone un procedimiento metodológico cualitativo para analizar las relaciones entre el teatro como ocio serio y el sí mismo. Este procedimiento, además de mostrar la influencia del teatro como ocio serio en actores y espectadores, permite la evaluación de programas de intervención.

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Perspectiva del Ocio Serio; Desarrollo del sí mismo; Teatro; Twenty-Statement Test; Técnica del Presupuesto de tiempo

Introduction

For anything so o'er done is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to the nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (W. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Act III, Scene 2)

The theoretical framework provided by the serious leisure perspective (hereinafter SLP) explains the central role that leisure activities can acquire in the lives of the people who practice them, to the extent that “[w]hen people take activities seriously, they may get

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so involved as to not only experience flow in the short term but through further special-
 AQ1 ization turn it into an identity-defining preoccupation” (Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011,
 p. 127). In effect, the SLP contemplates the impact of theatre on personal development – of
 the self in particular (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, 2013; Pestana & Codina, 2015a).
 However, there is still a lack of rigorous psychosocial studies of theatre as a leisure activity
 and, in this sense, two issues demand attention if scientific knowledge about the potential
 of theatre is to be advanced.

First, it is important to note that involvement in theatrical activity and its association
 with identity is especially interesting from the standpoint of its twofold symbolic back-
 ground (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994): on the one hand, as a representation of a
 world that is exhibited to the public; and on the other hand, on account of the spectators’
 identification with the performers. Thus, the analysis of the theatrical phenomenon pre-
 sents two scenarios: what the actors show of themselves, and the content those who watch
 them identify with.

Second, a set of instruments that empirically analyses the relationships between those
 involved in the theatre and the construction of their identities is essential – a set of instru-
 ments that is still unavailable.

In view of the above, this paper attempts to analyse the relationship between the self
 and theatre as serious leisure as well as proposing a qualitative methodological procedure
 for this purpose.

Theatre as a contributor to the social sciences: from Metaphor to Praxis

The actor as an object of study of the social sciences has appeared in themes ranging from
 the influence theatrical performance exerts on the basic psychological processes of the
 individual (e.g. perception, attention and memory: Jacobson, 1934; Noice & Noice,
 2006) to the shaping and transforming role that the theatrical phenomenon plays in
 certain societies and cultures (Duvignaud, 1965/1966; Turner, 1982). In fact, it was Aris-
 totle who affirmed that attending tragedies that laid bare feelings such as pity and fear pro-
 pitiated the proper purgation of these emotions – that is, their catharsis. This overlap
 between theatre and society in ancient Greece reached such a point that deities were intro-
 duced to represent the events we now call theatre (Grimal, 1996): the god Dionysus and
 the muses Melpomene (Tragedy) and Thalia (Comedy). However, this divine vision did
 not prevent theatre from having close ties with human beings’ everyday lives, for, as Finn-
 bogadóttir (1999) has pointed out, “theater is exactly the same size as life, neither larger
 nor smaller. Its subjects and its concerns may take on larger dimensions, but the form
 itself is life-size and that is how we receive it”.

In the field of the social sciences, Goffman (1959) is the best-known advocating theatre
 as a heuristic for social interaction (understood as the representation and exchange of
 roles). The fact that Goffman attended theatre workshops (taught by R. Schechner) and
 that his sister was a professional actress played a role in the development of this proposal
 AQ2 (Sebastián de Erice, 1994). Goffman considers behaviour in society as encounters between
 individuals with pre-established patterns of action (part), which become specific activities
 (performance). The self-image is shaped as a result of this process of patterned interaction:
 “some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character
 effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him ... and the characteristic

issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited” (Goffman, 1959, pp. 252–253). In the wake of this Goffman’s work the relationship between social life and theatre has been more deeply examined; thus, Brisset and Edgley (1990, p. 31) argue that “[l]ife is neither theater nor is it different from theatre. It is theatre-like. Dramaturgy is a description of the behaviour of human beings who use theatrical (expressive) means to build a world”.

In the field of leisure studies, with an eye on the audience, the pioneering research carried out by Dumazedier (1967) and Weber (1963) reflected the importance of active spectators, *that is*, a critical audience whose attendance at a show was a formative activity. This perception squared with the changes experienced by the theatre audiences of the time, who from being passive consumers of shows became their co-creators (Aslan, 1974; Berthold, 1972). One early example is the emergence in 1959 of the so-called happening, a theatrical event in which the audience could either follow or become involved in the performer’s actions (De Marinis, 1988). As far as the actors are concerned, Burden (2000a, 2000b) has pointed out the importance of the leisure experience based on community theatre, where the shows derive from the performers’ life experiences. In these cases, Burden (2000b) observed changes in the actors and actresses’ perception of self and also the perception of the public attending the shows; these changes are explained by the representation of familiar situations and conflicts, either because of the closeness of the performers or the subject matter involved (there are other similar approaches in Stein, 1996; Yuen, Mueller, Mayor, & Azuero, 2011).

As can be seen, leisure research has been sensitive to the cultural and social influences exerted by theatre both on those who witness the activity and on those who perform it. The two roles have in common the transformations that may be entailed by involvement in the activity, which make theatre a serious leisure activity.

Theatre seen from the SLP: research and challenges

Theatre as an activity has been taken into account by the SLP since its initial formulations (Stebbins, 1990, 1992, 1998), and more recently it has been considered an example of augmentative play (i.e. a combination of challenging circumstances, inventive solutions and continued activities: Stebbins, 2015).

Serious leisure is

the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling, and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience. (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3)

This willingness, attitude or intention expressed by the person in relation to certain leisure activities is distinguished by six characteristics: 1. the need to persevere; 2. the tendency to develop a career in the activity; 3. the significant personal effort made to acquire knowledge, training and/or skills; 4. the acquisition of lasting benefits; 5. the distinction of the individual according to a certain set of beliefs, norms, events, values, traditions, moral principles and standard behaviours; and 6. strong identification by the participants with what they do. With regard to these characteristics, Stebbins (1992, p. 7) has specified “self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, recreation or renewal of self, feelings

of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity” as durable benefits.

The presence of these durable benefits of theatrical performance as a serious leisure activity has been clearly demonstrated (Bendle & Patterson, 2009; Stebbins, 1979a, 1979b, 1990, 2015), which implies that, in the long term, theatre can provide a source of personal and social identity. As far as active spectators are concerned, recent years have seen the consolidation of types of participation that contribute to the transformation of the public, to such a point that sometimes the division between actors and spectators becomes fuzzy (Pestana & Codina, 2015b). For example, taking the role of the “oppressed” in the performances at the Forum Theatre (Boal, 1995), attending sessions where the preparation of a play is deconstructed or explained (Savarese, 2002), and participating interactively with the actors and the stage setting, are some of the ways in which the active spectator has experienced theatre as serious leisure.

This way of experiencing the theatre does not ignore other possibilities contemplated also by the SLP, such as casual leisure and Project-based leisure. Casual leisure is immediately intrinsically rewarding and fundamentally hedonic; and it is a relatively short-lived, pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it (Stebbins, 1997). Casual leisure is less substantial, and offers in the career of the kind just described for serious leisure; in the case of theatre, an example of casual leisure would be the participation in this activity in a passive way, that is, collaborating punctually with a show or attending sporadically as a public. In the case of project-based leisure (Stebbins, 2005), it is a short term, moderately complicated, either one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time, which is not intended to be serious – in the sense mentioned earlier. An example of theatre as project-based leisure would be the organization and/or occasional participation in a performance for a celebration. Without disregarding the importance of casual leisure and project-based leisure, our interest lies in the type of serious leisure whose influence is greater for the individual (for a detailed presentation of the entire SLP, see Stebbins, 2007).

All told, the studies dealing with theatre as a serious leisure activity for actors and active spectators are interesting but lack huge empirical evidence, a scenario that prompts the need for a methodological procedure to analyse the relationship between theatre as serious leisure and the self.

An empirical approach to the relationship between serious leisure and the self

On recognizing the complexity of the relationships between the self and the theatre as serious leisure, and on account of the empirical requirements, the need for a research methodology that accurately records the information provided by the participants becomes clear, which analyses – with the researcher making minimal inferences – the relations between the practice of theatrical activities and self. In this respect, we propose a methodology for collecting and analysing the information systematically – apparently disparate and disorganized – that participants supply in unstructured tests (Codina, 2004).

In order to investigate theatre as a serious leisure experience, we propose the joint application of two tests of open questions (earlier versions of this approach in Pestana, 2007;

Pestana & Codina, 2009). One is an ad hoc version of the Twenty-Statements Test (TST, based on the original work of Kuhn & McPartland, 1954/1967) and the other, a version – also ad hoc – of the time budget technique (TBT, in line with Neulinger’s adaptation, 1986). The sensitivity and flexibility provided by the TST for freely registering participants’ self-descriptions has permitted the study of the characteristics of self in people from diverse cultures (Watkins, Yau, Dahlin, & Wondimu, 1997). As for the TBT, Neulinger’s proposal (Watkins et al., 1997) involves the participants recording and evaluating each of their daily activities (e.g. perceptions of freedom and satisfaction), an approach that remains valid for time-use research (e.g. Gershuny, 2011; Harvey & Pentland, 1999). By applying these two open-ended questionnaires – and asking explicitly about theatre – information is obtained, on the one hand, about the dynamics of the self in the context of an expressive activity and, on the other hand, about perceptions of freedom, exploration and commitment related to the theatrical activities.

The proposed methodology for both tests lays the emphasis on the sequencing of information collection and analysis by the participants themselves of the data they have recorded, so that the researcher hardly makes any practical inferences about the participant’s answers. The procedure is as follows, distinguishing as appropriate between actors and active spectators.

Record, through the TST, 20 answers to the question “Who am I?” and then ask the participants to assess their own self-designations. The assessment criteria depend on the objectives of the research on theatre as a serious leisure. By way of an example, participants can assess the degree importance or satisfaction expressed in each one of their statements taking the self as a whole, the degree to which they would like to change or improve them in the future, and to what extent they believe such changes or improvements can be achieved through theatrical activities.

Design theatre activities that favour knowledge of the self in relation to the serious leisure experience. The activities programmed for sessions of theatrical activities must favour knowledge of self, in conditions that facilitate the participant’s freedom of choice and exploration, and also their commitment to the serious leisure activity. At this point it is important to distinguish, in the case of the actors, between freer exercises geared to the actors’ work on themselves and the work done on the construction of the characters, more tightly adjusted to the requirements of the performance (Stanislavski, 1936, c.1938/1949), because it is essential to work with the actors on the development of self-awareness (Boal, 2002; Brook, 1968; Strasberg & Hethmon, 1968). In the case of the active spectators – and in the light of the examples cited above – the impact on the self of activities involving new forms of theatre audience participation could be assessed.

Assess theatre activities as serious leisure through the TBT. Once the theatrical experience has concluded, each actor/active spectator must assess to what degree any theatrical activities constituted a serious leisure experience (both those planned by the researcher, and those other activities that the participants wish to highlight). The assessment of theatrical activities through the TBT involves questions such as: How free did I feel when doing them? To what extent was I able to explore the possibilities they offered me? To what extent did they make me feel a commitment? In other words, the activities carried out should be evaluated in accordance with the serious leisure characteristics that turn out to be of interest when researching this experience.

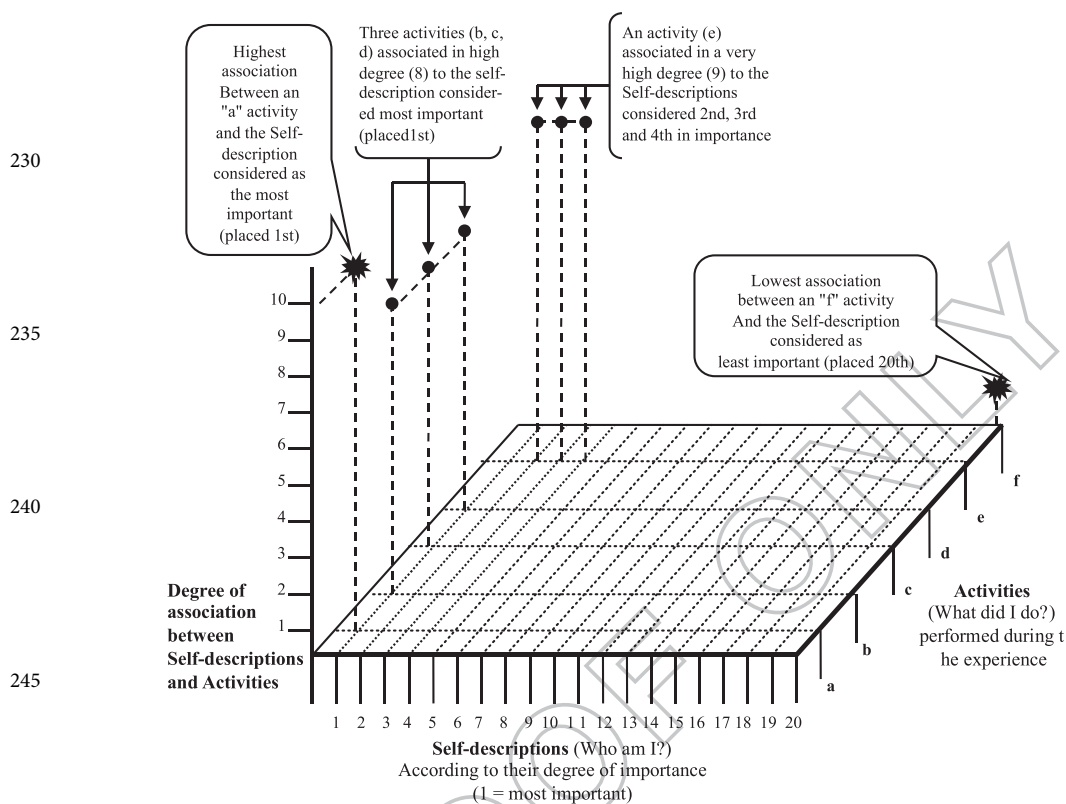


Figure 1. Examples of possible associations between Self-descriptions (Who am I?) and activities performed (What did I do?) in a Serious Leisure theatrical experience (Source: Pestana & Codina, 2012).

Analyse the degree to which theatrical activity as a serious leisure experience is related to the self. Joint analysis, by the participants, of the answers to the TST and TBT shows which theatrical activities favour certain characteristics of the self, and vice versa, which aspects of the self are present (see the possibilities offered by relating activities and self-descriptions in Figure 1). In addition, participants can assess the perceived changes in the self throughout the process, for example: What self-descriptions have varied in terms of importance or degree of satisfaction? What aspects have I identified after doing theatre? What has changed – or not – in me?

This proposed method of analysis makes organized data available to researchers. It allows them to assess the serious leisure experience associated with each activity while doing theatre, and also the connections between theatre activities and self-descriptions (i.e. the stability of and changes in the self). Moreover, the results obtained may be useful for designing initiatives whose activities are geared to developing the self by virtue of the serious leisure experience.

Concluding remarks

The influence of theatre as a serious leisure experience on the self has been accepted by the scientific community. However, this influence needs to be analysed in greater depth. This

paper proposes a procedure that combines a systematic, accurate approach to both information collection and the evaluation of the relations between theatre as serious leisure experience and the dynamics of self. In this regard, though the joint use of the TST and the TBT it is possible to observe the central role the serious leisure experience plays in the self. The proposed methodology can also facilitate the evaluation of initiatives (i.e. intervention programmes) based on the SLP and focused on promoting the expression and growth of the self in individuals.

AQ4 Disclosure statement

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