Ethics in Leisure - An Agenda for Research

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Introduction

About a decade ago the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre and the theologian Stanley Hauerwas noted:

> This is not the first time that ethics has been fashionable. And history suggests that in those periods when a social order becomes uneasy and even alarmed about the weakening of its moral bonds and the poverty of its moral inheritance and turns for aid to the moral philosopher and theologian, it may not find these disciplines flourishing in such a way as to be able to make available the kind of moral reflection and theory which the culture actually needs. Indeed on occasion it may be that the very causes which have lead to the impoverishment of moral experience and the weakening of moral bonds will also themselves have contributed to the formation of a kind of moral theology and philosophy which are unable to provide the needed resources. (1983, p.vii)

And so it was that in the nineteen eighties, in Britain at least, there was considerable evidence of a major demise in the academic study and teaching of philosophy. Many departments were simply forced to close. If the effects in the parent discipline were profound, the effects on sub-disciplines such as the philosophy of leisure, sport and physical education were magnified.

Despite the philosophical flurry that accompanied the establishment of new degrees in leisure and related fields, during the period 1985-1995 there were only two full time appointments in Britain in philosophy of leisure, sport and Physical Education. As the natural sciences have gained hegemonic ascendancy in our fields so philosophy has concomitantly been marginalised to the point where it is now almost extinct. In Great Britain, only Bedford, Brighton, Cardiff , Cheltenham and Leeds (to the best of our knowledge) now employ philosophers in departments of leisure studies or management or, indeed, in departments of sports, Physical Education or Human Movement for that

matter. And in this diminishing sphere, courses fall by the way side, post-graduate students are attracted by other fields and the downward cycle goes on.

By contrast, in many spheres, not merely leisure, issues that can be captured under the umbrella term "applied ethics" are to be seen with increasing prominence in academic and professional journals and conferences. But what makes these issues ethical, and who is left to investigate them as such, is precisely the point of MacIntyre and Hauerwas's remarks. The temper of our times is antithetical to philosophical reflection. Yet it is precisely this temper that is both the source of its own evidence and the cause of renewed urgency. The point of our brief paper today is to draw attention to the scope of ethics in leisure research (and therefore, by implication, teaching too) that is underpinned by philosophy and the rich potential it offers for academics in the next century. We also highlight the kinds of research we are engaged in at Cheltenham.

Our original intention was to offer a description of extant literature by searching the journal **Leisure Studies** and the various **Leisure Studies Association Publications** and give a classification of these in an attempt to systematise future discussion of ethics and leisure. As with all theoretical plans empirical difficulties were not far away; it became apparent that the programme itself held too many intrusive presuppositions for us effectively to set about the classificatory task. Dependent upon how the term "ethics" was interpreted almost everything and almost nothing might be included in leisure research.

"Ethics" and "ethics"

Most of what is called "ethics", with a small "e", is simply social science by another name. We prefer to call it social scientific descriptions of ethically problematic practices, persons or policies. Here researchers seek to describe that portion of the world that is ethically problematic by the received methods of social science; observation, ethnography, interview, questionnaire and the like. Alan Tomlinson and Scott Fleming's recent edited collection "Ethics, Sport and Leisure" (1995) is a good example of ethics with a small "e" (with the exception of Graham McFee's introductory chapter). The most common examples of "ethics" in leisure that spring up in casual conversations, as well as the academic literature, are matters of equity and/or of access (for example, racism or disability), deviant sub-cultures (for example, so-called football 'hooliganism'), deviant practices (for example cheating, sexual abuse or doping) and so forth.

What we call "Ethics", with a capital "E" by contrast, without elevating one above the other, is moral philosophy by which, briefly, is meant the systematic conceptual enquiry of questions regarding how we ought to live our lives. This entails the analysis of central concepts such as duty, right, harm, pain, pleasure and promise within (often ignored) theoretical perspectives such as Contractarianism, Deontology, Utilitarianism, Virtue Ethics, Rights based Ethics and so forth.

The distinction between "ethics" with a small "e" and "Ethics" with a capital "E" is, unsurprisingly enough, a contentious one. It is conceived of differently according to how one understands the nature of "Ethics" itself. Questions such as whether there are moral

facts; whether there is a clear distinction between facts and values; how the fact : value relationship is characterised; whether moral obligations override considerations of virtue and so on, are not answerable from outside a given theoretical perspective. Something like this distinction is commonly drawn in moral philosophy as that between "descriptive" and "normative ethics". But there are difficulties with a distinction that tries to distinguish one programme that sets out to describe the world from another that prescribes a programme for action. The two are intertwined in complex ways. Still the distinction need not be sharp to be important.

Locating "Ethics" and "ethics" in Leisure Studies Research

When we examined material published by the Leisure Studies Association (LSA) which might be deemed to be leisure "ethics" (small "e") we found difficulty in identifying any single theme or topic which did *not* have ethical content when viewed from one or other of the philosophical perspectives listed above. In other words, the very exercise of attempting to classify work in this way proved the point about the ubiquity of ethical concerns. It also indicated that LSA publications, at least in the recent past, are overwhelmingly concerned with social science investigations into ethically problematic persons, practices and policies. Obvious examples under these headings include the following:

Persons:	-	celebrity, sexuality and "tragic Magic" (Rowe 1993)

		-	rural deprivation and young women's leisure (Prosser 1995)

		-	leisure and recreation for young delinquents (Tsuchiya 1996)

Practices: -   sado-masochism as leisure (Geurtsen1993)

                 -       sexual licence in night clubs (Brackenridge & Power 1993)

                 -       responsible tourism (Hudson 1995)

Policies: -   community leisure and urban regeneration (Clarke 1991)

                 -       welfarism and tourism development (Leslie 1992)

                 -       gender, morality and the National PE curriculum (Hargreaves, 1995)

Of course, less obvious examples can also be found:

                 -       training for quality assurance (Barber 1991)

                 -       sporting civic pride (Critcher 1992)

                 -       the future role of the public sector in leisure (Ravenscroft 1992)

                 -       organizational effectiveness (Papadimitriou 1993)

All of the above, it can be argued, have latent, if not manifest, ethical implications which could be the subject of fruitful research.

'Traditional' definitions of leisure (and play) are rooted in the notion of freedom from constraint (i.e. negative freedom) which is precisely why leisure **is** ethically problematic now: in other words, that "just doing what you like" leads, eventually, to severe moral conflicts. This is well known as the paradox of freedom: too much causes too little. And this is precisely why 'serial killing' is an example which might help us to (re)define the boundaries of leisure - it does not, in our book at least, qualify!

Looking amongst the same selection of publications at what might be considered from the big "E" ethics point of view very little, if anything, could be found, depending upon how we conceived "Ethics" itself. With very few exceptions, those pieces which, on the face of it, address Ethics, referring explicitly to such terms as 'morality', 'deviance' or even 'Ethics' *per se,* fail to address the philosophical content which might underpin and help to clarify such debates. For example, Alan Clarke (1996 p.209) writes:

There has always been an ethical **core** recognised in the study of leisure. This has often been an implicit code which nonetheless determines the position adopted by the writers. It is a version of a **humanist code** with a strong commitment to the utilitarian notions of maximising opportunities and minimising negative impacts on others....

There has been little concern shown for explicitly discussing **the morality** of leisure. (emphases added)

Two points need to be made here. First, Clarke is absoutely right to point out the inescapable ethical background that is often taken for granted in leisure research. He falls short, however, in presupposing that "the morality of leisure" is a singular phenomenon. This interpretation is confirmed in his own conclusion. He writes:

At the heart of these critiques [of theory and policy in leisure], I believe, there is **a leisure ethic**. It is a core which seems to approximate to the moral core found in the writings around the sustainability movement and the Agenda 21 declaration from the Rio Earth Summit. (p.212, emphasis added)

In the same book as Clarke's piece, one of the authors (McNamee, 1996) highlighted an example of theoretical ethical conflict (between duty and virtue ethics) with respect to professional codes of practice. This point is developed below.

Ethics as Moral Philosophy

The question at the heart of the matter "how ought we to live our lives?" is a daunting one. How to justify and develop others into such forms of life we consider best is often perplexing and sometimes paralysing. But this is the task that is, however, working in the background of leisure professions and policy. What makes this task particularly problematic is the fact that just what is to count as the terrain of morality is itself contestable. How, then, are we to define a destination, or perhaps better, how shall we draw a map of territory whose contours and signposts shift under our theoretical gaze? (This does not lead us down the primrose path to postmodernism!)

All this may seem trite or, worse, plain silly to the leisure professional. Surely, our intuitions would have it, morality is what morality is and that's the end of it. Perhaps, too, the sceptic might say 'all we need to do is to define our terms' and that's the end of the matter. No problem there. But to respond to the latter riposte it must be asked why, then, the floor of the philosophical ocean is scattered with the wrecks of rival moral theories such as naturalism, emotivism, utilitarianism - to name but three would-be contenders to the moral throne. And it is precisely the argument concerning the nature of morality, and ethical life generally, which is absent from much, if not all, leisure research that calls itself "ethical".

Charles Taylor (1989), Alisdair MacIntyre (1986) and Bernard Williams (1985) are prominent among those who have recently attempted to chart the moral topography of contemporary western culture. Although their theses differ in key respects, commonality can be found in their insistence that morality and moral theory is incomplete if it focuses

solely on the nature of our obligations. Like others, they decry the manner in which much contemporary moral philosophy has narrowly conceived its direction, importance and responsibility. Since Kant, much professional philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than what it is good to be.

Received wisdom has it that acting morally is related to certain principled obligations concerning what we should and should not do which are universalisable, that is, to be observed by all people in all places at all times where the situations are relevantly similar. We venture that under this description of ethics, leisure-related concerns would represent pretty much a null category.

Williams, in contrast to what was until very recently received wisdom, argues that obligations ought to be viewed as merely one type of ethical consideration among others. MacIntyre argues similarly that we should return to the ethical ideal of living well as opposed to acting right. He offers an account of the good life which is greater in scope than what Williams (1985) refers to as the "peculiar institution" of morality". Taylor (1989) too addresses himself to the question "what is it that makes life worth living?" He outlines a cluster of notions which are central to ethical life: the respect for life, integrity, well-being and the flourishing of others. Even if the notions of duty, obligation and rights were constitutive of morality then we must also recognise that there are other demands upon us which bring in strong evaluations which are also of central concern to us. Taylor writes:

These are questions about how I am going to live my life which touch on the issue of what kind of life is worth living, or what kind of life would fulfil the promise implicit in my particular talents, or the demands of someone with my endowment, or of what constitutes a rich, meaningful life. (1989, p.14)

Under this broader description of ethics it becomes clear that leisure is clearly a matter for philosophical conjecture and, for that matter, always has been. Yet the extant literature has often progressed without a proper recognition of philosophical procedure and the wealth of writings on the nature of the good life itself. (See for example the 1996 Sheffield conference on 'Leisure and Quality of Life'.) Except in those cases where academics have attempted to situate the analysis of the concept of leisure itself in philosophical terms, the research has emerged relatively unscathed by philosophical analysis.

Ethics and Leisure Related Research at Cheltenham and Gloucester

The possibilities for Ethical and ethical research in leisure are manifold. It would be fruitless to attempt to chart its full diversity. What we will do, however, is to share with you some of the projects that we have instigated with some collaborating institutions as examples of scholarship that ground leisure practice in moral philosophy. All the projects below attempt to combine ethics and Ethics. If we are to philosophise about leisure, the good life, human flourishing or evil for that matter masquerading as leisure, we can only do so within a framework that attempts to make sense of the phenomena under description. And that sense will be seriously impaired if it proceeds askew on matters of social description. Rather than hermetically sealing facts from values, serious

investigation in ethical aspects of leisure must start from a basis which begins "what are the attitudes and possibilities that can justifiably adopted in respect of this set of facts?". Here are some examples where we have begun to ask this and other related questions.

Sexual harassment and abuse: in particular, policies and codes of practice and conduct as these affect organisers, coaches and players of sport and/or service delivery in sports development and leisure management and the development of practical measures for minimising risk to participants and maximising organisational security (Brackenridge et al., 1995).

Fair play: in particular, attempts to reconcile contractarianism and virtue ethics in sporting contests and investigations into specific "idiocultural norms" (Fine, 1987) in different international contexts (McNamee and Loland, 1996a).

Coaching ethics: in particular, exploration of the relationships between children's moral and legal rights and players rights more generally and the obligations that arise from those rights for coaches and organisations (McNamee, 1996; Brackenridge, 1987, 1994).

Research ethics: including critical self-reflection for those of us engaged in what is often referred to as "sensitive" research (Lee, 1993; Brackenridge, 1996). One common scenario researchers find themselves party to is the uncovering and handling of incriminating information. This problematic scenario sometimes labelled "Guilty

Knowledge" (McNamee, 1996a) is not uncommon in ethnographic work and is likely to become more pressing if leisure studies develops research into "deviant" leisure.

Conclusion

We began with MacIntyre and Hauerwas's quotation about the current vogue for ethics and the corresponding decay of the traditional sources of ethical reflection. In this very brief paper we have advanced only two points of significance. First, proper recognition needs to be made of the inescapably philosophical character of matters regarding the quality of our lives. Leisure research cannot be hermetically sealed off from philosophy but can, and sometimes does, proceed ignorant of it. Secondly, we must jettison once and for all the idea that the "ethics of leisure" or "leisure ethic" will be a unified phenomenon. Just as the proto-sociologist of leisure 40 years ago may not have understood the complex contestation of interpretation, shaped by theoretical diversity, leisure researchers must be disabused of the idea that ethical reflection is uncontested or that such diversity as exists will be dissolved by the proper application of the methods of social science. Moral life and philosophy just are messy.

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