The Use of Leisure: A Qualitative Study of Tavern Patrons

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Abstract This qualitative ethnographic study was conducted in a family owned and operated bar. This particular research project seeks to examine leisure activities that take place in a small bar that is family owned and operated. The research concentrates on how the family members and bartenders accommodate the leisure of the patrons that visit the bar. The main goal of the study was to describe the use of leisure by the patrons and how the bartenders and family members contribute to the leisure of the patrons. The regulars of this tavern have either traded other social ties for the social ties at this tavern or they have failed in other social arenas and sought social acceptance at the tavern. Interestingly, many of the tavern patrons come from varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

Keywords Leisure, Qualitative, Tavern, Bar, Ethnography

1. Introduction

The local tavern is an important social setting that provides leisure for the transient, working class people. There has been a multitude of research on taverns [1-4] and on leisure [5-9], but little to no research has examined these two elements together. In this study, a family-owned local tavern in a medium-sized city in the northwest was studied.

The purpose of the study was to examine the leisure activities that take place in a local, family-owned tavern. People's perceptions of leisure and experiences in the small family owned bar was examined. All of the people in the tavern were studied, which included patrons, family members, and bartenders. The main goal of the study was to describe the use of leisure by the patrons and how the bartenders and family members contribute to leisure of the patrons.

The ethnographic study was conducted in a family owned and operated bar, which will be referred to as Lowell's. The study involved participant observation, photos and interviews. This particular research project seeks to examine leisure activities that take place in a small bar that is family

owned and operated. The research concentrates on the how the family members and bartenders accommodate the leisure of the patrons that visit the bar. Currently, there has not been any qualitative research performed in this particular area of interest, but there are many qualitative studies that look at either the culture of bars or the use of leisure.

1.1. Bar Literature

Gottlieb [10] found that, on average, five cents out of every dollar is spent in drinking establishments. Obviously, people are attached to these establishments if they are spending so much money in them [10]. The literature suggests that there are seven types of bar patrons: the transient, the unmarried, alcoholics, call girls or prostitutes, young people looking for a good time, and men and women searching for a mate, and regulars [11]. Taverns, unlike cocktail lounges, have a clientele with similar backgrounds, who are usually from the working or low socioeconomic classes [10].

Several studies [10,12-13] described taverns as a type of voluntary alliance in which deeply held norms existed for the group and group action was easily achieved. Roebuck and Spray [11] discovered that the regulars who frequent bars either trade other social ties for the social ties of the bar or have failed in other social arenas and seek out the bar for social acceptance.

Even though these businesses are collecting a large amount of money from American citizens, very few people have examined the culture of bars to determine why people are so willing to hand over more money for a beer that they could easily get cheaper at a grocery or convenient store. Could it be the gratification of leisure they receive at these bars? Whyte [14] stated that it is important for a manager to know what the customer wants. In regard to the bar establishment, an owner or bartender must know how to accommodate the leisure of a patron. This pattern of thinking is clearly absent from the bar literature.

1.2. Leisure Literature

What is leisure? Cunningham [15] provides several workable definitions that he collected from several leisure

articles and studies. First, leisure is the opposite of work because one does not engage in leisure to advance economically. Second, it is an enjoyable prospect and memory. Third, it involves instinctive social-role commitments. Fourth, it provides a sense of freedom. Fifth, it brings the person closer to the values of the culture. Sixth, it can vary from the unimportant to the very important. Finally, it can sometimes be considered play.

Kelly [16] notes that the main problem with leisure studies is that there is no clear definition as to what leisure truly is. It is impossible to study something if one does not know exactly what they are studying. Kelly [17] gave a general definition that leisure is the things people choose to do without obligation to do them. For practical purposes, this is the definition used for the current study.

Havighurst and Feigenbaum [18] argued that there were four typologies of leisure lifestyles. The first one is "High". It involves a person who is well known for a leisure activity in which he/she is a quality player. These people choose many different leisure activities for the interesting experience. The second typology is "Above average". A person in this category would have four or five regular leisure activities. The activities are usually different, but the person shows skill in each one.

The third typology is labeled "Medium", and it involves a person with two to three leisure activities. These people usually only excel at one, but they enjoy the other activities quite well. The final typology is actually a combination of two labeled "Low level". These people either just seek entertainment without getting involved or they might not have any spare time for leisure. They could be apathetic and not looking for any interests or they could have a hard time relaxing and always need to have something interesting for engagement purposes [18].

Havighurst and Feigenbaum [18] state that working class people do not have strong family values, so most of their activities will be divided by sex. They use the example of the men going to a bar with the "boys". They found that the working class participated in the "Low level" of leisure. Conversely, Kelly [17] found that it was not socioeconomic position but the participant herself/himself that determined the amount of leisure if any to engage in.

Many of the leisure articles use drinking at bars as an example of a leisure activity, but there have been no studies solely examining the leisure activities that take place at a bar. Furthermore, there have been no studies specifically looking at the leisure of tavern patrons.

2. Conceptual Framework

As the literature suggests, patrons of taverns are usually from the lower socioeconomic bracket of society [10], but there are conflicting findings in regard to the use of leisure by people with a lower socioeconomic status. Havighurst and Feigenbaum [18] claim that it is the people with a middle or higher socioeconomic status that frequently engage in

leisure activities, while the lower classes do not. This could be due either to the fact that they cannot afford leisure activities or they do not have as much time to engage in activities due to work or family commitments.

Based on this literature, the theoretical framework for the current study is conflict theory. This raises several different questions. Do the working and lower socioeconomic classes engage in leisure activities at taverns? If so, what types of leisure activities do they engage in? How much time do they spend on these leisure activities?

Karl Marx stated that material contributions determine the extent to which social classes can organize effectively to fight for their interests. The material circumstances of making a living are the main determinant of one's style of life. These Marxian principles provide the basis for the conflict theory of stratification [19]. As applied to this study, this could be interpreted to mean that the amount of money one makes determines what and how much leisure activity is engaged in. This study is significant mainly because there is a dearth of research in regard to the use of leisure by bar patrons.

3. Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature using an ethnographic approach. It utilized the participant observation method comparable to that of Whyte's [20] used in *Street corner society*. This means that the researcher not only observes but also actually participates by socializing with the members of the group being studied. The data was collected through note and picture taking. I also interviewed patrons, bartenders and family members.

3.1. Participants

Anyone present at Lowell's during the participant observation time was observed and could be considered a participant. After building rapport with some of the bartenders and patrons, the purpose of the study was explained and they were guaranteed that their statements were confidential. All of the people interviewed signed a written consent. Three bartenders were interviewed. Since there was only one female bartender, she was interviewed. One family member bartender was interviewed and a non-family member was interviewed. Three patrons were selected for interviews as well. A regular visitor, a somewhat frequent visitor and a not so frequent visitor were chosen for interviews. All the people that were asked for an interview accepted. Observations of the tavern and its patrons consisted of 9 hours per week for four months.

3.2. Bias and Credibility

Like any participant observer, the personal beliefs, opinions, prejudices and experiences of the researcher can possibly taint the lens through which the researcher observes.

The subjective states of the patrons were observed objectively. All of the field notes included personal challenges to my own subjectivity to ensure that the data was being analyzed and collected as objectively as possible.

4. Results

Lowell's clientele are mostly regulars that live in the neighborhood. Joe, one of the bartenders and family members described the regulars like this: "In a given week, most of them [patrons] come in for three to four hours a day; you're looking at about twenty-four hours a week".

Many different people make up Lowell's clientele. They are construction workers, security guards, plumbers, painters, etc. Most of them work in some type of manual labor. This is consistent with Gottlieb [10], who said that taverns have a clientele with similar backgrounds and are usually from the working or low socioeconomic classes. It appears that the working and low socioeconomic classes are community-centered and engage in a considerable amount of leisure unlike the typology of Havighurst and Feigenbaum [18].

Joe said that Lowell's is a "neighborhood tavern where everybody knows each other". He said that it is a little "cliquey" but "everyone is accepted". Lowell's, as Jack one of the somewhat frequent visitors said, is a "hole in the wall" place.

Lowell's has two pool tables, three arcade games, two dart boards, a jukebox and a big screen television to contribute to the leisure of the patrons. There is a wrap around bar that seats fifteen people on a busy night. There are two tables where four people can sit comfortably, two tables that hold six people and two two-person tables. There are also there benches beside the pool tables. There is always plenty of room for the patrons to have a seat, and no one has to push their way to the bar.

It is a small building, but accommodates the patrons quite well. The number one complaint about Lowell's is that it is too smoky. There are many cigarette smokers that frequent the bar. Sam, a bar regular, said that Lowell's was a "small" and "simple" place that does not play the music too loud like some of the other bars downtown.

People were asked why they come to Lowell's. Responses included: "cheap beer", "I know the family", "I am friends with the people there [bartenders, family members, and patrons]", "conversation", and the "laid back" atmosphere.

4.1. Bartenders

Bar owners and bartenders must know how to accommodate to the leisure of the patrons. Bartenders serve drinks and food and regulate the sale of pull-tabs, a form of gambling. For the regulars, all of the bartenders know what they drink and have it ready for them at their usual arrival time. Ben, a non-family member bartender, said that it is also a bartender's job to "deal with problems". He said that if

there was a fight, he would separate them and kick one or maybe both out of the bar depending on the situation.

Ben said it was important to make sure nobody is bothering the patrons. All of the bartenders interviewed claimed to be able to recognize the patron who likes to be left alone and the one who wants to talk. They said it is important to listen to the patrons or they may go somewhere else. Joe said he has heard many of the patrons' stories over and over again, but he appears to listen just as attentively every time.

Most of the patrons agreed that there was a bartender that they did not care for named Ben. Some of the patrons would not even come inside Lowell's when they knew he was working. They claimed that Ben did not give good service because he was impolite and did not give speedy refills. Jack said that Ben was just "going through the motions". One of the patrons said that Ben is an awful bartender because he is just there to "shoot the breeze" and he does not pay attention to the needs of the patrons.

Patrons reported and I observed the other bartenders, that the patrons identified as giving good service, greeting patrons every time someone walked in the bar. Then, the bartender would ask the patron what he/she could get for them. After the bartender returned with the requested drink or items, they would usually engage in some casual conversation.

One day I was in Lowell's sitting next to Harry, who is in his fifties. He was drinking Rainier beer and talking on a cell phone. He had an empty can that he had crushed sitting in front of him and another rainier beer that had condensation on the outside, which he was drinking. Every time he wanted another beer, he would put two dollars on the bar counter. The bartender would pick up the two dollars and give him another beer without saying a word.

The bartender at the time was Jan, a lady in her thirties. She was wearing purple overalls with short legs instead of pant legs. Underneath the overalls, she was wearing a white tank top with spaghetti shoulder straps. She was wearing white socks with white cloth tennis shoes with thick white rubber soles. She had reddish brown hair that went down to the middle of her back. It was very curly indicating she had just gotten a perm.

She was constantly busying herself with cleaning glasses, straightening up, wiping tables, or any other thing that needed to be done for the patrons. She would engage in personal conversation with every guest. She would ask a patron where somebody was or she would ask how come he or she was so early today.

One day, Lauren, a girl in her twenties walked in about 5:00 and sat one seat away from me on my left. Jan came by and told her some guy had called for her earlier and asked if she needed to use the phone. She said yes and the Jan went to the back of the bar and got a cordless phone for her to use. Lauren said she wanted a small pitcher and Jan instinctively poured a small pitcher of Budweiser. The girl never said what kind of beer she wanted, but she came in so often that Jan knew what to get her. Lauren got done with her telephone call and poured a glass of beer into the chilled schooner the

bartender had placed in front of her. People always compliment Jan's bartending because she always makes sure there are ice-frosted glasses for the beer.

Lauren told the bartender who it was that had called and said that he was on his way. Then she turned to me and I spoke to Lauren for the first time. She said, "Damn it's hot in here." I said, "Yea this is the hottest day we have had in a while. It's a nice break." She said, "Yea, I haven't put up my shorts yet. I always wait because you know its gonna get hot again before it gets cold again." I told her I always wait until it snows to put my shorts away around here. She laughed and said, "you definitely know it ain't getting hot after it snows". She turned back around and started drinking her beer again.

A guy in his thirties joined her. His pint glass was almost empty. Jan started to ask him if he wanted another, but just poured another one and sat it in front of him instead. He finished the other beer and started to drink the new beer the bartender had poured. No conversation took place between him and the bartender at this time.

Later, a man came and sat down next to Lauren. The bartender brought over another schooner glass and poured beer into it from the girl's pitcher and handed it to the man. She never asked anyone if they wanted her to do that and she was not asked to do it. The man drank the beer and engaged in conversation with the other two. Once again no conversation was made in reference to the beer poured.

Observations and interviews reveal that patrons like a bartender that is in sync with their needs. They like when their beer is poured for them before they come in and they like it when they do not have to ask for a refill. Most people come into Lowell's after a hard day of work and they just want to relax. The bartenders help the patrons wind down after work by anticipating their needs and catering to their leisure.

4.2. Leisure Activities of the Patrons

Lowell's caters to a lot of different leisure interests. Lowell's sponsors an in-house dart league. Every once in a while, they will change the rules of the game to make it more fun for the players. They have a blind darts game and a dart game where the players can only throw under-handed.

Everybody on the league knows one another because they are all Lowell's regulars. Every Saturday, they have an open pool tournament. These tournaments bring in a larger crowd than usual. There is usually around forty people in Lowell's on most Saturday nights. One night when I was there, there was a girl sitting at the table in between the pool tables against the wall taking scores and posting the winners of each game. Every table, booth, and barstool was occupied. It was louder than usual and people kept wandering outside every once in a while because the number of people in the small building was making it quite hot.

Everyone who was sitting on the half of the bar with the pool tables were constantly watching and commenting on the shots of each player. They would cheer if a good shot was made and they would boo if the shots were bad. Some people

would yell at the players jokingly and some very drunken people would yell undecipherable things at the players.

One of the regulars, Matt, told me about the pool tournaments. He said it costs three dollars to enter and each time there is a game, each player pays a quarter. If a player loses two games, they are out of the tournament. He said, at the beginning of the tournament, all of the players are making bets and taking the tournament very seriously. By the end of the night, it is only luck that determines the winner because everyone in the tournament will be drunk. He said that every bit of the money paid to enter the tournament went to the winner, and Lowell's did not keep any of it. He said that this was just one of the many ways in which the owners made the bar an enjoyable place to "hang out".

Matt stated that they throw him a birthday party every year. He said the bartenders "make him" drink out of a pitcher, and he is not allowed to pour the beer into a glass. He told me that four years ago he had gotten really drunk after drinking four pitchers on his birthday, so he put on a g-string and danced around the bar to some "sexy" music that was playing on the jukebox. Everyone in the bar thought it was funny and they all had a good time.

Whenever there is a NFL game and every year for the Super Bowl, all of the regulars bring a dish and have a potluck dinner. At least once a month, there is a dinner of some sort at Lowell's. Sometimes it is the football potlucks, but they have other dinners as well. Every year the family members/owners host a Thanksgiving potluck for all the regulars that do not have family or anybody else to eat with. However, the patrons that come to the Thanksgiving dinner do not see it that way. Sam said:

"They [bartenders and family members] treat us so good here, it makes me want to spend every bit of my free time here. All of my friends are here. Well shoot, I guess you could sort of call us a family. We all kind of look out for one another and stuff. We do all kinds of things with each other like playing pool and darts. Well, I am just thankful they set up all the tournaments and stuff like they do so we have something to do in between work and sleep."

5. Discussion

Most of the regulars of Lowell's spend a majority of their free time there. Similar to the findings of Roebuck and Spray [11], the regulars of Lowell's have either traded other social ties for the social ties at Lowell's or they have failed in other social arenas and sought out Lowell's for social acceptance. Some patrons claim that the people at Lowell's are like family. Sam said, "All the friends I need are right here [at Lowell's]." Furthermore, Jack said that he did not have any friends in the city until he started frequenting Lowell's. It appears that the bartenders have a very important role to play in facilitating the family-like atmosphere by engaging the patrons in conversation and coordinating leisure activities.

Havighurst and Feigenbaum's [18] claim that the working class people are in the "Lower level" of leisure activities is

not consistent with the findings of this study. Havighurst and Feigenbaum [18] said that these types of people either just seek entertainment without getting involved, but most of Lowell's patrons are involved in a few if not many of the social activities that go on in the bar. They also claimed that they might not have any spare time for leisure. The regulars at Lowell's spend anywhere from three to four hours a day at the bar, so they obviously have spare time to engage in leisure activities.

Furthermore, Havighurst and Feigenbaum [18] believe that the working class people will be apathetic and not looking for any interests. To the contrary, Matt said that when the Lowell's employee that organized the pool tournaments was sick, the entire bare worked together to organize the tournaments until he was better. They have also independently organized other social activities that go on in the bar. For example, they will throw a birthday party or a potluck dinner.

Finally, Havighurst and Feigenbaum [18] maintain that working class people have a hard time relaxing and are always in need of something interesting. On the contrary, whenever there is not an organized social activity going on at the bar, most of the patrons sit and talk for hours at the bar. Talking and telling stories to one another is not considered a thrilling activity, but it is a relaxing leisure activity that the patrons like to engage in.

6. Conclusions

Conflict theory adequately sets the framework for the leisure activities engaged in by the tavern patrons. The patrons of the tavern do not make enough money to allow them to spend the entire day every day at the tavern, but they do spend what free time they have there. The prices at Lowell's are affordable, allowing the patrons to spend more time there because they can afford to buy the "cheap beer". The social activities they participate in are not expensive leisure activities like deep sea diving, betting at horse races, or skiing in foreign countries. However, there is no evidence that the tavern patrons do not excel at or engage in as many leisure activities as those in higher socioeconomic classes. Leisure in taverns is used by all socioeconomic classes, but those patrons considered regulars, most of which were working-class in this study, tend to find a family-oriented dynamic in the local tavern.

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