

# Leisure in the Turkish Context: A Preliminary Account

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## Abstract

The literature on leisure has been dominated by Western examples until recently. Some recent accounts of non-Western cases provide a different and richer context for understanding leisure. This study is an attempt to reveal the nature and development of leisure in the Turkish context. The historical background of leisure in Turkish society is briefly presented as an aid to understanding the current situation better. The findings of recent research on time use by Turkish people are also presented with a particular focus on leisure patterns. The data were collected through a field survey in Ankara, the capital city. The results indicate that leisure patterns vary along with settlement type and socio-demographic characteristics.

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## Introduction

Although the meaning of leisure has varied along with the relationship between work and leisure in different cultures, the dominant focus of research has been on white, able-bodied Westerners (Hilbrecht, 2007, p. 382). The few studies that provide a non-Western perspective on leisure as an alternative to Western dominance in leisure research inspired this attempt to explore the meaning(s) of leisure for Turkish people. Recent accounts of Chinese (Liu, Yeh, Chick and Zinn, 2008) and Japanese (Horne, 1998) leisure are examples of such studies. Walker and Wang (2009) analyze the meaning of leisure for Chinese Canadians, while Arab-Moghaddam, Henderson and Sheikholeslami (2007) offer a case from the Middle-East documenting women's leisure constraints in Iran. The subjectivity of leisure definitions and practices has been acknowledged in the Western literature revealing differences alongside socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, income and race. Feminist literature has long been providing evidence of gendered leisure

practices and sites (Henderson 1996, 1990). Scraton and Watson (1998) recognize the gendered character of public spaces in the postmodern city, while Warner-Smith and Brown (2002) provide similar evidence from a small country town. McDowell, Ward, Fagan, Perrons and Ray (2006) discuss the situation of working women in a large city in which the organization of daily life affects their time spent on and experience of child care. Spatial factors could be organized better to help working women to benefit from leisure opportunities (Hilbrecht, 2007). Scraton and Watson (1998) further suggest that women are not a homogeneous group and their leisure choices are not exempt from power relations.

Research indicates that subjective and plural meanings of time use can best be explored by treating leisure as shaped around cultural practices other than just work in an increasingly globalized world. Many developing countries including Turkey have become connected to global work practices and time-use patterns in the daily organization of life, especially in

big cities. However, traditional life patterns can still be observed in rural areas and traditional suburbs of big cities such as squatter settlements which are inhabited by people of rural origin. Research on time use patterns in work and leisure which compares developed and developing countries indicates some different time perceptions of individuals living in different cultural contexts (Manrai and Manrai, 1995). As rightly put by Horne (1998, p. 48) "to understand fully the meaning of leisure time and space in Japan, one needs to locate leisure within wider notions of culture". This is also valid for other cultures, especially those which are outside the extensively researched Western cultures. In any case, Hilbrecht (2007, p. 382) claims that issues of diversity such as race and disability have not been adequately included in work-leisure research even in the Western context.

Locating leisure in its cultural contexts is also imperative for exploring how the subjective experience of time varies with occupational differences. Zemke (2004) stresses that time and space work together in forming this experience. "Place influences the type, frequency, duration, and style of behaviour, and through occupational behaviour, influences lifestyle and well-being" (Hamilton cited by Zemke, 2004:614). Technological advances of our era provide the basis for different perceptions of time in different cultures, varying according to levels of access to these advances. Increasingly global connections, long distance travel, internet use and web-based communication make multitasking possible in a limited time without even requiring the physical presence of individuals. Naturally, these changes influence some cultures more than others and change the nature and balance of work and leisure. These changes are always shaped by the historical and cultural context of a particular country. This is why the USA and Japan are so different in their time use patterns despite the fact that both are developed and technologically advanced countries.

Turkey is an excellent case – influenced by Western attitudes towards work and education in urban areas, yet traditional in rural areas and small towns as well as in some squatter

settlements in large cities. Leisure patterns seem to be less influenced by globalization even though the commercial sites – mostly in the form of shopping malls – have been attracting Turkish citizens during the last two decades (Erkip, 2005). My claim is that the very nature of leisure in Turkish society, which involves every aspect of daily life including work, has not changed significantly. In this study, I investigate the meaning of leisure for Turkish citizens living in Ankara – the capital city of Turkey – through a survey about time-use.

### **The origin of the concept of leisure**

Before introducing observations on contemporary leisure patterns of Turkish people in a large – and capital – city, a brief historical account will provide a basis for understanding leisure in the context of Turkish culture. Some limited literature on leisure as a part of daily life can be found in accounts of foreign visitors to old Istanbul, the largest and the most global city of Turkey in all of history. De Amicis (1993) documented the "flaneur" in Istanbul in the late-1800s, stating that passing time without a concern and without doing anything at all was a common practice of Turkish people. Passing time at ease was a favourite leisure pursuit during which there was no need to hurry. Spending half the day drinking Turkish coffee is one of the examples used by de Amicis (1993) to reflect this pattern. His observation reflects a European view of Turkish culture, which was (maybe still is) perceived as lacking in widely acclaimed Western values about a work ethic, such as being hard-working, efficient and productive.

Although this approach seems to portray a generically Eastern type of leisure, it involves activities and spaces specific to Turkish culture as well. At this point, the extensively gendered character of leisure in Turkey should be mentioned (see Meric, 2007, on various aspects of daily life in the Ottoman period that provide extensive clues to gendered practices). Participation by women – mostly of high class – in public leisure was limited to taking part in entertainment in open public spaces such as parks and seaside promenades. Their leisure was usually of a private nature, within the bounds of home and neighbourhood. There

were periods in Ottoman history during which women were banned from the streets and any public appearance (Sevengil, 1927). Although one should mention the role of social class in leisure patterns, it seems to involve space rather than the activities. After the conquest of Istanbul by Fatih Sultan Mehmet, the city witnessed a construction and population boom, followed by leisurely uses of spectacular sites such as the Golden Horn and Kagithane. Consuming wine in spaces that were built for this purpose (meyhane) until this was banned by the Magnificent Suleyman was a leisure pattern for males of all social classes. Beginning from the 1550s, the coffeehouse (kahvehane) has been the main male space of leisure, originally designed for intellectual activities such as telling stories, reading, and discussing public affairs along with drinking coffee – a special type of coffee named Turkish coffee – and smoking nargile. The original Arabic word “keyf” (“keyif” is the Turkish version) means leisure and is also used to mean being content or leisurely (keyifli olmak), and even being high as it is also used in relation to drug use, consuming alcohol or smoking (keyif verici madde kullanmak) (Nisanyan, 2008).

Some public events such as concerts, competitions and dances also took place in coffeehouses (Deleon, 1996). Even today coffeehouses are male spaces, in which card games and watching TV are the most common activities. Passing time still seems the dominant pursuit. Despite the changing nature of activities, these spaces still exist in Turkey, side by side with modern and Western versions in large cities and developed urban areas. After the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, Ottoman values were abandoned in the official organization of daily life. Although this changed social structures radically with a new lifestyle that was oriented towards the West, certain aspects of daily life including leisure habits remained much the same. Recent versions of coffeehouses are part of the modern urban lifestyle and, depending on the locality and level of integration with the global and modern world, they are frequented by females as well as males. Here, it should be noted that gender discrimination persists although it is less

visible due to the requirements of a modern lifestyle. Findings from recent research on the leisure activities of university students support this claim (Demir and Demir, 2006). Shopping and browsing are other favourite pastimes for both genders and are an emerging leisure pursuit for Turkish families. Erkip (2003, 2005) has documented the reasons and patterns of increasing mall patronage in Turkey. However, Turkish people seem to adopt mainly passive types of leisure. Sport activities are very limited in many segments of society where watching TV is the most common leisure pursuit. Recreation is defined by Henderson and Bialeschki (2005) in relation to the arts, music, culturally creative pursuits, fitness and sports, but in Turkey physical activity is specific to people of high-income and education. Even academic staff working at a university in Ankara report that they do not have sufficient time for such leisure activities although they spend two-thirds of their free time watching TV (Colakoglu, 2005). Organized leisure is highly correlated with income, especially for adults and older people, as organized sport activities are available only for young people attending schools at various levels. There are also private sport clubs training selected youngsters for amateur or professional teams, but this is a limited service for a certain group with appropriate qualities. It seems that sport activities are not common among university students (Balci and Ilhan, 2006). This may be an indication of the non-obligatory character of active sport for Turkish people.

### **Leisure in contemporary Turkey: the case of Ankara**

This study is a part of, and presents some preliminary findings from, the first time-use survey in Turkey. The field survey that constitutes the basis of this account aimed at investigating the relationship between time and space use, based on the belief that space had been the missing link in much previous time-use research. As Henderson and Bialeschki (2005) state, the “perception and reality of time in people’s lives directly influence individual physical activity”. This study also proposes space as a causal component in time-use and activity patterns.

### **Methods of data collection**

The research was carried out in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey, during three months in 2007, using mixed methods including a time-diary and interviews. Instead of a full diary, a predefined activity list was developed with the help from various sources on time-use such as the activity codes of the MTUS (multi-national time-use study), the main activity list of the 1997 Australian time-use survey, the activity list used in the 2004 study by SCP (Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands) and some traditional activities in the Turkish cultural context.

Another important feature of this study is the sampling through location, which we believe represents different segments of the Ankara citizenry more accurately than other sampling methods as the city is spatially segmented. The settlements selected were recently formed gated communities, traditional apartment blocks, suburban communities, squatter settlements, and rural settlements on the outskirts of the city. In this way, we expected to encounter different space experiences for individuals living in different types of settlements. A household questionnaire and individual questionnaires were filled in by interviewers in selected dwellings at each site. So as to grasp the differences between time-use patterns on weekdays and weekends, activity lists were completed for weekdays and weekends alternately in each settlement.

As the main aim was to collect qualitative data, quota and snowball sampling methods were used. In total, 58 people from five different settlements participated in the survey. In addition, focus groups were held in two settlements: a squatter settlement and a block of suburban apartments. Household members aged 15 and over were selected. The variables that structured the sample were: living in urban and suburban areas (residents could be of urban or rural origin), gender, working versus not working, and being well-educated versus relatively uneducated. The latter two statuses were assigned on the basis of self-claims by the respondents.

Although the sample was small it provided rich data for the analysis of time use in different

settlements, and among different income and gender groups. In this study, leisure is considered as a subjective experience and is investigated primarily by qualitative methods, namely, individual and focus group interviews. Since this approach required qualitative analysis of activities and spaces we relied mostly on the individual interviews. Face-to-face interviews were complemented by site observation and photographs of the physical characteristics of the households and neighbourhoods. How specific spaces influenced uses of time in terms of duration and quality was the major concern. The methods and some of the findings from this research have been presented earlier (IATUR, 2007). Here we seek clues about uses of leisure that locate it in the Turkish context.

### **Procedure of data evaluation**

Simple statistical analyses were applied only to show correlations between variables. The household and individual questionnaire forms and activity lists were evaluated by two different researchers separately to note prominent patterns of time-use. An additional reviewer repeated the procedure independently to check the validity of the evaluations (see Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003, on the evaluation of qualitative data). Although our evaluation covers all kinds of activities, this study presents only the leisure activities – measured by duration as well as variety – and investigates if and how these activities varied according to income, education and settlement.

We had a strong belief that space would be influential in time-use both in terms of the physical qualities of the space in which the activities took place and in terms of the location of and facilities provided by the settlement in which the respondents lived. The five settlements in the survey were chosen to reflect this variety. However, we noticed that the responses did not provide sufficient clues about the location of activities other than a few specially mentioned public spaces. For example, people differentiated one mall from the other by stating their names, but interior household private spaces remained undefined in most cases. We only know about the appearances of the houses and facilities nearby through ob-

ervation. The household survey indicated that some appliances were common to all – TVs, refrigerators and washing machines – while only a few had internet connections, cable TV, DVD, camera recorders, and motor cars. House ownership also varied.

## Findings

The statistical analyses have been presented in detail in IATUR (2007). Here, the focus is on the findings that indicate overall patterns of leisure activities. Statistical analyses show that settlement type and individual income level, and education and household income level, were weakly correlated, as expected. Home ownership was correlated with settlement type, yet the findings indicate a different pattern from what might be expected. Home ownership was most common in rural and squatter settlements, followed by gated communities.

For analyzing differences in patterns of leisure activities, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the five types of settlements. The results indicated that there were significant differences in leisure activities but not in watching TV, duration of watching TV, number of outdoor leisure activities or number of indoor leisure activities. Time estimates, number of outdoor leisure activities and overall duration of leisure did not appear to be different between the settlements. However, within a comparable leisure period people tended to be involved in different leisure activities in the different settlements. Indoor leisure seemed to play a large role in these differences. Thus, house facilities such as a balcony and garden might have an influence on this pattern. This supports the view that that housing facilities somehow shape leisure styles, even if not the duration.

Socio-demographic factors were also compared within settlement types. Income seemed to influence the types of leisure but not the duration or the number of activities. High-income groups reported a more active and outdoor leisure pattern. Education seemed to influence the number and duration of leisure activities other than watching TV. Gender had an influence only on time estimates but seemed to be the most powerful determining

factor in time estimates, which could be partly because women appeared to be more accurate estimators than men. However, it is interesting to note that the number and duration of leisure activities were not statistically different between women and men.

Statistical analyses provided some valuable information on the explanatory factors for the leisure patterns of different groups even though the sample was quite small. Settlement characteristics seemed to play a more powerful role in shaping leisure patterns than income level, education and gender, a finding which requires further research. Education was the second most important factor which appeared more influential over leisure patterns than income or gender. Gender did not appear to be an important factor in this respect, though its influence on time estimates invites further attention.

## *General observations based on qualitative data*

The most salient findings that are based on individual and focus group interviews and observations of settlement characteristics are the following:

- There are differences in time perception between different groups of people, including gender differences in time estimates. Distortions in reported uses of time appeared most common by unemployed males, which can possibly be explained as an effort to reduce reported amounts of idle time, which is perceived negatively in Turkish society.

- Idleness seems to disturb low-income people because of social norms that devalue it. Unemployed males experience anxiety when describing their leisure time and activities.

- Watching television is the dominant leisure activity for all groups. Only among low-income groups does listening to the radio, which used to be the most common pastime before TV, still remain common.

- Volunteer work is limited everywhere but tends to be informal and communal in rural and squatter areas, and more organized among high-income urban groups. It is probably grossly over-estimated in terms of duration as it is highly approved by social norms.

■ Sport activities are limited for all groups where there are different perceptions of the same activity. A daily leisurely walk would be reported as a sport activity by low-income, less educated people in an effort to report an active lifestyle. Organized sport activities are accessible only for high-income people.

■ A gender difference was observed in reporting feelings. Females talked more easily about their disliked activities, mainly domestic chores, whereas males talked about obligations and routines when they disliked an activity. Domestic chores are disliked by all groups, except child-care, which is praised by Turkish society.

■ Religious rituals differ among settlements. Residents in rural and squatter settlements practice religion more; daily prayers are more common there compared to other parts of the city. Males go to mosque for prayer and to socialize with their peers, whereas females pray only at home.

■ There appears to be a positive relationship between community ties and spatial characteristics, such as better maintenance and cleaning. People with strong community ties also have a stronger place attachment regardless of income level.

## Discussion and conclusion

The research findings presented above are part of the time-use survey that was carried out in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. In this paper, the evidence has been used to explore different leisure patterns and activities so as to offer a contemporary account of leisure in Turkey. Being perceived by the Western world as a part of Eastern culture despite her efforts to adopt Western values during the modernization period is one crucial problem for Turkey. The Ottoman lifestyle, which left little trace after the foundation of the Republic in 1923, has been a salient part of the West's oriental view of Turkey. "Leisure as passing time" is deeply rooted in Turkish history, and is now mixed with "leisure as escaping pressure" under the more stressful conditions of contemporary urban life (see, Watkins and Bond, 2007 for definitions). Recreation involving the arts, music and sport appears to be an under-developed aspect of leisure in present-day Turkey. The organization of

daily life for many people does not provide time and space for such activities due to economic and cultural constraints.

Some characteristics of the Turkish people such as organizing daily life around work still persist. The first and utmost important quality is mixing the two distinct areas of work and leisure successfully. Many people enrich their work with social engagements with colleagues and meet friends during their daily routines. Business meals are common for people in management and professional jobs, particularly those who are close to global links. However, almost all Turkish citizens experience leisure as mixed with other daily practices. Hence, distinctions between leisure and other activities are not clear, a characteristics which provides support for perceiving leisure as a state of mind and as an end in itself rather than an activity that leads to other results such as productivity and health. This may be partly because of the development level of the country in which the organization of leisure is still weak, yet definitely bears the imprint of Turkey's historical and cultural background. This aspect requires further research and analysis.

There is an increasing tendency to see leisure as a state of mind and a source of experiences such as relaxation. The "slow city" movement that originated in Europe is a good example of searching for a new way of life in the pursuit of happiness ([www.slowcity.com](http://www.slowcity.com)). This development may be seen as an alternative to work and productivity-oriented leisure (Hilbrecht, 2007; Kleiber, 2000). Distinct leisure patterns in different cultures seem to persist despite global influences. The Turkish case provides a fresh view of leisure and supports this claim. Further research on various aspects of leisure is obviously required to build on these conclusions.

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