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Purpose and Relatedness in Action: Leisure in The Lives of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

Leisure is more than the absence of work; it is a space of play, creativity, and identity formation. While theorists emphasize autonomy and intrinsic motivation as driving factors for leisure behaviour in general population little is known about phenomenology of how persons with intellectual disabilities experience leisure. This study explores the phenomenological dimensions of leisure in 17 persons with intellectual disabilities in South India, using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology alongside critical phenomenology. Data from interviews, observations, and shared activities show that leisure often lies in the "crevices" of everyday life—chores, caregiving, and routines imbued with joy, pride, and purpose. Leisure for participants was relational and purposeful, reflecting connection and contribution rather than escape. Despite structural restrictions, participants exercised micro-agency by redefining ordinary tasks as meaningful leisure. The findings challenge conventional work–leisure binaries and affirm leisure as a site of dignity, agency, and relational flourishing for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: Leisure; Persons with Intellectual Disabilities; Phenomenology; Eudaimonia; Relatedness; Work-leisure binary

Introduction

Leisure: A space to expand beyond the obligatory

Leisure provides an avenue for enjoyment and relaxation; but in perspective it is also a space for us to define ourselves and push the boundaries of understanding and being of who we are. These sentiments/observations has been expressed/stated by many leisure theorists. Dumazedier [1], described leisure as freedom from obligatory tasks that allows for play and exploration. Since this play and exploration occurs without external demands, he saw it as an opportunity for tremendous creativity. Even before that Huizinga [2], emphasized play as foundational to culture itself, underscoring leisure's creative potential. According to him it is in playful acts that humans step beyond survival and necessity into meaning-making. Leisure as play becomes a medium where new worlds of imagination and identity unfold. Scholars such as Deci and Ryan [3], framed leisure as a psychological state of perceived freedom and intrinsic motivation, enabling individuals to transcend routine selves and experience deep engagement. Stebbins' [4], serious leisure perspective that demonstrated how voluntary pursuits allow individuals to assume fulfilling roles that extend beyond work further adds to this understanding of the potential of leisure to facilitate human exploration of roles beyond what the realm of work and responsibility offers. Csikszentmihalyi's [5], insight into leisure as a site of flow where one feels most alive further testifies to the potential of leisure as a domain of activity that animates the enjoying, problem solving, and exploring potential of the human condition. All these literature points to the potential of leisure to allow a human to expand and rise above the boundaries, the obligatory, and the routine of everyday work and living.

Leisure and the preferences people express within it are not arbitrary or trivial; rather, they are profound indicators of what individuals value in life. Leisure choices often reveal the underlying priorities, aspirations, and meanings that structure one's existence. Kelly [6,7], has argued that leisure serves as a "mirror of the self," where the activities people freely choose reflect deeply held values and commitments. In this sense, what one does during leisure is more than mere pastime; it is an articulation

of identity and meaning. From a psychological perspective, Iso-Ahola [8], and Deci and Ryan [3], underscore the role of intrinsic motivation in leisure: people tend to choose activities that feel self-congruent, enjoyable, and aligned with their inner sense of worth. These preferences often reflect enduring values such as creativity, belonging, autonomy, or achievement. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that leisure is not simply "time off," but a vital arena where personal and cultural values are enacted. The preferences expressed within leisure—whether for solitude or community, for creativity or physical challenge, for contemplation or social engagement—are, in effect, statements of what individuals consider significant. In this way, leisure operates both as a personal declaration of values and as a social practice through which broader cultural meanings are reproduced and reinterpreted.

For the average person, work and leisure often exist in a regular rhythm, with access to both largely unrestrained and uncontested. Yet this balance cannot be taken for granted in the lives of all. For individuals whose opportunities are shaped—and often limited—by medical, physiological, or psychological conditions, the terrain of both work and leisure is far more complex. Their access may be uneven, disrupted, or redefined in ways that differ significantly from dominant societal patterns. In this context, it becomes vital to ask: what place does leisure hold in such lives, and what unique implications and possibilities does it carry? What deeply held values and preferences are expressed through the choice and practice of leisure in their lives? This article seeks to explore precisely these questions by examining the meanings, offerings, and impacts of leisure in the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disability (ID) is a developmental condition characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, originating before the age of twenty two (AAIDD, 2021) [9]. According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2021) [9], intellectual functioning includes reasoning, problem-solving, and abstract thinking, while adaptive behaviour encompasses conceptual, social, and practical skills needed for everyday life. This dual criterion ensures that diagnosis reflects both cognitive performance and real-world functioning, rather than intelligence alone. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [10], broadens this view by recognizing that disability results from the interaction between individuals with impairments and societal barriers that hinder full and effective participation on an equal basis with others. This rights-based perspective shifts the focus from deficits within the individual to the enabling or disabling nature of social and physical environments. In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act [11], defines intellectual disability as a condition characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills. This definition aligns national law with global frameworks while recognizing the diversity of intellectual impairments.

Overall, intellectual disability is best understood not merely as a medical or psychological category, but as a socially situated condition that calls for supportive environments and inclusive practices. Contemporary approaches emphasize capacities, participation, and the right to dignity, replacing older deficit-based models with a focus on rehabilitation and person-centred supports [9-11].

Leisure and Persons with Intellectual Disability

A literature review of early studies in the field of leisure among persons with intellectual disabilities highlight how leisure was associated with life satisfaction but also revealed that most leisure participation remained passive and highly controlled by caregivers, often characterized by infantilization [12,13]. Reynolds (2002) [14], and others documented the structural barriers that prevented fuller participation—such as financial constraints, lack of resources, transport, and community attitudes—while Buttimer and Tierney (2005) [15], found that persons with intellectual disabilities were more likely to engage in solitary, passive activities compared to their peers. This body of work emphasized that leisure for this population was qualitatively different, often constrained, and shaped by power relations, which led Aitchison [16], to call for the development of a dedicated field of "disability leisure". This call for a separate field of "disability leisure" by Aitchison was a result of her strong understanding of the unique nature of leisure life of persons with disabilities, for whom leisure served as the core domain for engagement and expression of self socially. The call for a separate domain of "disability leisure" was also to critically analyse how exclusionary practices and ableist assumptions restricted leisure opportunities for persons with disabilities.

More recent studies have underscored both the challenges and the transformative potential of leisure. Research in Korea showed that leisure satisfaction strongly predicts life satisfaction, highlighting its role in fostering independence, self-esteem, and positive social relationships [17]. In India, studies revealed that children with intellectual disabilities largely experienced leisure within family settings, with activities often remaining passive and dependent on familial support [18].

Much ground has still to be explored in the understanding of leisure of persons with intellectual disabilities. There is a need to understand leisure as an experience- understanding the qualitative and phenomenological dimensions of the leisure experiences. The leisure experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities in the developing world, in countries such as India has also to be explored to understand the breadth of leisure

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experience for the human condition. The paper focuses on a study that explored the phenomenological aspects of leisure in the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities in the south of India.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how persons with intellectual disabilities experience leisure in the contexts of their everyday lives. The methodology drew on Moustakas' [19], transcendental phenomenology while also incorporating insights from critical phenomenology [20,21]. This combination allowed the study to remain attentive to the depth of individual accounts, while also questioning the social and structural conditions that influence how leisure is made possible—or limited—for this group. Seventeen participants—eight women and nine men aged 18 to 45—were selected through a process of purposive sampling. Participants were recruited purposively from special schools, community centres, and residential institutions across the district, ensuring representation of both genders, age groups, and living contexts (home and institutional). Gatekeepers such as teachers, therapists, and social workers facilitated initial introductions, after which informed consent was sought from both participants and their legal guardians. The guiding criterion was the participants' ability and willingness to share their leisure experiences through participation. To ensure inclusion, the researcher conducted interviews in familiar, comfortable settings — often at participants' schools, homes, or institutions — where they could feel at ease and supported. Sessions were kept short, adaptive, and flexible, and spread across multiple sittings. Trusted caregivers or teachers were occasionally present to assist in clarifying communication but were instructed not to influence or answer on behalf of participants.

Rather than following a structured set of questions, conversations remained open-ended and responsive, encouraging participants to speak about their leisure routines, preferences, and experiences of joy or restriction. Observations made during shared moments—such as dancing, drawing, singing, and household tasks—complemented these dialogues. Participants interested in photography were given cameras to capture what they enjoyed in their surroundings, serving as both an icebreaker and an expression of choice. Within these organic interactions, subtle gestures of autonomy, preference, and longing became visible.

The 17 participants in this study, all residents of Thiruvananthapuram in south India and aged between 18 and 45, brought with them a wide spectrum of lived worlds. Their leisure stories were as varied as their daily rhythms. Among the women, Sigi's[1] yearning for companionship and her enduring love of cinema contrasted with Laila's calm pleasure in broom-making and her gentle caregiving presence within the institution. Others—such as Kunjumol, Veena, and Rakhi—expressed sociability and creativity through dance, craftwork, and music, while participants like Arathy and Bismi found leisure in the quieter textures of gardening, colouring, or solitary contemplation. The men's narratives reflected a similar breadth. Vinod's thoughtful routines, and aspiration to teach stood alongside Dileep's disciplined athleticism and his longing for familial closeness. The twin brothers, Kiran and Sarun, animated their days with movie-watching and an catchy sense of personal style, while Adil inhabited a vibrant ecosystem of friendships. Others—such as Sunoj, Saji, and Manikkuttan—found dignity and purpose in simple, steady acts: watering plants, folding clothes, playing drums, or caring for peers. Varun's life near the sea, punctuated by solitary walks afternoon spent listening to radio, revealed leisure's quiet persistence even within isolation. Taken together, these narratives portray leisure not as mere recreation but as a deeply human terrain of belonging, expression, and meaning—one where agency, affection, and adaptability continue to flourish despite structural and institutional constraints.

Happening concurrently with data collection was the process of epoché. In the phenomenological study on leisure among individuals with intellectual disabilities, the process of epoché —or bracketing—was central to the researcher's approach, enabling the phenomenon to be encountered without distortion from personal assumptions. The researcher initially held conventional notions of leisure as autonomous, pleasurable, and distinct from work, influenced by dominant cultural narratives and theories such as Stebbins' [4], "serious leisure." However, engagement with participants challenged these assumptions. Through conscious reflexivity, the researcher suspended preconceived links between leisure and autonomy, productivity, or pleasure, and began to view it as a contextual, relational, and deeply personal experience. Practicing epoché required both cognitive and emotional discipline: acknowledging and setting aside feelings of pity, frustration, or idealization that could shape interpretations. This reflexive bracketing helped the researcher move beyond stereotypes or "super-crip" narratives, appreciating instead the unique, diverse, and relational expressions of leisure in participants' lives.

Further analysis was guided by the steps of phenomenological reduction, including horizontalization, clustering of meanings, and imaginative variation. A critical reading was then layered onto the findings, drawing attention to how institutional rules, family expectations, gender roles, and spatial restrictions shaped the way leisure was lived and understood. In this study, work was understood as those activities — whether paid, unpaid, structured or informal — that individuals perceive or are socially expected to perform in fulfilment of moral, familial, social, or role-based responsibilities. These are the tasks 'one ought to do' because they sustain relationships, contribute to collective well-being, or honour social commitments, whether or not they yield material reward. Leisure on the other hand was seen as those activities that individuals voluntarily pursue due to intrinsic motivation, those that facilitate enjoyment.

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Findings

Leisure in the Crevices of Everyday Life

When asked what she enjoyed most during her day, Veena, a 43-year-old woman attending a special school, responded without hesitation

I like being in the kitchen in the morning. She elaborated, *I make my own hot water, to drink… I boil the water myself and fill my bottle. I take it to school with me*

Adil, a 20-year-old man, shared

I like going to the barber shop with Uppa (father)*… I see many in the neighbourhood there……I also like it when he takes me to the bakery… Being outside with Uppa.*

Leisure, for the participants, was not a pursuit of grandeur or planned recreation. It breathed quietly through the smallest gestures of the day — the warmth of water poured into a bottle, the familiar rhythm of walking beside a loved one, the gentle hum of routine that framed their worlds. In these unassuming acts, joy shimmered softly. Participants expressed more about these everyday pleasures than about the scheduled "leisure periods" offered in schools or institutions. What these examples show is that leisure for persons with intellectual disabilities often lies not in novelty or escape, but in the familiar rhythms of ordinary living.

The significance of these small pleasures is especially striking in light of the restricted freedoms many participants experience. Most participants spent the majority of their daily lives within the confines of their homes or institutional settings. Their engagement with the outside world was limited to rare trips—to the hospital, a nearby shop, or, an infrequent visit to the beach. For those who lived at home and attended school, the daily journey to and from the classroom offered one of the few regular opportunities to step beyond these boundaries and experience the wider community.

For Sigi, even a simple walk to the beach behind her house is contingent on the availability of her eight-year-old nephew, who must accompany her for safety. Laila, similarly, can gather cashews from the courtyard trees, an activity she deeply enjoys only when a caregiver is present to supervise her. These situations reveal that access to leisure is shaped not only by structural dependence, but by a constellation of factors—family rules, risk perceptions, institutional norms, gendered expectations, and the broader social imaginaries of disability. Together, these forces delimit when, where, and how leisure can be accessed, making autonomy fragile and negotiated.

Yet, within these layered constraints, participants continued to find and create joy in the spaces available to them. Sigi describes her routine to the beach,

I go to the beach *with Monkuttan….We walk..*

Her sister, Girlie, interjects, *I have told Monkuttan not to let Sigi go near water. She can't swim.* Sigi likes the beach because, *there is a horse. We go to see the horse.*

Sigi's narrative reveals how leisure emerges not from unfettered freedom but from a choreography of permissions, protections, and relationships. Even within this mediated space, her delight is unmistakable: the walk, the presence of her nephew, and the ritual of visiting the horse next door together.

These accounts illuminate how participants' leisure reflects a profoundly adaptive and resilient orientation to life. Pleasure surfaces in modest, relational, everyday acts—suggesting that the most meaningful sources of well-being often arise not from grand experiences, but from the quiet openings that persist within constrained worlds.

Beyond the Work–Leisure Binary

For several participants, activities typically categorised as "work" became meaningful and even pleasurable parts of their day. Laila's narratives offer a striking example. During the interview, her eyes brightened whenever she spoke about the kitchen area or the washing space. She described, with unmistakable pride, how she washed plates after meals. It was not the mechanical act she emphasised, but its purpose. Holding an imaginary plate in her hands, she explained softly but firmly:

People have to eat, no?

This simple question carried layers of meaning. For Laila, the task was not a chore; it was a contribution. Washing plates was intertwined with the idea that others are fed, that a part of the life in the institution flows because someone—she—also helps keep things moving. Her narration conveyed a sense of quiet responsibility, and a joy that emerged not from leisure as escape, but from participation in the everyday life of her community.

Laila expressed similar enthusiasm for making brooms and doormats. These tasks were formally assigned as part of routine institutional work, yet she often volunteered to take on more. As she described the process—sorting the fibres, tying them neatly, shaping the broom—her hands moved as though rehearsing the motions. She spoke of these activities not with resignation but with warmth, as though they were personally meaningful projects rather than obligatory chores.

A similar outlook was shared by Kiran and Sarun, twin brothers who both described their favourite activities in ways that blurred the line between work and leisure.

Researcher: "So your mother says, you like going out outdoors … what is your favourite place Sarun?"

Sarun: *"The temple. I wash plates and glasses. All of the very many of them."*

Their mother added context that reinforced their orientation toward purposeful activity.

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Mother: *Both of them… they always help. At home, in the temple… wherever they go, they want to do something.*

Her remark highlighted that their enjoyment was not episodic but part of a consistent pattern—seeking out opportunities to contribute, to participate, to be useful.

Kiran, then added to the account: *I arrange desks in school. In the evening. I do it myself.*

On further exploration, Kiran did not answer in words. Instead, he smiled, folding his arms closely around his chest and rocking gently—a gesture that carried its own meaning. The pleasure he felt was evident not in explanation but in embodied expression, as though the satisfaction of aligning desks into neat order was something he felt deeply.

Other participants also described household or institutional chores as ways of feeling active, engaged, and productive. Rakhi, for instance, spoke about helping her mother with evident pride, framing these contributions as part of her leisure rather than as obligation. During the interview, she stated:

I go buy grocery. Alone. After a pause, she added with a shy smile, *Amma (mother) likes it… My sister goes to college. I help Amma. I help in kitchen too.*

Her words carried a quiet assurance: being the one who could step in, run errands, and support the household gave her a sense of purpose. What might be viewed as routine domestic labour was, for Rakhi, a source of enjoyment and meaning—an expression of contribution, competence, and belonging. For these participants, routine tasks gained a recreational quality when combined with personal meaning and a sense of contribution. Helping others was itself a source of fulfilment, while the act of helping brought joy and a sense of leisure.

This theme recurred across other participants and settings. Manikkuttan described his leisure simply as *"joli cheyyan"* (doing work), recalling how he assisted construction workers at the institution he lived in and cared for chickens and ducks. Saji, living in a men's institution, spoke with pride about sweeping the campus and watering plants, remarking: *"If I don't do water, won't they wilt?"*

Sunoj, who came from a financially well-off family, also described his favourite activities in ways that centred on the quiet satisfaction of simple tasks. When asked what he most enjoyed doing at the institution, he did not mention television, games, or the outings available to him. Instead, he responded immediately:

"I like folding clothes."

As he spoke, his hands lifted slightly, mimicking the motion of smoothing fabric. He added, with a small nod of pride,

"I fold it nicely… like this."

He then described another task he looked forward to each day:

"I switch on the lights in the corridor."

The corners of his mouth lifted as he explained the sequence:

"One… then one… then one."

He pressed an imaginary switch, making a soft clicking sound with his tongue, as if replaying the sensory satisfaction of the moment.

Even though he had access to many other "fun" pursuits, in the form of institutional leisure activities, it were these modest daily tasks that he chose to emphasise. The feel of the cloth in his hands, the tiny resistance of the switch under his finger, the glow of lights coming alive — these were the experiences he recalled most vividly.

Taken together, these accounts challenge conventional understandings of leisure as strictly separate from work or as exclusively recreational. For the participants in this study, the line between work and leisure was porous. Activities typically framed as work were imbued with intrinsic rewards—joy, creativity, connection, and a sense of responsibility. Leisure, in their lives, appeared less about escaping duties and more about engaging meaningfully with the world around them.

Emotions and Motivations Associated with Leisure

Emotions, for the participants, were not easily spoken; they revealed themselves through gestures, silences, and small acts. Leisure as a quiet unfolding — felt in the rhythm of sweeping, in the laughter that passed between two friends, in the stillness of watching sunlight on a wall. The researcher, moving alongside them — through games, shared movie hours, yoga sessions, and music classes — began to sense leisure not as a category of activity but as a mode of being: moments when the participants seemed most themselves, most at ease in their worlds.

The experiences revealed a spectrum of feeling — joy, belonging, curiosity, pride, calm, and sometimes, longing. These emotions were not declared but lived — expressed in the spark in an eye, the hum of a song under the breath, the steady repetition of a familiar act. Ummu's morning routine of sweeping the courtyard, done with the same wide arcs of the arm each day, held the cadence of an inner peace. The soft scrape of the broom against sand was almost meditative — a sound that marked the beginning of the day and, perhaps, anchored her within it. In Ummu's words, *"I sweep.. I clean our yard and aunty's yard…. Every morning… I pluck flowers..new ones.. I see them first".*

For Manikkuttan, the daily visit to the nearby construction site or the tending of animals in the shed offered a similar rhythm — a small constellation of tasks that gave the day its shape. The repetition here was not a dull loop. It was an assurance — a way of inhabiting time with intention in lives where time was often structured by others. Manikkuttan's friend, 9 year old Raghu, who is also the caretakers's son, says, *"He works works all the time. Without any rest. Work.. work… work.. non-stop".*

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In the institutional spaces, where choices were narrow and schedules dense, routine it seems becomes a refuge. The known sequence of tasks gave a sense of control, and through that control, pleasure. Leisure emerged here as the comfort of predictability — a refuge that takes root in repetition. Leisure was also the texture of companionship. It glowed in the nearness of others — in Kunjumol's laughter beside her father as they watched YouTube videos together, in Laila's gentle care for Najida, her fellow resident. Laila refers to her as *She is my baby….I plait her hair, help dress her and we sit together… I take care of her"*

The joy was relational, not individual — a current that flowed between people, transforming chores into communion. The making of brooms, the folding of mats, the shared songs — these were acts of togetherness, through which participants affirmed, again and again they belonged in companionship with the people they held close in their living spaces.

For many, leisure also bore a pulse of purpose — a sense that doing was a way of being useful, of mattering. Helping, for them, was not service but self-expression. *"People have to eat, no?"* Laila said, her words simple, her meaning profound when she talked about why she enjoyed washing plates at the institution's kitchen. Saji's watering of plants, his care for their life, became a mirror of his own need to nurture and persist. These gestures of purpose wove meaning into the mundane, assuring that their actions sustained both others and themselves.

In general, across the lives of the participants, leisure appeared not as escape but as engagement — not a departure from duty but an embrace of it. It shimmered in repetition, companionship, and purpose. It was felt through hands that worked, bodies that moved, voices that sang — each act an affirmation of being connected, and capable within the boundaries of dependence.

Expression and Agency

Dependence formed the atmosphere of many lives in this study — a dense air of care, supervision, and routine that shaped the boundaries of being. Participants lived within spaces defined by others — the mother's watchful eye, the caregiver's hand, the timetable of the institution. Safety and love wrapped around them, yet this same care often narrowed their worlds. Kitchens were forbidden, outings rare, movements supervised. And still, within these limits, life expanded — through the ways they inhabited those limits, reworking them from the inside. Within these enclosures, something delicate persisted: a pulse of will, of quiet choosing. Leisure appeared here not as freedom from control but as a slow negotiation with it — a rhythm of adaptation, resistance, and expression, carried out in gestures so small they might go unnoticed. Their agency was rarely expressed in large-scale decisions but rather in small, moment-to-moment choices—what may be called micro-agency. This took the form of carving out enjoyment in everyday chores despite structural limitations, reimagining routine tasks as purposeful and adapting limited settings and resources in ways to achieve a sense of enjoyment and purpose.

Participants spoke of finding joy in places and activities that might otherwise appear mundane: Laila described *"feeling the wind while standing on hill top"* during routine cashew-picking walks with a caregiver; Adil enjoyed visits to the barber with his father; and Veena spoke fondly of preparing hot water and packing her school lunch. Such accounts highlight how leisure was woven organically into the everyday rhythms of living.

Agency in these worlds did not announce itself loudly; it shimmered quietly in the reworking of chores into expression, in the insistence on joy where joy was not designed to be. One such example, was what could be observed in the way, one of the participants, Ummu engaged in self-expression in her school. Ummu's habit of bringing earrings and bangles to school was not a simple matter of adornment. Each morning she arrived with a small cloth pouch tucked carefully into her bag — its faded floral print hiding a tiny, curated world. Inside lay hoops, studs, brightly coloured plastic bangles, a pair of silver jhumkas wrapped in tissue. Between classes she would slip her hand into the pouch, selecting a new combination with the seriousness of someone choosing a mood. The quiet click of a bangle sliding over her wrist, the soft jingle as she shook her hands to settle them in place, the tilt of her head as she fastened a new earring — all of it formed a choreography of selfhood.

She was not simply decorating; she was *announcing*. Each change signalled something — a playful defiance of routine, a small insistence on beauty, a way of saying *I am here, I am choosing.* Her classmates watched her avidly; a few giggled. With each class, she emerged slightly altered, beaming with the pleasure of self-fashioning in a world that often gave her little space to decide anything at all. Such acts whispered of autonomy: not defiance, but the shaping of meaning from within the structure that held them. In these lives, agency and leisure were inseparable — both lived as forms of quiet creativity. Work-like tasks, routines, and duties were not simply endured; they were reimagined, repurposed, made personal. Each act of care became a declaration: I can give, I can choose, I can make this mine.

Discussion

The findings in the study point to 4 themes that populate the leisure lives of the participants with intellectual disability in the study- the disengagement from leisure as "free time", the importance of relatedness and purpose in leisure, the sense of eudaimonia in leisure and leisure as a site of agency.

Beyond free time

One of the striking insights from the data from the study is that leisure is a state of mind rather than free time or activity type. Leisure was seen to be defined more by subjective experience rather than objective categorisation as free time or a particular

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activity. This aligns with literature that states that leisure is not universally defined by specific actions or standardized markers of free time but that it is shaped by individual perceptions and subjective experiences [22-24]. Participants in the study identify as leisure the chores they engage in, service they do for their families or communities and seem to value these activities for the way they help them to remain useful and connected even though these activities are not identified typically as "leisure".

This view of chores as leisure corresponds to insights from Aitchison's work [16,25,26], that highlighted how leisure has many work-like qualities for persons with disabilities. Most of the persons with intellectual disabilities are unemployed, and they are dependent on their caregivers for support and assistance to engage in leisure activities also. Leisure activities, so, often takes the role of work in the lives of these individuals to act as sites to express identity, purpose and sense of service. Participants in this study are seen to find comfort, enjoyment, and continuity in repetitive work-like tasks. The data from the study therefore strengthens argument made by Aitchison for the need for a more inclusive, nuanced understanding of leisure—one that moves beyond rigid work-leisure distinctions and instead recognizes meaningful engagement, purpose, and social connection as central to leisure for persons with intellectual disabilities. When the researcher enquired upon the sentiments behind enjoying work, participants responded in ways that illustrated their value of being recognised, connected and being useful through their chores. These findings from this study demonstrate that persons with intellectual disabilities, like all human beings, are animated by a desire to matter—to be seen, needed, and appreciated within their social contexts.

Self-Determination Theory [3], identifies competence, autonomy, and relatedness as core psychological needs, suggesting that individuals flourish when they feel effective, connected, and in control. Rosenberg and McCullough's [27], concept of "mattering" encapsulates the basic human need to feel important and impactful in the lives of others. While persons with intellectual disabilities face constraints to full autonomy, their capacity for competence and relational connection is facilitated through their daily chores. Participants such as Veena, who finds satisfaction in packing her bag and preparing for school, or Rakhi, who delights in shopping independently for her family, reflect intrinsic motivation to act meaningfully within the scope of their lives.

Even mundane actions like folding clothes, helping a friend, or sweeping a compound take on significant symbolic and affective weight, affirming one's place in the social fabric. Thus, the desire to be useful, competent, and significant is not absent in persons with intellectual disabilities. Rather, it is often expressed in quiet but powerful forms, embedded in daily routines, relationships, and care practices. These expressions deserve not only recognition but structural support. As Frankl [28], wrote, meaning is the deepest driver of human life. This study affirms that persons with intellectual disabilities are no different in this regard—they seek to live lives that are not only cared for, but also caring and meaningful in themselves and leisure becomes a site of expression of that.

Relatedness, and Purpose in Leisure

Findings from this study suggest that what makes an activity "leisurely" for persons with intellectual disabilities is not its outward form, but the psychological 'state of being' it engenders. As leisure theorists have long argued, leisure is fundamentally a subjective experience, marked by freedom, intrinsic motivation, and pleasure [4-6]. In the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities, one conventional hallmarks of leisure—autonomy—is sparsely present in an unqualified sense. Participants in the study lived in contexts of high dependence, where families, caregivers, and institutions determined much of their daily activity. Sigi's access to the beach, contingent on her 8-year-old nephew, or Laila's engagement in broom-making and plate-washing regulated by her matrons in her institution, are telling examples of this.

Despite these constraints, participants still experienced joy and fulfilment in activities were engendered in restrictive environments. Washing plates, sweeping yards, watering plants, or preparing hot water became meaningful because they were infused with purpose, connection, and responsibility. While mainstream leisure theories emphasize autonomy as central, the data here suggest that for participants in the study, relatedness and purpose often outweigh autonomy as a motivation for leisure. Leisure is not diminished because it is shared, supervised, or embedded in daily routines. Rather, its meaning seems to lie in the capacity to connect, contribute, and find satisfaction within available spaces.

The data further underscore that leisure for persons with intellectual disabilities carries a strong dimension of purposefulness and relatedness. Participants derived satisfaction from activities that affirmed their roles in their families, institutions, and communities. Laila's remark, *"People have to eat, no?"* when explaining her enjoyment of washing plates, or Saji's insistence on watering plants lest they "wilt," reveal a deep ethical awareness that ties leisure to contribution and care. Such accounts resonate with self-determination theory, which identifies competence and relatedness as core psychological needs [3].

Importantly, these findings show how leisure takes on functions that, for many others, are fulfilled through formal employment or civic roles. In the absence of such avenues, leisure becomes the primary site for expressing competence, identity, and social value. Activities like shopping independently, preparing meals, or helping peers with chores became occasions for participants to demonstrate capability and relatedness within the limits imposed on them. In this sense, leisure is both compensatory and transformative.

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Leisure as a site of Agency

Shakespeare and Kittay [29,30], discuss how restrictions rooted in care, though well-intentioned, can limit the autonomy of persons with disabilities—what may be understood as 'benevolent limitations.' The narratives in this study demonstrate that participants in the study face many such benevolent limitations in their lives. However, they are not passive recipients of such limitations and limiting structures. Instead, they engage with what may be called micro-agency—small, context-specific acts of resistance, adaptation, and meaning-making that allow them to personalize and reshape their everyday worlds.

One aspect of this exercise of agency is that the exercise is one of micro-overtures - small modifications to express a preference. Such expressions remind us that agency is not defined by scale but by significance. Small acts—Adil savouring visits to the barber with his father and Ummu carrying her jewellery to school and wearing new earrings after each session bell, are all cherished autonomy claimed in constrained contexts. This resonates with de Certeau's [31], idea of everyday "tactics" simple adaptations humans make in everyday living to exert their agency.

Another feature of the agency exercised by persons with intellectual disability with regards to leisure is affiliated to Mahmood's [32], argument that agency lies not only in overt resistance but also in inhabiting norms with meaning. Saba Mahmood [32], in her work Politics of Piety, urges us to rethink agency not only as resistance but also as the capacity to 'inhabit' norms and make meaning within them—an idea highly resonant in the lives of institutionalized or closely supervised individuals with intellectual disabilities. Participants in this study did not often reject their circumstances outright but found ways to infuse them with personal meaning—choosing which TV show to enjoy, savoring a routine walk with a caregiver, or caring for others who live with them with affection and pride etc. This perspective is also reinforced by Veena Das [33], who suggests that agency may lie in the repetition of ordinary acts that hold emotional and existential significance.

Ultimately, these findings reposition leisure as something not "delivered" to persons with intellectual disabilities but something they actively shape within their environments, routines, and relationships. In this sense, leisure becomes a quiet but powerful testimony to their creativity, adaptability, and humanity [34-40].

Beyond hedonism

Synthesizing these insights, leisure in the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities emerges as eudaimonic rather than hedonic. While conventional views frame leisure as a break from obligation or a pursuit of pleasure, participants in this study located its meaning in contribution, connection, and responsibility. Their leisure was rarely about escape or novelty; it was about mattering to others, sustaining relationships, and experiencing purpose within routines. Watching television with family, sweeping a courtyard, changing bangles at school, or braiding a friend's hair during a movie screening were all narrated as leisure—not because of their recreational form, but because of the meaning they carried [41-50].

This challenges normative, individualistic notions of leisure and highlights the importance of relational and teleological perspectives. Leisure here is interwoven with daily life, overlapping with duty, routine, and care. It is a site where agency is exercised in micro-ways, where identity and competence are affirmed, and where relational flourishing takes precedence over individual autonomy. In this sense, the leisure of persons with intellectual disabilities is best understood not as absence of work or as freedom in the abstract, but as eudaimonia, relatedness and purpose in action: a lived pursuit of purpose, connection, and well-being within the realities of dependence and constraint [51-54].

Conclusion

The data from the study strongly suggests that leisure in the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities not be understood through conventional definitions of free time, recreation, or autonomy alone. Instead, leisure emerges as a deeply embedded and relational practice, often intertwined with chores, caregiving, and everyday routines. Participants in the study located joy and meaning in small acts of contribution, finding purpose in helping others, sustaining relationships, and cultivating a sense of mattering within constrained environments. These accounts reveal the porousness of the work–leisure divide and also the eudaimonic way in which leisure is sought and engaged with. Moreover, the findings affirm that leisure is not a trivial adjunct to life but a vital domain through which persons with intellectual disabilities express agency, identity, and dignity. The individual case examples highlight the resilience and creativity with which individuals reimagine limited opportunities as sites of fulfilment. Recognizing chores, relational engagements, and micro-acts of resistance as leisure underscores the need for inclusive leisure theory and practice. For policy and caregiving contexts, this calls for a shift from viewing leisure as a "delivered service" to leisure empowering spaces where persons with intellectual disabilities can exercise preference, experience connection, and engage meaningfully with people and nature around them.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) of the Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology (IIST) that follows ICMR guidelines which operationalize Helsinki principles in the Indian socio-legal context.

All procedures were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the research process was carried out

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abiding by the values and principles in United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Informed consent for participation was obtained from the legal guardians of all participants. Participants themselves were provided with accessible explanations of the study, and their voluntary assent was respected throughout the research process.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. No identifiable personal data are published in this manuscript. Names where mentioned have been changed.

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