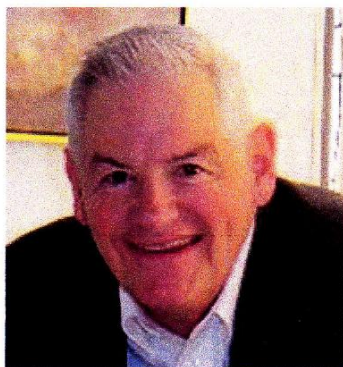


Leisure Reflections



Robert A. Stebbins

Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with 40 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 47 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); *Serious Leisure and Nature: Sustainable Consumption in the Outdoors* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011, with Lee Davidson); *The Idea of Leisure: First Principles* (Transaction, 2012); and *Work and Leisure in the Middle East* (Transaction, 2013). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1999, and Senior Fellow of the World Leisure Academy in 2010. He has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, most recently as President of the Centre d'accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

Website (personal): <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~stebbins>

Website (perspective): <http://www.seriousleisure.net>

Leisure Reflections . . . No. 36

Experience as Knowledge: Its Place in Leisure

Experience is a key concept in leisure studies. Its nature and centrality in the field are well described in Kleiber, Walker and Mannell (2011, chap. 4). The leisure experience is a state of mind, a feeling about what is happening to oneself during un-coerced agreeable activity pursued in free, or non-obligated, time. The phenomenological basis of leisure is nowhere better set out than in the research and theory on this subject. Moreover, I use it as one of two angles from which to define in detail the very idea of leisure (Stebbins, 2012, pp. 10-12).

Nevertheless, the goal of this article is not to discuss the leisure experience, but rather to clarify for leisure studies a related concept, namely, that of experience as knowledge, or *experiential knowledge*, as Thomasina Borkman referred to it over 35 years ago. She defined experiential knowledge as 'truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others' (Borkman, 1976, p. 446). She identified 'the two most important elements of experiential knowledge'. One is the type of information on which it is based. That type consists of wisdom and know-how gained from personal participation in a phenomenon instead of isolated, unorganized bits of facts and feelings on which a person has not reflected. This wisdom and know-how tend to be concrete, specific, and commonsensical, since they are based on the individual's actual experience, which is unique, limited, yet more or less representative of the experience of others participating in the same activity.

The second element is one's attitude toward that information. In other words, what level of 'certitude' does the participant have toward the experiential knowledge that he or she has acquired. The idea of experiential knowledge 'denotes a high degree of conviction that the insights learned from direct participation in a situation are truth, because the individual has faith in the validity and authority of the knowledge obtained by being a part of a phenomenon' (Borkman, 1976, p. 447). She adds that experiential knowledge is different from information provided by others. The second refers to being acquainted with or able to recognize facts, whereas the first has to do with understanding or having a complete mental grasp of the nature and significance of something.

Experiential Knowledge in Leisure

Borkman's research on experiential knowledge centred on that gained while serving in self-help groups, participation in which for some members may be conceived of as career (serious leisure) volunteering (not a term she used). My interest in this article, however, is much broader. It revolves around the role that experiential knowledge plays in all leisure experience. In what ways are a participant's experiences in a leisure activity influenced by that person's acquired wisdom and know-how and the certitude with which these two are held? Experiential knowledge can be an important part of both the serious and the casual leisure experience (for definitions of serious, casual and project-based leisure and related terms, see www.seriousleisure.net).

[net/concepts](#)). Still, such knowledge appears to play little or no role in project-based leisure, primarily because the projects commonly have no relevant experience-generating precursors.

Serious Leisure

Wisdom and know-how in the serious leisure activities are highly specialized for each activity. That is, each serious leisure activity has its own distinctive body of experiential knowledge. The following exemplify this distinctiveness:

1. Skiing alternatively in shady and sunny areas in well-above freezing temperatures, I learn to anticipate abrupt changes in 'glide' (rate of speed).
2. Presenting my stand-up comedy routine, I learn how long I should wait while the audience laughs at the end of the present 'joke' before introducing the next one (Stebbins, 1990, p. 52).
3. Raising outdoor plants I learn which species thrive best in which parts of my garden according to the amount of wind, rain and sun they receive there.
4. Playing poker (as an amateur or a professional), I learn which bluffing tactics work best against which kinds of players.
5. Collecting antique furniture, I learn how to bargain for the best price for each piece I am interested in buying.
6. Practising their trade, amateur and professional emergency medical workers develop a sense of patient behaviour according to the injury or illness at hand.

Wisdom is illustrated in numbers 1-3 and 6. Numbers 4 and 5 seem better qualified as examples of know-how or knack, including the tricks of the trade. Wisdom is factual, whereas know-how/knack is an acquired often subtle sense of what to do or what is appropriate in certain circumstances. There are probably factual elements in 4 and 5 as there are in the other examples. Furthermore, specific, concrete facts generated from experience can be discussed with fellow participants as parts of a shared, activity-related common sense, as parts of that activity's social world.

Not so with know-how; it is generally too subtle to verbalize clearly. Puddephatt (2003) discusses know-how in chess: 'thus, as players develop meanings for certain pieces, moves, and overall approaches to the game, these preferences become routinized and influence the way they perceive, judge, and make decisions in play'. (p. 268)

Know-how is developed through the senses. In the case of physical activities, the use of muscles for balance and lifting, for example, is partly a matter of learning. Optimal positioning in space sometimes as it relates to gravity is another (e.g., ski jumping, auto racing, animal photography). Meanwhile, experienced cooks and gourmet diners develop an educated and discriminating taste for *haute cuisine* (de Solier, 2013, pp. 78-79). An accomplished musician learns to hear when the ensemble is playing well (and when it is not). Amateur and professional interior decorators develop an eye for balance and color in a room. To be sure, there is a genetic basis for some of this, but some of it is also learned through constant participation in the core activity.

Certitude, the other element in experiential knowledge, is even more difficult to express than know-how. Practically speaking, it is the participant's faith that his or her wisdom and know-how have met their test many times over. This person knows from long experience that the first is valid and the second works. Certitude begets confidence, a solid self-assurance founded on experienced reality. Veteran professionals told me in the study of Canadian football (Stebbins, 1993) that, although they have less energy, stamina and speed than their younger teammates, experience (experiential knowledge) makes up substantially for these deficiencies. It was said of Peyton Manning, aging quarterback of the Denver Broncos (American) football team: 'Flashiness doesn't automatically win the day. Neither does fleetness. But smarts, patience, plotting? These are paramount, and they're less pronounced in youth than in the rickety, wobbly expanse beyond it' (Bruni, 2014).

A large and useful stock of experiential knowledge is a source of pride in the serious pursuits (i.e., serious leisure and devotee work, Stebbins, 2012, pp. 69-85). Put otherwise, it is a main ingredient in the self-fulfillment realized through the pursuit's core activity¹. Experienced participants can find immense satisfaction in their core activities, partly because of their considerable accumulated experiential knowledge.

Casual Leisure

Can we learn experiential truth from participating in casual leisure? Can we gain wisdom and know-how from such activity and eventually come to regard both with certitude? Is this possible in what is basically hedonism? Let us examine these possibilities in three types of casual leisure: play, casual volunteering and sociable conversation.

Play — one of eight types of casual leisure — bears a special relationship to a number of serious pursuits (i.e., serious leisure and devotee work, Stebbins, 2012), for it generates some vital experiential knowledge that facilitates their execution and enhances the participant's sense of fulfillment. During play, wherein participants consciously or semi-consciously produce, identify, and weigh ideas and choices, they are absorbed in imaginative, creative activity. Such highly rewarding sessions may result in for instance, a wonderfully written passage of poetry, brilliantly performed set of athletic manoeuvres in basketball or exquisitely flavored sauce in cooking. These are serious pursuits, yet they get a significant part of their impetus from casual leisure of the type called play (Stebbins, 2013).

Play activities of this sort are often spur-of-the-moment, as seen in manoeuvres in sport, interpretations in music, choices of words in creative writing, implications of exploratory data in science, artistic renderings of raw craft material, among many other possibilities in the serious pursuits. These playful possibilities are enriched with experience, such that later in the leisure/work career an accumulated body of very specific knowledge may be brought to bear on any given moment of play in the activity. In play the knowledge applied is that of know-how. Wisdom is mighty important, too, but by contrast

its application is conscious, intentional and therefore decidedly not play-like.

Casual volunteering requires no skill- or knowledge-based background, though there are typically some on-the-spot instructions about what the volunteer is to do while 'on the job'. Casual volunteering includes distributing leaflets, collecting money on street corners, taking tickets at school concerts, serving meals at community kitchens, and stuffing envelopes. It is possible to gain some experiential knowledge in some of these activities. Those who collect money on street corners could, over time, learn which passersby are most likely to contribute to the can and where to position themselves geographically to stimulate their largesse. Experiential knowledge among the servers of community meals might include accumulated wisdom about the dietary preferences of regular consumers as well as their conversational preferences.

According to Simmel (1949), the essence of sociable conversation lies in its playfulness, a quality enjoyed for its intrinsic value. Sociable conversation guarantees the participants maximization of such values as joy, relief and vivacity; it is democratic activity in that the pleasure of one person is dependent on that of the other people in the exchange. Because it is a non-instrumental exchange between persons, sociable conversation is destroyed when someone introduces a wholly personal interest or goal and maintained when all participants exhibit amiability, cordiality, attractiveness, and proper breeding.

Sociable conversations can spring up in a wide variety of settings at any time during a person's waking hours. They often develop in such public conveyances as buses, taxis and airplanes. Waiting rooms (e.g., emergency rooms, dentists' offices) and waiting areas (e.g., queues, bus stops) may beget sociable conversations among those with no choice but to be there. Still, possibly the most obvious as well as the most common occasion for sociable conversation springs not from adventitious events, such as those just described, but from planned ones such as receptions, private parties and after-hours gatherings. Of course, to the extent that these get-togethers become instrumental, or problem-centred, as they can when work or some other obligation insinuates itself, their leisure character fades in proportion.

Experiential knowledge can grow from such leisure; it revolves around how to ensure that the activity is democratic and enjoyable for all participants. Such wisdom, accumulated over the years, might include allowing others to speak (refrain from 'monopolizing' the conversation), avoiding subjects of little interest to them and presenting oneself in an agreeable manner (e.g., be modest not conceited). Admittedly, many a conversationalist fails to respect these principles. In their situation experiential knowledge in conversations is dramatically different. These people have learned how to monopolize a conversation, strut conceitedly their accomplishments and perhaps even embarrass or enrage others with indiscrete observations and questions. It takes some experiential knowledge — probably much of it of the know-how variety — to be a complete boor, if that is one's wont.

**Forthcoming in LSA Newsletter No. 99
(July 2014): Robert Stebbins's *Leisure Reflections* No. 37 on 'Emotions in Leisure:
The Positive and the Negative'**

Conclusion

Experiential knowledge the importance of which should now be evident is only rarely discussed in leisure studies. Yet, it is a central part of many leisure experiences, especially for most if not all of the serious pursuits. So, when we speak of the leisure experience, we must also remember that, in some casual leisure activities and possibly all the serious pursuits, experiential knowledge is an important component. Fulfillment there depends significantly on this acquisition, as it grows across the leisure career.

Endnote

¹ The concept of the general activity in leisure (e.g., cooking, playing trumpet, collecting stamps) gets further amplified in the concept of *core activity*. A core activity is a distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve the fulfilling outcome or product that the participant seeks. As with general activities core activities are pursued in life's three domains: work, leisure and non-work obligation (Stebbins, 2012, p. 7).

References

- Borkman, T. (1976) Experiential knowledge: A new concept for the analysis of self-help groups, *The Social Service Review*, 50(3): 445-56.
- Bruni, F. (2014) Maturity's victories, *New York Times*, 1 February (online edition).
- de Solier, I. (2013) *Food and the Self: Consumption, Production and Material Culture*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Kleiber, D.A., Walker, G.J. and Mannell, R.C. (2011) *A Social Psychology of Leisure*, 2nd ed., State College, PA.: Venture.
- Puddephatt, A.J. (2003) Chess playing as strategic activity, *Symbolic Interaction*, 26(2): 263-84.
- Simmel, G. (1949) The sociology of sociability. *American Journal of Sociology*, 55: 254-61.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1990) *The Laugh-Makers: Stand-Up Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style*. Montréal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- (1993) *Canadian Football: A View from the Helmet* (reprinted ed.), Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press.
- (2012) *The Idea of Leisure: First Principles*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- (2013) 'Leisure studies and the study of play: Differences and similarities', *Leisure Reflections* No. 34) in *Leisure Studies Association Newsletter*, 96 (November): 13-16 (also available at <http://www.seriousleisure.net/digital-library.html> ,

Bob Stebbins, University of Calgary
stebbins@ucalgary.ca

Website (personal):

<http://soci.ucalgary.ca/profiles/robert-stebbins>

Website (Perspective): www.seriousleisure.net