

# Leisure Reflections No 43: Leisure's Images: Commonsense, Personal and Professional/Practitioners

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Leisure is a term whose etymologic roots date to ancient Rome and the Latin noun *licere*. In everyday parlance, leisure refers both to the time left over after work and non-work obligations – often called free time — and to the way we spend that time. Scientific attempts to define the idea have revolved, in considerable part, around the problems generated by this simplistic definition.

What are the commonsense views of leisure? These are images of it held outside those scholarly circles where it is an enduring object of inquiry (i.e., leisure studies or, somewhat more broadly, leisure science). Clearly, the lay public holds these views, but so too does the intellectual world, to the (considerable) extent that it has negligible contact with the scholarly study of leisure. Popular conceptions of leisure make difficult its scholarly study, for leisure is far more complex than meets the untrained eye. Many people who might want to take seriously the study of leisure must come to grips with these conceptions, both for themselves and for others who might question whether this interest is truly worthwhile.

The first section of this article contains a discussion of some of leisure's commonsense images, all being essentially positive in tone – leisure is regarded favorably. A section on the negative commonsense images follows.<sup>[1]</sup> There is also a personal image and a professional/practitioner image, which are not, however, of the commonsense variety.

## Leisure's Positive Images

It was just observed that popular conceptions of leisure make its scholarly study difficult, for leisure is far more complex than meets the untrained eye. That eye does get some of it right, however, for leisure is accurately (scientifically) seen in many parts of the world as being one activity or another that people like to do but do not have to do (i.e., it is un-coerced activity). I will refer to this commonsense view as its *free-choice* image. In line with the condition noted elsewhere (Stebbins, 2000), any obligation here is agreeable and hence not ordinarily felt as coerced.

But, for some people, leisure seems to be merely *residual fun*: that time when one is free of the negative obligations of work and non-work. Put otherwise, leisure is (“thank goodness”) not

work. With the free-choice image, real leisure participants are, they believe, freely pursuing an activity that interests them. By contrast, the residual image denotes a passive approach to free time, as expressed in 'I'll just vegetate' (until I must return to work, until I have to go grocery shopping, etc.). And what does such vegetation consist of? Examples include a casual, even haphazardly, searching for something interesting to do as realized through television channel surfing or flipping through the pages of a magazine. One might also vegetate by dosing, sitting outside and watching passersby, browsing on a smart phone, or lounging in the warmth of the sun or a blazing fire. All can be classified as casual leisure, as passive activity of one sort or another. The risk with residual leisure is that it can descend into boredom, given that the first seems typically to be only a half-hearted attempt to avoid the second. Residual leisure is probably most of the time short-term, rather than of longer duration as is true of the other three positive images.

Alternatively, leisure is sometimes seen today as *planned fun*, as casual leisure in quest of some kind of hedonism. This type rests on planning. After obligations are met participants here look forward to watching certain TV programs, sitting for a spell in a hot tub, reading some more of a lengthy popular novel, listening to music, and the like. A combination of such activities can be planned in advance for an upcoming period of time free of obligation.

A related image is that leisure is *spontaneous fun*, in the sense that there is little need or desire to plan in advance for it, that what we do in free time can be, perhaps should be, determined on the spot. Such leisure seems often to be born of a full schedule of work and non-work obligation such that little or no time is ordinarily available to plan free-time interests beforehand. A typical scenario might be the person unexpectedly faced with a full day clear of disagreeable obligations and the question of what to do during this time. What to do: watch some television, visit a friend, work on a puzzle, walk in a local park, play solitaire, stroll through a trendy shopping area, or do a combination of these? Much if not all of this is fun, differing from the planned-fun type primarily by its spontaneous entry into the participant's awareness. Still, clear decisions are made on the spot about what to do to optimally use of the newly found free time. Residual leisure, on the other hand, consists of drifting from one interest to another in an attempt to pass time.

Spanning these different commonsense images is that of leisure as *relaxation*, as 'down-time'. Whatever else leisure is it is neither work nor non-work obligation, unless of course, one likes one's work. Leisure in this image is a distinctive domain of life, encompassing activities that are agreeably residual, freely-chosen, planned, and spontaneous, all of which facilitate personal unwinding.

### **Leisure's Negative Images**

'For Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do', proclaimed Issac Watts some 300 years ago. Today negative views of leisure tend not to be of this genre (though some observations on boredom come close, e.g., Brissett & Snow, 1993), but rather appear in different forms. For instance, the work ethic of modern times stresses that a person should work, work hard, and avoid leisure as much as possible. Work is good, while leisure is not (although a little of it after a solid day's work is acceptable). Indeed the history of leisure shows the different negative image

problems leisure has had to face with the passage of time (Stebbins, 2009, Chap. 2). At its most general this is leisure as *unwanted activity*.

Moreover, leisure is sometimes popularly seen today as *frivolous*, as simply having fun in an activity defined by both the participant and the general public as having little value or importance beyond the immediate present. This is the public's view of women's roller derby, a serious leisure activity (Breeze, 2015). In the language of leisure studies this is casual leisure and the quest for hedonism. Having (residual, planned, spontaneous) fun here is a positive experience, of course, but all concerned nonetheless recognize the frivolity of it all.

The image of frivolity fades off into that of leisure as a *waste of time*, because frivolousness is believed by some people to lead more particularly to nothing substantial. This wastefulness image reflects the holder's belief that free time could be better spent doing something more worthwhile such as working, meeting non-work obligations, even engaging in serious or project-based leisure. The latter alternative, however, presupposes that the person in question knows about such leisure, which is by no means universally true. For, as Green and Jones (2005) observe, leisure is often described as the direct opposite of work, and therefore not always readily associated with the 'seriousness' experienced in serious and project-based leisure. Moreover, leisure studies offers another interpretation, seen in the several benefits of casual leisure that have been identified (Stebbins, 2001; Kleiber, 2000; Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2005). Even casual leisure is not inevitably a waste of time.

A related image is that leisure is *unimportant*, in the sense that there is little need to plan for it, that what we do in free time can be determined on the spot. But, as just noted, some other people put a positive spin on leisure by valuing the spontaneity of those activities where planning is unnecessary. Such inconsistency adds to the general ambiguity with which leisure is perceived in commonsense.

Finally, in commonsense, leisure is sometimes seen as *deviant*. Accounts in the mass media, descriptions from friends and acquaintances, sightings on the street, and the like reveal deviant leisure in our midst. These accounts describe what is observable in public: behaviour of drunken revelers or dope-smoking adolescents, naked and near-naked activities, same-sex affectionate behaviour, prostitutes on the stroll, Internet pornography, and so on[2]. There is enough of this sort of thing in the lives of most big-city dwellers to create the impression that leisure there is sometimes deviant. Note, however, that the deviants themselves may not embrace this unsavory image of their questionable activities. Note, too, that negativeness of the image is stronger in cases of intolerable deviance than in those held to be tolerable. Surely we would, for example, view with greater intolerance serial murder (Gunn & Cassie, 2006) or serial arson as leisure than gamers' social construction of violent video game play as leisure (Delamere & Shaw, 2006).

What is important to observe with respect to leisure's public image is that deviant leisure can assume either the casual or the serious form (we have so far been unable to identify any project-based deviant leisure).[3] Casual deviant leisure is probably the more common and widespread of the two, though not necessarily the more tolerable. And it seems that the commonsense view of deviant leisure roots mostly in the casual kind.

## **Leisure's Positive Personal Image**

Thus it appears that most people see leisure in both a negative and a positive light. Such is the complexity of the commonsense image. Personally, however, these same people see their own leisure in parallel as something positive, doing so in at least two ways. One, they commonly see it as fun, expressed in participants smiling, laughing, and being at ease with what they are doing. Hence the intense concentration of the serious leisure athlete or performing artist, for example, is incongruous for them, possibly not even really leisure. Two, they look fondly on their own leisure as something positive. They want to pursue their personal leisure, for here they find satisfaction or fulfilment, sometimes both.

Put otherwise, the general public tends to regard leisure through its commonsense lens as both positive and negative activity, while in their personal lives individual members see it (their own activity) as dominantly positive.<sup>[4]</sup> The dangers in this inconsistency are obvious. For example, a person might hold a hypocritical attitude toward the leisure domain of life or feel guilty for enjoying casual leisure in the shadow of its negative connotations in the popular image.

## **Leisure's Positive Professional/Practitioner Image**

There is another angle from which leisure is viewed as positive, namely, the one of leisure application. Professionals in a fair range of applied sciences have drawn on leisure theory and research to help inform effective practice. I am not referring here to application of such theory and research to practical problems traditionally considered the province of leisure studies, exemplified in those related to parks, forests, leisure services, and leisure policy. Rather, I have in mind a miscellany of applied disciplines whose origins lie outside leisure studies, but which have gained significant nourishment from the second.

These disciplines have learned about the serious leisure perspective (SLP), and have adopted aspects of it bearing on their interests. Sometimes word about the SLP has come from within, in that one or more insiders have imported certain parts of the Perspective. On other occasions a leisure studies specialist has exported observations from the SLP to a particular applied discipline.

Elsewhere (Stebbins, 2012, pp. 101-118) I have discussed this kind of cross-fertilization in some detail. There are 17 fields of which I am aware, fields that have a noticeable infusion of SLP-related thought and research as related to one or more of their central interests:

- Tourism
- Ethnicity
- Quality of Life/Well-Being
- Leisure Education
- Gender
- Retirement/Unemployment
- Disabilities/Therapeutic Recreation
- Library and Information Science
- Entertainment and Popular Culture

- Arts Administration (e.g., zoos, museums, arts festivals, heritage sites)
- Consumption
- Contemplation/Spirituality
- Adult Education/Lifelong Learning
- Non-profit and Volunteer Sector Studies
- Youth/Delinquency
- Social Entrepreneurship
- Event Studies

In the book just mentioned I examine eight from this list showing how both the study of leisure and the field of practice have benefited from their intermarriage. The ‘marital’ link is that of the SLP with the field in question. Evidence of this link resides in the extensive bibliography presented in [www.seriousleisure.net](http://www.seriousleisure.net) (over 1,230 entries). Works in leisure studies falling outside the Perspective that also bear on these intermarriages were not included in this analysis. There could be a significant number of these as well.

## Conclusions

A crucial foundational proposition in this discussion about leisure’s commonsense images is that they influence the laity’s behaviour. The images are part of a society’s belief system, wherein beliefs guide behaviour, often in complicated and sometimes mysterious ways. It is against this cultural background that the scientific study of leisure must contend, which poses no mean challenge. That this background also dogs the establishment of leisure studies in academia and government as a valid and important field of inquiry underscores how critical it is to inform the general public about what leisure really is. I will make a start in this direction in Stebbins (in press).

## Endnotes

[1] The positive and negative commonsense images presented here are not necessarily an exhaustive list. They represent only the ones I have observed in 40 some years as a student of the institution of leisure and its myriad activities.

[2] Staci Newmahr (2011) sums up the highly complex scientific view of homosexuality *vis-à-vis* public sentiment on the matter: ‘irrespective of whether homosexuality is relevant as an analytical category, many people view deviation from the cultural norm of heterosexual dyadic partnerships as deeply problematic’ (p. 258). That homosexuality is listed here as tolerably deviant leisure is consistent with commonsense.

[3] Deviance as serious leisure is found in activities requiring a substantial amount of learning, as in complex deviant religions, radical political ideologies, and deviant sciences (e.g., astrology). See Stebbins, 1996, Chap. 10.

[4] Some people maintain that they have no leisure; work and non-work obligations take up all the free time they have. Such people would have no personal image of leisure as discussed in this

section. Whereas careful analysis of their lifestyles using the serious leisure perspective would most probably rebut such claims, it is *their* definition of their situation that is of interest here.

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On 'The Role of History in Leisure Studies'

