

Visible Leisure in the Community: Its Negative Side

[March 10, 2016](#) / [Leisure Studies Association](#)

By **Bob Stebbins**. University of Calgary

stebbins@ucalgary.ca

Website (personal): <http://soci.ucalgary.ca/profiles/robert-stebbins>

Website (Perspective): www.seriousleisure.net

There is a bias in leisure studies toward parading the positive face of free-time activities and their consequences. There is plenty of theory and research about the usefulness of leisure in, for instance, therapeutic recreation, health promotion and social and psychological well-being. Leisure's value in the general population is evident nowadays in such slogans as 'Thank God it's Friday', 'the end of labor is leisure' (originating with Aristotle) and, indirectly, the first verse of Fats Domino's tune: 'Blue Monday':

Blue Monday how I hate blue Monday
Gotta work like a slave all day
Here comes Tuesday oh Tuesday
I'm so tired I've no time to play
Here comes Wednesday
I'll be to myself
My world's poor by the time that I'm up
But then it's a hard workin' day
But I gotta get my pay

(<http://www.metrolyrics.com/blue-monday-lyrics-fats-domino.html>, retrieved 8 October 2015)

Zuzanek (2014) provides evidence for the proposition that, today, there are also 'Sunday blues', or emotional discomfort arising from the prospect of a new week. Third, our colleagues, me included, have written at length about the positive role of leisure in personal development and community volunteering. And I have come out with the observation that leisure studies is the 'happy science', the discipline that centers exclusively on the positive side of human existence (Stebbins, 2007)^[i].

Leisure and the study of it *are* positive, but certain kinds of leisure are unwelcome by certain segments of society or in certain parts of town. That is, leisure, positive as it is for its participants, is sometimes defined negatively by non-participants who observe it, who for the most part see, hear, or smell aspects of a leisure activity that offends them. My goal here is to explore some of the unwanted effects of other people's visible leisure felt in the wider

community, to implant the idea that *Homo otiosus* (leisure man) may need to do some role taking with others in the community to determine how his leisure interests will be received. Moreover, the leisure experience found under conditions of a negative public reception is certainly different from that when the activity is widely accepted.

These effects are classified as products of casual, serious, and project-based leisure. The proposition here is that there will be less sympathy for hedonic leisure with negative effect than for more serious undertakings based on skill, knowledge, commitment and self-development.

Casual Leisure Effects

This is a highly varied group, some of whose activities are obvious. We see it in female street prostitution (leisure for the john), raucous behavior by patrons leaving bars at closing time, and noisy late-night parties in neighborhood backyards and urban apartment buildings. In fact, disagreeable noise is a main, if not the sole, unwanted quality of these negative consequences. The joy-riding motorcyclists speeding along urban streets at all hours on machines seemingly without mufflers are a common example. The recreational jet skiers create their own disagreeable noise. Jet skis are noisy, especially when several are skimming at full throttle over the same stretch of water. For tourists and coastal residents who value the peace and quiet of a lake or ocean environment, growth in opposition to it has paralleled its increasing popularity, at least in the United States and Britain (e.g., Roe and Benson, 2001).

The urban neighborhood barking dog is by no means always a consequence of the owner's casual leisure, say, his or her source of relaxation, play or sensory stimulation (primarily watching the dog's actions). But, whatever the nature of the leisure, BarkingDogs.Net (<http://barkingdogs.net/persuadeneighbors.shtml>, retrieved 10 October 2015) shows the difficult problems that can arise as an aggrieved neighbor tries to silence the offending animal. Thus the consequences can be serious, as when the barking routinely prevents sleep, the animal's owner becomes fractious upon being asked to take measures to silence it, and the like.

Some casual leisure or combinations thereof give off a variety of noxious effects. For example, consider the 'party house', a rental establishment in an otherwise ordinary urban neighborhood. This one is in Austin, Texas:

Emmy Jodoin lives next door to . . . (one) with her family. 'It is loud, and there is live music and karaoke stuff, and it's all done outside because of the pool', she said. 'They're out in front at 4 in the afternoon waiting for their Uber to come, drunk on the front lawn'

Homeowners had other complaints about guests, including trash bins overflowing with beer cans, public urination, catcalling, foul language, racist remarks, companies throwing events and the appearance of a [rainbow-colored painted pony](#). 'Sometimes, when they are outside, they're playing beer pong just wearing their underwear', said Hazel Oldt, age 11, who can see them next door from the third-floor rooftop garden of her house. (Lieber, 2015).

Obnoxious presentations of self through dress and bodily decoration can negatively affect observers of these creations. Some passersby are disgusted by wildly-coloured hair arranged in

offensive hairdos, by seemingly outlandish make-up and by the risqué clothing that sometimes adorns both sexes. Here the (sensory casual) leisure of the offending individual is found in deciding how to dress and decorate oneself in ways that appeal to a particular group, while showing the outside world that one is a bone fide member of that same group.

Serious Leisure Effects

Somewhat less obvious, perhaps, are the skateboarders who frequent special parks placed in neighborhoods where the noise of the boards and the behavior of their riders displease nearby residents. Karsten and Pel (2000) write that this conflict continues with the boarders colonizing conducive public spaces for their activity. Thus, during their study the authors learned that owners of the Albert Heijn grocery store and other shops located on Jodenbreestraat in Amsterdam could not reach an agreement with the boarders about use of the smooth walkway leading to the entrances of their shops.

If we may consider raising chickens in one's urban back garden a serious leisure (making and tinkering) hobby, then there is a small list of objectionable consequences that are sometimes foreseen by the neighbors about to become a party to these pets. The following website lists some of these, arguing that they are not substantial:

<http://blog.mypetchicken.com/2012/07/20/the-6-silliest-arguments-against-backyard-chicken> (retrieved 10 October 2015). Here negative consequences may only exist in the eyes of the beholder, but then only where roosters are forbidden by law.

Tourists may develop an antagonistic relationship with the locals or, alternatively, the former may simply annoy the latter (Cohen, 1984, pp. 381-382). This is an enormously complex area human interaction, which is impossible to cover adequately in this short article. Casual leisure mass tourists are possibly guiltier of antagonistic or annoying behavior than serious leisure cultural tourists are (Stebbins, 1996a).^[iii] For instance, mass tourists may crowd the town's parks, streets, sidewalks, roadways and restaurants. They may litter inordinately and drive or walk around the tourist zone at a significantly slower pace than the locals would like. Nonetheless, patronage of commercial establishments brings additional employment and revenue to the community, which is welcomed by some of its residents. That the town is worthy of touristic attention is a compliment. Hence the love/hate relationship with regular tourism that sometimes grows from this kind of leisure.

Effects of Leisure Projects

Streaking (naked) would seem to offend some viewers of the act but probably not others. It may be classified as project-based leisure, though conceivably among those who find the experience exhilarating, a project that might be repeated occasionally. The project-like nature of this activity is described in <http://www.wikihow.com/Go-Streaking> (retrieved 10 October 2015). Elsewhere lawn decorations — basically leisure projects — can be offensive to neighbors. Grace Murano (2013) has posted 11 of them online that brought official action. Several were temporary, such as when created for Halloween, whereas others were meant to have an indefinite life. Here beauty is certainly in the eyes of the beholder.

Meg Malone (2012) writes about ‘disgusting holiday decorations’ for inside the home. The project-based leisure in this is seen in her list of 13 such decorations, from which one selects those that will be lightly disgusting for visitors during the holidays. ‘Lightly’ usually means in this case a decoration that is not so offensive that those who see it are deeply offended.

Negative Effects from Intolerable Deviance

Why stop with the visible negative effects of leisure? There are surely plenty of instances of virtually invisible negative effects to examine as well. They are found in some kinds of deviant casual leisure, ranging from sexual swinging, consumption of pornography, and private nudist activities to use of recreational drugs, cross-dressing and patronizing casinos and bingo parlours are usually discrete or relatively so. Thus they appear to bother only the few more straight-laced, intolerant citizens of the town who are directly aware of them. Studying such a small population is difficult in itself, since such offended members would be hard to find for observation or interview.

Now, all the foregoing bears only on tolerable deviant leisure. Some intolerable deviance – it is illegal — is nevertheless engaged in as leisure activity, for example, rape (rapist’s view), vandalism and animal blood sports (e.g., cockfighting and dog fighting are illegal in some jurisdictions). ‘Brutal leisure’ (Stebbins, 2013, Chap. 6) may be legal or illegal. It consists of violent acts that can be classified as either serious leisure or devotee work, where sometimes a leisure career from the first to the second is possible. The activities considered under this heading include terrorism, assassination, religion-based violence, revolutionary violence, some police work and some of the military occupations. The violence in question occurs as rape, torture, beatings and killings.

The preceding paragraph contains a very mixed bag of leisure activities, which fails to lend itself to the analysis presented in the preceding sections of this article: negative effects of visible leisure. For some intolerable deviance is visible and may not even be intolerable in some parts of the community (e.g., sectarian violence, revolutionary violence). Animal blood sports may be illegal but nonetheless draw a crowd of clandestine viewers. Rape and vandalism commonly have no viewers other than the participants themselves. And a substantial proportion of intolerable deviance is not leisure but either work or adjustment to personal circumstances that eventuate in addiction or mental disorder (Stebbins 1996b, pp. 6-7, 11-15).

Conclusions

It has been argued that leisure is not freely chosen (e.g., Juniu and Henderson, 2001). One heretofore ignored manifestation of this principle is that our chosen leisure activity may have negative consequences in the community that we, as citizens in it, would not want to be seen as causing (though not true for streaking and disgusting holiday decorations). For this reason alone we may realize that we are not really as free to engage in this activity as we first thought we were. The leisure seeker’s empathic capacity is clearly at issue here. Still, even when empathy reveals significant opposition to the activity in question, some seekers may cling to their controversial interest. This determination brings up on a new plane the issue of selfishness as it drives the pursuit of that which we want to do (Stebbins, 1995).

Endnotes

[1] Positive psychology is also a happy science, a field that was born in 2000 and that I was still unaware of when I wrote in 2007.

[2]The assumption here is that serious leisure, or cultural, tourists are attracted to the town because they like it as it is, unchanged by extraneous influences. They have come for its architecture, music, museums, history, geographic beauty and the like. They have come to learn about such interests as liberal arts hobbyists.

References

Cohen, E. (1984) 'The sociology of tourism: approaches, issues, and findings', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10: 373-92.

Juniu, S. and Henderson, K. (2001) 'Problems in researching leisure and women: global considerations', *World Leisure Journal*, 43(4): 3-10.

Karsten, L. and Pel, E. (2000) 'Skateboarders exploring urban public space: ollies, obstacles and conflicts', *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 15: 32-40.

Lieber, R. (2105) 'New worry for home buyers: a party house next door', *New York Times* (10 October), online edition.

Malone, M. (2012) '13 gross items to skip for your holiday celebration', Source: <http://www.gurl.com/2012/12/02/home-holiday-decorating-gross-gifts> (retrieved 12 October 2015).

Murano, G. (2013) '11 front lawn decorations that sparked controversy', Source: http://www.oddee.com/item_98759.aspx (retrieved 11 October 2015).

Roe, M. and Benson, J.F. (2001) 'Planning for conflict resolution: jet-ski use on the Northumberland Coast', *Coastal Management*, 29: 19-39.

Stebbins, R.A. (1995) 'Leisure and selfishness: an exploration' in G.S. Fain (ed.), *Reflections on the Philosophy of Leisure, Vol. II, Leisure and Ethics*, Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance.

Stebbins, R.A. (1996a) 'Cultural tourism as serious leisure', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23: 948-50.

Stebbins, R.A. (1996b) *Tolerable Differences: Living with Deviance*, 2nd edn, Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. Also available in the Digital Library at <http://www.seriousleisure.net>

Stebbins, R.A. (2007) 'Leisure studies: the happy science', *Leisure Studies Association Newsletter*, 76 (March): 20-22. (also available at <http://www.seriousleisure.net/> Digital Library)

Stebbins, R.A. (2013) *Work and Leisure in the Middle-East: The Common Ground of Two Separate Worlds*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Zuzanek, J. (2014) Sunday blues: Have Sunday time use and its emotional connotations changed over the past two decades? *Time & Society*, 23(1), 6-27.