
Leisure Reflections

Leisure Reflections ... No. 1

Choice and Experiential Definitions of Leisure

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins pioneered the ideas of "serious leisure," "casual leisure," and "optimal leisure lifestyle" and has spent 30 years studying all three. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 26 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important works bearing on these three ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); *After Work: The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *The Urban Francophone Volunteer: Searching for Personal Meaning and Community Growth in a Linguistic Minority* (University of Washington, Canadian Studies Centre, 1998); and *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001). He is presently conducting a study of leisure activities: *Rocky Mountain hobbyists in kayaking, snowboarding, and mountain climbing* (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), and working on a grant proposal for research on grassroots associations in the lives of their amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer members and participants. Stebbins is currently awaiting release of a book in the latter area entitled *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and 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, primarily as President of the Société d'accueil francophone (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.

'Choice' and 'freely chosen,' those once sacrosanct, *de rigueur* elements in standard definitions of leisure as experience (Kelly, 1990: p. 21), have lately come in for some bad press. Juniu and Henderson (2001: p. 8), for instance, say that such terms cannot be empirically supported, since people lack significant choice because 'leisure activities are socially structured and shaped by the inequalities of society.' True, experiential definitions of leisure published in recent decades, when they do contain reference to choice, tend to refer to perceived, rather than objective, freedom to choose. The definers recognize thus that various conditions, many of them unperceived by leisure participants and unspecified by definers, nevertheless constrain choice of leisure activities for the first. Juniu and Henderson argue that these conditions are highly influential, however, and that defining leisure even as perceived choice tends to underplay, if not overlook, their true effect.

One logical outcome of their position would be to toss the idea of perceived choice onto the scrap heap of outmoded scientific ideas, thereby sparing ourselves its indirect dismissal of inequality (Juniu and Henderson do not carry their argument this far). But as Rojek (2000: p. 169) observes: to throw out all considerations of choice is tantamount to throwing out human agency. Without the capacity and the right to choose leisure activities, people acting in this realm of life would be reduced to mere structural and cultural automatons.

It is clear, however, that beyond its definitions of experiential leisure, the field of leisure studies recognizes in several ways that individual choice is anything but unfettered. For instance an ever-growing literature describes a great range of leisure constraints, one effect of which is to dampen all enthusiasm for the assumption that leisure entails unqualified free choice. Further, culturally rooted preferences for certain leisure activities, acquired through primary and secondary socialization, steer so-called choice in subtle directions, often unbeknownst to the individual. Then there is boredom in leisure (subject of the LSA Newsletter March 2003 edition of 'Leisure Reflections'). It springs from having nothing

interesting to do, from having woefully little choice among leisure activities.

So the time has come, I believe, to declare that words like 'choice' and 'freely chosen' have indeed outlived their utility as quintessential definers of leisure. They are hedged about with too many qualifications to serve in that capacity. Here is a sample of such qualifications:

When, as scientists, we speak of leisure choice, we must

- further explain that what participants find appealing stems from socialization, from what they learned through friends, family, culture, and the like;
- expand on the question of who has what rights to what kind of leisure, doing this along such lines as gender, tradition, ethnicity, social class, and social inequality;
- expand on the question of ability and aptitude along such lines as age, disability, and mental capacity;
- expand on the question of known alternatives and the role of leisure education in broadening and describing lists of them; and
- expand on the question of accessibility of alternatives along such lines as temporal, spatial, and socioeconomic constraints affecting it.

When "choice" appears in a definition of leisure, there is now an intellectual obligation to qualify the idea with such statements. Too much has been written about them for us to plead ignorance. Yet, what an inelegant, complicated, confusing definition it would be were we to try to honor this obligation. Furthermore, stating, as some writers do, that leisure is based on perceived choice, tends to steer attention away from the considerations just mentioned — an invitation to misperceive the true nature of leisure.

But there is a way out of this impasse: carrying on without mentioning in definitions of leisure the likes of 'choice' and 'freely chosen, while still preserving human agency in the pursuit of leisure. For it appears, to paraphrase Marx's observation on history, that "men make their own . . . [leisure], but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1977: p. 300). So would it not be more valid to define experiential leisure by describing it as uncoerced behavior, rather than chosen activity?

Behavior is uncoerced when people make their own leisure. Uncoerced, they feel they are doing something they are not pushed to do, something they

are not disagreeably obliged to do. Emphasis is on the acting individual, which retains in the formula human agency. This is in no way denies that there may be things people want to do but cannot do because of numerous limitations on choice such as those just mentioned (people do not make leisure just as they please or under circumstances chosen themselves). And having now buried free choice as a defining property of leisure, it is the time to note that what is left — limited choice — is not a distinctive quality of leisure. Limited choice is also a condition of work and of the many obligations encountered outside it. Marx argued that it applied to all of history. For this reason it has no place in a definition of leisure. In other words, after having presented our experiential definition of leisure, we must be sure to frame it in structural, cultural, and historical context. Here is the appropriate place for discussing choice and its limitations.

Lack of coercion to engage in an activity is a quintessential property of leisure. No other sphere of human activity can be exclusively characterized by this property. Having said this, I should nevertheless point out that some forms of work (e.g., some of the professions) are so profoundly satisfying that they approach this ideal.

But what about the idea of 'voluntary action'? Could it not serve in the experiential definitions in lieu of choice? Bosserman and Gagan (1972: p. 115) and David Horton Smith (1975: p. 148), for example, argued that, at the level of the individual, all leisure activity is voluntary action. My preference is still for 'uncoerced,' however, since it underscores that leisure participants are not somehow forced to do what they do, whereas "voluntary" flirts with freedom to choose in that action to do something springs unchained from individual will. Rojek (2000: p. 169) observes that "a . . . problem with voluntaristic approaches to leisure remains. That is, they have a tendency to overstate individual freedom."

Where does obligation fit in all this? I mentioned earlier that uncoerced participants in leisure do something they want to do, something they are not disagreeably obliged to do. People are obligated when they do or refrain from doing something because they feel bound in this regard by promise, convention, or circumstances (Stebbins, 2000). But is this not coercion by another name? No, for obligation is not necessarily unpleasant. For example, the leading lady is obligated to go to the theater during the weekend to perform in an amateur play, but does so with great enthusiasm rooted in her passion for drama as leisure activity. By contrast, her obligation to turn up at work the following Monday morning after the high satisfaction of the leisure weekend comes as a letdown. Indeed,

though she could refuse to honor both obligations, for no one would likely to force her to do so, such refusal is inconceivable, since it would very probably result in some unpleasant costs (e.g., a fine for missing work, a rebuke by the director for being absent). Another example might center on people, among them a fair range of professionals, for whom their occupation is as much a passion as acting is for the actress and for whom going to work each Monday, however obligatory, is viewed as highly desirable.

We are dealing here with *agreeable obligation*, an attitude and form of behavior that is very much part of leisure. It is part of leisure because such obligation accompanies positive attachment to an activity and because it is associated with pleasant memories and expectations. It might be argued that agreeable obligation in leisure is not really felt as obligation, since the participant wants to do the activity anyway. Still, my research in serious leisure suggests a far more complicated picture. My respondents knew they were supposed to be at a certain place or do a certain thing, and they had to make this a priority in their daily lives. They not only wanted to do this, they were also required to do it; other demands and activities could wait. At times, the participant's intimates objected to the way this person prioritized everyday commitments, leading thus to friction and creating costs that somewhat attenuated the rewards of the leisure in question.

Despite this dark side of agreeable obligation, it nevertheless figures in a number of leisure activities, sometimes sporadically, sometimes routinely. The particular nature and pattern of routine agreeable obligation will, of course, vary from activity to activity. Thus ethnographic examination of particular leisure activities should include examination of the nature and scope of agreeable obligation found there, considering its disagreeable counterpart only when trying to explain why some people abandon activities no longer experienced as leisure.

If choice and allied terms have no further place in experiential definitions of leisure, they are not, for all that, obsolete as leisure studies concepts. People do choose what leisure to engage in, doing so from accessible alternatives as they see them, pitifully few though they may be at times for some. This suggests that choice should be used, not as a definer, but as a sensitizing concept in scientific inquiry (Blumer, 1969, pp. 146–152). It alerts researchers to the fact that people do choose free-time activities and encourages those same researchers first to learn what these choices are and then to describe how people are constrained in making them.

Choice should also be a main tool in the work kit of leisure educators. Although no one has universal choice of leisure activities, many people have a greater range to choose from than they realize. One of the principle goals of leisure education is to inform students (adult, adolescent, and child) of the range of activities available to them as well as, of course, the nature of those activities and the costs and rewards participants can expect to find in pursuing them.

To the extent the ideas just presented win acceptance in leisure studies, terms like choice and freely-chosen will disappear from the experiential definitions of leisure. But as sensitizing concepts for research and directives for leisure education, they are anything but passé. People do make leisure choices, and it is for leisure studies to both study this choice making and provide information on realistically available options.

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