
Leisure Reflections

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 30 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 30 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); *After Work The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001); *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002); *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering* (CABI, 2004, edited with M. Graham); and *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004). Forthcoming books include *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig) and *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover). 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 Past-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.

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The Serious Leisure Perspective

The *serious leisure perspective* is a theoretic framework that synthesizes three main forms of leisure, showing, at once, their distinctive features, similarities, and interrelationships. Those forms are serious, casual, and project-based leisure (short definitions of these are available on www.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure, 'basic concepts' page). Research began early in 1974 on the first of these, and has continued since that time, while work on casual leisure and then on project-based leisure came subsequently. Within each form a variety of types and subtypes has also emerged over the years. That the Perspective (wherever Perspective appears as shorthand for serious leisure perspective, to avoid confusion, the first letter will be capitalized) takes its name from the first of these should, in no way, suggest that I regard it, in some abstract sense, as the most important or superior of the three. A book that defines and describes in detail the Perspective (Stebbins, 2006) demonstrates the folly of that sort of thinking. Still, Cohen-Gewerc and I (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, in press) do argue that, on the specialized plane of leisure education, serious leisure, compared with the other two, does occupy a special place. Rather the Perspective is so titled, simply because it got its start in the study of serious leisure; such leisure is, strictly from the standpoint of intellectual invention, the godfather of the other two.

Furthermore serious leisure has become the bench mark from which analyses of casual and project-based leisure have often been undertaken. So naming the Perspective after the first facilitates intellectual recognition; it keeps the idea in familiar territory for all concerned. Be that as it may, I might have titled it 'core activity perspective'. A *core activity* is the distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve an outcome or product attractive to the participant. For instance, in serious leisure, a core activity of alpine skiing is descending snow-covered slopes, that of cabinet making is shaping and finishing wood, and that of volunteer fire fighting is putting out blazes and rescuing people from them. In each case the participant takes several interrelated steps to successfully ski down hill, make a cabinet, or rescue someone. In casual leisure core activities, which are much less complex than in serious leisure, are exemplified in the actions required to hold sociable conversations with friends, savour beautiful scenery, and offer simple volunteer services (e.g., handing out leaflets, directing traffic in a parking lot, clearing snow off the neighborhood hockey rink). In leisure projects core activities are intense, though limited in time and moderate in complexity, and seen in the actions of serving as scorekeeper during an amateur sports tournament or serving as museum guide during a special exhibition of artifacts. Engaging in the core activity (and its component steps and actions) is a main feature that attracts participants to the leisure in question and encourages them to return for more. In short the core activity is a value in its own right, even if more strongly held for some leisure activities than others.

Although the core activity motivates people to participate in the larger leisure activity, the intensity, meaning, and contexts of appeal of this core vary across the three forms. For instance, in serious leisure, participants gain a sense of deep fulfillment from the core activity, whereas this is impossible in casual leisure. More broadly, the chief import of the serious leisure perspective is that serious, casual, and project-based leisure often generate different positive psychological states, with the serious form being by far the most productive of such states.

Similarly, I might have dubbed this framework the 'leisure experience perspective'. After all each of the three forms refers to an identifiable kind of experience had during free time. Indeed, it fits all three of Mannell's (1999) conceptualizations of this experience, as subjectively defined leisure, as immediate conscious experience, and as post hoc satisfaction. Still this label would be too limiting, for the Perspective is broader than what people experience in their leisure. It also provides a way of looking on the social, cultural, and historical context of that experience. A similar problem undermines the suggestion made by Tomlinson (1993) that serious leisure be called 'committed leisure'. Though commitment is certainly an important attitude in serious leisure, it is, nevertheless, too narrow to serve as a descriptor of the entire Perspective, even if the other two forms also generate commitment on occasion.

Because the serious and casual forms have sometimes stirred discussion about the relative merit of one or the other, let us be clear from the outset that the serious leisure perspective looks on each as important in its own way. That is, it is much less a question of which is best, than a question of how well combinations of two or three of the forms serve individuals, categories of individuals (e.g., sex, age, social class, religion, nationality), and their larger communities and societies. This, in turn, leads to such considerations as leisure lifestyle, optimal leisure lifestyle, and social capital, all of which are, themselves, important concepts in this framework.

The idea of perspective communicates at least three important points. One, any perspective is a way of theoretically viewing leisure phenomena. So, this one, too, provides a unique prism through which to look at what people do in their free time. Two, as a theoretic framework, the serious leisure perspective synthesizes the three forms, showing at once their distinctive features, their similarities, and their interrelationships. Three, although it was never my intention as I moved from one study of free-time activity to the next, my findings and theoretic musings have nevertheless evolved into a typological map of the world of leisure. That is, so far as known at present, all leisure (at least in Western society) can be classified according to one of the three forms and their several types and subtypes. More precisely the serious leisure perspective offers a classification and explanation of all leisure activities and experiences, as these two are framed in the social psychological, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which each activity and accompanying experience take place. But, consistent with the exploratory approach that has guided much of basic research in this field, open-ended inquiry and observation could, some day, suggest one or more additional forms. Briefly put the construction of

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scientific typologies, in principle, never results in completed intellectual edifices.

Given the scope of this paper, it is unnecessary to review the many definitions of leisure. Rather what is called for here is a working definition of the concept that respects past conceptual insights into such activity, but that also logically fits the serious leisure perspective, while demarcating clearly the sphere of human life to which it applies. To this end, leisure is defined here as: uncoerced activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both), use their abilities and resources to succeed at this. 'Free time' is time away from unpleasant obligation, with pleasant obligation being treated here as essentially leisure, since *homo otiosus*, leisure man, in fact feels no significant coercion to enact the activity in question (Stebbins, 2000b).

Note that reference to 'free choice' – a long-standing component of standard definitions of leisure – is for reasons discussed in detail elsewhere (Stebbins, 2005b), intentionally omitted from this definition. Generally put choice is never completely free, but rather hedged, is about with all sorts of conditions. This situation renders this concept and allied ones such as freedom and state of mind useless essential elements in a basic definition (Juniu & Henderson, 2001). Note, too, there is no reference in this definition to the moral basis of leisure. That is, contrary to some stances taken in the past (e.g., Kaplan, 1960: pp. 22-25), leisure in the serious leisure perspective, and by implication associated positive states, can be either deviant or non-deviant (Rojek, 1997; Stebbins, 1997).

Synthesizing and Extending the Perspective

A number of social scientific concepts have emerged over the years that, each in its own way, helps synthesize the three forms, thereby making for a truly integrated, theoretic perspective. In the main this integration, which I refer to as a synthesis, is accomplished by situating the forms, which, at bottom, are experiential (each of the three forms refers to a distinctive kind of experience found in the core activity), in broader social scientific context. That is each concept has its own place in the larger social scientific literature, while also finding a special place

in one or more of serious, casual, and project-based leisure. In other words they synthesize the Perspective as much by being differentially manifested within it as they do by occupying certain common ground across two or three of the forms.

Let there be no mistake: these synthesizing concepts are as much a part of the serious leisure perspective as the basic concepts of serious, casual, and project-based leisure as well as their types, subtypes, and related processes. For both the synthesizing and the basic concepts help explain the three forms, including their similarities, differences, and interrelationships, in addition to serving as guides for research. The following synthesizing concepts and bundles of concepts are considered in Stebbins (2006: chap. 4), with relevant research noted where it exists: 1) organization (groups, associations, social worlds, etc.), 2) community (family; work; gender; social class; contributions, including civil society, citizen involvement, and social capital; deviance), 3) history, 4) lifestyle (including discretionary time commitment, optimal leisure lifestyle), and 5) culture (commitment, obligation, values, selfishness).

Turning to extension of the Perspective, I report a set of studies that have steered aspects of the serious leisure perspective in dramatically new directions, namely, into another field of research. As with past research on the Perspective, many of these studies are exploratory, but in them, the choice of research subject springs from a desire to link the Perspective with another scholarly domain rather than to continue extending it within the ambit of one or more of the three forms, considered for purposes of this discussion as constituting a distinctive field of research. In a full statement on the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 2006: chap. 5), extensions are made to the following areas: tourism, ethnicity, quality of life and well-being, leisure education, gender, retirement and unemployment, adult learning and self-directed learning, disabilities, library and information science, entertainment and popular culture, work and leisure, shopping, contemplation, and arts administration.

Conclusions

Most people who go in for serious leisure avoid filling their free time with it, to the exclusion of one or both of the other two forms. Serious leisure can be intense, exhausting, and its enthusiasts may become temporarily saturated with it. My study of the mountain hobbies of kayaking, snowboarding, and mountain climbing demonstrated that, as attractive and fulfilling as these activities are for participants, they also valued their casual leisure, for it gave them respite, both physical and mental (Stebbins, 2005c: chap. 7). Although these hobbyists engaged in very little project-based leisure, note that it, too, can be rather intense and exhausting, requiring some time away from it to engage in casual leisure. In other words, perhaps aided by leisure education, participants in serious leisure will want to search for an optimal leisure lifestyle (Stebbins, 2000a), consisting of, for them, a pleasing balance with casual leisure, possibly augmented on occasion with a leisure project.

Yet, there are people, perhaps most of them living in the West, who either care little for serious leisure or have no time to pursue it. These people, once finished with everyday work and non-

work obligations, carve out a leisure lifestyle filled with casual and, possibly, some project-based leisure. And I have argued over the years that a number of benefits and rewards flow from these two, whether alone or in combination (see Stebbins, 2006: chap. 3). These benefits and rewards should never be minimized, even if they constitute a blander offering than serious leisure. That is, what gives the latter its special appeal is its potential for self-fulfillment, something missing altogether, or substantially diluted, in the other two forms. This omission is critical, for in leisure, work, indeed, all of life, I believe that this fulfillment stands out as a singular, highly positive, personal state.

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