
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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Leisure Studies: the Happy Science

Martin Seligman observed in his presidential address in 1998 to the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association that a new field known as 'positive psychology' had emerged within the discipline of psychology. Its mission: to underscore and study the positive side of emotion and other personal states. Its link with leisure is obvious in several places in the following passage (from Seligman's 'Positive Psychology Network Concept Paper' found at: <http://www.psych.upenn.edu/seligman/ppgrant.htm>, p 3):

I proposed changing the focus of the science [psychology] and the organization of scientists in the world. I proposed changing the focus of the science and the profession from repairing the worst things in life to understanding and building the qualities that make life worth living. . . . I call this new orientation 'Positive Psychology'. At the subjective level, the field is about positive experience: well-being, optimism, flow, and the like. At the individual level it is about the character strengths – love, vocation, courage, aesthetic sensibility, leadership, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, and genius. At the community level it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship, responsibility, parenting, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.

Seligman added that this new field is meant to develop into a 'positive social science'. This is to counteract the fact that many other social science disciplines also emphasize the negative rather than the positive side of human life.

Happily, leisure studies can plead not guilty of this oversight, as charged for all the social sciences, since leisure studies is the only, essentially, *happy science*. This is true, notwithstanding a little list of negative emotions that occasionally creep into some leisure. Certainly it is negatively experienced when, for example, anger boils up at an umpire's questionable call in amateur baseball or embarrassment emerges from having performed poorly in a local theater production. Among the costs of serious leisure are the negative emotional situations occasionally faced by participants (e.g., fear from facing great risk in mountaineering, hate from conflict experienced while volunteering, sorrow from death of friend in a musical group).

But these situations are, for these leisure participants, mere sidelights, in that they are certainly not among their reasons for taking up the activity in the first place and staying with it thereafter. Rather these situations contrast vividly with the core activities that bring (dare I say tempt or lure) participants to the larger leisure activity. A *core*

activity (Stebbins, 2006a, pp. 1-2) is a set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve an outcome or product that the participant in the larger leisure activity finds attractive. For instance, in serious leisure, a core activity of the larger leisure 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 their counterparts 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, even if limited in time and moderate in complexity, as 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 powerful value in its own right, even if more strongly held for some kinds of leisure activities than others.

A core activity is found at the heart of every leisure experience, and the foregoing description of this activity squares with all three of Mannell's (1999) conceptualizations of this experience. That is during a leisure experience participants subjectively define it as leisure, are immediately conscious of it, and derive post hoc satisfaction from it. The concept of core activity gives substance to the idea of leisure experience, showing in detail what I mean when describing leisure studies as a science that concentrates on life's positive side, as a happy science.

Lack of coercion to engage in an activity is a quintessential property of leisure. Scientifically speaking, leisure is uncoerced activity undertaken during free time. Uncoerced activity is positive activity that, using their abilities and resources, people both want to do and can do at either a personally satisfying or a deeper, fulfilling level (Stebbins, 2005). Note, in this regard, that boredom occurring in free time is an uncoerced state, but also that it is, decidedly, not something bored people *want* to experience. It is not, therefore, leisure; it is not positive experience, as just defined. No other sphere of human activity can be so exclusively characterized as 'upbeat.' Indeed, leisure studies is *by definition* a positive science.

Let us look more closely at this claim. In their leisure people want to partake of activities that promote enjoyment (found in casual leisure), satisfaction (found in casual, serious, and project-based leisure) or self-fulfillment (found mostly in serious leisure but also to some extent in project-based leisure). (The differences

**Forthcoming in
LSA Newsletter
No. 77 (July 2007):**

**Robert Stebbins's
'Leisure Reflections
No. 15', on**

**Leisure's Role in
Voluntary Simplicity**

between enjoyment, satisfaction and self-fulfillment are set out in Stebbins, 2004a.) The field of leisure studies revolves around this positive motivational center as well as around its ramifications at the levels of culture, structure, and social and community life. Leisure provision and leisure policy may be seen as avenues leading leisure participants and consumers to these desirable states. Furthermore the problems that leisure studies specialists encounter are not typically negative. Rather these people look on them positively as challenges, as in those that come with forming effective policy or providing valuable services, or in the areas of theory and research, as in solving difficulties in study design or conceptual clarity. In brief no other social science focuses so directly and so exclusively on positive psychological states and their socio-cultural consequences.

The Other Social Sciences

Leisure studies is not, therefore, a 'dismal science', Thomas Carlyle's widely quoted sobriquet for the field of economics. Leisure studies is not oriented toward 'repairing the worst things in life,' to borrow Seligman's locution, unless one of those worst things is something like trying to stamp out 'leisure lack' (Neulinger, 1981, pp. 188-191). But what about the other social sciences? Seligman thinks psychology is much too concerned with the negative, with repairing what is threatening. Still it seems to me to be more accurate to argue that the social sciences have a mandate to be negative, a mandate given to them, in part, by the societies in which they work and play and, in part, emerging from their own proclivities. Specifically, modern societies have many sobering, intractable problems their members want solved (e.g., governmental corruption, ethnically biased historical explanations, deterioration of

the language, familial tension, dwindling water supplies, exploitation of indigenous peoples, mental disorder), and they often look to the social sciences for help. They offer research money for projects bearing on such problems, and researchers, eager to help their communities, are likewise eager to acquire this money, hoping to use it to generate useful ameliorative theory and research.

Of course every social science looks at both neutral and positive phenomena, as well. For instance, studying family structure is largely a descriptive, neutral undertaking in sociology and anthropology. The same may be said for linguistics, when some scholars there plot changes in a society's mother tongue. The study of the roots of democracy is a positive contribution of political science. Some fields of history, notably the histories of the arts and the sciences, have plenty to consider that is positive (even if Voltaire held that 'history is little else than a picture of human crimes and misfortunes', *L'Ingénu*, chap. 10). In geography researchers describe in neutral terms how groups of people adapt to their natural environment, without necessarily dwelling on either the positive or the negative features of that adaptation.

Another important reason why the other social sciences are so drawn to repairing the worst things in life is that leisure and all its positive qualities seem far from the minds of the majority of their scientists. The negative problems not only beckon, as just observed, but also leisure, where most of what is positive happens, is little thought about as a subject for scholarly analysis. (True, positive experiences can sometimes be found in the core activities of work, even if this feature is uncommon there, Stebbins, 2004b.) As evidence of this I was recently invited to present a paper on serious leisure and positive psychology (Stebbins, 2006b), the organizers of the conference being of the conviction that the latter field was too little informed about the former.

Turning to sociology, note that the study of serious leisure roots, in part, in the failure of modern sociologists to view leisure as a distinctive aspect of society and social life. In 1974 I could find no sociological definitions of amateur and hobbyist and no recognition in sociology (the discipline I was trained in) of the unique role and status played by those who pursue amateur and hobbyist activities. Regrettably little has changed since that year. To be sure, the occasional leisure-oriented article is published in the sociological journals, but institutional sociology still mostly ignores this area of social life. For example one hunts in vain for a session on leisure at a typical annual meeting of the American Sociological Association or the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association. And it is Mission Impossible trying to find leisure listed as an area of specialization in the graduate programs in sociology offered in North American universities. The latter deficiency is hardly surprising, since virtually no member of faculty in these programs has been trained in the sociology of leisure. The situation is different in Britain,

however, where the British Sociological Association sponsors a study group titled 'Leisure & Recreation'.

Of course the sociology of leisure is alive and well, though living in academic locations far away from North American sociology departments. In units variously named Leisure Studies, Leisure and Recreation, Leisure and Physical Education, Parks and Leisure, and more recently, Leisure and Health Studies, the sociology of leisure has grown into a vibrant branch of knowledge. So it is not that this branch of sociology is weak, but rather it is on the broader, institutional level of this discipline (in North America) where such weakness is conspicuous. Here sociology is inadequate at a time when Western society takes leisure very seriously, spends a great deal of money on it, and is bent on experiencing a wide range of positive, free-time activities.

People in the West are interested in the positive side of life, even while most of the social sciences are not. And to the extent that this interest is growing, the happy science will be well positioned, both theoretical and practically, to shed light and offer services on matters about which these people care a great deal.

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