
Leisure Reflections

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.

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Boredom in Free Time

Barbalet (1999) observes that boredom springs from a person’s perception of the meaninglessness of a situation or activity. Boredom, he says, ‘is a restless, irritable feeling that the subject’s current activity or situation holds no appeal, and that there is a need to get on with something interesting’ (p. 631). It is an emotional state of mind rooted in acute lack of significance for the bored individual of objects, activities, or the situation itself, as understood within his system of values and the larger culture. Looking at it from a somewhat different angle, Brissett and Snow (1993) argue that boredom is born of lack of momentum or lack of psychological involvement in the events at hand. In any case, meaninglessness and absence of momentum experienced as boredom are, for many people, strong motivators to find meaning, even if, in some instances, the meaning found involves risk, deviance, conflict, and the like.

Clearly, boredom does not spring exclusively from inactivity (‘nothing to do’); it can also arise from activity which, alas, is uninteresting, unstimulating. And, as might be expected, such activity may be obligatory, whether it is work or required activity outside work, as found in many unskilled jobs and certain domestic necessities such as, for many people, washing dishes and preparing routine meals. Boredom, then, is hardly a feature of life unique to its free time side.

Still, boredom has not gone unnoticed in leisure studies, youth studies, or research on mental health problems, particularly those of adolescents (for a review of this literature see Patterson, Pegg, and Dobson-Patterson, 2000, pp. 54-59). Nor should it, given Schopenhauer’s observation that ‘the most general survey shows us that the two foes of human happiness are pain and boredom’. As Tess Kay (1990, p. 415) notes, boredom, lethargy, and depression are commonly the lot of the unemployed, whatever their age. Concern in the present article is not with this research, however, but rather with the broader conceptual issue of the nature of free time and the place of boredom within it.

For one, since boredom is a decidedly negative state of mind, it can be argued that, logically, it is not leisure at all. For leisure is typically conceived of as a positive mind set, including among other elements, pleasant expectations and recollections of activities and situations. Of course, it happens at times that

expectations turn out to be unrealistic, and we get bored (or perhaps angry, frightened, or embarrassed) with the activity in question, transforming it in our view into something quite other than leisure.

Still, boredom (anger, fright, embarrassment) may occur in free time, indicating that free time occupies a broader area of life than leisure, which is nested within. Moreover, it follows that careful usage of the terms 'free time' and 'leisure' should reflect this relationship between the two. After all, few recreational specialists would want to spread the gospel that it is important to have free time, when such time includes the possibility of becoming bored. Better we should be arguing, more precisely, for finding time for leisure.

This is not to argue, however, that the study of boredom in free time has no place in leisure studies. Quite the contrary. Leisure studies must also pay attention to its boundaries, to activities that approach being leisure even though they are not. By doing so we come to understand better the essence of leisure itself as well as the conditions for its emergence and change. For instance, as we shall see shortly, leisure studies research shows boredom is related to deviant leisure, as when bored youth (the group most commonly examined) seek stimulation in drugs and alcohol or criminal thrills like gang fighting, illegal gambling, and joy riding in stolen cars. Concern here has been with the antecedents of such deviance, where some of them, it turns out, lie well beyond the sphere of leisure itself in the broader domain of free time. Indeed, some of those antecedents even operate outside free time in the world of obligations, exemplified by the lamentable situation of being bored at school.

Nevertheless what is considered boring is a matter of personal interpretation. For instance, Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1987) hypothesized that, for some youth, leisure can become tedious, in part because they lack both personal leisure skills and sufficient leisure opportunities. In response to this predicament, these youth seek excitement in delinquency or illicit drugs, if not both. In a subsequent study designed to test this hypothesis, Iso-Ahola and Crowley (1991) found that leisure boredom is associated with drug abuse, although the causal relationship between these two variables still remains to be established.

Surprisingly, however, the bored adolescent drug abusers they examined turned out to be more active than the control group of non-abusers, since the former were involved in such sports as football, baseball, gymnastics, skateboarding, and roller-skating. That the drug abusers were still bored, even while participating in active serious leisure lifestyles, led the authors to suggest ways for therapists to discourage further recreational drug use. They could accomplish

this by providing abusers 'with copious opportunities to experience [non-deviant] leisure activities that potentially meet the same needs that were formerly met through substance abuse' (Iso-Ahola and Crowley, 1991, p. 269). The authors neglected to identify these leisure activities, though they did cite research indicating that substance abusers are more likely than non-abusers to seek thrilling and adventurous pursuits, while showing little taste for repetitious and constant experiences. In other words, these youth were looking for leisure that could give them optimal arousal, that was at the same time a regular activity — not a sporadic one like bungee jumping or roller coaster riding — but that did not, however, require long periods of monotonous preparation. Such preparation is necessary to become a good football player or skateboarder.

To the extent that wayward youth have little or no interest in repetitious and constant experiences, we must ask, then, what kind of leisure will alleviate their boredom? Some forms of casual leisure, if accessible for them, can accomplish this, but only momentarily. Such leisure is by definition fleeting. As for serious leisure activities all do require a significant level of perseverance, but not all require repetitious preparation of the kind needed to learn a musical instrument or train for a sport (Stebbins, in press). For example, none of the volunteer activities and liberal arts hobbies calls for this. The same can be said for amateur science, hobbyist collecting, various games, and many activity participation fields. Spelunking, orienteering, and some kinds of sports volunteering exemplify non-repetitive serious leisure that is both exciting and, with the first two, adventurous.

Boredom, as noted earlier, results in part from the subject's view that there little of interest to do, little to choose from. This situation certainly squares with the argument made in the previous edition of 'Leisure Reflections' (Stebbins, 2002) that choice cannot serve as a defining condition of leisure. But at the same time being bored during free time is not, it seems to me, a product of coercion. The problem is rather more one of lack of known and accessible activities that constitute true leisure, than one of being forced into inactivity or to do something boring. Being coerced suggests to the coerced person that no palatable escape from his condition exists; he must work since money for necessities can come from nowhere else, he must give the thief his money or risk getting shot. With boring activities, however, palatable alternatives do exist, some of which are deviant, as we have just seen, some of which are not.

Those that are not must nevertheless be brought to light, which is a central goal of leisure education. But

what would leisure educators (including leisure counselors and leisure volunteers) teach to the chronically bored? In general they should focus not on casual leisure but on serious leisure, giving attention to two programs. The first aims to educate or train the chronically bored to find satisfaction in an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity. This kind of education involves informing them in detail, first, about one or more of the activities which appeal to them and, then, about ways to get started in those activities.

The second program of serious leisure education consists of instruction of a more general nature: informing the chronically bored about serious leisure as a kind of activity distinct from casual leisure. Since those who suffer from too much ennui and the general public are both largely unaware of the concept of serious leisure, the first educational goal here must be to inform everyone about its nature and value. Both programs could be incorporated in high school curricula, for example, thus targeting youth a substantial proportion of which is these days chronically bored.

For all the meaninglessness and superficiality of free time boredom, it is not, when widely shared, an insignificant feature of community life. Thus we just noted that boredom among youth was related to certain forms of deviance, such as juvenile delinquency and drug and alcohol use, and to thrill-seeking activities like bungee jumping and high-risk sport (see also Caldwell and Smith, 1995). And it has been said occasionally that leisure might be a fruitful way to divert non-deviant youth from deviant interests and persuade wayward youth to abandon such interests. In nearly every instance, however, the leisure in question is a sport of some kind. In this regard, Schafer (1969) hypothesized that involvement in sport tends to deter involvement in juvenile delinquency. Later, more controlled research by Segrave and Hastad (1984), for example, suggested that, in general, athletes were indeed less likely than non-athletes to engage in delinquent behavior.

Comments so far have centered primarily on individuals and their feelings of boredom. Still, this emotional state can also have far-reaching social consequences. Cohen-Gewerc (in press) argues that boredom can become a gateway for creative leisure. Individually, it can stimulate people to discover their inner selves, and thereby emancipate themselves from boring tasks and roles. Collectively, widespread boredom in a given group or population can spawn significant social change. William Ralph Inge, twentieth century British churchman, wrote that 'the effect of boredom on a large scale in history is underestimated. It is a main cause of revolutions, and would

soon bring to an end all the static Utopias and the farmyard civilization of the Fabians'. It is not just that people dislike being bored, but also that they sometimes get angry with their condition and seek to shape the world such that they can escape it (and perhaps punish those felt to have caused it). In this regard we might ask how many of today's rebels, terrorists, and religious zealots have found everyday life excruciatingly boring and now seek stimulation in extreme causes. Even if their cause fails, the actions taken in trying to promote it leave lasting changes, evident in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 suicide assault on the World Trade Center in New York.

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Forthcoming in LSA Newsletter No. 65
(July 2003): Robert Stebbins's
'Leisure Reflections No. 3', on
'leisure and citizen participation'