

# Leisure Reflections

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 35 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 34 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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### Social Entrepreneurship as Work and Leisure

If articles in the mass print media and on some Internet websites are any indication, social entrepreneurship has become something of a modern-day hit among morally conscious people itching to solve a particular social problem and possibly make money in the process. Social entrepreneurship is an altruistic undertaking. These entrepreneurs execute innovative solutions to what they define as social problems, be they local, national, or international. In social entrepreneurship people use the principles of enterprise to foster social change, which they do by establishing and managing a venture. Some of them set up small, medium, or large non-profit groups designed to ameliorate a difficult situation threatening certain people, flora, or fauna or a certain aspect of the environment, if not a combination of these. Others are profit-seekers. They work to establish a money-making enterprise that also improves such a situation in one of these four areas.

Whether starting and running a non-profit or a for-profit social enterprise, these entrepreneurs are commonly practically oriented people. They have a mission, typically one that is powerfully felt, and they want action leading to solution of the problem targeted in that mission. But what, in scientific terms, are these people doing? How can we explain why some people devote huge amounts of time and sometimes personal funds to solving a social problem? One might argue that in the case of the for-profit entrepreneurs the answer is obvious: they want to make money. But, when profit is the motive, nearly all social enterprises are substantially risky ventures. If you want to be sure to make even a modest amount of money, there are far more secure businesses than this kind.

In other words we must look beyond the profit motive for a more profound explanation of social entrepreneurship. The serious leisure perspective offers a two-pronged explanation that meets this requirement. The crux of the argument that follows is that pursuit of non-profit entrepreneurship is a serious leisure undertaking of the career volunteer kind, whereas pursuit of for-profit entrepreneurship is a kind of devotee work. What, in detail, does this mean?

### The Career Volunteer as Social Entrepreneur

Career volunteering is one of three types of serious leisure. *Serious leisure* is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience. It takes considerable commitment to stay with an activity like developing a social enterprise, and to stay long enough to acquire the special skills, knowledge, and experience needed to succeed. A sense of career emerges from acquiring these skills, knowledge, and so on. The serious leisure that social entrepreneurs pursue is that of the volunteer.

A *volunteer* is someone who offers un-coerced altruistic help either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay for the benefit of both the target of benefits (beneficiaries of the work of the enterprise who are not part of the volunteer's family) and the volunteer. Among the benefits volunteers commonly gain are the

acquisitions and rewards mentioned in the preceding paragraph, expressions of gratitude from the target of benefits, and valued identity of being a volunteer for a particular cause or organization. Social entrepreneurs volunteer their time, and not infrequently their money, to start up and guide to fruition their own enterprises. They are not as such volunteers in someone else's group or organization. This is what distinguishes the volunteering entrepreneur, for the vast majority of today's volunteers are engaged by another group or organization or, even more obscurely, work within a social movement to support a cause of some kind.

### Casual and Project-Based Volunteers

The career (serious leisure) volunteers are the ones who start up and run social enterprises. Their volunteering is substantial and highly complex, and is to be distinguished from casual leisure and project-based volunteers. *Casual leisure* is short-lived, immediate, hedonic activity; it requires little or no skill or knowledge to enjoy it (e.g., taking a nap, gossiping about workmates, watching entertainment television). Casual volunteering includes stuffing envelopes, distributing leaflets on a street corner, and taking tickets at an event.

*Project-based* leisure refers to a short-term, moderately complicated, either one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time. It requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes skill or knowledge, but for all that is neither serious leisure nor intended by the participant to develop into such. Common projects include surprise birthday parties, enjoyable home improvements, and volunteer service at arts festivals and games (competitive events in an art or sport).

The career volunteer who sets up and runs a social enterprise will probably engage other career volunteers and possibly some casual and project-based help as well. Social entrepreneurial career volunteers may be lobbyists, legal advisors, publicity specialists, a secretary or treasurer in a board of directors, among many other possibilities. The typical social entrepreneur will recognize such people as kindred spirits, in that they find the same kinds of rewards and levels of commitment in their leisure.

Nonetheless nonprofit social entrepreneurs often need one or both of the other two types of volunteers: those serving in casual roles and those serving in projects. True the serious volunteers could also conceivably act in these ways, but this strategy risks overusing such valuable people. So the wise entrepreneur searches for other helpers to meet casual needs and those associated with projects. The chief point to be made in the present article is that these two types of volunteer are looking for their own leisure experiences, of the sort described in the definitions of them set out earlier.

Casual and project volunteers can certainly become committed to the tasks they have agreed to perform. But for this to happen, the tasks must be short term. For these volunteers, were they looking for long-term altruistic involvement, would be looking for opportunities to volunteer as serious leisure.

### Obligation and Commitment as Parts of the Explanation

Unlike work most leisure is free of obligation (it is un-coerced), but that said there are some interesting exceptions to this rule. One, for example, is that social entrepreneurs are occasionally obligated to attend a meeting of the leaders of their enterprises or present a talk about their mission, which however, they usually want to do. In other words agreeable obligations can be part of leisure; it is the disagreeable ones that cannot logically be considered leisure. Indeed it may well be because of certain disagreeable obligations in an entrepreneur's life and the lives of some other people that the former has been galvanized into entrepreneurial action.

Another exception is that some entrepreneurs intend to develop a for-profit social enterprise, from which they hope to derive a livelihood. There is also a leisure sense about the way this will be accomplished, but it is, in the end, work, or work related. We return to this approach to entrepreneurship in a later section dealing with "devotee work."

#### • Moral obligation

While discussing obligation as an explanation of entrepreneurship, it should also be noted that strong moral obligations drive some people to develop social enterprises. To the extent they feel coerced into social entrepreneurship, they are not doing it as leisure. Entrepreneurs fired by, for example, strong religious convictions, powerful beliefs about a certain social injustice, or a nagging sense of imminent environmental disaster feel that they have no choice but to act, to get an ameliorative social enterprise up and running. Nonetheless this is not leisure — they would rather be doing something else in their free time — but neither is it work. For few if any of these advocates (some are crusaders) foresee a livelihood in their cause. Still it is an obligation, and one to which they are powerfully committed. In the serious leisure perspective this kind of obligation falls into a third domain of life, namely, that of non-work obligation. It is that area of life in containing all those unpleasant things we have to do that we cannot classify as either work or leisure, the other two domains (Stebbins, 2009, chap. 1).

#### • Commitment

Other social entrepreneurs, those not driven by disagreeable obligation, also have a strong commitment to their enterprise and its mission. This is something they most certainly want to do and therefore choose to do. And, yet, it is something they could deny themselves, possibly because they lack the time, energy, money, knowledge or other resources needed for such an undertaking. Commitment and leisure may seem like an odd couple, but in one form of leisure — serious leisure — commitment is actually a central condition.

### Entrepreneur as Occupational Devotee

Working as an occupational devotee is, in many ways, serious leisure (Stebbins, 2004). *Occupational devotion* refers to a strong, positive attachment to a form of self-enhancing work, where the senses of achievement and fulfillment are high and the core activity (set of tasks) is endowed with such intense appeal that the line between this work and leisure is virtually erased. An *occupational devotee* is someone inspired by occupational devotion.

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**Robert Stebbins's  
Leisure Reflections No. 24  
on**

**'Addiction to Leisure Activities:  
Is It Possible?'**

*Devotee work* is the core activity of the occupation. It is capable of inspiring occupational devotion.

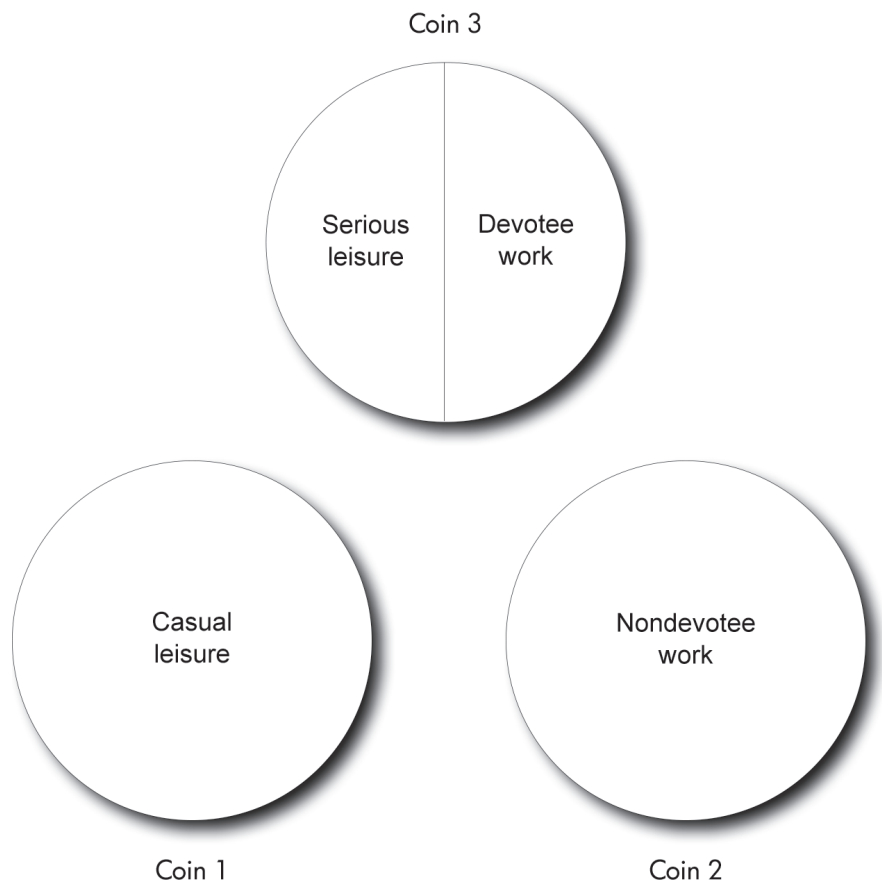
Occupational devotees turn up chiefly, though not exclusively, in four areas of the economy, providing their work there is, at most, only lightly bureaucratized: certain small businesses, the skilled trades, the consulting and counselling occupations, and the public- and client-centered professions. Public-centered professions are found in the arts, sports, scientific, and entertainment fields, while those that are client-centered abound in such fields as law, teaching, accounting, and medicine. Social entrepreneurs striving for success through a for-profit organization are, in effect, occupational devotees who are running businesses.

These entrepreneurs approach their work with the commitment and enthusiasm of a serious leisure participant. The main difference between the two is that the first are dependent on the enterprise for all or a substantial part of their livelihood. In the final analysis, however, the for-profit entrepreneurs are coerced to work at their enterprise. Here its leisure-like character gets blurred, for in reality, going to work and making a living are also for many people two of life's obligations, albeit agreeable ones for the devotee.

• **Devotee work**

Having a passion for work, as every occupational devotee does, is rare. Most workers in this world are simply not fortunate enough to find jobs so thoroughly agreeable as this. But for those who do find them, their work

- meets the following six criteria. To generate occupational devotion:
- 1) The valued core activity must be profound; to perform it acceptability requires substantial skill, knowledge, or experience or a combination of two or three of these.
- 2) The core must offer significant variety.
- 3) The core must also offer significant opportunity for creative or innovative work, as a valued expression of individual personality. The adjectives "creative" and "innovative" stress that the undertaking results in something new or different, showing imagination and application of routine skill or knowledge. That is, boredom is likely to develop only after the onset of fatigue experienced from long hours on the job, a point at which significant creativity and innovation are no longer possible.
- 4) The would-be devotee must have reasonable control over the amount and disposition of time put into the occupation, such that he can prevent it from becoming a burden. Medium and large bureaucracies have tended to subvert this criterion. For, in interest of the survival and development of their organization, managers have felt they must deny their nonunionized employees this freedom, and force them to accept stiff deadlines and heavy workloads. But no activity,



**Figure 1 Work-Leisure Coinage**

Source: Stebbins, R.A. (2004) *Between Work and Leisure: The Common Ground of Two Separate Worlds* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction), p. 120.

be it leisure or work, is so appealing that it invites unlimited participation during all but a few waking hours.

- 5) The would-be devotee must have both an aptitude and a taste for the work in question. This is, in part, a case of one man's meat being another's poison. John finds great fulfillment in being a physician, an occupation that holds little appeal for Jane who, instead, adores her for-profit social enterprise (work John finds unappealing).
- 6) The devotees must work in a physical and social milieu that encourages them to pursue often and without significant constraint the core activity. In the area of social entrepreneurship this includes avoiding excessive paperwork, funding crises, bitter policy disputes, governmental resistance, and the like.

Except for (5) these criteria are delicate. A number of conditions can easily arise that weaken them, transforming what was a devotee job into one now largely disagreeable. Should this transformation occur the devotee social entrepreneur, if he or she stays with the enterprise and its mission, becomes an entrepreneur driven by disagreeable obligation. Here the devotee and leisure qualities of the activity have become appreciably undermined by uncontrollable external forces.

So it happens that work and leisure, in general, and social entrepreneurship, in particular, are not always so easily separated. While casual leisure and non-devotee work can be seen as separate coins, serious leisure and devotee work can only be logically seen as the two sides of a single third coin (see Figure 1).

Up to now in this article, we have been discussing three kinds of social entrepreneur: volunteer/non-profit, disagreeably obligated (non-profit/for-profit), and agreeably obligated for-profit. Whichever kind the individual enterprise is it is highly probable that, at least in the early stages of its development, the social entrepreneur will also be engaging volunteers to help realize the entrepreneurial mission. But, to the extent that the enterprise comes to be driven by profit motives, reliance on volunteers tends to disappear. They are almost exclusively found in the non-profit, or third, sector of the economy, if for no other reason than that their altruistic motive of giving selflessly squares poorly with the business ethic of being remunerated for a job that someone else can afford to pay for.

## Conclusions

There is much more to being a social entrepreneur than wanting to do something beneficial for other people or for the flora, fauna, and natural environments of this world. In the case of the for-profit enterprise, there is more to it than finding a livelihood and wanting to do something beneficial at the same time. To be sure, these are real motives and as such they help explain social entrepreneurship. But they are also incomplete as explanations.

But the point of this article is that they are also incomplete as explanations. Taken alone they simplify a complex activity and its impact in an age when existing governmental and non-governmental organizations are either unable or unwilling to solve crucial problems. By analyzing social entrepreneurship within the framework of the serious leisure perspective (which includes

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occupational devotion), we gain the additional sense of how the search for personal and social rewards, experience of the core activity, and the contexts of society, culture, and history can enrich our understanding of it. True, I have said little in this article about rewards and context. To have covered these would have made it necessarily long, since such discussion exists elsewhere (Stebbins, 2007).

## References

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