

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 37 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig, 2005); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and *Social Entrepreneurship for Dummies* (Wiley, 2010, with M. Durieux). 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 *Centre d'accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones* (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.

Leisure Reflections No. 25

Flow in Serious Leisure: Nature and Prevalence

A fair number of scholars (noted below) have weighed in on the link between flow and serious leisure. All have concluded through empirical research or theoretic appraisal that the serious leisure activities under study do generate flow and that this experience is one important motive for participation there. The impression created in this literature is that, by implication, all serious leisure offers significant moments during which participants find flow. In this article I will examine the proposition that serious leisure is not necessarily a source of flow. My conclusion is that some serious leisure cannot generate this experience.

The Nature of Flow

The yardstick with which I will work to examine this proposition is Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, pp. 48–67) set of eight components of this experience:

1. sense of competence in executing the activity;
2. requirement of concentration;
3. clarity of goals of the activity;
4. immediate feedback from the activity;
5. sense of deep, focused involvement in the activity;
6. sense of control in completing the activity;
7. loss of self-consciousness during the activity;
8. sense of time is truncated during the activity.

These components are self-explanatory, except for the first and the sixth. With reference to the first flow fails to develop when the activity is either too easy or too difficult; to experience flow the participant must feel capable of performing at least a moderately challenging activity. The sixth component refers to the perceived degree of control the participant has over execution of the activity. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 59) says this is, more precisely, a matter of 'lacking the sense of worry about losing control'. It is the sense of participants in flow that they can successfully handle any usual condition that comes along in their activity. On page 61 he further observes that 'what people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control in difficult situations'.

Components 1 and 6 are intricately intertwined: feeling competent in doing an activity generates a sense of being able to exercise control, especially in difficult situations. It follows that an activity, to qualify as productive of flow, must be seen by its participants as allowing for situations where control may be a challenge. They are aware of these situations, even though they are uncommon. Indeed, most of the time the activity presents the usual challenges, though stiff enough to generate flow. In such conditions participants execute the activity, while feeling that they can handle whatever unusual comes along. Additionally Elkington (2006; 2008) found in his research that trust in the other participants in the activity being pursued at the time is often an important condition for feeling that one has control.

It follows logically that, if these eight components are necessary conditions of flow, they must all be present for the participant to experience this state. If one or more of them are absent, the leisure experience at the time cannot be qualified as flow-based. This is an important criterion. For example a person can be deeply involved (component 5) in a film or a roller coaster ride without having to be competent at something or feel a sense of control or both. If we adhere strictly to the eight components, these two activities cannot be described as flow-based. On the other hand, if we reject strict adherence, the two could then be regarded as flow-based. Indeed a loose adherence to the eight components would expand immensely the list of flow-based activities. But this approach would also force an unwanted imprecision on the concept, making it scientifically less useful. Therefore it is best to stay with the strict version, labelling as flow the activities to which

it applies and creating other terms for the activities that are characterised by some but not all eight of the components.

At the same time it is not sufficient simply to assume that a given leisure activity allows for the eight components or fails to. Instead this claim should be demonstrated by way of research. Furthermore empirical examination of an activity not only shows that flow is possible there but also describes its distinctive manifestations. Thus, the sense of competence is different for surf-boarding, as seen in balance on waves and charting a course through them, compared with that sense in theatre, as seen in artistically presenting lines in interaction with the other actors and props on stage at the moment. Both examples require concentration and focused involvement, but the goals sought are sharply different — remaining gracefully afloat in surfing, performing the role well in theatre.

Flow in Serious Leisure

Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 2007a). Since there is rather little research linking flow and serious leisure in the detailed manner just described, we can only speculate about which activities in this form might be found to generate this experience. But first note that flow has been found in quilting (Stalp, 2007); barbershop singing (Stebbins, 1996); table tennis, amateur acting, coaching amateur sport (Elkington, 2006; 2008) and white-water kayaking, mountain climbing and snowboarding (Stebbins, 2005). Heo, Lee and Pedersen (2010) and Mannell (1993) have also studied flow in serious leisure pursued by older adults, although the activities themselves were not identified in the publications (both studies gathered data on serious leisure in general). These studies vary as to how rigorously their authors apply the eight components, with Elkington's being, among this list, the most thorough in this regard.

In pursuits qualified as flow-based we would expect to find flow in their core activities, either all the time (as in basketball, alpine skiing, hang gliding and ice hockey) or a significant part of it (as in acting, bird watching, fishing ['when they're biting'] and mountain biking).¹ Activities like these require physical skill commonly enacted with mental acuity and relevant knowledge. The twin components of competence and control are obvious here. More generally all the amateur activities and physically-active hobbies would seem to generate full or intermittent flow.

But what about leisure activities that are primarily mental such as playing chess or poker or reading something involved like a novel or an essay? The component of competence is evident in both kinds of pursuits, as experience and strategy are combined to influence each move on the chessboard or card table and background knowledge and developed vocabulary are combined to understand the written work. But where does control come in for the reading activities? Perhaps research specifically designed to explore this question will reveal that there is something to control but, at least for me, it is not obviously present. I will therefore hypothesize that the reading hobbies — the liberal arts hobbies — are not typically productive of flow (more about this proposition in the next section).

Do the making and tinkering hobbies produce flow? Making a quilt, chair, ceramic vase or origami figure or undertaking a typical do-it-yourself (DIY) project all require competence in particular skills and accumulated experience to execute them in a fulfilling way. Moreover control over external or unexpected forces can be an issue, as when the quilting fabric is found to be inferior or unexpectedly tears, the woodworker encounters an unexpected knot, the clay becomes too watery or the DIY plumber discovers a structural property in a wall that hinders successfully completing the project.

The collecting hobbies also combine competence and control, and so may be considered flow producing activities. Competence is observed

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in knowing what genuine collectibles look like, where to find them, what price is reasonable, how to spot blemishes, and the like. Control is sensed over procedures such as these when the collector has the confidence to engage in them without worrying about wasting time looking in the wrong place, being gyped by a seller, or failing to see the item's crucial faults. In these hobbies flow is experienced intermittently, say, during the moments when the collector is examining a set of possibly collectible items, when one is found and when a transaction to buy gets underway.

We turn finally to the career, or serious leisure, volunteer activities. The very definition of volunteers in this area includes the need for special knowledge, experience, and sometimes, skill. In short career volunteers must be competent at what they do. But do they sense a need for control over expressions of this competence?

To answer this question, consider a typology of volunteer activities (Stebbins, 2007b), one constructed in part from six interests in volunteering: popular (related to people), ideas, material (things), floral, faunal and environmental. Serious leisure activities in all six appear to carry with them a sense of possible need for control. This seems obvious in such popular volunteering as ski patrol, search and rescue and emergency medical work as well as in idea-based volunteering like pro-bono legal service and volunteer consulting. Less obviously environmental career volunteering, for example, includes the possible need for control while maintaining hiking trails and trout streams in difficult terrain as well as creating, organizing and conducting eco-friendly publicity campaigns in communities hostile to this stance toward nature.

The Liberal Arts Hobbies

This review of flow in the world of serious leisure brings to the fore the non-flow character of the liberal arts hobbies. Their goal is acquisition of a body of knowledge and understanding of, for example, one or more arts, sports, foods, beverages, languages, cultures, histories, sciences, philosophies or literary traditions. A similar goal motivates the inveterate albeit intellectually-oriented followers of current politics. These hobbyists look on the knowledge and understanding they have gained as ends in themselves rather than, as is common in the other serious leisure pursuits, as background, as a means to involvement in another hobby, amateur or volunteer activity. When compared with the other serious leisure activities, the knowledge acquired pursuing a liberal art is of primary rather than secondary importance. Of note is the fact that some of these hobbyists also gain knowledge through cultural tourism, video documentaries, public lectures, continuing-education courses and similar resources.

There is competence in pursuing this hobby, seen in having an adequate vocabulary for it, an intellect sufficient to follow the argument, a learned capacity to evaluate the validity of the material being consumed, and the like. But what sense do readers here have of any need for control in doing all this? Is there any sense of the possibility of something going wrong and then having to react to correct the problem so as to continue on the path to further learning? True the television could malfunction making it impossible to watch a video, a cultural tour of a museum might be abandoned because the place caught fire or a public lecturer could wind up with the flu forcing cancellation of the event. Yet it seems improbable that liberal arts hobbyists approach such eventualities with

a sense of being competent enough to control them. As for the core activity of this hobby — actually reading something — what sense of control could emerge here such that, when combined with a sense of competence, a feeling of flow would result? I can think of none.

The liberal arts hobbies are woefully under-examined in leisure studies. Detailed exploratory work that includes some attention to the possibility of flow might produce evidence that negates my hypothesis. But at this point in time they do appear to stand as evidence that flow is not a universal feature of serious leisure. We have yet to survey a population for the proportion who goes in for this hobby, though casual observation suggests that it is substantial. Thus we are not speaking about some remote corner of the world of serious leisure. The hypothesized distinctiveness of the liberal arts hobbies — it rests in part on their lack of flow — should be noted by all scholars interested in the true extent of this kind of autotelic experience.

Casual and Project-Based Leisure

Casual leisure has been defined as the immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it. Project-based leisure, the third form comprising the serious leisure perspective, is short-term, reasonably complicated, one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time, or time free of disagreeable obligation (Stebbins, 2007a). We look first at casual leisure.

According to its definition, which revolves around activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it, casual leisure lacks the first component of flow. Consider its eight types, each of which shows that competence is not a prerequisite for carrying them out. The activities are *play* (including dabbling), *relaxation* (e.g., sitting, napping, strolling), *passive entertainment* (e.g., TV, books, recorded music), *active entertainment* (e.g., games of chance, party games), *sociable conversation*, *sensory stimulation* (e.g., sex, eating, drinking), *casual volunteering* (e.g., handing out leaflets, addressing envelopes, taking tickets at concert) and *pleasurable aerobic activity*. The last and newest addition to this typology — pleasurable aerobic activity — refers to physical activities that require effort sufficient to cause marked increase in respiration and heart rate (Stebbins, 2004). Here reference is to 'aerobic activity' in the broad sense, to all activity that calls for such effort. Thus the concept includes the routines pursued collectively in (narrowly conceived of) aerobics classes and those pursued individually by way of televised or video-taped programs of aerobics. Yet, as with its passive and active cousins in entertainment, pleasurable aerobic activity is, at bottom, casual leisure. That is, to carry out such activity requires little more than minimal skill, knowledge, or experience.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 52) briefly discusses 'micro-flow activities', or private behaviours intended to relieve everyday boredom (e.g., doodling, chewing on things). They may be conceived of as instances of the play and sensory stimulation types of casual leisure. His accompanying comments on the micro-flow activities suggest, however, that he does not regard them as true flow. Why? At bottom they lack complexity and demanding challenge.

Project-based leisure requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes skill or knowledge, but is for all that neither serious leisure nor intended to develop into such. Examples include surprise birthday parties, elaborate preparations for a major holiday and volunteering for sports events. Flow is certainly possible where skill, knowledge or both are needed to complete a project, as in using knowledge of Powerpoint gained at work to mount a slide show of one's two-week tour of the Antarctic to be shown at an evening gathering of friends. An experienced and competent user of Powerpoint would be able to control, or solve, the problems that could possibly spring up during preparation and presentation of the show (e.g., how to present the slides on a full screen, implement the fly-in effect, insert photos).

Conclusions

The majority of serious leisure activities generate flow during all or a significant portion of the time spent engaging in their core activity. One might therefore be forgiven the inclination to paint all serious leisure with this brush, since the non-flow liberal arts hobbies are in the minority, often overlooked (hobbyist readers commonly attract little attention) and seldom studied scientifically. So this article urges us to be more discriminating about how we understand the place of flow in serious leisure. Furthermore some of the casual leisure activities, especially the sensory stimulation type, look as though they offer flow-based experiences. But application of the eight components fails to support this impression. Elsewhere by no means every leisure project is capable of producing flow for its participants. In other words here, too, each project studied requires close scrutiny to determine its potential for flow.

The desire to experience flow in leisure is a powerful motive, and the concept is clearly a major theoretic breakthrough for the study of leisure activities. That said we cannot explain the appeal of all leisure using this idea.

Note

¹ A core activity is the distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve the outcome or product the participant finds attractive (e.g., enjoyable, satisfying, fulfilling) (Stebbins, 2007a).

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