

Leisure Studies and the Study of Play: Differences and Similarities



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Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with 40 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 41 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *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); *Serious Leisure and Nature: Sustainable Consumption in the Outdoors* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011, with Lee Davidson); *The Idea of Leisure: First Principles* (Transaction, 2012); and *Work and Leisure in the Middle East* (Transaction, 2013). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1999, and Senior Fellow of the World Leisure Academy in 2010. He 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, most recently 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.

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These two fields — leisure studies and the study of play — would be one might think natural partners in the investigation of free time activity. For example, both set themselves off from the domain of work, albeit this distinction in both disciplines has sometimes been crudely conceptualized (I’ll return later to this point). Both have had to fight the headwinds of naïve lay public imagery, which sees them as dealing exclusively in the frivolous. Yet, both have generated through research practical lessons with deep import.

If we may thus conceive of leisure studies and the study of play as riding in the same scientific canoe, it is also true that they are mostly unaware of each other’s presence there. The one in the bow (it makes no difference which one) paddles in directions unbeknownst to the one in the stern and vice versa. I suspect that it is because of this preoccupation, each field paddling its own disciplinary canoe as though no one else were aboard, that this mutual ignorance has taken root and thrived. In general, members of the two fields know little about what their counterparts at the other end are doing. As evidence it is rare in the study of play to see words like ‘leisure’ and ‘recreation’ (‘fun’ is a common term, though), while in leisure studies ‘play’, though appearing relatively more frequently, is hardly a household word.¹

The Scope of the Two Fields

The goal of any definition is to set out its essential features, thereby distinguishing the definiendum from everything else. Since such efforts are uncommon when it comes to defining play, Edward Norbeck’s definition is especially welcome. His is a provisional statement, provisional in that future thought and research could prompt changes to it. He holds that play is ‘behavior resting upon a biologically inherited stimulus or proclivity, that is distinguished by a combination of traits: play is voluntary, somehow pleasurable, distinct temporally from other behavior, and distinct in having a make-believe or transcendental quality’ (Norbeck, 2013, p. 1). He goes on to note that many definitions of play include the condition that it is non-utilitarian. Observing that this may not always apply to professionals in art and sport, he prefers to say that ‘at least among non-professional players, the goals of play are usually not consciously utilitarian’ (p. 2). He states further that there is in play ‘a transcendence of ordinary cognitive states which ... seems to represent altered neurophysiology in a distinct and distinctive physiological state’. Kimberlee Bonura (2009) adds that play is self-initiated, self-ended and open-ended, thereby falling at the opposite end of a continuum starting with the domain of work. Furthermore, play activities have a beginning and an end. Nonetheless, I will argue later that this definitional stance needs qualifying in certain places.

That play is defined as a kind of behaviour is not to imply that the latter is necessarily physical. True, we can physically play or dabble with an object or an organism, including those that some other people approach seriously (e.g., a piano, microscope or food on a plate). Yet, it appears that most play is mental behaviour, as seen most vividly in the creative, innovative manipulation, both conscious and semi-conscious, of certain ideational elements leading thereby to new constructs of immense variety. These ideas may be expressed in, for instance, daydreams, stories, pretend play and solutions to problems (including serious ones). Artistic and scientific creativity and strategies for winning games and sporting competitions also exemplify this kind of play. Consonant with this mental behaviour thesis is one of the OED's many definitions of play: '3 fig. & gen. Action, activity, operation, working, esp. with rapid movement or change, or variety. (Now almost always of abstract things, as fancy, thought, etc.)'. Thus it should come as no surprise that the study of play revolves substantially around its psychological and neurological roots in humans as well as, recently, those found in other mammals in whom play behaviour has also been observed.

And, speaking of the OED, it shows that the word 'play' and its derivatives are awash in different meanings and usages. Play occupies nearly two full (dictionary-sized) pages in the OED. By contrast, 'leisure' gets approximately four inches in one column and 'recreation' about half of that (there are three columns per page). So, according to that dictionary, we play idly with an object, play a game of rugby, play on another's sensitivities, play the flute and make a play for something, to mention a few meanings.

The scope of the study of play is determined substantially by the fact that one of its central concepts is a verb (play is also a noun). Moreover, it is several centuries old (the OED traces it to Old English). As a result plenty of time has elapsed during which its users have piled on new meanings, subtle distinctions, pithy sayings and lively metaphors. Moreover, because play is both a transitive and an intransitive verb, the range of its usage is still further extended and enriched.

This linguistic evolution has resulted in an amorphous, if not ambiguous, assemblage of ideas and, it seems, a veritable challenge to play scholars trying to convincingly adumbrate their field of inquiry and define its central concepts (e.g., Henricks, 2006, pp. 2-4).² Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) holds that the very idea of play is 'ambiguous'. Granted, some play scholars have little interest in a clear definition of the study of play as a field or even of its central concept, maintaining instead that open-endedness here is advantageous. They argue that it facilitates the exploration of frontiers and discovery of new ways of conceiving of play and its consequences.

By contrast leisure is a noun only. That is, we cannot 'leisure', notwithstanding John Neulinger's (1981) attempt

to introduce a new verb in his book *To Leisure*.³ As a word leisure is at least as old as that of play, yet it cannot come anywhere near matching the proliferation of meanings of the latter. Compared with those who study play, leisure studies scholars, in attempting to determine the essence of their central concept, have had many fewer allied meanings, distinctions, sayings and metaphors to contend with.

Therefore definitions of leisure abound (Kelly, 1990, pp. 16-23). Moreover, they do not always agree. Indeed, I found the defining of leisure to be so involved that my attempt to do the job thoroughly required a small book. There I described leisure (the short definition) as 'un-coerced, contextually framed activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both)' (Stebbins, 2012, p. 2). Yet, definers of play face a much greater challenge in trying to nail down the essential definitional elements in their field's far more complex accumulation of usages.

Play: Concentrations of Research and Theory

Much of theory and research in the social scientific study of play falls into three concentrations: 1) play as disinterested activity; 2) play as interested activity in games, both sport and non-sport; and 3) play as interested activity in the arts.⁴ The play of children within these three has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Huizinga's (1955) famous definition of play centres primarily in concentration 1, though he also sees the arts (3) in these same terms. He says play lacks necessity, obligation and utility, being pursued with a disinterestedness that sets it, as an activity, apart from ordinary, real life. Examples include daydreaming, dabbling at an activity and fiddling with something. Concentrations 2 and 3 fall at the end of a continuum identified by Roger Caillois (2001) as *ludus*, or rule-governed activity. The latter did not include 3 in his discussion, however, because art, as with work, creates wealth (Caillois, 2001, p. 5). On the other hand, he did regard hobbies as playful. At the other end of his continuum lies *paidia*, the play of concentration 1. In the study of play Huizinga's conceptualization has been rather more influential than that of Caillois. Concentration 1 might even be viewed as a pure type of play.

Concentrations 2 and 3 juxtaposed with concentration 1 reveal some logical difficulties, for the first two show that play activity is neither always disinterested nor wholly open-ended. Games have rules, which constrain what participants may (playfully) do in them. Likewise, in much of amateur and professional art, creativity is constrained by canon, by a set of aesthetic criteria embraced and promulgated by the art's establishment (in music, painting, theatre, dance, craftwork, etc.). Play in games, sport and art is also interested, goal-oriented activity. Furthermore, in these second two concentrations, though there may

be no utility, there is, especially in team-based activity, obligation (e.g., obligation to members of the team). The fact that some activities in games, sport and art are pursued as work muddies further the conceptual waters of the study of play. Here, these workers play just as their amateurs counterparts do, doing so, however, in service of their livelihood.

These concentrations of research and theory in the study of play are perfectly defensible, given how the verb play has been used in these three ways for centuries. And, to the extent that activities pursued in the three concentrations allow for the imaginative play of ideas, the study of play can surely contribute to our understanding of those activities. Even where play is partly structured, as in concentrations 2 and 3, spaces exist where the mind is free to roam, to play. Thus, the chess player ponders the consequences of alternative moves of his pieces on the board and the composer considers different harmonic options for ending a movement of a symphony she is writing. This, to repeat, is the play of ideas.

In the study of play, children at play are sometimes described as 'having fun', which amounts to a sort of research operationalization of the concept of play. But here, too, commonsense usage begets confusion. For 'fun' is also sometimes used to describe what people (children, adolescents, adults) experience when doing activities not ordinarily considered play (Stebbins, 2004). Telling a friend that I had fun the other day while skiing or playing Dungeons and Dragons refers to feelings about two leisure activities of far greater complexity than the fun a child experiences in playground activities.

Moreover, play is not always positive for the player, as leisure is not always thus for the participant (Stebbins, 2009). Sutton-Smith (2001) writes that play can be destabilizing, destructive or disturbing. He observed imaginative expressions of this nature in children's stories. And are not adults also capable of letting their imaginations run wild with negative as well as positive thoughts? The principal difference separating the two is that leisure, even when marred by occasional negative experiences, is positive activity overall. It is activity that people want to do. On the other hand, play can sometimes be both disagreeable and unavoidable. Is this kind of play even leisure?

Play as Leisure/Leisure as Play

In the serious leisure perspective (SLP) play is classified as a type of casual leisure (Stebbins, 2007). There it is conceived of as concentration 1 and is therefore in harmony with Huizinga's approach. Concentrations 2 and 3, however, are treated rather differently in leisure studies. In the SLP these are discussed as amateur or hobbyist serious leisure and, recently, as devotee work (Stebbins, 2012). Play according to concentration 1, if considered at all in these two, is conceptualized as dabbling. That is, some amateurs

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and hobbyists acquire their initial interest in their serious leisure by disinterestedly playing at, for example, hitting a tennis ball, picking out notes on a piano or drawing something (e.g., Stebbins, in press)

Here leisure studies and the study of play overlap, even while apart from the word play itself, their theoretic terminology tends to be different. Thus it is possible to view play as a special activity pursued within the many leisure activities that foster it. More precisely, Play activity — it is an activity with a beginning and an end, both initiated by the participant — occurs as part of the core activity of a larger, or general, leisure activity (the core-general distinction is discussed in Stebbins, 2009).

By way of illustration, consider painting as a general leisure activity, the core activity of which is for certain painters portraying a still life of flowers. The play activities in the core (there will be several) are evident in the artist's expressing on canvas a personal interpretation of the flowers' colour, arrangement, backdrop and the like. Nevertheless, the general activity is comprised of more than its component play activities, for the artist must also select the best brush for the job, ensure that the ambient lighting is adequate and assemble all the colours of paint needed for (playfully) mixing the final shades to be placed on the canvas. Play activities, specialized as they are, drive and motivate — they are enormously fulfilling — the spur-of-the-moment manoeuvres in sport, interpretations in music, choices of words in creative writing, implications of exploratory data in science, artistic renderings of raw craft material, among many other possibilities in the serious pursuits (i.e., serious leisure and devotee work, Stebbins, 2012).

It is when these play activities are engaged in concentrations 2 and 3 that we see most clearly how the two fields complement each other. Here the psychology, neurophysiology and ethology of play are central interests, interests that have attracted rather few leisure studies scholars (but see Kleiber, Walker and Mannell, 2011). Leisure studies specialists are primarily concerned with the more encompassing core and general activities, what motivates people to pursue them, the social-cultural-historical context of the activities, the consequences of the activities for participants and society and so on. As one of a multitude of free-time activities, play in leisure studies has had no special status.

Nevertheless, leisure studies could benefit handsomely from recognizing the importance of play and incorporating it into theory and research. In the study of play, play is seen mainly as a process underlying those

parts of the pursuit of a leisure activity where it can find expression, this being especially evident in concentrations 2 and 3. Sutton-Smith (2001, p. 4) provides a nine-fold classification of such activities, a list that has a number of counterparts in the classification of activities in the SLP (see www.seriousleisure.net/SLP diagram). Play — consciously or semi-consciously generating, identifying and weighing ideas and choices — is in this, its essential sense, invariably imaginative, creative. Therefore play can contribute hugely to the rewarding pursuit of those leisure activities that encourage it, resulting in for instance, a wonderfully written passage of poetry, brilliantly executed set of athletic manoeuvres in basketball or exquisitely flavored sauce in cooking. Scientific interest in leisure's core activities should include these playful moments and their inspiring, fulfilling ramifications. Herein lies the complementarity of the two fields.

Conclusions

Scholars devoted to the study of play have carved out for themselves a crucial interdisciplinary field of positive social science. Though there is an anthropology and a sociology of play, the intellectual roots of this activity lie in psychology and physiology. Therefore, researchers in leisure studies should, on the one hand, be turning to the individual side of the study of play when they want to explain the creative/imaginative foundation of the pursuit of free-time activities and the personal fulfillment that follows. On the other hand, the anthropology and sociology of play can profit mightily from a more profound understanding of leisure theory and research and the free-time activities that can be enhanced by play.

So, these two inter-disciplines complement each other, albeit in very particular ways. Among the specialties in leisure studies, the psychology and social psychology of leisure have the greatest affinity for research on play. Here play, itself a complex form of behaviour, is also at times a vital part of the leisure experience. From another angle, since play must also be understood in social-cultural-historical context, the anthropology and sociology of play have much to learn from leisure studies, the latter having been systematically amassing data and theory in those two fields for a good forty years.

Notes

- ¹ Most leisure studies textbooks say little or nothing about play. The encyclopedias and handbooks follow a similar pattern (but see Moore, 2003). The richest discussion of play within the field of leisure studies is found in its social psychology, most notably that of Kleiber, Walker and Mannell (2011).
- ² Norbeck (2013) observes that 'scholars interested in [defining play] have been troubled in answering the question 'What is play'?
- ³ Leisure studies has not embraced Neulinger's suggestion, however helpful it might have been (Stebbins, 2013).
- ⁴ The study of play is highly interdisciplinary and includes volumes on play and the brain and play in non-human animals.

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