

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.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTS IN LEISURE STUDIES

In the social sciences the word 'concept' refers to a class of acts, thoughts, activities, processes, or structures that we scholars have learned have enough in common to warrant treating under a single name. That is, a concept is, at bottom, a generalized idea about an aspect of the empirical world, and as Kaplan (1964, p. 78) observed, one subject to continual revision until perfected, usually late in the development of the field in question. In other words concepts are essentially hypotheses that will become invalid, should they fail to fit in some critical way the empirical reality it is claimed they represent.

Early in the development of a science, when largely in its descriptive phase, most of its concepts are low-order labels for fundamental classes of the phenomena on which the science is centered. Later, as the science matures, more abstract ideas about those phenomena emerge, often achieved by tying lower-order classes to one another. In either form, concepts constitute the very heart of the science and of any theory constructed in its name. Thus, as Matthew Arnold said of ideas (concepts), they 'cannot be too much prized in and for themselves, cannot be too much lived with'. In a science its concepts drive research, steering inquiry according to the meaning of each.

There is a certain amount of evidence in leisure studies and other social science disciplines that we who work there respect Arnold's evaluation. For example, a number of books designed for classroom use have recently come on the market purporting to treat of the key, or core, concepts of a particular field of study. Further the practice of listing the 'key words' contained in journal articles has become a valuable indicator of what is written there, while being easily disseminated over the Internet for word-search purposes. And concepts figure conspicuously in scholarly publications, often as centres for analysis or means for organizing the work as by chapter or section.

Raymond Williams (1976, p. 13) wrote that 'key words' — our term for concepts — cluster in sets to become a 'vocabulary'. This body of words is shared among colleagues, constituting an in-group language for general discussion there. But it is the point made by

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Barney Glaser that most stimulated me to write this article. He said, in discussing what to put into expositions of grounded theory, 'The most important thing to remember is to *write about concepts not people* [italics in original]. . . . The power of theory resides in concepts, not description' (Glaser, 1978, p. 134).

Glaser advised thus because he saw too many exploratory researchers losing sight of the chief mission of science — to generate theory, which is built from concepts — instead spending valuable time and space quoting interviewees. Too much quoted material of this sort, which is highly idiographic, occludes the nomothetic generalizations and component concepts that from time to time are supposed to emerge from it. This likely happens, as well, in exploratory research on leisure, though my concern for leisure studies is broader than this. It is that leisure studies might be an under-conceptualized discipline. After all, especially in North America, it began as a practically-oriented, problem-centred discipline, where direct action was more prized than abstract ideas. A field bereft of concepts would also be short on theory uniquely bearing its stamp.

One way to conceptually portray a scholarly field is to work from the old research formula of the five Ws: who, what, whom, when, and where. I dredged up this formula (acquired somewhere during my 40-year scholarly career) to indicate in a general way what exploratory researchers in the social sciences should be looking for as they go about their discovery work. (I consider, as data generating devices, the five in Stebbins, 2001, p. 23. See also Denzin, 1970, pp. 269-284.) In exploration the researcher wants to learn *who* is doing (thinking, feeling) *what* to (with, for, about), *whom* and *when* and *where*. Open-ended procedures generate data on these five questions, data that, in turn, become the basis for generalizations in the form of concepts and their interrelationship in propositions. What the old formula neglected and, consequently, I neglected in the little book on exploration, and will now correct, is that there is also a most important additional question: *how*? How do the people being observed do *what* they do? This is not so much a conceptual interest, however, as a descriptive one. The answer to this question gives the

descriptive, ethnographic, underlay on which the explorer constructs more abstract grounded theory revolving around the five Ws and I now add a sixth. That is there is also the theoretical question of *why*. Answering it does not steer data collection, but it does greatly aid data interpretation. Accordingly this article revolves around six Ws.

Concepts in Leisure Studies

It seems to me that the sum of the concepts generated from answering the six Ws actually forms the conceptual foundation of any social science field, once of course, the question of how has been answered. Let us try out this claim on leisure studies in an effort to determine its conceptual base. I will, in doing this, limit discussion to concepts primarily oriented to leisure.

First, which of our concepts speak to the question of who? The most obvious answer is the person who is taking leisure: leisure man, *homo otiosus*. From the standpoint of all of humankind and its social sciences, leisure studies is unique for its broadest focus, which is on this type of person. But, more narrowly, there are many other 'whos', including the leisure service provider, the manager of leisure services, and the leisure educator (counselor). There are also the amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers. These types add further to the distinctiveness of the field, while being more precise about who is found there. There is also a burgeoning literature on, for example, gays and lesbians and people with handicaps as they act as particular types of leisure individuals, though these concepts are shared with several other disciplines. It is likewise for leisure deviants.

How have we conceptualized what do these people do? *Homo otiosus* pursues leisure activities and leisure experiences, two widely-discussed concepts in leisure studies. But most fundamentally *homo otiosus* pursues leisure or recreation, if not both, two concepts whose definitions have, over the years, engaged many a scholar. Concern with leisure meaning, a closely related concept, has also occupied for at least as many years no small amount of attention. Both the activities and the experiences can be further conceptually analyzed as serious, casual, or project-based leisure, with several subtypes flowing from each of these three. Play, and to a lesser extent relaxation, two subtypes of casual leisure, have themselves been the subject of discussion. Recreational specialization, which refers to a narrowing of focus of certain free-time activities, is properly placed under this rubric. Deviant leisure is also part of this conceptual cluster, as is 'purposive leisure' (Shaw and Dawson, 2001).

The concepts clustering around the question of 'whom' organize much of leisure studies thought.

Although variously identified, the leisure client is a main type in the fields of leisure service and leisure education. From another angle, people seek leisure either for their own benefit or, in the case of volunteering, for the benefit of self *and* others. The relevant concepts here are 'self-interested leisure participant' and 'altruistic leisure participant', which are not, however, widely discussed as such in the literature. By contrast, *with* whom people pursue their leisure is rich in concepts that are widely treated of, although these concepts are shared with many other disciplines. Thus we study family leisure, gay-lesbian leisure, adolescent leisure, leisure among the elderly, all-male and all-female leisure, and so on. The concept of leisure social network also helps answer the question dealing with whom people spend their free time.

The question of whom also encompasses the broad idea of leisure group, which is not, alas, part of the leisure studies vocabulary. True, some types of leisure groups have nonetheless been systematically considered, most notably the family and the adolescent friendship group. But a huge range of grassroots associations (Smith, 2000) has been, as such, largely overlooked conceptually in leisure studies (though not in nonprofit sector studies). So has dyadic, triadic and other informal small group leisure been neglected as such. Collective phenomena such as the 'tribe' (Maffesoli, 1993), and the social movement, both of which help explain who pursues certain kinds of leisure with whom have likewise been largely overlooked (Stebbins, 2002). Some working in leisure studies do recognize nevertheless the concept of 'social world', another collective phenomenon that is, however, by no means an exclusively leisure studies term (see Unruh, 1979; 1980).

When people pursue their leisure has been an important question for leisure studies, largely considered under the concepts of time and time use. These two are closely identified with the field of leisure studies. The same may be said for the concept of lifestyle, so long as we qualify it as leisure lifestyle. Leisure lifestyle relates to patterns of leisure behavior enacted during the typical day, week, month, and year. Optimal leisure lifestyle refers to a personally defined agreeable balance of time in and quality of serious and casual leisure activities. The concepts of life-cycle and life-course relate to the question of when we pursue, over the years, which forms of leisure. The concept of leisure constraint falls, in part, under this heading, since people may be blocked by non-leisure time commitments from pursuing the leisure they desire. Still leisure constraint applies as well to whom people pursue their leisure with as well as where they do this and what leisure they engage in. The concept of constraint is evidently one of leisure studies' broadest

ideas. Finally, the concept of obligation (Stebbins, 2000) bears on when people pursue their leisure. Leisure obligations (always agreeable) are part of this calculus. Work and non-work obligations (both possibly disagreeable) make up other parts of it.

Where do people engage in leisure? The concept of home leisure helps answer this question. Concern for leisure activities pursued in parks and recreational areas and centres also conceptualizes the *where* question. Theme park and amusement parks can also be added to this list, as can the various venues for viewing sport (stadia, arenas, stands) and staged artistic performances (halls, auditoria, theaters, cinemas, night clubs). Some people frequent zoos and museums in search of leisure. Tourism, as a leisure concept, addresses the *where* question, and this includes such sub-concepts as types of sites for volunteer tourism, cultural tourism, mass tourism, sex tourism, and the like. The question of *where* looms large in discussions of deviant leisure, since it must be clandestinely pursued. Yet, conceptual terminology here is borrowed from the sociology of deviance, as in brothel, gay bar, stripper stage, nudist resort, cult church, and Internet pornography website. Moreover some leisure is pursued, say, annually at fairs and festivals. Finally, there is a range of concepts for places of informal leisure, notably bars, pubs, casinos, restaurants, trendy shopping districts, games parlours, scenic areas, and drop-in and social centres.

Last but hardly least is the question of *why*. This is the home of leisure theory (bundled concepts linked by propositions), itself made up of many of the aforementioned concepts. Explanations of leisure motivation help answer the question of *why*, as do constraints theory and the serious/casual/project-based leisure perspective. Moreover theories about gender differences in leisure interests form part of the answer to this question and so do those about access and exclusion to leisure opportunities. The approach based on the concept of feminism looks at the woman's unique experience of leisure and the special problems she faces trying to engage in it. Recreational specialization, mentioned earlier, helps explain why people specialize in their pursuit of a certain kind of complex leisure. Discussions of the concept of leisure meaning can also be classified as part of the *why* question. Furthermore, the idea of leisure choice should be included here, in that it helps explain the questions of whom (*with*, *for*), what, when, and where.

Conclusion

This review has turned up a wide variety of concepts in leisure studies, and yet, by no means all were included in the sample examined in this article. By my reckoning, slightly over half are substantially or exclusively

associated with this discipline, with the rest being imports developed and applied one or more other fields as well. My conclusion, then, is that leisure studies does have a distinctive conceptual core. It has also borrowed from other disciplines, but with a hybrid discipline, that is as it should be. And, while such borrowing is likely to continue, the core of predominantly leisure concepts will also grow, signaling an admirable level of conceptual maturity in this field.

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News from ILAM

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Welcome to the eighth instalment of News from ILAM

This is certainly the shortest and possibly the last edition of this column – shortest because there is little to report and last because as the new professional body for leisure emerges it seems probable that ILAM will lose its identity as an autonomous organisation.

What can be reported is that talks are in progress to determine how the new organisation will be constituted and how the metamorphosis of ILAM, the ISRM and the NASD into this body is to be brought about.

A joint statement issued in late April confirmed that the new body would have a cross-sectoral interest and a primary focus on sport, physical activity, leisure, play, parks and open space and fitness. After months of talks about talks the three organisations are also beginning to come together at a regional level; here in the North West the spring ILAM Regional Council meeting has been re-scheduled to include members of the other organisations.

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