

Leisure Reflections

Leisure Reflections No. 24

Addiction to Leisure Activities: Is It Possible?

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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.

Let it be clear from the outset that I have no intention in this article of trying to contribute to the vast scholarly and lay literature on addiction any thoughts about its causes. Addiction is presently an intellectual minefield, strewn with contradictory scientific definitions, wide-ranging lay opinion, numerous causal models, and an ample dose of emotional involvement in the entire question. Instead my concern will be with whether it is valid to describe a powerful interest in a particular leisure or work activity as addictive, a common explanation today in some scientific and lay circles.

A Definition of Addiction for Leisure Studies

Aviel Goodman, a psychiatrist, developed a definition he believed fit both psychoactive substance abuse and pathological gambling. His definition, which is broad enough to apply to leisure activities, holds that:

essentially, addiction designates a process whereby a behaviour, that can function both to produce pleasure and to provide escape from internal discomfort, is employed in a pattern characterized by (1) recurrent failure to control the behaviour (powerlessness) and (2) continuation of the behaviour despite significant negative consequences (unmanageability). (Goodman, 1990)

This statement refers to physical dependence on something, a condition where the addict suffers acute physiological symptoms when administration of it is stopped (e.g., psychoactive substance abuse). It also refers to psychological dependence. Here the addict feels that life is horribly dull when the effects of the drug or activity wear off; satisfaction and well-being are noticeably absent (e.g., pathological gambling; irresistible flow-based activities).

Addiction, Substances and Casual Leisure

Addiction as leisure is, on one level, clearly an oxymoron. This is the world of physical addiction. In it addicts lose control over use of a drug on which they have become dependent (e.g., alcohol, nicotine, heroin, cocaine, hallucinogens). Although they initially take the drug frequently as leisure, later these people — now as addicts — have, in Goodman's terminology, grown powerless to control their addiction-generating activities as well as manage the consequences flowing from them. The unpleasant physical reactions resulting from any refusal to use the drug repeatedly drive these addicts back to active consumption. Such a scenario hardly sounds like leisure when defined as essentially un-coerced, freely chosen activity. Physically addicted people, when they feed their addiction, are not engaging in leisure.

Psychological dependence occupies a different world. Here there is no physical dependence — though some scholars still call it addiction — but rather an absence of a desired positive psychological state, such as tranquility, satiation, well-being, relaxation, or happiness. Thus, regular marijuana use is commonly believed to create psychological dependence in some people, as can such use of prescription drugs like the barbiturates, amphetamines and tranquilizers. It is likewise for food addictions and addictions to sex and possibly exercise. A crucial difference between the psychologically addictive drugs, foods and activities, on the one hand, and the drugs leading to a physical addiction, on the other, is that the

first create a temporary *positive* mental state. By contrast the second mainly avoid or temporarily eliminate a *negative* physical or psychological state (e.g., pain, fear, tremors, nausea). In both worlds a passing sense of well-being normally follows from consuming or engaging in the supposedly addictive substance or activity.

Dependence on a drug to produce a positive state of mind (as opposed to alleviating a negative state) has the same goal that many people seek in ordinary, non-drug-based leisure. But may we then say that positive dependence is leisure? The answer to this question depends on how coercive this drug dependency. For example, do these users lack attractive alternative non-addictive activities, as in consuming drugs to counteract boredom? Is there a genetic tendency toward using a particular drug? Does a person's lifestyle or certain past or present situations within it drive him or her, as it were, to one or more drugs? Are close associates of the user consuming the same drug or a similar one, creating thereby social pressure to conform to group interests? Affirmative answers to questions like these make it logically difficult to describe this kind of drug use as leisure. By the way this relationship cries out for research and, ultimately, for a scale by which we can measure degrees of psychological dependence as it increasingly undermines the sense of leisure.

But, when the answers to questions like these are 'no', when such use is un-coerced, it would appear to be a leisure activity. More precisely it is, being hedonic, casual leisure, sought as relaxation or sensory stimulation or a combination of both.

Addiction, Activity and Leisure

The label of addiction has also come to be applied by some professionals and many lay people to the psychological dependency thought to develop around such activities as work (workaholics), *gambling* (problem gamblers), shopping (shopaholics), television (TV addicts), religious practice (ritualists), mobile phone use (Leung, 2008) and surfing and gaming on the Internet (Li & Chung, 2006). People deeply attached to such activities may feel that, when denied an opportunity to engage in them, their psychological well-being is substantially threatened. Is not this feeling of threat a kind of withdrawal symptom?

To answer this question let us return to our definition: are these participants, these 'addicts', powerless to control their 'addiction', therefore continuing with the activity despite negative consequences? This could be true for the casual leisure activities mentioned in the preceding paragraph. But only if they are indeed uncontrollable, even in face of substantial negative consequences like threat of divorce, financial ruin, jail or a heavy fine, public ridicule, or heart failure and even death caused by certain eating disorders (e.g. bulimia, anorexia). If the so-called addict abandons his or her self-defeating ways because the costs for continuing them are perceived as too great, this person has shown that, with sufficient motivation, the dependency can be controlled and managed. The habit has been broken (or never established) and any claim that it is an addiction shown to be invalid (see Johnson, 2009, for how this process works in so-called Internet addiction).

Serious Leisure

Taking Goodman's definition as our yardstick, is it possible that serious leisure may become addictive? Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered

Forthcoming in LSA Newsletter No. 87
(November, 2010)

Leisure Reflections No. 25

'Flow in Serious Leisure:
Nature and Prevalence'

on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience. First, note that serious leisure is not hedonic. Instead it is motivated by ten substantial rewards (Stebbins, 2007: pp. 13–15):

Personal rewards

1. Personal enrichment (cherished experiences)
2. Self-actualization (developing skills, abilities, knowledge)
3. Self-expression (expressing skills, abilities, knowledge already developed)
4. Self-image (known to others as a particular kind of serious leisure participant)
5. Self-gratification (combination of superficial enjoyment and deep satisfaction — fun, flow)
6. Re-creation (regeneration) of oneself through serious leisure after a day's work
7. Financial return (from a serious leisure activity)

Social rewards

8. Social attraction (associating with other serious leisure participants, with clients as a volunteer, participating in the social world of the activity)
9. Group accomplishment (group effort in accomplishing a serious leisure project; senses of helping, being needed, being altruistic)
10. Contribution to the maintenance and development of the group (including senses of helping, being needed, being altruistic in making the contribution)

Second, serious leisure is further defined by six distinguishing qualities (Stebbins, 2007). One is the occasional need to persevere, such as in learning how to be a capable museum guide. Yet, it is clear that positive feelings about the activity come, to some extent, from sticking with it through thick and thin, from conquering adversity. A second quality is that of finding a career in the serious leisure role, shaped as it is by its own special contingencies, turning points and stages of achievement or involvement. Careers in serious leisure commonly rest on a third quality: significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training, experience, or skill, and, indeed, all four at times. Fourth, several durable benefits, or broad outcomes, of serious leisure have so far been identified, mostly from research on amateurs. They are self-development, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity (e.g. a painting, scientific paper, piece of furniture). A further benefit is that of self-gratification, or the combination of superficial enjoyment and deep fulfilment. Of these benefits, self-fulfilment — realizing, or

the fact of having realized, to the fullest one's gifts and character, one's potential — is the most powerful of all.

A fifth quality of serious leisure is the unique ethos that grows up around each instance of it. A central component of this ethos is its special social world in which participants pursue their free-time interests. Unruh developed the following definition:

A social world must be seen as a unit of social organization which is diffuse and amorphous in character. Generally larger than groups or organizations, social worlds are not necessarily defined by formal boundaries, membership lists, or spatial territory. ... A social world must be seen as an internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants. Characteristically, a social world lacks a powerful centralized authority structure and is delimited by ... effective communication and not territory nor formal group membership. (Unruh, 1980, p. 277)

The sixth quality rests around the preceding five: participants in serious leisure tend to identify strongly with their chosen pursuits. These six qualities have commonly been used to separate serious from casual leisure.

Participants who experience the foregoing rewards and whose serious leisure activities meet the distinguishing qualities realize deep personal fulfilment. Self-fulfilment is either the act or the process of developing to the full one's capacity, more particularly, developing one's gifts and character. Given these rewards and distinguishing qualities, can serious leisure participants become addicted to their amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity, activity that generates such a powerful personal return?

The answer is, in general, 'no'. This conclusion can be explained by the condition that participation in any serious leisure activity is subject to a number of constraints. Six are mentioned here. One is mental or physical fatigue, and sometimes both, felt after a lengthy session in the activity. The participant needs a rest. Another is institutional: work and non-work obligations, including for some people familial obligations, force the enthusiast to spend time at non-leisure activities. A third is related to lifestyle: some people, even while holding a full-time job, are able to pursue more than one serious leisure activity during the same part of the year (e.g., tennis and playing in an orchestra; volunteering, collecting stamps and skiing on weekends). Each activity constrains pursuit of the other(s). Moreover some of these people may also get involved from time to time in a leisure project. (Project-based leisure is a short-term, reasonably complicated, one-shot [one-off] or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time, Stebbins, 2005.) Fourth, participation in some serious leisure is constrained by availability of co-participants. For instance, SCUBA divers must descend with at least one other person, who may however, be free for this activity only on a certain day of the week. Fifth, climatic conditions can constrain a person's leisure. Some these conditions are temporary, a snow or rain storm could force cancelation of a planned afternoon of snowmobiling or golfing, for example, as drought might dry up fishing opportunities or strong winds discourage sailing. But some climatic conditions are seasonal, such that snowmobiling can only be done in winter while sailing (on fresh water) is limited to times of the year when lakes are not frozen.

A sixth constraint is based on manageability. Serious leisure enthusiasts are highly enamoured of what they do, such that they want to be able to return again and again to the activity. To the extent

that engaging in it excessively risks injury, burnout, family or relational conflict, and other unpleasant repercussions that can constrain their involvement, many serious leisure participants are (often reluctantly) inclined to rein themselves in.

The controllability of serious leisure

Nevertheless I have argued over the years (e.g., Stebbins, 2007: pp. 17–18) that the desire to participate in the core amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity can become for some participants some of the time significantly *uncontrollable*. This is because it engenders in its practitioners the desire to engage in the activity beyond the time or the money (if not both) available for it. I wish to underscore in the present article, however, that uncontrollability is a *tendency* not an inescapable compulsion or obsession. Furthermore this tendency is often felt in ways having little to do directly with addiction, as in a desire to upgrade equipment or clothing or acquire more and more training or education.

Searching for Flow

Considering the foregoing constraints to participation in serious leisure, it is difficult to see how it can, for the typical participant, be qualified as addiction. And that despite the passion serious participants commonly express for their activities and the enthusiasm (as measured, for instance, in time, energy, monetary costs) with which they go about them.

Nonetheless there are exceptions; some people defy these constraints suggesting thereby that they are addicted to, or dependent on, their serious leisure. Consider Régine Cavagnoud, French world champion in alpine skiing, who died in a collision with a ski coach while hurtling down a slope in the Alps:

Many times previously Miss Cavagnoud had been badly injured on the slopes while pushing herself to her natural constraints, and probably beyond, in her drive to become a world champion.... Miss Cavagnoud did feel fear. Considering the risks involved, there have been relatively few deaths on the slopes. ... But many skiers are badly injured. Miss Cavagnoud dreaded ending up in a wheelchair. But even more, she said, she dreaded doing badly. (*The Economist*, 2001)

Giddens (1992: pp. 70–74) wrote about similar 'characteristics of addiction' leading to high-risk leisure, when discussing ecstatic experience, the fix gained from having it and, thereby, being 'transported to another world' beyond everyday life. The vast majority of high-risk leisure participants (e.g., alpine skiers, bicycle racers and paragliders) are content with the level of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) experienced from doing their activity and avoid situations where they lack full control of and competence in the activity. Not so with a minority of them who seem hooked on the strong, positive, emotional and physiological feelings that come with going over the top edge of their control and competence. Some say they are motivated by an 'adrenalin rush'. While this would be abhorrent to the majority, it becomes for this minority as it did for Ms Cavagnoud an addictive magnetism, accompanying fear notwithstanding.

According to Goodman's definition, addiction results from searching for pleasure as a remedy for internal discomfort. This combined interest in finding pleasure while alleviating discomfort, the concept of addiction suggests, is frequent and recurring. Thus, once rested addicted skiers and bicycle racers would be irresistibly and recurrently drawn to the slopes and roads, free of the constraints mentioned earlier. And, presumably, if their activity is seasonal, they

would be driven to find an equally exciting counterpart during the off-season. The same may be said for actors, jazz musicians, ballet dancers, and some others in the performing arts who simply cannot get enough of expressing their talent and feeling the flow it generates and who, as addicts, have abandoned all allegiance to these constraints. Still such hyper-enthusiasts are comparatively uncommon.

Searching for Success

The drive for success in any field of work or leisure can be heavily time-consuming, suggesting to some people that addiction is the cause of activity this intense. Where success is achieved through strongly felt flow experiences and the constraints of participation are ignored, as can happen in playing jazz or engaging in alpine skiing, for example, addiction could conceivably be an outcome. But, when success is reached in activities offering only weak flow, or none at all, the label of addiction seems far-fetched, implausible. Meanwhile more empirically valid and profound explanations for such behaviour exist. They include the list of rewards presented earlier and the qualities of serious leisure and devotee work (devotee work has these same qualities and set of rewards, Stebbins, 2004b). These observations call into question whether the supposed workaholic is really an addict, as some writers have claimed (for a discussion of workaholism as addiction, see Stebbins, 2004b: pp. 28–29).

The drive for success does not mean that the behaviour leading to it is uncontrollable, as true addictions are. Rather the successful person in leisure or work knows full well what it takes to succeed and, with a strong sense of control and personal competence, has set out to reach this goal. He or she *is* in reasonable control of an unfolding career personally designed to achieve identifiable rewards. In other words the drive for success is carried out by way of a variety of positive activities. By contrast addiction itself, as defined in this article, is negative — an unpleasant state — to which the addiction-related behaviour brings only temporary relief. This hardly sounds like an antecedent to success in the multitude of activities in which people aspire to achieve this goal.

Conclusions

Identifying leisure as addictive when it is not has at least two very important consequences. One is the creation of deviance. Labelling someone as an addict to a leisure activity is, at the least, stigmatizing. Calling someone an addict is insulting. Even more serious is formally labelling that person as an addict, an act that officialises his deviance (Becker, 1963). This is now the practice in China, where a recently enacted law makes illegal ‘addictive’ use of the Internet, with fines, incarceration, and compulsory therapy numbering among the possible correctional responses (McCabe, 2009). Meanwhile a private hospital in Britain has chosen instead to medicalize the problem, by offering a technology addiction service to ‘screenagers’ (mostly 15- to 17-year-olds) supposedly hooked on computer games or their mobile phones (*Calgary Herald*, 2010). The service consists of intensive inpatient, day care, or group therapy.

Two, there are unwanted consequences in describing leisure activities as addictive, in that some people may avoid them for fear of becoming obsessed with them, just as they are warned by the same logic against using certain drugs. How many youth have been told to eschew a certain sport on grounds that they will get hooked on it and want to do nothing else (such as go to university, get a steady job)? How many have been advised, for similar reasons, to stay away from computer games, even though these activities can be understood as serious leisure (e.g., Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Silverman,

2006) addiction to which, I have just argued, is substantially constrained? How many people fear their own potentially uncontrollable involvement in a leisure activity that they find enormously fulfilling? Might they become addicted to it, they ask, and in that state, spawn problems for themselves and their friends and family?

I have argued that leisure can sometimes be addictive, but I have also argued that outside the leisurely use of hard drugs, this is a relatively rare occurrence.

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