

# 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' 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.

**Website (personal):**

**[www.ualgary.ca/~stebbins](http://www.ualgary.ca/~stebbins)**

**Website (perspective):**

**[www.soci.ualgary.ca/seriousleisure](http://www.soci.ualgary.ca/seriousleisure)**

## Leisure Reflections No. 28

### LEISURE AND HAPPINESS

Interlaced among all the dreary news of the day are persistent and mellifluous observations about happiness in our lives. Even though there is in this trendy interest a certain amount of phony and simplistic advice and thought, it is on the whole a good thing. At least it accents the positive and gets people thinking about their lives in such terms.

Richard Layard (2005, p. 12) defines happiness as the state of feeling good and enjoying life. It is a descriptive term. Moreover some thinkers see happiness as momentary: '[it] is considered to reflect a person's more temporary affective feelings of the present moment' (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997, p. 208). Examples include: 'I was happy with my performance on the test', 'I am happy that my party turned out so well', 'I was very happy to receive that award the other day'. Let us label this *short-term happiness*, so-called because the 'present moment' might last for a few minutes or even a few days.

By contrast, others see happiness as a description of a broad swath of life, as expressed in such observations as: 'I was happy as a child', 'My years in this community have been happy ones', 'I will be happy in retirement'. In this vein Diener (2000) holds that happiness and subjective well-being are the same. For him well-being is a combination of positive affect and general life satisfaction. In a similar vein Keyes (1998, p. 121) defines social well-being as 'the absence of negative conditions and feelings, the result of adjustment and adaptation to a hazardous world'. To put the matter positively, let us say that well-being comes with having good health, reasonable prosperity, and in general, being routinely happy and content. This is *long-term happiness*.

Short or long term, happiness is the result of a huge variety of personal and social conditions leading to this state in individuals. Thus, it is interesting to describe people's (usually long-term) happiness, to know how many of them are happy, think they will be happy, once were happy, and so on. In this regard it is now common to compile national happiness ratings (see Datablog in *guardian.co.uk*, 14 November 2010), while Britain's Prime Minister, David Cameron, has decided to create a national happiness index. These are major undertakings, which by the way appear to ignore the short/long-term distinction just set out.

Yet even more complicated is the project of explaining such tendencies as well as explaining the condition of happiness itself. A substantial part of the explanation of happiness has been driven by the question of whether money makes people happy. And, from what I will be saying about fulfillment in this article, it should be easy to conclude that, much of the time, no direct link exists between happiness and money. Layard (2005) determined from his review of comparative research on this issue that 'comparing countries confirms what history also shows'—that above \$20,000 [USD] per head, higher average income is no guarantee of greater happiness' (p. 34). Once food, clothing, shelter, and the like are secure, having more money is not necessarily a source of increased well-being (Franklin, 2010, p. 5).

Subjective or social, the concept of well-being rests on the presupposition that, to achieve it, people must be proactive, must exercise personal agency to arrive at this state. Well being is therefore also a goal, which when reached will demonstrate a person's overall happiness. The same may be said for obtaining a decent quality of life. Both concepts speak to a process of personal betterment, as the individual defines this state. Happiness is therefore further explained by our willingness to work toward our well-being and agreeable quality of life.

Moreover psychological and sociological positiveness are sources of happiness. Happy people are positive about their lives, whether at the

moment or over a long period of time. This observation describes the result of positive living, of the pursuit of positiveness in a life seen as attractive and worth living. Be that as it may, positiveness is both a condition *and* a goal. As a condition it may be seen as an aspect of long-term happiness. As a goal, however, it stresses finding worthwhileness; it emphasizes getting something desirable out of life. Personal agency is also a prerequisite of positiveness (Stebbins, 2009, p. 7). It stresses actively finding a life that is, in combination, rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling. Here people direct their own efforts to find worthwhile activities, even while those efforts are inevitably framed and sometimes constrained by broader social, cultural and structural conditions.

### The Limits of the Idea of Happiness

Leisure can generate happiness, but is not itself happiness. Happiness is a state of mind; it is positive affect and a component of emotional well-being (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 71). By contrast leisure is activity; it is what we do in free time to make life attractive and worthwhile. We may describe ourselves as 'happy', but we may not say we are 'leisure' (however happy we may be).

In general to be happy with a leisure activity is, at least in part, to be satisfied with it. Mannell and Kleiber (1997, p. 208) observe following Campbell (1980) that satisfaction implies a judgment, a comparison of the outcome of, for example, a leisure activity in the present with what the participant expected. Thus low satisfaction with that activity would fail to generate happiness at that moment.

So, by no means all leisure activity results in a happy state. I am not speaking here of boredom, which I have argued elsewhere is not leisure (Stebbins, 2003). Whereas people try to avoid becoming bored, some of them find that certain leisure activities have minimal appeal such that they are only marginally better than boredom. Bruno Frey (2008) found in his studies of happiness conducted at the University of Zurich that results were mixed on whether watching television makes people happy. But it is clear from his group's research and the relevant literature that such activity, if it leads to happiness at all, generally leads to low satisfaction and hence a low order of this mood. Moreover they found indirect evidence to support the hypothesis that: 'television consumption significantly lowers the life satisfaction of individuals with high opportunity costs of time, whereas as it has no discernible effect on the life satisfaction of individuals with low opportunity costs of time'. In economics the concept of 'opportunity cost of time' refers to time lost in an activity that could have been used to pursue a more satisfying one such as self-employment or high-level salaried work (e.g., professional jobs, top bureaucratic positions). It takes good self-control to avoid the high opportunity costs of time attendant on the excessive consumption of television.

What has been referred to elsewhere as 'volitional abandonment' (Stebbins, 2008) constitutes another free-time situation where leisure fails to engender happiness. Volitional abandonment takes place when a person consciously decides to participate no further in an activity. I dealt with this antecedent in my comparison of devotee work and serious leisure (Stebbins, 2004, pp. 88-89). There it was observed that some people eventually come realize that their formerly highly appealing work or leisure is no longer nearly as enjoyable and fulfilling as it once was. It has become too humdrum, possibly no longer offering sufficient challenge, novelty, or social reward (e.g., social attraction, group accomplishment, contribution to development of a larger collectivity). Perhaps they have become

discouraged with one or more of its core tasks, so discouraged that they believe they will never again find deep satisfaction in it.

Nevertheless some people hang on for a period of time, unhappily participating in the activity while finding it difficult to extricate themselves from it. This is a common fate among volunteers who have served well in responsible positions, often because they have established a standard of performance few others are willing or able to meet. Amateurs and hobbyists in team-based activities may reluctantly stay with them, when others in the group complain that, if the first leave, the orchestra, sports team, bridge club or barbershop quartet, for example, will deteriorate, if not cease to function. In this half-life it is questionable whether such participants are truly at their leisure; perhaps for them the activity has slid into disagreeable obligation.

Casual leisure, because it is evanescent hedonism, is subject to losing its appeal and drifting toward low levels of satisfaction and short-term unhappiness, if not completely out of the zone into boredom. Frey's data from his study of television fit here. In addition, it is certainly possible that some kinds of sociable conversation lose their appeal after a protracted period of it. And most of us like to eat and sleep, but can become satiated with either after too much. In serious and project-based leisure participants may be dissatisfied, or unhappy, with how their activities or projects have turned out. The relatives get into a vicious quarrel at a family picnic; the soloist in the community orchestra concert, gripped with stage fright, plays badly off key; the board member of a non-profit has at every meeting acrimonious exchanges with the organization's executive director. Some of these examples depict only short-term unhappiness, allowing thus for the possibility that long-term happiness in the activity remains unthreatened.

### Happiness in Leisure: Authentic or Profound

Martin Seligman (2003) brings us to the jumping off point for relating leisure and long-term happiness, when he states that 'authentic happiness' comes from realizing our potential for enduring self-fulfillment. This observation opens the door to the central relationship that leisure has with happiness. Putting his thoughts into a leisure studies framework, we may say that enduring self-fulfillment springs primarily from serious leisure and devotee work activities, where it commonly takes several years to acquire the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to realize this personal expression. Leisure projects are often capable of producing some sense of self-fulfillment, but not at the level of the 'serious pursuits' (summary term for serious leisure and devotee work, Stebbins, 2011, chap. 1). Casual leisure, because it is based, at the most, on minimal skill and knowledge, is incapable of producing self-fulfillment and therefore long-term happiness by means of it.

But there is reason to question Seligman's use of the adjective 'authentic'. Is the happiness achieved through serious pursuits any more real or genuine than that achieved through casual leisure? Surely casual leisure happiness is real enough, as in the thrill of a roller coaster ride, an entertaining night at a comedy club, an enjoyable sociable conversation or a bus tour offering breath-taking natural scenery. Rather, the central issue is how long does such happiness endure and how profoundly related is it to our personal history, acquired skills and knowledge, and special gifts and talents? Most leisure leads to real, authentic, happiness but only some of that happiness is profound, whereas some of it is superficial, falling thus at an intermediate point on the happiness-unhappiness dimension.

**Forthcoming in  
LSA Newsletter No. 91  
(March, 2012)  
Leisure Reflections No. 29  
on  
Self-Directed Learning as a  
Foundation for Leisure Activity**

Seligman, by the way, does not mention leisure in his discussion. Instead it is I who extended his observation into free time and called into question the appropriateness of 'authentic' as applied to happiness in the activities there. This brings up a more general observation central to this discussion, namely, that outside the various descriptive indicators of happiness associated with leisure, leisure is far from being a prominent theme in the literature on the subject. Perhaps this is to be expected, for a growing proportion of that literature is written by economists and psychologists (for a partial review see Frey, 2008, pp. 13-14). On this account Nobel laureate Gary Becker (1965, p. 504) concluded that 'although the social philosopher might have to define precisely the concept of leisure, the economist can reach all his traditional results, as well as many more, without introducing it at all! Nonetheless, economist Layard (2005, pp. 74-75), to his credit, does recognize leisure of the serious kind (he does not use the term) at which point he cites Csikszentmihalyi and flow.

Samuel S. Franklin (2010), a psychologist, approaches the relationship of happiness and fulfillment from the angle of his discipline. Starting with Aristotle's concept of happiness, he brings together theory and research from psychology, philosophy, and physiology in support of the second's views on this psychological state. Franklin's main premise is that happiness is the fulfillment of human potential and not a series of transient pleasures, accumulated wealth, or an outcome of religious belief. For him happiness is long-term, a way of living that characterizes such fulfillment. This said, there are few words in his book about leisure. As with economics this should come as no surprise. For what is known about leisure from the standpoint of psychology has been described as a 'social psychology of leisure' and 'a child of leisure studies' (Mannell, Kleiber, & Staempfli, 2006, p. 119). These authors hold that 'leisure has all but been ignored by social psychologists in the field of psychology during the past 100 years' (pp. 112-113).

### Conclusion

Although leisure is not happiness it clearly plays a pivotal role in generating this state. We should never lose sight of this relationship with one of today's most vibrant spheres of life, for to do so would be to miss an opportunity to promote leisure's relevance to matters that count with science and the general public. Even if some (mostly

casual) leisure leads only to short-term, superficial happiness, it is nonetheless a kind of happiness many people like. We in leisure studies should be showing them the many free-time avenues that may be taken to reach this goal and the nature of the benefits that may be found along the way. We should also plug serious and project-based leisure as additional routes to happiness, albeit of a more profound and enduring sort. In effect we are arguing, in doing this, that, whereas money is generally a poor currency for buying happiness, leisure offers a much more profitable route to this goal. Serious and project-based leisure are far more likely to lead to long-term happiness, especially when, with the casual form, all three are integrated in an optimal leisure lifestyle.

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