

Leisure Reflections No. 46: The Literature Review in Exploratory Leisure Research

[October 27, 2017](#) / [Leisure Studies Association](#)

By Robert A. Stebbins. University of Calgary

stebbins@ucalgary.ca

Website (personal): <http://soci.ucalgary.ca/profiles/robert-stebbins>

Website (Perspective): www.seriousleisure.net

I think it safe to state that research on leisure is mainly quantitative, sometimes hypothesis-driven, and centered on known, previously studied questions. The place of the “lit” review in this area of investigation is well established, and certainly has good reason for existing as scientific practice. Let us call it the *confirmatory lit review*. What is poorly understood by comparison, is the nature and role of the lit review in exploratory research aimed at developing grounded theory, the *exploratory lit review*.

This is no pedantic distinction, for leisure in the West (as opposed to heavily tradition-based societies) is an area of life filled with new activities the initial studies of which are most effectively executed by way of an open-ended, flexible methodology in search of inductively generated propositions, or hypotheses. A confirmatory lit review here is highly inappropriate, in that new leisure activities, especially the very new ones, have yet to attract empirical examination. My position, set out below, is that particularly in leisure studies a special kind of lit review is required, not the conventional kind (see Dunn, 2011, for a general discussion of the lit review polemic as related to grounded theory research).

The Exploratory Lit Review

This last observation begs the question of what literature is there to review when few people if any have studied the activity of interest? This was the situation I faced at the time of my ethnographic work on archaeologists, snowboarders, river kayakers, stand-up comics, and entertainment magicians (for references see <http://www.seriousleisure.net/amateurs> and Hobbyists). The lit review in these circumstances consisted simply of noting that I could find no leisure-focused research on them. Such a declaration puts the onus on anyone who disbelieves it to find relevant research of the ethnographic variety missed by the author. A narrower qualitative or quantitative study or two of, say, the identity of snowboarders or the social class of amateur archaeologists is not ethnographic. Still, ethnographic researchers might briefly mention these as kindred work in the area even though they are not of the in-depth, descriptive, inductive kind they will carry out.

Thus the narrower, focused studies, qualitative and quantitative, demand a confirmatory lit review, even if little or no research has been conducted on the object of research. Such a review will be short where there is little relevant research to comb through, but will nonetheless show the need for the proposed study. For example, a study of the identity of snowboarders might look for

similarly-targeted studies of alpine skiers, cross-country skiers, and snow shoers. In a lit review for an inquiry on the class of amateur archaeologists, research on the class of amateur entomologists, mineralogists, and botanists, if it exists, would be worth noting.

Lit reviews where justifiable help give intellectual context to the study in question. Nevertheless, the theory or theories used to frame the proposed study are usually far more effective in this respect. The disadvantage of purely descriptive research conducted without either of these two ways of contextualizing the data collected is a weakened understanding of their value to science and practice.

The Lit Review as Shibboleth

I have argued (Stebbins, 2001, pp. 42-43) that the requirement that a lit review be undertaken prior to conducting a social science research project is one of the research shibboleths of modern times. It is true that wide-ranging lit reviews are wholly justified as background for writing textbooks and review articles and for empirical or theoretical examinations of particular areas of research to determine the nature and scope of prior scientific activity there, so that proposed work will truly add to the corpus of writings. But difficulties emerge when this approach is applied without modification, as it often is by researchers who are largely unfamiliar with exploration, to the methodology required for discovering new ideas.

By contrast, lit reviews in exploratory research must be carried out to demonstrate that little or no work has been done on the group, process, or activity under consideration and that a flexible and open-ended procedure to data collection is, therefore, wholly justified. The formula I have followed over the years is first to search for the study or studies that come closest to examining what I have set out to explore and then to show how this research leaves unexplored certain critical aspects of that phenomenon. Where exploration is most justified this is a short undertaking. In this lit review I devote the greatest amount of space to these works, after which, proceeding as if by concentric rings, I devote less and less space to works increasingly removed from my project.

Accordingly, compared with confirmatory lit reviews, those in truly exploratory research are necessarily short. This brevity, as might be suspected, often alarms social scientists unacquainted with the conventions of exploration. But the pressure to review past work in the way this is done at the confirmatory level must be resisted, for to stuff the research report with an extensive tour of marginally related studies makes for heavy and distracting reading. This practice also diminishes considerably a work's literary quality, which is especially important in this phase of the scientific process.

This is not to argue, however, that marginally related studies should be ignored everywhere in research reports containing exploratory data. True, in the main or formal lit review, which conventionally appears as a special, usually early, section of the written text, the content should focus on the most closely related studies. But exploratory researchers, when presenting their findings in later sections of the report, do nevertheless refer occasionally to some of the more remotely related studies, with the intent of showing how their own findings support or contradict them.

This is another way to contextualize intellectually an exploratory project. These later links give exploratory data some additional intellectual anchorage; they show how the data relate to the wider scholarly world. Moreover, it is always important to note where existing ideas are supported or contradicted by the new data and generalizations constituting the emergent grounded theory. And challenging received theory and research demonstrates further the important role that discovery research plays in circumventing the constraints of strictly deductive reasoning that is the hallmark confirmatory science.

Conclusions

Leisure studies has special grounds for being interested in exploratory methodology. The serious leisure activities, especially because of their rich social worlds, are immensely complicated. Consider David Unruh's (1980, p. 277) definition of this organizational milieu:

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.

In a second paper Unruh noted that the typical social world is characterized by voluntary identification, by a freedom to enter into and depart from it (Unruh, 1979). Moreover, because it is so diffuse, ordinary members are only partly involved in the full range of its activities. After all, a social world may be local, regional, multiregional, national, even, international. Third, people in complex societies are often members of several social worlds. Finally, social worlds are held together, to an important degree, by semiformal, or mediated, communication. They are rarely heavily bureaucratized yet, due to their diffuseness, they are rarely characterized by intense face-to-face interaction. Rather, communication is typically mediated by newsletters, blogs, posted notices, telephone messages, mass mailings, Internet communications, radio and television announcements, and similar means, with the strong possibility that the Internet could become the most popular of these in the future.

Initial research on a serious leisure activity, of necessity exploratory in nature, includes developing an ethnographic picture of its social world in all its complexity. This complexity is evident, in addition to the explorations mentioned above, in those by Stalp (2007 — quilting), Brown (2004 — shag dancing), Wheaton (2003 — surfing), Breeze (2015 — roller derby), and Fine (1988 — mushrooming), among many others. Had there been earlier depictions of these social worlds, they would probably have been discovered in an exploratory lit review by these authors. The same holds for new casual and project-based leisure, such as cell phone throwing (Finland), bog snorkeling (Wales), and one-time volunteer tourism (discussed in Stebbins, 2008).

References

Breeze, M. (2015). *Seriousness and women's roller derby: Gender, organization, and ambivalence*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brown, C. A. (2004). *The social world of a Society of Stranders festival: Shag dancing as serious leisure*. Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, Clemson University.

Dunn, C. (2011). The place of the literature review in grounded theory research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(2), 111-124.

Fine, G. A. (1998). *Morel tales: The culture of mushrooming*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stalp, M. B. (2007). *Quilting: The fabric of everyday life*. New York: Berg.

Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *Exploratory research in the social sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stebbins, R. A. (2008). The New Leisure, *LSA Newsletter* No. 80, **Leisure Reflections...No. 18**, July.

Unruh, D. R. (1979). Characteristics and types of participation in social worlds. *Symbolic Interaction*, 2, 115-130.

Unruh, D. R. (1980). The nature of social worlds. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 23, 271-296.

Wheaton, B. (2003). Surfing: A subculture of commitment. In R. E. Rinehart & S. Sydnor (Eds.), *To the extreme: Alternative sports, inside and out* (pp.75-101). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Forthcoming:

Leisure Reflections No. 47

On "The Serious Leisure Perspective: Past, Present, and Future"