

Leisure Reflections No 50: The Joys of Loafing

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The OED defines loafing as to “spend time idly, loiter; saunter.” It is quintessential hedonic casual leisure that appears to be immensely popular, though I know of no quantitative measure of the nature or extent of free-time loafing in any particular population. Nevertheless, the practice merits our attention, for it is part of common-sense and often finds its way into everyday talk. Moreover, as casual leisure it qualifies as relaxation and sometimes also as play or sensory stimulation, if not both. In short, we should not in leisure studies ignore loafing when presenting an inclusive portrait of the leisure domain (as is done in textbooks, encyclopedias, and survey courses)

Loafing can be described as *residual fun activity*: what some people do when free of the negative obligations of work and non-work (Stebbins, 2017). This residual image denotes a passive approach to free time, as expressed in “I’ll just vegetate” (until I must return to work, until I must go grocery shopping, etc.). And what does such vegetation consist of? Examples include a casual, even haphazard, searching for something interesting to do as realized through television channel surfing or flipping through the pages of a magazine. One might also vegetate by loafing; by dozing, sitting outside and watching passersby, browsing on a smart phone, or lounging in the warmth of the sun or a blazing fire. All can be classified as casual leisure, as passive activity of one sort or another. This is where in common-sense the general public observes play as disinterested or lamely interested activity (Huizinga, 1955).

A related image is that leisure is *spontaneous fun*, in the sense that there is little need or desire to plan for it in advance, that what we do in free time can be, perhaps should be, determined on the spot (Stebbins, 2017). Such leisure seems often to be born of a full schedule of work and non-work obligation such that little or no time is ordinarily available to plan free-time interests beforehand. A typical scenario might be the person unexpectedly faced with a full day clear of disagreeable obligations and the question of what to do during this time. What to do: watch some television, visit a friend, work on a puzzle, walk in a local park, play solitaire, stroll through a trendy shopping area, or do a combination of these? Much if not all of this is fun, differing

from the planned-fun type primarily by its spontaneous entry into the participant's awareness. Still, conscious decisions are made on the spot about what to do to optimally use of the newly found free time. Residual leisure, on the other hand, consists of drifting from one superficial interest to another in attempting to pass time.

Resources

The risk with all residual leisure is that it can descend into boredom, given that the first seems typically to be only a half-hearted attempt to avoid the second. Residual leisure is probably most of the time short-term, but its duration does depend on, among other conditions, the availability of resources. One set of resources is made up of parks, plazas, shopping malls, pedestrian ways, and the like. In such places one may loaf by sitting and watching passersby. Another is handy visual and light reading material in the form of popular magazines and newspapers, and for children, picture books (all being the fare of waiting rooms, which are notorious for their tendency to generate boredom). Entertainment television serves as another resource in this category, providing however, that the programming is only marginally entertaining for the loafing viewer.

Day dreaming can be a loafer's resource. It is positive not nightmarish, and as such, can provide the dreamer with imagined fancies of love, fame, fortune, excitement, holidays, consumer goods, and the list goes on. Loafing can also occur as sauntering, as casually walking and observing on a street (including casual window shopping), in a garden, along a walking path, and so on. Another resource supports loafing as loitering, as effected in hanging around (often with others) on a street corner, in a bar or coffee shop.

Loafing as Stopgap

Loafing was defined above as residual fun activity. In other words, we tend to loaf as a way of pleasantly passing time between activities of greater importance, be they leisure (other casual or serious), work, or non-work obligation. Loafing may be play or relaxation or both, while in the case of the latter kinds of obligation, it may also be procrastination. That is, it can be a way of avoiding temporarily doing some things that we ought to do. Thus, one might procrastinate about mowing the lawn, going to the store, making a phone call, doing a session of (disagreeable) exercise, among other examples. Further, the procrastination could take the form of loafing.

We see here an instance of the intricate relationship between unpleasantly obligatory activities in the work and non-work domains and leisure. As a stopgap loafing or other leisure spares for the time being the individual the unwanted experience. It is possible as well that for a few people devotee work becomes the procrastinatory option, illustrated in the academic who would rather work on an article than cut the grass or the lawyer who would prefer to work on a court case than take the family car in for an oil change.

Loafing and Boredom

From what has been said so far, loafing is not boredom. Yet, there is a risk that it might become so, since loafing is not powerfully attractive. Indeed, it is in one sense mildly negative; that is, as noted earlier, it is a stopgap, a way of pleasantly passing time between activities of greater attractiveness — leisure (other casual or serious) or greater duty — work or non-work obligation. In other words, loafing has the potential for becoming boring.

Barbalet (1999) observed that boredom springs from a person's perception of the meaninglessness of a situation or activity. Boredom, he says, "is a restless, irritable feeling that the subject's current activity or situation holds no appeal and that there is a need to get on with something interesting" (p. 631). It is an emotional state of mind rooted in an acute lack of significance for the bored individual of objects, activities, or the situation itself, as understood within that person's system of values and the larger culture.

Clearly, boredom does not spring exclusively from inactivity ("nothing to do"); it can also arise from activity which, alas, is uninteresting, unstimulating, as can happen with loafing. Furthermore, since boredom is a decidedly negative state of mind, it must be concluded that, logically, it is not leisure at all (Stebbins, 2009, p. 9).[1]For leisure is typically conceived of as a positive mindset. Nonetheless, a session of loafing might not last long enough to degenerate into boredom, or the supply of resources is sufficient enough to prevent such change.

Loafing and Aging

Anyone can loaf; it is neither age-specific nor gender-specific. Nonetheless, the elderly may be more prone to certain kinds of loafing, given that, with advancing years, their repertoire of leisure activities shrinks. After all, physical capacity declines with years and, for some, this also happens with their mental capacity. When watching TV and visiting with friends and relatives constitute the greatest pleasures possible, loafing remains as the main alternative, if not pure boredom.

But what are the resources for loafing available to those elderly finishing out their lives in lodges and senior care facilities? The resources out in the larger community can usually be accessed only when a relative, friend, or a service can transport the individual to one or more of them. As a result, boredom is a problem faced by many seniors, especially those who are institutionalized: "Boredom that leads to depression is a major factor in many homes, senior health care facilities and assisted living homes. It is up to family caregivers to reduce such risks when it comes to taking care of our elderly population." (<https://www.parentgiving.com/elder-care/senior-engagement-fighting-boredom-is-essential-for-quality-of-life>, retrieved 9 June 2018).

Loafing can offer an antidote to this unwanted state of mind, though finding resources for it is challenging for this group. A small garden on the grounds of the care facility might serve this need for some residents. Inside it a tank of tropical fish or a cage with a few canaries might serve the same purpose. Lodges that maintain in a special lounge an afternoon coffee and tea or wine and beer service give the elderly (and their visitors) an opportunity to loiter.

Conclusions

This article is about loafing as leisure, and therefore has avoided any reference to “social loafing.” According to Karau and Williams (1993) such “loafing is the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually” (p. 681). It is a sort of “let George do it” attitude. The substantial literature in this area centers primarily on work and work-like tasks thereby offering scant insight into loafing during free time.

Returning to loafing as leisure, can the first become a way of life in that domain of life? This would seem to be a real possibility for people with some loafing resources but little else available to them for serious, project-based, or other casual leisure. For instance, the corner boy is one who loafes on street corners, a lifestyle of some late adolescent male youth.[2]The term “barfly” refers to people loafing routinely in bars. As a third example note that, for some people in old age, loafing as described above, may become a way of life. There is simply nothing else to do.

Loafing is an open-ended activity, in the sense that the loafer has no other aims than to pass time pleasantly. Such an orientation may lead to the discovery of a new and more substantial interest. Here are two possibilities: A middle-aged man loafes daily by strolling through the wooded section of a local park. During these sessions, he becomes increasingly interested in the habits of squirrels, which inspire him to read about them on the Internet. This is no longer loafing now, but rather a budding liberal arts hobby or amateur science passion in zoology. Alternatively, a woman of the same age loafes routinely at a large shopping mall, where she observes a seemingly endless flow of male and female passersby of various ages differently dressed and pursuing a range of interests. Beyond being fascinated by all this diversity, she begins to notice some regularities and patterns in the crowd, eventually deciding to write about them for a local community magazine. Favorable reader reactions encourage her to continue as an amateur author and observer of everyday life in public places. In brief, loafing is as indicated at the start residual leisure at risk of becoming boring, but for some loafers, the opportunity may be found to launch a serious leisure career (Stebbins, 2014) anchored in one of the loafing resources.

Endnotes

[1]This fits in the domain of free time, which until now I have been calling leisure. But boredom, unwanted as it is, is not leisure, even though it is experienced in free time (and elsewhere).

²Although the term originated in Ireland, corner boys are found in many countries.

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Forthcoming:

Leisure Reflections No. 51

On "Leisure-Based Sociability: A Ubiquitous Reward of Free-Time Activity"