Leisure Reflections No. 48: The Social Worlds of Leisure

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Much of leisure in the West, and possibly outside it as well, is organized by way of a social world of some sort. The most complex formations are found in the serious pursuits, with the casual leisure activities generally being much more superficially structured in this regard. Nevertheless, within these two types we find considerable variation along the dimension of complexity and hence the richness of a given social world. My goal in this article is to show how the concept illuminates experience in certain kinds of leisure activities and therefore why it often plays a central role in explaining why people go in for them. First, however, we must review the nature of social worlds.

The Social World

According to David Unruh (1979; 1980) every social world has its characteristic groups, events, routines, practices, and organizations. It is held together, to an important degree, by semiformal, or mediated, communication. In other words, in the typical case, social worlds are neither heavily bureaucratized nor substantially organized through intense face-to-face interaction. Rather, communication is commonly mediated by newsletters, posted notices, telephone messages, mass mailings, television and Internet announcements, and similar means.

Furthermore, Unruh (1980, p. 277) says of the social world that it:

> 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.

The social world is a diffuse, amorphous entity to be sure, but nevertheless one of great importance in the impersonal, segmented life of the modern urban community. I have added that its importance is further amplified by the parallel element of the special ethos (which is missing from Unruh's conception), namely that such worlds are also constituted of a substantial subculture. One function of this subculture is to inter-relate the many components

of this diffuse and amorphous entity. In other words, there is associated with each social world a set of special norms, values, beliefs, styles, moral principles, performance standards, and similar shared representations.

Every social world contains four types of members: strangers, tourists, regulars, and insiders (Unruh, 1979; 1980). The strangers are intermediaries who normally participate little in the leisure/work activity itself, but who nonetheless do something important to make it possible, for example, by managing municipal parks (in amateur baseball), minting coins (in hobbyist coin collecting), and organizing the work of teachers' aids (in career volunteering). Tourists are temporary participants in a social world; they have come on the scene momentarily for entertainment, diversion, or profit. Most amateur and hobbyist activities have publics of some kind, which are, at bottom, constituted of tourists. The clients of many volunteers can be similarly classified. The regulars routinely participate in the social world; in serious leisure, they are the amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers themselves. The insiders are those among them who show exceptional devotion to the social world they share, to maintaining it, to advancing it (see involvement scale in Stebbins, 2014, pp. 32-33 or in http://www.seriousleisure.net/Diagrams). Scott and McMahan (2017) describe in detail these exceptional participants who engage in "hard-core" leisure.

The concept of social world was first set out as a distinguishing quality of the serious pursuits in Stebbins (2007/2015) but has now been refined in Stebbins (in press). As shown below the idea has considerable empirical support in leisure studies, despite the difficulty it presents when under study. Unruh's four types of members – strangers, tourists, regulars, and insiders – attest the complexity of this formation, and what therefore must be done to portray decently the social world of any given complex leisure activity. In other words, these four types are interrelated in diverse and often subtle ways, demanding thus an initial close ethnographic examination of them.

I have reviewed the studies up to 2002 that included an SLP-based analysis of the social worlds of various amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer activities (Stebbins, 2002, Chap. 6). The amateurs discussed were fishers (Yoder), runners (Wilson), mushroom collectors (Fine), stand-up comics (Stebbins), and entertainment magicians (Stebbins).[1]The section on hobbyists covered barbershop singing (Stebbins), purebred dog breeding (Baldwin & Norris), gun collectors (Olmsted), genealogy (Lambert; Home, 2002), curling (Apostle), and shuffleboard (Snyder). Volunteer social worlds have been explored among fire fighters (Thompson), francophones living as linguistic minorities (Stebbins), and people serving motorsport events (Harrington, Cuskelly, & Auld). Additional research on leisure social worlds is reported in many of the Foundational Ethnographies (see Stebbins, in press, Chap. 2).

Finally, a couple of studies were inadvertently omitted from Stebbins (2002), which add still further to the corpus of literature on this distinguishing quality on the serious pursuits. They are Cassie's (2001) research on the social world of older birders and that of Scott and Godbey (1994) on the social world of contract bridge players. Moreover, numerous subsequent works have continued to expand our understanding of this key concept in the study of leisure. They explored it in classical music (Palmer, 2006), shag dancing (Brown, 2004), beekeeping

(Ferguson, 2007), human-canine partnerships (Hultsman, 2015), yoga travel (Patterson, Getz, & Grubb, 2016), long-distance running (Robinson, Patterson, & Axelsen, 2014,), long-distance running tourism (Shipway, 2008), event and travel careers (Getz & Patterson, 2013), and a miscellaneous sample of "hard core" hobbyists (Scott & McMahan, 2017).

The Primacy of the Social World

We have yet to analyze the social world of a particular serious leisure activity by exploring all the dimensions and entities that make it up theoretically. For example, small groups (dyads and triads included) and social networks also help comprise the typical leisure social world, but systematic analyses of these are missing as well. The same holds for newsletters, magazines, web sites, mass mailings, and similar mediated means of communication. In fact, the culture of the various social worlds of, for instance, amateur science or sport, hobbyist outdoor activities, and social movement volunteering are yet to be systematically examined, though aspects of them show up in the early SLP ethnographies.

Still, the people who comprise particular leisure social worlds and their practices, or patterns of behavior, that have emerged there over time have been reasonably well explored. This has happened not because of systematic research on social worlds (of which there has been very little) but because of the large number and variety of ethnographic studies that have been conducted on the core leisure activities around which they have formed. Yet, for some participants in these activities, the allied social worlds may at times appear to be more like simple tribes than the complex entities described in this article. That is, these participants know that other people share their leisure passion, that some of these people live in the same community and that many more live outside it in the same country or, in many instances, abroad. Moreover, they know these kindred spirits share many of the same leisure habits and values. Thus, amateur astronomers can count on their colleagues, wherever they live, to be perturbed about artificial light pollution, primarily because it interferes with observation of the heavens. And serious philatelists the world over expect each other to be connoisseurs of the fine postal cancellations and graphic artwork that help distinguish the most collectable postage stamps.

Research has also revealed that, in themselves, serious leisure social worlds, when recognized as such, become attractive formations (Stebbins, 1999, p. 267), though they appear to inspire people more to stay in them than to join them in the first place. Usually, it takestime to learn about the social world of, say, darts or volunteering for the Scouts or the Guides, something that actually only effectively occurs once inside that world. Nevertheless, I found that belonging to and participating in the social worlds of theater, entertainment magic, stand-up comedy, and classical music were heady experiences for many of the amateurs I interviewed. For them, membership and participation constituted two additional powerful reasons for pursuing their art, albeit two social reasons. This is true, in part, because belonging to such a world helps socially locate individual artists in mass urban society as well as helps personalize to some extent their involvement there. Today's serious leisure social world is significantly less impersonal than either the modern mass or the postmodern tribe (see Stebbins, 2002, Chap. 5). Moreover, serious leisure activities generate their own attractive

lifestyles, which develop with reference to particular social worlds.

Indeed, nearly every serious leisure activity is anchored in a vibrant social world endowed with the capacity – once recognized — to attract and hold a large proportion of its participants. Although the activity itself is exciting, the excitement it generates is also greatly enhanced by the presence of networks of like-minded regulars and insiders, important strangers, local and national organizations, spaces for pursuing the activity, and tourists who visit from time to time — the audiences, spectators, admirers, onlookers, and others. Magazines, newsletters, courses, lectures, workshops, and similar channels of information make up another prominent part of the typical serious leisure enthusiast's social world. In short, the feeling of being part of the scene is a special benefit, which includes gaining activity-related information, advice, encouragement, opportunities, sympathy, sense of belonging, and the like.[2]

What makes amateur social worlds distinct in the domain of leisure is the indisputably central role that professionals play in them. In some instances these people are locally available, where amateurs can rub elbows with them, pattern their serious leisure lives after them, and marvel at their feats made possible by full-time involvement in the activity. Although not all professionals are good role models or blessed with agreeable personalities, a sufficient number come close enough to these ideals to win a place of honor in one of the worlds of avocational leisure. They may only rarely be seen in person, but their influence is both wide and deep, owing in part to their frequent appearance in the print and electronic media and their outstanding reputations in the science in question.

Casual Leisure Social Worlds

Some casual leisure activities are so idiosyncratic that they contain few if any elements of a social world. Much of relaxation can be characterized this way (eg, napping, watching the family dog chase sticks, observing passersby from a bench on a busy street). It is likewise with some kinds of play, including daydreaming, doodling, and feeding pigeons in a public square. Third, consider the singular sensory pleasure gained from observing clouds on a windy day or the currents in a brook or river.

Casual leisure based on one or more services, requires other people, or necessitates equipment shows a social world of somewhat greater complexity. Thus, patrons at a cinema need someone to rent and project the featured film in a darkened environment maintained for this purpose. There is a somewhat more complex social world that emerges around watching television, such as manufacturers, sellers, and repair of TV sets; organizations that arrange for programming; reviewers of some of the TV offerings and publishers of their reviews; and technical services for acquiring television services, all classifiable as strangers.

The Social World of a Serious Pursuit

Compare the relatively simple social worlds found in some casual leisure with their opposite numbers found in many of the serious pursuits. For example, Gary Fine (1998) describes the social world of amateur mushroom collectors in the United States. Many are members of local or regional organizations, which often meet weekly during mushrooming season to hear talks,

see slide shows, and examine finds that have occurred since they last met. Local clubs also organize several "forays" — mushroom collecting expeditions into nearby fields and forests — for members interested in collecting and eating what they pick. In the United States, many of these clubs are affiliates of the polymorphic North American Mycological Association. Additionally, clubs often hold an annual banquet, an annual picnic, and various get-togethers where members can share dishes prepared from wild mushrooms. Moreover, in some organizations, informal after-meeting gatherings take place at a nearby bar or restaurant, the purpose of which is to continue talk about the shared love for the mushroom and its hunt. Additionally, forays to be held on private property put organizers in touch with landowners.

There is, however, still more to this social world. Budding mushroomers can take classes on fungi, whether offered by the club or by a school, museum, or governmental agency. And there is reading to be done, of books and journals kept by the organization or a nearby public or university library or purchased from bookstores. Many enthusiasts subscribe to *Mushroom: The Journal of Wild Mushrooming*, a quarterly featuring articles on well-known amateurs and hobbyists in this pursuit, mushrooming forays, evaluations of field guides, and advice on cultivation. Last but not least, are the suppliers of important items of equipment ranging from baskets specially designed for mushroom pickers to microscopes for detailed analysis of finds. In brief, the social world of mushroomers is comprised primarily of strangers and each other as regulars and insiders as well as various organizations, networks, small groups, and a body of literature. Non-mushrooming guests invited to a dinner featuring freshly-picked local mushrooms constitute one kind of tourist in this science. Other examples of this degree of complexity in amateurism, hobbyism, and career volunteering are presented in Stebbins (2002, Chap. 6).

Conclusion

Apart from the prominent role played by one or more strangers in the social worlds of some casual leisure activities, the social worlds of the large majority of serious pursuits are substantially more complex. Even such individualistic serious pursuits as collecting, making and tinkering, and the liberal arts hobbies operate in social worlds organized around, among other participants, numerous strangers, some tourists (interested in what has been collected or made), and various regulars and insiders.

The social worlds of the serious pursuits are sufficiently complex to distinguish them from those found in casual leisure. True, on the scale of complexity a few casual leisure worlds fall closer to the serious pursuits than the others, while some of the social worlds in the serious pursuits are less complex than the others in that category. This scale has raised the question of whether the social world is really a distinctive feature of the serious pursuits (see most recently Veal, 2016). One promising solution to the problem has emerged with development of the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM) (Gould, Moore, McGuire, & Stebbins, 2008), which has been used on numerous occasions to statistically distinguish social worlds and their absence in particular leisure activities (Stebbins, in press, Chap. 2 lists a dozen studies using the SLIM for this purpose).

Notes

[1]References for the authors of the studies noted in this paragraph and the next are available in Stebbins (2002), or they can be found in http://www.seriousleisure.net/Bibliography under the headings of Amateurs, Hobbyists, Volunteers, and Tourism and Event Analysis.

[2]Social worlds, though generally positive formations, sometimes offer negative experiences. These include jealousy (back-biting), favoritism, enmity, unethical competition, and unscrupulous strangers (e.g., agents, impresarios). It happens that these experiences are poignant enough to drive some participants out of the activity.

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