

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 34 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); *After Work The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001); *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002); *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering* (CABI, 2004, edited with M. Graham); and *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004). Forthcoming books include *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig) and *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover). 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'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 Past-President of the Société d'accueil francophone (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.

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Paid to volunteer: Linking leisure and work

In work oriented societies it can be confusing when people do something for no remuneration that appears to be neither part of their livelihood nor part of their leisure. In simplest terms the question asked by the common man in such societies is why work if there is no money to be made or, at the very least, nothing to be paid in kind? Nevertheless volunteers, whose activities I will argue shortly are leisure, do sometimes receive money, goods, or services for their efforts. These benefits can seem inconsistent with the altruistic, selfless character of volunteering widely held to be its very essence.

The goal of this article is to examine the subtleties revolving around being paid in money or in kind to perform a volunteer role. When does this happen, what forms does it take when it does happen, why does it occur? Before turning to these questions, however, we must first review the main concepts pertaining to them.

Concepts

To put the question of remuneration/payment in kind in perspective, look first at the two principal definitions of volunteering that orient it as practice and object of research. The *volitional* definition of volunteers refers to people who feel that they are engaging in enjoyable a serious, casual or project-based altruistic leisure activity that they have had the option to accept or reject on their own terms. A key element in this leisure conception of volunteering is the felt absence of coercion, moral or otherwise, to undertake a particular activity.

The *economic* definition of volunteering — volunteering is unpaid work — is the more commonly used of the two. It largely avoids the messy, though critical, question of motives for volunteering, which however, the leisure, volitional conception meets head on. Since the present paper examines being paid in some way to volunteer, the economic definition falls beyond its scope.

Smith, Stebbins and Dover (2006: pp. 239-240) define 'volunteer' — whether economic or volitional — as someone who performs, even for a short period of time, volunteer work in either an informal or a formal setting. It is through volunteer work that this person provides a service or benefit to one or more individuals (they must be outside that person's family), usually receiving no pay, even though people serving in volunteer programs are sometimes compensated for out-of-pocket expenses. Moreover, in the field of nonprofit studies, giving, say, blood, money or clothing as an altruistic act is not regarded as volunteering, since no volunteer work is involved. Meanwhile, in the typical case, volunteers who are altruistically providing a service or benefit to others are themselves also benefiting from various rewards experienced during this process (e.g., pleasant social interaction, self-enriching experiences and sense of contributing to nonprofit group success). In other words volunteering is motivated by two basic attitudes: altruism and self-interest.

For the purposes of this article it is helpful to conceptualise volunteers as pure, reimbursed or marginal.

Pure Volunteers

In the scheme being developed here the pure volunteer may be viewed as falling at one pole on a scale of payment for volunteering. At the other pole lies the remunerated volunteer for whom volunteering constitutes either a livelihood or a significant part of it. The remunerated volunteer, who does not exist in reality (livelihoods create dependence which is involuntary) appears on this scale strictly as a heuristic device.

At the pure end of the scale there is neither pay in the form of money nor reimbursement for expenses (Smith, Stebbins and Dover, 2006, p. 244). There may, however, be payment in kind. For example a man agrees to coach a local youth football team, for which there is no monetary pay and no reimbursement of personal expenses (primarily costs of transportation to practices and games). By our definition he is a pure volunteer. An example of payment in kind might be some free tickets to games of the local professional football team or a gift certificate to a sporting goods shop. Yet the youth league for which he volunteers has limited financial resources. It has no money for payments, whether in kind or otherwise, or for reimbursements. The personal fulfillment that can come with coaching youth and the altruistic feeling of giving time and paying minor expenses for a good cause must do. This is a common situation in the third sector.

Reimbursed Volunteers

The reimbursed volunteer is a pure volunteer, some or all of whose expenses are reimbursed. Commonly reimbursement is seen as necessary because the expenses are substantial. Here, for instance, volunteers may have to drive their own cars a fair distance to reach the volunteer site, pay for parking once there, eat a meal while on the job, and so on. If the volunteer role includes inter-city travel, then reimbursement will probably include room and board while in the distant city as well as transportation costs to get there and back. Payment in kind is also possible for this type, which depends on many factors, among them, the financial status of the volunteer organisation or grassroots association, difficulty of recruiting and retaining volunteers and ideological stance of the organisation or association. Concerning the latter a religious group might argue against either reimbursement or payment in kind on grounds that volunteers should be willing to serve the deity motivated by pure altruism. By contrast members of the executive of the local barbershop chorus, when asked to attend a regional meeting of the executive of their national organisation, would typically expect reimbursement for the expenses of traveling to and from the host city and staying there while doing the work of their organisation.

Payment in kind is a slippery idea. Robert Barker (2003, p. 41), writing for social workers, defines *in-kind benefits* as 'services or goods rather than money (for example, food baskets, agricultural surpluses, housing, and personal counseling).' But, in the world of volunteering, when is kind payment meant to

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serve as a livelihood or a substantial part of it and when is it meant only to be a token of appreciation? Receiving free housing or agricultural surplus can help immensely with someone's livelihood, whereas a few free tickets to football matches or a gift certificate to a sporting goods shop cannot be conceived of in these terms. Finally payment in kind must be seen as something *gained* from the volunteering, in addition to the usual rewards it generates as leisure. Reimbursement of expenses, on the other hand, is for the volunteer, a way to *avoid losing* money while volunteering.

Marginal Volunteers

Marginal volunteers feel a certain moral coercion to perform a particular volunteer activity. They have a range of activities to choose from, but choice is substantially guided by extrinsic interests or pressures (Stebbins, 2001). But what are their motives? Are they volunteering for the rewards that come with pure volunteering or are they motivated by those rewards and some others? Put it this way: would they volunteer for the group were there no reimbursement of expenses? Would they volunteer for that group if there were no kind payments of the sort they have been receiving or have been promised? Some would-be volunteers might have to answer the first question negatively, because the expenses are too great to bear. They would have to forego the rewards of this kind of leisure (and probably other kinds, too), because they lack the money needed to participate.

But what about the second question? The attraction of kind payment, and let us now add, monetary payment, push to centre stage another sort of reward for volunteering, for this form of leisure. To the extent that the volitional definition is valid, that people volunteer as a leisure activity, we would not expect them to have an interest in making money from it. In fact it is normally the opposite: we are used to spending money to engage in

leisure, and where we do not do this, as in pursuing non-consumptive free-time activity (e.g., sunning on a beach, going for a walk, taking a nap), making money from it is not on our minds. It seems, then, that an interest in turning a volunteer activity into one that is, in some way, remunerative or otherwise extrinsically beneficial, in fact, finds volunteers redefining the activity as one that should also relate directly to their livelihood. It is thus that we may speak of marginal volunteers.

In this sort of marginal volunteering the individual's livelihood comes to the fore, with the volunteer role seen as one way of augmenting it. Some in kind payment or a bit of remuneration, perhaps both, will help; they can help meet the ordinary needs of the volunteer. Alternatively such benefits might be seen as expressions of appreciation from the volunteer organisation, in which case it would inaccurate to qualify as marginal the volunteer receiving them. In brief marginality on our payment scale adds the dimension of economic dependence to how volunteers understand their role.

Such dependence seems to be at the root of appeals for establishing a tax deduction for certain volunteer efforts. Of late the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs has been campaigning for a sliding scale of tax relief for volunteer fire fighters, the proposed deduction being based on the number of hours served (*Calgary Herald*, 2009). The president of the Association argues that this tax relief could aid recruitment in the small communities where volunteer fire service is all that is available, a service also growing increasingly difficult to staff. The proposal is for a deduction of \$1,000 (Cdn.) from taxable income for 100 hours worked annually and a \$2,000 for 200 hours of annual service. Presumably recruitment will be facilitated by the possibility that this extrinsic reward could add significantly to a fire fighter's livelihood.

The above proposal for tax relief for volunteers is no isolated case. A Google-driven search in February 2009 revealed similar proposals and established practices in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Some of these also offer relief calculated from unreimbursed expenses. The search did suggest, however, that such tax relief is only in effect among, or being requested for, providers of essential services like volunteer fire fighters, emergency medical service personnel, and search and rescue workers.

For another example of marginal volunteering, consider legislation presently working its way through the federal government of the United States. It proposes to institute a national "volunteer" service (an expansion of AmeriCorps), consisting of minimal living expenses and a modest educational stipend after one year of participation. The question of how truly voluntary and altruistic participation actually is seems not to be at issue (*New York Times*, 2009).

Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurs may fall at any point on the payment scale. They may be volunteers of the pure variety or of the marginal kind. As initiators of their enterprise there is typically no person or organisation to reimburse them for their enterprise related expenses. True such reimbursement may become possible later

as the enterprise evolves into an organisation, but for this to happen at the beginning is impossible. Consequently reimbursement cannot be a condition for volunteering to launch a social enterprise.

Many social entrepreneurs are undoubtedly pure volunteers and many more undoubtedly reimbursed volunteers. Some, however, initiate their social enterprise as volunteers with the intention of turning it into a for-profit entity. Others in this category, once the enterprise has succeeded at a certain level, recognize its potential to turn a profit and set about making it their livelihood. Both are, in effect, actual or future remunerated volunteers. These distinctions are recognized in the scholarly definitions of social entrepreneur.

Dees, Haas and Haas (1998, p. 4) define 'social entrepreneurs' as people who 'play the role of change in the social sector by: adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value) [and] recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission'. Light's (2006, p. 30) definition adds some additional information on the social entrepreneur as 'an individual, group, network, organization, or alliance of organizations that seeks sustainable, large-scale change through pattern-breaking ideas in what governments, nonprofits, and businesses do to address significant social problems.' Limiting ourselves in this article to individual social entrepreneurs, we may say that they are volunteers, albeit newcomers on the scene of the problem to be solved.

Dees and Anderson (2006) distinguish two types of social entrepreneur: 1) one who organizes and operates a business guided by a social objective and 2) one who reforms or revolutionizes certain ways of producing social value, who engages in social change relative to a social problem. The first type, who launch their social enterprises with the intention of eventually turning them into for-profit entities, are marginal volunteers. In such cases the altruistic component of volunteering is substantially overridden by the self-interested one, leading eventually, it is hoped, to a profit and an acceptable livelihood. The pure volunteer does not enter the volunteer role with such a goal.

Nevertheless, assuming the enterprise becomes profitable, the type one entrepreneur foresees fulfilling work in it, in much same sense that career, or skilled, pure and reimbursed volunteering are. That is for-profit entrepreneurs start their enterprise as a volunteer activity they truly love (as if they were amateurs, lovers of the activity). Then, should their social businesses succeed, they become what I have referred to elsewhere as 'occupational devotees' (Stebbins, 2004). Such workers find a livelihood in a work role, which qualifies in all ways as serious leisure except the condition of non-coerciveness caused by a dependence on the money it brings.

Dees and Anderson's second type remains a pure volunteer, though should the enterprise develop into a grassroots association or volunteer organisation, he or she might become a reimbursed volunteer. This would hold even if the entrepreneurial group or organisation made enough money to meet all its needs. This kind of cash flow and its use would still qualify the group for official non-profit status, meanwhile exemplifying well this second type.

Conclusions

This article draws attention, as others and I have in the past, to the complicated, multi-faceted relationship between leisure and work. The payment scale developed here enables us to view this relationship in a new light. Considering the three types of serious leisure (the other two being amateur and hobbyist pursuits), this relationship is possibly most involved in volunteering. Since here, in addition to what has just been said, arrangements are such that volunteers are much more often in contact with workers in their shared areas of activity. For example both often operate in coordinated fashion within the same organisation. Volunteers may be directed and supervised by a paid worker. Some volunteers actually do the same work as some paid workers, though usually with a reduced load. Finally, volunteers may find or create a paid job in the organisation or economic sector in which they serve, forging thereby an occupational career that starts in leisure but subsequently develops into a livelihood (Stebbins, 2004, chap. 5).

In sum we may say that the question of being reimbursed, paid in kind or paid with money constitutes an important theoretic perspective from which to examine volunteering and remunerated employment in the same area of activity.

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Bob Stebbins

University of Calgary
Stebbins@ucalgary.ca

Website (personal):

www.ucalgary.ca/~stebbins

Website (perspective):

www.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure

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mcfee@solutions-inc.co.uk