

## Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 30 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 30 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.

## NON-WESTERN LEISURE: HOW TO STUDY IT

A former graduate student of mine, who was soon to start fieldwork on sport and leisure among youth in one of the African states, suddenly began to question whether leisure, as we know it and write about it in the West, existed in the Third World. He had been reading the leisure studies literature, including some of my own writings, and was aware, from his coursework in anthropology, that Western social scientists far too frequently assume, quite naively, that their findings in the West are also valid outside it. Hoping to avoid getting tarred with the brush of scientific ethnocentrism, he asked me how he could determine whether the youth he was about to study had free time and leisure and, if so, how he might describe these two conditions.

My answer was that, first, it is reasonable to assume that in every society most members enjoy a certain amount of free time and that they pursue some sort of leisure within this period of life. This is the dominant pattern, for in some societies, there are those who lack this kind of time (e.g., the harried, all-work-and-no-play drudge found in some Western societies). This assumption holds, even though opportunities for sport, leisure and tourism are, compared with the West, substantially less prevalent in developing countries (Sheykhi, 2003). Second, the sort of leisure pursued will often differ substantially from that pursued in the West, though in this regard, globalization may now be generating a certain level of international uniformity. Consequently someone intending to study leisure in a Third World country would do well to try to find out, first-hand, what the locals define as free time and leisure, as opposed to arriving with a list of leisure activities known to be pursued in the West. Matejko (1984) discusses some of the problems that come with following the latter approach.

But how does a researcher go about discovering what leisure is in local terms, when it is likely local people have no concept of free time or of the leisure nature of activities undertaken within it? My advice to my student was the following:

First look for three types of activities:

1. those people like to do and do not have to do;
2. those people like to do and also have to do; and
3. those people do not like to do, but must do them anyway.

A combination of participant observation and informal question asking should, in most instances, provide answers to these three questions. Answers to 1 and 2 would qualify as leisure in Western terms (see my definition of leisure as

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uncoerced activity that people want to do, Stebbins, 2005b). Free time could be inferred from time left over after people met the obligations implied in 3. Although it might be difficult to determine whether those disagreeable obligations were fulfilled as part of work or as part of something outside work, this would matter little for the leisure researcher. For this person the third type of activity is of peripheral concern relative to the first two.

But, you might argue, why not also regard type 2 as peripheral? After all it, too, is obligatory. To do this would leave a clean division between type 1, for some scholars their proper focus of leisure studies, and types 2 and 3. This conceptual maneuver would, however, expose the researcher to the charge of Western bias, for as I have observed elsewhere (Stebbins, 2004), finding work in the West that is so attractive that it is essentially experienced as leisure is not a commonly achieved goal. Moreover, most Westerners do not expect to find such 'devotee' work. And so it is in the West. Meanwhile we cannot assume that the rest of the world experiences some or all of its work in the same terms.

Then there is the matter of obligation. I have argued (Stebbins, 2000, and later in Stebbins, 2005b) that a person can find pleasant, agreeable obligations in certain activities, in this way further validating type 2 as a concern for leisure researchers working in the Third World. An example from the West might be the leading lady who is obligated to go to the theatre during the weekend to perform in an amateur play, but does so with great enthusiasm rooted in her passion for drama as leisure activity. By contrast, her obligation to turn up at work the following Monday morning after the deep satisfaction of the preceding leisure weekend comes as a letdown. An example from an African country might be the sense of fulfillment gained from skilfully, knowledgeable, and creatively decorating a clay pot. The pot is needed for water, whereas its decoration, rather than being utilitarian, becomes an occasion for hobbyist artistic expression.

Both foregoing examples are serious leisure, even though it is possible to incur pleasant obligations with respect to casual leisure and project-based leisure, the latter being defined as the leisure experienced in carrying out as a short-term, moderately complicated, one-off or occasional though infrequent, creative undertaking (Stebbins, 2005a). As an illustration of casual leisure, John, having promised to do so, now feels obligated to give Jane a ride to the company picnic, an extension of that casual leisure event he will enjoy

since he likes her company. Cross (1990, p. 14) describes the *viellées* held in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, during which local women would gather together to knit or crochet (in those times this was obligatory economic activity), but turn the occasion into a session of casual leisure consisting also of talk and, possibly, song. But will researchers find casual and serious leisure in Third World countries?

The issue of serious leisure outside the First World has, to my knowledge, never been raised in the literature, that is, it has not yet emerged as a matter of debate among researchers. Still it has stirred comment among students, notably those in the international masters program on leisure and the environment jointly sponsored by the World Leisure and Recreation Centre of Excellence (WICE) and Wageningen University, where I have taught from time to time since its inception in 1992. Their views on the role, frequency, and dispersion of serious leisure in their countries have been most illuminating.

The greatest contrasts were provided by the First and Third Worlds. Students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, for example, believed that vis-à-vis the First World serious leisure is much rarer in their countries, and some forms of it hardly seem to exist at all. They did acknowledge the pursuit there of amateur sport, but not of amateur science. Amateur art and entertainment were vague ideas for them, since both fields merge almost seamlessly with their folkloristic counterparts. Collecting as serious leisure was largely a foreign idea to them, as were the liberal arts hobbies and nearly all the activities classified as activity participation (hunting, fishing, and the folk arts being exceptions). More familiar was the hobby of making things, particularly making baskets, clothing, and pottery as well as raising animals. But with the making and participation activities that they did know, there was, in a way similar to the arts and entertainment fields, a blurring of the line separating what is obligatory from what is leisure. The concept of competitive sports, games, and contests was familiar, but the activities themselves, which are so common in the First World, are much less so. Some students spoke of amateur and hobbyist serious leisure as being available only to their country's elite, whose leisure tastes, they felt, had been influenced by the West.

Students from the Third world recognized the practice of volunteering, but held that it is differently enacted there. Formal organizational volunteering is much less common than the less formal grassroots type, while informal volunteering — helping — appears to be considerably more widespread than either of these two formal kinds. Even here the line separating obligation and voluntary action is fuzzy, in ways largely unknown in the First World. For example, in some countries, the expectation of helping is institutionalized, as seen in the practice found in parts of Columbia where every man in the village is obliged to help with the construction when one of them builds a house.

If we qualify as 'Third World' American Indian tribes (Rigsby, 1987, classifies as 'Fourth World' any dispossessed or disenfranchised minority within larger states), then some

research does exist on serious leisure in this socioeconomic context. Blanchard (1981) studied the 'serious side of leisure' among the Mississippi Choctaws, as seen in their pursuit of American baseball, basketball and softball as well as earlier in history in playing their own sport of stickball. Though Blanchard makes no use of the serious leisure framework (it was first published in the same year as his book), his description of the Choctaw orientation toward these games leaves no doubt that, for these native Americans, such sport was pursued in earnest, wherein participants found a special personal identity, main central life interest, distinctive leisure lifestyle, vibrant social world, and the like. Blanchard (1981, p. 65) also cites other instances where native peoples in colonial countries have embraced on a serious leisure level certain Western sports, notably cricket. All this harmonizes with the observation of Third-world WICE students mentioned earlier, namely, that in their countries, sport is one of the few recognizable forms of serious leisure.

In this article I have intentionally avoided treating of leisure in former Communist block countries, the so-called Second World. Discussion of serious and casual leisure with WICE students from this part of the globe reveals still another understanding of these two forms, an understanding too different and complicated to include in the present article. Consider Jung's (1996) comments on leisure in Poland. The tendency there, at the time, was to participate less in the collective and socialized forms of leisure and more in those based at home or in privatized facilities. Furthermore, this trend was said to be nurturing the growth of individualized leisure, hinting thereby at a possible upswing in the pursuit of the predominantly self-interested forms of serious leisure, namely, the hobbyist and amateur activities.

As for my student, who is now in the field under the aegis of a graduate program at another university, he has yet to report on how useful to him my advice has been. Assuming that he will eventually write to me on the matter, I will present in a future instalment of 'Leisure Reflections' his thoughts on it.

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