
Leisure Reflections

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.

Leisure Reflections ... No. 12

DISCRETIONARY TIME COMMITMENT: EFFECTS ON LEISURE CHOICE AND LIFESTYLE

Free time has long been regarded in leisure studies as a key resource for the individual, to manipulate to his or her personal ends. It has also been looked on there as a principle constraint to leisure, though one that is sometimes negotiated with certain other people. And time use studies have been around for since the early days of leisure research, considered as a separate interdisciplinary field. To shed some new light on this pivotal concept, I introduce in this edition of 'Leisure Reflections' the concept of *discretionary time commitment*.

Discretionary time commitment is noncoerced, allocation of a certain number of minutes, hours, days, or other measure of time that a person devotes, or would like to devote, to carrying out an activity. Such commitment is both process and product. That is people either set (process) their own time commitments (products) or willingly accept such commitments (i.e., agreeable obligations) set for them by others. It follows that disagreeable obligations, which are invariably forced on people by others or by circumstances, fail to constitute discretionary time commitments, since the latter, as process, rest on personal agency. In short, discretionary time commitment finds expression in leisure and the agreeable sides of work (which, in effect, are experienced as leisure, Stebbins, 2004).

Note, however, that we can, and sometimes do, allocate time to carrying out disagreeable activities, whether at work or outside it. Such commitments – call them *coerced time commitments* – are, obviously, not discretionary. Hence they fall beyond the scope of this discussion and, with some interesting exceptions, beyond the scope of leisure (i.e., some leisure costs – see the most recent discussion of them in Stebbins, 2006, chap. 1 – can be understood as coerced time commitments).

More generally we commonly speak of past, present, and future time commitments (discretionary and coerced) at work, leisure, and in the realm of nonwork obligations. The kinds of time commitments people make help shape their work and leisure lifestyles, and constitute part of the patterning of those lifestyles. In leisure the nature of such commitments varies substantially across its three forms: serious, casual, and project-based leisure.

Varying Time Commitments

Generally speaking serious leisure requires its participants to allocate more time than participants in the other two forms, if for no other reason, than that, of the three, it seems most likely to be pursued over the longest span of time. In addition certain qualities of serious leisure, including especially perseverance, commitment, effort, and career, tend to make amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers especially cognizant of how they allocate their free time, the amount of that time they use for their serious leisure, and the ways they accomplish this.

There are many examples. Amateur and hobbyist activities based on the development and polishing of physical skills (e.g., learning how to juggle, figure skate, make quilts, play the piano) require the aspiring entertainer, skater, quilter, and so on to commit a fair amount of time on a regular basis, sometimes over several years, to acquiring and polishing necessary skills. And once acquired the skills and related physical conditioning must be maintained through continuous use. Additionally some serious leisure enthusiasts take on (agreeable) obligations (Stebbins, 2000b) that demand their presence at certain places at certain times (e.g., rehearsals, matches, meetings, events). But most important, the core activity, which is the essence of a person's serious leisure, is so attractive that this individual very much wants to set aside sufficient time to engage in it.

In other words, serious leisure often borders on being *uncontrollable*. It engenders in its practitioners a desire to pursue the activity beyond the time or the money (if not both) available for it. So, even though hobbies such as collecting stamps or making furniture usually have few schedules or appointments to meet, they are nonetheless enormously appealing, and as such encourage these collectors and makers to allocate, whenever possible, time for this leisure.

Project-based leisure may be accompanied by similar demands. It is a short-term, reasonably complicated, one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time, or time free of disagreeable obligation (Stebbins, 2005). There participants may find scheduled meetings or responsibilities, if not both, and though of short-range, the condition of uncontrollability can also be a concern. But project-based leisure does not, by definition, involve developing, polishing, and maintaining physical skills, this being one of the key differences in use of discretionary time separating it from serious leisure. Furthermore, with project-based leisure comes a unique sense of time allocation: time use is more or less intense but limited to a known and definite period on the calendar (e.g., when the athletic games are over, when the stone wall is built, when the surprise birthday party has taken place). Indeed one of the attractions of projects for some people is that no long-term commitment of time is foreseen.

Finally casual leisure may, in its own way, generate time commitments, as in the desire to set aside an hour each week to watch a television program or participate as often as possible in a morning neighborhood coffee klatch. Further some casual leisure, famously watching television, is attractive, in part, because it is often available on a moment's notice — call it 'spontaneous discretionary time commitment'; it can fill in gaps

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between discretionary and coerced time commitments, and in the process, stave off boredom. Additionally casual volunteering commonly has temporal requirements, as in joining for the weekend an environmental clean-up crew, serving on Thanksgiving Day free meals to the poor, and collecting money for a charity by going door-to-door or soliciting on a street corner.

Moreover, in fashioning their leisure lifestyles, people blend and coordinate their participation and allocation of free time in one or more of the three forms. In this regard, some people try to organize their free time in such a way that they approach, as they define it, an 'optimal leisure lifestyle' (Stebbins, 2000a). The term refers to the deeply rewarding and interesting pursuit during free time of one or more substantial, absorbing forms of serious leisure, complemented by judicious amounts of casual leisure or project-based leisure or both. People find optimal leisure lifestyles by partaking of leisure activities that individually and in combination help them to realize their human potential, leading thereby to self-fulfillment and enhanced well-being and quality of life.

The discretionary allocation of time in leisure is, then, hugely complicated. So, when broaching the subject, we must be sure to specify the form and, within the form, the type of leisure in question. Time allocation differs substantially from amateur boxing to hobbyist barbershop singing to volunteer fire fighting and from genealogical projects to casual people-watching from a street-side cafe. Complexity of allocation of leisure time may also be affected by significant others. Not infrequently such allocation is negotiated with spouses, partners, friends, and relatives. The leisure participant may want to devote more time to an activity than these people will accept, given that the latter want the former to spend time (and perhaps money, too) with them. Enter, once again, the issue of uncontrollability.

The Study of Time in Leisure

In leisure studies the term 'time use', unlike our term 'discretionary time commitment', connotes no sense of personal agency or intentionality (to allocate time, set aside time, etc.). Time use, as conventionally conceived of, is an objective idea. Two different levels of analysis are typically undertaken here, both of them general. 1) *Participatory time use*, as in participation in activities, refers to average amounts of time different categories of people give to particular activities (often expressed as patterns of time use). 2) *General time use*, as in global allocations of time across a typical day or week, is about how categories of people typically allocate their time to all leisure and work as well as to nonwork obligations.

Discretionary time commitment is also particular; but however, it revolves around how individuals *intend* to allocate their time as part of their lifestyle and, in this article, their involvement in leisure, in general, and certain leisure activities, in particular. Discretionary time commitment is subjective. It relates directly to motivation and inclination to participate. Thus it is an individualistic concept, which when generalized, is expressed as the lifestyle of a certain kind of leisure participant (e.g., lifestyle of volunteer search and rescue workers, hobbyist kayakers, 'couch potatoes', amateur astronomers). By contrast, time use of both types is cultural and therefore inevitably general; the individual is of scant concern, except as a source of data collected to help determine broad patterns and trends.

Moreover, within their lifestyles, people blend and coordinate their participation during and allocation of free time while engaging in one or more of the three forms of leisure. And some people go still farther by trying to organize their free time, and then benefit from this arrangement, through what was identified earlier as an optimal leisure lifestyle. In short most people actively manage this part of their lives, trying in the course of it to create a decent existence for themselves.

Because casual leisure is popular and therefore likely to be part of the general culture, we can learn through inference from time use studies something about discretionary time commitment at that level. This does not hold, however, for serious and project-based leisure. They are much less popular, while, it appears, having much more complicated patterns of discretionary time commitment. General time use studies, at least as they have been conducted in the past, tell us little about how discretionary time is allocated in these two forms.

Conclusion: Generalizing Lifestyle

According to Veal (2003) lifestyle research declined during the 1980s and early 1990s, but became rejuvenated in the later 1990s fired by an interest in consumerist lifestyles (see Veal's, 2000, helpful online annotated bibliography of works bearing on leisure lifestyle). But, as Kelly (1999) has observed the consumerist classifications of lifestyle are narrow in scope; for this reason they fail to throw significant theoretic light on the general nature of leisure lifestyle. More precisely the

problem in the past has been how to escape the idiographic tendency in lifestyle research, namely, the tendency to report in detail on a particular lifestyle, say of amateur tennis players, volunteer fire fighters, or soap opera devotees, while making little effort to generalize that lifestyle to the broader category into which these enthusiasts fall of athlete, service volunteer, and television viewer. In showing how the process of discretionary time commitment varies across the three forms of leisure, I have tried to overcome this weakness, and give theory and research a way of looking on lifestyle that facilitates generalization.

Perhaps, with this approach, the decline noted by Veal can be reversed, not only for research on consumerist lifestyles, but also for research on leisure lifestyles in general.

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