

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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Leisure Abandonment: Quitting Free-Time Activity That We Love¹

Leisure abandonment is a point in a person's life course, at which he leaves a particular leisure activity. Observations to date suggest this is accomplished by way of one of the following alternatives: 1) deciding consciously to quit the activity, 2) being forced from it by external circumstances, 3) or leaving the activity by drifting away from it. The activity, be it casual, serious, or project-based (Stebbins, 2005a) leisure, has been pursued long enough for the participant to have developed a positive, reasonably strong emotional attachment to it, such as that felt in enjoyment or fulfillment. And this sentimental state holds even if the attachment has faded somewhat, as happens in Alternative 3. Abandonment of a serious leisure activity is at the same moment the final turning point in the participant's leisure career in the activity. And whereas enthusiasts leaving their activities by way of Alternatives 1 and 2 could conceivably become reunited with them, that possibility appears at the time of abandonment to be both far away and unlikely. In short, the experience of abandonment is poignant enough to amount to a personal crisis of sorts.

The concept is not to be confused with Neulinger's (1981, pp. 188–191) idea of "leisure lack," or wanting leisure when none is available. Nor does it refer to the related process of leisure replacement, about which there is a modest literature (e.g., Iso-Ahola, Jackson and Dunn, 1994). People who abandon a leisure activity may well strive to replace it with another, and that new activity, because of its appeal, may even encourage abandoning the old one. The matter of leisure substitutability has also gained some consideration (e.g., Brunson and Shelby, 1993). But it, like replacement, revolves mostly around the search for an activity not previously pursued.

By contrast the focus of leisure abandonment is on what "is wrong" with a current activity—to learn why people leave it—rather than on the allure of another activity, whether as replacement, substitute, or addition. A problem unique to the abandonment process is that, especially in serious leisure but also to some extent in the project-based form, leaving is personally momentous. For this is renunciation of leisure, of a pursuit founded on substantial commitment to its core activity as well as on a set of deeply fulfilling rewards gained from it. Why would a participant want to give up such activity? What has gone wrong?

Conditions of Abandonment

Leisure abandonment, which to my knowledge has never been systematically examined in the leisure sciences, whether under this heading or an equivalent, can be an enormously variegated and complicated process. What is more, it appears that most people face such abandonment, such personal crisis, at least once during their life course. I have so far been able to identify 13 antecedent conditions leading to one of 5 types of abandonment:

Volitional Leisure Abandonment

1. Participant loses interest in the activity.
2. Participant retains interest, but an even more appealing activity comes along, leading the person to abandon the first one. This assumes that to pursue both activities would require more time or money, or both, than is unavailable.

Social Psychological Leisure Abandonment

3. Participant forced out of the activity by social pressures largely beyond his control.
4. Participant forced out of the activity by social psychological pressures largely beyond his control.
5. Participant forced out of the activity by lack of social support.

Physical Leisure Abandonment

6. Participant suffers injury or illness, forcing him to abandon the activity for a lengthy period of time.
7. Participant suffers irremediable injury or illness, forcing him to permanently abandon the activity.
8. Participant forced out of the activity by the aging process, or the physical and mental changes that occur as people grow older.

Geographic Leisure Abandonment

9. Participant forced out of the activity by enduring changes in enabling geographic conditions.

Regulatory Leisure Abandonment

10. Participant forced out of the activity by regulations that set limits.
11. Participant forced out of the activity by alleged or proved behavior considered unacceptable by others.
12. Participant forced out of the activity by competitive arrangements.
13. Participant forced out of the activity by a legally or morally suspect manoeuvre.

This is a fair list, but even then, probably not likely an exhaustive one. Nevertheless it is long enough to give us a cornucopia of examples with which to flesh out the rudiments of the leisure abandonment framework.

Volitional Leisure Abandonment

Volitional abandonment takes place when a person consciously decides to participate no further in the activity. This was the type that first alerted me to the broader issue of leisure abandonment, as elaborated in the foregoing list of types and antecedents. It is also the most perplexing of the five types, since it raises the question of why people abandon certain highly attractive activities. Indeed, **Antecedent 1** seems to have no facile explanation.

I dealt with this antecedent in my comparison of devotee work and serious leisure (Stebbins, 2004, pp. 88–89). There I observed that some people eventually come realize that their formerly highly appealing work or leisure is no longer nearly as enjoyable and fulfilling as it once was. It has become too humdrum, possibly no longer offering sufficient challenge, novelty, or social reward (e.g., social attraction, group accomplishment, contribution to development of a larger collectivity). Perhaps they have become discouraged with one or more of its core tasks, so discouraged that they believe they will never again find deep satisfaction here.

Antecedent 2 centers on the fact of having found a new leisure activity that, by comparison, makes the abandoned one look substantially less attractive. And this even when the abandoned activity has none of the “faults” just described (i.e., being humdrum, etc.). As for the so-called new activity, it might be one that the participant has just learned about or one he has been doing for some time but has recently come to view as significantly greater importance than heretofore.

People acting in accordance with Antecedent 1 or 2, might also abandon certain attractive *casual* leisure activities. Consider those who give up drinking socially, walking the family dog, or watching a particular television program, simply because these activities have lost appeal. People driven by burnout to quit a casual volunteering post constitute another instance of casual leisure abandonment.

We may hypothesize that the deeper the fulfillment derived from the activity — invariably serious leisure — the greater the resistance to abandoning it. In this situation personal investment is high, rewards are numerous and powerfully attractive, and the enthusiast is motivated by, among other conditions, membership in an evolved social world, absorption in a leisure career and sense of an absorbing central life interest. There are costs, to be sure, but they must be most disagreeable to lead to a decision to quit an activity holding such allure.

Social Psychological Leisure Abandonment

Here, in line with **Antecedent 3**, the participant is, for social reasons, no longer able to participate, buffeted as he is by such pressures as work requirements, family demands, and the appeal of other irresistible leisure activities. This is familiar territory for many a leisure studies specialist, and accordingly, there has been, albeit using different terminology, sporadic

discussion of Antecedents 3, 4, and 5 (e.g., on work, see Florida, 2002, p. 160; on women's leisure and family, see Samuel (1996, p. 2). I addressed myself to Antecedent 3 in an exploration of the leisure lifestyle of mountain hobbyists in kayaking, snowboarding, and mountain climbing as these men and women strove to integrate the demands of work and family with their serious leisure passion (Stebbins, 2005b). A small number of them had to quit the latter for several years, experiencing as part of this crisis leisure abandonment.

On the casual leisure plane think of the number of husbands who have, in face of wifely pressure, renounced their weekly "night out with the boys" or their habit of smoking cigars. Alternatively, a preemptive desire to work overtime can drive a person to abandon in a typical week several hours of watching television or surfing the web. And having children can, for both parents, force abandonment of all sorts of leisure activities, just as getting married itself possibly did some years earlier.

Antecedent 4 is exemplified by a variety of social psychological pressures, among them chronic and intolerably intense stage fright, fierce inter-competitor rivalry and bitter relations with a leader such as a coach, director, or manager. Thus Coakley (1992) found that adolescent elite athletes can "burnout," grow disenchanted with their sport because of intense competition, rigorous training and practice schedules and little opportunity to explore other aspects of life that might foster personal development. Stand-up comic Andrew Smith (Borns, 1987, pp. 153–154) stayed off the stage for years, gripped by a fear of "bombing," of failing to make the audience laugh. He sustained his interest in the art through writing scripts for films and sketches.

The following illustrate **Antecedent 5**. The participant permanently loses a close friend or other partner who participated regularly with the person in the leisure activity in question, a situation that renders impossible continued involvement in it. Moreover, it occasionally happens that a local activity club disbands, leaving many former members with no outlet for the activity it once organized. And far too common in these times of budgetary restraint is the possibility that a municipality might close a needed recreational facility or program, leaving users with no local equivalent.

Physical Leisure Abandonment

Participants in this type are physically unable to continue further with an activity (**Antecedents 6 and 7**). Whereas this sort of leisure abandonment in amateur, professional, and hobbyist sport is reasonably well documented (for a review, see Waddington, 2000, pp. 414–419), it is very much less so in other physically based leisure activities. These include music, dance, acrobatics and the multitude of physically based hobbies (e.g., hunting, aerobics, woodworking, orienteering, needlecraft, mushroom collecting). In the sphere of casual leisure, heart disease for example, puts pressure on many of its victims to

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renounce certain deleterious but nevertheless appealing dietary habits and forms of relaxation like sitting and napping. A newly acquired permanent disability in the legs can eliminate the leisure activity of weekend bird watching or daily walking of the family dog (when conceived of as leisure).

The aging process also eventually forces many people, not all of them elderly, to quit some of their favorite leisure activities (**Antecedent 8**). The limitations on participation in elite-amateur and professional sport imposed by aging have been sporadically considered under the rubric of "retirement," while in this regard, the other areas of leisure have largely been ignored. McPherson, Curtis and Loy (1989, p. 261) observe that retirement comes early for most athletes (often before 30 years of age) and that physical decline commonly figures into their decision to retire. Nonetheless, the aging process appears to be as potent outside as inside sport. Thus, arthritis in the fingers, a disease associated with aging in later life, can force leisure abandonment in elderly violinists, knitters, painters and those who go in for origami. Deteriorating eyesight can drive people from such hobbies as sewing, lapidary work, gun and bow-and-arrow marksmanship and reading, both casual and liberal arts. Other components of Antecedent 8 include diseases that cause hearing impairment, weakness of hands and limbs and increase in general fatigue, all of which can lead participants to terminate a range of serious and casual leisure activities. Stebbins (1996, pp. 58–59) briefly explored the effects of aging on participation in barbershop singing, and Midlarsky and Kahana (1994, p. 227) mention serious illness as one reason seniors in the plus-85 age category give for dropping out of volunteering. Finally, some older people quit (usually by drift, rather than conscious decision) the casual leisure activity of sexual relations, a common antecedent for which is the aging process.

Geographic Leisure Abandonment

Leisure abandonment associated with one or more geographic antecedents (**Antecedent 9**) has received precious little attention in the leisure studies literature. Examples of such antecedents include low water in rivers and lakes, lack of snow, insufficient ice (because of warm weather), absence of wind, too much rain or snow, and environmental pollution. These conditions, when linked as antecedents to geographic leisure abandonment, must be shown to block over a long period of time of, say, several years participation in a particular activity. Accordingly, such abandonment cannot then be said to occur when a golf outing is cancelled because of thundershowers or a snowstorm prevents people from reaching the ski slopes that day. A warm winter can preclude ice climbing for an entire season or a summer of heavy rain can wipe out the floral gardening scene. But neither is geographic leisure abandonment, which is of such temporal magnitude that participants are inclined to permanently give up on the affected activity and look for a replacement.

Recent global climatic changes could, in theory, be engendering geographic leisure abandonment at what may be unprecedented rates in activities where technology has been insufficient to offset the changes. Perhaps, but I could find no research in this area, even while plausible examples exist. Thus, severe forest fires in Western North America have probably eliminated local camping as well as certain kinds of berry picking (both seasonal play forms of casual leisure). Further, years of drought in the same region appear to have eliminated trout fishing in creeks now with water levels too low to support fish life, while the hot springs in Banff National Park are running dry and eliminating a main form of casual leisure for skiers and hikers there (Mason, 2004, p. 28).

Furthermore geographic leisure abandonment can result from excessive use of an area by people and their institutions. For instance the grizzly bear hunt in the Canadian Rockies appears to be on its way to extinction, in wake of governmental policy to issue fewer and fewer annual hunting licenses as a way of heading off the bears' own extinction. The annual hunt combined with highway kill, railroad kill, and human exploitation and human encroachment on their habitat by way of back packing and day hiking are exacting their toll. Historically, numerous species of bird, fish, reptile, and animal have, for the same reasons, met with extinction or near-extinction, not only in North America but also in some other regions of the world (e.g., the elephant in Africa, Leakey & Morell, 2001). And how often has industrial pollution in almost every corner of the planet eliminated for the long term such casual and serious leisure as swimming and sport fishing (e.g., river pollution in China, *The Economist*, 2004, p. 56)?

Regulatory Leisure Abandonment

In regulatory leisure abandonment, would-be participants are barred from entering a particular activity by some governing

authority (**Antecedent 10**). Thus, in many organized amateur and hobbyist athletic, artistic and scientific endeavors, age or number of years of "eligibility," if not both, help determine who participates in, for example, junior sport (in Canada), youth orchestras, young writers competitions and adolescent science fairs. Volunteer service on a board of directors is often fixed at one or two terms. Along different lines, certain kinds of (usually illegal) deviant behavior, such as rape, drug use (including use of performance-enhancing substances) and property offence often lead to expulsion from the team or list of individual competitors of the amateur or hobbyist activity in question (**Antecedent 11**).

And, following **Antecedent 12**, leisure abandonment sometimes results from, for instance, losing a qualifying race or, more rarely probably, a race in the final competition. Such abandonment is especially common in elite amateur sport, as observed in, for instance, the European, Commonwealth, and Olympic Games. Other examples include failing at tryouts to get selected for a sports team (in Canadian football, see Stebbins, 1993, pp. 108–109); failing to win an audition leading to membership in a theater company, community orchestra or local dance group; failing to win jury approval to hang paintings at an exhibition; and rejection of a manuscript by a book or periodical editor. True, in many of these examples, the participant rolls with the punch and soldiers on, refusing to abandon the leisure. But sometimes such failure comes as the final blow, prompting the person to quit the activity for one more likely to generate success.

Favoritism and discrimination constitute a special kind of regulatory leisure abandonment (**Antecedent 13**). I have interpreted this as regulatory, because the individual's statutory right to participate has been violated. That is, favoritism and discrimination, according to the rules, are not supposed to occur, but nonetheless do. It does happen that, for instance, a player is told in mid-season by the coach that he or she will no longer play a certain position, forcing the first to abandon that sport (this assumes no other outlet exists). It is possible, or it might be alleged, that the coach's decision was based on discrimination or favoritism, as opposed to objective judgment of quality of the player's performance.

Project-Based Leisure

Project-based leisure is, in this article, considered separately from casual and serious leisure, because its relationship to leisure abandonment is more tenuous than the first two. Project-based leisure is a short-term, reasonably complicated, one-shot (one-off) or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time (Stebbins, 2005a). It requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes skill or knowledge, but is for all that neither serious nor casual leisure or is it intended to develop into such. Examples include surprise birthday parties, elaborate preparations for a major holiday, and volunteering for sports events. Though only a rudimentary social world springs up

around the project, it does in its own particular way bring together friends, neighbors, or relatives (e.g., through a genealogical project or major religious celebration), or draw the individual participant into an organizational milieu. The latter occurs, for example, when volunteering for a sports event, arts festival, or major convention.

Leisure projects get abandoned, as illustrated in quitting one's volunteer role as ticket taker at an arts festival, giving up trying to complete a do-it-yourself construction project and being forced by illness to scupper religious holiday preparations. The critical requirement concerning abandonment of a project is whether sufficient emotional attachment to it exists. If the individual has invested considerable self in the project, has found substantial enjoyment or fulfillment there, and for these reasons, wants to continue but cannot, then non-volitional abandonment (types 2–5) offers a reasonable explanation of why that person left the project. But, when people have not yet developed such an emotional tie, this cardinal condition of leisure abandonment is missing and the concept cannot help explain why they leave these projects. To help understand why strong interest never developed, we must look instead to other explanations, including the theory of leisure motivation (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997, pp. 208–209) and the perspective of casual leisure and its relationship to project-based leisure (Stebbins, 2005a, p.10).

Drift toward Leisure Abandonment

Discussion to this point might lead one to believe that leisure abandonment is a phenomenon we are always aware of; that is, people consciously decide to quit an activity or are aware that they are being forced out of it. And abandonment conditioned by Antecedents 5–7 and 9–13 gives considerable weight to this impression. But *drift*, a process we are much less conscious of, describes well the circumstances leading to leisure abandonment that does not necessarily presume a conscious decision to quit an activity. It is the third alternative for exiting a leisure activity, mentioned in the definition of leisure abandonment set out in the first paragraph.

Consider a couple of hypothetical examples. A musician in the local civic orchestra has been growing ever more disenchanted with the drift of the group's concert material toward popular music and show tunes, a trend that springs from the group's financial need to increase the size of its paying audiences. One day, while comparing the attractiveness of today's concerts with that of past concerts, our musician realizes the great fulfillment once experienced in public orchestral performance has become significantly diluted (Antecedent 1). It is now clear that the time has come to formally sever ties with the group. In another example pressure at work (Antecedent 3), as felt, let us say, through a major increase in hours of employment, leads some workers to participate less and less in a particular leisure activity, even while never formally deciding to abandon it. She simply takes up less often her knitting

needles, and he simply goes less frequently to his metal working shop. Perhaps in the latter case, a formal decision finally is finally only when the hobbyist decides to sell his tools.

Drift compared with conscious decision-making is much more difficult to study, but for all that, is no less important for a well-rounded understanding of leisure abandonment.

Conclusions

It is possible to make a number of general observations about leisure abandonment. First, leisure abandonment is, to the extent the activity renounced was once strongly appealing, almost entirely a negative experience. Only abandonment conditioned by Antecedent 2 is unequivocally positive. In this alternative, by the way, the study of abandonment, substitutability and replacement are joined. Here participants are observed planning ahead to new leisure activities, often it seems, basing their choices on their experience with the ones they are leaving. Second, most leisure abandonment appears to be caused by external forces (Antecedents 3–13), calling into question once again the validity of choice as an essential element in definitions of leisure (Stebbins, 2005c). Nevertheless, people are adaptive; they will find alternative leisure such that human agency remains a significant force at these critical junctures in life. Third, leisure abandonment links people to the outside world in at least three important ways: through ties with other people, changes in the geographic world, and structural constraints of organizational regulation. Fourth, I hypothesize that every form of casual, serious, and project-based leisure is subject to being abandoned according to one or more of the 13 antecedents. Leisure abandonment is a widespread phenomenon.

If leisure abandonment is largely a negative process, there is nonetheless a silver lining to the cloud that forms around it. In other words, unless predicated on Antecedent 3, it invariably makes available more time for different leisure, with some different leisure not even being possible unless an earlier abandonment occurs. These critical points in life, then, bear on leisure adaptation and change over the life course. Still, they fail to qualify as leisure experience (Mannell, 1999). Rather they come at the end of this kind of experience and, as such, amount to a separate experience. Leisure abandonment is an experience, — about that there is no doubt — but it is not a *leisure* experience.

Moving to a broader plane, leisure abandonment brings up the question of resilience in and through leisure. How do people adapt over the years, over their life course, to changes in themselves and their social/physical/geographic environment? How resilient are they in face of these changes and what free-time mechanisms sustain whatever resilience they have? Since studying leisure abandonment gives only a partial answer to this question of resiliency in life, we must turn to the broader study of adaptation and resilience for a more complete explanation of how people deal with actual abandonment or with the possibility that it might occur. Indeed, discovering how people

avoid the personal crisis of abandoning a cherished activity is a yet another aspect of leisure life well worth investigating.

The present exploration of leisure abandonment gives rise to numerous research questions. For instance, having set out its basic conceptual framework, we now need more descriptive data on the nature of leisure abandonment in casual, serious, and project-based leisure. It cannot be assumed to be the same for all three, since each is motivated differently and may relate differently to the 13 antecedents. We should also look into the distribution of leisure abandonment in casual, serious, and project-based leisure. That is does abandonment occur with the same frequency in each and each of its types and subtypes? Finally, leisure abandonment should also interest life course researchers. Do differences exist across the life course according to the types of abandonment and associated antecedents, as measured by their frequency and demographic distribution (e.g., by sex, ethnicity, education, occupation)?

A complete theory of the pursuit of leisure activities across the life course will consist of, among others, propositions about continuation, abandonment, substitutability, replacement and their interrelationship. The goal of this paper was to highlight the importance of the second, whose place in this larger conceptual picture had received little scrutiny.

Note

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