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.

Social Networks in Leisure: From Meso- to Macro-structure

Although scattered research on social networks and leisure dates at least to my own study of those of amateur classical musicians (Stebbins, 1976), widespread interest in this area took flight with the appearance of Patricia Stokowski’s doctoral dissertation (1988) and subsequent book (1994). She argued, from exploratory data on social networks and recreation in a rural town in Washington State, that people construct a sense of their leisure within the social milieu of their daily lives. Her principal interest was to propose a new sociology of leisure, one based more centrally in ‘structure’ than the psychological and social psychological models of leisure as experience dominant in the United States at the time she wrote.

Elizabeth Bott’s (1957, p. 59) definition of social network fits best the small amount of work done on this form of organisation within the domain of leisure. She defines social network simply, as ‘a set of social relationships for which there is no common boundary’. Bott’s approach is ego-centric; networks are calculated from the reference point of individuals. In her definition, a network is not a structure, as Stokowski puts it, since it has no shared boundaries (boundaries recognized by everyone in the social network) and no commonly recognized hierarchy or central coordinating agency. Nevertheless, interconnections exist between others in the network, in that some members are directly in touch with each other while others are not. Thus a social network is a form of social organisation (Stebbins, 2002, chap. 2).

As individuals pursue their leisure interests, they develop networks of contacts (friends, relatives and acquaintances) related in one way or another to these interests. As a person develops more such interests, the number of networks grows accordingly, bearing in mind that members of some of these will nevertheless sometimes overlap. For instance, a few members of John’s dog breeding network — they might be suppliers, veterinarians, or other breeders — are also members of his golf network — who might be suppliers, course personnel, or other golfers. Taken from the opposite angle network contacts may stimulate an individual’s interest in a particular leisure activity. Whichever direction the line of influence, knowing people’s leisure networks helps explain how they socially organize their leisure time. In this manner, as Blackshaw and Long (1998, p. 246) observe, we learn something new about leisure lifestyle.

Lifestyle and social network are two important components of ‘meso-structure’. David Maines (1982) coined the term over 25 years ago to identify the intermediate field of interaction lying between the sphere of immediate social interaction and the sphere of such all-encompassing abstractions as community, society, social-class, and large-scale organisation, or broadly put, social structure. On the meso-structural level, human interaction continues to be discernible in research and theory carried out and constructed under the disciplinary banners of sociology, anthropology, and social psychology. My elaboration (Stebbins, 1992) based on a number of studies showing that amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers operate within some sort of meso-structural context as well as, to be...
Consider, briefly, three examples. Varshney (2007) examined the work of masters and doctoral theses (there were about 12) with a substantial focus on networks and leisure. Most of this work appears as masters and doctoral theses (there were about 12) mainly in their meso-structural manifestations. Most of this research in this area is little more than the idiosyncratic study of small, isolated groups of enthusiasts organized around some ‘quaint’ pastime.

Stokowski thought of her work on social networks and leisure in the rural town as bearing on macro-sociological social structure, rather than on mid-level meso-structure. But in fact, her study and its interpretation fit best in the second. Van der Poel, in a review of the 1994 book, explained the problem:

Firstly, if we want to have a real sociology of leisure and link developments in leisure to developments in the context of people’s daily lives in modernity, we cannot stop talking about the social networks of people in terms of their ‘interactional’ (such as ‘frequency of communication’ and ‘reciprocity’) and ‘structural’ criteria (such as network ‘size’ and ‘density’) (p. 61). As people will always be engaged in a variety of social networks, we will want to know how these networks are influenced and have an influence upon broader societal developments such as unemployment and the restructuring of industries, changing households, the marginalizing of the welfare state in most Western countries, ethnic, age and sexual divisions in society, and so on. (van der Poel, 1995, p. 69)

This is, at bottom, the same criticism of Stokowski’s work made by Blackshaw and Long (1998).

Still it seems that the study of leisure networks is, for the most part, stuck at the meso-structural level, yet to be effectively linked with any number of the macro-sociological perspectives that would give it social, cultural, and historical context. I foreshadowed this meso-structural trend in the aforementioned analysis of the networks of amateur classical musicians. Thus, one analytic feature of social networks is their ‘reachability’. It refers to the number of intermediaries in a person’s network who must be contacted to reach certain other members of it. Reachability is relatively great when few or no intermediaries are needed for this purpose, as opposed to when many are needed. I observed that in a community orchestra, the concertmaster usually has greater reachability than any other instrumentalist in the ensemble, mainly because of responsibilities requiring direct contact with the majority of its members. For example, this person may be simultaneously assistant conductor, chief recruiter, and disciplinarian, all in addition to being the orchestra’s subleader.

In a review of research on leisure and social networks from 1980 to the present I found much the same focus: an interest mainly in their meso-structural manifestations. Most of this work appears as masters and doctoral theses (there were about a dozen with a substantial focus on networks and leisure). Consider, briefly, three examples. Varshney (2007) examined the social support networks of older adults, concluding that larger formations resulted in greater life satisfaction and subjective health. Foose (2004) found that the leisure activity patterns of older adults were positively correlated with the size of social support networks. Hibbler’s (2000) study of interracial couples revealed greater social isolation among those which lacked social networks in their daily lives, including their leisure activities. Marsden (1990, p. 435), in a review of the general literature on social networks also stresses this meso-structural tendency. She defines them as constellations of identifiable relationships that join individual units, be they persons or collectivities.

Robert Stebbins’s work addresses the connection of leisure and work. He defines leisure as “a set of unstructured activities, performed primarily for the pleasure or enjoyment that they provide.” He argues that leisure is a form of social organization which is diffuse and amorphous. ... 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. (Unruh, 1979, p. 115)

Individuals develop a sense of the social worlds in which they embedded, that is, a sense of a moderately abstract constellation, or community, of participants in the central activity. The participants may be local, regional, national and sometimes international. The idea of social network, based as it is on an ego-centric view of an individual’s links to other people, has at bottom a social psychological orientation. Person X interacts from time to time with persons Y, Z and so on who constitute his network. Both social networks and social worlds are units of social organisation, but the first rests on direct interaction whereas the second rests, much more abstractly, on a personally identifiable constellation of diverse events, practices, organisations, categories of people and the like.

One way Bendle mapped the arts worlds he studied was to ask its spokes people to estimate the numbers of their association’s members whom they regarded as strangers, tourists, regulars, and insiders. According to Unruh (1979; 1980) every social world is populated with these four types. Strangers are intermediaries who normally participate little in the leisure activity itself, but who nonetheless do something important to make it possible by, for example, repairing musical instruments, selling artists’ supplies and producing publicity for amateur artistic events. Tourists are temporary participants in a social world; they have come on the scene momentarily for entertainment, diversion, or profit. Most amateur activities generate publics of some kind (e.g., audiences, viewers, readers), which are in this conceptualization, conceived of as tourists. Regulars routinely participate in the social world; in Bendle’s study they are the amateurs themselves. Insiders are those among them who show exceptional devotion to the social world they share, to maintaining it, to advancing it, and to displaying artistic excellence there. These personal typological images of a particular social world, which are shared with other members of a particular social world, and with other participants there, coalesced into a macro-sociological understanding of the arts community in the city that Bendle studied.

To be sure, this is not the sort of macro-sociology van der Poel and Blackshaw and Long had in mind when they criticized Stokowski’s work. Nevertheless their key point is important: we need also to know the social-cultural-historical context in which social networks operate if we want to explain them fully. Bendle’s work shows us one route by which we may move from meso- to macro-structure, starting from social network and social world. The meso-structural concept of lifestyle (Stebbins, 1993, also mentioned above by Blackshaw and Long), linked as it is to life course, life cycle and the institutions of work, family and leisure, offers another route.

References

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