

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 37 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig, 2005); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and *Social Entrepreneurship for Dummies* (Wiley, 2010, with M. Durieux). 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 President of the *Centre d’accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones* (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.

Website (personal):

WWW.ucalgary.ca/~stebbins

Website (perspective):

WWW.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure

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LEISURE CHOICE, FACILITATION and CONSTRAINT

This trio of terms — choice, constraint and facilitation — has been around leisure studies for many years, with the third being the most recent arrival. The tendency, it appears, has been to treat of one of them with little or no discussion of one or both of the other two. Thus, I weighed in on the limitations of the idea of choice in defining leisure, without so much as a word about either facilitation or constraint (Stebbins, 2005), while Scott (2003), for example, in a review of the constraints literature, said nothing about choice or facilitation. Raymore (2002) glimpsed some of the undesirable effects of this tendency to consider these three ideas in isolation of the others when he pointed out that the dominant interest in constraints has occluded an interest in leisure’s facilitators, and what is more, that “an absence of constraints does not necessarily lead to participation” (p. 37). Since choice of leisure activity is substantially affected by both constraints and facilitators faced by and available to the participant, we could understand leisure participation better were we to consider all three simultaneously.

Relating Choice, Constraint, and Facilitation

Because this article is, at bottom, about the nature of leisure, we need a definition of it on which to base the present argument. Since the precursor of Stebbins (2005) published in 2002 in the *LSA Newsletter*, I have been trying to develop such a definition. Its most recent version is as follows: leisure is un-coerced, contextually framed activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way, if not both (more fully discussed in Stebbins, in press).

Note that reference to ‘free choice’ and ‘freely chosen’ — both long-standing components of standard definitions of leisure — are, for reasons set out elsewhere (Stebbins, 2005), intentionally omitted from this definition. Generally put, choice is never completely free, but rather is hedged about with all sorts of conditions, constraints and facilitators being prominent among them. This situation renders useless as an essential element in a basic definition the concept of free choice and allied ideas such as freedom and feeling free (c.f., Juniu & Henderson, 2001).

But abandoning, as we must, the idea of choice in definitions of leisure, this approach also risks abandoning the vital condition of personal agency in directing leisure participation. To escape this dilemma, I have begun to speak not about the capacity of choice but about the lack of coercion in pursuing leisure activities, about un-coerced participation. This language enables discussion of the things people want to do but in certain instances cannot do because of any number of constraints on choice. Because they encounter limiting social and personal conditions; for example, aptitude, ability, socialized leisure tastes, knowledge of available activities, and accessibility of activities. In other words, when using a definition of leisure that includes as a central ingredient the lack of coercion, we must be sure to understand leisure activities in relation to their larger personal, structural, cultural, and historical background (Stebbins, in press). And it follows that leisure is not really freely chosen, as theorized earlier by various observers (e.g., Parker, 1983, pp. 8-9; Kelly, 1990, p. 7), since choice of activity is significantly shaped by this background. How facilitation fits in all this will be considered shortly.

A critical problem with this line of reasoning about constraints and facilitators is that, as context, they fail to tell us what leisure is in the eyes of the participant. For this person leisure is not about what he is prevented, or constrained, from doing. It is not even about being facilitated to do an activity. Rather leisure is doing that activity (Stebbins, 2009a, p. 108), actually participating in it as something the participant wants to do and can do at a satisfying level. Now this is not to argue that it is therefore unimportant to study how the social, cultural, structural milieu shapes free-time choices of activities. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Rather, knowing this helps explain the leisure choices that people do make. A full theory of leisure must include propositions about context.

Yet, taking off from Raymore’s observation, it seems that a disproportionate interest in constraints accentuates the negative in the sole domain in life devoted to finding positiveness — that is, the domain of leisure. The quest for positiveness should be a central theme in leisure studies, with research on the effects of

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negativeness being organised with reference to it. Yet, if this observation is obvious in the case of constraints, it is perhaps less so in the case of facilitators.

Facilitating Leisure

According to Raymore facilitators to leisure are ‘factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived or experienced by individuals to enable or promote the formation of leisure preferences and to encourage or enhance participation’ (p. 39). This definition is an adaptation of Jackson’s (1997) definition of constraint, where facilitator is seen (by Raymore) as its antonym. Nevertheless the two are not polar opposites, since facilitation is not necessarily achieved by overcoming one or more constraints or even achieved because of their absence. Writing on the relationship of facilitators and constraints to leisure motivation, Raymore argued that “the facilitator is the condition itself, not the process through which that condition energizes or motivates behavior leading to (i.e., facilitating) or limiting (i.e., constraining) participation” (pp. 43-44). He follows up this observation by linking constraints and facilitators to the expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation. Raymore wrote on facilitation, because he believed that the popularity of constraints as an object of research was creating an imbalance relative to their importance in a full explanation of leisure motivation.

In this conceptualisation facilitators may be regarded as resources for leisure activities. Furthermore, as with constraints, facilitators may be intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural. Raymore theorizes that intrapersonal facilitators are individual characteristics, traits and beliefs that enable or promote the development of leisure preferences and that encourage or enhance leisure participation. The interpersonal facilitators, which originate in other people or groups of people, have these same effects. It is likewise with structural facilitators: they are found in social and physical institutions, organisations and belief systems.

Inherited characteristics constitute an important class of intrapersonal facilitators. For example being endowed with exceptional muscular strength, vocal clarity or facial beauty enhances success in rugby, operatic singing or fashion modeling, respectively. Knowing the coach, being a member of an outstanding musical group or working in an electronics shop may facilitate on an interpersonal basis, getting invited to join a football team, experiencing top honours in a chamber music context or having access at discounted prices to computer equipment. Structurally an individual’s participation in a leisure activity may be facilitated by membership in an amateur science society or fishing club with exclusive use of a private pond or by adherence to a religion that allows the faithful access to a retreat.

The Limited Role of Choice

Constraints limit choice, as has just been noted. But, in their peculiar way, so do facilitators. To the extent that participants are aware of the positive effects of the second, they will want to take advantage of them. In other words choice of other leisure activities is thereby limited, in that the other activities lack these facilitators. Why, for instance, take up a musical instrument when the singer with an exceptionally clear voice has a natural advantage at succeeding in his or her passion for music as a vocalist? Why abandon fishing as a summer hobby in order to take up another, when the private pond frequently yields the unforgettable experiences of outstanding catches?

Conclusions

Both constraints and facilitators limit choice. But, otherwise, the two have remarkably different effects on the pursuit of leisure. First, constraints are negative; they hinder leisure choice. Second facilitators are, like leisure itself, positive; they enable people to pursue what they want to do. Yet, that facilitators limit choice is usually of rather little consequence for the participant. As the foregoing illustrations suggest there is much of the

time little incentive to abandon an activity that is well facilitated for another which lacks in significant measure this resource. More precisely facilitators are conditions that help motivate people to take up an activity and stay with it. At this point the activity in question is in the process of being chosen or has been chosen and is now being actively pursued, however limited the antecedent range of choices shaped by a diversity of constraints. Some of these constraints are highly restrictive, for depending on the society, some members may be denied the right to pursue a fair assortment of leisure activities. For example Martin and Mason (2004) report that, among devout female Muslims, sport and physical recreation, though acceptable, may only be pursued according to precepts of Islamic modesty and dress. And in all societies knowledge of the full range activities to which the individual does have a right is rarely complete.

This discussion of constraints and facilitators leads to the broader observation that context can be either negative or positive. Moreover the foregoing ideas suggest that choice of activities, to the extent that people have choice, is guided not only by what is available to them but also by what the chooser can do well at, find resources for, and find encouragement in. This is why we need to consider this trio of ideas as an ensemble. If nothing else we need much more research on facilitation, which is so far very thin.¹ One danger in ignoring facilitation and failing to look at the three ideas together lies in over-stressing the role of constraints in the sole domain in life where positiveness reigns (for an examination of leisure as positiveness, see Stebbins, 2009b).

Note

¹ A partial literature search revealed but one article (Woodside, Caldwell, and Spurr, 2006) and a brief mention of the idea (Samdahl, 2005, p. 346).

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**Bob Stebbins, University of Calgary
stebbins@ucalgary.ca**