
Leisure Reflections

Leisure Reflections ... No. 4

Relaxation: Rocking-Chair Leisure and More

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins pioneered the ideas of “serious leisure,” “casual leisure,” and “optimal leisure lifestyle” and has spent 30 years studying all three. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 26 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important works bearing on these three ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); *After Work: The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *The Urban Francophone Volunteer: Searching for Personal Meaning and Community Growth in a Linguistic Minority* (University of Washington, Canadian Studies Centre, 1998); and *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001). He is presently conducting a study of leisure activities: *Rocky Mountain hobbyists in kayaking, snowboarding, and mountain climbing* (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), and working on a grant proposal for research on grassroots associations in the lives of their amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer members and participants. Stebbins is currently awaiting release of a book in the latter area entitled *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002). 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 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.

Not so long ago (Stebbins, 1997), I classified relaxation as one of six types of casual leisure. In keeping with the essence of casual leisure, the parenthetical examples of relaxation presented in that article were purely hedonic: sitting, taking a nap, and strolling in a park. Neither in that statement nor in my subsequent writings have I said anything more about relaxation. Yet, there is more to say, for it has since become clear that treating it as casual leisure implies that relaxation is wholly frivolous, which in several ways it is decidedly not.

According to the OED relaxation is, in the sense of the word most appropriate to this discussion, release from mental or physical tension, especially by recreation or rest. Kleiber (2000) salvaged relaxation from the dustbin of frivolity by singling out a number of its virtues. Even while it is often easy to relax, he observed, that is to engage in the relaxing activity itself, it is also important at times to do precisely that. In other words relaxation is rocking-chair leisure and more.

Kleiber was inspired by Josef Pieper’s (1952) celebrated treatise on leisure, in which the latter stresses the importance of relaxation as context for contemplation. Kleiber reflects on the contemporary relevance of Pieper’s observations about relaxation:

Pieper’s conception of leisure seems even more elusive as we begin this new century. Being the productive society we are, we celebrate effort and value relaxation primarily for its role in recharging that effort. A more mature view sees the importance of relaxation for reflection and planning, for gaining the kind of perspective that leads to an effective change in direction, acceleration of efforts in some direction and deceleration of effort in others. But such considerations seem somehow to be recessed in our high-speed, technologically-charged existence, and rarely find their way into prescriptions for optimizing life’s opportunities. (Kleiber, 2000, p. 83)

Except when relaxation comes in the form of taking a nap or being entertained, for example, this kind of leisure lends itself well to playful contemplation,

which appears to bear most fruit when done in solitude. This special role of solitude has not been lost on a number of the world's great thinkers. Cicero, for instance, observed that a person is 'never less idle than when wholly idle, nor less alone than when wholly alone'. Rousseau was more specific in his appraisal, while underscoring the importance of the walk: 'never have I thought so much, existed so much, lived so much, been so much myself, if I may dare to say it, as when I went alone and afoot'. When this contemplation is playful we speculate freely about any number of interests. Here we combine two types of casual leisure (play and relaxation). But it can happen that our contemplation drifts toward trying to solve a pressing problem, a change that can threaten its status as leisure, regardless of form. In these circumstances contemplation takes on the solemn sense of obligation, for the problem in question needs solving, so much so that it intrudes on the person's free time.

Writing in a diary is a form of contemplative relaxation. It is relaxing to describe the important thoughts and events of the day, perhaps along with some conclusions about what each one means. And nowadays it is apparently relaxing for some people to share these daily musings with others, accomplished by logging into, for instance, WWW.blogger.com. At this site participants, known as 'bloggers', present for public comment aspects of, or 'blogs' from, their diary, giving each blog a descriptive title perhaps accompanied by some graphical elements, and then, since the site is interactive, sit back to await responses. But here, too, these web logs can take a serious turn, as when readers offer advice to help a blogger solve the problem presented in a particular blog.

Moreover, some forms of relaxation, if they are to be properly experienced, require significant preparation. This points to another area where the casual leisure conception of relaxation needs amending. Consider, as example, the personal use of such systems as yoga and tai chi, which have among their principal goals to both enable and encourage the participant to meditate. A byproduct of such meditation is relaxation. First, however, the novice must learn the various moves and positions as well as the philosophy behind them, which indicates that these systems, even though their goal is relaxation, are complex enough to be considered hobbies, to be classified as serious leisure. In other words, only certain kinds of (essentially hedonic) relaxation qualify as casual leisure, which are, for all that, far more popular with the general public than these systems.

Moreover, with some forms of relaxation, to the extent people find pleasure in them, they must first

learn what to look for. For instance, a range of *tastes* exist in music, art, writing, food, and the like that usually have to be cultivated to a point where they can produce the greatest pleasure for the consumer (Kleiber, 2002, p. 6). Developing a taste for a genre of music or art is not the same, however, as becoming an amateur practitioner or a hobbyist expert in it. The latter two are on-going pursuits that continue indefinitely, whereas the first is finite: once the taste is developed, the main goal is to find occasions to relax while enjoying it.

A third example is the cultivation of our powers of observation, reflection, and general curiosity (Kleiber, 2002, p. 6). Gathering information for the fun of it, as in reading newspapers, watching television, and browsing the internet, is relaxing and an expression of this cultivation. Here, while relaxing during free time, people have the opportunity to acquire and feed a broad interest in the world around them.

In the end, it seems to me that the question surrounding relaxation as casual leisure is not whether we should occasionally sit in the rocking chair, but how often and for how long we should do this and for what purpose. In other words what is the ideal formula for an optimal leisure lifestyle? This question cannot be answered at present with any significant precision, since optimal leisure lifestyle (Stebbins, 2000) is personal; it is based on what individuals feel is the best balance of serious and casual leisure they can strike, given their knowledge of the leisure alternatives accessible to them. Be that as it may, many people need some time simply to unwind, during which they may also do some playful reflecting, reflection not intended with any earnestness to solve a problem. This is recreation (re-creation) in a fundamental sense of the word.

Life's little sessions of conjecture during either casual or serious leisure relaxation can be most stimulating as well as truly calming. How many of us have thought at length at one time or another about what we would do with the cash should we win the lottery? How many of us have (day) dreamed about nicer living accommodations or more ideal working conditions? On an earthier plane how many have contemplated (dare I say coveted) life with another sexual partner or any sexual partner at all? And then on to the really cerebral, many scientists and humanists have passed some inspiring moments speculating about new ideas in their field, which for all that fall outside the routine problem-solving required of them in their work. To be sure, such speculation could, down the road, become the basis for a major research project or theoretic treatise.

But, as already suggested, the thorny problem with relaxation is its tendency to become license. Neither Pieper nor Kleiber appears to recommending it in the name of debauchery, of which nevertheless many people no doubt need some. A little hedonism may be all some folks have energy and enthusiasm for following a long stint of work or serious leisure, with even playful contemplation being out of the question. But we in leisure studies also know that a sizable proportion of the population enjoys an indulgent, free-time lifestyle far in excess of what they need to re-create themselves after substantial labor or leisure. The point is, surely, not to throw the baby out with the bath water, not to categorically label relaxation as frivolous, as suggested by my initial classification of it as a type of casual leisure.

Still, in my second article on casual leisure (Stebbins, 2001), where I examined both its costs and its benefits, I observed that, most often, such leisure makes only a limited contribution to self and community. Unless the person has created, discovered, or learned something new, casual leisure, relaxation included, is unlikely to produce a distinctive identity, which constitutes one aspect of this cost. Other aspects include the common failure of casual leisure to generate good feelings about oneself — the value of self-esteem — and to foster self-development — the value of personal enhancement. Further, much of casual leisure, beyond its oftentimes considerable economic punch, contributes little to development of the community, viewed here as participation by its members in activity resulting in improvement of one or more of its identifiable aspects (Pedlar, 1996), and strengthening communal patterns of human and institutional interrelationships (Ploch, 1976: p. 8). Of note, however, are the casual leisure volunteers; since their work does contribute to self and community (Stebbins, 1996); they are exceptions to the observations made in this paragraph.

Relaxation can be viewed, in broad terms, as either adjustment or adaptation in free time to particular mentally or physically tense circumstances in a person's everyday life. It is usually found in casual leisure but, as pointed out earlier, it can also be experienced as serious leisure. Long ago Herodotus had occasion to underscore the importance of relaxation. He said 'if a man insisted always on being serious, and never allowed himself a bit of fun and relaxation, he would go mad or become unstable without knowing it'. That Herodotus found it necessary to make this observation in the fifth century B.C., in the sense that he saw some his fellow citizens

as insufficiently relaxed, suggests that, in this respect, life has not changed much. At least Kleiber is saying something very similar about his contemporaries in the twenty-first century A.D. So the challenge now, as then, is to encourage people to relax when they can benefit from this practice, while discouraging them from relaxing when sloth is the result.

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