

Robert A. Stebbins: Leisure Reflections #60

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Serious Leisure and Wayward Youth

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It seems that, from time immemorial, wayward youth have made their presence felt in one disturbing way or another in the communities where they live. Their propensity for going against the grain of conventional society has commonly been traced to conditions unique to adolescence and young adulthood, often the most unsettling transition in life during which the person mentally and physically is no longer a child and not yet fully an adult. It seems, however, that in modern times in industrial society aberrant behavior of this segment of the population is felt to have got out of hand, giving rise in recent decades to calls for its control, if not its elimination. And amidst the clamor we hear it said occasionally that leisure might be a fruitful way to divert non-deviant youth from deviant interests and persuade wayward youth to abandon such interests.

In nearly every instance, however, the leisure in question turns out to be sport. In this regard, Schafer (1969) hypothesized that involvement in sport tends to deter involvement in juvenile delinquency. Later, more controlled research by Segrave and Hastad (1984), for example, suggested that, in general, athletes were indeed less likely than non-athletes to engage in delinquent behavior. Yet, as research in leisure studies makes abundantly clear, by no means all youth are interested in sport, or at least in the sports routinely available to them in their schools and neighborhoods (Kelly & Godbey, 1992, pp. 258-264; Ardakani & Nosrati, 2015). Like some adults, some youth care little for sport, however available or unavailable. Finally, delinquency, one common definition of which is committing an offense against the law by a person below the age of legal responsibility, is far from the only category of deviance that youth find attractive. In other words, we need to use a much broader conception of leisure if we are going to succeed in persuading youth to take up a leisure activity and refrain from or desist in pursuing one or more kinds of deviance.

In the following pages I argue that the serious leisure perspective (SLP) can help effect this redirection of interest. Because of space limitations, the discussion is restricted to wayward youth (defined in the next paragraph). Nevertheless, with a few appropriate modifications, some of the ideas presented here might also be applied to the broader category of all youth at risk, of which wayward youth are but one component. Also at risk are youth who are unemployed, members of tension-filled families, and students in violence-ridden schools. Though some of the latter may be wayward, too, many are not.

Wayward Youth

For the purposes of this article, *wayward youth* are defined as adolescents and young adults who, in pursuit of deviant leisure, have run afoul of either the criminal law or certain other seriously regarded moral norms of the community, doing so to the extent that their deviance has become a way of life. By dint of being heavily involved in such “secondary deviation” (Lemert, 1972), they constitute a special, but nonetheless sizable, category of youth at risk. They are at risk because they routinely flout one or more of their society’s moral norms, norms that proscribe either “intolerable” or “tolerable” deviance (Stebbins, 1996, pp. 3-7). I will also consider *potential wayward youth*: youth for whom deviance is not presently a way of life, but who face certain social and personal conditions pushing them in that direction.

Depending on the society, tolerable deviance undertaken for pleasure encompasses a range of moderately proscribed deviant sexual activities, including cross-dressing, homosexuality, watching sex (e.g., striptease, pornographic films), and swinging as well as group sex. Heavy drinking and gambling, but not their more seriously regarded cousins alcoholism and compulsive gambling, are also tolerably deviant as are use of cannabis and illicit, pleasurable, use of certain prescription drugs. Social nudism has also been analyzed from the tolerable deviance perspective (all these forms are examined in greater detail in Stebbins, 1996, chaps. 3-7, 9, available in Digital Library, www.seriousleisure.net).

In the final analysis, deviant leisure roots in sensory stimulation, and in particular, the creature pleasures it produces. The majority of people in society tolerate most of these pleasures even if they would never think, or at least not dare, to enjoy themselves in these ways. In addition, they actively scorn a somewhat smaller number of intolerable forms of deviant leisure, demanding decisive legal control of, for example, incest, vandalism, sexual assault, and what Jack Katz (1988, chap. 2) called “sneaky thrills” (certain incidents of theft, burglary, shoplifting, and joyriding). Nonetheless, except for joyriding, the sneaky thrills are not motivated so much by a desire for creature pleasure as by a desire for a special kind of excitement: going against the grain of established social life. Finally, though not really leisure, alcoholism and compulsive gambling still number among the forms of intolerable deviance, thereby helping to explain why the youth so afflicted are likewise at risk. The principal theme of this article (stated in the next paragraph) applies to them as well, and they will therefore be included in the discussion.

Nearly all deviant leisure pursued by wayward youth, as they were just defined, is casual. *Casual leisure* is “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18). With this definition we come to the principal proposition of this paper; namely, that we should be able to entice many wayward and potentially wayward youth away from their deviant casual leisure by introducing them to and encouraging them to take up one or more non-deviant forms of serious leisure.

Serious Leisure

As we have seen, leisure activities can be classified as either serious or casual, with each form offering its participants sharply different experiences and generating sharply different states of mind. Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of self-fulfillment through an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 2020). Amateurs are found in art, science, sport, and entertainment, where they are linked with professional counterparts. Hobbyists, by contrast, lack a professional alter ego, even though they sometimes have commercial equivalents and often have small publics who are interested in what they do. The SLP classifies the multitude of hobbyists in one of five categories: collectors; makers and tinkerers; activity participants (e.g., hunters, mountain climbers, barbershop singers); competitors in the largely non-professionalized sports, games, and contests; and enthusiasts in the liberal arts (e.g., devoted readers of a kind literature, history, science). Volunteers, inspired by a combination of personal and altruistic goals, willingly help others.

Serious leisure is often contrasted with casual leisure. Casual leisure forms abound in nearly bewildering variety; besides deviant leisure they include strolling in the park, observing a fireworks display, going on a picnic, and taking an afternoon nap. In broad, colloquial terms, this definition could serve as the scientific term for the widespread practice of doing what comes naturally.

Serious leisure is further defined and distinguished from casual leisure by six special qualities, qualities found among amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers alike. One is their occasional need to persevere, as when confronting danger or managing stage fright or embarrassment. Serious leisure research shows, however, that positive feelings about the leisure activity come, to some extent, from sticking with it through thick and thin, from conquering such adversity. A second quality is, as already indicated, that of finding a career in the endeavor, shaped as it is by its own special contingencies, turning points, search for rewards, and stages of achievement or involvement.

Careers in serious leisure commonly rest on a third quality: significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training, or skill, and, indeed, all three at times. Examples include such valued acquisitions as showmanship, athletic prowess, scientific knowledge, and long experience in a role. Fourth, eight durable benefits, or outcomes, of serious leisure have so far been identified, mostly from research on amateurs: self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity (e.g., a painting, scientific paper, piece of furniture). A further benefit – self-gratification or pure fun, which is considerably more evanescent than the preceding eight – is the one most often shared with casual leisure.

A fifth quality of serious leisure is the unique ethos that grows up around each instance of it, a central component of which is the special social world within which participants there realize their interests. David Unruh (1980, p. 277) defines the social world as “an amorphous, diffuse constellations of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into spheres of interest and involvement for participants [and in which] it is likely that a powerful centralized authority structure does not exist.” Another key component of the social world of any particular pursuit is its subculture, which inter-relates the “diffuse and amorphous constellations” by means of such elements as special norms, values, beliefs, moral principles, and performance standards.

The sixth quality revolves around the preceding five: participants in serious leisure tend to identify strongly with their chosen pursuits. In contrast, casual leisure, although hardly humiliating or despicable, is nonetheless too fleeting, mundane, and commonplace for most people to find a distinctive identity within it.

Leisure for Wayward Youth

Nondeviant casual leisure is far more common and therefore more popular than nondeviant serious leisure. Notwithstanding this general attitude, Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1987) hypothesized that, for some youth, the first can become tedious, in part because they lack both personal leisure skills and sufficient leisure opportunities. In response to this predicament, these youth seek excitement in delinquency or use of illicit drugs or both. In a subsequent study designed to test this hypothesis, Iso-Ahola and Crowley (1991) found that leisure boredom *is* associated with drug abuse, although the causal relationship between these two variables remains to be established.

Surprisingly, the bored adolescent drug abusers they examined turned out to be more active than the control group of non-abusers in such sports as football, baseball, gymnastics, skateboarding, and roller skating. That the first were still bored even though they participated in active serious leisure lifestyles led the authors to suggest that therapists could possibly discourage further recreational drug use by providing abusers “with copious opportunities to experience leisure activities that potentially meet the same needs that were formerly met through substance abuse” (Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991, p. 269). The authors neglected to identify these leisure activities, although they did cite research indicating that substance abusers are more likely than non-abusers to seek thrilling and adventurous pursuits, while showing little taste for repetitious and constant experiences. In other words, these youth were looking for leisure that could give them optimal arousal, as in flow, that was nevertheless a regular rather than an infrequent activity, such as bungee jumping or roller coaster riding, but that did not however require long periods of what they saw as monotonous preparation.

This suggests that casual leisure, in general and as a steady free-time practice, is inadequate for wayward youth in at least four ways: it may be boring; it may not be exciting enough, often enough, for a long enough period of time; it may be illegal as delinquency is; or it may be tolerably deviant as heavy drinking is. Therefore, if leisure is to play a significant role in helping wayward youth, we must look to its serious form. But as the work of Iso-Ahola, Weissinger, and Crowley so clearly shows, only certain types and subtypes of this leisure will be appealing. To be effective, the types and subtypes must be matched with the personality and social situation of each wayward youth. The hypothesis here is that, given the right match, wayward and potentially wayward youth will find their serious leisure significantly more exciting than the deviance they might pursue in the future or are pursuing in the present. As a result, they would favor the former over the latter as the preferred way of using their free time.

But how are wayward youth going to discover serious leisure as a distinctive field and then discover the activities there that hold the greatest appeal for them as individuals? And how are they going to be effectively matched with that activity? This where leisure education enters the picture. In another communication (Stebbins, 2000), I have stated that, for the most part, this branch of education should center on serious leisure; it should consist mainly of imparting knowledge about the nature of such leisure, about its costs and rewards, and about participating in particular serious leisure activities. Note that this conception of leisure education intentionally excludes casual leisure, doing so primarily on grounds that such leisure requires little or no training or encouragement to engage in it and find enjoyment there.

It is for leisure educators to inform wayward and potentially wayward youth about serious leisure in general and to help individual youth discover and get started in the types they find most interesting. For the purposes of this article, a leisure educator is a specialist trained in a leisure and recreation program or a professional trained in such a field as youth work, high school teaching, or probation and parole, who has also received instruction on serious leisure along the lines just set out. In this regard, sport has been by far the most common category of activity promoted. For example, a basketball program for troubled youth in Ottawa, Canada caught the attention of federal government officials in that country who saw it as a successful model of crime prevention (Bronskill, 1998).

Linking Youth with Activities

But, to return to the question posed earlier, what can be done if the wayward youth in question have little or no aptitude for or interest in the sports being made available through local programs? Leisure educators must pick up the gauntlet at this point, first by attempting to determine which serious leisure activities individual males and females find most interesting. Happily, the range of activities from which they can draw is extensive. Elsewhere,

see “Hobbycue” on the home page of www.seriousleisure.net, where hundreds of amateur, hobbyist, and career volunteer activities are listed. Many of them are also described on Wikipedia (may be necessary to go to “List of Hobbies” to find the description).

A number of these require little or no money to pursue, which can be learned without either formal or repetitious training. They include amateur choral singing (typically in religious establishments and barbershop choruses) and several amateur sciences, among them botany, ornithology, entomology, meteorology, archaeology, and local history. Additionally, there are several sports that are seldom considered in the deterrence literature that could nonetheless appeal to certain wayward youth, providing sports facilities and equipment were made available free of charge. These include boxing, bowling, rowing, handball, darts, table tennis, pool, badminton, volleyball, field hockey, hiking, and weightlifting.

Turning to the hobbies, most collecting activities require money for buying the collected items, although this is not true for collection of natural objects (e.g., shells, leaves, fossils, butterflies, wildflowers). The subtype of hobby referred to earlier as “activity participation” encompasses a handful of activities that can be pursued with little or no money; bird watching, spelunking (cave exploration), and mushroom gathering require little more than a purchased or borrowed guidebook and transportation (hopefully free) into the countryside. Hiking can be added to this list, provided the participant can afford a decent pair of shoes and a day pack. Several competitive sports — classified here as hobbies since they lack a professional wing — can be engaged in without cost, if the necessary facilities and equipment are subsidized; here youth can choose from pool, darts, lacrosse, ringette, croquet, handball, horseshoes, ping pong, and shuffleboard. Beyond these lies a range of table and board games, many of which are available at local youth centers and YMCAs and YWCAs (e.g., chess, checkers, cribbage, monopoly, dominoes). And a simple deck of cards can provide serious leisure by way of such games as bridge, hearts, poker, gin rummy, and various solitaires.

Least well-known of the hobbies are those centered in the liberal arts. A liberal arts hobby is the systematic and fervent pursuit during free time of knowledge for its own sake. People who take up such a hobby have as their primary goal acquisition of knowledge and understanding of, for example, one or more arts, sports, foods, beverages, languages, cultures, histories, sciences, philosophies, or literary traditions. A similar goal motivates the inveterate albeit intellectually-oriented followers of current politics. These hobbyists look on the knowledge and understanding they have gained (usually by reading) as ends in themselves rather than, as is common in serious leisure pursuits, as background, as a means to involvement in another hobby or in an amateur activity. Unlike other hobbies and various amateur activities, the knowledge acquired in a liberal arts hobby is of primary rather than secondary importance.

Finally, volunteering should never be overlooked as an appropriate and engaging leisure activity for some wayward and potentially wayward youth. For example, there are youth who identify with the volunteer practice of providing necessities for the needy, such as food, clothing, or certain services. Other youth might be interested in doing particular kinds of environmental volunteer work, helping to enhance public lands, lakes, and streams. Otherwise, depending on personal circumstances of the youth themselves, they might find satisfying career volunteering in the areas of civic, health, safety, recreational, and governmental services and in the field of human relationships (for details, see Stebbins, 1998, pp. 75-79).

When leisure educators work with individual wayward youth, one goal should be to try to find two or three viable serious leisure activities with which that person can identify. In this regard, many people, wayward youth included, do have enough time to pursue more than one serious leisure activity and indeed value highly the variety that comes with pursuing two or three. And what about casual leisure in this lifestyle? It will be valued too, especially as a kind of interlude of relaxation and change of pace between the more substantial aspects of life they are drawn to in their serious leisure or obligated to undertake as part of their work. Perhaps some wayward youth will occasionally, perhaps even frequently, engage in deviance at this point, drinking, gambling, or using drugs to excess. But it would appear that recourse to deviant casual leisure will, in general, be considerably reduced compared with when it was the person's only interest. Still, much research remains to be done in this area before we can say with precision how wayward youth will respond to serious leisure counseling.

What about wayward youth who have little or no interest in repetitious and constant experiences, the orientation of Iso-Ahola and Crowley's subjects? True, whereas all serious leisure activities require some sort of perseverance, not all require repetitious preparation of the kind needed in learning a musical instrument or training for a sport. Thus, none of the volunteer activities and liberal arts hobbies requires this. The same can be said for science, collecting, many activity participation fields, and various games. Perhaps Iso-Ahola and Crowley's subjects would not have sought leisure in drug abuse had they been informed of the full range of serious leisure activities available to them and helped to make a start in the two or three that looked most appealing.

Conclusions

We have not considered in this paper the many variables and conditions – the various theories – that explain why wayward youth, in preference to conventional casual leisure, turn to deviant casual leisure as their primary free-time activity. Rather the object has been to underscore the importance of serious leisure, which has its own theoretical framework, relevant parts of which were presented earlier. In other words, this framework takes a dramatically different approach from that usually taken in the study of crime and deviance. It explains how wayward youth and other people can become attracted to amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer pursuits, rather than how they become attracted to deviance. Furthermore, it

helps explain the assumption on which this article has been based: that serious leisure, once discovered, will prove to be so absorbing that the typical youth will find he or she has little time left for and relatively little interest in engaging in deviant activities. Nevertheless, the empirical validity of this assumption remains to be established through research.

On this subject, we should not expect that research will find the assumption valid for all youth. For surely there will be some who take up serious leisure *and* find time and interest to continue in or take up some sort of deviance, as well as others who will eschew every serious leisure activity suggested, preferring instead a steady diet of deviant casual leisure. Nichols (1997), for example, found in a sample of unemployed men on probation that sports counseling sometimes fails to reduce offending. Serious leisure theory cannot explain these preferences, whereas theories of crime and delinquency can, which they do by invoking a variety of background conditions such as low self-esteem, unsettled family situation, weak educational achievement, and differential association with other deviants. As for the assumption, its acid test lies in determining whether wayward youth with such background conditions, can nonetheless be directed toward serious leisure and away from either tolerable or intolerable deviance. If this change in interest can be accomplished with most of these youth, then the assumption would be validated.

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