



# Leisure Reflections No. 64 by Robert A. Stebbins

news / October 9, 2023

---

## *Leisure Reflections* No. 64, November 2023

### **“Communitarianism and Leisure”**

By Robert A. Stebbins. University of Calgary

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni devoted much of his lengthy scholarly career to the study of communitarianism. He wrote that it:

is a social philosophy which maintains that societal formulations of the good are both justified in normative terms and supported by social science findings.

Communitarianism is often contrasted with classical liberalism, a philosophical position that holds that each individual should formulate the good autonomously.

Communitarians examine the ways shared conceptions of the good (values) are formed, transmitted, enforced, and justified. Hence, they are interested in communities and the

moral dialogues they engage in, historically transmitted values and mores, and the societal units that transmit and enforce values, such as the family, schools, voluntary associations from social clubs to places of worship, and interpersonal rituals and holidays. (Etzioni 2010, p. 521)

Communitarians view the self as “embedded” in the community rather than as a freestanding agent. They find that individuals who are well-integrated into communities are better able to reason and act in responsible ways than isolated individuals. “Responsibility” is a key concept here, in the sense that members of the community so endowed feel they must help meet the needs of other members and thereby augment their well-being.

Nonetheless, by no means all members have this outlook, which is rooted in empathy for those in the community having such needs and big-picture thinking about how to help meet them. Diverse leisure activities can spawn communitarianism leading, sometimes unwittingly, to responsible activity that augments the well-being of all concerned with the communitarian-related leisure activity.

### **Serious Leisure**

The amateur activities meet community needs in diverse albeit unconventional ways. For example, science amateurs in archaeology contribute new knowledge about local or regional history, as do amateur astronomers when they send observational records on variable stars to data clearinghouses, which professionals then use in their work on these phenomena. Amateur artists add to their community’s culture through music, dance, painting, sculptures, literature, photography, and the like. They do this as fine arts enthusiasts or as entertainers. Finally, amateurs in sport offer for public viewing games, meets, matches, tournaments, playoffs, and so on. By sport I mean inter-human, competitive, physical activity based on a recognized set of rules (Coakley 2001). These defining criteria are important, for as will become evident below the label of sport is sometimes applied to activities that fail to

meet these criteria.

Many of the hobbies also contribute to a community's well-being. [1] The making and tinkering pursuits do so mainly by adding to it, for example, well-crafted furniture, clothing, quilts, foods (e.g., jams, desserts, breads, beverages) to its material culture. Not to be forgotten here are the much appreciated and often diverse services of the local handyman (usually a tinkerer). In activity participation the hobbyist steadfastly pursues a kind of leisure requiring systematic physical movement, has inherent appeal, and is carried out within a set of rules. Commonly the activity poses a challenge, though usually a non-competitive one. When engaged in continually for these reasons, the activities included in this type are as varied as fishing, video games, and barbershop singing. And speaking of games, the various card, dice, and board games are communitarian in the sense that they bring two more participants together to play them (e.g., games played as serious leisure like bridge, Scrabble, poker, chess).

## **Nature Activities**

This extremely diverse set of interests is pursued in the outdoors. Sorted here into the categories of nature appreciation, nature challenge, and nature exploitation, most are enjoyed most of the time away from towns and cities. Still, within the natural areas in the towns and cities, we may be able to fish, watch birds, cross-country ski, and fly model airplanes, to mention a few possibilities.

At the center of the nature appreciation activities lies the awe-inspiring natural environment in which they take place. Seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling the surroundings — “getting out in nature” — add up to a powerful reason for doing one or more of the following: hiking, equestrian activity, back packing/wilderness camping, birdwatching,

canoeing/kayaking, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling, among others.

### **Body-Centered Hobbies**

The body-centered hobbies draw the participant's attention directly to his or her body. This contrasts with the nature activities where that person's attention is fixed on an aspect of nature. In the nature activities the body is a vehicle with which to appreciate or exploit nature or meet one of its many challenges. By contrast, routine exercise is a body-centered hobby, though only to the extent it involves skill and knowledge and is considered fulfilling. Swimming, bodybuilding, ice skating, roller skating, and the martial arts when used for conditioning number among the exercise activities qualifying as serious leisure.

Gymnastics, tumbling, and acrobatics fall into a separate category of body-centered activities. While they obviously offer a good deal of exercise, the goal of perfecting a set of difficult bodily maneuvers, or "feats," is equally important. The same may be said for another corporeal activity: ballroom dancing. It, too, provides exercise, while inspiring its enthusiasts to master such dances as the waltz, foxtrot, samba, rumba, and tango. All the body-centered activities generate a communitarian spirit framed in the appeal each activity has for the followers of it (fans, the hobbyists themselves).

### **Volunteering**

Volunteering is un-coerced, intentionally productive, altruistic activity engaged in during free time. Engaged in as leisure, it is, thus, activity that people want to do (Stebbins 2012). Moreover, using their abilities and resources, they actually do it in either an enjoyable (casual leisure) or a fulfilling (serious leisure) way and sometimes both. This

definition alludes to the two principal motives behind volunteering. One is helping others — volunteering as altruism. The other is helping oneself — volunteering as self-interestedness. Examples of the latter include working for a strongly felt cause or working to experience, as serious leisure enthusiasts do everywhere, the variety of social and personal rewards available in volunteering and the leisure career in which they are framed. In other words, this is an inwardly rewarding self-interestedness. It is one driven by a desire to reach such externally based advantages as gaining work experience to facilitate getting a job or in filling a requirement in a training program.

Thus, what marks leisure volunteering as a special type of serious leisure is its altruism. A significant part of what is rewarding about volunteering is the benign regard for another person or a set of others as manifested in and communicated through particular acts and activities. By contrast, altruism is largely absent in the other two types of serious leisure. More precisely, altruistic action here is actually volunteer work done as a sideline to the person's amateur or hobbyist interest.

That we may have a (leisure) career as a volunteer has given birth to the distinction between *career volunteering*, the serious leisure form, and *casual volunteering*. In this regard, it seems that the motive of self-interestedness drives the pursuit of such a career more than the motive of altruism. This even holds where our altruism inspired us to enter the field in the first place. A main reason for this difference is that career volunteering involves acquiring, over time, certain skills, knowledge, or training and, not infrequently, two or three of these. Their acquisition contributes to the sense of an evolving career, itself highly rewarding. As Coralie McCormack and her colleagues (2008) concluded for female baby boomers who were seeking this kind of volunteering in retirement: "I want to do more than just cut the sandwiches."

It is the altruistic component of volunteering that augments

communitarianism most substantially with self-interest playing a supporting role in this regard. Elsewhere, however, self-interest rather than altruism is the dominant motive guiding amateur and hobbyist activities. In other words, individualism, can foster creativity but also selfishness, the collective variety included (Stebbins 2020).

## **Conclusions**

The idea of interest playing a role in motivating roots in Robert Dubin's (1992) discussion of "central life interests," a powerful force in attracting people to certain work and leisure activities. He defines this interest as "that portion of a person's total life in which energies are invested in both physical/intellectual activities and in positive emotional states" (p. 41). These interests are typically experienced in a distinctive activity endowed with an appealing creative or inventive component. Sociologically speaking, a central life interest is often associated with a major role in life. And, since they can only emerge from positive emotional states, obsessive and compulsive activities can never become central life interests.

Such dominant interests can lead to selfishness, which in turn, can undermine communitarianism. That is, when we define an act as selfish, we make an imputation. This imputation is most commonly hurled at perceived self-seekers by their victims, where the self-seekers are felt to demonstrate a concern for their own welfare or advantage at the expense of or in disregard for those victims. The central thread running through the fabric of this interpersonal selfishness is exploitative unfairness — a kind of personal favoritism infecting the everyday affairs of many people in modern society. In comparing the three forms of leisure (comprising the serious leisure perspective), it is evident that serious leisure is nearly always the most complicated and enduring of them and, for this reason, often takes up much more of a participant's time (Stebbins, 1995). Consequently, it is much more likely to generate charges of selfishness. The foregoing definition

of selfishness is common sense, in that it closely resembles the one in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (5 ed., 2002). Yet, as we shall see, some students of the subject have strayed from this basic conception.

We can introduce this second type by elaborating the definition of interpersonal selfishness just presented. At the risk of stressing the obvious, it should be noted that a selfish act is necessarily a goal-directed one. Self-seekers have certain ends in mind, the pursuit of which results in what others define as unfair exploitation. Nevertheless, we shall see that they may be surprised, even chagrined, to learn that their purposive behavior has been defined by its victims as hurtfully self-centered. This is most likely to happen at the macro communitarian level where the distance between victims and self-centered people is often much greater than at the interpersonal level, as vividly exemplified today by the goals of some politicians.

## References

Coakley, J. (2001). *Sport in society: Issues and controversies*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 20.

Dubin, R. (1992). *Central life interests: Creative individualism in a complex world*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Etzioni, A. (2010). Communitarianism. In Anheier, H. K., & Toepler, S. (Eds.) *International encyclopedia of civil society* (pp. 521-523). New York, NY, Springer, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-93996-4\\_66](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-93996-4_66).

McCormack, C., Cameron, P., Campbell, A., & Pollock, K. (2008). "I want to do more than just cut the sandwiches: Female Baby boomers seek authentic leisure in retirement." *Annals of Leisure Research*, 11(1), 145-167.

Stebbins, R. A. (1995). Leisure and selfishness: An exploration. In G. S. Fain (Ed.),

*Reflections on the philosophy of leisure*, Vol. II, *Leisure and*

*ethics* (pp. 292-303). Reston,

VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education,  
Recreation, and Dance.

Stebbins, R. A. (2012). Unpaid work of love: Defining the  
work-leisure axis of volunteering. *Leisure Studies*, 32(3),  
339-345, doi: 10.1080/02614367.2012.667822.

Stebbins, R. A. (2013). *Planning your time in retirement:  
How to cultivate a leisure lifestyle to suit your needs and  
interests*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Stebbins, R. A. (2020). Leisure Reflections Number 54:  
Collective Selfishness through Citizenship: On the Dark Side  
of Political Participation, July 28. Leisure Studies  
Association.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Hobbies in the SLP are more fully discussed in Stebbins  
(2013, Chap. 4).

## **Forthcoming:**

Leisure Reflections No. 65, March 2024: 'How to Identify the  
Professional Counterpart to an Amateur Activity'