
Leisure Reflections

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.

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FUN, ENJOYABLE, SATISFYING, FULFILLING: DESCRIBING POSITIVE LEISURE EXPERIENCE

Both as researchers on leisure and as participants in everyday life, we hear it all the time: ‘I sure had fun last night at the football game’; ‘It will be a fun time at Joan’s sleep-over’; (said to the host) ‘It was a most enjoyable evening’. Much less often do we hear leisure experiences being described as satisfying or fulfilling, even though, for their participants, some experiences have just that quality. Why these differences in choice of descriptors for positive leisure experience, and what do the four descriptors mean in science and common sense?

Commonsense usage of the four, as typical of common sense everywhere, is rather loose and, for the first two, broadly applied. Thus the adjective ‘fun’ usually denotes finding pleasure or amusement in a particular activity, while the adjective ‘enjoyable’ typically refers to an activity that can be enjoyed, that gives pleasure or delight. In other words these two descriptors are basically synonyms. Turning to the third term, a ‘satisfying’ experience, in one sense of the word, is itself synonymous with an experience that is fun or enjoyable (sometimes referred to as gratifying). But in another sense this adjective is substantially different: it refers to meeting or satisfying a need or want. Put otherwise a satisfying experience, in this second sense, leads to contentment with reference to a particular need or want, an additional meaning that sets it apart from the other three descriptors. By contrast, the fourth term, in one sense, points to a fulfilling experience; or more precisely, to a set of chronological experiences leading to development to the fullest of a person’s gifts and character, to development of that person’s full potential. A second sense of this adjective is, however, synonymous with the second sense of satisfying.

These four descriptors form a rough scale of depth of positive leisure experience, running from that which is relatively superficial — fun — to that which is relatively profound — fulfillment. In commonsense usage we seem to recognize these differences, in that, for example, few people would describe a sleep-over as fulfilling or a grueling marathon as fun or enjoyable. The task of leisure science, and this article, is to recognize the existence of this implicit, commonsense scale of leisure experience, while trying to iron out vagueness and inconsistency as these plague everyday usage of the four terms. Let us start with fun.

Research and theory

A handful of theorists and researchers have tried to bring clarity to scientific usage of these terms. Podilchak (1991a) is one of the few leisure researchers to analyze the meaning of leisure at the superficial end of our positive leisure scale. His analysis revolved around fun, which he defined as “a social emotional interactive process which deconstructs the social and historical biographical inequalities of lived experience to create a with-equal other social-human bond” (p. 134). This is an adult-centered definition, he observed, for children may not always be conscious of social inequalities, or even of having fun. Podilchak (1991b) went on to note that, in the past, fun has been equated with leisure, often by the general public and sometimes even by leisure researchers themselves. Critical to his conception of fun is the condition that it is impossible to experience without some sort of social reference point, typically that found in ongoing interaction with other people.

Shaw (1985) studied a number of ‘perceptual dimensions’ of leisure, among them enjoyment — also referred to by her respondents as fun or pleasure — as well as satisfaction. The enjoyment dimension turned out to be one of the two that best discriminated leisure situations from non-leisure situations (relaxation was the other dimension). This finding points to the centrality of fun/enjoyment for most people during most of their leisure time. I will argue later that this dimension is evident in all casual leisure and even some serious leisure.

Moving along our positive leisure experience scale, Shaw (1985, p. 9) operationalized satisfaction as a good feeling about a given leisure situation; in particular, as developing a sense of accomplishment or achievement with reference to it. This dimension, compared with that of enjoyment, discriminated

much more poorly between leisure and non-leisure situations. For most people most of the time leisure is not about achievement and the like, a finding that squares with my assertion that most leisure is casual rather than serious (Stebbins, 1998, p. 49); the latter form revolves substantially around, among other characteristics, achievement, which in free time is by no means everyone’s goal.

Mannell and Kleiber (1997, pp. 185–186) treat satisfaction in terms consistent with the second sense of the term described above: the activity in question is satisfying when it meets needs or motives, leading thus to contentment and, where appropriate, a sense of achievement. The authors then go on to link the pursuit of satisfaction in free time with leisure motivation. Note that some of the needs satisfied by leisure activity are ones related to achievement and accomplishment —even if, as Shaw found, such satisfaction is only a minor dimension of the popular meaning of leisure.

Because of this twofold meaning of satisfaction, I have found it necessary, when striving to be sufficiently clear about the rewards of serious leisure, to rely exclusively on the concept of fulfillment, which is substantially different from satisfaction, even in the second sense of the word. Serious leisure is about satisfying achievement and accomplishment — of that there is no doubt; but it is also about personal development, of maximizing one’s gifts and character through pursuit of particular leisure activities (see Stebbins, 2004a, p. 1). Meanwhile, satisfaction, I realized only a few years ago, can also mean, as noted in this article, becoming content or being content through gratification or pleasure experienced in an activity, often one of casual leisure.

To avoid this confusion when talking about the rewards of serious leisure, it is necessary to frame discussion in the less ambiguous language of fulfillment rather than the more ambiguous language of satisfaction. The latter is a slippery idea, primarily because it is cursed with two quite different meanings. Moreover, experiencing achievement (the second sense) is not really the same as experiencing fulfillment. For the latter rests on a clear sense of personal career (Stebbins, 2004b) in a complicated role (found in work, leisure, a relationship, etc.), the sense of realizing one’s gifts and character over many years. Achievement, in contrast, results from a particular effort at a particular time in life. Fulfillment, then, is composed of many serial and inter-related achievements interpreted by the individual across a span of time.

Be that as it may, serious leisure enthusiasts do, at times, qualify their activities as fun. I have tried to deal with this seeming anomaly by invoking the idea of *gratification*. Over the years I have come to describe as 'gratifying' an activity that the participant sees as fun, but that also generates fulfillment. For instance, some of the kayakers in the Canadian Rockies whom I interviewed and who had the skills and experience said it is 'fun' to paddle Class-4 Rivers, by which they meant that this is gratifying because, with time, they have acquired the technical qualifications to carry it off with relative ease (Stebbins, in press). This level of activity is fun precisely because it is technically difficult but nonetheless quite manageable, given the participant's high level of development in the hobby. In technical activities of this sort, fun has also been found to be a significant component of the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp. 49 and 72, links enjoyment with flow).

Commonsense usage

Commonsense usage of the word 'fun' to describe leisure experiences at all levels of profundity shows the scope of the problem facing leisure studies in this area. It follows that we must be careful when using this adjective in surveys, and be prepared in open-ended interviews to probe further to get the most precise understanding possible of its meaning for the respondent. The same holds for the several adjectival synonyms for fun: enjoyable, pleasurable, agreeable, pleasing, amusing, diverting, entertaining, and interesting. And, although fewer synonyms have sprung up around satisfying and fulfilling, they do exist and do contribute significantly there to ambiguity in meaning that, when used in research, also calls for caution.

The scientific definitions worked out in the preceding section may, when contrasted with commonsense usage, seem arbitrary, and to some extent they are exactly that. I have arbitrarily crafted definitions of satisfying and fulfilling that are mutually exclusive, that have no overlap. I did the same thing many years ago when I believed it necessary to develop, from the mishmash of inconsistent and contradictory definitions found in the dictionaries of the day, a scientifically workable definition of 'amateur' (Stebbins, 1979, pp. 21–22). Indeed, I have learned through experience that sensitizing concepts which start life as commonsense ideas, if they are to perform their duties well, often

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require some provisional conceptual shaping (see also Van den Hoonaard, 1997: pp. 26–27).

What is important is that, as researchers, we be constantly aware of the popular tendency toward imprecise usage in this area of life, and try to fit that usage into a set of carefully worked-out definitions such as I have proposed here. I believe that the present set of concepts is not a Procrustean bed, however, for it allows for identification and analysis of the positive side of all leisure experiences, even while interview respondents sometimes use different terms. If we, as researchers, know both our scientific definitions and the context of the respondent's answers, we can with minimal distortion place those answers on this scale. Or, in the case of surveys, we can word questions and fixed responses that both reflect the scale and direct the respondents to tick the boxes that describe best their leisure experiences.

Conclusions

The study of leisure experience requires us to get inside the skin of leisure participants to see the world as they see it. How, as untrained leisure studies specialists, they describe that world is vitally important for a scientific understanding of it. In this regard, note that Mannell and Kleiber (1997, chap. 7) link satisfaction to the enduring psychological question of motivation: being satisfied with a leisure activity helps explain why people are motivated to continue to engage in it. I have made the same argument for fulfillment (Stebbins, 2004c).

The risk in what I have just said is that these scientific definitions may lose touch with their commonsense antecedents and counterparts and therefore with the meanings people ascribe to their leisure experiences in everyday life. Consequently, we must be forever vigilant, pausing from time to

time to verify that our more precise definitions, which will always have to be used in combinations of the four in the positive leisure experience scale, still reflect the ways people describe their leisure. That is, the meanings of fun, enjoyable, satisfying and fulfilling will likely undergo subtle change in the fast moving world in which we presently live. Our definitions must remain sensitive to this transformation.

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News from ILAM

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Welcome to the sixth instalment of News from ILAM

Reading a transcript of the Roger Quinton Memorial Lecture delivered at this summer's ILAM 2004 conference (published in the September issue of *Leisure Manager*), it is tempting to draw some comparisons with our own LSA 2005 conference scheduled to take place at Napier University in Edinburgh next July. The lecture was delivered by Huw Irranca Davies, currently a parliamentary private secretary in the Department for Work and Pensions but formerly a leisure manager and a lecturer in leisure management. The theme of Huw's speech was based on the social benefits of leisure and the importance of identifying and evaluating these. Speaking from inside the government, Huw observed that there is an increasing willingness to acknowledge that leisure has a range of social benefits beyond the economic (hence the link with LSA 2005). The challenge, as he expressed it, is to do more to convince government that this inclination is well-founded. Although his speech was addressed primarily to practising leisure managers, there is a message in it for leisure academics too.

The withdrawal of the Institute of Sport and Recreation Management from discussions of a merger with ILAM and the National Association for Sports Development (NASD) was reported in a previous column. However ILAM and the NASD continue to work together to develop the single professional body representing leisure that the government has openly stated it wishes to see. No news is available at the time of writing, but there are signs that a new association formed of the two may be a possible outcome. I hope to have more news by the date of the next Newsletter.