

---

# Leisure Reflections

## Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 30 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 30 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); *After Work The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001); *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002); *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering* (CABI, 2004, edited with M. Graham); and *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004). Forthcoming books include *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig) and *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover). 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 Past-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.

## Leisure Reflections ... No. 8

### Recreational Specialization, Serious Leisure and Complex Leisure Activity

Over the years I have received the occasional e-mail message, always, as I recall, from graduate students, asking me to set out how serious leisure relates to recreational specialization. Some of the messages have arisen as their writers were reviewing the leisure studies literature, perhaps in preparation for a comprehensive doctoral examination or a paper required in a theory course. Others have issued from graduate seminars, where the two concepts have come up for discussion. In all instances, the writers noted the common focus of the two on complex leisure activity: activity requiring some combination of substantial skill, knowledge, and experience to carry out in a fulfilling way its many different and highly interrelated facets.

Recreational specialization is both process and product. As process it refers to a progressive narrowing of interests within a complex leisure activity; 'a continuum of behavior from the general to the particular' (Bryan, 1977, p. 175). As product it refers to the fact that a person has, in this fashion, narrowed his interests in the activity. Hobson Bryan coined the term and pioneered the theoretical perspective in which it is embedded. An inductive, participant observational study of specialization in trout fishing served as the empirical basis for his theoretical ideas. Bryan observed that, as people become more immersed in this hobby, they tend to specialize in it. That is, they come, for instance, to fish only a certain species of trout, fish using only 'barbless' hooks, fish only with artificial flies, or fish in either streams or lakes. Thus there is often also a specialization in equipment accompanying this narrowing of interests.

Bryan believed that this tendency toward specialization is universal among people pursuing leisure activities of all kinds (not just complex ones). 'It is important to remember that the specialization dimension likely underlies any recreational activity' (italics in original) (Bryan, 1979, p. 88). Accordingly, we would expect neophytes in, say, quilting, basketball, and volunteering to initially take a general interest in their newfound leisure, then later, to drift toward a specialized side of it. In quilting this might occur as concentration on use of certain materials, making quilts of a certain size, or working exclusively with a certain design. In basketball the player might develop a preference for playing guard or forward, after shooting from and defending in all zones of the court. People interested for the first time in doing some volunteering have been found to weigh carefully their opportunities, basing their choice of opportunity on particular incentives (Van Til, 1988, p.27). The choice made can be interpreted as a kind of specialization.

Studying the tendency toward recreational specialization leads the researcher directly to the question of commitment to the leisure activity under consideration. Bryan observed that commitment increases with specialization, and that

finding and pursuing a specialty within a framework of growing commitment gives a historical sense of personal involvement and improvement in the activity. Although he did not use the term career to describe this process, to have done so would have been a valid application of the former. In any case, the historical sense of growing personal involvement and improvement was seen, in itself, to spur people on in their participation in and attachment to their specialty. Scott and Schafer (2001), after reviewing the literature on recreational specialization, developed their own conceptualization of it, seeing it as a process entailing a progression in behavior, skill, and commitment. That is, with increasing skill, knowledge, and commitment related to a complex leisure activity, behavior tends to become ever more focused on a specialized facet of it, usually accomplished in parallel with a growing emotional attachment to it.

This perspective can be criticized for claiming too much, for arguing that specializing in this way is a *universal* tendency among people pursuing leisure activities. In other words, there are people who choose to remain generalists, as it were, who for example, prefer to collect and make lists of whatever mushrooms they encounter rather than specialize in photographing or scientifically analyzing them (Fine, 1998, pp. 15–16), or who kayak rivers, creeks, and lakes rather than only one of these three (Stebbins, 2005b). The hobbyist handyman is, by nature, always a generalist, no matter how many years of experience. Furthermore, a few complex activities appear to offer little or no opportunity for specialization, as evident in Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak's (2002) study of the hobby of being a serious fan of a particular football team. Amateur wrestling, boxing, and bowling also appear to be of this genre.

The recreational specialization framework stands as an important contribution to the theory of leisure motivation, by explaining how some people continue their participation in a complex form of leisure. Thus the question of how neophytes in a complex activity decide to pursue it initially falls beyond the scope of the theory. Nonetheless, the social psychology of leisure motivation has by and large overlooked the matter of continuing motivation in leisure pursuits. Bryan's ideas and associated research (see Scott and Shafer, 2001, for a review) have in this regard constituted a significant advance, even while they cannot be applied to all complex leisure.

## Serious Leisure

And what about serious leisure? Serious leisure is systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity (i.e., a complex 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, 1992; 2001). I coined the term 1982 (Stebbins, 1982) following the way people I had been interviewing and observing during the previous decade described the importance of such activity in their everyday lives. The adjective "serious" (a word the respondents often used) embodies qualities like earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness.

Serious leisure is further defined by a set of distinctive qualities, qualities uniformly found among its amateurs,

hobbyists, and volunteers (Stebbins, 1992, pp. 6–8). One is the occasional need to *persevere* at the core activity to continue experiencing there the same level of fulfillment. Another is the opportunity to follow a *career* (in a leisure role) in the endeavor, a career shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement and involvement. Third, serious leisure is further distinguished by the requirement that its enthusiasts to make significant *personal effort* based on specially acquired knowledge, training, or skill and, indeed at times, all three.

The fourth quality is the numerous *durable benefits*, or tangible, salutary outcomes such activity has for its participants. They include self-fulfillment, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and sense of belonging, 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 by far the most evanescent benefit in this list — is also enjoyed by casual leisure participants. The possibility of realizing such benefits becomes a powerful goal in serious leisure.

Fifth, serious leisure is distinguished by a *unique ethos* that emerges in association with each expression of it. At the core of this ethos is the special social world that begins to take shape when enthusiasts in a particular field pursue substantial shared interests over many years. According to Unruh (1980) every social world has its characteristic groups, events, routines, practices, and organizations. Diffuse and amorphous, it is held together, to an important degree, by semiformal, or mediated, communication. The sixth quality — *distinctive identity* — springs from the presence of the other five distinctive qualities. Participants in serious leisure tend to identify strongly with their chosen pursuits.

The serious leisure perspective also includes a set of propositions about the rewards of such leisure (10 have now been identified) and another set about such motivators as leisure lifestyle, leisure identity, and central life interest. There are, furthermore, propositions about the place of serious leisure in civil society, the quality of life and well-being, and the larger community (in general and among adolescents, retirees, people with disabilities, and the unemployed). Another set of propositions centers on serious leisure and leisure education. Finally, the various ideas about the interrelationship of serious leisure, on the one hand, with casual leisure (it could be called, by comparison, 'simple leisure activity') and project-based leisure (Stebbins, 2005a), on the other, further explain serious leisure itself, by placing the latter in the broader context of two other major uses of free time.

## Comparing the two perspectives

One reason why the students wrote asking how the two perspectives differ is that they appeared to them to be much the same. Clearly both bear on the same subject, namely, complex leisure activity. Moreover, both help explain leisure motivation. Career and commitment are also important considerations in the two, even if the first is only implied in Bryan's work. Had they not been developed at virtually the same time, either Bryan or myself might stand accused (perhaps even plagiaristically) of merely putting old wine in new

bottles. In fact, however, the two perspectives seem to have emerged in ignorance of the other's efforts; both authors seemed to believe that they were plowing new ground. (I published my definitions of amateur the year of Bryan's first statement [Stebbins, 1977], whereas the first exposition of the concept of serious leisure appeared somewhat later [Stebbins, 1982].)

But there are differences, and they are, in my view, at least as important as the similarities. One, the serious leisure perspective covers considerably more ground, by for example, addressing itself to the questions of the rewards of the complex activities, their basis for personal identity, and their place in the larger community and civil society, to mention a few areas. Put otherwise, serious leisure offers a far more complete explanation of complex leisure activity than recreational specialization does. Two, unlike the latter, the serious leisure perspective includes a typology of complex leisure activities, as in amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer and their subtypes. Three, with this typology and the six distinctive qualities, the serious leisure perspective describes in far more detail than recreational specialization just what complex leisure activity is.

But perhaps the easiest way to compare the two perspectives is to show where recreational specialization fits within the serious leisure framework. Viewed as an aspect of serious leisure, specialization can be seen as part of the leisure career experienced in those complex activities that offer participants who want to focus their interests an opportunity to specialize. In particular, when specialization occurs, it unfolds as a process within the development or establishment stage, possibly spanning the two (of the five-stage sequence of beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline), or should the participant change specialties, it unfolds within the maintenance stage. In career terminology, developing a specialty is a career turning point.

This theoretical exercise not only gives recreational specialization a home in a broader conceptual perspective, but also contributes to building general leisure theory. As for the students who wrote to me, I am most grateful to them for encouraging me to clarify the relationship between the two perspectives. Note, too, that 'Leisure Reflections' is nicely suited for answering such requests, so all readers, student and non-student alike, are invited to send them along. I will, if appropriate, respond immediately, with a statement in a later edition of this series.

## References

- Bryan, H. (1977) Leisure value systems and recreational specialization: The case of trout fishermen. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 9, 174–187.
- Bryan, H. (1979) *Conflict in the great outdoors*. Bureau of Public Administration, University of Alabama, University, Al.
- Fine, G.A. (1998) *Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Gibson, H., Willming, & Holdnak (2002) "We're Gators ... not just Gator fans': Serious leisure and University of Florida Football. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 34, 397–425.
- Scott, D, & Schafer, C.S. (2001) Recreational specialization: A critical look at the construct. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 33, 319–343.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1977) The amateur: Two sociological definitions. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 20, 582–606.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1982) Serious leisure: A conceptual statement, *Pacific Sociological Review*, 25, 251–272.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1992) *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston, Canada.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2001) *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure*, Mellen Studies in Sociology, vol. 28, Edwin Mellen, Lewiston, New York.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2005a) Project-Based Leisure: Theoretical Neglect of a Common Use of Free Time. *Leisure Studies*, 24, 1–11.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2005b) *Challenging Mountain Nature: Risk, Career, and Lifestyle in Three Hobbyist Sports*, Detselig Enterprises, Calgary, Canada.
- Unruh, D. (1980) The nature of social worlds. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 23, 271–296.
- Van Til J. (1988) *Mapping the third sector: Voluntarism in a changing social economy*, The Foundation Center, New York.

**Bob Stebbins**

**University of Calgary**

**Stebbins@ucalgary.ca**

**Forthcoming in LSA Newsletter No. 71 (July 2005):  
Robert Stebbins's 'Leisure Reflections No. 9', on  
'The Importance of Concepts in Leisure Studies'**