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The Sociology of Leisure: an Estranged Child of Mainstream Sociology

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Abstract Starting with Veblen the rocky career of the sociology of leisure is traced up to the present. The field grows slowly during the first half of the twentieth century in North America and Britain and then from approximately 1950 to 1970 it enjoys a spurt of research. After that mainstream sociology in various ways abandons its progeny referred to here as subdisciplinary sociology of leisure. Fortunately, interdisciplinary sociology of leisure comes alive and continues to develop a vibrant, research-based conceptual foundation anchored in new ideas bubbling up from the interdisciplinary side and trickling down from the disciplinary mainstream. Despite this ferment the sociological mainstream remains seriously out of touch with what is happening in the sociological part of interdisciplinary leisure studies. This is most unfortunate. Leisure activities are universal and widely sought after. They are thus positive, a quality of social life to which mainstream sociology, being problem-centered, has given short shrift.

Keywords Veblen · Leisure studies · Positive sociology · Sociology of leisure

Imagine yourself a sociologist attending a regional, national, or international conference – you may specialize in any area except leisure – and someone (appears to be a student) approaches you with the question of whether sociologists study leisure. After some thought you remember from your theory courses a man named Veblen, but then had to acknowledge that he did write a while back (1899 to be precise). "What about today?" the person asks. You are stumped, for you cannot think of anyone offhand, and know of no graduate or undergraduate programs specializing in the subject. Reaching for your conference program you suggest that there might be in it a session of papers

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where some people expert in the area would be gathering. But, alas, no such session is listed there.

You and the question-asker part company, leaving you to ponder what happened to the sociological study of leisure since Veblen wrote. That evening over a leisurely dinner with colleagues there is, of course, shop talk, gossipy interchanges and, yes, mention of such free-time interests as stamp collecting, playing jazz, gourmet cooking, and relaxing at a summer home in the countryside. In the evening's conversation these activities are treated of with importance, so why are there not some obvious centers of research about and teaching on the likes of them?

1 A Brief History of the Sociology of Leisure

Veblen's (1899) study is commonly hailed as the starting point for the sociology of leisure. Surprising as it may seem his interest in leisure was secondary; it was merely a vehicle for explaining conspicuous consumption and conspicuous display by way of leisure activities. The nature of leisure itself was of little concern to him – he was trained in economics and philosophy – for his definition of leisure was basically that of common sense. Be that as it may, Veblen's observations on leisure were destined to reign in social science for approximately 70 years, and they are by no means *passé* even today.

Given its secondary role, scientifically speaking, leisure attracted scant sociological attention in North America during the first half of the twentieth century. It was as if there were many more important social phenomena to study than what seemed to be the trivia of hedonism. A main exception of which I am aware was that of Lundberg et al. (1934/1969) who examined leisure in an American suburb. It became the first of a handful of community studies in the United States in which leisure was a main point of analysis. Thus Hollingshead (1949/1975) followed with a survey analysis of youth and, among other interests, their leisure in a small Midwestern city. Next came a study of small town leisure conducted by Vidich and Bensman (1958/1968).The primary goal in these investigations was to describe the place of leisure in the American local community, as it is linked with such demographic correlates as class, status, occupation, and income and, in the case of youth, the correlates of their parents (see also Clark 1956).

With the start of the second half of the twenty-first century, North American sociological interest in leisure shifted from its role in the local community to its pursuit in the wider society. David Riesman (1950/1961) focused on the leisure interests of the masses. His observations on the decline of the work ethic in the United States and the rise there of the "other-directed man," ushered in an era of work-leisure comparisons and a lasting debate about this basic typology. Shortly thereafter, analyses appeared on mass leisure (eg, Larrabee and Meyersohn 1958) and on the ways work and leisure are related. Max Kaplan (1960, 1975) continued this society-based line of inquiry as it pertained to the United States. Apropos the work-leisure interest, Kando and Summers (1971, pp. 83–86) formulated and tested two celebrated hypotheses about "spillover" (work is similar to leisure) and "compensation" (work is separate or different from leisure), though neither was convincingly confirmed (Kelly 1987, pp. 147–153).

In contrast to their North American counterparts, sociologists Rowntree and Lavers (1951) studied British leisure by, among other ways, gathering a substantial number of

case histories, which when read together, gave "a reasonably accurate general impression of the philosophy of life of a majority of the people dwelling in England and Wales" (p. xi). Yet, they were mostly alone in this approach, for at this time, Parker (1971) wrote more generally about the future of work and leisure as they influence each other and shortly thereafter wrote more exclusively on the sociology of leisure (Parker, 1976). In both Britain and North America there was talk that the leisure society was just around the corner, which however, was never turned. In fact, since the 1970s in the sociology of leisure, the possibility of such a society quickly began to fade (Veal 2011, 2012).

The coming of leisure led to calls for wider academic recognition (Snape and Pussard 2013). Aware of the existence of a National Recreation School in New York, Jacks (1932) proposed for the UK the establishment of a National College of Recreational Culture to enable the study of recreation and its values and the formation of "future recreational leaders." In the United States, Lundberg et al. (1934/1969, p. 11) urged a more serious academic consideration of leisure in the social sciences. Neumeyer and Neumeyer (1936) even published a sort of leisure studies textbook to help readers understand leisure in modern society. Each chapter concluded with questions and discussion points. The outbreak of war interrupted progress in the UK, with no further major research on leisure undertaken there until Rowntree and Lavers wrote the book mentioned above.

Snape and Pussard (2013) point out that the inter-war period generated a multitude of scholarly interests on leisure:

> When leisure began to receive serious sociological attention in the 1970s, the inter-war debates on work–leisure relationships, inequality in leisure, young peoples' leisure, the potential of leisure to develop citizenship and communities, the effects of new mass forms of leisure, passivity, individual agency, the right use of leisure and the respective roles of the state and the voluntary sector in providing leisure opportunities were re-interpreted as core themes of the emerging field of Leisure Studies, though with minimal acknowledgement of the extensive body of related work produced between the wars. (p. 14)

The inter-war theoretic work on leisure in Britain did, however, produce a worthy set of principles, which foreshadowed those adopted within the emergent field of leisure studies in that country. Most notable among those principles was the belief that equality and democratic opportunity in leisure were vitally important, and therefore, that the state had the duty to provide leisure facilities and opportunities for all citizens. The promotion of individual and social well-being is its mandate.

In France, Joffre Dumazedier (eg, 1967, 1974) discerned a Western trend toward increased cultural leisure, especially "educational activities," broadly conceived of today as any of the serious leisure activities. He was the first president of Research Committee 13 (of the International Sociological Association), and his approach differed from those in Britain and North America. As leisure grew in scale he held that it would play a stronger role in society. He went directly to the study of leisure by regarding it as a source of values, wherein participants choose to do activities for their intrinsic satisfaction. These values could influence other domains such as the workplace and the family.

1.1 Critique

Dumazedier's approach corrected weaknesses cited by Neil Cheek (1971) who, after reviewing the American literature on the sociology of leisure written between 1945 and 1965, said:

> The consensus, as indicated above, is that the attempts to date are largely abortive. What few unambiguous findings may exist have failed to suggest any theoretically interesting or unique characteristics of this amorphously defined area of human activity (Neilsen 1969).

> Perhaps some of the difficulty lies in the implicit acceptance of leisure as a cafeteria concept residual, by definition, to work. Logic reminds us that the negative of a positive is "not-some-thing."

The rest of Cheek's article, given that he found leisure to be a vast, "amorphous," poorly defined field, dealt with leisure as "not-work." Citing sociologists studying leisure between 1945 and 1965, he argued that "they have yet to formulate hypotheses in a manner conducive to developing knowledge about leisure as a sociological entity per se, instead of further verifying the explanatory limits of variables like social class" (p. 246). Cheek then drew further on Meyersohn's (1969, p. 53) conclusion that "little of the empirical work carried out by sociologists comes close to testing illuminating hypotheses." Indeed, as he noted later in the same article, "the discovery of correlations of participation in particular leisure activities with social class or occupation are perhaps more valuable to our understanding of the meaning of class than they are toward our understanding of the meaning of leisure" (1969, p. 57).

It would be inaccurate to paint today's leisure studies in these colors, an interdiscipline that is composed substantially of the sociology of leisure (see later in this article). But those colors do apply to the branch of sociology that goes by the same name, which was the object of the critique by Cheek and his colleagues. The interdisciplinary sociology of leisure is alive and well within its interdiscipline, whereas the subdisciplinary sociology of leisure – it is a branch of mainstream sociology – now suffers from near obscurity in that relationship, an estrangement, if you wish.

2 The Sociology of Leisure Today

It appears that the subdisciplinary sociology of leisure is continuing in the ways scorned by Cheek, Meyersohn, and Neilsen a good 45 years ago and despite Dumazedier's attempt to make leisure the center of analysis for understanding some of the main aspects of the larger society. Thus, Ken Roberts (2013a) who has written a comprehensive review of the sociology of leisure, concludes with the following:

> As explained earlier, the emergent sociology of leisure was able to draw on occupational sociology's insights about the 'long arm of the job', and information about people's daily lives as reported in studies of families and neighbourhood communities. During subsequent decades, sociology continued to inject theories

into leisure studies – symbolic interactionist perspectives, Marxism, feminism and debates about the likely character of an emergent post-industrial age. (p. 9)

But à la Cheek and colleagues these approaches are rooted in mainstream (ie, subdisciplinary) sociology; they view leisure from an array of external (to leisure studies) concepts and research problems. Roberts provides his own list near the end of his article:

Just as in the 1960s, the sociology of leisure needs to draw on broader sociological theories about changes in twenty-first-century societies. For example:

- The kinds of work–life balance and imbalances experienced by different sociodemographic groups in different countries.
- The implications for patterns of stratification of changes in the distribution and types of economic, social and cultural assets.
- The long-term implications of past and current changes in leisure socialization during childhood, youth and young adulthood.
- The consequences for leisure behaviour and social identities of the growth of commercial consumer industries and the spread of the associated consumer cultures.
- The implications of governments looking increasingly towards the leisure industries to promote economic growth, or to prevent stagnation or degeneration.

These are subdisciplinary interests, and clearly ones suitable to a sociology of leisure. But what about those sociological interests that have either emerged in the interdisciplinary side or have been significantly elaborated in that sphere and that therefore might later take root in the mainstream? The remainder of this section contains some possibilities.

Thus, Ben Fincham (2016) writes at length on the sociology of fun and then goes on to approach from this angle, among other matters dear to the sociologist's heart, power, freedom, life course, and work/life balance. Turning to social capital (Putnam 2000), it can be generated through the pursuit of leisure activities, exemplified through becoming involved in particular socially-based leisure projects. The process by which this happens is known alternatively as "community involvement" or "civil labor." Community involvement is local, meso-level voluntary action, where members of a local community participate together in non-profit groups or, more generally, in community activities. Often the goal here is to improve community life in a particular way. Civil labor, Rojek (2002, pp. 21, 26–27) observes, differs from community involvement only in its emphasis on human activity that is devoted to unpaid renewal and expansion of social capital. He holds that, for the most part, civil labor is the community contribution that amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers make when pursuing their serious leisure.[1]

The sociological concept of social world was conceptualized in symbolic interactionist circles by Unruh (1979) and Strauss (1978) and from whom the concept was soon imported into leisure studies (Stebbins 1982). Today more than 25

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[1] See also Backlund and Kuentzel (2013) for a similar argument on the relationship of serious leisure and the generation of social capital as it leads to social change.

exploratory studies have analyzed a wide variety of leisure activities from this conceptual angle (Stebbins 2017, Chap. 5). In his way the interdisciplinary sociology of leisure can contribute to its disciplinary counterpart some rich empirical support for one of its concepts.

The same may be said for the idea of serious leisure. While they have mostly shunned serious leisure as a research topic, disciplinary sociologists interested in leisure (eg, de Grazia 1962, pp. 332–336; Glasser 1970, pp. 190–192; Kaplan 1975, pp. 80, 183; Kando 1980, p. 108) had recognized the difference between serious and casual leisure (though they used other adjectives). De Grazia, Glasser, and Kaplan leaned toward the former as the ideal way for members of post-industrial society to spend their discretionary time. But the concepts of serious and casual leisure acquired their validity in the research milieu of interdisciplinary leisure studies. Today, more than 1500 empirical studies and theoretical treatises bearing on the two are listed at www.seriousleisure.net/Bibliography).

2.1 Deviance

Deviance is an enduring interest of subdisciplinary sociology, even though the proposition is relatively new there that such behavior is often the product of a person's search for leisure in activities deemed immoral by the wider community. In subdisciplinary sociology Becker (1963, p. 43), for instance, in writing about marijuana, noted that "the most frequent pattern of [its] use might be termed "recreational." Cohen (1954, p. 26) asked of juvenile stealing: "Can we then account for this stealing by simply describing it as another form of recreation, play, or sport? Surely it is that." But he then went on to note that the delinquent subculture is composed of a number of non-recreational elements that also help account for the behaviour of the youth influenced by it. Much later the idea that some kinds of deviance are leisure for the deviant resurfaced more profoundly in Katz's (1988, Chap. 2) book where he introduced the concept of "sneaky thrills." He argued that certain incidents of theft, burglary, shoplifting, and joyriding can be understood as fun. They generate a special excitement while going against the grain of conventional social life.

Nonetheless, it has been in the interdiscipline of the sociology of leisure where deviant leisure has enjoyed the greatest level of attention, both theoretical and empirical. Deviant leisure has been defined in the SLP as a contravention of the moral norms of a society that frame leisure behavior (first discussed in Stebbins 1996).[2] What is important to note with respect to the Perspective is that deviant leisure may take either the casual or the serious form (no project-based deviant leisure has been identified yet). Casual leisure is probably the more common and widespread of the two. Tolerable deviance undertaken for pleasure – as casual leisure – encompasses a range of deviant sexual activities including cross-dressing, homosexuality, watching sex (eg, striptease, pornographic films), along with swinging and group sex.[3] Heavy drinking and

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[2] Other early thinkers on deviant leisure, include Curtis (1988) on "purple recreation" and Rojek (1997) on "abnormal leisure."

[3] Staci Newmahr (2011) sums up the highly complex scientific view of homosexuality *vis-à-vis* public sentiment on the matter: "irrespective of whether homosexuality is relevant as an analytical category, many people view deviation from the cultural norm of heterosexual dyadic partnerships as deeply problematic" (p. 258). That homosexuality is listed in this article as tolerably deviant leisure is consistent with common sense.

gambling, but not their more seriously regarded cousins alcoholism and compulsive gambling, are also tolerably deviant forms of casual leisure, as are the use of cannabis in some circles and the illicit, pleasurable, use of certain prescription drugs. Social nudism has also been analyzed within the tolerable deviance perspective (all these forms are examined in greater detail with accent on their leisure qualities in Stebbins 1996, Chaps. 3–7, 9). In the final analysis, deviant casual leisure roots mostly in sensory stimulation and, in particular, the creature pleasures it produces.

Beyond the broad domains of tolerable and intolerable deviant casual leisure lies that of deviant serious leisure, composed primarily of aberrant religion, politics, and science. Deviant religion is found in the sects and cults of the typical modern society, while deviant politics is constituted of the radical fringes of its ideological left and right. Deviant science centers on the occult which, according to Truzzi (1972), consists of five types: divination, witchcraft-Satanism, extrasensory perception, Eastern religious thought, and various residual occult phenomena revolving around UFOs, water witching, lake monsters, and the like (for further details, see Stebbins 1996, Chap. 10). Thus deviant serious leisure, in the main, is pursued as a liberal arts hobby or as activity participation, or in fields like witchcraft and divination, as both.

In whichever form of deviant serious leisure a person participates, he or she will find it necessary to make a significant effort to acquire its special belief system as well as to defend it against attack from mainstream science, religion, or politics. Moreover, here, the person will discover two additional rewards of considerable import: a special personal identity grounded, in part, in the unique genre of self-enrichment that invariably comes with inhabiting any marginal social world.

What is deviant in the SLP version of tolerable and intolerable deviance is, in part, what the dominant society defines as deviant. The sociology of deviance generally embraces this analytic approach. From this angle such behavior is understood as stigmatizing for the deviant person. But, as Spracklen and Spracklen (2012, 2014) and Spracklen (2017) have observed in *dark leisure*, some so-called stigmatized deviants want their deviance to be known; they are proud of it. Dark leisure is, among things, "communicative." The Spracklens studied Pagans, Satanists, and Goths by way of example. And I wish to add here that some scientific deviants might well feel the same way, proud as they are of their water witching abilities (join the Canadian Society of Dowsers) or interest in a lake monster (join the Loch Ness Monster Fan Club). As of September 2017 according to www.seriousleisure.net/Bibliography/Deviance, 21 studies had been conducted on deviance as guided by the SLP framework. Theory and research on deviance based on other perspectives are not found in this list.

2.2 Organizational Base of the Subdisciplinary Sociology of Leisure

Subdisciplinary sociology of leisure may be described as an estranged child of mainstream sociology. As pointed out earlier the latter gave birth to the former, only to abandon it in recent decades. What evidence is there for this rejection?

First, where does the sociology of leisure presently hang its scholarly hat? It turns out that its vestiary is now located almost exclusively in departments and similar academic units variously named "Leisure Studies," "Leisure and Recreation," "Recreation and Park Administration," "Sport, Leisure, and Physical Education," "Parks, Leisure, and Tourism Studies," and "Recreation and Tourism Management." Here is

where the contemporary hub of this specialty resides. Sociologists in these units, along with colleagues inclined toward sociology, identify with the interdisciplinary field of *Leisure Studies* and its several research centers and professional associations scattered across the world. In this lively intellectual milieu sociologists rub elbows mostly with psychologists, geographers, philosophers, economists, historians, and a diversity of practitioners, for example, those in tourism, gerontology, and therapeutic recreation. Leisure studies is organizationally anchored in the aforementioned academic units and various professional associations (eg, Leisure Studies Association [UK], Academy of Leisure Sciences [USA], Canadian Association for Leisure Studies, Australia and New Zealand Association of Leisure Studies, World Leisure Organization). Each offers periodic conferences that attract a multitude of international participants. Each sponsors its own journal.

Although few academic units in sociology offer a leisure and recreation curriculum, cultural sociology has in recent decades for some sociologists become the center of the sociology of leisure. In their eyes this supports their claim that in sociology itself the sociology of leisure is alive and well because cultural sociology is thriving there. This claim rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of leisure, however, for much of leisure falls well beyond the scope of cultural sociology. That is, leisure is far broader than the consumption of fine and popular art, sports events, the mass media of entertainment, and the like (Stebbins 2009b), even while each forms an important part of the sociology of culture. Indeed, much of leisure cannot be conceived of as cultural (in this consumptive sense), as seen in the active pursuit of amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer interests, certain "non-cultural" casual leisure activities (eg, napping, daydreaming, sociable conversation), and such undertakings in free-time as short-term projects. For similar reasons, the sociology of sport cannot be regarded as synonymous with subdisciplinary sociology of leisure. For one, sport is inherently competitive, whereas much of leisure is not, including collecting, amateur science, most volunteering, and the reading hobbies.

Furthermore, leisure studies is also a field of practice, with considerable research and application devoted to such practical matters as leisure counseling, leisure education, delivery of leisure services, and development and management of parks and recreation centers. Additionally, there are strong ties with tourism and events studies, therapeutic recreation, information science, and arts and science administration. Leisure sociology helps inform these diverse applications and, of course, is further shaped by them. In sum, the sociology of leisure since the early 1970s has by and large come of age theoretically and empirically in this interdisciplinary arena.

3 Conclusion

The sociology of leisure is advancing. It has become a vibrant approach of its own, even if organizationally estranged from mainstream sociology. In the twenty-first century, as leisure gains equal standing with work, as issues related to work/life balance, quality of life, and well-being grow in importance, there exists the possibility that sociologists in sociology departments might again start playing a prominent role in this area of academic study that sprang from their discipline.

The signs of this happening are mixed. Subdisciplinary sociology of leisure is largely invisible in modern Western sociology and quite possibly outside it as well. For example, it is rare at an annual conference to find a session of papers identified as such. More commonly one finds papers typically scattered in various sessions over the duration of the event with leisure being examined from the angle described above by Cheek, Meyersohn, Nielsen, and Clarke. Perhaps this pattern should not be surprising, for university courses offered under the aegis of the sociology of leisure are rare as are professors trained in the subject who could teach them. If there is a vibrant leisure studies department or unit in the same institution, a sociologist might be seconded to teach such a course. Still, I have never heard of this happening, leaving me with the impression that little interest exists for this arrangement. Meanwhile, the general journals and monograph publishers catering to subdisciplinary sociology seldom publish articles or books on leisure, though we should note some worthy exceptions (eg, Fine 1998; Craig 2007; Puddephatt 2003; Stalp 2006; Roberts 2013b).[4]

Finally, I wish to observe that the sociology of leisure (both types) is one of the few social science disciplines devoted to the study of the positive side of life (another is positive psychology). Positive sociology is the study of what people do to organize their lives such that those lives become, in combination, substantially rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling (Stebbins 2009a). This new field differs from the discipline's mainstream, which is predominantly problem-centered. That is, a large segment of sociology has focused and continues to focus on explaining and ameliorating various problematic aspects of life, aspects many people dislike because they make their lives disagreeable. But, for most people in Western society, there is much more to life than eliminating or adequately controlling crime, drug addiction, urban pollution, daily stress, domestic violence, overpopulation, and so on. To be sure, significant levels of success in these areas bring a noticeable measure of tranquility to people substantially affected by them, but they do not, in themselves, generate positiveness in daily life, only relief, tranquility, security, and similar feelings. Meanwhile, substantially rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling leisure can carry the participant into the captivating orbit of positive activities.

Compared with the mainstream this new field necessarily starts from some different premises. In general, explaining positiveness rests on a non-problematic model. That is, the principal wellspring of positive sociology is, in large part, the sociology of leisure. Among the basic concepts in the sociology of leisure, and hence in positive sociology, are agreeable activity and human agency.

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