EMERALD POINTS

NON-WORK OBLIGATIONS

On the Delicate Art of Dealing with Disagreeableness

ROBERT A. STEBBINS

NON-WORK OBLIGATIONS

This page intentionally left blank

NON-WORK OBLIGATIONS

On the Delicate Art of Dealing with Disagreeableness

ROBERT A. STEBBINS
University of Calgary, Canada

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80071-017-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-016-0 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-018-4 (Epub)

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

PREFACE

Over the years, I have written off and on about non-work obligation defined as disagreeable activities that are neither work nor leisure. This book pulls together much of that writing, while adding many new ideas which emerged as I started to put everything together. It bears on both work and leisure, but indirectly so. Scholars in both fields have mostly ignored this third domain of life, on the grounds, I suspect, that it appears to be of no concern to them. As an excuse, such an attitude is myopic, for non-work obligations negatively affect our well-being and the positive side of our lifestyles and can demand that we engage in some voluntary simplicity to mute their impact. The first two in this list are of great concern in leisure studies and stir the interest of some of those who study work. Additionally, the current research interest on work–life balance cannot afford to ignore the effects that non-work obligation has on it. Consumer studies specialists will be interested in the purchase of goods and services related to these obligations.

Chapters 1 and 2 are primarily conceptual. Enough of the serious leisure perspective is set out in the first chapter to enable me to link it later in the book with non-work obligations treated of as distinct activities. Chapter 2 is devoted to defining those obligations. In the next chapter, we explore the personal meaning of non-work obligations and then, expanding the scope of the analysis, we look in Chapter 4 at the lifestyle of non-work obligation that takes shape across the years. In this context, I discuss work–life–obligation balance and people's efforts to implement some measure of voluntary simplicity as the years pass. Chapter 5 is devoted to the social world of non-work obligations and the culture in which they are embedded. We return in Chapter 6 to the matter of definition of non-work obligation. This is also the place to consider the disagreeable personality, which is not always, however, a non-work activity, but rather an adventitious encounter with such a person

while at work or leisure. Nonetheless, disagreeable people can routinely haunt recurring free-time gatherings. Finally, the difference between responsibility and duty in non-work obligation is clarified at this point as is the question of the degree of disagreeableness experienced when we confront odious duties and responsibilities of a diverse sort.

1

INTRODUCTION

Most people in Western society, and possibly many of those outside it, have a binary view of life: what they do for their livelihood (work) is disagreeable and what they do for leisure outside work is agreeable. To be sure, what is positive and what is negative to the individual is subject to much interpretation, such that widespread consensus on these two dimensions is sometimes hard to find. Nevertheless, for most people, the core, or essential, activities constituting their employment are disagreeable in some measure, to be avoided were it not for the uncomfortable fact that it is through them that they sustain life.

In this mix of attractive and unattractive activities, people in the West also encounter a third, vaguer domain of obligations that are neither work nor leisure. They are by definition disagreeable, for were they seen as agreeable, they would be defined as leisure or as devotee work (discussed later in this chapter). These obligatory activities are often viewed negatively, among them raking leaves, shoveling snow, and caring for an incapacitated relative, identified at times in common sense as "chores" and sometimes as "duties."

In short, to many people, non-work obligations make up a substantial part of the gloomy, negative side of everyday life. As such, they help undermine our overall positiveness as found in well-being, quality of life, and feelings of happiness. Moreover, the time and effort spent meeting them is therefore not available for leisure interests and those of devotee work. For the self-employed, non-work obligations may also cut into the pursuit of activities comprising part of their work.

These personal conditions are the focus of Chapter 3. Chapter 2 is devoted to the details of the non-work obligations. They merit closer examination than the scant attention given to them in the work-leisure literature, in part, because they can affect in diverse ways how people pursue their work and leisure activities and experience well-being. Moreover, though chores are

disagreeable, their completion or its absence can sometimes have an impact on, for example, the neighborhood, local networks, wider community, and even on certain international circles.

THEORETIC BACKGROUND

Over the years, I have been treating of non-work obligations as one of three domains (first set out in Stebbins, 2009, Chapter 1). A *domain* is an area of social and personal life the boundaries of which are circumscribed by the totality of activities associated with a common, broad human interest. So far I have been able to determine there are three such domains: work, leisure, and non-work obligation. The first two are conventionally conceived of as social institutions, whereas the third is not. Indeed, the third, though vaguely recognized in everyday life, is little recognized in social theory if recognized at all there.

Obligation outside that experienced while pursuing a livelihood is terribly understudied. Much of it falls under the heading of family and/or domestic life. Obligatory communal involvements are also possible, though they, too, are sometimes seriously misunderstood (exemplified in coerced "volunteering"). To speak of obligation is to speak not about how people are prevented from entering certain leisure activities – the object of much of research on leisure constraints – but about how people fail to define a given activity as leisure or redefine it as other than leisure, as an unpleasant obligation. Obligation is both a state of mind, an attitude – a person feels obligated – and a form of behavior, he must carry out a particular course of action, engage in a particular activity. But even while obligation is substantially mental and behavioral, it roots, too, in the social and cultural world of the obligated actor. Consequently, we may even speak of a culture of obligation that takes shape around many work, leisure, and non-work activities (see below).

Obligation fits with the discussion in this section in at least two ways: leisure may include certain agreeable obligations and the domain of life centered on non-work obligation consists of disagreeable requirements capable of undermining the positiveness of leisure and devotee work (for a deeper treatment of obligation, see Stebbins, 2000). *Agreeable obligation* is very much a part of some leisure activities, evident when such obligation accompanies positive commitment to an activity that evokes pleasant memories and expectations (these two are essential features of leisure, Kaplan, 1960, pp. 22–25). Still, it might be argued that agreeable obligation in leisure is not

really felt as obligation, since the participant wants to do the activity anyway. But my research in serious leisure suggests a more complicated picture. My respondents knew that they were supposed to be at a certain place or do a certain thing and knew that they had to make this a priority in their day-to-day living (e.g., Stebbins, 1979, 1993). They not only wanted to do this, they were also required to do it; other activities and demands would have to wait. Agreeable obligation is also found in devotee work and the other two forms of leisure, though possibly least so in casual leisure.

On the other hand, *disagreeable obligation* has no place in leisure because, among other reasons, it fails to leave the participant with a pleasant memory or expectation of the activity. Rather it is the stuff of the third domain of non-work obligation. This domain is the classificatory home of all we must do that we would rather avoid that is not related to work (and to moonlighting). So far I have been able to identify three types: unpaid labor, unpleasant tasks, and self-care. They will be introduced in the next chapter.

Non-work obligation, even if it tends to occupy less time than the other two domains, is not therefore inconsequential. The three types just mentioned support this observation. Moreover, some of them may be gendered (e.g., housework), and accordingly, occasional sources of friction and attenuation of positive lifestyle for all concerned. Another leading concern in this lifestyle fostered by non-work obligation is that the second reduces further (after work is done) the amount of free time for leisure and, for some people, devotee work. Such obligation may threaten the latter, because it can reduce the time occupational devotees who, enamored as they are of their core work activities, would like to put in at work as, in effect, agreeable overtime.

WORK AND LEISURE

My conception of work was presented in Stebbins (2009, p. 21). Herbert Applebaum (1992, p. x) says it has no satisfactory definition, since the idea relates to all human activities. That caveat aside, he sees work, among other ways, as performance of useful activity (making things, performing services) done as all or part of sustaining life, as a livelihood. Some people are remunerated for their work, whereas others get paid in kind or directly keep body and soul together with the fruits of their labor (e.g., subsistence farming, hunting, fishing). Work, thus defined, is as old as humankind, since all save a few privileged folks have always had to seek a livelihood. The same may be

said for leisure, to the extent that some free time has always existed after work (Chick, 2006, p. 50).

Today, in the West, most work of the kind considered here is remunerated, but the nonremunerated variety is evident, too. The most debated example of the latter is housework, but there are also livelihood activities that we tend to define as non-work obligation (e.g., do-it-yourself house repairs, money-saving dress making). Work, as just defined, is activity people have to do, if they are to meet their economic needs. And, though exceptions exist, most of them do not particularly like their work.

In Stebbins (2017a, pp. 1–2), I defined leisure in such a way as to bridge the *individual* and *contextual* (micro/macro) approaches in social science, with both being equally important in defining this concept. From these two angles, leisure is both seen and experienced by the individual participant as well as being seen as embedded in the wider social, cultural, historical, and geographical world. Earlier I tackled the problem of defining leisure from these two angles (Stebbins, 2012). A condensed, dictionary-style definition of leisure emerged from that undertaking: *un-coerced, contextually framed activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both)*. "Free time" in this book (it is further defined in Stebbins, 2012, Chapter 2) is time away from unpleasant, or disagreeable, obligation, with pleasant obligation being treated of here as essentially leisure. In other words *Homo otiosus*, leisure man (Stebbins, 2020a, pp. 6–7), feels no significant coercion to enact the activity in question. Some kinds of work – described later as "devotee work" – can be conceived of as pleasant obligation, in that such workers though they must make a living performing their work, do this in a highly intrinsically appealing pursuit. Work of this sort is also essentially leisure and will be treated of as such in this book.

WHAT IS ACTIVITY?

The condensed definition just presented refers to "uncoerced activity." An *activity* is a type of pursuit, wherein participants in it mentally or physically (often both) think or do something, motivated by the hope of achieving a desired end (Stebbins, 2012, pp. 6–10). *It is a basic life concept both in the serious leisure perspective and outside it*. Our existence is filled with activities, both pleasant and unpleasant: sleeping, mowing the lawn, taking the train to work, having a tooth filled, eating lunch, playing tennis matches, running a

meeting, and on and on. Activities, as this list illustrates, may be categorized as work, leisure, or non-work obligation. They are, furthermore, general. In some instances, they refer to the behavioral side of recognizable roles, for example, commuter, tennis player, and chair of a meeting. In others, we may recognize the activity but not conceive of it so formally as a role, exemplified in someone sleeping, mowing a lawn, or eating lunch (not as patron in a restaurant).

The concept of activity is an abstraction, and as such, one broader than that of role. In other words, roles are associated with particular statuses, or positions, in society, whereas with activities, some are status based, whereas others are not. For instance, sleeper is not a status, even if sleeping is an activity. It is likewise with lawn mower (person). Sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists tend to see social relations in terms of roles, and as a result, overlook activities whether aligned with a role or not. Meanwhile, certain important parts of life consist of engaging in activities not recognized as roles. Where would many of us be could we not routinely sleep or eat lunch?

This definition of activity gets further amplified in the concept of *core activity*: a distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve the outcome or product that a participant seeks. As with general activities, core activities are pursued in work, leisure, and non-work obligation. Consider some examples in serious leisure: a core activity of alpine skiing is descending snow-covered slopes; in cabinet making, it is shaping and finishing wood; and in volunteer fire fighting, it is putting out blazes and rescuing people from them. In each case, the participant takes several interrelated steps to successfully ski downhill, make a cabinet, or rescue someone. Casual leisure core activities, which are much less complex than in serious leisure, are exemplified in the actions required to hold sociable conversations with friends, savor beautiful scenery, and offer simple volunteer services (e.g., handing out leaflets, directing traffic in a theater parking lot, clearing snow off the neighborhood hockey rink). Work-related core activities are seen in, for instance, the actions of a surgeon during an operation or the improvisations on a melody by a jazz trombonist. The core activity in mowing a lawn (non-work obligation) is pushing or riding the mower. Executing an attractive core activity and its component steps and actions is a main feature drawing participants to the general activity encompassing it, because this core directly enables them to reach a cherished goal. It is the opposite for disagreeable core activities.

In short, the core activity has motivational value of its own, even if more strongly held for some activities than others and even if some activities are disagreeable but still have to be done. In brief, the core activity is an arena of

work, leisure, or non-work obligation within which a participant finds certain distinctive experiences. In leisure, most of them are positive, whereas in (non-devotee) work and non-work obligation most are negative.

SERIOUS LEISURE PERSPECTIVE

Only those elements of the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) are presented here that are needed to understand the role of leisure in non-work obligation. In its most general sense, the Perspective is the conceptual framework that synthesizes three main forms of leisure showing, at once, their distinctive features, similarities, and interrelationships (the SLP is discussed in detail in Stebbins, 2012, 2007/2015, 2020b). The Perspective also explains how the three forms – serious pursuits (serious leisure/devotee work), casual leisure, and project-based leisure – are shaped by various psychological, social, cultural, and historical conditions. Each form serves as a conceptual umbrella for a range of types of related activities. For a brief account of the SLP, see the history page at www.seriousleisure.net or for a longer version, see Stebbins (2007/2015, Chapter 6).

Since non-work obligations are neither work nor leisure, they are not central to the SLP. They do serve as part of its sociocultural context, however, depicting sometimes vividly the boundaries of leisure (and work). Furthermore, we can understand more clearly the nature of these two by showing what they are not and how non-work obligation is related to them. We will also examine the role of leisure and attractive work activities as avenues for procrastination intended to avoid such obligation.

We start with the serious leisure component of these pursuits. *Amateurs* are found in art, science, sport, and entertainment, where they are invariably linked in a variety of ways with professional counterparts. The two can be distinguished descriptively in that the activity in question constitutes a livelihood for professionals but not amateurs. Furthermore, most professionals work full-time at the activity, whereas all amateurs pursue it part-time.

Hobbyists lack this professional alter ego, suggesting that, historically, all amateurs were hobbyists before their fields professionalized. Both types are drawn to their leisure pursuits significantly more by self-interest than by altruism, whereas volunteers engage in activities requiring a more or less equal blend of these two motives. Hobbyists may be classified in five types: collectors, makers and tinkerers, non-competitive activity participants (e.g., fishing, hiking, orienteering), hobbyist sports and games (e.g., ultimate Frisbee,

croquet, gin rummy), and the liberal arts hobbies. The liberal arts hobbyists are enamored of the systematic acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. Many of them accomplish this by reading voraciously in, for example, a field of art, sport, cuisine, language, culture, history, science, philosophy, politics, or literature (Stebbins, 1994, 2013). But some of them go beyond this to expand their knowledge still further through cultural tourism, documentary videos, television programs, and similar resources.

Volunteering is uncoerced, intentionally productive, altruistic activity engaged in during free time. Engaged in as leisure, it is, thus, activity that people want to do (Stebbins, 2015a). It is through volunteer work – it is done in either an informal or a formal setting – that these people provide a service or benefit to one or more individuals (who must be outside that person's family). Usually volunteers receive no pay, though people serving in volunteer programs are sometimes compensated for out-of-pocket expenses. Meanwhile, in the typical case, volunteers who are altruistically providing a service or benefit to others are themselves also benefiting from various rewards experienced during this process (e.g., pleasant social interaction, self-enriching experiences, sense of contributing to nonprofit group success). In other words, volunteering is motivated by two basic attitudes: altruism and self-interest.

Six Qualities

The serious pursuits are further defined by six distinctive qualities, qualities uniformly found among its amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers (Stebbins, 2007/2015). One is the occasional need to *persevere*. Participants who want to continue experiencing the same level of fulfillment in the activity have to meet certain challenges from time to time. Another quality distinguishing all the serious pursuits is the opportunity to follow a (leisure or leisure-devotee work) *career* in the endeavor, a career shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement and involvement. Moreover, most, if not all, careers here owe their existence to a third quality: serious leisure participants make significant personal *effort* using their specially acquired knowledge, training, or skill and, indeed at times, all three. Careers for serious leisure participants unfold along lines of their efforts to achieve, for instance, a high level of showmanship, athletic prowess, or scientific knowledge or to accumulate formative experiences in a volunteer role. The multitude of ways that these careers articulate with meso and macro contexts will be sampled in the coming chapters.

The serious pursuits are further distinguished by several *durable benefits*, or tangible, salutary outcomes such activity has for its participants. They include self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, self-fulfillment, 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 constitutes a powerful goal in the serious pursuits.

Fifth, each serious pursuit is distinguished by a unique *ethos* that emerges in parallel with each expression of it. An ethos is the spirit of the community of serious leisure/devotee work participants, as manifested in shared context of attitudes, practices, values, beliefs, goals, and so on. The social world of the participants is the complex organizational milieu in which the associated ethos – at bottom a cultural formation – is expressed (as attitudes, beliefs, values) or realized (as practices, goals). According to David Unruh (1979, 1980), every social world has its characteristic groups, events, routines, practices, and organizations. It is held together, to an important degree, by semiformal, or mediated, communication. In other words, in the typical case, social worlds are neither heavily bureaucratized nor substantially organized through intense face-to-face interaction. Rather, communication is commonly mediated by newsletters, posted notices, telephone messages, mass mailings, radio and television announcements, and similar means.

Unruh (1979, p. 115) says of the social world that it:

> *…must be seen as a unit of social organization which is diffuse and amorphous in character. Generally larger than groups or organizations, social worlds are not necessarily defined by formal boundaries, membership lists, or spatial territory… A social world must be seen as an internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants. Characteristically, a social world lacks a powerful centralized authority structure and is delimited by… effective communication and not territory nor formal group membership.*

The social world is a diffuse, amorphous entity to be sure, but nevertheless one of great importance in the impersonal, segmented life of the modern urban community. Its importance is further amplified by the parallel element of the special ethos (which is missing from Unruh's conception); namely that such worlds are also constituted of a rich subculture. One function of this