

## Obligation as an Aspect of Leisure Experience

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“Obligation” is a frequently used but lamentably under-conceptualized idea in leisure studies. Its importance there stems from two facts: leisure activities occasionally or frequently have an obligatory side that some participants nonetheless experience as part of leisure, but that other participants experience as offensive, chiefly because it effectively robs the activities of the essential quality of leisure choice. To speak of obligation, then, is to speak not about how people are prevented from entering certain leisure activities, the goal of leisure constraints research, but about how people fail to define a given activity as leisure or redefine it as other than leisure, as an obligation. Accordingly, this paper treats obligation both as a state of mind, an attitude—a person feels obligated—and as a form of behavior—a person must carry out a particular course of action. But even while obligation is substantially mental and behavioral, it roots, too, in the social and cultural world of the obligated actor. Hence, the study of obligation is at once a psychological and sociological enterprise.

People are obligated when, even though not coerced, they do or refrain from doing something because they feel bound in this regard by promise, convention, or circumstances. Obligation is not, however, necessarily unpleasant. For example, the leading lady is obligated to go to the theater during the weekend to perform in an amateur play, but does so with great enthusiasm because of her passion for drama as a leisure activity. By contrast, her obligation to go to work the following Monday morning after the high satisfaction of the leisure weekend comes as a letdown. In fact, she could refuse to honor both obligations, for no one is likely to force her to do so, but such refusal is unlikely, because it would very probably result in some unpleasant costs (e.g., a fine for missing work that day, a rebuke by the director for being absent). Another example might center on people, among them a fair range of professionals, for whom their occupation is as much a passion as acting is for the actress and for whom going to work each Monday, however obligatory, is viewed as a good thing.

Obligation also thrives beyond work and leisure in a third sphere; it is constituted of what might be called “personal” obligations, for want of a better descriptor. I have in mind such diverse requirements in life as eating, grocery shopping, taking a shower, attending religious services, going to the

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dentist, mowing the lawn, driving the children to the cinema, and paying the family bills. These are routine activities. Participation in one-shot or highly unusual events can also be obligative, as in having an operation or getting a divorce. Routine or unusual, these activities must be done, even if some are occasionally pleasant and perhaps sporadically satisfying (e.g., finding a bargain at the grocery store or an insight in the sermon). And however viewed, they are normally seen as neither work nor leisure. Thus personal obligations are of concern to leisure studies only to the extent that they help demarcate this discipline, indicating that leisure is limited, in part, by the demands they occasionally impose.

The relationship between obligation and leisure has been examined before. Dumazedier (1967) coined the term "semi-leisure" to describe "activities, which from the point of view of the individual, arise in the first place from leisure, but which represent in differing degrees the character of obligations." He observed that the line separating leisure and obligation is at times unclear and depends largely on a person's attitude toward the activity. Thus, playing with one's children or going shopping can be a duty or a delight (Bowlby, 1997, p. 102 distinguishes between "doing" and "going" shopping.). Laverie (1998) found that aerobics are considered serious leisure by some participants, while others see them as personal obligation.

But semi-leisure sometimes degenerates into "anti-leisure." Godbey (1975, p. 47) defines the latter as "activity which is undertaken compulsively, as a means to an end, for a perception of necessity, with a high degree of externally imposed constraints, with considerable anxiety, with a high degree of time consciousness, with a minimum of personal autonomy, and which avoids self-actualization, authentication, or finitude." It is clear from this definition that disagreeable obligation is a central feature of anti-leisure.

Parker (1983) in presenting a five-fold classification of work and leisure identified four types of obligations: those of the job or livelihood, those related to it (e.g., driving to and from work, preparing to go to work), those pertaining to existence (e.g., eating, washing, sleeping), and those seen as nonwork obligations and semi-leisure (primarily personal obligations). Parker's fifth type was leisure itself, described as time free from commitments and obligations.

These attempts to incorporate the idea of obligation into the study of leisure show how slippery the terrain can be in this regard, especially given that a major condition of leisure is that it be relatively freely chosen. Kaplan (1960) hints at the resolution of this contradiction in his extended definition of leisure where he notes that, among other qualities, leisure is characterized by "a minimum of social role obligation." Although Kaplan never elaborated on this proposition, serious leisure research has demonstrated on several occasions (Stebbins, 1992) that obligations felt there are *defined* by committed participants as minor, as "minimal." But they are real nonetheless, even if the powerful rewards of the activity significantly outweigh them and the participant has an option to quit the activity at a convenient point in the near future. In other words, serious leisure was found to be characterized by

*flexible* obligation, by relative freedom to honor commitments, a condition missing in the work and personal varieties.

Given its greater simplicity and evanescence, it is possible that casual leisure *vis-à-vis* its serious counterpart presents its participants with fewer flexible obligations. Nevertheless, the first can certainly have obligatory moments, as when a person promises to join a friend for dinner at a restaurant, only to find that, owing to a sudden new pressure at work, he or she must now eschew any leisure. Here, too, obligation is flexible, in that, henceforth, the pressured worker can refuse to make leisure commitments of this sort.

Furthermore, flexible obligation is a cardinal feature of career volunteering, serious leisure volunteering in roles resulting in noticeable personal growth and community development. My study of francophone volunteers in Alberta, Canada (Stebbins, 1998a; 1998b) revealed that many felt obligated to volunteer for their language community so they could give something to it in return for what it gave them. But obligation in their situation was diffuse. Many a volunteer told me in the interviews that should his or her present volunteer role become disagreeable, he or she could, and would, abandon it for one more acceptable. The volunteer in this situation would still serve the community, while preserving choice in leisure.

The volunteer study also demonstrated clearly how initially freely-chosen activities can turn into disagreeably obligatory ones. Key volunteer roles consist of major responsibilities, which often consume considerable time. Those who fill them sometimes grow weary of such demands, even though they were once highly exciting. Now they would like to abandon the role for a less hectic and demanding activity, only to discover in some instances that no one comes forward to replace them. Consequently, they are stuck, possibly burnt out, forced by obligation to remain indefinitely in what has by this time turned into anti-leisure.

Disagreeable obligation has no place in leisure, since it fails to leave the participant with a pleasant memory or expectation of the activity, another basic feature of leisure. The aforementioned thinkers seemed to have had *disagreeable obligation* in mind, when they wrote about leisure as minimally obligated, without obligation, or with obligation present, as vitiated (semi-) leisure. The role of disagreeable obligation in distinguishing anti-leisure is obvious. In general, these writers seemed to be primarily interested in demarcating the field of leisure, by showing how this kind of activity falls beyond its boundaries.

But in so doing, they ignored *agreeable obligation*, an attitude and form of behavior that is very much a part of leisure. It is part of leisure because such obligation accompanies positive attachment to an activity and because it is associated with pleasant memories and expectations. It might be argued that agreeable obligation in leisure is not really felt as obligation, since the participant wants to do the activity anyway. Still, my research in serious leisure suggests a far more complicated picture. My respondents knew they were supposed to be at a certain place or do a certain thing, and they had to make it a priority in their daily lives. They not only wanted to do this, they

were also required to do it; other activities and demands could wait. At times, the participant's intimates objected to the way he or she prioritized everyday commitments and this led to friction, creating costs that somewhat diluted the rewards of the leisure in question.

Despite this dark side of agreeable obligation, it nevertheless figures in a number of leisure activities, sometimes sporadically, sometimes routinely. The particular nature and pattern of routine agreeable obligation will, of course, vary from activity to activity. Thus ethnographic examination of particular leisure activities should include a look at the nature and scope of agreeable obligation there, considering its disagreeable counterpart only when trying to explain why some people abandon activities no longer experienced as leisure.

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