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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this research reflection is to describe a slice of serious leisure that we call hard-core leisure, which we define as a form of serious leisure that involves extraordinary commitment that is directed toward an “authentic” style of social world activity. Using examples from birdwatching, Civil War enacting, and climbing, we explain how hard-core participants separate themselves from other participants in terms of what they believe are superior styles of participation and unusual degrees of effort, perseverance, and conduct. Too often, serious participants in any given leisure activity are seen as homogeneous in their attitudes and behavior. The concept of hard-core leisure makes problematic this assumption by bringing to light an extreme form of leisure participation.

Stebbins (2007) defined serious leisure as “the systematic pursuit of … a core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career that centers on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (p. 8). Although the serious leisure perspective is useful in terms of describing an intense style of leisure participation, scholars tend to ignore the fact there are gradations of seriousness (Scott, 2012). In various writings, Stebbins (2007, 2012, 2014) has acknowledged this very point, and he has posited that serious participants fall along a continuum from “neophyte” to “devote.” Borrowing from the work of Siegenthaler and O’Dell (2003), Stebbins has further argued that among the more serious participants, there are “moderate devotees” and “core devotees.” Core devotees are highly dedicated to their pastimes and are distinguished from moderate devotees and others “by the different amounts of time they commit to their serious leisure, as manifested in engaging in the core activity, training or preparing for it, reading about it, and similar indicators” (Stebbins, 2014, p. 32).

It is important to note that Stebbins (2012) fully recognized that this calibrated typology of serious leisure “has failed to attract a lot of scholarly attention” (p. 372). Indeed, the vast majority of studies and writings in this area have treated serious leisure in opposition to casual leisure (Scott, 2012), with relatively minor attention devoted to elucidating characteristic styles of participation. Extant research on serious leisure also tends to ignore the fact that participants are often divided in terms of ideology and about what types of activities and behaviors are deemed acceptable. Serious rock climbers, for example, sometimes clash over issues related to risk-taking and environmental practices, which has prompted endless
debates about authenticity and created sharp cleavages between competing camps (Bogardus, 2012). Similar debates occur among Civil War reenactors over issues related to period clothing, weapons, and other accoutrements of war. Importantly, these and other clashes tend to occur among the most dedicated serious participants or, in the language of Stebbins, core devotees.

As a point of departure, our interest lies in the tendency for serious leisure participants to divide based on differences in values, orientations, and performance standards. More specifically, our purpose in this research reflection is to describe a slice of serious leisure that we call hard-core leisure. In everyday life, hard-core is used as both a noun and adjective and refers to people or group members who are exceedingly active, dedicated, committed, and/or dogmatic. Unlike the term core devotee (Stebbins, 2007), the phrase has everyday currency among leisure participants and their use of the phrase is consistent with the dictionary definition. An example is appropriated from a neophyte World War II reenactor who admitted that he was not up to hardships that other reenactors were willing to face: “The truck with Texas tags arrived … and I hopped in its bed with half a dozen reenactments who couldn’t take how [italics added] hard-core the drive on Stalingrad was” (Schroeder, 2012, p. 10).

Surprisingly, the term hard-core is used little by leisure scholars and its significance for understanding leisure phenomena is uncharted. Chalmers and Arthur (2008), a pair of consumer behavior scholars, came close to providing a methodical explanation of hard-core leisure in their investigation of what they described as “consumption-oriented subcultures.” Unfortunately, they did not cite literature on serious leisure and it is unclear whether the hard-core members of the consumption-oriented subcultures they described are any different from serious leisure participants studied by Stebbins and others.

We define hard-core leisure as a form of serious leisure that involves extraordinary commitment that is directed toward an “authentic” style of social world activity. A few points about this definition are necessary. First, authenticity here means a style of participation that is regarded by hard-core participants as superior in worth compared to other styles. While many hard-core participants may use historical facts to support their claims to authenticity, our interest lies in how hard-core participants distinguish themselves from other participants in terms of these claims. Second, as the name suggests, extraordinary commitment includes a range of activities and behaviors that place hard-core participants in a class by themselves. Hard-core participants separate themselves from other serious participants by an exaggerated degree of effort, perseverance, and conduct. We get a sense of this commitment in the behavior of “cinephiles,” individuals who are committed moviegoers. The late movie critic, Roger Ebert (2003), who himself watched about 450 films annually, had this to say about them: “If I were one of these cinephiles, I would have seen 700 to 1,000, would know the exact count, and would also have the programs, ticket stubs, press kits, and promotional coffee mugs.”

This article is largely descriptive, as we seek to describe these two parameters of hard-core leisure using narratives drawn from popular accounts of people’s participation in Civil War reenacting, birdwatching, and climbing. We hope to make two contributions to the literature. First, we show that serious leisure participants are far from homogenous in their attitudes and behaviors. In this regard, our depiction of hard-core participants goes beyond Stebbins’s (2007) core devotees. We describe how participants across a range of seriousness might fully recognize this form of leisure behavior as extreme, if not excessive. As a point of reference, we refer to Stebbins’s notion of core devotees as we seek to describe a hard-core style of leisure participation. Second, we draw attention to why serious leisure participants coalesce around desired leisure activities. We show that hard-core participants actively construct and
legitimize social world activity, and create meaning in their involvement with kindred spirits. Stated differently, hard-core participants create community and solidarity in what others might call a fanatical style of leisure participation.

**Contested activity**

Researchers have long noted that leisure is contested. Throughout history, groups have argued over the moral soundness of various activities and, within many leisure social worlds, division occurs because people fundamentally disagree over what constitutes appropriate activity. In their study of the social world of bridge, Scott and Godbey (1992) found that players tended to gravitate toward social or serious bridge groups. The study was among the first of its kind to describe how leisure social worlds segmented along ideological differences in styles of play. It fell short, however, of documenting how and why some serious participants defect from existing groups and become intolerant of conventional patterns of behavior.

The rise of hard-core leisure is linked to the emergence of activities or styles of participation that are believed to be more authentic and, thus, superior to activities and styles pursued by others. This premise is a restatement of Strauss's (1982) assertion that for a distinct subworld to develop, "there has to emerge a collective definition that certain activities are worth doing and 'we' are doing them" (p. 175). Hard-core participants use standards of truthfulness, performance standards, and historical accuracy to highlight how their style of participation is superior to those pursued by core and other participants. By doing so, they actively engage in boundary maintenance to identify and marginalize nonadherents (Donnelly, 2006).

Hard-core Civil War reenactors (a native term within that social world) painstakingly create characters based on documented sources and engage in behaviors that approximate conditions as they existed during the Civil War. Horwitz (1998) documented how a group that described itself as the Southern Guard, pursued “authenticity” by wearing filthy and smelly clothing, eating period food (hardtack and salt pork), and losing enough weight to “achieve the gaunt, hollow-eyed look of underfed confederates” (p. 12). Hard-core reenactors view themselves as being distinct from core or mainstream reenactors who were unwilling to approach the activity with the same commitment to authenticity. Horwitz noted that hard-core reenactors represent a fringe group among reenactors and are regarded by core participants as elitist, purists, and peculiar. Mainstream participants “feared that the hardcore faith, taken to its fundamental extreme, would turn the hobby into a performance art that no one would want to watch—much less participate in” (p. 127).

As subworlds of hard-core participants develop, members actively claim worth by highlighting how their activities are distinct from those of others (Strauss, 1982). In the social world of birdwatching, for example, some participants describe themselves as “birders” rather than “birdwatchers.” Many of these birders are oriented to listing and are quick to distance themselves from people whose participation is limited to watching birds around the home. A fixation on listing is often accompanied by hard-core birders developing exceptional identification skills. These standards are used to judge who is a rightful member of the birding community. The emergence of these performance standards, characterized by exclusivity and snobbery, explain why some hard-core birders disparaged James Vardaman’s record-breaking Big Year (a year-long competition to list bird species in the United States and Canada) of 699 birds which he completed in 1979. Vardaman recognized he was not a top birder and relied heavily on paid guides throughout North America to set his record. One hard-core birder, Stuart Keith confessed, “he isn’t a birder, he’s a businessman. The whole thing leaves a very sour taste in my mouth” (quoted in Vardaman, 1980, p. 190).
A final example comes from the social world of climbing where some “traditional” climbers have set themselves apart from other forms of climbing, particularly sport climbing. They revere past climbers, original routes, and historical connectivity, which forms the *raison d’être* for their style of climbing. The Italian climber, Reinhold Messner, who made the first ascent of Mount Everest without supplemental oxygen, articulated this point of view: “Adventure climbing on natural rock will remain an elite activity based on the activity’s tradition and the intelligence to respect mountains as ancient wild places” (Mortimer, Rosen, & Lowell, 2014). He went on to lament how “mass-membership clubs…are pushing for the mountains to be ‘prepared for everybody.’” Traditional climbers are adamant there is a right way to climb and climbers who do not conform to this are regarded with contempt. Pioneer rock climber, Royal Robbins stated: “Getting to the top is nothing. The way you do it is everything” (Mortimer et al.). Many of the above ideas are illustrated in a popular slogan “Sport Climbing is Neither” that appears on stickers, shirts and in guide books. It is used to publicly emphasize perceived short comings of sport climbing and further denouncing it as fake and inferior to traditional climbing.

**Extraordinary commitment**

Implied in Stebbins’s (2007) characterization of serious leisure is the idea that participants are committed to their respective pursuits. He likened serious leisure to a central life interest—“that portion of a person’s life in which energies are invested in both physical/intellectual activities and in positive emotional states” (p. 18). Various characteristics of serious leisure suggest it is activity pursued with a high degree of commitment, including a strongly held identity, significant personal effort, perseverance, and pursuits that are enduring in nature. We argue that hard-core leisure participants evince all of these characteristics, but to an extraordinary degree.

One way this is reflected is in travel behavior that to core devotees may seem excessive. To add birds to a life list, a hard-core birder may travel thousands of miles to see a single rare bird that has either never or infrequently appeared in the United States or Canada. It is not uncommon for hard-core birders to drop everything they are doing and spend hundreds or thousands of dollars for an opportunity to see the bird. Extraordinary commitment is also displayed by frequency of participation. Hard-core birders who do “Big Years” spend hundreds of days birding, many of these away from home (Obmascik, 2004). One such participant told the first author that during her 2008 Big Year, she spent 272 days away from home birdwatching. She said she flew over 110,000 miles (on 92 flights), drove 65,000 miles, and walked over 1,000 miles. Altogether, she listed 723 birds in the United States (excluding Hawaii) and Canada and photographed 503 of them.

Similar patterns of extraordinary commitment are evident among hard-core climbers. Like birders, climbers seek to check off climbs traveling all over the world to climb the highest peaks on all seven continents and ski to both the north and south poles. These individuals dedicate significant time and money toward the planning and travel required to undertake these challenges that, intended or not, often result in recognition and notoriety. In addition, some individuals expose themselves to more risk and face greater challenges and difficulty through first ascents, solo attempts, or unsupported expeditions. Training regiments demand full-time dedication to one’s craft in order to hone physical and technical skills. Some individuals take on multiple jobs, relocate in order to optimize training, or depend on sponsorship to support their level of participation. In their pursuit of uncommon achievements, their lives become dominated and often disrupted by climbing.
Hard-core leisure entails extraordinary sacrifice and can be painful. As noted earlier, hard-core reenactors may diet in order to more fully recreate a Civil War character or sleep out in the cold and rain with little or no protection during the reenactment (Horwitz, 1998). Birders who go on pelagic (ocean) trips may endure long bouts of seasickness. The first author spoke to a birder who described a 15-hour pelagic trip off the coast of New Jersey in December as the “pelagic trip from hell.” Some high-altitude mountaineers may opt to climb without oxygen and expose themselves to the “death zone” and the proper acclimation needed to support essential body functions. Solo climbers and explorers often endure prolonged periods of isolation from family and friends. In sum, hard-core participants routinely subject themselves to a variety of physical, psychological, environmental, and emotional hardships that set themselves apart from core devotees and others.

Conclusions

In this article, we sought to describe a slice of serious leisure that we called hard-core leisure. We noted that hard-core leisure participants distinguish themselves from core devotees based on attitudes about authenticity and behaviors that display extraordinary commitment. Simultaneously, many core devotees or mainstream participants probably regard hard-core participants as elitist. Notwithstanding assertions from Stebbins (2007, 2012), too often serious participants are seen as homogeneous in their attitudes and behavior (Scott, 2012). The concept of hard-core leisure makes problematic this assumption by bringing to light an extreme form of leisure participation. Although we have limited our comments to birdwatching, Civil War reenacting, and climbing, hard-core leisure probably exists in most leisure social worlds. More systematic research is necessary to identify the characteristics of hard-core participants across a broader array of leisure activities.

Of sociological interest are the processes by which hard-core participants challenge existing ideas, legitimate activity, and recruit new members to their way of doing things. As such, we provided examples of how hard-core participants develop a sense of community or solidarity among one another. They coalesce around authenticity, historical connectivity, and ethics or ideals. It would be useful to explore which of these is more salient than others for hard-core participants and why these factors resonate with some individuals and/or social worlds and not others. Also of interest would be to explore how participants develop a hard-core identity in light of competing demands from family, friends, and work. Some hard-core participants live what others perceive as unconventional lives. Sometimes they are viewed by other participants, including those who regard themselves as core devotees, as eccentric, if not weird. Our article provides only a preliminary conceptualization of hard-core leisure and only scratches the surface in terms of addressing these and other research questions.

References


