Introduction to the Sociology of Leisure

This course will study some of the effects of government, the tourism industry, personality and social factors in shaping how people perceive, experience and respond to the availability of discretionary time. The course will also examine current/previous theories and research focusing on the impact of leisure on the socio-psychological adjustment of the individual, and application to human problems associated with leisure. We will examine how and why people choose to fill and structure their free time or leisure time with behaviors and experiences and why they make these choices and the implications of these choices for their happiness and personal growth. This course will examine the dynamics of the tourism and recreation industries as elements of the leisure service delivery system.

Our objectives will be to:

• Define the various concepts and theoretical underpinnings of leisure

• Explain the relevance of leisure, recreation, and play in a changing society

• Discuss the role of government in providing leisure and recreational opportunities to society

• Discuss various motives and satisfactions related to engagement in leisure and tourism activities

• Assess the implications of personality types as they are related to leisure/ tourism engagement

• Identify various issues of leisure across the human life-span.

Leisure Sociology is the study of how humans organize their free time. Leisure includes a broad array of activities, such as sport, tourism, and the playing of games. This field is closely tied to the sociology of work, as each explores a different side of the work-leisure relationship. More recent studies in the field move away from the work-leisure relationship and focus on the relation between leisure and culture.

Studies of leisure have determined that observable patterns cannot be easily explained by socioeconomic variables such as income, occupation or education. The type of leisure activity is substantially influenced by the individual's immediate situation (presence or lack of family, age, and other factors).

Sociology of leisure is a fairly recent subfield of sociology, compared to more traditional subfields such as sociology of work, sociology of the family, and sociology of education: it saw most of its development in the second half of the 20th century. Until then, leisure had often been seen as a relatively unimportant, minor feature of society. Leisure is now recognized as a major social institution, deserving of serious sociological inquiry, particularly in Western societies.

As John Wilson and others have noted, it is difficult to define leisure. Its definitions are numerous and often mutually contradictory, for example as a discrete portion of one's time or as a quality of experience irrespective of time. Joffre Dumazedier distinguished four distinct definitions of leisure, which begin broadly and gradually narrow in scope. The first and broadest defines leisure as a style of behavior that may occur even at work, the second defines it as any non-work activity; the third further excludes family and household obligations; and, finally, the narrowest defines leisure as activities dedicated to self-fulfillment. Dumazedier's four definitions are not exhaustive – there are also others. Incompatible definitions and measurements are seen as a major factor accounting for contradictory research findings.

There are some unresolved questions concerning the definition of work: in particular, whether unpaid endeavors, such as volunteering or studying, are work. Non-work time should not be equated with free time, as it comprises not only free time, dedicated to leisure, but also time dedicated to certain obligatory activities, such as housework. Dividing activities into free and dedicated time is not easy. For example, brushing one's teeth is neither work nor leisure; scholars differ in their classifications of activities such as eating a meal, shopping, repairing a car, attending a religious ceremony, or bathing/showering (various individuals may or may not classify such activities as leisure).

The relation between work and leisure can also be unclear: research indicates that some individuals find skills that they have acquired at work useful to their hobbies (and vice versa), and some individuals have used leisure activities to advance their work careers. Sociologists also disagree as to whether political or spiritual activities should be included in studies of leisure. Further, among some occupational communities, such as police officers or miners, it is common for work colleagues to be off-time friends and to share similar, work-based leisure activities.

Apart from a definition of leisure, there are other questions of theoretical concern to the sociologist of leisure. For example, quantifying the results is difficult, as time-budget studies have noted that a given amount of time (for example, an hour) may have different values, depending on when it occurs—within a day, a week, or a year. Finally, as with many other fields of inquiry in the social sciences, the study of the sociology of leisure is hampered by the lack of reliable data for comparative longitudinal studies, as there was little to no standardized data-gathering on leisure throughout most of human history. The lack of longitudinal studies has been remedied in the last few decades by recurring national surveys such as the General Household Survey in the United Kingdom (ongoing since 1971). In addition to surveys, an increasing number of studies have been focusing on qualitative methods of research (interviews).

Over time, emphasis in studies of leisure has shifted from the work-leisure relation, particularly in well-researched majorities, to study of minorities and the relation between leisure and culture. Marshall Gordon noted that there are two approaches in the study of leisure: formal and historical-theoretical. The formal approach focuses on empirical questions, such as the shifting of leisure patterns over an individual's life cycle, the relation between leisure and work, and specific forms of leisure (such as the sociology of sport). The historical-theoretical approach studies the relation between leisure and social change, often from structural-functionalist and neo-Marxist perspectives. Sheila Scraton provided a different analysis, comparing North American and British studies. The British approaches focus on input from pluralism, critical Marxism, and feminism; the American approaches concentrate on the social-psychological tradition.

Many sociologists have assumed that a given type of leisure activity is most easily explained by socioeconomic variables such as income, occupation or education. This has yielded fewer results than expected; income is associated with total money spent on such activities, but otherwise only determines what type of activities are affordable. Occupation has a similar effect, because most occupations heavily influence a person's income (for example, membership in a prestigious occupation and "country-club" activities such as golf or sailing are significantly correlated – but so is membership in those occupations and high income, and those activities with high cost). Education is correlated with having a wide range of leisure activities, and with higher dedication to them. As Kelly noted, "Predicting a person's leisure behavior on the basis of his socioeconomic position is all but impossible." On the other hand, type of leisure activity is substantially influenced by the individual's immediate situation—whether he has a family, whether there are recreational facilities nearby, and age. Early family influences, particularly involving the more social leisure activities, can be profound. The type of leisure activity also depends on the individual's current place in the life cycle.

Specific findings in sociological studies of leisure are illustrated by John Robinson's late-1970s study of American leisure. Robinson found that Americans, on average, have four hours of leisure time each weekday, and more on weekends—six hours on Saturdays, almost eight on Sundays. Amount of leisure time diminishes with age, work, marriage, and children. However, the amount of free time does not significantly depend on an individual's wealth. People desire less free time if they are uncertain of their economic future, or if their job is their central interest. During the second half of the twentieth century, watching television became a major leisure activity, causing a substantial decrease in the time dedicated to other activities; in the early 1970s the average American had 4 hours of leisure per day, and spent 1.5 of them watching television. And, he found that shared leisure activities increase marital satisfaction.