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.