

What constitutes optimal leisure?

Large sections of our society have had an increasing amount of time on their hands outside of work since the inception of the industrial age. People have developed multiple ways of occupying this time through varied and multifaceted leisure activities. These activities have been extensively researched and documented in recent decades, and Professor Robert Stebbins at the University of Calgary has provided a seminal framework – called the Serious Leisure Perspective – which synthesises the science of leisure activities. This framework has relevance not only for the research community but also for people and policymakers looking to understand ways of thinking about and organising leisure activities, to assist people in pursuing optimal lifestyles.

Professor Robert Stebbins has developed a theoretical framework of leisure that incorporates scientific research from various fields, including social psychology and sociology. This analysis includes individual- and group-level processes involving leisure activities. The schema of leisure is organised around three main forms of leisure: casual leisure; project-based leisure; and serious pursuits of leisure. These three components constitute Professor Stebbins' Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP), the framework emergent from the study of serious leisure.

This framework is based on extensive research data regarding leisure, derived from interviews, participant observation of leisure activities, as well as numerous other accounts and documents. Professor Stebbins synthesises this data to develop the SLP framework and offers a schema which people can use to organise their understanding of the wide range of theoretical and empirical research conducted in the field. He explains that the study of leisure activities has been examined and reported on for many decades. The first of these areas of activity to be studied was that of serious leisure, with initial analyses of amateur musicians. Over time, the study of serious leisure came to include hobbies, volunteer activities, projects, and physical activities, with which people occupied their free time.

SERIOUS LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Serious leisure activities are those undertaken by people in their spare time which usually entail an element of care and commitment. These activities usually require the cultivation of special skills,

knowledge, and experience, such as musical skill. Professor Stebbins identifies three groups of people who may be involved in serious leisure activities.

First, amateurs, who participate in serious leisure activities across many different fields, including the arts, sciences, sports, and entertainment. These amateurs may have relationships with professionals – who undertake the same activities in public for commercial reasons – and also with the public, when pursuing their leisure activities.

This sets them apart from the second group of people undertaking serious leisure activities, namely the hobbyists, who usually do not have these relationships. Hobbyists are classified into five categories of leisure activity: collecting; making and tinkering; participating in activities such as fishing; playing sports and games; and liberal arts hobbies, such as reading. The third group of people Professor Stebbins classifies as engaged in serious leisure activities are volunteers, who either casually or on a serious basis (knowledge/experience) offer help for the benefit of others, usually with no pay.

A fourth group of people engaged in serious leisure activities are people Professor Stebbins describes as involved in devotee work. People choosing these activities are usually inspired to pursue a specific occupation in their leisure time, motivated by a sense of achievement through the activity, that offers a pathway towards self-enhancement and self-growth. This category of serious leisure may offer a livelihood to the person and Professor Stebbins says that it can thus be difficult to differentiate this category of



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The Serious Leisure Perspective synthesises the science of leisure activities.

serious leisure activity from a work activity. Examples include people involved in small businesses during their leisure time or skilled trades and even the liberal and consulting professions.

The defining characteristics of all serious leisure activities include a drive to persevere with improving in the leisure activity; that effort is required to acquire the skill and knowledge inherent in the leisure activity; there is a realisation of benefits from the activity; an attractive identity is linked to the leisure activity; and a unique ethos and vibrant social world are associated with the activity.

CASUAL LEISURE

There are also casual leisure activities that people engage with and pursue to occupy their spare time, that do not share the characteristics of serious leisure activities. These casual leisure activities include play activities; relaxation activities (eg, napping, or walking); passive entertainment (eg, listening to music, reading books, watching a television series); active entertainment, such as games; social conversations; and sensory stimulation

activities (eg, sex, eating and drinking). Aerobic activities which people find pleasurable, rather than overtly challenging, as well as volunteering in a more unskilled manner, also fall into the category of casual leisure.

PROJECT-BASED LEISURE

The third main component within the SLP incorporates project-based leisure

activities. These are typically undertaken as a one-off, infrequent activity which occupies leisure time. These activities may require significant planning, effort, skill, and knowledge, and as such can be differentiated from casual leisure. They are also differentiated from serious leisure activities by the fact that these project-based leisure activities are not in themselves undertaken with the same degree of long-term interest. Project-based leisure activities may include similar activities to those within the serious leisure categories, such as making and tinkering, volunteering, and being involved in the arts.

DISCRETIONARY VERSUS OBLIGATORY COMMITMENTS

Professor Stebbins says the way in which people occupy and allocate their time typically gets spread across three domains of life: work, leisure, and disagreeable non-work obligations. These domains shape and constitute a person’s lifestyle even while this lifestyle may evolve and change at different points in time. The

distinction between leisure and work together with non-work obligation is fundamentally that the first of these, leisure, implies flexibility and discretionary choice.

While people may make commitments to their leisure activities, these commitments are fundamentally self-selected and autonomously driven.

Within leisure activities there are also differences in the levels of commitment, effort, and persistence required. For example, pursuing a one-off leisure project requires a different commitment to that required of an amateur or skilled/knowledgeable volunteer who is involved in a serious leisure activity. These commitments may imply future time commitments to maintain proficiency in a skill developed through a leisure activity.

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The Serious Leisure Perspective

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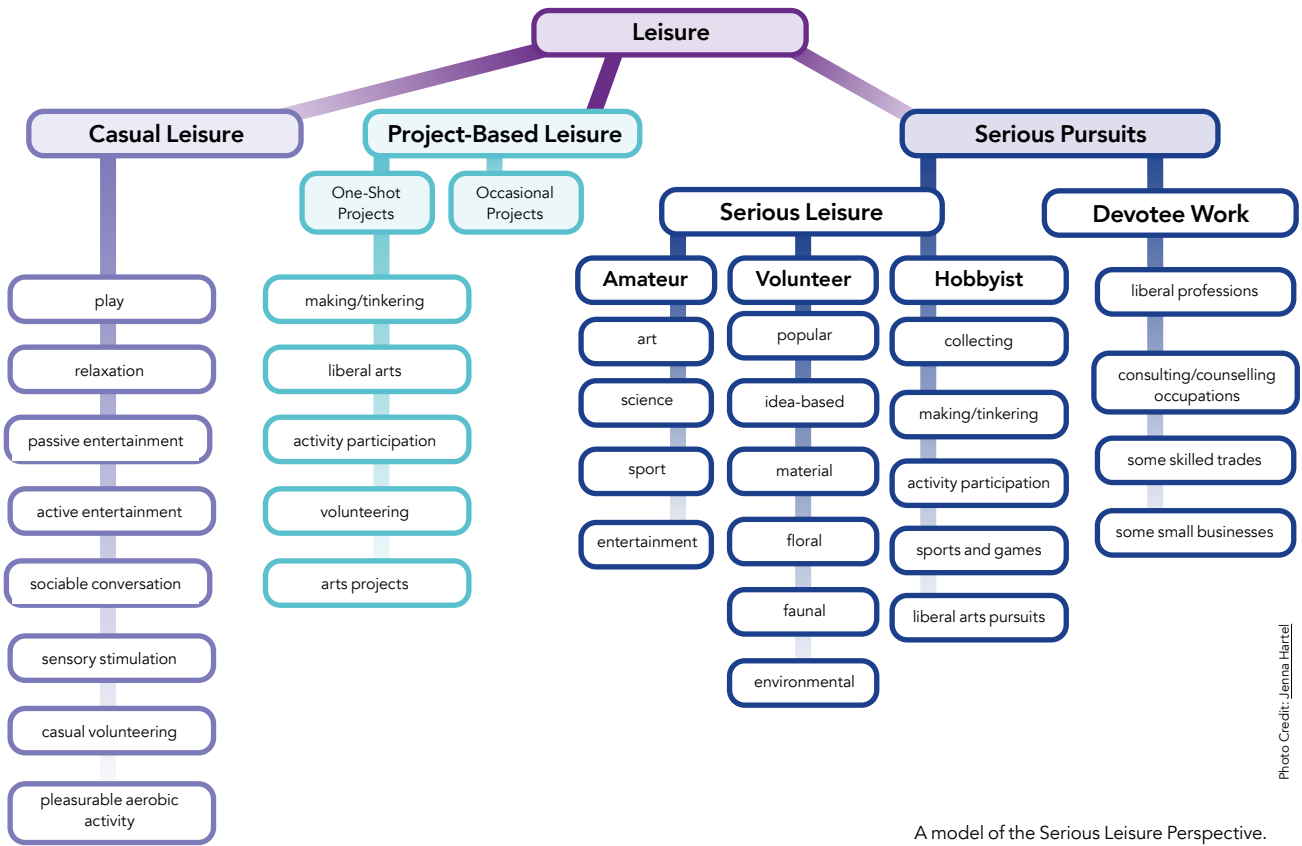


Photo Credit: Jenna Hartzel

A model of the Serious Leisure Perspective.

Some project-based leisure activities can also require significant time commitments, as can casual leisure activities. There is thus an element of time analysis required for an understanding of serious leisure activities, but Professor Stebbins says that this issue of time allocation in leisure activities has not been extensively researched. Other elements important to include in an analysis of serious leisure include the understanding of geographies and space entailed in the pursuit of these activities, as this too has a broad implication for the understanding of leisure (Professor Stebbins has outlined seven types of space in which leisure activities take place, including conquered space, such as that used for sports or board games, and virtual space, used for online activities).

OPTIMAL LEISURE LIFESTYLE

Professor Stebbins points out that, while people may have different views

of what constitutes an optimal leisure lifestyle, one of the main reasons for people getting involved in leisure activities is to create an optimal lifestyle for themselves. Leisure can have different meanings for different groups of people. For example, those with significant amounts of free time such as retirees and unemployed people may have significant free time to dedicate to leisure activities, depending on

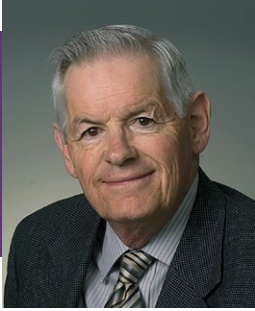
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their individual circumstances. These leisure activities can in themselves become a key source of wellbeing, notwithstanding any costs that might be associated with pursuing a serious leisure activity.

Fundamentally, choices about leisure activities shape one's lifestyle. Serious leisure activities all take place within geographic spaces that may be unique

and offer different social interactions with others, as well as different sensory experiences. Serious leisure activities also typically involve cognitive activity inherent in the processing of information linked to a leisure activity. Knowledge can be acquired through the pursuit of serious leisure activities and there is thus an element of personal development and growth that has implications for a person's wellbeing.

Professor Stebbins proposes that educating people about leisure can help people find interesting and rewarding leisure activities. Leisure education thus presents a key opportunity to improve people's lives. A framework that helps people define, organise, and understand the different components of leisure facilitates people making choices about pursuing activities that enhance self-growth, development, flourishing and wellbeing, which ultimately brings people closer to establishing an optimally fulfilling lifestyle.



Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Professor Robert Stebbins has developed the framework known as the Serious Leisure Perspective.

Detail

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Bio

Robert A Stebbins received his PhD in sociology from the University of Minnesota (1964). He taught at Presbyterian College (1964–65), Memorial University of Newfoundland (1965–73), University of Texas at Arlington (1973–76), and University of Calgary (1976–99). He became Professor Emeritus at the University of Calgary (2000). Stebbins was President of the Social Science Federation of Canada (1991–92) and elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1999).

Collaborators

Jenna Hartel



References

Stebbins, RA, (2020) *The Serious Leisure Perspective. A Synthesis*. Palgrave, Macmillan. Ebook doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48036-3

Personal Response

Do you feel that it is possible to find an optimal lifestyle balance between time for serious leisure activities and time dedicated to life's disagreeable obligations, including work?

// Finding optimal balance among our leisure activities and the demands of work is itself a challenge. It might be met by reducing the time spent on work. Alternatively, try engaging in some voluntary simplicity, as found in spending less time filling certain non-work obligations. One might even cut back on time devoted to one's less rewarding leisure interests. //