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# Leisure Reflections

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 30 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 30 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); *After Work The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001); *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002); *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering* (CABI, 2004, edited with M. Graham); and *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004). Forthcoming books include *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig) and *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, primarily as Past-President of the Société d'accueil francophone (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

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## A Leisure-Based, Theoretic Typology of Volunteers and Volunteering

Readers might question the need for this article when, in fact, there is no shortage of classifications of volunteers and the activities they engage in, called volunteering. Researchers and theorists, to deal scientifically with the myriad of roles for volunteers and the multitude of people who fill them, have been forced to put both into categories so they can then generalize about them. Indeed I was drawn into this practice awhile back, when I developed a seventeen-class, institutional classification of career volunteering composed of, among other areas, those of health, sport and science as well as the arts, environmental fields and social services (Stebbins, 1998: pp. 74–80).

But scientific classifications are not all cut from the same cloth. In this regard David Horton Smith (2000, pp. 4–5, 232–233) distinguishes between 'purposive' and 'analytic', or 'theoretic', classifications of voluntary groups. The first are superficial and highly descriptive, based on some obvious characteristic differentially shared by sets of individuals. The seventeen-class scheme I developed was purposive. As such it enabled me to describe the vast scope of volunteering as a type of leisure activity.

Few, if any, of the purposive classifications of volunteers or volunteering, mine included, are other than descriptive (Smith, 2000: p. 232). Useful as they are for bringing some sort of conceptual order to an undifferentiated mass of people and activities, they carry little or no explanatory power. For example, knowing that someone volunteers at a local hospital tells us little about the motivation, structural conditions, cultural context and historical background for such altruism. Using my earlier classification we may only say that this person is a health volunteer who is volunteering in a health organization rather than another type of institution.

So, theoretic typologies are also needed, with the best being rooted in concepts and propositions, both grounded in research data. It follows that they are also subject to empirical validation, which is to say that, in light of new data suggesting they be modified, we are forced to act accordingly. At least we *should* act accordingly, to avoid the charge made by Samdahl (1999: p. 124) that "typologies have an air of formality and finality that can too easily be taken for reality".

In harmony with the volitional definition of volunteer set out in the next section, I will present a leisure-based theoretic typology of volunteers and volunteering. I know of only one such typology, namely, that of Susan Arai (2000). She developed her typology from research data on voluntary associations, it consisting of three types of serious leisure volunteer: 'citizen', 'techno' and 'labour'. The first is a volunteer participant in organizational decision

making (e.g., board member); the second an expert with a particular skill, say, in fund raising or computers; the third implements the activities and services of a voluntary association, through, for example, administration or service delivery. Arai developed her typology to aid understanding of social capital, citizenship and civil society.

The leisure-based typology offered in the present paper is broader than Arai's, in that it incorporates all three forms of the serious leisure perspective and centers on both formal and informal, usually non-organisational, volunteer activity. It is meant to apply to the entire range of volunteers and volunteer activity.

### Theoretic foundation

The theoretic typology presented here is based on the serious leisure perspective, in general, and the volunteer (leisure) experience as felt through its core activity, in particular. A *core activity* is the distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve an outcome or product that a leisure participant finds attractive. The core activity of the larger leisure activity of which it is a part is a value in its own right, even if more strongly held for some leisure activities than others (Stebbins, 2006: pp. 1–2). Volunteers and their activities — their volunteering — may be classified according to whether they are serious, casual or project-based leisure. These three forms of leisure are briefly defined as follows (discussed in detail in Stebbins, 2006):

- **Serious leisure:** systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.
- **Casual leisure:** immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.
- **Project-based leisure:** short-term, reasonably complicated, one-off or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time, or time free of disagreeable obligation.

This typology rests on a *volitional* definition of volunteers: people who feel that they are engaging in enjoyable serious, casual or project-based leisure, activity that they have had the option to accept or reject on their own terms. A key element in the leisure conception of volunteering is the felt absence of coercion, moral or otherwise, to undertake a particular activity. The more common *economic* definition of volunteer largely avoids the messy, though critical, question of motives for volunteering, which however, the leisure, volitional conception meets head on. It is for this motivational reason that, in the theoretic typology set out here, I privilege the latter conception and associated approach.

Smith, Stebbins and Dover (2006: pp. 239–240) define 'volunteer' — whether economic or volitional — as someone who performs, even for a short period of time, volunteer

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work in either an informal or a formal setting. It is through volunteer work that this person provides a service or benefit to one or more individuals (they must be outside that person's family), usually receiving no pay, even though people serving in volunteer programs are sometimes compensated for out-of-pocket expenses. Moreover, in the field of non-profit studies, since no volunteer work is involved, giving (of, say, blood, money, clothing), as an altruistic act, is not considered volunteering. Meanwhile, in the typical case, volunteers who are altruistically providing a service or benefit to others are themselves also benefiting from various rewards experienced during this process (e.g., pleasant social interaction, self-enriching experiences, sense of contributing to nonprofit group success). In other words volunteering is motivated by two basic attitudes: altruism *and* self-interest.

It is the self-interested component in volunteering which directs us to take seriously the volitional definition, for personal interest is a main explanatory element in leisure motivation. In Western societies around the world there are many people who want to help others — they have altruistic feelings about an aspect of local, regional, national, or international life. Yet they tend to gravitate only toward 'interesting' altruistic opportunities, from which they believe they will reap some positive, personal, nonmaterial rewards such as experiencing pleasure, developing oneself (e.g., learning something, acquiring a new and valued skill), and expressing previously-acquired skills and knowledge. Note, also, that volunteering occurs during free time, where if obligations exist, they are felt to be agreeable.

### A typology in two dimensions

My informal observations made over the years suggest that volunteer activities are motivated, in part, by one of six types of interest: interest in activities focused on 1) people, 2) ideas, 3) things, 4) flora, 5) fauna or 6) the natural environment. Each type offers its volunteers an opportunity to pursue, through an altruistic activity, a particular kind of interest. Thus, volunteers who like working with certain ideas are attracted to idea-based volunteering, while those who like certain kinds of animals are attracted to faunal volunteering. Interest is the first dimension of our typology. Do these six types constitute an exhaustive list? They would appear to, but we should certainly leave open the possibility that one or more new types of interest may be discovered.

But volunteers and volunteering cannot be explained by interest alone; other theoretic elements are needed. They come from the serious leisure perspective, the three forms of which make up the second dimension of our typology. This perspective sets out the motivational and contextual (socio-cultural, historical) foundation of the three. With discussion organised along the intersections of these two dimensions, we turn first to the interest of working with people, as expressed in popular volunteering.

#### *Popular volunteer*

Examples of career, or serious leisure, volunteering with people include ski patrol, search and rescue, emergency medical worker, trained/experienced hospital volunteer, and tutor of second-language learners. The world-wide volunteer organization The Guardian Angels, which safeguards from crime and violence neighborhoods, schools and now, cyberspace, further exemplifies this type. Casual volunteering with people is seen in, among other activities, ushering, handing out leaflets, collecting donations (including fund-raising), giving directions, and serving in community welcoming clubs. Popular volunteering in leisure projects is evident in the various people-oriented roles volunteers fill at conferences, arts festivals, children's festivals and sporting tournaments.

#### *Idea-Based volunteer*

Volunteering centred on ideas often gets expressed in a service of some sort. Serious leisure examples are legion: pro-bono legal service, volunteer consulting, volunteer retired business people advising on business, and political party volunteers working on strategy or policy. Not conceivable as a service, however, is advocacy volunteering (including protest activity), which nonetheless requires manipulating ideas, in this instance, to persuade a target group. Moreover, for those wanting only a limited volunteer experience, any of these could also be carried out as leisure projects. Finally I could think of no instances of casual volunteering using ideas, and perhaps for good reason. Casual leisure is fundamentally hedonic and, as such, not idea-based volunteer activity as conceived of here.

#### *Material volunteer*

It is possible that volunteer work with human-made things is the arena for the largest amount of project-based volunteering. Some material volunteers organise their work for Habitat for Humanity as a project, as do those who donate their trade skills to fix a plumbing or electrical problem at their church, prepare food for the needy on Thanksgiving Day, or help construct the set for a high school play. Examples of material volunteering as serious leisure include: regular volunteers who repair and restore furniture and clothing donated to the Salvation Army, prepare meals for the indigent, and perform secretarial or book keeping services for a nonprofit group. Volunteers providing water filters and electrical lighting to Third World countries are engaging in serious leisure material volunteering, as are

volunteer fire fighters (when not rescuing people). Casual material volunteering refers to such activities as regularly stuffing envelopes for a nonprofit group mailing, picking up trash along beaches or roadsides (could also be classified as environmental volunteering), and keeping the score at adolescent sporting matches.

#### *Floral volunteer*

Career volunteering here occurs as, for example, gardening (flowers, shrubs), say, for a church, town square, friend or neighbor. Vegetable gardening for the needy also falls into this category, as does planting each season trees and shrubs to beautify a park or community organization. As with idea-based volunteering any of these might also be pursued as leisure projects. The casual floral volunteer performs for church, community, charitable organization, and the like such altruistic activities as raking leaves, watering lawns and plants, and weeding gardens. To constitute leisure volunteering, these must, however, be seen by the volunteer as agreeable, not as an unpleasant obligation.

#### *Faunal volunteer*

Faunal volunteers work with animals, including birds, fish and reptiles. Career volunteers in this type serve, among places, at the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, in animal rescue units, at the local zoo, and in animal rehabilitation services. Knowledgeable people who care for someone's pet (outside the volunteer's family) on a regular basis (serious leisure) or as a one-off service (project-based leisure) are also part of this type. Volunteering only to feed a holidaying friend's bird or cat or walk that person's dog, assuming this experience is enjoyable, are instances of casual leisure in the area of faunal volunteering.

#### *Environmental volunteer*

Environmental volunteering entails either monitoring or changing a particular set of external conditions affecting the people, flora or fauna living in them. The change striven for is not always defined as favorable by everyone it may affect (e.g., mountain hikers might oppose a campaign by dirt-bikers for new trails in areas where the former have enjoyed exclusive use). Career volunteering here includes maintaining hiking trails and trout streams as well as creating, organizing and conducting environmentally-related publicity campaigns (e.g., anti-smoking, clean air, clean water, anti-logging or mining, access to natural recreational resources such as lakes, forests, ocean frontage). Any of these could also be pursued as leisure projects. The casual volunteer also finds opportunities in these examples, seen in door-to-door distribution of leaflets promoting a clean air campaign and picking up litter in a park or along a highway.

#### *Mixed types*

Many volunteer activities bridge two or more of the aforementioned types. One is *pro bono* legal service, wherein a lawyer works with both ideas and people. Volunteer consultants also work with these two, as do zoo and museum

**Table 1** A Leisure-Based Theoretic Typology of Volunteers and Volunteering

Leisure Form	Type of Volunteer		
	Serious Leisure (SL)	Casual Leisure (CL)	Project-Based Leisure (PBL)
Popular	SL Popular	CL Popular	PBL Popular
Idea-Based	SL Idea-Based	CL Idea-Based	PBL Idea-Based
Material	SL Material	CL Material	PBL Material
Floral	SL Floral	CL Floral	PBL Floral
Faunal	SL Faunal	CL Faunal	PBL Faunal
Environmental	SL Environmental	CL Environmental	PBL Environmental

guides and volunteer teachers and instructors. Missionary work invariably centers on both ideas and people, but may also involve things (e.g., building a school, setting up a hospital). Furthermore missionary work could extend across four types such as when its goals include working with local people to establish a safe water site, which requires cleaning up the surrounding environment. And membership in certain nonprofit groups brings with it volunteering in several types of activities, as in the Sea Cadets where youth in, for example, leadership, knot tying and use of weapons (Raisborough, 1999).

## Conclusion

This typology of volunteers and volunteering, when we cross its two dimensions — interest and form of leisure — is constituted of 18 types. Each has already been discussed as, for instance, serious leisure popular volunteering, casual leisure floral volunteering, and the project-based environmental volunteer. **Table 1** shows, schematically, the types that result when the two dimensions are crossed.

The utility of this typology for research is considerable. For example, should we wish to explore the leisure basis for volunteering as a language tutor in a high school French course, this typology and its theoretic base would suggest we question such tutors about their interest in French, adolescents, linguistic instruction, and the rewards they get from this kind of core leisure activity as well as study the socio-cultural/historical context in which the tutors operate. We could use the project-based leisure framework to explore why people seek volunteer roles in arts festivals, asking about their interest in the arts, the people they are associated with, the core volunteer activity they are attracted to, and so on. Furthermore with exploratory research we may well discover subtypes such as SL Popular Volunteers who prefer working only with youth or only with the elderly or CL Material Volunteers who want only to stuff envelopes or pick up roadside litter.

Whether we want to guide data collection using some or all of these types or frame data we have already collected according to them, we must be sure the types fit the facts. Should a discrepancy appear we must check the typology and

its underlying theory (interests, the serious leisure perspective) for its grounded validity. Perhaps the problem lies instead with the data collected, but this should never be assumed.

A purposive typology of volunteers and volunteering cannot aid research in these ways, hence the need for one that is theoretically based.

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