

Leisure Reflections No. 47: The Serious Leisure Perspective: Past, Present, and Future

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By Robert A. Stebbins.
University of Calgary

stebbins@ucalgary.ca

Website (personal): <http://soci.ucalgary.ca/profiles/robert-stebbins>

Website (Perspective): www.seriousleisure.net

The serious leisure perspective (SLP) was launched in late 1973 anchored in the dualism of serious and casual leisure. These two terms are my own, but the distinction they denote has been discussed using different adjectives by, among others, de Grazia, (1962, pp. 332-336), Glasser (1970, pp. 190-192), Kaplan (1975, pp. 80, 183), and Kando (1980, p. 108). In a far more simplistic way than suggested now by the SLP, the first three leaned toward serious leisure as the ideal way for people in post-industrial society to spend their free time. The serious leisure perspective (introduced in Stebbins, 2007/2015) is the name for the theoretic framework that bridges and synthesizes three main forms of leisure, known as casual leisure, project-based leisure, and the serious pursuits (i.e., serious leisure and devotee work).

A reasonably detailed history of the SLP up to approximately 2007 has been set out in Stebbins (2007/2015, Chap. 6). A sketchier version of its history up to 2014 is available on www.seriousleisure.net/history. The field has been advancing and appears destined to continue to advance along four lines: 1) empirically — new qualitative and quantitative studies of particular leisure activities; 2) theoretically — new concepts and reformulated versions of older ones; 3) methodologically — primarily new measures and scales; and 4) practically — extensions of the SLP into applied fields.

Empirical Advances

The entries in the Bibliography at www.seriousleisure.net from approximately 2014 to the present show the considerable amount of research mounted during this period in the name of the SLP. In general, this section revolves around studies of previously studied activities and those centered on heretofore unstudied activities (always from the SLP). Yet, such growth has been uneven across the nineteen categories comprising the Bibliography. Thus, sport and games, general casual leisure, general serious leisure, and the SLP have substantially more entries than the others, a pattern that has held since 1973. The last three contain some theoretic discussions, while most of the empirical works there center on two or more casual or serious leisure activities. Studies of hobbyists have continued apace, though at a lower rate than the above three. Research on aging and retirement has over the years grown steadily but slowly to a point where its rate is now similar

to that of hobbyists. Studies oriented by the SLP and focused on ethnicity have recently become more prevalent.

Other categories have declined somewhat, including research on amateurs, volunteers, and tourism and events. Specialties within the SLP like deviance, gender, work, therapeutic recreation, and library and information science have a low, but steady, rate of production. Art and science administration and leisure education, along with project-based leisure, are the weakest research areas in the SLP. This is understandable in the case of the third, which is comparatively speaking, a newcomer to the perspective (Stebbins, 2005).

Nonetheless, all the areas mentioned in the paragraph above require further empirical attention, so that the SLP can show better its full potential as a broad explanation of leisure. Its global reach is also in need of expansion. Considerable empirical work has been carried out in Australia, New Zealand, China (including Hong Kong), South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Europe (including Turkey), Israel, and North America. There is evidence of research in India and Japan in the form of conference papers on one or more aspects of the SLP, but so far, I am aware of no formal publications.

Theoretic Advances

Included in this section are the most far-reaching theoretic debates that have emerged in the past ten years or so. First, I have tried to integrate the concept of leisure constraint with the SLP as one of the costs (as opposed to the rewards) encountered in pursuing serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007/2015, p. 15) . Most recently, however, I have in Stebbins (2017, pp. 12-15) treated of both constraints and facilitators (Raymore, 2002) as aspects of the micro-meso-macro context in which all leisure is experienced and organized.

Another conceptual point of discussion is the relationship of recreational specialization (Bryan, 1977) to leisure career. Scott and Schafer (2001), after reviewing the literature on recreational specialization, developed their own conceptualization of it, seeing it as a process entailing a progression in behavior, skill, and commitment. That is, with increasing skill, knowledge, and commitment related to a complex leisure activity, behavior tends to become ever more focused on a specialized facet of it, usually accomplished in parallel with a growing emotional attachment to it. In general, the easiest way to compare the two is to show where recreational specialization fits within the serious leisure framework. Taking it as an aspect of serious leisure, I have argued that specialization may be seen as part of the leisure career experienced in those complex activities that offer participants an opportunity to focus their interests (Stebbins, 2007/2015, pp. 21-22).

This brings us the question of the “serious leisure-casual leisure dichotomy” and the problems it would appear to harbor (Shen & Yarnal, 2010). I responded to their observations and those of Scott (2012) in Stebbins (2012), but it took a monograph (Stebbins, 2014) to adequately sort out the matter. At least, I believe that I have now clarified the relationship between casual leisure, serious leisure, project-based leisure, and devotee work as these four relate to the leisure career. Still, future research in this area will undoubtedly unearth new points that will need integration into this model.

On a related theme Lamont, Kennelly, and Moyle (2015) identified a cluster of terms in the serious leisure perspective (SLP) – namely, cost, constraint, and perseverance – the relationship of which needed clarification. I replied in Stebbins (2016a) with a statement that the three authors agreed shed light in this area of the SLP, demonstrating in the course of the exchange the importance of debating and clarifying the perspective’s conceptual framework and its grounded theoretic foundation.

The most recent challenge and broadest of those considered in this section was launched by Veal (2016). He suggested that the SLP should be reconstituted as a “Leisure Experience Perspective” based on a variety of faults he finds in his reading of the literature on the perspective. Nevertheless, four problems seriously undermine his assessment: 1) he bases much of his critique on a textbook, namely, Elkington and Stebbins (2014); 2) he ignores the central idea of “core activity”; 3) he fails to see the theoretic bases of the types in the SLP schematic typology, which is a map of central concepts and processes; and 4) he understands poorly the grounded theoretic basis of the perspective. These points are taken up in Stebbins, 2016b).

A common theme running through the discussion to this point in this section is the ever-growing complexity of the SLP and a burgeoning literature undergirding it (the Bibliography in www.seriousleisure.net contains over 1,300 entries). A major synthesis of all this is badly needed, with the one I am working having got started in mid-2017. In it I am organizing discussion according to the main concepts and research findings, with attention also being given to the perspective’s exploratory and (now) confirmatory empirical basis, which is by no means uniformly strong.

One final theoretic advance should be considered in this section: development of the leisure-based (“volitional”) definition of volunteer and the reigning economic definition. I suggest the following short, dictionary-style definition of the work-leisure axis of volunteering. It is un-coerced, intentionally- productive, altruistic activity framed in distinctive context and engaged in during free time. It is also altruistic activity people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both). If people are compensated the payment in cash or in-kind is significantly less-than-market-value. “Activity” (and core activity) is substituted for “work” in this definition, because the first is the more precise term for what people do in and get from their leisure and volunteering (Stebbins, 2015a, p. 21).

Methodological Advances

Measurement scales and theoretic diagrams bearing on the SLP first appeared in Stebbins (2007/2015), with the first quantitative scales arriving shortly thereafter: Gould and colleagues (2008 – the SLIM tested in the USA) and Tsaur and Liang (2008 – serious leisure scale tested in China). These were the first confirmatory instruments, following on thirty-five years of dominantly grounded-theoretic research. The first version of the typological map of the SLP appeared in Stebbins (2009a). About the same time Kim (2009; 2015) developed in South Korea a serious leisure exercise scale. Mueller (2012) created a recreational sport participation scale, which was validated in the United States. The serious and casual leisure scale (SCLM) appeared much later, being constructed and tested in Turkey by Munusturlar and Argan (2016). Gallant, Smale, and Arai (2016) developed a scale in Canada for measuring feelings of obligation to volunteer. The

countries of origin of these scales signal their linguistic base, and immediately necessitate translation when applied to different language groups.

Not all measurement scales in this field are quantitative. Stebbins (2014) developed an ordinal scale called the SLP Involvement Scale. This scale and the typological map are available at www.seriousleisure.net under the heading of “SLP Diagrams.” The “measurement scales” are referenced on the same site, complete with abstracts and full bibliographic information. The trend toward validation of existing measurement scales (especially the SLIM) and the addition of new ones seem likely to continue.

Practical Advances

The full SLP or aspects of it have met with varying degrees of success in a fair number of related applied fields, referred to here as SLP “extensions.” The SLP-related publications in all these fields are listed in the Bibliography at <http://www.seriousleisure.net>. The perspective has been most widely applied in tourism and event analysis, research on disabilities and therapeutic recreation (TR), and library and information science (LIS). Although I have published in all three fields, the bulk of the work there has been conducted by others. In tourism see Hall and Weiler (1992 – initial statement on special interest tourism), Getz (2008 – initial statement on event analysis), and Wearing (2001 – initial statement on volunteer tourism). The earliest work on disabilities and TR was carried out by McGill (1996) and Patterson (1997). Today, Patterson and Fenech have the longest lists of publications in this SLP extension. In LIS Jenna Hartel is the undisputed pioneer who has brought the SLP into that discipline (c.f., Hartel, 2003) and she has continued into the present as the main contributor along these lines.

Concerning aging and retirement I cast the first stone as it were (Stebbins, 1978) followed by a study from Snyder (1986) of elderly shuffle boarders. Today, Kleiber, Nimrod, Cheng, and Heo number among the most prolific contributors. Leisure education is conceived of here as an extension, whose earliest writings came from Ruskin and Sivan (1995). Cohen-Gewerc, Stebbins, and Kleiber have been among the most prolific authors since then, in a specialty that has, as far as the SLP is concerned, declined noticeably in recent years.

Most of the extensions have been launched by someone else. I have, however, written the main application (so far) of the SLP to consumption (Stebbins, 2009b, pp. 89-91), arguing there that consumer behavior is by no means always hedonic. Consumption is instead facilitative when it is done in the interest of a serious pursuit. The same may be said for the application of leisure to play (Stebbins, 2015b), where play is conceived of as augmenting serious pursuits, and the application of the SLP to positive sociology (Stebbins, 2009a) and to positive psychology (Stebbins, 2015c).

Conclusion

The SLP is gaining scholarly acceptance, and is highly likely to continue doing so in the years to come. A significant part of its success is its explanatory and practical utility as an extension beyond the field of leisure studies. The SLP conceptually and empirically organizes leisure into a manageable and understandable entity (notwithstanding the weaknesses noted earlier in this article), which is a badly needed development. For, as I note at the beginning of a forthcoming

book: “as with some other complex ideas current in the modern world, that of leisure suffers at the level of commonsense from a combination of oversimplification, moral depreciation, and in some quarters, even lack of recognition” (Stebbins, in press; see also Breeze, 2015, on the public misunderstanding of seriousness in leisure). Concerning the extensions they are starting to take root in food studies (e.g., de Solier, 2013), map making (e.g., [Budhathoki](#) & Haythornthwaite (2013) , meditation/contemplation (e.g., Choe, Chick, & O’Regan , 2014), and pets (e.g., Hultsman, 2015), among others. Parts of the world not yet tuned into leisure science thereby get introduced to a more refined understanding of the use of free-time than commonsense allows.

Endnote

This article was to appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Leisure Research* (JLR) the goal of which was to celebrate in 2019 the periodical’s 50th anniversary. Unfortunately, JLR had become bogged down with legal problems involving ownership, and now the special issue may never be published there.

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