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Serious Leisure

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Serious leisure is a constellation of insights about the activities that happen within leisure time. It is useful for studying information behavior in the leisure parts of everyday life, where few research precedents exist, notwithstanding such notable exceptions as Hektor (2001), Julien & Michels (2004), Kari (2001), Pettigrew (2000), Pettigrew, Durrance, & Unruh (2002), Ross (1999), and Savolainen (1995).

Though leisure is personally cherished and socially important, it may also seem nebulous, unstructured, and marginal to information behavior investigators, who have traditionally focused on academic or professional settings. A key insight of serious leisure is that leisure is not homogenous in character but takes two forms: *serious* and *casual*. The *serious* kind of leisure is highly informational and involves knowledge acquisition. Hence the most important feature of serious leisure is that it establishes a mandate for the library and information studies field to explore certain leisure realms. Further, serious leisure supplies definitions, descriptions, and classes that make leisure a more approachable research topic.

Serious leisure was coined in 1982 by Robert Stebbins and is based upon wide-ranging ethnographic research. Though a sociologist, Stebbins considers serious leisure to be interdisciplinary, for it draws from nearly every social science. Conveniently, Stebbins recently summarized the literature on serious leisure in the landmark, *New directions in the theory and research of serious leisure* (Stebbins, 2001). Serious leisure was introduced into library and information studies in 2004 by Hartel who sees it as a call to action and cornerstone for a research program on the informational dimensions of leisure (Hartel, 2004).

A starting point for this concept is to view the day as comprised of four types of activity: paid work, unpaid work, self-care, and free time (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). Leisure happens in this last segment, and is

the “uncoerced activity undertaken in free time” (Stebbins, 2002, p. 15). Next, leisure is divided into two forms: serious and casual, which differ markedly. Serious leisure is “the systematic pursuit of an [activity] participants find so substantial and interesting that in the typical case they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 3). The word “serious” in this usage implies concentration and dedication, not gravity, for serious leisure is largely fun. Serious leisure has three varieties: *amateurism*, *volunteering*, and *hobbies*.

The counterpart to serious leisure is *casual leisure*, “the immediately and intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived, pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 58). Put another way, casual leisure is, “doing what comes naturally” and it is one of life’s simple joys. Napping, watching television, or kissing a sweetheart are prime examples. There are six types of casual leisure: *play*, *relaxation*, *passive entertainment*, *active entertainment*, *sociable conversation*, and *sensory stimulation*. Because casual leisure does not require knowledge acquisition (one needn’t *learn* how to nap!) it may be a less-compelling subject for information behavior research, but is mentioned to bring the distinct qualities of serious leisure into relief.

Stebbins has identified six essential qualities to all serious leisure pursuits. These qualities supply background insights while also suggesting good information-related research questions. To start, serious leisure involves proactive acquisition of knowledge and skill. It is likely this process of knowledge acquisition and its resources that information behavior scholars will seek to explicate. Second, serious leisure includes an occasional need to persevere, as when a cook searches doggedly for the ideal recipe. Third, there is a leisure version of a career that proceeds in stages: beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline. The evolution of information phenomena over the arc of the career is an important and unexplored issue. Fourth, serious leisure has 10 durable benefits, which are personal and social rewards (see Stebbins, 2001, pp. 13–15). Next, participants in serious leisure have a strong identification with their community, which may manifest in displays of affiliation such as a style of dress. Finally, there is a unique ethos or culture to serious leisure realms.

Serious leisure also has a relative intensity scale. Here, imagine the nonchalant and occasional sailor, versus one who is "gung-ho." Those with low levels of involvement are participants, while the ultra-passionate are devotees. Doing serious leisure sporadically (outside of the career stages) is dabbling and is performed by dabblers.

Research on serious leisure can occur at five possible levels of analysis: the personal, interactional, mesostructural, structural, and sociocultural (see Stebbins, 2001, pp. 21–25). Generally speaking, this echoes the "micro" to "macro" poles common to research in the social sciences. Along this axis, the disciplinary emphasis shifts, as would the theoretical approach to information behavior research. The personal level is the province of psychology, and in information behavior may involve a cognitive orientation, such as that of Kuhlthau (1993). The mesostructural level looks at the dynamics of groups and orients sociologically, akin to Chatman's work on prisoners (1999) and the elderly (1996). The most abstract stratum, the sociocultural, engages sociology and anthropology; it is manifest in bibliometrics or domain analysis (Hjorland & Albrechtsen, 1995).

The set of analytical devices just reviewed applies to any of the three forms of serious leisure: amateurism, volunteering, and hobbies. Hartel (2004) argues that hobbies are the plum starting point for information behavior research because of their prevalence. Here, amateurism and volunteering will be tabled so that hobbies can be reviewed in detail.

By definition, a hobby is "the systematic and enduring pursuit of a reasonably evolved and specialized free-time activity" (Stebbins, 2003). Stebbins' research into hobbies has identified five general classes: collectors, makers and tinkerers, activity participants, players of sports and games, and liberal arts enthusiasts (Stebbins, 2001, p. 5). Stamp collecting, knitting, ballroom dancing, playing checkers, and following politics, respectively, are popular examples of individual types of hobbies within the broad classes.

The classes are self-explanatory, except for the liberal arts enthusiasts, who become fascinated with a subject and learn about it incessantly. These hobbyists may amass impressive collections of books and gain reputations as lay experts (see Stebbins, 2001, pp. 27–40). Members of this hobby class should be of particular interest to the information behavior community because of their fervor for information.

Scholarship under the umbrella of serious leisure is sometimes enhanced with the theory of *social worlds* (Unruh, 1980). Social worlds are communities held together by a shared interest. According to Stebbins, the social unit that forms amidst serious leisure is a social world. Additional insights and instruments can be brought to bear on a research project by applying social worlds theory (see Unruh, 1980).

It is important to note that serious leisure and social worlds are not metatheories or theories of information; nor do they determine research design or methods for information behavior projects. Rather, they are interdisciplinary constructs that illuminate features of everyday life and leisure. Per sociologists Wagner & Berger (1985, p. 703) they are "unit theories," a set of concepts specified into a concrete setting (i.e., leisure). Information behavior researchers must adopt theories that matches their research questions. Hartel (2004), for example, paired serious leisure with domain analysis (Hjorland & Albrechtsen, 1995) to study the information forms of hobby cooking.

In some forms of leisure, serious leisure beckons the information behavior community to take leisure seriously. Its descriptive and classificatory elements illuminate, isolate, and stabilize serious leisure subjects so that information behavior research can occur rigorously and systematically. This opens up an exciting and virtually unexplored frontier for the library and information studies field.

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