

## A critique of serious leisure as theory

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### Abstract

The Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) divides leisure activity into three forms: serious, casual and project-based, each with a number of distinguishing qualities, rewards, costs and benefits. It is presented by its creator, Robert Stebbins, as both a classification system and a theoretical framework. In its early history, it was seen as a micro-level, or at most meso-level, construct concerned with the behaviour of individuals and small groups. More recently claims have been made that its theoretical reach extends to the macro-level, encompassing broad societal issues. This paper evaluates these claims in three parts: first, examining existing macro-level critiques of the SLP in the research literature; second, assessing claims of macro-level relatedness in SLP publications; and third, considering the extent to which generic macro-level social and leisure theory have been, or could be, related to the SLP. A number of under-explored or neglected opportunities for macro-level theoretical analysis are identified but, when examined, they invariably expose the theoretical weakness of the SLP, particularly regarding any distinctive role for serious as opposed to casual leisure. This leads to the conclusion that the claim that the SLP offers a viable macro-level theoretical framework for the study of leisure is questionable.

**Key words:** serious leisure, casual leisure; serious leisure perspective; leisure theory; macro-level theory

### Introduction

The concept of *serious leisure* and its leisure-wide conceptual framework, the *serious leisure perspective* (SLP), created and nurtured by Robert Stebbins over a number of decades, has inspired a prodigious amount of published output from Stebbins himself and a myriad of doctoral graduates and their supervisors. There can be no doubt that the SLP has provided a service to a generation of leisure researchers, presenting an accessible and attractively labelled framework for the conduct of empirical research on leisure activities. The concept of *serious leisure*, divided into *activity types* and *sub-types*, characterised by six *distinguishing qualities*, ten *rewards* and five *costs*, has provided ready-made checklists upon which empirical studies could be based (Stebbins, 1982). Un-serious leisure activity was labelled *casual leisure*, with its own checklists (Stebbins, 1997). These two leisure forms were later joined by a third, *project-based leisure* (Stebbins, 2005)<sup>1</sup>, and together they comprise the SLP (Stebbins, 2007). A summary of key features is provided in Figure 1.

Forms			
Casual leisure	Serious leisure		
<i>Types</i>	<i>Types</i>		
Play Relaxation Passive entertainment Active entertainment Sociable conversation Sensory stimulation Casual volunteering Pleasurable aerobic activity	Amateur	Volunteer	Hobbyist
	<i>Sub-types</i>		
	Arts Science Sport Entertainment	Popular Idea-based Material Floral Faunal Environmental	Collecting Making/tinkering Non-competitive activity Sports/games/contests Liberal arts
<i>Distinguishing qualities</i>	<i>Distinguishing qualities</i>		
1. Less substantial than SL 2. No career 3. Immediate rewards 4. Little/no training 5. Short-lived 6. Hedonic 7. Fleeting, mundane	1. Perseverance 2. Career progression (4 stages) 3. Effort/training/knowledge/skills 4. Durable benefits (9 benefits) 5. Unique ethos (social world) 6. Identification with activity		

**Figure 1. Summary of key components of the Serious Leisure Perspective**

Note: For a more complete summary of the SLP in diagrammatic form, including project-based leisure and details of rewards, career stages and individual durable benefits, see Veal (2017a, Fig. 1). For a diagrammatic and narrative summary see Stebbins (2020, pp.13-40).

From time to time developments in the SLP have been summarised in consolidating books (Stebbins, 1992, 2001, 2007, 2014). In the most recent of these, *The Serious Leisure Perspective: A Synthesis* (referred to as the *Synthesis* below), Stebbins (2020) makes a number of ambitious theoretical claims for the SLP. The aim of this paper is to assess the validity of these claims. During the period of the SLP's development, while leisure studies as a whole has existed in a continuous state of what Rojek (1985, p.4) referred to as *multi-paradigmatic rivalry*, the SLP has not featured prominently in this critical fray. Given its considerable and continuing influence on leisure researchers around the world, the perspective merits more critical attention than it has received to date. Such is its ubiquity, that any weakness in its claimed underlying theory will affect a not insubstantial proportion of leisure studies research output.

The SLP is typically presented as both a classification system for leisure activities and a theoretical framework for the study of the whole of leisure. While a classification system offers *description* of leisure forms and types, theory should offer *causal explanation* and *understanding* of social processes (Charmaz, 2006, pp.125–128). The SLP can be criticised on both grounds. The following two sections of the paper summarise critical commentary on the SLP as a classification system and as micro/meso-level theory. These are followed by the main sections of the paper, which focus on macro-level theory.

### The SLP as a classification system

The SLP as a classification system has been subject to a certain amount of critical examination, primarily on the ground that most leisure activities can be participated in in both

casual and serious mode, so the binary division of leisure activities into distinct casual and serious forms would be more appropriately thought of as a serious leisure-casual leisure (SL-CL) *continuum*, applicable to all leisure activities (see, Derom and Taks, 2011; Shen & Yarnal, 2010; Scott, 2012; Veal, 2017a). This was once envisaged by Stebbins himself when he anticipated that he would ‘abandon eventually this primitive categorical terminology for terminology conveying continuousness’ (1982, p.255). However, this has not eventuated. His responses to various SL-CL continuum proposals have been to ignore them<sup>2</sup> or to accept the idea in only a limited way (Stebbins, 2012). In the *Synthesis*, the continuum idea is not included as part of the ‘essential SLP’, which continues to be summarised in categorical diagrammatic form (Stebbins, 2020, p.21).

Most empirical research using the framework has focussed exclusively on serious leisure,<sup>3</sup> despite casual leisure accounting for some 80 per cent of all leisure activity (Stebbins, 2007, p.134). As a consequence, claims concerning the *unique* qualities of serious leisure have not generally been subject to empirical testing because of the marked lack of comparable research demonstrating the theorised distinctive qualities of casual leisure (Veal, 2017a), an observation which Stebbins has also ignored.

### **The SLP and theory at the micro, meso and macro level**

Theoretical or conceptual frameworks can be analysed in relation to another continuum, ranging from the *micro-level*, concerning individuals and small groups, to the *macro-level*, concerning major groupings and institutions and whole societies. While these terms are not used extensively in leisure studies, they are common elsewhere, notably in economics (see, e.g., Tribe, 2003), but also in social science generally (Collins, 1981; Turner, 2010). Ideally, it is argued, macro-level and micro-level theory should be linked (Giddens, 1984, pp.139-144; Alexander, Giesen, Munch and Smelsner, 1987); indeed, macro-level social institutions can be seen as evolving from, and/or as functionally related to, micro-level groups (Johnson, 2008).

In the past, Stebbins (1993, p.23) saw serious leisure analysis as lying somewhere between the micro-level and macro-level, namely at the ‘meso-structural level of social scientific analysis’. However, in *Leisure Activities in Context* (Stebbins, 2017a), drawing on Turner (2005),<sup>4</sup> he sought to associate the SLP with the whole micro-macro range of analysis/theory. This is reiterated in the *Synthesis*, where he states that, while the SLP:

started in fieldwork, which tends to favour discovery of micro-level groups and processes (a social psychological focus), the Perspective has in its 47 years of development incorporated numerous propositions that also bear on relevant meso- and macro-level phenomena. At these latter levels, the SLP is sometimes cultural, sometimes historical, sometimes geographical, sometimes economic. (Stebbins, 2020, p. v)

Stebbins then declares that his presentation will ‘proceed from micro to meso to macro’ levels which, he observes, follows:

the theoretic route taken by Max Weber, which he started on with *Verstehen* [understanding] and from there proceeded to develop a profound explanation of organization and bureaucracy. Yet, it should also be evident in the following pages how macro and meso levels leave their own marks on lower levels of context. (Stebbins, 2020, p.36).

This progression from the micro to the macro is reflected in the structure of the *Synthesis*, with parts I-III of the book devoted, respectively, to the ‘micro level’, the ‘meso level’ and the ‘macro level’.

One view of the SLP framework is that it is essentially descriptive in nature (Veal, 2017a, p.207), with associated empirical research concerned primarily with examining the extent to which the features of individual leisure activities conform to the ideal type outlined by Stebbins, with emphasis often being placed on the six *distinguishing qualities*. However, certain theoretical features of the SLP can be identified. These were critically examined in Veal (2017a, pp.208-213) focussing primarily on the micro/meso-level. Deficiencies identified included the failure of the SLP project: to engage adequately with complementary approaches, such as needs, benefits, commitment, specialization, constraints theory and involvement; to fully explore the potential of social worlds and their relationships with tribes, subculture and class; to address proposals regarding the paramount significance of identity; and to empirically test the claim that serious leisure participation was a necessary component of an optimum leisure lifestyle. As with the critique of the SLP’s classification system, noted above, Stebbins (2017b) did not address these observations in his response to Veal (2017a; 2017b).

The primary aim of this paper is to evaluate the relationship between the SLP and macro-level theory. The above topics are therefore not revisited, except insofar as they have macro-level implications. Stebbins (2020, p.195) admits that the SLP is ‘weakest at the macro level where research ... is relatively thin’. While this is true in regard to empirical research, the immediate weakness lies in the theoretical framing of the perspective.

The analysis of macro-level theory and the SLP is presented here in three parts which consider, in turn:

- the extent to which the limited macro-level critique of the SLP in the leisure studies literature has been adequately responded to by Stebbins or others;
- the validity of explicit claims of relationships between macro-level theory and the SLP in the *Synthesis* and other SLP publications; and
- the extent to which potential relationships between the SLP and existing generic macro-level social and leisure theoretical frameworks support or challenge the status of the SLP as a macro-theoretical framework.

### **The SLP and macro-level theory: existing critique**

The one area of macro-level theory where the SLP has been subject to some, albeit limited, critical attention is *social change*. Hamilton-Smith (1993, p.12) observed that ‘perhaps Stebbins and others have devoted too much attention to the definition and description of serious leisure rather than its dynamics over time’. Rojek (2000, p.19), supported by Blackshaw (2010, p.43), argued that the SLP provided ‘no basis for regarding leisure as a lever for social change’. Kuentzel (2012) was of the opinion that serious leisure was incapable of addressing social change because of its structural-functional and closed and static nature, in contrast to his favoured alternative framework, ‘recreation specialization’. This, he claimed, was open and dynamic and could ‘accommodate critical theories of leisure behaviour’ (p.376).

In the early days of the development of the SLP, as noted in Veal (2017a), a possible counter to this criticism was Stebbins’ (1982) claim that serious leisure could play a significant role in regard to the then widely anticipated reduction in working hours in industrial societies. Serious leisure was offered as ‘a main route’ open to people who would be ‘searching the world of leisure for ways to express their abilities, fulfil their potential, and identify themselves as unique human beings’ (p.251); it was presented as the ‘remedy to help solve the social problem of meaningless empty leisure’ (Stebbins, 1992, p.126). This theme persisted in the 1990s and into the early 2000s when Stebbins anticipated a ‘leisure age’ (1998, p.129) or a ‘job-reduced future’ (2001, p.147). However, this potential macro-level role for serious leisure is not claimed in the *Synthesis* or other recent SLP writings, despite growing concerns about longer working hours, ‘time-squeeze’, work-life balance issues (see Veal, 2020) and increasing job-fragmentation. So there has been no direct response to the social change critique on behalf of the SLP, although the *Synthesis* does appear to offer an indirect response, as discussed in the next section below.

It should be noted, however, that the argument that serious leisure could play a role in a future work-reduced society would not have addressed the concerns raised by critical theorists. Such a role could be seen as *coping* with social change, even *retarding* it in some respects, rather than being a lever *for* change. Indeed, in an earlier volume, but not in the *Synthesis*, Stebbins (2001, p.152) claimed that serious leisure was a stabilising social force, contributing ‘significantly to communal and even societal integration’. For a critical theorist such as Rojek (2000, p.19), however, serious leisure’s role in emphasizing the ‘integrative effect of leisure in reinforcing social order’, was a negative feature, since critical theory seeks to highlight leisure’s disruptive and even emancipatory potential in capitalist society (Rojek, 2000, p.20; Hemingway, 1996).

The above discussion is predicated on *serious* leisure playing a significant role in regard to social change, whether viewed in positive or negative terms. The implication is that casual leisure plays a relatively insignificant role. However, given the almost total lack of theoretical or empirical research on the roles of casual leisure, this proposition remains untested. If the degree of seriousness of leisure activity were found to be unrelated to social change then the

capability of the SLP to contribute to an understanding of the role of leisure in social change would be in doubt.

### **The SLP and macro-level theory: claims in the *Synthesis***

An indirect response to the social change critique may be seen in the title of one of the chapters in the macro-level section of the *Synthesis*: ‘Culture and social change’ (chapter 8).

The section of the chapter on *culture* examines ‘ethnicity, gender, information, social class, cultural costs and constraints and temporal space’ (Stebbins, 2020, p.151), with up to a page devoted to each topic. Here we consider ethnicity/race, gender and class since they are commonly discussed in social theory generally, being seen as major sources of division and inequality in advanced industrial societies. They have also been central to much leisure studies research. A common macro-level treatment in leisure studies has therefore been to show that leisure activity and institutions are not immune to the effects of social division and inequality but often reproduce or even exacerbate them. This is indicated by, for example, Hylton (2005) in regard to race, Henderson and Gibson (2013) in regard to gender and Clarke and Critcher (1985) and Critcher and Bramham (2004) in regard to class. This type of research is typically seen as being in the ‘critical theory’ mould, but some authors, particularly in North America, prefer the term ‘social justice’ (e.g., Parry, Johnson and Stewart, 2013; Frias and Dattilo, 2020). While this terminology is not used in the *Synthesis*, it might be expected that it would include an examination – at least theoretically – of the extent to which serious and/or casual leisure activity reproduce or exacerbate divisions and inequalities related to these variables. However, the discussions are not at this level. For each variable, the pattern of treatment is to offer some definitional remarks and to list references to nominally relevant micro/meso-level serious leisure studies,<sup>5</sup> but not to engage with their actual or potential macro-level theoretical findings or implications. Regarding ethnicity, the references seem simply to demonstrate that serious leisure research has been conducted in a wide range of countries. Regarding gender, the references cited indicate that there have been some serious leisure studies on single-sex activities/samples and some comparing men and women. In the case of class, examples are noted of SLP-related research on certain motor sports which attract working class participants. However, the one study which used empirical data to suggest that serious leisure could be seen as a middle class phenomenon (Parker, 1996), is dismissed as mere opinion which needs ‘nuancing’ (Stebbins, 2020, p.154).

In discussing these variables, therefore, Stebbins fails to engage with their macro-level implications. Whether or not the SLP has any particular macro-theoretical role to play is consequently not established since the question is not asked. Were it to be asked, there is no *prima facie* reason to assume that serious leisure activity would be the only form of leisure involved in reproducing and exacerbating divisions and inequalities related to race, gender and class, so the macro-theoretical relevance of the SLP, with its fundamental differentiation between serious and casual leisure, cannot be assumed.

The *social change* section of the chapter first considers four ‘SLP-related trends’: mass leisure and consumption; digital and internet leisure; high-risk leisure; and individualism/identity (Stebbins, 2020, pp.156-159). These topics are discussed in purely descriptive or definitional terms, accompanied by lists of references to SLP-related research claimed to be relevant. However, no indication is given of the substantive findings of the cited research and no consideration is given to macro-level theory to which it might be related.

- *Mass leisure and consumption* are equated with casual leisure but no reference is made to relevant mass society theoretical literature (e.g., Roberts, 1978, pp.41-61; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/ 2002; Featherstone, 1991).
- *Digital and internet leisure* is discussed entirely at the micro/meso-level, with no reference to, for example, Spracklen’s (2015) work. Henderson and Spracklen (2018) are cited, not in relation to macro-level social change, but elsewhere in the book as an example of pursuits which can involve professional adjuncts (Stebbins, 2020, p.22).
- *High-risk leisure* commentary is concerned with the phenomenon of extreme or lifestyle sports, with no less than 25 SLP-related studies cited, but again not engaged with in substantive terms. Two of Belinda Wheaton’s papers on lifestyle sports are cited but not listed in the chapter references. Her edited collection (Wheaton, 2004) is cited elsewhere in the *Synthesis*, but not her most recent monograph (Wheaton, 2013). The latter, in particular, discusses the political dimension of lifestyle sports. They are viewed as part of the counter-culture and of contemporary responses to global post-modern trends, such that they ‘can, and should, inform our understanding of sport’s relationship to wider global and local cultural, economic and political processes’ (Wheaton, 2013, p.186). This level of discussion does not feature in the *Synthesis*.
- *Individualism/individuality* are discussed but with no reference to the macro-level analysis of, for example, Giddens (1991, pp.5,80-81) and Beck (1992, pp.88,91-92), who see a trend *towards* individualism in Western society, as opposed to Maffesoli (1988/1996), who sees a *decline* in individualism.

It can be concluded, therefore, that, in regard to the ‘SLP-related trends’, the *Synthesis* hints at potential macro-level links between the SLP and social change but does not explore their actual workings or engage with relevant theory.

The discussion of the SLP-related trends in the *Synthesis* is followed by a section on *social capital/civil labour* (pp. 160-161). This is based on an analysis by Rojek (2002), who drew on Hemingway (1999). The Hemingway source could, prima facie, have provided the basis for an SLP-related discussion of social change, since it examined Putnam’s thesis of the historical decline of social capital in America. This involved observation of falling levels of participation in collective/social/voluntary types of leisure activity and increasing participation in individual/domestic activity, such as television-watching. Insofar as serious leisure is associated with the collective/social/voluntary activity, this would imply that serious leisure should be encouraged as part of any policy to halt the decline in social capital. However, the likely outcome of empirical analysis to explore the distinctive role of voluntary mode serious leisure activity in promoting social capital would be uncertain, given that, as

Stebbins (2020, pp.22, 160) indicates, volunteering can be engaged in as both casual and serious leisure. As with social change, if the level of seriousness of leisure activity is not related to the level of contribution to social capital, the theoretical value of the SLP would be called into doubt. Furthermore, Blackshaw and Long (2005, pp.248-249) have argued that both Stebbins and Putnam neglect both the power relations in voluntary organisations and their often inward-looking nature, which means that their 'ability to contribute to social capital is clearly compromised' (p.249).

Rojek's interest in social capital was, however, structural. Citing the likes of Durkheim, Simmel and Goffman, he saw social capital as involving 'reciprocity, sociality and sociability', which played a key role in the 'constitution and remaking of the social order' (Rojek, 2002, p.22). He then suggested that serious leisure was the 'classic statement' of how leisure practice elicits such qualities, in the form of 'social integration, moral bonding and the remaking of everyday life' (p.25). Casual leisure, on the other hand, often took the form of 'deviant conduct' (p.25), so it did not 'generally add to social capital' (p.26). Rojek then offered some questionable observations on the nature of serious and casual leisure, in declaring that, while 'caring, helping and educative functions' were 'ordinary components of serious leisure', their absence from leisure resulted in 'the deformation of free time, in the form of casual leisure' (p.26).<sup>6</sup> The 'caring, helping and educative functions' of serious leisure were then classified as *civil labour* activity, and were consequently be seen as serious leisure's distinctive contribution to social capital. Rojek followed with a discussion of the role that civil labour/serious leisure might play in changing labour markets characterised by casualization and 'end of work' scenarios. He did not point out, however, that this ambitious macro-level theorising came full circle to produce a contemporary version of Stebbins' original work-reduced society scenario for serious leisure. Thus Rojek, who, as noted above, had previously accused serious leisure of lacking a social change role, found himself devising one. The analysis was, however, dependent on two challengeable propositions: that serious leisure equates with civil labour and that casual leisure does not contribute to social capital. Stebbins (2020, p.160) ignores these macro-level issues, and descriptively maps elements of the SLP onto social capital and civil labour as static, classificatory meso-level concepts.

In regard to the issue of social change, therefore, the *Synthesis* fails to engage with macro-level dimensions of the SLP, even though the discussion is located in the macro-level part of the book. Furthermore, speculative exploration of such dimensions raises doubts as to the contribution which the SLP might make.

### **The SLP and macro-level theory: existing social/leisure theory**

Stebbins (2020, p.5) argues that the SLP's relationships with 'various epistemologies, theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods' should be discussed, so it is appropriate to consider the range of relevant existing macro-level theory to which the SLP might relate. However, in arguing that the SLP is unique in having been developed from within the field of leisure studies, Stebbins (2020, p.1) seems to imply that it is also self-sufficient: 'Such theories as functionalism, symbolic interactionism, critical analysis, and



postmodernism contain certain ideas about leisure, but those ideas emerged with reference to intellectual interests quite distant from leisure'. This seems to assert that, in effect, because generic social theory was not initially developed with a significant focus on leisure, it lacks relevance. This ignores a mass of leisure studies literature which seeks to make the case for such relevance. An example is Roberts' (2016) recent overview of social theory as it relates to leisure and sport. He observes that leisure theories developed from within leisure studies, including that of Stebbins (but also Parker and Dumazedier) have not been 'mainstreamed into any of the social sciences' (Roberts, 2016, p.11). He is therefore of the view that leisure scholars are 'best advised to scan, take and use their selections from the stock of theories that have been built since the nineteenth century. This will best serve the study of sport and leisure: there is no need to build theories anew' (p.188).

Roberts summarises the work of Durkheim; Parsons; Marx; Weber; Elias; the Frankfurt School; Habermas; Blumer; Foucault; Bourdieu; and Beck. Of these, two can be seen as a micro/meso-level theorists: Elias, associated with figuration, and Blumer, with symbolic interactionism. Serious leisure is seen as an 'excellent example' of symbolic interactionist research (Roberts, 2016, p.113), while it is noted that there is debate on the extent to which the latter articulates with macro-level theory (p.109). In the *Synthesis*, Stebbins (2020) mentions only two theorists from Roberts' list: Weber, in relation to research strategy, as noted above, and a historical reference to the Protestant ethic (p.136); and Beck, in reference to individualisation (pp.47, 159). In the past, he has also referred to Marx indirectly when distancing the SLP from the 'macro-sociological claims of the Marxists' (Stebbins, 1992, p.133), but there is no mention in the *Synthesis*.

There are numerous examples from the contemporary leisure studies literature which offer macro-level theoretical frameworks, often linked with the above 'classic' theories, to which a framework such as the SLP might be expected to connect. Among these are: pluralism; communicative versus instrumental reason; lifestyles; and tribes. These are discussed in turn below. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list but to provide illustrative examples.

### *Pluralism*

Roberts (1978) long ago advocated a 'pluralist' model of society, in which market processes in liberal democracies are seen as responding to and adequately satisfying people's consumption, including leisure, needs in conditions of relative freedom. He declared that this model represented 'the unofficial ideology of Western society' (p.86). Later, despite the substantial body of neo-Marxist and post-Marxist critical theory emerging in the intervening years, he argued that the model needed no on-going defence because its main propositions were 'now generally accepted' (Roberts, 2006, p.x). However, it does not feature in his overview volume discussed above. Politically right-leaning versions of the pluralist model might be seen, in contemporary parlance, as *neo-liberalism*, while left-leaning versions, involving acceptance of markets accompanied by a strong welfare state, are more appropriately seen as *social democracy* (Veal, 1998). While the *Synthesis* makes no reference to Roberts' pluralist model or anything similar, the absence of critical/emancipatory

sentiments in Stebbins' writing suggests that it probably reflects his view on the socio-economic/political macro-level workings of contemporary society.

### *Communicative versus instrumental reason*

Although Jürgen Habermas has been referenced in the past by leisure theorists (e.g., Kelly, 1987; Rojek, 1995; Hemingway, 1996), one leisure sociologist, Karl Spracklen (2009, 2013), has made him central to his analysis. In Habermas' theoretical framework, individuals live in their own *lifeworlds*, a term developed from the phenomenological work of Husserl and Schutz (Habermas, 1981/1989, pp.113-197). Micro-level lifeworlds are largely taken-for-granted or sub-conscious and are also variable since different engagements with others may involve deployment of different areas of knowledge (e.g., language) with differing scope, complexity, customs and expectations (Fairlough, 1991). They play a social role when individuals, workers and social groups interact, guided by the *communicative reason* which characterises free social intercourse. Lifeworlds constitute one of two spheres which make up society, the other being the system, or *steering media*, comprising the market/money and government/law apparatuses. These are guided by *instrumental reason*, such as the profit motive and the exercise of power. In very simple societies, the two spheres coincide, involving the same relatively small number of people. As societies become more complex, the size and number of instrumental institutions grows and the resultant system becomes separated from the lifeworlds of the masses. However, in their search for profits and control, the agencies of instrumental reason are constantly seeking to colonise new areas of the communicative realm. Applying this framework to leisure, Spracklen (2013, p.233) asserts the need both to resist 'commodified leisure and passive consumption' imposed by instrumental rationality and to defend 'communicative leisure, activities that are local, democratic, leaderless, anarchic, private and free'. He calls for a campaign 'against any attempt to take our sports, our leisure, our culture, away from us, even if that means throwing away our satellite dishes and tearing up our tickets for mega-sports events' (p.239).

Henderson and Spracklen (2014) undertake the task of linking the SLP to the Habermas model. They note the existence in the SLP framework of the 'macro-sociological view of a Professional, Amateur, Public (P-A-P) perspective' (p.208). This was an early development of the serious leisure project (Stebbins, 1979), based on the observation that some activities, particularly in entertainment, involved both amateur (serious leisure) and professional (paid work-based) participants. Henderson and Spracklen (2014, p.208) observe that this can be seen as 'linking into Habermasian rationality as activities move from a communicative leisured amateur to an instrumental professional whilst interacting with a public that shares a common interest'. This macro-level observation is not echoed by Stebbins.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, however, that the *professionals* providing the link between the two spheres are, by definition, not engaged in leisure activity. A further development of the P-A-P model incorporates professional adjuncts who supply goods, services and sponsorship support to participants in some serious (and casual) leisure activities, resulting in a 'commodity-agents-professionals/commodity-agents-amateurs/professionals' (C-PC-AP) model (Stebbins, 2020, p.22). This can be seen as a further case of the colonisation process in operation. This again is

not recognised in the *Synthesis*. Stebbins (2020, p.22) notes that music promotion is an example of the C-PC-AP model in operation and cites Henderson and Spracklen (2018) as a relevant study, but again ignores their application of the Habermasian framework.

### *Lifestyles*

The concept of lifestyle has had a continuing presence in the SLP in the form of the idea of individuals searching for an *optimal leisure lifestyle*. This is discussed in the meso-level section of the *Synthesis* (Stebbins, 2020, pp.106-110), so it does not claim to be offering macro-level theory. Consequently, the short discussion of the concept of lifestyle (pp.103-105) does not include a macro-level perspective. Significant theorists such as Bourdieu (1986, pp.128-9), Giddens (1991, p.80-81) and Beck (1992, pp.91-92) have presented lifestyle as replacing, modifying or characterising class as a significant stratifying variable in contemporary society. Lifestyle has also been presented, using the related Weberian concept of status, as a stratifying adjunct to the pluralist model of society (Veal, 1989, 2013). Lifestyle refers to distinctive patterns of consumption, taste and day-to-day life patterns, including time devoted to, and meaning attached to, work, leisure, family and friendship. In the SLP, an optimal leisure lifestyle results when people successfully ‘strive to get the best return possible from the use of their free time’ (Stebbins, 2020, p.106), subject to the constraints imposed by other features of their overall lifestyles. People know they have an optimal leisure lifestyle when they ‘believe they have enhanced their well-being by finding their best combination in two or three of the [SLP leisure] forms’ (p.106). In previous iterations of the SLP, serious leisure activity was seen as an *essential* ingredient for an optimal leisure lifestyle (e.g., Elkington & Stebbins, 2014, p.30) but this condition does not appear in the *Synthesis*, perhaps because it has been pointed out that there is no supporting empirical evidence for it (Veal, 2017a, p.211). As a result, while an optimal leisure lifestyle might be seen as a component of a satisfactory overall lifestyle, and might therefore be theoretically related to the macro-level social structure, it is no longer clear that this is being claimed as part of the SLP.

Another missed opportunity to link optimal leisure lifestyle with macro-level theory is the failure to exploit the potential of *social worlds*. In the SLP framework, each serious leisure activity is distinguished by a unique *ethos* which is ‘the spirit of the community of serious leisure ... participants, as manifested in shared context of attitudes, practices, values, beliefs, goals, and so on’ (Stebbins, 2020, p.26). The social world of serious leisure participants is ‘the organizational milieu in which the associated ethos ... is expressed ... or realized’ (p.26) and is ‘constituted of a substantial subculture’ (p.27). In an earlier publication it was noted that this connection with subculture made it possible to ‘logically speak about ... social stratification’ (Stebbins, 2001, p.8). However, stratification is treated as taking place *within* social worlds (members – strangers – tourists – regulars – insiders) rather than in relation to any macro-level subcultural stratification system of which a social world might be part (Stebbins, 2020, p.27). By contrast, from the 1970s, critical youth studies viewed subcultures as the source of the macro-level phenomenon of class-based *resistance* to the mainstream culture, with a particular emphasis on leisure (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). Engaging with this

literature could have opened up macro-level discussion of the SLP, even though, since youth subcultures are often centred around casual leisure, this may have undermined the contention that social worlds are an exclusive feature of serious leisure. From the late 1990s, however, following the ‘post-subcultural turn’ (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Bennett, 2011) the neo-Marxian rigidities of this view of subculture were rejected in favour of either lifestyle (Muggleton, 2000, p.30; Miles, 2000, p.16), as discussed above, or tribe (Bennett, 1999), as discussed below. In further developments, the role of class, tribes and politics in youth culture has been subject to considerable debate (see Shildrick & McDonald, 2006; Marchart, 2003; St John, 2004). None of this lively debate is referred to in the *Synthesis*.

The neglect of the macro-level potential of social worlds also arises as a result of Stebbins’ limited view of the phenomenon. His literary source for social worlds is the work of Unruh (1979, 1980) from which he derives a view of the phenomenon as a ‘unit of social organization which is diffuse and amorphous in character not necessarily defined by formal boundaries, membership lists, or spatial territory’ which ‘lacks a powerful centralized authority structure’ (Unruh, quoted by Stebbins, 2020, pp.26-27).). An alternative view was offered by Strauss (1978, p.121) who, in a definitive paper, observed that there were countless types of social world: ‘Some [social] worlds are small, others huge; some are international, others are local. ... Some are so emergent as to be barely graspable; others are well established, even well organized. ... Some are very hierarchical; some are less so or scarcely at all’. Furthermore, Clarke and Star (2008, p.113) introduce the concept of an *arena*, which is ‘composed of multiple [social] worlds organized ecologically around issues of mutual concern and commitment to action’. An example of such an arrangement would be sport clubs organised within leagues, under a national governing body. The rather inward-looking, small-group version of social worlds presented in the *Synthesis* omits the macro-level dimension. It therefore excludes the possibility of exploring the way the mass of local-level social worlds relates to the ethos/social world of the macro-level parts of an organisation or movement. This is vividly illustrated by the ‘gun lobby’ of the USA, with the macro-level role played by the National Rifle Association (see Shields, 1996, p.xi). However, as with the examples discussed above, the relative influence of serious and casual leisure participation on macro-level processes is an unanswered theoretical and empirical question.

### *Tribes*

It is relevant here to consider the work of Michel Maffesoli because considerable attention is paid to his ideas in the first macro-level chapter of the *Synthesis* (Stebbins, 2020, pp.139-143). Maffesoli (1989, p.vi) presents a postmodernist perspective, on the grounds that the existing modernist macro-level ‘great systems of interpretation such as Marxism or Freudianism’ have become ‘exhausted’. He sees society as being increasingly characterised by ‘social figurations that seem to go beyond individualism’, comprising members of ‘the undefined mass, the faceless crowd and the tribalism consisting of a patchwork of small local entities’ (Maffesoli (1988/1996, p.9). Such figurations are exemplified by the ‘conformism of youth, the passion for likeness within groups or ‘tribes’, the phenomena of fashion,

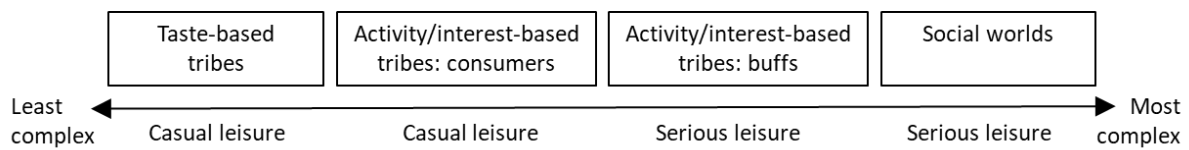
standardized culture, up to and including the unisexualization of appearance' (p.64). These 'tribes' typically lack formal organisation, are ephemeral and, while they may involve some face-to-face interaction, are also based on affinities which are often anonymous, with a regional, national and even global reach. Such capabilities will have been enhanced with the advent of social media in the decades since Maffesoli was writing on these matters. The proposition that postmodern society is moving 'beyond individualism' appears to be at odds with other theorists who have claimed to observe a process of individualisation, linked with distinctive lifestyles (e.g., Giddens, 1991, pp.74-80; Beck, 1992, pp.91-2). However, Evans (1997, p.239) suggests that the positions are not necessarily incompatible since the same authors observe that individuals freed from the rigidities of the mass identities of modernity, notably class, can pursue an individual identity by making choices from alternative lifestyles which are nevertheless collective in nature (Giddens, 1991, pp.80-81; Beck, 1992, p.88; Veal, 2013). Part of this affiliation process could involve more fluid tribes (Maffesoli, 1988/1996, pp.96-100).

The informal, ephemeral and often leisure/consumption-orientated features of these tribal groupings might suggest that their macro-structural or political role is likely to be minimal. However, Maffesoli's framework clearly has implications for the macro-level of society since it is presented as a replacement for traditional macro-level approaches based on structural and top-down power systems. Rojek (1995, p.152) suggests that tribes do not play such roles, arguing that any social integration which tribalism temporarily delivers 'evaporates in the diffuseness of postmodern life'. However, macro-level integrative dimensions can be discerned. According to Maffesoli (1988/1996, pp.145-148), there is communication between tribes via a mosaic-like 'network of networks'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Riley, Griffin and Morey (2010) argue that some tribal groups, such as participants in electronic dance music culture, can be seen as playing an alternative political role in the form of 'everyday politics'.

It could also be argued that, in recent years, the political world has moved in a Maffesolian direction, as exemplified by: régime-changing movements of the 1980s/1990s in Eastern Europe and later in the Middle East; the Brexiteer movement (to leave the EU) in the UK; the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA and beyond; the *gilets jaunes* in France; and the global #MeToo movement. Leisure, politics and tribalism overlap in such one-off events as Band Aid and Live Aid (Rojek, 2013), and did so in 2020 when it was claimed that users of the TikTok video-based app combined to disrupt a planned political rally of US President Donald Trump by making as many as a million false bookings for tickets (Lorenz, Browning & Frenkel, 2020). While these events/movements often involve some formally organised participants, their strength lies in their large numbers of typically loosely affiliated participants.

In a section of the *Synthesis* headed 'The global, neo-modern tribe', Maffesoli's concept is acknowledged and summarised (Stebbins, 2020, p.139). Stebbins latches on to comments by Shields (1996, p.xi) in the foreword to Maffesoli's book, which suggested that examples of tribes include 'not only fashion victims, or youth subcultures' but also 'interest-based collectivities: hobbyists; sports enthusiasts; and ... environmental movements'. This

recognition of serious leisure type activities leads Stebbins to conclude that ‘tribalization and the SLP go together’ (Stebbins, 2020, p.140). He then engages in a procrustean taxonomical exercise to align Maffesolian tribes with the SLP framework (p.141). The ‘fashion victims and youth subcultures’ identified by Shields are labelled *taste-based casual leisure tribes* while ‘interest-based collectivities’ are labelled *interest-based serious leisure tribes*. The latter are then relabelled *activity-based tribes* and split into two: *consumers* (casual) and *buffs* (serious). Serious leisure participants, other than ‘buffs’, are labelled *social worlds*. The three types of tribe together with social worlds are then arranged on a *structural complexity* continuum, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. SLP complexity continuum**

Source: Modified version of: Stebbins (2020, p.141: Fig. 7.10); activity-based tribes relabelled activity/interest-based

This schema gives rise to a number of puzzling issues.

- At the ‘least complex’ end of the spectrum, the proposition that *casual leisure/taste-based tribes* are inevitably less complex than the typical serious leisure groups located at the ‘most complex’ end of the spectrum, is surely questionable – see, for example, the discussion of tribal youth/music gatherings by Riley et al. (2010).
- The leisure activity of *casual leisure/taste-based tribes* could involve instrumental (e.g., political) as well as hedonic goals which may amount to a common ethos and associated ‘social world’ experiences, typically associated with serious rather than casual leisure (Stebbins, 2020, pp.31-32).
- The classification of *consumer tribes* as casual leisure participants in Figure 2 is at variance with research which sees some of them as serious leisure participants, clearly occupying distinct social worlds (e.g., Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2007).
- The *serious leisure* categories in Figure 2 consist of the *buffs* who are tribes, and the *social world* groups who are not tribes. *Buff*s are amateur experts in a field, such as music or sport, but not necessarily direct participants, while the *social world* groups comprise regular serious leisure participants. Being engaged with serious leisure, both groups enjoy an associated ‘social world’, possibly the same one. Arguably, therefore, the Figure 2 framework reduces the clear distinction between serious and casual leisure, largely because of the actual or potential presence of social worlds in all specified tribal groupings.
- The continuum format of Figure 2, spanning casual and serious leisure, is at variance with the categorical format of the traditional ‘essential SLP’ (Stebbins, 2020, pp.13-40), while failing to acknowledge the micro/meso-level continuum argument outlined above.

The interest here, however, is in the extent to which tribes and the Maffesolian theoretical framework facilitate macro-level analysis of leisure activity. The framework clearly opens up a macro-level cultural and/or political role for leisure-related tribes, particularly when they adopt an ethos which is resistant to the organised rational world of commerce, commodification and government. The macro-level role might be facilitated via the geographical mosaic of networks of tribes or via internet/social media, as discussed above. However, this level of analysis is not pursued in the *Synthesis*. Once again, however, were such an analysis to be undertaken, Stebbins' own analysis, as shown in Figure 2, suggests that tribes can be associated with both casual and serious mode of leisure participation, so any distinctive theoretical role of the SLP is elusive.

## **Conclusion**

The serious leisure perspective (SLP) is a major presence in contemporary leisure studies. Its strengths and weaknesses therefore affect a not insignificant proportion of leisure studies published output. The validity of the perspective as a classification system and as micro/meso-level theory has been critically examined and questioned elsewhere. More recent claims in relation to macro-level theory have prompted the assessment in this paper.

The actual, claimed or potential relationships between the SLP and a range of macro-level concepts and theories are examined in this paper. These include: social change; ethnicity/race, gender and class; mass leisure and consumption; digital and internet leisure; high-risk leisure; individualism/individuality; pluralism; social capital/civil labour; communicative versus instrumental reason; lifestyles; and tribes. In each case, it is found that macro-level dimensions of the SLP, or potential links between the SLP and macro-level issues, have generally been inadequately addressed in the SLP literature or not addressed at all. However, the limited exploration of macro-level analysis possible within the scope of this paper exposes the weakness of claims that the SLP has macro-level theoretical explanatory powers. This is largely because the SLP is built on the distinctions between serious and casual leisure but the relevance of such distinctions at the macro-level has not been established theoretically or empirically.

In addition to weaknesses previously identified in the SLP as both a classification system and as micro/meso-level theory, this paper therefore establishes considerable weaknesses in regard to macro-level theory. Researchers who might be considering adopting the SLP as a conceptual framework to provide theoretical underpinning for their research would therefore be well-advised to give full consideration to such weaknesses.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Project-based leisure is not considered further in this paper, due to space constraints and to the fact that it is, essentially, just a time-constrained version of serious leisure.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Synthesis*, Derom and Taks (2010) are mentioned, but not in relation to the SL-CL continuum. Shen and Yarnal (2010) are also ignored, although they received a passing mention in Stebbins (2012). In his response to Veal (2017a) Stebbins ignored the continuum argument (Stebbins, 2017; see Veal, 2017b).

<sup>3</sup> As chronicled at [www.seriousleisure.net](http://www.seriousleisure.net) and by Stebbins (2020, p.34).

<sup>4</sup> Stebbins adopts Turner's use of micro, meso and macro, but not his associated conceptual schema (Turner, 2010, p.18).

<sup>5</sup> A common feature of Stebbins', and others', writing on the SLP is to celebrate the increasing number of different leisure activities which have been studied as serious leisure, as if it is anticipated that some organised sporting, cultural or hobby groups might be found *not* to be serious leisure. But since the samples studied are typically recruited from organised groups, confirming that the activity concerned is 'serious' is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The same could be said of studies located in a succession of different countries.

<sup>6</sup> Stebbins does not dissent from this analysis, indicating that, with some exceptions, casual leisure does not contribute to social capital (Stebbins, 2020, p.160). However, while Putnam's analysis is focussed on organised groups as indicative of social capital, it is clear that the mostly casual, sport *spectators* and arts/entertainment *audiences* contribute to social capital, not just the players and performers. The decline of communal casual leisure, not just serious leisure, constitutes the decline in social capital.

<sup>7</sup> The source is cited in the *Synthesis* (p.37) as a source on 'occupational devotion' but not in relation to macro-level ideas.

<sup>8</sup> Network analysis of leisure has been championed by Stokowski (1994), but has not generally been adopted by leisure scholars. Stebbins (2020, p.5) acknowledges her work, but only in regard to micro-level analysis.

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