

SERIOUS LEISURE, CAREER VOLUNTEERS AND THE ORGANISATION OF ARTS EVENTS IN A REGIONAL AUSTRALIAN CITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results from an exploratory study that is framed by serious leisure theory and investigates the social organisation of the arts in a regional Australian city. This study found that local voluntary amateur and hobbyist artist groups are active in the local community and according to Stebbin's (1982) definition, can be regarded as serious leisure participants as they develop and coordinate resources, provide continuing calendars of activities, and organise events for the benefit of their members and the public. Consequently, it was found that each artist group relies heavily on a small number of members who, in addition to active participation in their group's creative activities, also undertake leadership duties and responsibilities to manage their group's activities and events. These members were identified as combining their creative amateur or hobbyist pursuits with a career volunteer role within their group. The personal rewards and personal costs of those roles align with the six qualities of serious leisure. The paper, briefly introduces the underlying beliefs of serious leisure theory, the method of research, and findings related to events and career volunteers. It also describes in aggregate terms, the events provided by voluntary artist groups, and identifies themes that emerged from the analysis of discussions with group spokespeople about their career volunteer roles, associated personal rewards, and personal costs.

KEYWORDS

Serious Leisure, volunteers, arts events

INTRODUCTION

Stebbins (1982; 1992) used the term 'serious leisure' to describe the activities of a small segment of people who have become increasingly involved in different types of leisure from which they do not make a living. This was a similar concept to what Dubin (1992) referred to as a 'central life interest,' or that portion of a person's total life in which energies are invested in physical, intellectual and positive emotional states. Stebbins concluded that there are many people in society whose work and leisure merge together because of the need to engage in such serious leisure activities as amateurism, hobbyist pursuits and/or career volunteering.

The study is framed by Stebbin's serious leisure theory and focuses on the career volunteer in the creative arts sector. He defined serious leisure as, "... the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience"(Stebbins, 1992). Serious leisure has six main qualities: perseverance, career, effort, unique ethos, identity, and durable benefits that include self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, recreation, accomplishment, self-image, social interaction, social belonging, and lasting products. This contrasts with casual leisure which is "...immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it" (Stebbins, 1997).

The amateur, hobbyist, and career volunteer are the three main types of serious leisure. Common to amateurs in art, science, sport, and entertainment sectors is a set of relationships known as the P-A-P (professional-amateur-public) system that characterises the amateur in relation to a corresponding professional identity and to the interest of an informed public (Stebbins, 2002). The hobbyist, without a corresponding professional identity, is active in a simpler H-P (hobbyist-public) system. "A hobby is a specialised pursuit beyond one's occupation, a pursuit that one finds particularly interesting and enjoyable because of its durable benefits" (Stebbins, 1992, p.10). Commercial activity and the interests of a small public can be found among collectors, makers and tinkers, activity participants (in non competitive rule-based pursuits), players of sports and games (where no professional counterparts exist) and liberal arts enthusiasts that make up the five hobbyist categories considered in serious leisure theory (Stebbins 2001).

The career volunteer is an active helper undertaking 'delegated tasks' usually within an organisational setting. A system of relationships is not designated for the career volunteer however, Stebbins (1992) noted that the volunteer and amateur are both involved in relating their serious leisure interests to a public or a client. Opportunities for career volunteering are available within at least 16 different areas including the provision of necessities, education, science, civic affairs, spiritual development, health, economic development, physical environment, religion, politics, government, safety, human relationships, the arts, recreation, support services, and informal volunteering (Stebbins, 1998).

VOLUNTEERS AND LEISURE

A volunteer has been defined as..."someone who willingly gives unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, through a club, organisation or association" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003, p. 2). In Australia, the ABS has recently released statistics that showed that one third of Australians aged 18 years and older undertook voluntary work in the 12 months prior to the interviews being conducted in 2000. Sports organisations had the largest number of volunteers, receiving assistance from 1.1 million people. This paper however is concerned more with the arts community, and ABS figures indicate that 282,000 people volunteered for the heritage and arts sector, with 117,000 men and 163,000 being women.

It has been argued that volunteering is a leisure activity because of the similar motivations and benefits that are derived from both. That is, both are intrinsically motivating as well as sharing common benefits such as having positive effects on people's physical and mental vitality, purposeful behaviours, sense of control, and social involvement (Shmotkin, Blumstein & Modan, 2003). Studies indicate that older volunteers in particular enjoy higher physical and mental well-being (Wheeler, Gorey & Greenblatt, 1998). Other leisure benefits such as role participation and social integration were shown to reduce the mortality risk of older volunteers (Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999). Shmotkin, Blumstein and Modan (2003) found in their study of older volunteers that they enjoyed a higher socio-economic status, remained more active, regarded themselves as healthier, and functioned better in cognitive, emotional and social domains than non volunteers. The volunteer has been connected to serious leisure in activities as diverse as the UK Guide Association (Nichols

& King, 1999), motor sport in Australia (Harrington, Cuskelly, & Auld, 2000), and biodiversity conservation in Canada (Caissie & Halpenny, 2003).

Because most of the research has been conducted with volunteers in sporting organisations (Cuskelly, 1994; Harrington et al., 2000) there is a need to look in greater depth at volunteers in the creative arts sector using a theoretical framework that has been developed by Stebbins in his studies on serious leisure. Several research questions were developed to guide this exploratory study,

1. What were the membership attributes of the local artist groups?
2. What were the major roles of artist groups in organising local events?
3. What were the career roles, personal rewards, and personal costs for volunteers working in the creative arts sector?

METHODS

Study Location

This exploratory study was undertaken in an Australian local government area known as 'Swamp Town' which is located on top of a plateau, two hours highway travel from the state capital. Historically, the difficulties of getting people and goods up and down the plateau edge encouraged the growth of 'Swamp Town' as a prosperous community, distinct from the urban mass of the state capital, and substantial enough to service the surrounding agricultural hinterland on the plateau. The geographical and economic qualities of 'Swamp Town' have supported population growth to approximately 90,000 residents with a corresponding development of substantial community, sporting, and cultural services provided by local government and community groups.

Data Collection

This was undertaken in one local government area and was limited to active voluntary groups expressly concerned with hobbyist, amateur, or professional artists. The study had two delimitations - first, it was an incomplete census of local artist groups as it excluded un-contactable and disbanded groups. Second, the position of informants within the artist groups varied as dialogue with each group resulted in certain individuals being recommended as the most appropriate and willing spokespeople to be interviewed. Several types of artist groups were identified in 'Swamp Town', which included 23 Incorporated Associations operating under State Government legislation, and eight unincorporated artist projects operating informally without legislative obligations. A total of 31 artist groups were identified using the eight artist categories of - actor, craft practitioner, composer, community cultural development worker, dancer, musician, writer, and visual artist, by searching through community service and telephone directories, local newspaper back issues, and the internet in conjunction with other field research. The eight artist categories were adapted from a recent study into the economic circumstances of serious practicing professional artists in Australia (Throsby & Hollister, 2003).

Data was collected by semi-structured interviews with 41 informants from 31 different artist groups being interviewed. This included 30 informants from the 23 Incorporated Associations, and 11 informants from the eight unincorporated artist projects. These were allocated by the different artist categories, as listed below in descending order as follows:

1. Musician and composer: eight associations and 11 informants;
2. Craft practitioner: seven associations and 10 informants;
3. Visual artist: three associations plus three projects and eight informants;

4. Actor: two associations plus one project, and five informants;
5. Writer: two associations plus one project, and four informants;
6. Community cultural development worker: three projects and three informants; and,
7. Dancer: one association and one informant.

Among the 30 informants from the 23 incorporated associations were 16 Presidents, five Secretaries, three founding members, two Committee members, one Vice-President, one Treasurer, one Patron, and one administrator. On seven occasions, joint interviews that included an Association President accompanied by another spokesperson such as the Treasurer, Secretary, Committee Member, or Patron occurred. All association spokespersons who were interviewed were elected committee members, or had been elected at some time before the interview. Among the 11 informants from the eight unincorporated artist projects, three who were jointly interviewed were collaborators for one project; two were jointly interviewed as collaborators for another project; while the remaining seven were interviewed separately representing one project each.

The age distribution of informants ranged from a 19 year old project co-ordinator to an 83 year old group patron. A total of 11 informants were under 30 years, one informant was 37 years, and the remaining 29 were 44 years or older. Gender was divided almost equally with 22 males and 21 females. Twenty informants were employed, self-employed, or running a household, 18 were retired, and five were university students.

Research Design

During the semi-structured interviews descriptive, qualitative and relational data was collected in relation to the history, purpose, structure, membership, activities, lifestyle, social world structure, serious leisure type, and inter-group connections of each group. In addition, demographics, creative education, and the career volunteer role, personal rewards and personal costs of each informant were discussed. This paper emphasised descriptive data in regard to group events in conjunction with qualitative data concerning career volunteer roles and associated personal rewards and costs.

RESULTS

Local Artist Group Membership Attributes

All the Incorporated Associations had similar office bearer positions, committee structures, and financial membership requirements. This formal structure allowed estimates of membership attributes. Generally, their membership numbers were stable. The average group size was 65 and varied from 22 members in a writer's group, to 160 members in a musical theatre group. The combined membership of the 23 incorporated associations was approximately 1,500 members. Gender and age distribution was homophilic among some artist group categories such as craft practitioner, visual artist, and writer groups. For example, craft practitioner groups interested in textiles had almost exclusively middle aged and elderly female memberships. In comparison, actor, dancer, and musician groups had mixed gender groups and age memberships. The ad hoc artist projects did not have formal memberships; interestingly however, two visual artist projects and one actor project identified their followers as predominantly as young females in their 20's.

Local Arts Events

The study found that the 31 voluntary artist groups maintained a busy calendar of performance seasons, exhibitions, and festivals for public enjoyment, combined with weekly, fortnightly, and monthly activities for their members. Additionally, commercial entrepreneurs, community service clubs, educational institutions and the local government art museum, and local government performing arts centre presented exhibitions, festivals, and performances. Occasionally, the local government art museum, and the performing arts centre hosted exhibitions and performances involving local artist groups. For example, the performing arts centre

on a fee for hire basis, provided a venue for annual performances by large musical groups. Generally, events by local artist groups presented the accomplishment of their members, encouraged recruitment, and raised funds; and the larger groups offered events that were more complex.

Groups involved in the performing arts provided rehearsal and performance opportunities for members, and seasons of performances for public enjoyment. The three actor groups organised member try out nights, youth theatre workshops, members own productions, theatre skills workshops, and an annual season of eight or more repertory plays. The two choral groups provided frequent rehearsals for members to support performance seasons of Christmas and Easter oratorios, concerts, musical theatre, theatre restaurants, opera, operettas, variety shows, and stage musicals; also, their choirs participated in charity, community, and sporting events. The two country music groups organised weekly and monthly rehearsal nights, bi-monthly social concerts, an annual country music competition, and an annual junior country music festival. The jazz group ran weekly rehearsals and fortnightly public jazz nights. The brass band provided weekly rehearsals, monthly performances and an annual concert. The folk group presented four free concerts annually. Each year the eisteddfod group staged two 15-day sessions to judge 4,000 to 5,000 entries spread among separate sections of vocal, choral, piano, organ, instrumental, speech, drama, and literary effort.

The craft practitioner, community cultural development worker, visual artist, and writer groups provided frequent membership meetings, training workshops, competitions, publications, and exhibitions for members and the public. The five visual artist groups provided weekly and monthly classes, technical workshops, art competitions, exhibitions, and film screenings; and annually, a national photography exhibition, and a junior art award for children. The seven craft practitioner groups provided weekly, fortnightly, and monthly workshops, group travel to special events and residential camps; and annual exhibitions of textile crafts, and lapidary. The three writer groups held regular member appreciation meetings and writing workshops, published the literary efforts of members, and held annual writing competitions. The three community cultural development groups published arts information and coordinated community art projects including murals and youth music festivals.

Career Volunteer Roles, Personal Rewards, and Personal Costs

During each interview, informants discussed their role within their group, the personal rewards they received from fulfilling this role, and the personal costs incurred because of this role. Digital recordings and transcripts of the semi-structured interviews discussing career volunteer issues were analysed and various themes emerged around roles, rewards, and costs. In the following discussion, the voices of various group members, as quotes, provide a direct link to their practical experience.

Informants from Incorporated Associations identified a leadership role that extended the required office bearer positions of President, Secretary, or Treasurer which had a mundane profile among members. Although the legislation associated with Incorporated Associations does not specify particular position descriptions, annual reporting requirements are usually interpreted as obligations for the Treasurer, and administration functions for the Secretary. Typically, unincorporated artist projects had one or two individuals acting as coordinators of an ad hoc project committee.

Leadership as a theme included three minor themes: administration, community liaison, and coaching. Administration included coordinating activities and resources, managing finances, and servicing regular committee meetings. Community liaison required acting as the public voice of the membership and promoting the group to the broader community, local government, and business sponsors. Coaching responded to the perception that someone had to see the big picture, understand the membership as a team, consolidate group commitment, encourage excellence, and applaud a job well done. Suffering a certain ambiguity, the

role of President was open to interpretation that required the incumbent to develop an individual response, as the President of a craft practitioner group (104 members) reflected,

'President is always a funny job with any organisation. You do not have specific functions that I can work out. Secretary, Treasurer, and people in subcommittees you know exactly what they do, but President is a bit vague' (female, 58 years, employed).

Leadership approaches varied across the various categories of artist groups, extending between the two poles of the executive leadership style of large musician and actor groups at one end, and the consensual leadership style of exclusively female craft practitioner groups at the other end. The President of an amateur actor group (130 members) that owns and operates a repertory theatre had a clear understanding of his leadership style,

'Probably to be that person who steers the organisation or so I find. Even though I have many good experienced people here, they look to the President. What somebody will do is come in and have some crazy idea which is going to be a disaster so, while everybody will talk about it, I will handle it in the committee situation to make sure that it doesn't get out of hand' (male, 53 years, employed).

His executive style contrasted with the consensus style of another President of a craft practitioner group (84 members) who approached her leadership role as one being the first among equals,

'Just keep everybody in tow, making sure new members are welcome, and that things are running smoothly in the Guild. The ladies make the decisions at the monthly meetings, so you have to know what is happening each month and make sure it's brought to their attention' (female, 74 years, retired).

Coaching has a very practical application in keeping the viability of the group spread across the membership, as a committee member from a country music group (60 members) pointed out:

'Keeping everybody aware that without total involvement of people nothing every gets done. You cannot just sit back and expect money to come to the club; everybody has to work for it' (female, 48 years, employed).

In summary, the leadership roles within the groups generally followed elected committee position lines where, as briefly mentioned, individuals tailored their leadership style to meet the creative purpose and dynamics of their group. Furthermore, leadership roles, as a group need and as a voluntary obligation for some members, formed a significant part of the unique ethos of group life.

Personal Rewards: Community Advantages and Individual Advantages

Two themes emerged from an analysis of personal reward discussions: firstly, community advantage, which was derived from altruistic experiences of personal effort combined with members' actions to contribute something substantial to the community; and secondly, individual advantage derived from a sense of personal accomplishment and positive external feedback.

Descriptions of community advantage rewards included working for the community good, getting the community involved, being community minded, filling a gap in the community, giving an opportunity to young people, and putting something back into community. Community advantage as a personal reward emerged among established incorporated associations and ad hoc projects. The president of a choral group (160

members), by his leadership efforts, enjoyed giving back to the community what he had received from a lifetime of amateur singing and musical theatre,

'Since I have gained so much pleasure, since I was eight or nine from singing it is a great pleasure to put something back in to the community. In some sort of token of repayment, for all that I have got out of it' (male, 69 years, retired).

A visual artist shared his creative experience for mutual benefit by coordinating a community mural project:

'Guess I am in some ways community minded, sharing the benefits of art that I have experienced personally to a broader community allowing them the opportunity to experience it and reap the benefits of that creative experience' (male, 20's, employed).

Explanations of individual advantages included the satisfaction from a job well done, confidence building, making friends, helping people, gaining respect and recognition, access to a safe and inspiring social group, social networking, wearing out but not rusting out in retirement, and 'giving me a buzz'. The Secretary of a craft practitioner group (100 members) reaped a significant boost to her self-esteem from her leadership efforts,

'It's a big confidence builder I found because I'm a relatively new to spinning, I've only being doing it for two years, I wouldn't have had to confidence or ability to attempt half of what I've have done without the support of the members of the group - yeah, very supporting and encouraging' (female, 37 years, employed).

An appreciation of his contribution kept up the commitment of the President of a musician group (30 members):

'I suppose you cannot buy gratitude like someone saying, '...yeah, it was a good club concert, thanks,' and that type of thing. So, you know, as much as there has been a number of times when you think - I'm not going to stand again, people will come and say, '...we wouldn't have a folk club if it wasn't for you,' and I suppose you listen to all those sort of things' (male, 50 years, employed).

The President of another musician group (100 members) valued the recognition and respect of her role within the broader community:

'What you get is being recognised as being the President of the society. Where I may not have had any recognition from other dignitaries or people in authority in this town, however they acknowledge that I hold the position and that brings a sense of respect' (female, 44 years, employed).

Occasionally, the personal rewards of community and individual advantage intersect, and a member obtains personal rewards from both kinds by making a leadership contribution to their group. The Secretary of a writers group (25 members) explained her experience of matching personal and group outcomes when, as a group struggled to remain functional, she enlisted in a leadership role:

'I wanted the group to keep going and so did other people but they did not feel capable of doing the things that needed to be done because they hadn't had any experience. It sounds a bit strange, but I really didn't want to be Secretary because I have just been Secretary of another group for six or seven years, which was a much bigger group with much more responsibility and a much wider spread. Therefore, I really did not want to be Secretary, but simply I wanted the writing group to

keep functioning. That is the reason I did it, and I get my jollies from the fact that it is there, that it is there for me. It is self-centred but it is true, I had just found it and I thought - Help! No, this cannot happen it cannot shut down' (female, 59, self-employed).

In summary, the personal rewards, derived from a mixture of community and individual advantages experienced by members in leadership roles included such durable benefits as self-enrichment, accomplishment, self-image, social interaction, and social belonging.

Personal Costs: Time and People Management

Descriptions of the personal costs of fulfilling a leadership role included burnout, hassles, internal politics, missing my moment in the sun, people grizzling, putting out bushfires, dealing with crazy ideas, and stress. Generally, increased time commitment was the common cost, however, as the complexities of negotiating group outcomes were discussed, the theme of people management emerged. The President of a craft practitioner group (104 members) summarised the personal costs of increased time demands and availability,

'Time and demands are certainly costs, and the more you become involved in the club the more time. Some people, who go to the club, never do anything for the club so they would not have any demands at all. Certainly, since becoming President you are the one everybody phones about anything, everything, and nothing at all' (female, 58 years, employed).

Balancing group outcomes with personal development could challenge a member in a leadership role. The consideration of others could go unreciprocated as the Secretary of a country music group (60 members) discovered,

'If you are organising other people to, say, get afternoon tea ready you might have to take a backward step as far as the performance is concerned. However, I have learned to say – no, I am entitled to my moment in the sun same as the rest of them. I used to take a backward step and let other people practice in preference to myself. But, I do not any more, because I have got to the stage of realising - you only do that to your own detriment' (female, 48 years, employed).

As one President reflected on the challenge of managing people in the creative flux of amateur repertory theatre (130 members), the co-ordination of diverse personalities to achieve successful group outcomes required stressful negotiations within a context where co-operation is always voluntary:

'Sometimes it can be stressful when you are dealing with difficult people, sometimes when you have somebody who is very valuable to the organisation, who has really overstepped the bounds, who really needs telling that. But, they cannot be told because people in a theatre tend to be a little bit flighty and a little bit emotional and it is hard to tell them something they do not want to hear. Sometimes you have to stick to a person mainly because of the enormous contribution they make rather than specifically because they are right about a point on a certain occasion. So, a couple of compromises get made and you have got to watch that people come in with the right attitudes' (male, 53 years, employed).

In summary, group members in leadership roles were able to tolerate the pressures on their time and patience, they were philosophical about the demands they faced, typically insisting that it all came with the territory. Underlying this approach was the voluntary nature of their commitment and their willingness to persevere.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The activities and events provided by local artist groups in 'Swamp Town' were reliant on each group, wholly within a voluntary context, managing resources and people successfully. All groups in the study, regardless of size, functioned and provided events because a few members accepted additional responsibilities. They provided stable leadership and a reservoir of experience, often for years at a time, holding and rotating through elected positions. These individuals appeared to combine their amateur or hobbyist creative pursuit with a career volunteer role in their club.

This study indicated a nexus between the local arts events provided by voluntary artist groups, the coordination of resources undertaken by these groups, the members in leadership roles within the groups, and the personal rewards and personal costs they experienced in managing the resources of their group. These roles, rewards, and costs identified in the study align with the qualities of serious leisure. The leadership role is part of the unique ethos of the groups; the personal rewards of a leadership role included durable benefits such as self-enrichment, accomplishment, self-image, social interaction, and social belonging; and the personal costs associated with a leadership role required time and perseverance.

This nexus indicated a combination of serious leisure types whether amateur or hobbyist, by undertaking a leadership role they became a career volunteer within their group as well as both a participant and a facilitator. In this configuration, a group member experienced qualities of serious leisure on two fronts, balancing the additional rewards and costs of their leadership commitments with artistic endeavours. In this study, all informants who were interviewed insisted that they maintained their creative career over and above their additional group obligations: artist first, leader second, and volunteers all. The successful process of a group included the development a calendar of events that provided personal rewards that were significant enough to encourage the ongoing commitment of members who took on leadership roles, as well as coordinating the group resources to achieve event outcomes.

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