

A Model of Psychological Mechanisms Mediating Leisure to Subjective Well-Being

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Introduction

Background

Leisure is a key life domain and a core ingredient for overall well-being. Yet, within positive psychology, its definition and the psychological pathways by which it evokes happiness are elusive (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008).

Aim

The present research addresses these issues by delineating leisure and presenting a conceptual framework linking leisure to subjective well-being (SWB).

Summary

To explain the effects of leisure on SWB, a quantitative summary of theories from 363 research articles linking leisure and SWB was conducted. Based on our findings, we propose five core psychological mechanisms that leisure potentially triggers to promote leisure SWB: detachment-recovery, autonomy, mastery, meaning, and affiliation (DRAMMA). These psychological mechanisms promote leisure SWB which leads to enhanced global SWB through a bottom-up theory of SWB (see Figure 1).

Method

Initial Search

We conducted a quantitative summary of the existing theories based on a literature search. A keyword search on PsycINFO using "leisure or recreation" and "well-being, life satisfaction, quality of life, emotion, or happiness" recovered 3620 articles. Out of these articles, 363 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters were identified as relevant to the topic as they sought to examine the relation between leisure and SWB. The articles were examined for the theories proposed and the underlying psychological processes invoked by the theory (see Table 1).

Secondary Review

After this initial step of identifying five psychological mechanisms from the 363 peer-reviewed articles, we selected a random subset of 100 articles from the larger subset of 248 articles that did not reference any specific theory or framework. These 100 articles were tested to determine if the five psychological mechanisms proposed could be interpreted as potential mediating factors relating leisure to SWB (see Figure 2).

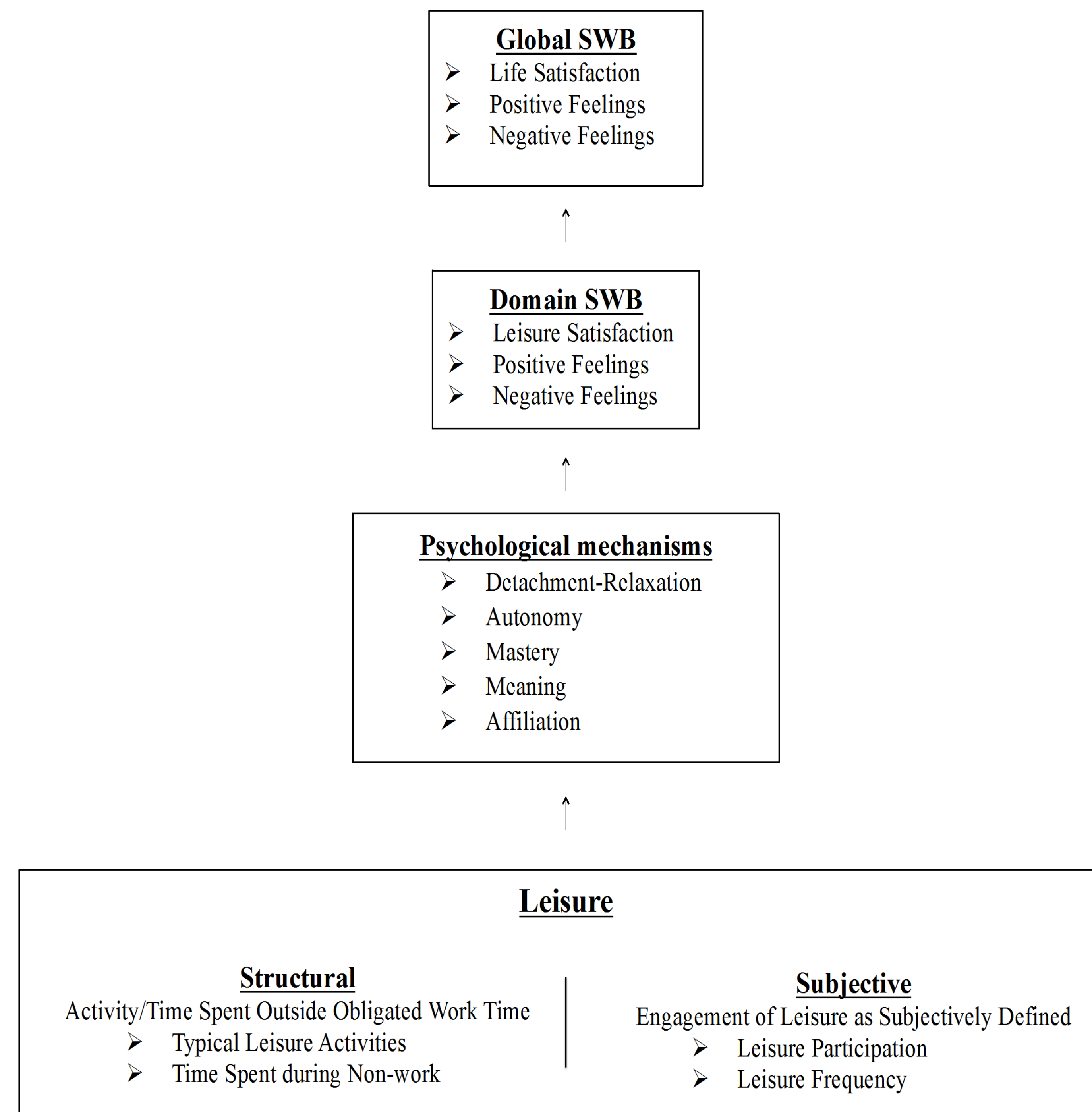


Fig 1. Conceptual model linking leisure to subjective well-being

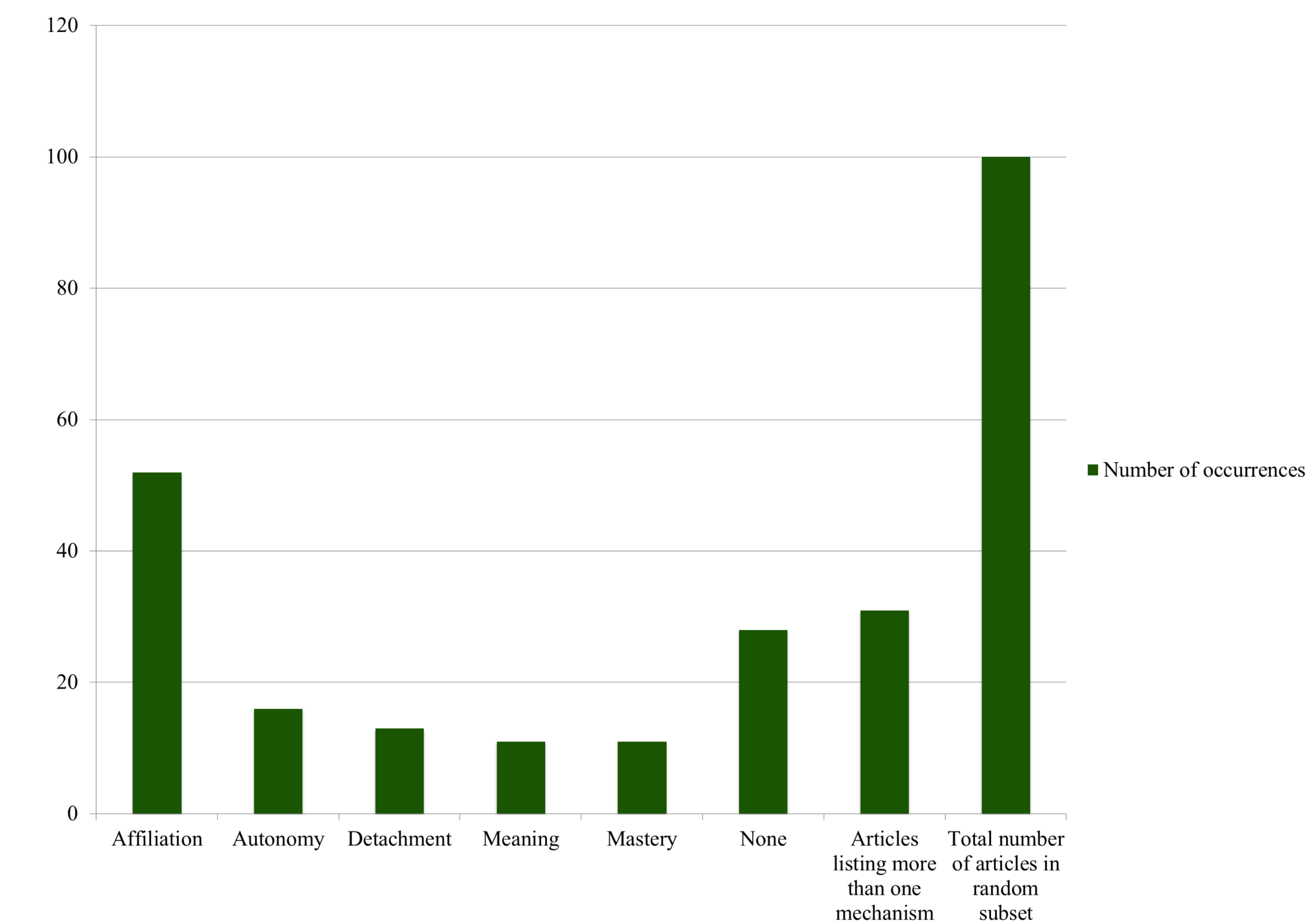


Fig 2. A graph showing the total number of occurrences of proposed psychological mechanisms found as a potential mediating factor between leisure and SWB from a chronologically representative subset of 100 articles not listing any framework, theory, or model

Discussion

The theoretical model merges and incorporates a large number of theories, models, and frameworks to describe the psychological mechanisms that underpin SWB, allowing for a clearer conceptual understanding of how SWB relates to leisure. While individual theories relating to leisure and SWB have provided the necessary data to build this model, an individual theory or model may not encapsulate other elements for a broad account. The theoretical model suggests that leisure activities or participation trigger certain psychological mechanisms. Through the use of this model, we are able to look at the different psychological pathways by which leisure affects SWB. The theoretical model explains why certain leisure activities promote SWB more than others. While not specified in the theoretical model, we also propose that individual differences may moderate the relation between leisure and SWB. Certain individuals may react more positively to certain psychological experiences, resulting in greater increases in SWB.

Conclusion

Leisure is a key domain in life and can influence SWB in a positive manner. We propose an integrative model based on past research that would be fruitful for future studies of the leisure-SWB association. We operationally define leisure in structural and subjective terms and propose five key psychological mechanisms based on theory: detachment-recovery, autonomy, mastery, meaning, and affiliation (DRAMMA). These mechanisms promote SWB in leisure, which subsequently promote general SWB, integrated as part of a bottom-up theory of SWB. Nevertheless, more questions remain in the study of leisure and SWB. We hope that this framework can serve as a crucial platform for building future knowledge on leisure and SWB.

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Framework/Theory/Model Found in Literature Search	Summary	Number of Occurrences	Corresponding Psychological Mechanism
Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)	The psychological state of total immersion and complete focus in an activity leads to optimal well-being.	44	Mastery
Activity Theory (Havighurst, 1961)	The elderly need to stay engaged and active in social relationships to age healthily.	27	Affiliation/Meaning
Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the three psychological needs required for psychological well-being.	24	Autonomy/Mastery/Affiliation
Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 1992)	Serious leisure is a leisure pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer, requiring high levels of skill, knowledge, and experience.	14	Mastery/Meaning
Disengagement Theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961)	The elderly disengage with social ties and relationships as they age.	14	Affiliation
Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1976)	The elderly maintain the same leisure activities as they age.	12	Autonomy
Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954)	Humans progress through five stages of motivation: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.	12	Affiliation/Autonomy/Mastery/Meaning
Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989)	Individuals accumulate resources used to overcome or respond to stress and threats.	11	Detachment from work
Effort-Recovery Model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998)	Effort expended during work leads to load reactions and can hamper the recovery process.	8	Detachment from work
Selection, Optimization and Compensation Theory (Baltes and Baltes 1990)	As people age, they become more selective in choosing activities and social relationships, optimizing choices while compensating for weaker areas.	7	Affiliation/Meaning
No Framework		248	
Examples of Other Relevant Theories	Optimal arousal theory (Iso-Ahola, 1980); Psychophysiological restoration theory (Ulrich et al., 1991)	15	

Table 1. A tally of the number of occurrences of relevant frameworks, theories, and models along with corresponding psychological mechanisms from the theoretical model