Toward a New Understanding of Recreational Specialization

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Abstract

Recreational specialization is a useful framework for exploring within-activity differences among recreation participants. Despite its utility, there is a degree of confusion surrounding the meaning of the construct. In this paper, we explore three interrelated meanings of recreational specialization. The first is that specialization refers to a continuum of behavior from the general to the particular (Bryan, 1977). This use of the construct helps researchers and recreation practitioners understand different styles of participation. Second, we examine specialization as a developmental process. Researchers assume people progress over time in leisure activities. We argue this assumption is questionable and begs for additional research. Third, specialization refers to an area of interest in which recreation participants may specialize. In this last section, we examine sources of segmentation within leisure social world and how people have careers across one or more activities within a social world.

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Keywords: Recreational specialization, segmentation, serious leisure, progression.

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Introduction

Recreational specialization is a well-established framework for exploring within-activity differences among recreation participants. The term was coined by Hobson Bryan (1977, 1979) and has been used extensively by outdoor recreation researchers as an "independent variable" to predict different facets of participation, including information sources people use when planning trips, motivations or expected rewards, place attachment, attitudes toward resource management, and preferences for physical and social settings attributes (Scott & Shafer, 2001a). The framework is robust enough that it has also been used to segment visitors to festivals and events (Burr & Scott, 2004), heritage tourism destinations (Kerstetter, Confer, & Graefe, 2001), and participants in more sedentary leisure activities (Scott & Godbey, 1994). Recreational specialization remains a highly useful framework for natural resource and recreation event managers as they seek to develop products and services to different segments of activity participants.

Despite its practical utility, we argue there remains a great deal of confusion in the meaning of recreational specialization which hinders potential areas of inquiry and application. Bryan (1977) originally defined recreational specialization as "a continuum of behavior from the general to the particular, reflected by equipment and skills used in the sport, and activity setting preferences" (p. 175). This definition is a bit cryptic but it basically means recreation participants vary in the intensity of participation from "casual" to "committed." In the first part of our paper, we explore this idea further and present some recent empirical developments that may aid researchers and recreation managers in their efforts to identify distinct groups of participants along the continuum.
However, we believe that specialization has two other meanings. One is that specialization is a process that involves a progression in how people participate in and view a leisure activity over time (Scott & Shafer, 2001a). The other is that specialization refers to a "specific field or area of interest within the broader, more inclusive social world" (Scott & Shafer, 2001b, p. 358). Both of these ideas are examined more closely in subsequent sections of the paper.

**Specialization as a Continuum of Behavior**

A key idea underlying recreational specialization is that within any given recreation activity, there are a range of attitudes, preferences, and behaviors displayed by participants. Another key idea is that individuals can be arranged along a continuum from "casual" to "committed." Stated differently, recreation participants vary in terms of their level of attachment and behavior to specific leisure activities. From a conceptual point of view, specialization is similar to a variety of frameworks used to describe "intensity of participation," including serious leisure, commitment, enduring involvement, experience use history, central life interest, and loyalty. Some scholars have played down the utility of specialization as they believe it is a manifestation of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) or commitment (Buchanan, 1985).

We argue that the specialization construct remains useful because of its emphasis on different styles of participation. A style of participation is a blend of attitudes and behaviors that characterize a person’s involvement in a given activity (Kerins, Scott, & Shafer, 2007). Recreationists can be grouped together in so far as they share similar styles of participation. In his original description of specialization, Bryan (1977) described four distinct types or groups of fishermen: occasional fisherman, generalists,
technique specialists, and technique-setting specialists. Each group of fishermen represented a unique style of fishing, as reflected by participants’ fishing orientations and equipments, attitudes toward management practices, angling history, setting preferences, and commitments to the activity. Bryan (1979) subsequently used these behavioral and attitudinal variables to create typologies of other outdoor recreation participants (e.g., backpackers, canoeists, hunters). Using the specialization framework, other researchers have created typologies of birdwatchers (McFarlane, 1994; Scott & Thigpen, 2003), dancers (Brown, 2007), bridge players (Scott & Godbey, 1994), and boaters (Donnelly, Vaske, & Graefe, 1986).

A major criticism of specialization research is that it has suffered from inconsistency in conceptualization and measurement (McFarlane, 2001). Although researchers agree that the construct is multidimensional and should be assessed using behavioral and attitudinal indicators, for many years there was little agreement about what specific variables should be used to measure the construct (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992; Scott & Shafer, 2001a). In one of the first empirical efforts to operationalize the construct, Wellman, Roggenbuck, and Smith (1982) identified three dimensions of specialization: investments, past experience, and centrality to lifestyle. This was followed up by Donnelly et al. (1986) who measured specialization among boaters using indicators of frequency of participation, equipment, skill, and boating related interests. Since then, the construct has been assessed using a wide range of dimensions and items. According to Kuentzel and McDonald, this lack of consensus about what constitutes specialization is exacerbated by the fact that "researchers do not always agree about what measures define what dimensions" (p. 271).

Ditton, Loomis, and Choi (1992) also observed that Bryan’s original definition of specialization tended to be tautological, meaning that the construct and "subsequent propositions are both defined and measured in
the same terms” (p. 34). In an effort to avoid this tautology, Scott and Shafer (2001a) argued that specialization could be measured using three distinct dimensions. First, they felt that specialization entailed a focusing of behavior. In this case, people were likely to vary according to how much time and money they devote to a given recreation activity. Some individuals participate in an activity so frequently they have little time, energy, and resources to devote to other pursuits. Second, Scott and Shafer argued that specialization entailed the development and the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Again, recreation participants differ markedly in skill from individuals with high levels of activity mastery and/or knowledge to individuals who are beginners or novices. Recreation participants are also likely to differ a great deal in how much interest they have in developing and sharpening their skills. Finally, Scott and Shafer argued that specialization should be measured by assessing personal and behavioral commitments. Personal commitment includes a strong personal attachment to the activity (e.g., "It doesn’t get any better than this!") and belief that the activity is worth doing for its own sake. Behavioral commitment has to do with those external investments (e.g., friendships, equipment purchases) that make withdrawal from the activity difficult. Individuals, for example, develop close personal relationships with other activity participants and activity cessation might result in loss of friends. For some recreation participants, commitments may be so high the activity constitutes a central life interest. For others, commitments may be low that participation represents a casual or minor pastime.

Lee and Scott (2004) confirmed the utility of measuring specialization using indicators of behavior, skill, and commitment. They also found that the dimensions were only moderately related, which indicates that people may be low in one dimension but high in one or both of the other dimensions. Indeed, some people may participate frequently in a leisure
activity (e.g., television watching), but may show little evidence of skill or activity commitment. Likewise, another individual may participate in a leisure activity (e.g., hunting) infrequently but display advanced knowledge and skill at shooting and weaponry, and/or exhibit a high degree of attachment to the activity. It is also important to note that individual dimensions may differ significantly in how well they predict other facets of participation. Studies have shown that dimensions of specialization differ in their relationship to physical and social setting preferences (Kuentzel & Heberlein, 1992), attitudes about management preferences (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992), place attachment (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000), and participant motivations (McFarlane, 1994).

One other conceptual issue that researchers have struggled with is how best to classify participants along the recreational specialization continuum. Two traditional approaches have been used. One is to create a composite (or additive) index by summing a recreation participant’s responses to different measures (e.g., Salz, Loomis, & Finn, 2001). Respondents are then divided into specialization groups that range from low (least specialized) to high (highly specialized). Kuentzel and McDonald (1992) criticized this approach due to the fact that specialization dimensions often fail to co-vary. A second classification approach has been to use cluster analysis. This latter approach takes into account the multidimensionality of the specialization construct. This approach has been used effectively in studies of fisherman (Chipman & Helfrich, 1988), birdwatchers (McFarlane, 1994; Scott & Thigpen, 2003), and campers (McIntyre & Pigram, 1992). Classifying people using cluster analysis allows for the possibility that recreationists in one group may share similar characteristics to recreationists in another group. Although useful, results of cluster analysis are likely to vary from study to study as researchers often use different indicators to measure specialization.
An alternative and potentially user friendly approach to classifying participants has been tested recently in studies of birdwatchers (Scott, Ditton, Stoll, & Eubanks, 2005) and Ultimate Frisbee players (Kerins et al., 2007). In these studies, respondents were asked to self-identify themselves as either a casual, active, or committed (serious) participant. Each type of participant reflected a unique style of participation and included elements of behavior, skill, and commitment. In the study reported by Kerins et al., the three participation types were presented on the questionnaire as follows:

1 *Committed Ultimate player*: in general, a person who travels out of town frequently to participate in Ultimate tournaments, who subscribes to Ultimate related magazines, websites, email lists, who is a member of local, state, and national Ultimate organizations, who keeps track of lifetime achievements (i.e. remembers high tournament finishes), who owns lots of Ultimate specific equipment, who Ultimate is the primary activity that you participate in, and who is constantly trying to develop Ultimate skills.

2 *Active Ultimate player*: in general, a person who travels out of town infrequently to participate in Ultimate tournaments, who may subscribe to Ultimate magazines, websites, or emails lists, who may be a member of local, state, or national Ultimate organizations, who is not as concerned with lifetime achievements (may remember a tournament, but not necessarily the final results), who may own a little to a lot of Ultimate specific equipment, and who is content with maintaining current Ultimate skill level.

3 *Casual Ultimate player*: in general, a person who rarely if ever travels out of town to participate in Ultimate tournaments, who
does not subscribe to Ultimate magazines, websites, or email lists but once in a while may read an article related to Ultimate, who is not a member of local, state, or national Ultimate organizations, who is not at all concerned with lifetime Ultimate achievements, who owns little if any Ultimate specific equipment, for who Ultimate is not a primary activity in terms of participation, and who has little if any inclination to develop Ultimate skills. (Kerins et al., 2007, 8-9)

The self-classification measure, in each study, was compared with an additive index and a cluster analysis measure in predicting participants’ motives. Results from both studies indicated that the self-classification measures performed as well, if not better, than the two traditional approaches in predicting motives for participation. Moreover, in both studies there was a strong association between the self-classification measure and individual specialization indicators. Using discriminant analysis, over 70% of respondents in each study were classified correctly using various indicators of specialization. These studies suggest that it might be possible to create a measure of recreational specialization that is relatively easy to administer and analyze. If standardized, a self-classification measure may also aid researchers and recreation managers to compare participant types at different events and recreation destinations. This would greatly aid event planners as they seek to develop programs, services, and promotional materials for distinct types of participants along the specialization continuum.

**Specialization as Progression**

Conceiving specialization as a continuum of involvement provides a useful analytic tool for segmenting recreation participants and identifying
distinct style of participation. Bryan (1977, 1979), however, also conceived recreational specialization as a framework for understanding the typical stages through which recreation participants were likely to progress the longer they participated in an activity. Scott and Shafer (2001a) argued that specialization, from this point of view, is a developmental process whereby people devote themselves increasingly to a particular activity to the exclusion of others. Bryan theorized that as people progress in a recreation activity, their preferences, attitudes, and motivations tend to change as well. Bryan argued, for example, that anglers "typically start with simple, easily mastered techniques which maximize chances of a catch, then move to more involved and demanding methods the longer they engage in the sport" (p. 182). This idea is consistent with Little’s (1976) thinking about specialization, who defined the construct as the "selective channeling of dispositions and abilities" (pp. 84-85).

A person’s involvement in an activity, if continued over any length of time, can be viewed and tracked much like a career. Involvement is represented by a trajectory that may include a number of turning points (Stebbins, 1992) or changes in route between beginning and end. The central idea behind a career trajectory that involves progression is that recreation participants become more focused in the activity, acquire more skill and knowledge, and become more committed over time. Progression might include movement among variations of a single activity, each representing new or refocused behavior, new or heightened skills, and a shift in commitment.

Amateur sports provide a useful entry point for understanding specialization in terms of progression. Hill and Hansen (1988) noted that specialization among athletes means intensely participating in a single sport to the exclusion of others. Indeed, many amateur athletes often compete in a single sport year round. They achieve excellence by
committing themselves to a regimental, if not fanatical, schedule of practice and training. For the "lucky few," specialization may mean earning a scholarship or even a career in professional sports.

Many researchers who have studied specialization among outdoor recreation participants have assumed that people progress in the activity over time (Ditton et al., 1992; Donnelly et al., 1986; McFarlane, Boxall, & Watson, 1998). Researchers have also assumed that the end product of specialization represents a privileged, if not exalted, status within the leisure social world and that "specialists" provide novices or newcomers to the activity a model of appropriate behavior (Bryan, 1977; Wellman et al., 1985; Williams, 1985). These assumptions are questionable and beg for empirical examination. The little evidence we have about progression suggests the following:

- Most people never progress to an advanced stage of involvement (Kuentzel & Heberlein, 2006). Studies, in fact, suggest that the vast majority of participants can be classified as casual participants or toward the low end of the specialization continuum (McFarlane, 1994; Scott et al., 2005; Scott & Thigpen, 2003).
- Years of experience in a leisure activity has been found to be only modestly related to skill and commitment (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992; Shamir, 1992; Virden & Schreyer, 1988). This suggests that continuity characterizes people’s involvement over time rather than progression.
- At least one study indicates that many leisure participants have little desire to progress over time (Scott & Godbey, 1994). Indeed, many people are content to participate in a leisure activity with elementary skills. These individuals may actually eschew performance standards and behaviors displayed by more advanced activity participants.
• Most leisure participants probably prefer participating in a wide range of leisure activities rather than pursuing any one activity at the expense of others (Kuentzel, 2001). Some outdoor recreation participants, for example, enjoy participating in several outdoor pursuits and do not specialize in any one activity.

• Many individuals prefer developing relationships with other people (Little, 1976). Their attachment to activities is inconsequential and activity choices are based on their ability to nurture these relationships (Little, 1976).

• Other individuals develop strong relationships with places rather than activities (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992). Although these places may facilitate participation in specific leisure activities (Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, & Wickham, 2004), they may be valued because they provide individuals symbolic and/or emotional meanings.

• Specialization may be more likely to occur for some groups of people than it is for others. In most, if not all, societies, specialization is more problematic for women than it is for men because they are often expected to serve others and lack support from significant others to develop their skills in leisure activities (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991).

• Likewise, a variety of constraints may inhibit progression. Lack of time and family and career commitments certainly hinder people’s ability to develop skills over time. Progression may also be constrained by inadequate opportunities, insufficient personal resources, and, in the case of minority groups, overt or subtle forms of discrimination (Shinew & Floyd, 2005).

• Performance standards in some activities may hamper would-be participants from progressing. Stebbins (1992) observed that
within group activities (e.g., theatre, choral groups, baseball), participants who lack appropriate skills and knowledge may "find others being hired or invited into a group before themselves" (pp. 82-83).

- In some cases, people may start participating at the high end of the specialization continuum. Bryan (2001) observed that this may be facilitated by formal instruction, innate skill, and refined equipment. He noted there may be a degree of "cultural lag" among newcomers who display high degrees of skill and equipment if they do not also display appropriate ethical conduct.

- Although progression may be associated with a variety of "enduring benefits" (Stebbins, 1992, 2007), it may also have a "dark side" insofar as it creates conflict among family members and other relationships. Some individuals' attachment to a leisure activity may become obsessive to such an extent that they lack perspective and understanding for others and their interests. Such individuals may even seem peculiar if they lack basic social skills to get along in everyday situations.

Progression clearly does characterize some people's participation in leisure activities. These individuals have careers in their pursuits, develop skills over time, and become increasingly committed to their chosen activities. They can be seen to take on the persona of the specialist or serious participant. However, as we have attempted to convey in the preceding bullet points, progression is probably not typical among recreation participants. There are a variety of constraints to progression, including a lack of interest. Moreover, people are just as likely to develop attachment to people and places. These attachments may contribute to or inhibit progression to a more specialized level in an
activity. Future research is needed to understand the conditions under which people progress. Progression also may have negative outcomes for some participants. Future research is needed to better understand the consequences that accompany specialization.

**Specialization as a Field of Action**

To better understand progression and other facets of recreational specialization, researchers and recreation managers would do well to frame leisure activities as complex fields of action. Stated differently, leisure activities are social worlds composed of actors, organizations, and regular ways of doing things that are meaningful and coherent to participants. As we have noted elsewhere (Scott & Shafer, 2001b), there are potentially multiple sources of division within a given leisure social world and people may progress along any number of lines. Specialization here refers to a "specific field or area of interest within the broader, more inclusive social world" (Scott & Shafer, 2001b, p. 358). In this section, we first examine sources of differentiation within social worlds and legitimation processes. We then examine how people have careers across one or more sub-activities within a given social world.

Within any given leisure activity, there are many options facing the beginning participant. Numerous subworlds within the larger social world vie for new members or attempt to exclude them until membership qualifications have been met. Straus (1982, 1984) identified six sources of subworld segmentation: space (subworlds grow up around spatial distinctions); objects (subworlds grow up around the use of different objects); technology and skill (technological revolutions often lead to new subworlds); ideology (subworlds emerge as people differ in what is believed to be authentic); intersections (when two worlds intersect to form
a new subworld); and recruitment (new members spur the formation of new subworlds). In some cases, groups of individuals may deliberately split-off from an existing social world to create a new social world. According to Strauss, this occurs because some social world members feel existing ways of doing things are no longer viable. Segmentation eventually leads to the formation of subworlds that are different from others in meaning, function, and organization. Individuals involved within subworlds of a leisure social world (e.g., bicycling, rock climbing, camping) see themselves as participating in culture areas that are authentic and meaningful (Scott & Godbey, 1992).

Strauss (1982) also described the legitimation processes that accompany the formation of new subworlds. Initially, legitimation involves discovery and claiming worth. For example, rock climbers doing a new activity realize that others are doing the same thing and they may jointly make claims about the goodness of the activity. According to Strauss, for a subworld to develop, members must regard the core activities as fun, appropriate, and aesthetically or morally right. Members of the newly formed subworld will seek to distance or differentiate themselves from other subworlds within the social world. Over time, members attempt to revise history so it relevant and consistent with new ways of doing thing. Frequently, subworld members will compete with other subworlds for resources. These competitions are sometimes debated in public arenas. As a result of these debates subworlds can further segment and even separate completely from the parent social world.

Recreation participants may participate in one or more subworlds and with varying degrees of intensity. Climbing provides a useful example. The social world includes mountaineering and rock climbing. The latter can be further divided into traditional (outdoor) climbing, indoor climbing, bouldering, and sport climbing. Most rock climbers will be
more or less devoted to one of these activities, but will also participate, in varying degrees, in other climbing activities. Traditional ideas about specialization might have a rock climber move from indoor climbing, to traditional (outdoor) climbing, and then graduate up to mountaineering. However, many who climb may well spend their entire climbing careers within one subworld and may not progress in behavior, skill, and commitment over time. Indeed, some climbers are quite content to participate for sociability and have little interest in developing advanced climbing skills. Which area climbers choose and their intensity of involvement is subject to many factors, including age, climbers’ first experiences (indoors or outdoors), other social world attachments, aversion or attraction to risk, and numerous other possible factors.

Bicycling provides an example of how specialists narrow their interests within a specific subworld. Bicycling has many sources of division with three being: road riding, mountain biking, and bike motocross or BMX (Scott & Shafer, 2001b). A newcomer may begin as a participant in both road cycling and mountain biking, but might eventually shift to a specific branch of road cycling (e.g., competitive road cycling) only. This change may require the individual to forgo mountain biking in favor of road cycling as he seeks to develop speed, endurance and tactical prowess. Over time, the individual may become increasingly committed to competitive road cycling as he joins a team, invests in equipment specific to the activity, and make friendships among fellow participants. The career trajectory in this example is similar to one a person might undertake in paid work. He may decide to focus his behavior and develop knowledge and commitments to achieve greater satisfaction and career advancement.

The activity of camping offers an example of how people might progress to a more sophisticated level of participation across different
leisure activities. This example provides insight into key turning points and contingencies (Stebbins, 1992) that impact a leisure career. Our hypothetical participant, Julie, may begin car camping in a pop-up trailer with her family at age 12 and continue to do so through her teens. She and her family worked their way up to extended day hikes after several years of taking their annual trip to a state park in their area. These hikes often lasted several hours and included a long walk to a beach for which the park was named. Her familiarity with, and enjoyment of, camping and hiking make her open to suggestions from friends to go backpacking during her first year of college. She enjoys the variation on her old activity, finding it gives her a chance to use old camping/hiking skills and knowledge while offering new challenges. Her enjoyment creates a need to learn more about nutrition, exertion at altitude, new types of equipment and how to pack for safety and comfort. She begins to travel often with the college outing club and develops a small group of friends who sign up for a mountaineering course the following summer. The course provides skill and knowledge that give her confidence to begin traveling to remote, high altitude locations where she excels at alpine climbing. She is now motivated to engage in specific strength exercises and begins a regimen of cardiovascular training between trips. Over her college years she climbs at progressively higher altitudes and under more difficult conditions-Mount Whitney, Mount Rainier and then Denali. After graduation Julie travels to Nepal in search of her first alpine ascent of an 8000 meter peak.

Understanding the segmentation processes that create different subworlds enhances our understanding of specialization by highlighting the different career paths that recreation participants may encounter over time. Some individuals may remain attached to one activity within a leisure social world. Other participants may progress over time to more
sophisticated forms of activity within the social world. Empirical research is needed to provide greater insight as to why some people progress and the forces that guide a participant through various subworlds. This understanding will allow researchers and practitioners to better understand why individuals are attracted to some activities over other and which paths are associated with prolonged participation.

**Conclusions**

We have argued that specialization has essentially three meanings. The first is that it is a continuum of behavior from the general to the particular (Bryan, 1977). Most scholars have interpreted this to mean that there is heterogeneity in styles of participation within any given leisure social world and that recreation participants can be highly casual or highly serious or somewhere in between. A key challenge facing recreation researchers and managers is to develop valid indicators of the construct that allow for comparisons across activities and settings. Second, specialization can be understood as a developmental process that entails a focusing of behavior, skills, and commitment over time. While most researchers have assumed that people progress over time, we have argued that this assumption is problematic and begs for empirical examination. It is more likely that few people ever progress to higher stages of participation. Research is needed to understand the factors that both constrain and facilitate specialization over time. Finally, specialization refers to a specific area of interest in which recreation participants may concentrate their behavior, skills, and commitments. Most leisure activities are highly diverse social worlds and include multiple subworlds. Multiple offerings mean people may progress along any number of lines. Furthermore,
some people may choose to participate in many subworlds; others may choose to devote their attention to one subworld to the exclusion of others. Research is needed to understand the factors that guide an individual to participate in one subworld over another.
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