Research Reflection

Serious Leisure and Recreation Specialization: An Uneasy Marriage

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A case is made to wed research on serious leisure and recreation specialization. Before such a marriage can occur, the strengths and differences of the two perspectives must be examined. In this article, four important contributions of the recreation specialization are put forward that will further our understanding of serious leisure and intense forms of leisure. These are (1) there is diversity among participants involved in the same leisure activity, (2) we can quantify recreation specialization and serious leisure, (3) there are gradations of seriousness and specialization, and (4) there are practical applications of understanding that participants vary along a specialization continuum.

Keywords casual leisure, recreation specialization, serious leisure

Introduction

In the 1970s, Robert Stebbins and Hobson Bryan embarked on lines of inquiry that focused researchers’ attention on complex forms of leisure that are central to participants’ identities and lifestyles. Stebbins’s (1979) early work focused on amateur actors, archeologists, and baseball players. He documented the commitments these individuals made to their respective avocations. Just a few years later, Stebbins (1982) outlined characteristics of serious leisure although a formal definition came later: “the systematic pursuit of . . . activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (1992, p. 3). Bryan’s (1977) work was initially limited to trout fishermen but he later applied his ideas to other outdoor pursuits, including hunting, photography, and mountain climbing (Bryan, 1979). He defined recreation 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). The idea here is that recreation participants can be arranged along a continuum of involvement from “casual” to “committed.”
The serious leisure and specialization frameworks continue to be used widely to study intense forms of leisure, although specialization frameworks have become the “construct of choice” among researchers in general. A quick check on Google Scholar (January 31, 2012) produced 2,650 hits for serious leisure and 1,170 hits for recreation specialization or recreational specialization. There are at least three reasons for the ascension of serious leisure over specialization:

1. Stebbins has sustained, uninterrupted, a productive career of more than 30 years studying serious leisure. He has published dozens of peer-reviewed journal articles and books, presented papers at numerous conferences, and even developed a website he calls the Serious Leisure Perspective. This level of productivity is testimony to his commitment to furthering our understanding of complex forms of leisure. Bryan’s career, in contrast, took him elsewhere and other researchers took up his ideas. Since his early work, he has published only a few short papers on recreation specialization (e.g., Bryan, 2000).

2. Serious leisure has been studied across a wide array of pastimes, including Civil War reenacting, barbershop quartets, dancing, football spectating, rock climbing, long distance running, and dog sports. In contrast, recreation specialization has been primarily applied to outdoor recreation activities, including fishing, boating, hunting, camping, and birdwatching.

3. The term itself, serious leisure, is fairly straightforward and has currency in everyday language. The term recreation specialization, in contrast, is a bit more ambiguous and begs for clarification.

Stebbins and Bryan stated (personal correspondence, September 1, 2010) they had no knowledge of one another in the 1970s when they first published their ideas. Their respective ideas incubated separately and according to their own muses. Today, each researcher has attracted several loyal disciples who study either serious leisure or recreation specialization. Few researchers are faithful to both. It is appealing to speculate whether or not this would be true today had Bryan and Stebbins met in the 1970s. Would they have collaborated with one another? Short of that, would there have been greater cross-fertilization or weaving together of ideas? Would they have agreed at the time that one term or the other was more satisfactory in capturing the phenomena they were looking at? They recently acknowledged (personal correspondence, September 1, 2010) had such a meeting occurred they would indeed have had much in common and much to discuss. Beyond that, it is difficult to speculate whether a weaving together of ideas would have transpired.

Is it time for researchers to acknowledge that serious leisure and specialization are similar enough that they should be married? Or are there enough fundamental differences between the two frameworks that they should remain apart? Stebbins (2005, 2007) has argued that while serious leisure and specialization are conceptually similar, the latter is best understood as a manifestation or outcome of some serious leisure pursuits. I am of the mind that there are enough commonalities between the two frameworks that they can be woven together to provide a more complete snapshot of intense styles of leisure involvement. Moreover, I am prepared to concede that the term serious leisure seems to capture more accurately this phenomenon than recreation specialization. Perhaps, as Stebbins has noted, recreation specialization should be retained but used to describe a particular facet of serious leisure.

I come to this marriage cautiously. I have spent a large part of my career writing about specialization, and my professional identity has been shaped, in part, by my writings and advocacy of the framework. I also fear that a marriage will be so one-sided that current and future students of leisure will minimize, if not outright ignore, the scholarly contributions made by specialization researchers. I say this because few articles using
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the serious leisure framework have incorporated research on recreation specialization. Therein lies the rub: We specialization researchers are not keen on pursuing a marriage that involves us becoming forgotten partners. I am of the conviction that research on recreation specialization contributes much to our understanding of serious leisure. My goal in the remainder of this paper is to outline some major breakthroughs in research on recreation specialization that will need to be affirmed if such a marriage is to be consummated. Many of these contributions can and should be interpreted as critiques of the serious leisure framework as it currently exists.

Diversity Among Participants

Stebbins and other students of serious leisure have argued that serious leisure stands in opposition to casual leisure. The latter is distinguished from serious leisure in that it is less substantial and offers little in the way of a leisure career (Stebbins, 1997). Stebbins cites eating, sightseeing, relaxing, and watching television as examples of casual leisure. Although activities certainly vary in their level of complexity, this dichotomy ignores the fact that there is diversity of commitment and seriousness within virtually all leisure activities. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that even complex activities (e.g., hunting, golf, music) can be pursued casually. Indeed, a starting point for the recreation specialization framework is the supposition that participants in any leisure activity can be arranged along a continuum of involvement from casual to serious. Users of the specialization framework have followed Bryan’s (1977) lead and argued that along the continuum of involvement there are characteristic styles of participation represented in the form of a typology. The typology of participants is a comparative tool for examining typical behaviors and attitudes along, for example, a “continuum of fishing specialization” (p. 184).

Bryan’s (1977) typology of trout fishing was organized around four classes of participants: occasional fishermen, generalists, technique specialists, and technique setting specialists. Similarly, McFarlane’s (1994, 1996) research on birdwatching suggests there are four major types of birdwatchers: casual, novice, intermediate, and advanced participants. Over the years, specialization researchers have documented that there is enormous variation among participants within any given activity system with regard to behavior, skills, commitment, motivations, and preferences (Scott & Shafer, 2001). Applying specialization terminology to serious leisure, we might conclude that activity participants vary along a continuum of seriousness. Only recently have researchers using the serious leisure framework acknowledged that the serious-casual dichotomy should be supplanted by a serious-to-casual continuum (Shen & Yarnal, 2010). This insight, as noted, has been a fundamental tenet of recreation specialization research since its inception more than 30 years ago.

Identifying a Serious Participant

Students of serious leisure are well versed in its six characteristics (Stebbins, 1982, 1992, 2007). According to Stebbins, participants identify strongly with their pursuits, persevere and overcome difficulties, have careers, evince effort and utilize specialized knowledge and skills, pursue their avocations within leisure social worlds, and experience durable benefits. These characteristics or dimensions were gleaned by Stebbins via ethnographic studies and have guided numerous studies of serious leisure.

While there is little doubt that these dimensions are useful in sensitizing researchers to the phenomena at hand, it is not always clear that participants being studied are truly serious.
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Part of the problem is that until recently little effort has been put forward measuring seriousness. Simultaneously, because many studies of serious leisure have been ethnographic, standard indicators of seriousness are not used. Research on specialization, in contrast, has a long history of using quantitative methods and great effort has been devoted to measuring the phenomena. Once again, McFarlane’s (1994, 1996) research on birdwatchers provides a useful example. She measured specialization on the basis of multiple indicators of past skill and experience, centrality to lifestyle (e.g., number of bird species on one’s life list), and economic expenditures. Using cluster analysis, she was able to conclude that 7% of study participants were advanced birdwatchers. Had she used the serious leisure framework, she may well have concluded that 7% of birdwatchers were “highly serious.” To be fair, specialization researchers have debated among themselves about how best to measure specialization (Scott & Shafer, 2001). Nevertheless, because of their predilection toward measurement, they have done a satisfactory job of defending how and why some participants are serious while others are not. With the recent publication of the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (Gould, Moore, McGuire, & Stebbins, 2008), it will be interesting to see the extent to which serious leisure researchers start to quantify serious participation.

How Serious is Serious?

This leads to a related issue: are there different gradations of serious leisure? As noted above, there has been a tendency to frame serious leisure in opposition to casual leisure. Specialization research has shown that very few participants within any given activity system are highly serious. Most people display a more casual or social orientation to the activity. Furthermore, there are many other participants who display characteristics of serious leisure but would be uneasy being labeled a serious participant. A colleague and I conducted an ethnographic study of contract bridge groups and players that provides insight into this phenomenon (Scott & Godbey, 1992, 1994). We found that many bridge players were highly committed to “social” bridge—a style of bridge in which players emphasized loose adherence to rules, getting along with one another, and sociability. These players actually eschewed skill development and rebuked the attitudes and behaviors of serious players whom they regarded as unpleasant. Importantly, many social players had been playing bridge habitually for decades with a regular group of friends and they regarded their participation in these clubs with extreme seriousness.

A recent ethnographic study of shag dancing reported by Brown (2007) supports the idea there are gradations of seriousness. She identified five types of shag dances: occasional, recreational, wannabes, competitive, and hard-core participants. Recreational participants constituted the largest group of dancers she studied. They danced regularly (at least once a week) but expressed limited interest in competition and skill development. Recreational participants emphasized having fun and developing and nurturing relationships with other dancers. As with social bridge players, they regarded their involvement as important and as a favorite leisure pastime. Results from the aforementioned studies suggest that participants do not fit neatly along a continuum of involvement and there are different types of casual and serious participants.

Not only are there shades of seriousness among leisure participants but also various life stages and career contingencies impact progression over time. In all fairness, Stebbins (1992) made this very point with regard to people’s involvement in serious leisure. He noted that “changes in leisure or work environments or personal circumstances” (p. 70) impact people’s involvement in leisure activities. Researchers using the specialization framework, however, are increasingly recognizing that few participants are inclined to progress to higher stages of participation. Using longitudinal data over 12-year and 22-year intervals,
Kuentzel and Heberlein (2006, 2008) reported that only a small number of boaters increased their activity involvement and skill level over time. Progression was linked to factors such as marriage and job changes. Importantly, the vast majority of boaters they studied had maintained active participation (as reflected by frequency of participation and interest in boating) over the years but they were hardly single-minded or specialized in their pursuit of the activity. Many other boaters they studied remained occasional participants or actually followed a retrogressive trajectory over time. Kuentzel and Heberlein concluded that most boaters do not progress along a specialization continuum from novice to expert. They also concluded that many participants regarded boating as a form of entertainment and were not inclined to develop their skills over time. To sum up, specialization researchers have documented that there are gradations of seriousness. There are many activity participants who exhibit high levels of commitment but are reluctant to take on the persona of the serious participant.

Practical Implications

Research on serious leisure and specialization has great potential to inform leisure service delivery. However, applications to practice have been taken up only by specialization researchers. This stems largely from Bryan’s (1979) insistence that the specialization framework provided natural resource managers a conceptual tool for understanding diversity among outdoor recreation participants. Furthermore, many of the researchers who first tested the specialization framework were individuals predisposed to conducting applied research in behalf of natural resource agencies. To this end, researchers have used the specialization framework to predict various facets of participation, including motivations and expected rewards, environmental attitudes, perceived crowding and recreation conflict, physical and social setting preferences, equipment preferences, types of information used to make trip decisions, participation in conservation activities, and socialization influences. Service delivery and policy are facilitated by knowledge of how recreationists along the specialization continuum vary with regard to these and other facets of participation. Had the serious leisure framework supplanted recreation specialization as a tool for understanding diversity among outdoor (and other) recreation activities, we may very well have concluded that leisure service delivery is facilitated by understanding the needs and interests among participants along a continuum of casual to serious.

Summary

It may well be time for the serious leisure and recreation specialization frameworks to marry. Both perspectives provide valuable insight into complex forms of leisure activity. However, before such a marriage can occur, the parties involved are going to have to acknowledge the strengths and contributions that others have made. Given my proclivity to the recreation specialization framework, I have identified in this research reflection four important contributions the specialization framework has made to our understanding of leisure phenomena: there is diversity among participants involved in the same leisure activity, the number of specialized (or serious) participants can be quantified, there are gradations of seriousness, and there are practical applications of understanding that participants vary along a specialization continuum. If the serious leisure framework were to become the construct of choice among academics in the years ahead, researchers would do well to incorporate more systematically insights developed by researchers who have plied their trade using the recreation specialization framework.
References


