Within any given leisure social world, activity participants exhibit a wide range of attachments and commitments. For some participants, the activity dominates their everyday lives and may be a central life interest. These individuals seek out other devotees, organize activity on behalf of others, hone their skills through practice and study, and negotiate constraints in order to maintain regular patterns of participation (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Scott & Godbey, 1994; Stalp, 2006; Stebbins, 2007). Other participants, in contrast, are far less attached to the leisure activity, participate infrequently, and have little interest in developing their skills. For these “casual” participants, activity choices are often based on their ability to nurture relationships with friends and/or family (Scott, Cavin, & Shafer, 2007).

Leisure researchers and practitioners have long recognized that an understanding of how recreationists differ in intensity of participation and how involvement changes over time can enhance leisure service delivery and policy (Bryan, 1977; Scott, 2012; Selin & Howard, 1988). Numerous studies have documented that participants’ experience, knowledge, and commitment influence several facets of leisure involvement, including motivations and expected rewards; attitudes about management practices; substitution decisions; place attachment; destination preferences; use of information to make trip decisions; perceived crowding and conflict; and physical and social setting preferences (Manning, 2011; Scott & Shafer, 2001). Understanding these relationships can help practitioners create programs and services that will be relevant to a multiplicity of activity participants.

There is less agreement, however, about how best to define and measure participants’ intensity of participation. Several interrelated concepts and frameworks have been advanced over the last 40 years to study the attachments and meanings people assign to leisure activities. Two frameworks—recreational specialization and serious leisure—have come to dominate how investigators study variability among activity participants. Other concepts and ideas, however, have also been proposed, including experience use history, activity loyalty, commitment, and ego involvement. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize how researchers have conceptualized and used these perspectives in leisure research. I begin by summarizing ideas about experience use history, loyalty, involvement, and commitment. I then turn to providing a summary of serious leisure and recreational specialization. I complete this chapter by putting forward some suggestions for future research.

CONCEPTUALIZING INTENSITY OF PARTICIPATION

Over 40 years ago, Elwood Shafer (1969) warned researchers and practitioners against indiscriminately lumping survey data collected from campers collected at different campgrounds and across different months of the year: “If you study campers by sampling at random at several campgrounds, you may find that your data describe an ‘average’ camper who simply does not exist” (p. 1). Shafer observed that policies and decision making based on an “average” camper would be invariably flawed as they fail to take into account diversity among participants.

Since the publication of Shafer’s (1969) classic work, several empirical and theoretical investigations have been put forward to study variability among activity participants. Much of this literature has been devoted to explaining patterns of leisure (e.g., social and setting preferences) in light of intensity of participation. I use intensity of participation as an umbrella term for characterizing the affective and behavioral attachments people exhibit toward specific leisure activities1. Three preliminary points about this definition are in order. First, as will become apparent, this

1 A similar term—high-investment activities—was put forward by Mannell (1993).
definition is a hybrid of several concepts proposed by researchers to depict participants' varying interest and experience in leisure activities. It is presented simply to orient readers to this area of research. Second, my focus here is on the meaning recreationists assign to specific leisure activities. We might ask, for example, what proportion of people attending a birdwatching festival are serious, intermediate, or casual birders? This leads to a third point: recreationists can generally be arranged along a continuum of participation from casual to highly serious. As noted by Hobson Bryan (1979), the complexity of the activity largely dictates the amount of variability along the recreation continuum. Participants in complex activities, such as hunting, birdwatching, chess, and contract bridge, manifest a wide range of styles of participation and commitments.

One of the initial attempts to operationalize intensity of participation was in the form of experience use history (EUH). Schreyer, Lime, and Williams (1984) conceived EUH as “an indicator of the extent and type of information available to the individual obtained through participation in differing circumstances” (p. 35). Although EUH was conceived as an indicator of cognitive complexity, Schreyer et al. and other investigators have measured the concept by creating a composite index that combines participants' responses to multiple behavioral variables. For example, Schreyer et al. had river users indicate: (a) the number of times they had floated the study river, (b) the number of rivers they had floated, and (c) the total number of river trips they had made. Based on their responses to these three questionnaire items, river users were then classified into one of six categories along a continuum of involvement ranging from novice to veteran. Researchers have used since EUH as a segmentation tool to predict motivations, satisfactions, perceptions of conflict, and other facets of involvement among backpackers (Hammitt, McDonald, & Hughes, 1986), horseback riders (Hammitt, Knauf, & Noe, 1989), and golfers (Petrick, Backman, Bixler, & Norman, 2001).

Intensity of participation has also been operationalized via activity loyalty. Backman and Crompton (1991) borrowed the concept from the consumer behavior literature to assess the factors that bind participants to golf and tennis. Their measure of activity loyalty included attitudinal (people's attachment to an activity) and behavioral (proportion of time devoted to tennis and golf) dimensions. Not surprisingly, the attitudinal measure was strongly related to a measure of social psychological involvement, while the behavioral measure was negatively related to frequency of participation in other leisure activities. Activity loyalty has been scantily used over the last 20 years to measure intensity of participation to leisure activities. Instead, it has been primarily used to measure participants’ allegiance to services and tourism destinations (e.g., Chi & Qu, 2008).

Selin and Howard (1988) broke important ground in the conceptualization of intensity of participation by introducing ego involvement (or simply activity involvement) to the leisure literature. They defined activity involvement as “the state of identification existing between an individual and a recreational activity, at one point in time, characterized by some level of enjoyment and self-expression being achieved through the activity” (p. 237). Havitz and Dimanche (1997) put forward an alternative, but similar, definition: “An unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product” (p. 246). As with the concept of loyalty, activity involvement was borrowed from the consumer behavior literature (see Rothschld, 1984) but was originally derived from social judgment theory in social psychology (Sherif & Cantril, 1947). The underlying idea is that when attitudes become aroused they give direction to a person's behavior. Stated differently, recreation participants who are highly attached (involved) to a given activity are more likely than others to behave and make lifestyle decisions that are congruent with their high level of involvement.

While some studies have employed behavioral measures to assess activity involvement (see Kim, Scott, & Crompton, 1997), attitudinal measures have dominated the literature. Some studies (e.g., Backman & Crompton, 1991; Kim et al., 1997) have used Zaichkowsky’s (1985) Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) to measure involvement. The PII is a single dimension scale comprised of 20 pairs of semantic differential items. Most studies in the literature, however, treat activity involvement as multidimensional. Many researchers have borrowed and/or modified the Consumer Involvement Profile (CIP) developed by Laurent and Kapferer (1985). The CIP was composed of 15 items and was purported to measure five dimensions of activity involvement: importance, pleasure, sign, risk probability, and risk consequences. Some researchers have questioned the utility of using all five dimensions (e.g., Havitz & Dimanche, 1997) to measure activity involvement. Still others have conceived activity involvement as including enjoyment, importance, self-expression, and centrality (McIntyre, 1989). Despite definitional and measurement differences, activity involvement has been used extensively to measure intensity of participation across a broad array of leisure activities (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997) and to predict various facets of participation, including loyalty to service providers (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Kyle & Mowen, 2005), place attachment (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Moore & Graefe, 1994), perceptions of constraints and negotiation of constraints (Lee & Scott, 2009), motivations (Kyle, Absher, Hammitt, & Cavin, 2006), and flow and enjoyment (Havitz & Mannell, 2005).

In many ways, activity loyalty and ego involvement are similar to the concept of commitment. Buchanan (1985)
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provided leisure researchers one of the first definitions of commitment: “the pledging or binding of an individual to behavioral acts which result in some degree of affective attachment to behavior or the role associated with the behavior and which produce side bets as a result of that behavior” (p. 402). Three dimensions of commitment are implied by Buchanan’s definition: (a) consistent or focused behavior and a concomitant rejection of alternative behavior, (b) affective attachment, and (c) side bets. In the leisure literature, affective attachment and side bets have been treated as antecedents of consistent or focused behavior. These two forms of commitment warrant further explanation.

Among sociologists, affective attachment is identical to personal commitment (Kim et al., 1997). Scott and Shafer (2001) described personal commitment as an inner conviction that a leisure activity is superior and worth doing for its own sake. Personal commitment goes beyond simply regarding the activity as enjoyable and interesting—it involves identifying and defining oneself in terms of the pastime (Shamir, 1988; Yair, 1990). It also entails espousing the values and culture of the social world in which one is involved (Buchanan, 1985). In contrast, side bets (which have been called behavioral commitment) are those outside interests and activities that become implicated when people pursue a particular behavior (Becker, 1960). Stated differently, side bets are those penalties or costs associated with discontinuing leisure participation. Some penalties associated with ceasing participation are loss of friends, loss of financial investments, loss of personal identity, and lack of alternative leisure interests.

A few studies have used commitment as a stand-alone indicator of intensity of participation and found it to be correlated with activity involvement, frequency of participation, behavioral intentions, and reported skill and perceived competence (Kim et al., 1997; Shamir, 1988; Yair, 1990). However, commitment is increasingly used in the conceptualization and measurement of recreational specialization. More will be said about commitment and recreational specialization below.

Two observations are in order before introducing ideas about serious leisure and recreational specialization. First, leisure scholars have generally shied away from debating whether or not the concepts reviewed thus far are more alike than they are different. Studies in fact have shown that measures representing the above concepts are moderately correlated with one another (Backman & Crompton, 1991; Kim et al., 1997; Shamir, 1988). That the concepts overlap with one another may stem from the fact that researchers introduced them independently from different disciplines. Some effort, however, has been made to reconcile these differences. Iwasaki and Havitz (1998), for example, argued that people’s involvement or attachment to activities was antecedent to commitment and loyalty. Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) subsequently modified their model and argued that activity involvement contributes to participants developing commitments and loyalty to agencies and services. Similar linkages have been proposed between activity involvement and participants’ attachments to outdoor recreation environments (Kyle et al., 2004). These studies are unique in their efforts to partition intensity of participation indicators and to link them causally.

Second, the above concepts provide snapshots of recreationists’ intensity of participation at a given point in time. They say relatively little about how recreationists’ attitudes and behavior change and/or evolve over time. EUH comes closest in capturing these changes as the perspective assumes recreationists’ cognitions become increasingly complex with increasing experience (Williams, Schreyer, & Knopf, 1990). However, because EUH is constructed by combining a handful of behavioral variables, it provides an indirect measure of participants’ cumulative knowledge and familiarly with a leisure activity. Likewise, the four concepts are mute about how skill and knowledge differences impact leisure involvement. For many recreationists, skill acquisition is integral to their participation and leisure and lifestyle choices are made accordingly. The next sections of this chapter summarize ideas about serious leisure and recreational specialization. Change and skill development are central to how these frameworks have been conceptualized.

SERIOUS LEISURE

The serious leisure framework is nearly synonymous with the name of Robert Stebbins. A sociologist by training, Stebbins’ (1979) early work focused on documenting the careers and commitments of amateur actors, archeologists, and baseball players. He would expand his focus to other leisure activities which would eventually lead to a formal definition of serious leisure: “The systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). Stebbins (1982, 1992, 2007) put forward six defining characteristics of serious leisure: participants identify strongly with chosen pastimes, persevere and overcome setbacks, have careers, display effort based on specialized knowledge and training, pursue activity within leisure social worlds, and experience durable (long-term) benefits.

Stebbins’ serious leisure framework includes two other important concepts: casual leisure and project-based leisure. Stebbins (1997) described casual leisure as activity that is inherently less substantial than serious leisure and offers little in the way of career development. He added that it is
“immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (p. 18). Examples of casual leisure include watching television, taking a nap, and reading the paper. Stebbins (2007) defined project-based leisure as “a short-term, moderately complicated, either one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time” (p. 43). Stebbins cited elaborate surprise parties and preparations for holidays as examples of project-based leisure. In sum, compared to serious leisure, casual leisure and project-based leisure lack complexity and do not offer the same opportunities for careers and skill development.

It is important to note that Stebbins’ (1979, 1982) early research on serious leisure was directed at elucidating an intense style of leisure participation. His definition of serious leisure and exposition of its six distinguishing qualities were created with this style of leisure participation in mind. Although Stebbins (2012) acknowledged that participants in complex activities varied in seriousness—he distinguished among devotees (highly serious), participants (moderately serious), and dabblers (unserious)—his focus has primarily been on describing patterns of participation of devotees (i.e., participants who are highly serious). Stebbins “dabblers” are similar to casual participants in that neither are highly invested and lack interest in developing their skills. However, he reserves the term “casual leisure” for describing activities that are inherently simple (i.e., not complex) and can be pursued without advanced training. In recent years, a new cadre of scholars have emerged who recognize that recreation participants do in fact vary in seriousness (Shen & Yarnal, 2010; Tsaur & Liang, 2008). A newly created Serious Leisure Inventory (Gould, Moore, McGuire, & Stebbins, 2008) seeks to measure the six distinguishing qualities of serious leisure. This instrument may help researchers and practitioners better study degrees of seriousness along a continuum of participation.

Stebbins (1992) emphasized that people have careers and serious participants go through typical stages of involvement. These stages were a beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline. Stebbins noted that movement from one stage to another is far from automatic and is contingent on a variety of factors that are sometimes outside the control of the individual. Children’s progression, for example, is contingent on parental support. Mentors and coaches may also provide participants instruction and confidence to persevere. Having requisite skills and being collegial may facilitate and/or inhibit progression. Stebbins noted that participants judged to be unskilled, lacking knowledge, or unfriendly are likely to “find others being hired or invited into a group before themselves” (pp. 82–83). Mastery and display of appropriate skills and knowledge appear to be essential for long-term participation in serious leisure.

Serious leisure has become a “construct of choice” (Scott, 2012) to study intense forms of leisure. It has been used to study a wide array of pastimes, including Taekwondo (Kim, Dattilo, & Heo, 2011), football spectating (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002), and Civil War re-enacting (Hunt, 2004). Serious leisure has also been studied across diverse groups, including immigrants, people with disabilities, older adults, and women. These and other studies have shown that participation in serious leisure activities contributes to positive outcomes, including successful aging (Brown, McGuire, & Voelkl, 2008) and challenging traditional gender roles (Dilley & Scraton, 2010). Participation in serious leisure can also contribute to ethnic identity and ethnic boundary maintenance (Lee, Scott, & Dunlap, 2011). In this case, immigrant groups use “serious leisure to highlight how they are culturally different from non-immigrant groups” (p. 305). In summary, the serious leisure perspective has proven to be a useful conceptual framework for describing how participants strive to create identity in contemporary societies and the behaviors and attitudes of participants involved in intense and complex forms of activities.

RECREATIONAL SPECIALIZATION

Hobson Bryan (1977, 1979) introduced the recreational specialization (or simply specialization) framework into the literature to explain within-activity differences among outdoor recreation participants. Although its use continues to be primarily applied to outdoor pursuits, some researchers have used the framework to study indoor pastimes (Scott & Godbey, 1994) as well as tourism activities (Kerstetter, Confer, & Graefe, 2001). Bryan defined 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” (1977, p. 175). This definition is a bit ambiguous but the idea is that participants within any activity can be arranged along a continuum from “casual” to “serious” as reflected by their level of commitment, frequency of participation, skill and knowledge, and equipment preferences.

The specialization framework goes beyond the serious leisure framework by describing characteristic styles of participation along a continuum of involvement. According to Bryan (1977), these styles of participation can be represented in the form of a typology (a system of classification). Bryan contended, for example, that trout fishermen could be grouped into four classes of anglers: occasional fishermen, generalists, technique specialists, and technique setting specialists. These angler types provide researchers and practitioners a “comparative tool for examining typical behaviors and attitudes along a “continuum of fishing speciali-
ization” (p. 184). Stated differently, the four categories of anglers can be distinguished on the basis of their equipment preferences, skills, social and setting preferences, and history of participation. Other researchers have developed similar specialization typologies of boaters (Donnelly, Vaske, & Graefe, 1986), contract bridge players (Scott & Godbey, 1994), birdwatchers (McFarlane, 1994), and scuba divers (Todd, Graefe, & Mann, 2002).

Similar to Stebbins’ ideas about serious leisure, Bryan (1977) argued that people have careers in their leisure pursuits. His typology of fishing participation, thus, constituted a framework for explaining the typical stages through which recreationists advance the longer they fished. He theorized 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). Specialization, thus, is more than an analytic scheme for differentiating participants along a continuum of involvement—it constitutes a developmental process that entails a progression in how people participate in and view the activity over time (Scott & Shafer, 2001). As recreationists move from one stage of participation to another, their motivations, social and setting preferences, and attitudes about management practices and policies change as well.

To recap, research on specialization seeks: first, to classify activity participants along a continuum of involvement from casual to serious, and second, to explain how participants’ interests and skills change over time. Both of these applications converge on a sticky point: exactly how should specialization be measured? Although researchers agree that specialization is multidimensional, they have put forward multiple overlapping dimensions and variables (Scott, Ditton, Stoll, & Eubanks, 2005; Scott & Shafer, 2001), including frequency of participation, past experience, general experience, recent experience, commitment, economic investments, centrality to lifestyle, enduring involvement, purism values, media involvement, skills, and resource use. Definitional challenges are exacerbated by whether or not specific measures reflect one dimension of specialization or another (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992). For example, ability to identify birds has been conceived as both an indicator of skill and an indicator of past experience.

After surveying existing research, Scott and Shafer (2001) concluded that specialization should be conceived and measured using three dimensions: (a) a focusing of behavior, (b) the acquiring of skills and knowledge, and (c) personal and behavioral commitments. Behavioral indicators include years of involvement and frequency of participation. Skill indicators are activity-specific and might include skill at navigating white water rapids and ability to identify bird songs. As noted, personal commitments include affective attachment and personal identity, while behavioral commitments include potential penalties (e.g., loss of friends) associated with ceasing participation. These three dimensions are quite similar to ones put forth by McIntyre and Pigram (1992) who argued that specialization included a behavioral dimension (e.g., prior experience and familiarity), a cognitive dimension (e.g., skills and knowledge), and an affective dimension (e.g., enduring involvement and centrality). Clearly, both of these approaches to operationalizing specialization borrowed a great deal from other intensity of participation concepts.

Researchers studying specialization have also debated how best to classify recreationists along a continuum of involvement. Two approaches have been dominant. One approach is to create a composite (or additive) index by adding a recreation participant’s responses to multiple questionnaire items (e.g., Salz, Loomis, & Finn, 2001). Recreationists are then divided into three or more groups that range from low (least specialized) to high (highly specialized). This approach has been criticized because specialization dimensions do not always co-vary and have different levels of relationship to other facets of involvement (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992). Researchers have avoided this problem by using cluster analysis. This statistical procedure takes into account the multidimensionality of the specialization construct and classifies respondents into homogenous groups. This second approach has been used extensively across a variety of activities, including fishing (Chipman & Helfrich, 1988), hunting (Needham & Vaske, 2013), birdwatching (McFarlane, 1994), and camping (McIntyre & Pigram, 1992).

An alternative approach for classifying participants has been tested in studies of birdwatchers (Scott et al., 2005) and Ultimate Frisbee (Kerins, Scott, & Shafer, 2007). These studies had respondents self-identify themselves as either a casual, active, or committed (serious) participant. The three categories of participation included elements of behavior, skill, and commitment and were designed to reflect unique styles of participation along the specialization continuum. In both studies, the self-classification measure was compared with an additive index and cluster analysis measure in predicting participants’ motives. Results from both studies indicated that the self-classification measure performed as well, if not better, than the two traditional approaches in predicting participants’ motives. Likewise, in both studies there was a strong association between the self-classification measure and individual specialization indicators.

Dozens of studies have used the specialization framework to effectively document differences among activity participants in regards to a wide range of variables, such as motives, substitution decisions, place attachment and dependence, attitudes toward resource management, socialization influences, equipment preferences, and perceptions.
of crowding (see Manning, 2011 for a more complete summary of variables studied by researchers). Before putting forward some conclusions and recommendations for future research, it is important to emphasize that scholars continue to grapple with how best to measure specialization. A lack of consensus has compromised their ability to generalize findings. Even with this limitation, the specialization framework provides researchers and practitioners an invaluable tool for exploring characteristic styles of participation along a continuum of involvement.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several concepts have been reviewed that purportedly measure intensity of participation. Two of these, serious leisure and recreational specialization, have come to dominate how researchers think about and study variability among activity participants. A question arises: Just how different from one another are the concepts and frameworks used to study intensity of participation? For example, specialization is frequently measured using indicators of experience use history, commitment, and involvement. Likewise, serious leisure implies commitment and a high degree of affective attachment. Are researchers guilty of reinventing the wheel or are the different concepts measuring different facets of participation? Arguments have been made that the concepts have more in common than not (Scott, 2012), but others scholars have argued they are different (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Stebbins, 2007). Research is needed to understand better the linkages among the concepts reviewed in this chapter. It could be that the concepts can be combined to provide a more complete assessment of people's participation in complex forms of leisure.

Although researchers agree that positive outcomes can accrue for individuals who advance to higher stages of involvement, progression can have a dark side. Stebbins (2007) used the term "uncontrollability" to refer to the "desire to engage in an activity beyond the time or the money (if not both) available for it" (p. 17). Another term for this is "addiction," which can be defined as a recurring and unhealthy behavior the individual has difficulty ending (Yee, 2002). Taken to an extreme, serious leisure can have negative consequences for participants' health, school and work, and relationships with significant others (Holt & Kleiber, 2009; Partington, Partington, & Olivier, 2009; Wu, Scott, & Yang, 2013). To date, researchers have focused primarily on the positive aspects of serious leisure, involvement, and specialization. More research is needed to understand the costs and negative consequences of serious leisure and progression.

Increasingly, researchers are questioning the conventional wisdom that participants naturally progress to higher stages of involvement over time. Panel data from boaters and birdwatchers suggest that while some individuals do in fact progress over time, most participants follow a pattern of stability or decline (Kuentzel & Heberlein, 2006; Scott & Lee, 2010). Studies also suggest that most recreation participants are clustered toward the casual end of the specialization continuum (McFarlane, 1994). At least one study shows that many participants actually eschew progression and are content to participate in a leisure activity at a rudimentary level (Scott & Godbey, 1994). The truth is we are only beginning to understand the contingencies and various life course events impacting people's interest and attachment to leisure activities over time. Additional studies using panel data will shed insight into how intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors both facilitate and constrain people's movement to different stages of participation. Such studies should examine the extent to which people desire to progress to higher stages of participation, and the factors that contribute to patterns of regression. It is also important to examine how performance standards contribute to progression, stability, and decline. Competitive sports, for example, tend to stymie participants' desire and ability to progress, whereas outdoor recreation activities provide participants more opportunities for both stability and progression over time.

A related and final area of research that is needed pertains to how different population groups think about intensity of participation. An argument could be made that ideas about serious leisure and specialization are male-centric. In many societies, opportunities for progression and advancement are more restricted for women than they are for men. Scott and Shafer (2001) noted that married women who participate in serious leisure go to great lengths to ensure that time spent in the activity does not interfere with family obligations. Simultaneously, the vast majority of studies on serious leisure and specialization have skirted issues related to race, ethnicity, and social class. Research clearly shows that discrimination and status group barriers are major constraints to leisure among people of color and people who are poor (Stodolska & Floyd, Chapter 28). At the same time, research shows that immigrants use leisure to insulate themselves from nonimmigrants. Extending investigations into the lived experiences of different population groups will enhance our understanding of serious leisure, specialization, and related concepts. This research will require using phenomenological and ethnographic methods to study intensity of participation.
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