

Recreation Specialization Revisited

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The essence of specialization theory, first published in *The Journal of Leisure Research* in 1977 (Bryan) and subsequently expanded in a 1979 monograph (Bryan), is that outdoor recreation participants can be placed on a continuum from general interest and low involvement to specialized interest and high involvement. Each level of specialization carries distinctive behaviors and orientations. These include equipment preference, type of experience sought, desired setting for the activity, attitudes toward resource management, preferred social context, even vacation patterns. Subsequent testing and refinement of the theory and its applications over more than two decades created a substantial literature on the topic. Researchers added to the body of knowledge through their studies and insights and led productive debate on the theory's accuracy, power, and applicability. Doing justice to this literature in a few pages would be a daunting, if not an impossible, task. I myself have done little subsequent work on the topic since framing it, other than using the specialization perspective in teaching and as a tangential concept in other areas of work. What can be done in this space, however, is to share a few reflections on the origins of the theory and its formulation and thoughts on applicability to other areas. Perhaps this will point to research directions and stimulate wider application in the new century ahead.

Background and Origins of Specialization Theory

Impetus for the theory came from realization of the typically low correlation between leisure activity variables and standard sociological variables, as well as difficulty reconciling what I was reading and teaching and what I was seeing in the field. Days in the field were those of an ardent angler plying the waters of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming every summer. I experienced first-hand such traditional conflicts as those between hikers and off-road vehicle users, canoeists and power boaters, anglers and rafters. But I was especially struck by conflicts within groups, particularly trout fishermen, as they clashed among themselves over the appropriateness of "catch-and-release" and "fly-fishing only" regulations, stream etiquette, and a host of other issues. My own membership in the angling fraternity made me aware of large differences in orientations and behaviors among these anglers. These seemed to be related in some way to how long and intensely anglers

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had been involved in the sport. I also observed that the hard-core enthusiasts seemed every bit as committed to their sport as my colleagues were committed to their jobs, that they exhibited a commonality with other highly committed recreationists in this regard. I began to wonder if fishermen and others were going through a "career stage" process, but in the realm of leisure rather than work. What I was observing informally (and later by way of interview data), while not meshing very well with prevailing leisure research assumptions, did fit well with dominant theoretical perspectives in the social and behavioral sciences. Leisure behavior is sustained (or extinguished), just as any other activity (human and non-human), by reinforcement schedules elaborated in social learning theory. But the human animal's perceptions are filtered through symbols, so that reward is also a matter of symbolic representation. Thus, as people move toward the specialized end of the continuum, their identity or "specialness" (Becker, 1973) becomes more and more defined in terms of the particular activity and anchored by reinforcement of "leisure social world" reference groups.

Reflections on Concept

As originally formulated, specialization theory centered on a "continuum of behavior from the general to the particular" (Bryan, 1979, p. 29), with subsequent statements including "preferences" and "attitudes." Some confusion has resulted from this definition. In retrospect, I would emphasize a behavioral operational definition of the specialization continuum, length and degree of involvement in an activity. But integral to and concomitant with length and intensity of involvement are clusters of attitudes and values as to the sport's meaning, its centrality to individual identity. Thus the independent variable, specialization, has both behavioral and attitudinal components that affect such dependent variables as equipment and skills used in the sport, preferences for certain settings, etc. The original emphasis on behavior came from pragmatic concerns about the inferential nature of attitudes. I wanted resource managers to be able to use specialization principles without having to conduct an attitude survey. Sustained involvement in an activity is fueled by a "just right" reinforcement schedule of success and recognition of that success by peers having similar values. But the "push" to specialize comes from a continual seeking of new challenges and solutions. The angler may change preference from large numbers of fish caught on live bait to smaller numbers of big fish on light tackle using artificial bait, or the skier may shift to runs on primarily blue to black slopes. But what is implicit in these changes is motivation to avoid boredom from doing the activity too well for too long, or frustration from not doing the activity too well for too long.

Reflections on Application

Theoretical applications of specialization are significant at the high end of the continuum. High intensity of activity, purpose, and conviction that

define this end have major consequences for those involved, the managers who accommodate them, as well as the resource base. At the low-end-of-the-continuum, the sport competes with other activities. Low-end participants in one activity may be high in another, and in domains outside the leisure sphere. Or the individual, by cause of situation or personality, may not push toward specialization in any particular activity, and other social and behavioral principles apply. Managerial applications of specialization are another matter. Large numbers of recreationists define the mid-to-lower-end of the specialization curve. They may have low to medium knowledge and sensitivity about resource management issues. Managers are cross-pressured between the majority public opinion of license holders and political clout of specialists advocating different actions. Popular opinion may be at odds with sound management. The larger numbers of occasional and generalist sportsmen thus may advocate fish and game stocking over habitat management, while specialists argue the reverse. Managers risk charges of unwise policy on one hand and pandering to the wishes of elite constituencies on the other.

The presence and advocacy of "specialists" may well be requisites for support for effective environmental action in an urban age. Those who have not been intimately involved in the natural world through their sport (or their work) are perhaps less likely to support soundly based ecological policies than those who have. Consistent with this view is the adage that hunting and fishing can be "windows to the environment." Thirty years ago, Trout Unlimited began strong and effective advocacy for water quality, "catch-and-release" practices and habitat protection and restoration. A similar push, though out of a different context, by Bass Angers Sportsmen Society (B.A.S.S.) occurred a few years later in warm water fisheries. B.A.S.S., Inc's promotion of tournament bass fishing is perhaps the ultimate example of "setting the stage to determine the difference between luck and skill," the hallmark of specialist motivation. But the emphasis on financial reward and status in this sport may very well have created a cultural lag between technical competence and value systems. Observers worry that some of those drawn to the sport's big money payoffs may develop technical proficiency long before acquiring ethical standards to guide their conduct. On a related note, the forces of specialization may have a "dark side." People can be just as strongly addicted to their sports from intermittent reward schedules (now fueled by cash prizes) as they can to a casino's slot machines, and sometimes with similar results. The fact that the enthusiast is spending time and great sums of money in pursuit of his/her sport and not gambling or otherwise engaged in vice is of small solace to financially stressed families and those left behind. Principles driving specialization theory, of course, have larger applications than the spheres of leisure and outdoor recreation. Sheely (1976, 1996) describes how people undergo "passages," periodic and characteristic crises and change at certain points in their life. Would not the mechanisms of change in our larger lives be similar to those that push specialization? Perhaps the process is more serious in such out-of-leisure contexts as work careers and marriage. In the world of outdoor recreation, the crisis might be

no more than the realization that hunting deer with a shotgun is no longer a challenge, and the hunter contemplates the bow and arrow. But in the world of careers, the crisis may lead to a job change. Or in personal relationships, the crisis may result in more time with family, or a new spouse. Is not life itself about seeking new horizons or extensions of old ones?

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