

Comments on Recreational Specialization: A Critical Look at the Construct

Bonita L. McFarlane
Canadian Forest Service

One of the primary goals of recreation research is to understand what contributes or detracts from high-quality outdoor recreation experiences that ultimately produce satisfied recreationists (Manning, 1999). Specialization research has contributed to this goal by providing a basis to delineate subtypes of recreationists with differing goals, preferences, and behaviors. Understanding these differences has assisted recreation managers in designing a diversity of recreation opportunities aimed at meeting the specific needs of specialization subtypes. Thus, the construct has the potential to be a powerful framework in guiding recreation management but has suffered from inconsistency in its conceptualization, measurement, and understanding of the process of specialization.

Scott and Shafer raise several fundamental questions of the specialization construct and provide an excellent review of the current state of recreation specialization research particularly related to specialization as a progression or developmental process. Their review definitely challenges researchers by focusing the issues and suggesting concrete areas for future research. I generally agree with their critique and my analysis only serves to reinforce many of the points they raise. There are some points that I think are fundamental to understanding specialization as a progression or developmental process.

In its initial conceptualization Bryan (1977) used participant observation techniques to hypothesize the relationship between observable manifestations of the specialization process and attitudes, preferences and behaviors. One goal of this early research was to identify stages of specialization from which one could infer recreationists' attitudes and behaviors without the need for extensive survey research. Since Bryan's initial work, however, specialization research has focused on quantifying the "amount" of specialization an individual possesses rather than the underlying stages and processes of the phenomena. Scott and Shafer begin to address this deficiency.

Before addressing the questions of how, when, and under what conditions progression occurs we must answer the question, progression on what? One issue that is fundamental to examining progression is defining the underlying dimensions of the specialization construct. While it is generally accepted that there are cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions to spe-

Address correspondence to: Bonita L. McFarlane, Canadian Forest Service, 5320 - 122 Street, Edmonton AB T5G 3S5. Phone: (780) 435-7383. Fax: (780) 435-7359. Email: bmcfarla@nrccan.gc.ca

cialization, the nature of these dimensions remains poorly understood. As Scott and Shafer point out there is little agreement about how to characterize and measure the construct. The inconsistencies in how specialization is conceptualized and measured suggests that there is a lack of construct and empirical validity (Bohrnstedt, 1983). Construct validity refers to whether the theoretical construct (i.e., specialization) exists as postulated and addresses the relationship between observed variables and the underlying construct. Inconsistencies in defining the dimensions of specialization and in the variables used to measure the dimensions suggests that future research is needed in this regard. Empirical validity refers to the generalizability or applicability to other populations, settings, and times. Generalizing measures of specialization both within and across recreation activities has generally failed. Addressing validity issues will be paramount to understanding progression and to future specialization research.

Employing a range of research methods will assist in delineating dimensions of the specialization construct and the conditions under which progression occurs. Most specialization research has relied on quantitative methods to delineate underlying dimensions and stages of progression. Quantitative methods, however often lack the depth and detail necessary to identify progression and its underlying factors. While subtypes of recreationists with varying levels of specialization have been delineated in many quantitative studies, it is not clear if the subtypes represent stages in a process or styles of participation. One means of addressing validity concerns and understanding the specialization process is through qualitative methods. Scott and Shafer suggest time series studies as one means of examining progression. While time series studies are often desired they are seldom feasible. The difficulty in retaining subjects over time and the cost of such research detract from this approach. Qualitative research, however, involving individuals at different "stages" of specialization could generate valid and detailed process information that leaves the participants' perspectives intact and provide an insider's view to better understand the specialization process (Henderson, 2000).

Understanding the process of specialization will require understanding specialization within a broader recreation involvement framework. These frameworks include stages of awareness, interest, a trial period, adoption of the activity, and a continuation phase with involvement maturation (Brandenburg et al., 1982; Decker et al., 1987). Each stage may be influenced by opportunity or absence of constraints, knowledge of the activity, the social milieu or an individual's reference group, and receptiveness of individuals to new experiences. In addition there may be key events that are independent of other influences that stimulate a person and serve to focus an individual upon a specific activity. Are there common conditions that are necessary at each stage (from awareness to continuation) that results in an individual becoming an elite participant? Are there triggers or key events that occur and at which stages? What are the temporal aspects of specialization? Can an individual have a low level of involvement in an activity for

years before progressing to an elite participant or do elite participants progress quickly? In personal interviews with 20 elite bird watchers in Edmonton, Alberta, two components: social milieu and key events were the most salient influences in the birding careers. The key events occurred during the early stages of adoption and served to focus interest on birding to the exclusion of other activities (McFarlane, 1991). Continued involvement and commitment to the activity were attributed to social influences and diversify one's birding activities and environments. Are these factors common to the process of becoming an elite birder and do similar factors operate within other recreation activities? These are only a few questions that need to be examined within the context of broader recreation involvement frameworks.

In summary, recreation specialization is complex, it is multifaceted, and it will require an array of disciplinary methods and approaches to address the questions surrounding progression. Scott and Shafer have provided a foundation for future research by reviewing the current state of specialization research, raising specific questions and providing hypotheses to guide future specialization research.

References

- Bohrnstedt, G. W. (1983). Measurement. In P. H. Rossi, J. D. Wright, & A. B. Anderson, (Eds.), *Handbook of survey research* (pp. 69-121). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Brandenburg, J., Greiner, W., Hamilton-Smith, E., Scholten, H., Senior, R., & Webb, J. (1982). A conceptual model of how people adopt recreation activities. *Leisure Studies*, 1, 263-276.
- Bryan, H. (1977). Leisure value systems and recreational specialization: The case of trout fishermen. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 9, 174-187.
- Decker, D. J., Brown, T. L., Driver, B. L., & Brown, P. J. (1987). Theoretical developments in assessing social values of wildlife: Toward a comprehensive understanding of wildlife recreation involvement. In D. J. Decker & G. R. Goff, (Eds.), *Valuing wildlife* (pp. 76-95). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Henderson, K. A. (2000). False Dichotomies, intellectual diversity, and the "either/or" world: Leisure research in transition. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32, 49-53.
- Manning, R. E. (1999). *Studies in outdoor recreation. Search and research for satisfaction* (2nd ed.). Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press.
- McFarlane, B. L. (1991). *A model of wildlife viewing motivation and involvement*. Unpublished manuscript. Alberta's Watchable Wildlife Program, Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta, Forestry, Lands and Wildlife, Edmonton, AB.