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Reply to David Scott and C. Scott Shafer, "Recreational Specialization: A Critical Look at the Construct"

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This reply to Scott and Shafer's review extends, rather than debates, discussion of several issues they raise, since I am generally in agreement with their interpretations and conclusions. My response will deal primarily with their findings regarding specialization as a process of progression. Thus, initial discussion is about the theory's original focus as a developmental process. Observations follow on the role and implications of leisure and sports marketing as intervening in this process. Finally, specific research needs are identified that might address some of the inconsistencies in findings noted in their review.

The authors conclude that "the prevailing evidence shows that while some people do progress [to more specialized stages of activity], most people probably do not." They also point out that few studies have actually tested whether or not people progress over time, and those that do reveal mixed findings. At least two issues can be posed out of the question of progression. The first is about "destination." Why do or do not people reach advanced levels of specialization? The second is more about the "travel," or motivation to get there. Do people want to go on the journey in the first place?

Specialization as destination was a moot point in early development of the theory. Observations and informal interviews, initially at least, were with highly skilled and committed anglers. They had already reached, or at least come close to, their destination. Specialization as motivation, the drive to specialize, was conceived out of this same segment's retrospectives about how they got involved in the sport and the stages they went through on the way to their destination. Subsequent student investigations, largely of the popular literature, along with structured interviews of those known to be highly committed to a particular activity, supported the stages of development idea. This solidified, at least in my mind, specialization as progression and the conclusion that the process operated across almost any hobby or sport.

It is not surprising, however, that most do not reach high specialization destinations. The authors' conclusions about this seem sound. Cast in terms of the travel metaphor, some people have "other places they would rather go" (other areas of life activity are more important to them). They think that the journey is boring (they found little success after their initial exposure to the activity). The trip is too expensive (they could not afford to

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pursue the activity). They could not leave the kids at home alone (they are at a stage in the life cycle that makes it difficult for to pursue the activity). They just "can't sit still long enough" to make such a long trip, or they had rather make a series of short day trips (their personalities predispose them to a variety of activities, rather than a single one). They either did not know about the destination, it was too far away, or they had no way to get there (they had little opportunity). And so on.

What about research that indicates many people simply start activities high on the refinement and skill-level end of the continuum, but without going through stages of development to reach this destination? To be sure, any complex activity has to be learned, and the learning usually proceeds from the relatively simple to the more complex, a progression. However, formal instruction and talent can and do accelerate learning of technical skills, as can the use of refined equipment. In short, people can be taught relatively quickly what some may have taken a lifetime to learn, and quality equipment aids the process. A core issue regarding progression, therefore, would seem to be the relative *speed* of the progression, how fast the activity is learned, not whether progression in stages occurs at all.

The influence of B. F. Skinner and other behaviorists of the time shows in the inception of specialization theory. They were skeptical of attitudes as causal agents in human affairs, lamented gaps between attitudes and behavior and the fact that attitudes had to be inferred from behavior, rather than directly observed. The approach, therefore, was to operationalize specialization in terms of the *behavior* of length of time and frequency of activity in the sport. Yet, as Scott and Shafer note, specialization theory included from its beginning the notion that clusters of attitudes attended specialization levels. Thus, though length and frequency of activity measured specialization, the dependent variables attitudes, beliefs, and values were considered integral to the concept.

To speculate, contemporary marketing in the leisure and outdoor recreation industry has encouraged and enabled people to, for lack of a better word, "jump-start" into highly refined and skill-demanding activities. The critically acclaimed film, *A River Runs Through It,* gave a boost in interest in fly fishing, made it a "cool" thing to do. (The movie evolved out of a backdrop of scenic Montana landscape and trout fishing action sequences). Yet, the more direct marketing of various types of angling and other sports in the recreation industry may be most responsible for the jump-start phenomenon. Orvis fly fishing schools and their marketing of refined sports equipment and clothing come to mind. Outdoor recreation equipment manufacturers and sellers obviously want people to buy expensive products. The message is that buying high quality and refined equipment insures not only rapid proficiency, but also high recognition and status. The industry offers other examples as well, a most notable one being Bass Pro Shops, which has increasingly promoted specialized, high quality equipment across a number of sports, not just to the estimated 30 million bass anglers in this country. Of course examples abound for a variety of other sports ranging from hiking

to biking. But what these modern marketers have discovered is what the Orvis Company knew years ago about cold water anglers and those who thought they might want to be. Equate the purchase of refined and expensive equipment with the "specialness" that comes from high status and proficiency, teach people to use it, and business will be very good indeed.

Development and active promotion of formerly noncompetitive sports as competitive has accentuated this trend. Deer hunting (the BuckMasters competition) and bass fishing (BassMasters Tournament Trail and the FLW Tour) readily come to mind, as does the formalized competition for mastering outdoor terrain (the Eco-Challenge event, mountain bike racing, adventure racing, skiing competition, etc.). Television has aided and abetted this trend with its coverage of non-traditional sports.

The marketing of outdoor equipment and associated sports to jumpstart participation and product consumption invites closer scrutiny by researchers, particularly with regard to "disconnects" between prima facie high specialization activities and the attitudes expected to accompany them. How do we explain equipment-refined, well-conditioned backpackers who leave litter at campsites and evidence little concern for the impacts of their activities on delicate ecosystems? How do we explain the highly skilled who display little concern for the ethic or the etiquette of their sport, whether it be mountain biking or fly-fishing? Thus, in addition to the issue of speed of progression in the accomplishment of high specialization skills, the total content of the activity is important to an understanding of the issue. This content includes both behavior and attitudes, technical skills and internalized orientations to the activity and its setting within larger contexts.

Therefore, if specialization is defined in terms of both behaviors and corresponding attitudes, and yet some enthusiasts exhibit high-end of the continuum skills and commitment without "appropriate ethical conduct" to guide the behavior, then this may be a classic example of "culture lag." While the skills, equipment, and various trappings of specialization are present, the ethical and other attitudinal underpinnings guiding the activity are largely absent. As with other "lag" issues in society, technology (and, in this case, the marketing of it) have gotten ahead of the ethical systems that responsibly guide it. Mountain bikers go off on the wrong trails or off trail and cause soil erosion; tournament bass anglers speed around lakes oblivious, sometimes even contemptuous, to others on the water.

The implications of culture lag in highly promoted outdoor activities may be significant, especially for such resource-dependent sports as hunting and fishing. Worse case scenarios include hunters with accurate aims but little respect for wildlife and anglers with fish-finding skills and little conservation ethic. A suspicion is that those who do not slowly "develop into a sport" through the normal process of socialization (remember the child who started fishing with a cane pole and worms) might be somewhat fickle in their commitment to the activity over the long term as well. A case can be made that the "old fashioned way" of gradual and then increasing involvement in a sport or hobby is pulled along more by intrinsic than extrinsic

reward structures. That is, the individual engages because the activity is fun; it is play. On the other, hand, with the institutionalization and formalized "big money" competition connected with many sports today, the attraction is more extrinsic. It is done for the money; it is work. Jump starting into such traditional outdoor activities as hunting and fishing may nullify the "window to the environment" phenomenon long associated with long-term socialization into these sports. The argument has been, of course, that specialists in these areas have developed unusual sensitivity to habitat and other environmental issues as a part of both their expertise and long-term commitment.

Finally, it is surprising that the question posed at the earliest stages of work, that of numbers or proportions of people at different levels of specialization, is still not being answered. The 1979 monograph, *Conflict in the Great Outdoors,* posited theoretical specialization curves to make the point that different activities had inherently different complexity and, therefore, different possibilities of attraction and refinement to individuals. The fundamental questions remain. How can levels of specialization be defined for different activities? And, for management purposes, how *should* they be defined? What proportion of the total participants in the activity fall under the different categorizations, and what are the management implications? What specific activities constitute the range of specialization for aggressive skating or bicycle motor cross. What proportions of participants engage in the activities at the various levels? How fast is the progression likely to be? What are the implications for those who manufacture, market, and sell equipment? What are the implications for those who manage parks and other settings that attract those with diverse leisure interests?

Scott and Shafer make a solid contribution to the literature in their comprehensive review of the work on specialization. Their stages of involvement, career changes, and turning points discussion offers valuable insights, as does their treatment of variables that facilitate or impede progression. The hope is that my few observations complement their excellent work.