

## How Specialized is Specialization Research?

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David Scott and Scott Shafer's paper "Recreational Specialization: A Critical Look at the Construct" offers a timely and thoughtful synthesis of a concept that has received nearly 25 years of research attention in the leisure literature. Their review of the specialization literature reflects the maturing of a research emphasis that is moving beyond some of the implicit and explicit definitional disputes over measurement constructs experienced in any emerging research field. Their paper also asks research to move beyond the descriptive segmentation of participants within a recreational activity, and to think about processes of change in leisure participation.

Their focus on change effectively reminds researchers of Bryan's (1977) original formulation of specialization as a developmental process; a model of change over time in the way people participate in leisure activities. It is easy to recognize change in our own, and others' style of participation in a leisure activity. With repeated leisure engagements, we become more capable participants, we begin to think differently about the activity and how it fits in our everyday routines, and we tend to develop an attachment to the activity and the social meanings connected to participation. The specialization construct provides an intuitively appealing model of leisure socialization to describe these developmental processes.

After reviewing the specialization literature and featuring their model of progression, however, the authors conclude that "[a]lthough some people certainly progress (and some to an elite status), most probably either maintain involvement at a relatively fixed level or actually decrease their participation over time." They also argue that many leisure participants may have little or no desire to become leisure specialists. I generally agree with their conclusion, and have argued before that the specialization process may not be a linear progression (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992). Other evidence cited by Scott and Shafer also questions the "general to particular" assumption of the specialization process.

Their response to this dilemma is a call to "understand the antecedents or mechanisms underlying progress"—a sort of "leisure constraints" approach to explaining variation in the progression of participants in a leisure activity. The "mechanisms of progression" they outline are important and viable research questions for leisure researchers. Yet, in theorizing why many participants do not become specialists, they steadfastly maintain their commitment to the specialization framework.

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I would argue, however, that their conclusion raises difficult questions for the specialization concept, and that some of its assumptions deserve further critical scrutiny. The reason many people do not become specialists may lie in the way specialization is conceptualized. Scott and Shafer's review suggests to me three questions about the specialization concept: 1) Is the concept theoretically too broad and too analytically accommodating?, 2) Is the concept of progress valid in contemporary society?, and 3) does the specialization concept characterize a new "leisure elite" that describes a minority rather than a majority of leisure participants?

### Is the Specialization Concept too Broad?

In trying to understand the contingencies of progress, specialization research must accommodate an expanding diversity of disciplinary questions. Scott & Shafer's review makes reference to behavioral psychology, cognitive psychology, existential philosophy, geography, gender analysis, class analysis, ethnicity, self-identity, and social networks. One could easily add to this list a variety of social science sub-disciplines that ask questions about social norms, values and attitudes, demography, life course analysis, leisure time analysis, and many others.

The diversity of questions about recreation specialization that each of these social science sub-disciplines could ask may indeed be interesting and important. For example, their observation that specialization may be a function of "social world" validation (Bryan, 1979; Ditton, Loomis, & Choi, 1992) of a participant's leisure identity is a useful explanatory device, and research like this could also contribute to the social psychology literature on self-identity. Additionally, the diversity of questions about specialization and "progress" might be necessary to explain the large behavioral variation found across the multitude of recreational pursuits.

But, does this diversity of questions clarify processes of leisure specialization or complicate understanding of these processes? Though complicated stories may not be a bad thing, the range of diverse questions required to explain the specialization process may also undermine the framework's explanatory effectiveness. This diversity may make generalizations derived from the specialization framework impossible. Empirically, is specialization too global a concept?

### Is Progress a Dying Concept?

#### *Progress or Ambivalence?*

The idea of progress was born in the Enlightenment, came of age in the industrial revolution, and is firmly stamped in the psyche of contemporary western society (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947). Based on principles of rationality and efficiency, progress was an ongoing and unlimited quest for a better, more fulfilling life. Global events of the 20th century (two world wars, the nuclear age, global economic depression, genocide, etc.) however,

led social theorists to question the assumptions of rationality and the inevitability of human progress (Kumar, 1995; Lyon, 1994). Following their experiences with Nazi Germany, theorists from the Frankfurt School laid the intellectual ground work for contemporary theories of modernity (Outhwaite, 1996) that reject enlightenment notions of the inevitability of human progress. For post-modern theorists, contemporary life is better characterized by increasing complexity, contingency, uncertainty, anxiety, and a growing ambivalence about action (Bauman, 1991; Delanty, 1999).

In this context, leisure participation may be less a question of achievement and skill perfection, and more about the growing diversity of leisure opportunities and the commercialization of leisure experiences (Urry, 1995). For some, the proliferation of consumer opportunities in leisure markets may encourage leisure variety and discourage a more focused leisure style. For those who do specialize, attachment to a specific leisure activity may be less about self-actualization, and more about anchoring one's identity in an increasingly complex and challenging world of obligation, opportunity, and ambiguity. The centerpiece of specialization research is the concept of progress, but is contemporary leisure about progress, or is it more about social integration? Do its assumptions of individual progress and self-actualization make it a less viable explanation of the contemporary leisure experience?

#### *Diversification of Opportunity?*

Within this modernity framework, the concept of specialization is problematic in two ways. First, the stage metaphor used to describe the specialization process in a leisure activity may be too rigid an application in contemporary society. The specialization framework argues that newer participants are socialized into an activity by aspiring to the skills and attitudes of experts, which direct the novice through a progression of implicit competency tests, or what Scott and Shafer call "turning points," and which initiate the participant into a "leisure social world" of like-minded people. While there are clearly regimented leisure systems like this in place, theories of modernity would emphasize the forces of leisure diversification over leisure standardization. In an environment of uncertainty and ambivalence, participants (novice and expert) will frequently negotiate and modify the meaning of competence, appropriate behavior, and desired outcome of a recreational experience. Moreover, the commercialization of leisure uses marketing and various technologies to make activities reproducible for a wider variety of participants (Urry, 1990), thus redefining an activity's specialization continuum and often diluting the importance attached to expert status. These processes also spawn offshoots of more traditional leisure activities. Skiers now share the slopes with snow boarders and Great Lakes boating destinations now host sailing yachts, racing yachts, cabin-cruisers, "cigar" boats, jet-skis, sea-kayaks and tour boats.

Instead of progressing through stages of participation in well-established activities, leisure participants may instead be sampling from a growing variety

of opportunities. Some participants may favor a diversity of experiences across different activities, rather than a qualitatively better experience with each repeated engagement in a single activity. Other participants may create their own distinct variation of a more traditional leisure activity forged in the specific engagement context and environment. If so, one can understand why the empirical evidence for progression would be weak.

### *Single or Multiple Trajectories?*

A second difficulty with the specialization framework is its conceptualization of an activity's participation trajectory. The specialization framework maintains that participants pass through a progression of different behaviors and levels of commitment, where competence at one stage leads to behaviors at the next level. It implies a pinnacle of progress achieved by few, but perceived by those "below" as the ultimate target of development. Scott and Shafer argue that "such an approach tends to ignore the fact that individuals are likely to vary markedly in their desire to develop their abilities and acquire knowledge."

I would agree that the "pinnacle" metaphor does not fit well with contemporary leisure participation, but not for the psychological reasons Scott and Shafer offer. If leisure is best characterized by diversity and expanding opportunity, then participation does not mean progress toward an ultimate pre-established objective—e.g., progress from worm-fishing from the dock toward fly-fishing on a spring-fed stream for native trout. Instead, participation instead may be better characterized by multiple trajectories from a single starting point. Some anglers may indeed progress from worm-fishing to fly-fishing. Nevertheless, it might be possible to specialize in worm-fishing, where the specialist may be able to choose just the right type of worm from the appropriate type of soil for the right type of fish species under exacting water quality conditions. Similarly, one could easily argue that trout fishing specialists have selected a different trajectory from bass fishing specialists. Hence, it may not necessarily be a lack of commitment or desire that is stalling people on an activity's specialization continuum. It may also be a rejection of the existing continuum in favor of some other trajectory.

Furthermore, if participants in a recreation activity are progressing toward a pinnacle of achievement, I believe one would observe less diversity in participation rather than more. Over time, there would be progressively more specialists who would exert behavioral guidelines on the less specialized participants. Moreover, they might reduce the range of activity behaviors by focusing on specific details of the experience to the exclusion of others. I would argue, however, that the trend is in the opposite direction, where there is a growing diversity of participation styles and variations of the original activity. In this way, "progress" in leisure participation generates multiple participation trajectories and expanding leisure opportunities.

### The New Leisure Elite?

Is specialization a framework for describing the new leisure elite? Of course, this is not the Victorian leisure elite of Veblen's conspicuous consumption (1918). Rather, it is a leisure elite of late-modernity where security in the traditional realms of work, family, and community has eroded, and people seek alternative ways to anchor one's sense of self. In this context, the specialization framework is appealing because it recognizes the growing importance of leisure expressions in everyday life. These expressions are an effective way of constituting one's self-identity in a complex and ambiguous world. Anchoring one sense of self in the competencies, the codified behavior and language, and the community of a leisure activity can ease the inherent anxiety and ambivalence of contemporary existence. Leisure and leisure identities have become important mechanisms in how people cope with ambiguity and "colonize the life-world" (Habermas, 1971) of late-modernity.

But does the specialization framework celebrate and encourage only the most committed and focused types of leisure expressions? It is easy to recognize the elite participants in most leisure activities who are pushing the extremes of the specialization continuum. At the University of Vermont, I teach many skiers, a few of whom compete at an Olympic level. The specialization framework applies quite nicely to the developmental process these people likely must go through. But how far can and should the generalization go? Scott and Shafer discuss the concept of leisure as a central life interest where the most committed people make lifestyle choices that will enhance their chances for more frequent participation in an activity. In our recent research among boaters at the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in 1997, about 20% of the sample said that their boating participation affected their choice of residence. Similarly, 14% said their boating participation affected their choice of spouse (Kuentzel & Heberlein, unpublished data). But what about the remaining four-fifths of the sample? The evidence presented by Scott and Shafer suggests that most will never approach the edge of the specialization continuum. Instead, they will follow a boating career that blends appropriately with a complex pattern of other life interests and obligations. Should this majority be expected or even encouraged to achieve the status of a specialist? Is it realistic to think that most even could become specialists?

### A Predictive Model?

I have attempted in this comment to outline some conceptual limitations with the specialization construct. Do these limitations invalidate specialization research as a whole? Of course not. The specialization framework continues to provide a compelling framework of change among participants in leisure activities. Change is a difficult and neglected concept in recreation research and I applaud Scott and Shafer's effort to steer research toward models of change. But, while the specialization framework has provided an

effective research orientation, particularly in describing variation among leisure participants, the breadth of its orientation has made specialization less effective as a predictive theory of leisure behavior.

I believe Scott and Shafer's discussion of the "mechanisms underlying progression" are appropriate as a direction for future research. I argue, however, that they are asking the wrong question. The question is not: "what keeps people from being specialized"—i.e., the contingencies of specialization. Research should instead be identifying the factors that influence variation in the trajectories of change in leisure participation—i.e., the complex of personal and social factors that constitute the life-world of leisure participants. What are the factors that influence changes in leisure commitment? To what degree do "leisure worlds" contribute to social integration? How do important life events affect the intensity of leisure participation? With its focus on change, the specialization concept is perhaps most valuable in the way it is leading leisure research toward a wider diversity of explanatory models for understanding leisure behavior.

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