

Introduction to the Special Issue

Recreation Specialization and Related Concepts in Leisure Research

MARK D. NEEDHAM

Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR, USA

DAVID SCOTT

Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX, USA

JERRY J. VASKE

Human Dimensions of Natural Resources
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO, USA

More than 40 years have passed since Shafer (1969) challenged the existence of the “average camper.” Recognizing that participants in recreation activities are heterogeneous in their commitments and interests, researchers have emphasized the importance of differentiating users into meaningful homogeneous subgroups. In his seminal article, Bryan (1977) coined the concept of recreation specialization as one approach for identifying, describing, and planning for these subgroups of recreationists. He 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” (Bryan, 1977, p. 175). At one end of this continuum are novices or infrequent participants who do not consider the given activity to be a central life interest or show strong preferences for equipment or technique. The other end of this continuum includes more avid participants who are committed to the given activity and use more sophisticated approaches. Recreationists have been thought to progress to higher stages along this continuum reflected by increasing skill, equipment, participation, and commitment (Bryan, 1977), although this assumption has come under some scrutiny (e.g., Kuentzel & Heberlein, 2008).

Since Bryan’s (1977) original work, more than three decades of empirical research examining recreation specialization has improved the understanding of diversity within

various activity groups (e.g., hikers, anglers, boaters, birders, hunters). Many studies have examined relationships between specialization and related concepts, including involvement, commitment, serious leisure, and experience use history. In addition, researchers have focused on how specialization influences characteristics and cognitions of recreationists, such as their behavior, motivations, satisfaction, place attachment, attitudes toward management, and perceptions of crowding. From a methodological perspective, studies have examined various dimensions of specialization (e.g., behavioral, cognitive, affective) and approaches for measuring (e.g., multiple variables, single item self-classification) and analyzing the concept (e.g., researcher vs. respondent classification). Other research has explored the roles of progression and activity careers associated with specialization (for reviews, see Manning, 2011; Scott & Shafer, 2001).

This special issue builds on this body of work by presenting cutting-edge research applications that expand and strengthen the conceptual and theoretical understanding of specialization, and its linkages with other concepts. Articles in this special issue examine the specialization of hunters, anglers, and players of online games, as well as relationships between this concept and participant preferences, flow experiences, identity, activity and resource substitutability, and leisure capital and investments.

Wu, Scott, and Yang (2013) focused on the dynamics of progression in specialization and flow experiences associated with online games, and the extent that they may induce addiction tendencies. Data were obtained from an online survey of players of Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Results showed that specialized players of these online games were more likely to experience flow and exhibit game addiction than inexperienced players. Specialization also intensified the effects of flow experiences on addiction tendencies.

Schroeder, Fulton, Lawrence, and Cordts (2013) examined how identity was related to specialization among lapsed and current waterfowl hunters in Minnesota. Results showed that some hunters specialized and progressed toward a waterfowl-hunter identity, whereas others either (a) hunted for years but never specialized and identified as waterfowl hunters, or (b) moved toward, but did not attain, a waterfowl-hunter identity. Hunters who achieved a waterfowl-hunter identity may have later relinquished this identity. Identification was associated with more specialization and resistance to change from a preference for waterfowl hunting. Those hunters who had relinquished their identity still retained some social and knowledge-based commitment to this type of hunting, but attraction and centrality declined.

Needham and Vaske (2013) examined relationships between specialization and activity substitutability for deer hunters in eight states and elk hunters in three states. Between 41% and 59% of deer hunters and 38% to 46% of elk hunters reported substitutes such as fishing and hunting other big game. Analyses revealed four specialization subgroups among these hunters (i.e., casual, intermediate, focused, veteran). Casual hunters were most likely to report an activity substitute followed by intermediates, focused, and veterans. This inverse relationship between specialization and activity substitutability was consistent across states and species hunted. Veteran hunters were most likely to report other big game hunting as an activity substitute, whereas casual hunters in many states were most likely to consider fishing as their substitute.

Oh, Sutton, and Sorce (2013) also examined relationships between specialization and substitutability by focusing on predictive relationships from a developmental perspective. They used data from a statewide survey of Texas anglers to test a structural model where site or resource substitution decisions were a function of experience preferences, consumptive orientation, and place attachment. They hypothesized that angler specialization was indirectly related to their substitutability of fishing sites through these concepts. Findings showed that as specialization in fishing increased, anglers became more attached to

specific places and, in turn, were less likely to substitute these specific fishing areas for other locations.

Beardmore, Haider, Hunt, and Arlinghaus (2013) tested the ability of specialization to predict intended fishing behaviors and preferences based on attributes describing available fishing opportunities (e.g., travel distance, expected catch). Data were obtained from anglers at a regional fishery in Germany, and three groups captured preference diversity in this sample. Eleven metrics of specialization were added to their model and information theory was used for selecting the metric that best predicted group membership, which was centrality to lifestyle. Weaker evidence existed for the dimensions of importance of catch, specialized gear use, and a multidimensional self-classification approach. Skill, media use, trophy fish, and harvest orientation did not predict membership. General specialization constructs such as centrality to lifestyle were best suited for predicting general fishing preferences and behaviors of anglers.

Backlund and Kuentzel (2013) provided a research reflection suggesting that the unidirectional continuum of specialization from novice to expert tends to be more the exception than the rule. They contended that a capital metaphor of changing leisure investments provides a more appropriate approach for explaining multidirectional participation in an activity. They proposed four mechanisms of leisure capital investments associated with specialization. First, diversification of leisure opportunities may encourage individuals to use their leisure capital in more, rather than fewer activities. Second, limitations in an individual's abilities, desires, or situations may cause him or her to have only casual or declining activity participation. Third, individuals may develop casual leisure routines that tend to provide organization, routine, and predictability in everyday life. Fourth, life-course changes may lead to activity attrition as leisure capital is devoted to new age and life-stage appropriate activities. The authors suggested that these mechanisms allow a dynamic framework of participation over time and cast some doubt on the hypothesized relationship between specialization and a unidirectional nature of progression.

Taken together, these contemporary applications of the specialization concept improve the understanding of recreationist cognitions and behaviors. These articles also advance the understanding of relationships between specialization and other concepts, such as identity, flow, and substitutability. Authors of articles in this special issue and referees of these articles are thanked for their contributions to expanding and strengthening the conceptual and theoretical understanding of specialization and its relationships with other concepts. Despite the advancements presented in this issue, however, specialization is complex and substantial work remains before many researchers would agree that the collective understanding of this topic is "specialized."

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