Life Course Changes and Competing Leisure Interests as Obstacles to Boating Specialization

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Life Course Changes and Competing Leisure Interests as Obstacles to Boating Specialization

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Research has shown that most boaters do not follow a specialization trajectory resembling a progression from novice to expert. This paper asks what kept people from becoming boating specialists. A life course analysis was used to explore the relationship between changes in boating specialization and life course events (e.g., family changes, career changes, health issues, and new leisure interests). Marriage had a uniformly negative effect on five specialization indicators. Changes in finances, retirement, and illness had selective effects. Although cause-and-effect constraints of life course disruptions were modest, developing other leisure interests had a strong negative influence on specialization, indicating a natural process of attrition occurred from boating over time. Future specialization studies should model processes of progression and retrogression in the research designs.

Keywords change, leisure careers, life course, panel studies, specialization

Scott and Shafer’s (2001) review of the specialization literature asked about the pervasiveness of specialization progression. Recreation specialization was originally conceived as a developmental process where individuals achieve progressively greater degrees of experience, skill, commitment, and socialization in a leisure activity (Bryan, 1979; Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992). How many people, however, actually follow a developmental progression from novice to expert? Kuentzel and Heberlein (2006) used panel data from boaters at the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore to show that specialization progress is more the exception than the rule. Their findings showed that more people maintained their involvement at a low fixed level than at a high fixed level. Boaters who were declining in specialization or remained causal participants over the years outnumbered increasing participants or long-term committed participants (i.e., the specializing boater). The study confirmed Scott

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and Shafer’s speculation 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” (p. 334).

This paper is a follow-up to Kuentzel and Heberlein (2006) research that asked why more boaters did not specialize over time. Scott and Shafer (2001) noted that “More systematic research is needed to examine the conditions that foster and stymie progression” (emphasis in the original; p. 338). If more boaters chose a pattern of casual participation and others were closing the book on past boating engagement, what factors kept them from following a progressive trajectory of specialized boating behaviors and commitments? This paper uses panel data to explore changing life circumstances that encourage some, but discourage more people from becoming specialists.

The life course literature (Kelly, 1983; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975) argues that leisure participation is a function of age-related themes and challenges encountered across different stages of the life course. The time investment, commitment, and skill development required of specialized boating may be affected by marriage, family obligations, or career development. Avid specialists in their 20s or 30s may have to reduce boating participation because of child birth, family obligations, job advancements, and/or residence changes. A natural process of attrition may occur in growing older. If boating was primarily a family activity, participation may decline with the empty nest. Retirement and a fixed income may make the financial demands of boat ownership prohibitive. The declining physical abilities of age also may force some to scale back boating activity. The goal of our study was to use the concept of life course change and disruption to help explain why the majority of Apostle Islands boaters did not specialize over time.

Analyzing and understanding how these life course contingencies affect the progression of leisure participation is fundamentally a question of change, which requires longitudinal data. No cross-sectional research is able to effectively analyze how these contingencies may affect specialization, or affect the trajectory of a boating career over time. Our study explores the relationship between life course change and specialization progression using a three-wave panel study of boaters at the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore.

Models of Change

The specialization framework is a model of individual change and personal growth. People begin their involvement in leisure activities as novices and learn the basic skills, competencies, and expectations of the activity. With experience they progress toward more refined knowledge and competency (Williams, Schreyer, & Knopf, 1990). With the accumulation of experience, skill, and personal benefit come more specific setting and equipment preferences (Virden & Schreyer, 1988), a stronger personal identification with the activity (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998), and an expanding circle of friends who are equally enthusiastic about the activity (Ditton, Loomis, & Choi 1992). Bryan (1979) conceived of this developmental progression as a series of activity specific stages. Subsequent research has thought of specialization more generally as a continuum, which is measured by a variety of behavioral and social psychological indicators. Either way, the specialization framework only theorizes a one-way developmental progression. Although people sometimes participate less frequently over time, lose interest, and move on to other leisure pursuits, this process of change lies outside the specialization framework and its cross-sectional empirical investigations. Consequently, the specialization framework might be considered a uni-directional model of leisure change, which only considers progression while excluding processes of retrogression.

What keeps people from following a trajectory of progression in leisure activities? Kelly’s life-course framework (1983) argued that the age-related signal events and themes
of the life course influence leisure choices and the trajectory of leisure participation. He outlined five developmental periods: preparation, early establishment, mid-establishment, late establishment, and culmination, which are characteristic of age-related life challenges and themes and which influence leisure preference. This framework assumes that changes throughout these developmental periods (e.g., changes in one’s family such as marriage, divorce, parenthood, and widowhood) or career (e.g., career development, changing employment status, residence change, career change, retirement) can produce a changing mosaic of leisure involvement (Kelly, 1990). Consequently, leisure participation is adjusted to an evolving set of age-related situations.

Some studies in the leisure literature have characterized these changing life cycle pressures as constraining and others have characterized them as enabling for leisure participation (Iso-Ahola, Jackson, & Dunn, 1994). Even one study (Bialeschki, 1994) described a circular process where life course stages can “interrupt” one’s preferred leisure. Those studies reporting the constraining pressures of life course change primarily focused on the declining interests or physical abilities as a source of changing leisure participation in later life stages. Several studies provide evidence that leisure participation declines with age (Kelly, 1987; Unkel, 1981). Iso-Ahola et al. (1994) found declines across the life course in exercise-related activities and team sports as well as declines in outdoor activities in the later stages of life. Conversely, Iso-Ahola et al. found increases in home-based activities and hobbies in the later stages of life and found that as their sample ceased leisure activities over the life course, they were also less likely to replace those activities with other new activities.

In a similar vein, Ervin (1987) along with Heberlein and Ervin (1990) used the 1975–1985 panel data from the Apostle Islands to show that life course events can have a negative effect on whether people continue to boat at the Apostle Islands over time. Between 1975 and 1985, those who gave birth to children, whose children left home, and who were divorced were less likely to continue boating at the Apostle Islands. Kuentzel (1994) used the same data to find that having no children was positively related to frequent boating participation. Conversely, getting married and having one or more children was negatively associated with frequent boating participation.

Other studies interpret leisure through the life course as a positive phenomenon. For Kelly (1983), leisure plays a crucial role in facilitating a smoother transition across the life course. He argued that leisure is an important life-space for working out one’s self-identity and a sense of self-coherence during life stage transitions. Other researchers have demonstrated that people will cling to the familiarity of old leisure patterns as a way to smooth the transition between life stages (Crawford, Godbey, & Crouter, 1986; Lounsbury & Hoopes, 1988). Some people even use both strategies (McGuire, Dottavio, & O’Leary, 1987). Either way, leisure participation lends coherence and order to the disruptions of life course change.

Finally, one study reported a “full circle” or returning pattern of leisure participation across the life course. Bialeschki (1994) examined leisure participation among women who were approaching the end of their active mothering duties. In her study, women reported “suspended” leisure careers while children were still reliant on the mother. Once children became more independent, women became less limited by the gender roles of caregiver and were able to return to pre-family leisure activities.

Changes in the trajectory of one’s leisure career, however, need not necessarily be the result of age-related events and challenges. The contingencies of one’s leisure career (Stebbins, 1992) parallel the leisure constraints literature (McQuarrie & Jackson, 2002) to focus on the conditions of everyday life that may conspire against a smooth trajectory of leisure specialization. The way people choose to use their time is contingent on a complex array of opportunities, expectations, obligations, rewards, norms, and changing preferences.
The leisure constraints literature (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991) argues that leisure choices are confronted by structural constraints such as available ice time for figure skating enthusiasts (McQuarrie & Jackson, 1996), interpersonal constraints such as the availability of mentors or social support in ongoing leisure participation (McFarlane, 1996; Stebbins, 1992), and intrapersonal constraints such as acquisition of the needed skills to navigate a yacht around the marina and on large bodies of water (Kuentzel & Heberlein, 1997). Leisure constraints are not necessarily “dead ends” of leisure participation. Rather, they can embody engagement and negotiation to modify the disruptions and redirect leisure along alternative paths (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). In sum, many patterns of choice, obligation, negotiation, and adaptation are evident in everyday life and across the life course that can conspire against a smooth progression of leisure participation and involvement.

Measuring Change

Many studies that explore these life course events and contingencies have measured the dynamics of change using cross-sectional research designs. Research in this mode typically identifies a discrete event and then solicits qualitative accounts of effect or quantitative responses to outcome indicators. Measures of change are indirect using either retrospective or correlational evidence. Much less research has used direct indicators of change, which can only be achieved with longitudinal data and particularly data from the same individuals over time. Panel studies of individuals across time allow researchers to observe discrete events, behaviors, and perceptions at time-1, and directly observe changes in those same indicators at time-2 and beyond. Not only does this approach provide direct measures of how discrete events and contingencies affect individuals at later points in time, but it can also provide direct summary indicators of change. Our study used panel data from boaters at the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in Wisconsin. In 1975 a study was initiated with the hope of following visitors to a newly established National Lakeshore. The study design included an initial sample of visitors in 1975. They were contacted and resurveyed in 1985 and again in 1997.

Specialization Change

Our study followed Kuentzel and McDonald (1992) in conceptualizing specialization as a multi-dimensional construct. Instead of using a single index measure of specialization, we acknowledged that the specialization process is expressed in a combination of dimensions such as behaviors, setting preferences, skill development, psychological commitment, activity socialization, and lifestyle expressions. The literature generally treats these measures as equally weighted indicators of the specialization construct when measured in a cross-sectional context. However, when the concept of change is introduced into the analysis, these various indicators may not follow parallel paths of progression and development (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992).

Our analysis examined five dimensions of specialization change as separate dependent variables. The first indicator was change in boat ownership. For Apostle Islands boaters, boat ownership is more than simply the accumulation of equipment (Block, Black, & Lichtenstein, 1989; Stebbins, 1992), but is itself a lifestyle expression. Many people spend a lot of time on boat maintenance. As a result, some may want to make the most of all this work by taking frequent sailing trips. Others may tire of the effort over time and want to sell. Others may find they are more often using the boat as a vacation home, and simply relaxing on board while docked at the marina.

The second dimension was change in the frequency of boating participation. Participation frequency is one indicator typically used in measuring the experience use history
Obstacles to Specialization

concept (Hammitt, Knauf, & Noe, 1989; Williams, Schreyer, & Knopf, 1990). Participation frequency measured at multiple time intervals should provide direct behavioral indicators of specialization progression or retrogression.

The third specialization dimension used in our study was change in boating skill. Most specialization studies use self-perceived measures of skill because objective measures of skill are more difficult and costly to assess. Consequently, the skill indicator may be more resistant to change in the short term (i.e., once a skill is learned, it is not easily forgotten), and may only be observed across longer periods of time.

The fourth specialization dimension measured in our study was change in psychological commitment (Buchanan, 1985; Stryker & Serpe, 1981) to boating. Developing commitment to an activity may be the motivating force behind increasing or sustained participation. Commitment to boating may also be slow to wane, even as participation frequency declines (Kuentzel & McDonald, 1992).

Finally, we measured change in activity socialization, or the social networks of a boater (Ditton et al., 1992). Change in social contacts associated with boating may be the most prone to life course influences such as marital changes, job changes, residence changes, or retirement. Although strong social support may be a primary predictor of specialized boating, changes in social support may be the least predictable variable in the specialization process. In sum, each of these specialization indicators may follow different developmental trajectories and they should be analyzed as discrete indicators within the broader specialization framework.

Life Course Change

The study drew primarily from the life course literature to analyze indicators of discrete age-related events that occurred over the 22-year timeframe among respondents. The study used nine indicators to measure four types of life course and leisure career changes. The first type of change was related to milestones of the family including marriage, divorce, child bearing, and the empty nest. Second were indicators of change related to career development including changes in job, financial well being, and retirement. The third type of indicator was health-related change where respondents were asked to report if they or members of their family had experienced any major illnesses in the previous 10 years. Finally, the study measured changes in leisure interests. Over time, some people may lose interest in boating and develop interests in other leisure activities. The first three types of life course changes represent milestones or signal events in a person’s life that can potentially alter the trajectory of leisure participation, particularly in an activity like boating that can require a substantial investment of time and money. The last type of change represents a more gradual life change that may reflect a loss of interest or natural attrition from an activity that has “run its course.” The analytical question asked in this study is: To what extent do life course disruptions and leisure career contingencies keep Apostle Islands boaters from becoming activity specialists?

Methods

Data for this study were taken from a panel of overnight boaters first contacted in 1975 at the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in Northern Wisconsin (for more detailed discussion of this area and the recreational activities see Kuentzel & Heberlein, 2006). These same people were contacted again in 1985 and 1997. Boaters were first contacted using a combination of self-registration cards at two locations on Stockton Island (90% of the 1975 overnight visitors stopped at either of these locations), and slip rental information provided by three of
W. F. Kuettzel and T. A. Heberlein

the four area marinas. From a list of 2,253 names gathered during the 1975 boating season, a systematic random sample of 926 boaters were drawn and sent a 16-page questionnaire. From this list, 648 people returned questionnaires for a 70% response rate, and became part of the panel.

At the end of each questionnaire, respondents were asked to provide the names and addresses of two people who might know how to contact the respondent in the future. During subsequent waves of the study, letters were sent to original respondent addresses asking people to acknowledge their current address. For those who did not reply, letters were sent to the contacts listed in the earlier questionnaires asking them to provide contact information for the panel member. In 1985, 501 of the original 648 people in the 1975 panel were located for a 77% response rate using these methods. Of this group, 397 people (79%) completed and returned questionnaires in 1985. From the original group, 61% filled out both the 1975 and the 1985 follow up questionnaires. Researchers repeated these methods in 1997 but added Internet address searches to help locate people. When a question arose about the identity of the person found in the Internet search, phone calls were made asking the individuals to confirm whether or not they had boated at the Apostle Islands in 1975 or 1985. Using these techniques, researchers were able to find 409 out of the original 648 (63%) from the 1975 panel. After sending a follow-up questionnaire, 245 people (61% response rate) from the 1975 panel returned surveys. Among these respondents, 50 people filled out questionnaires in only two of the waves (1975 and 1997), while 195 people filled out questionnaires in all three waves (1975, 1985, and 1997). Of the original 648 boaters in the 1975 panel, 38% were still participating in the study in 1997.

Measurement

Dependent Variables

The analysis included five categorical dependent variables to measure specialization progression. A 2-step process was used to construct the variables. First, boaters were classified as (a) declining, (b) casual, (c) sustained, or (d) increasing participants based on their change scores for each of the five variables. Second, change scores that were indicative of declining participation or casual participation were reflective of a respondent who was not becoming more specialized in boating. Change scores reflecting sustained participation or increasing participation were reflective of individuals who were specializing. In this study, each dependent variable was collapsed into a dichotomous indicator reflecting whether or not a respondent was following a specialization progression.

Individuals in the decreasing category sold their boat during the 22-year period, while people in the low stable category never owned a boat. Conversely, the high-stable category had owned a boat throughout the 22-year period, while those in the increasing category purchased a boat at some point between 1975 and 1997. The frequency of participation indicator asked respondents in 1985 and 1997 to report “how regularly you have been going [boating] over the years.” People who boated “most” years or “every” year in both 1985 and 1997 were categorized as “high stable.” Those who boated “seldom,” “occasionally,” and “about half” the years in both 1985 and 1997 were coded as “low stable.” Individuals who reported a change score of two or more between 1985 and 1997 were coded either as “increasing” or “decreasing” as appropriate. The boating skill variable also used a five-point scale, and was coded in a similar way as frequency of participation. People who were rated their skill as “high” or “expert” across the three waves were categorized as “high stable.” Skill level considered “none,” “novice,” or “intermediate” across the three waves was coded as “low stable.” A change score of two or more across the years were coded as decreasing or increasing as appropriate.
The commitment indicator used an additive index (using Z-scores) of five variables: self-reports of (a) boating commitment, (b) boating interest, (c) influence of boating on one’s life, (d) importance of one’s boating identity, and (e) whether or not boating is “worth it.” The scale reliability for both the 1985 and the 1997 waves was strong (\( \alpha = .88 \) in 1985 and \( \alpha = .87 \) in 1997). Respondents were assigned to specialization progression categories in the following way. If the change score between the two years exceeded one standard deviation unit, respondents were classified as increasing (i.e., a positive change score) or decreasing (i.e., a negative change score). If respondent change scores were less than one standard deviation unit, they were classified as high stable if their index scores were positive in both years, and classified as low stable if their index scores were negative in both years. Finally, activity socialization also included an additive index (using Z-scores) of five different items in the 1985 and 1997 waves: (a) the number of friends who boat, (b) the number of relatives who boat (i.e., none, a few, some, most, or all), (c) how often one’s spouse or partner boats (i.e., never seldom, occasionally, or frequently), (d) friends or relatives who started boating, and (e) new boating friends. The reliability analysis of these indicators showed modest results (\( \alpha = .53 \) in 1985 and \( \alpha = .63 \) in 1997). Respondents were classified into one of four specialization change categories using the same method as the boating commitment variable described above.

**Independent Variables**

The analysis used nine measures of life course related events as independent variables. Six of the nine variables (marriage, divorce, childbirth, empty nest, retirement, and family illness) were constructed as dichotomous indicators, where respondents were coded as “0” if they had not experienced the specific life course event and “1” if they had. Two of these six variables were generally one-time events (retirement and empty nest). The remaining four of the six were created as dichotomous indicators because the number of respondents with multiple marriages, multiple births, or multiple illnesses was quite small.

Two other independent variables (job change and other leisure interests) were constructed with three categories. Respondents were likely to have made more frequent job changes, or to have developed more than one other leisure interest, and evidence suggests a more linear function in these two indicators. Consequently, respondents were coded as “0” if they never changed jobs during the 22-year time frame, “1” if they had done so once and “2” if they had done so more than once. The changing leisure interest variable was measured in both 1985 and 1997. Respondents were asked to report other leisure activities they had become interested in that may have interfered with boating participation including team sports (e.g., baseball, basketball, hockey), individual sports (e.g., golf, skiing, fishing, jogging), outings (e.g., movies, plays, concerts), organizational activities (e.g., church, community, volunteer), household activities (e.g., playing with children, socializing, reading, musical instrument), and other (e.g., hobbies, travel). Respondents were then coded as “0” if they had developed no other interests, “1” if they had developed one other interest, and “2” if they had developed multiple other leisure interests.

Finally, the financial well-being indicator was constructed from change scores to a question that asked how well-off they felt in both 1985 and 1997. Respondents were coded as “-1” if their change score was negative (worse off), “0” if their responses were identical across the years (the same), and “1” if their change score across the years was positive (better off). In this analysis, we collapsed the “worse off” and “same” categories to make a dichotomous variable that measured whether or not respondents thought they were better off financially.
Analysis

The analysis used chi-square tests and logistic regression to test the effects of life course changes on boating specialization. The chi-square statistic was used to test the univariate relationship between 2-category or 3-category independent variables on each of the five dichotomous dependent variables. The analysis then used logistic regression to test for the relative importance of individual life-course effects on specialization change when controlling for the effects of other life course events.

Results

Table 1 shows the relationship between the nine life course variables and each of the five specialization variables. The first column under each dependent variable reports the percentage of the sample that did not specialize—i.e., showed patterns of decline or casual engagement. The percentage of people who did specialize (increased or sustained engagement) was not reported since the two categories always sum to 100% and can be calculated from the one column. The chi-square statistic is reported for each 4-cell or 6-cell cross-tabulation. The second column for each dependent variable shows the significant coefficients from the logistic regression equation, where all nine independent variables were entered into the model.

Boat Ownership

Overall, 71% of the sample did not show a pattern of specialization progression when boat ownership is used as a measure of specialization. Nearly half of the sample (42%) owned a boat in either 1975 and/or 1985, but no longer owned a boat in 1997, while another fourth (29%) never owned a boat during this time. Three life course factors were related to changes in boat ownership (Table 1). First, marriage was a constraint to boat ownership. ($\chi^2 = 6.6$, $df = 1$, $p = .01$). Those who were married ($n = 50$) at some point between 1975 and 1997 were more likely to either sell their boat or to have never owned a boat. Only 6 out of 45 people in the sample (13%) who were married either held on to their boat or purchased a boat. Second, financial health played a role in boat ownership over the years. Those who believed they were no better or worse off financially were more likely to sell their boat or never own a boat during the 22 years ($\chi^2 = 2.9$, $df = 1$, $p = .09$). Only 13 of 63 people (21%) who felt financially worse off or no better off owned a boat or bought a boat during the study years. Finally, those who developed other leisure interests during the 22 years were significantly more likely to sell their boat or never own a boat ($\chi^2 = 11.1$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). Three out of four people (76%) who developed one other leisure interest were less likely to own a boat, while roughly 9 out of 10 people (89%) who developed multiple other leisure interests were less likely to own a boat. Each of these three independent variables remained significant in the multivariate logistic regression model. The remaining six independent variables (loss of spouse, illness, retirement, job change, childbirth, and empty nest) were not related to changes in boat ownership (Log Likelihood = 265.5, $r^2 = .16$).

Frequency of Participation

One-third of the sample (35%) did not show patterns of specialization progression on the frequency of participation indicator. Only 14% said their participation declined during the 22-year period, while 21% sustained a casual rate of participation over the years. The majority (60%) sustained their participation over the years, having gone boating “most years”
### TABLE 1 Effects of Life Course Events and Changing Leisure Interests on Five Dimensions of Boating Specialization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boat Ownership</th>
<th>Freq. of Participation</th>
<th>Boating Skill</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Social Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did Not Specialize (%)</td>
<td>Logit Model B (se)</td>
<td>Did Not Specialize (%)</td>
<td>Logit Model B (se)</td>
<td>Did Not Specialize (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marriage</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (n = 200)</td>
<td>67.5**</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>31.5**</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>52.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes (n = 45)</td>
<td>86.7 (.53)</td>
<td>51.1 (.41)</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>66.7 (.41)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Loss of Spouse</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No (n = 202)</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>50.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes (n = 43)</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>37.2</td>
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<td>55.8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child Birth</strong></td>
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<td>No (n = 176)</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>51.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes (n = 69)</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>37.7</td>
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<td>50.7</td>
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<td><strong>Empty Nest</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No (n = 119)</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>34.4</td>
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<td>49.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes (n = 126)</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>35.7</td>
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<td>52.4</td>
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<td><strong>Job Change</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>0 (n = 88)</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>26.1**</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>50.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 (n = 74)</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>35.1 (.18)</td>
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<td>47.3</td>
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<td>&gt;1 (n = 83)</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finances</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worse (n = 63)</td>
<td>79.4*</td>
<td>−.64</td>
<td>44.4*</td>
<td>−.65</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better (n = 182)</td>
<td>68.1 (.37)</td>
<td>31.9 (.32)</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Retirement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>No (n = 148)</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>55.4*</td>
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<td>37.1</td>
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<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>0 (n = 155)</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>56.2**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (n = 90)</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>44.4 (.28)</td>
<td></td>
<td>42.4 (.29)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other Interests</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>0 (n = 165)</td>
<td>64.8**</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>28.5**</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>50.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 (n = 33)</td>
<td>75.8 (.23)</td>
<td>42.4 (.17)</td>
<td>54.5</td>
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<td>63.6 (.17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;1 (n = 47)</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*χ² significant at < .10.

**χ² significant at < .05
or “every year.” Table 1 shows that four of the nine independent variables significantly predicted changes in the frequency of boating participation. Those who were married between 1975 and 1997 significantly reduced their participation, or remained only casual participants over the years ($\chi^2 = 6.2, df = 1, p = .01$). Over half the people who were married (51%) during the 22-year period reduced or sustained a low level of boating participation. Changing jobs also reduced participation. The effect was linear. Job stability (no job changes) meant that respondents were less like to be casual participants or reduce their participation over time (26%), while a third of those who changed jobs once during the 22-year time frame participated less (35%), and nearly half (47%) of those who changed jobs multiple times participated less frequently ($\chi^2 = 6.3, df = 2, p = .04$). Next, those who felt they were financially worse off or the same were more likely to be casual or declining participants in boating ($\chi^2 = 3.2, df = 1, p = .07$). Conversely, those who believed they were better off financially also participated more in boating over the years. Finally, the development of other leisure interests over the 22-year timeframe was negatively related to frequency of participation ($\chi^2 = 10.6, df = 2, p = .00$). When respondents developed no other leisure interests, only 29% of the sample included casual or declining participants. For those who developed one other leisure interest, 42% boated less frequently over the years. For those who developed more than one other leisure interest, more than half (53%) boated less frequently. Each of these four univariate effects remained significant when entered into a multivariate logistic regression model (Log Likelihood=289.5, $r^2 = .15$).

**Boating Skill**

More than half of the sample showed patterns of change in boating skill that did not reflect specialization progression. One in 10 people in the sample (11%) reported a decline in boating skill over time, while 43% of the sample reported low levels of boating skill throughout the 22 years. Only two independent variables were significantly related to skill change over the years. First, having one’s last child leave home at some point during the 22-year timeframe was positively associated with skill change. Those who experienced the empty nest were less likely to report low levels of skill or declining skill than those who had not experienced the empty nest ($\chi^2 = 5.2, df = 1, p = .02$). In other words, having children at home has a constraining effect on skill development. Second, having an illness in the family was also related to changes in boating skill. Table 1 shows that those who reported one or more family illnesses were less likely to report low levels of skill or declining boating skills ($\chi^2 = 5.1, df = 1, p = .02$). Conversely, those who did not experience a major illness or accident during the 22-year period were more likely to report declining or low levels of boating skills. Both univariate effects were also significant in the multivariate logistic regression model. The remaining seven indicators, however, were not related to skill development and change over time (log likelihood=322.8, $r^2 = .08$).

**Boating Commitment**

Half of the sample reported levels of boating commitment that did not reflect specialization progression. One-third (34%) reported consistently low levels of boating commitment across the years, while 17% reported declining levels of commitment. Change in boating commitment was significantly related to four of the nine independent variables. First, marriage was a constraint to boating commitment. Among people who were married during the 22-year period, two-thirds (67%) reported low or declining commitment levels, while only 48% of those who were not married reported low or declining commitment to boating ($\chi^2 = 5.4, df = 1, p = .02$). Second, retirement was positively related to commitment. Those who
had retired at some time during the 22-year period were less likely to report low or declining commitment to boating than those who had not yet retired ($\chi^2 = 2.9, df = 1, p = .09$). Third, having a family illness was also positively related to boating commitment. Those who had experienced an illness in the family were less likely to report low or declining commitment than those who had not experienced a family illness ($\chi^2 = 4.4, df = 1, p = .03$). Finally, developing other leisure interests had a negative effect on boating commitment. Among respondents who had developed no other leisure interests, only 44% reported low or declining commitment levels. Conversely, among people who had developed one or more other leisure interests, nearly two-thirds reported low or declining commitment levels. Only three of the four univariate effects were significant in the multivariate logistic regression model. The chi-square statistic for the retirement variable was significant only at the .09 level. When controlling for the effects of all nine variables in a multivariate model, however, the retirement effect was not significant (log likelihood=316.4, $r^2 = .12$).

**Boating Socialization**

Half of the sample showed weak or declining social networks of boating friends during the 22-year period. More than a third of the sample (35%) reported having few friends or relatives who boated across the years, while 16% of the sample reported that their number of boating friends or relatives had declined over time. Two of the nine bivariate relationships were significantly related to changes in boating friends. Marriage keeps one from developing strong social networks related to boating participation. Among those who were married during the 22 years, more than three-fourths (78%) reported few boating friends or a decline in boating friends over time ($\chi^2 = 8.5, df = 1, p = .00$). As might be expected, developing other leisure interests also keeps people from developing strong social ties with other boaters. For those who developed no other leisure interests during the 22 years, only half (52%) reported few or declining social ties to other boaters. Among those who did develop one or more other leisure interests, more than two-thirds of the sample reported low or declining social networks ($\chi^2 = 8.2, df = 2, p = .01$). Both of these univariate effects remained significant in the multivariate logistic regression model. A third variable, however, was also significant in the multivariate model. Table 1 shows that those who had retired during the 22-year period were more likely to report low or declining numbers of boating friends ($B = .65, se = .31, p = .04$).

**Discussion**

Perhaps the most telling result from this study, is that life-course disruptions did not have a major effect on the trajectory of boating specialization overall. With the obvious exception of marriage, and a few selective effects of finances, retirement, and illness, the overall effects of the life course on specialization change were quite modest. Beyond marriage, the remaining univariate relationships between life course events and boating specialization were significant only about 20% of the time and made only a small contribution to the $r^2$ values in the multivariate models. This suggests that there may be few universal patterns of response to life course events. Some people might take most life-course changes in stride, while others may be devastated by those same types of disruptions.

The primary exception was marriage, which was one of the most pervasive factors that kept people from becoming boating specialists. For many, the amount of time and effort one invests in a marriage partner comes at the expense of the amount of time and effort one invests in boating. This of course does not mean that married couples are less likely
to become boating specialists. Married couples, with or without children, are a common profile among Apostle Islands boaters, and boating can be a primary shared leisure interest for many married partners. Instead, the results suggest that the marriage event may exert a strong influence on the trajectory of pre-marriage leisure interests and activities. The type of boating trips one takes with other single friends is probably different from the sort of trips one takes with a spouse and family. It is also possible that because boating tends to be a gendered activity, the male takes on the role of boat captain, and the wife may not always be a willing or cooperative crew member. So the marriage dynamic exerts negative pressure on boating participation over time.

Change in financial well-being was related to specialized boating behaviors, while retirement was related to the social psychological dimensions of specialization. Those who felt they were the same or worse off financially were more likely to boat less frequently over the years and to sell their boat. While the “upper-class image” of boating is no longer accurate because of new and less expensive boat manufacturing technologies, there still appears to be a financial threshold that sustains boating participation. The results also showed that retirement was positively related to boating commitment and negatively related to the number of boating friends. There was evidence to suggest that retirement for many in the sample represented a “full circle” trajectory, where people were able to reinvigorate their commitment to boating perhaps by spending more time on their boat or developing their racing skills. Conversely, for others, retirement for some in the sample meant a loss of boating friends, perhaps because boating friends were also friends tied to work, or because of relocation in retirement. Finally, experiencing a major illness or accident in the family had a somewhat counter intuitive effect on boating skill and commitment. Those who had experienced an illness were more likely to report higher levels of skill and commitment over time. Illness is likely to create considerable disruptions to boating involvement that for some may make them more appreciative of what they missed, and a determination to continue boating after recuperation.

Nevertheless, the question still remains: why did these independent variables not have a bigger effect? It appears that attrition appears to better characterize leisure participation over time than development and progression. The majority of people in the sample did not specialize because they had developed other leisure interests over time. Once boating skills are learned, it may become difficult to replicate the initial exhilaration, aesthetics, and social bonding experiences with each successive boating trip. There may also be circumstances that turn boating participation into a chore and an obligation—e.g., a wife in charge of cooking and childcare on a 36-foot boat, or an annual family reunion boating trip with disagreeable in-laws. When the passion for boating fades or participation begins to feel obligatory, people may turn to other leisure interests, which in part may be spurred on by the diversity of other leisure interests that may catch someone’s attention over time (Kuentzel, 2001). By developing other leisure interests, some Apostle Islands boaters grew tired of the activity and invested their time and energy into new skills, hobbies, and activities. The findings from this study suggest that the everyday slow process of attrition from boating participation may be more prominent than a cause-and-effect event that keeps people from developing their preferred leisure interests. Conditions of life are not “conspiring” to keep people from becoming boating specialists. Rather, boating for many people appears to have naturally “run its course” (Kuentzel & Heberlein, 2006).

A second reason that life course events had only modest effects on specialization change is because a single event can be positive or negative. Does divorce, for example, exert a positive or negative influence on boating participation? For some, divorce may liberate one from marital discord, and open up the “flood gates” for more active participation. For others, however, selling the boat may be part of a divorce settlement. Similarly, does giving birth to
a child enable or constrain boating participation? For some, sharing one’s leisure passions with children even at an early age is central to family life. For others, however, the thought of bringing on board a toddler or a small child who is easily bored is unpleasant if not frightening. In retirement, some relocate to be nearer to family or warm weather and may find it difficult to sustain previous levels of boating involvement. Others, however, may use retirement to develop their racing skills or to make long distance trips to places they have never been. In sum, the mere occurrence of life course events does not predict the trajectory of leisure participation. What was not controlled in this analysis were the perceived positive or negative effects of life course events—effects that are difficult to generalize across any population of activity participants. Future longitudinal research should build more effective controls for the perceived effects of life course or contingent events that may affect the trajectory of one’s leisure career.

The results from this study suggest that the notion of progression inherent in the specialization framework may need reconsideration. The concept of progression is based on the idea that people have a natural tendency for self-improvement, and those who are unable to specialize are simply “stuck” at lower levels of involvement. However, while some people do invest substantial time and commitment into boating and are frustrated by circumstances that constrain their participation, there also appears to be vector of diminishing involvement equal to, if not more prevalent than progression. It’s like a sort of psychological second law of thermodynamics. Over time, it may become easier and perhaps more desirable to stay at home and “putter” around the house than launch the boat from the marina, deal with the winds and weather, and navigate the boat to some secluded bay to watch the sunset. The rewards of the wind, weather, and sunset may be substantial. Nevertheless, over time, staying at home or perhaps trying different leisure experiences may be easier and eventually preferable.

Future specialization research should incorporate this vector of diminishing benefit into its models of change. Many of the people identified as nonspecialists or low specialists in cross-sectional studies may not simply be new entrants or people who have become “stuck,” but instead may be “on their way out.” Understanding both progression and retrogression in a population will help specialization research move beyond its user segmentation approach to leisure satisfaction to be able to better predict participation trends and changing leisure preferences. One way to do this is to better integrate the specialization framework with the serious leisure framework (e.g., Stebbins, 2005; 2007). The serious leisure framework would not be troubled by the finding that most boaters did not specialize. This approach, instead, explicitly accommodates processes of progression and retrogression that are inherent in the contingencies of one’s “leisure career.”

Multiple Data Sets Needed

The specialization framework is attractive because it is simple and easy to contemplate. There are clear steps of progression, and one can easily imagine the neophyte sailor going on a trip, discovering his/her interest, sailing more and more, finally buying a boat, and perhaps entering a few boat races. It is harder to think of the person who started sailing and then got married, met new people, but kept boating every once in a while, finally quitting when he/she retired and moved to Arizona. It is even harder to think of a person who is passionate about sailing at one point time become disinterested later in life because priorities and interests have changed and evolved. But it is these latter manifestations of change that are more common than the specialization scenario.

The only way to observe these kinds of changes, however, is to actually follow people over time in a panel. Unfortunately, panel studies are rare in the leisure or outdoor
recreation, and non-existent in the specialization literature. This longitudinal study shows some of the limits of the specialization construct. Past studies have used cross-sectional data to segment user populations so that recreation managers can better understand the variety of preferences among its clientele. The management goal has been driven by a traditional satisfaction framework. When managers understand the diversity of their clientele, they are better equipped to provide satisfying experiences. This panel study has asked a distinctly different question. Its goal has not been to simply understand the diversity of user preferences. Rather, its goal has been to document and understand divergent processes of change in leisure participation—change in behavior, change in commitment, and change in social networks of leisure involvement. This longitudinal approach provides a different way for recreation managers to prepare for the future, and a more powerful way of thinking about the needs of participants in a constantly changing social environment.

To conduct a study over time requires institutional support and personal commitment. Institutions, such as the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, or the long defunct Bureau of Outdoor Recreation fail to regularly monitor and follow-up visitors. Most sponsored research from public sector agencies is often driven by the need for a quick answer to a current problem and a scientific rationale for a pressing decision. The tourism industry is little different, using one-shot cross-sectional surveys to drive business decisions. In a context where a business model rules, and where taxpayers or stockholders demand accountability, longitudinal research is typically considered a luxury. When compared to the long-term monitoring we see in the natural sciences, such as the NSF funded Long-Term Ecological Research sites, the social sciences are at a complete disadvantage. While we develop models and theories of a dynamic nature, we are forced to test them with static data. As this analysis of Apostle Islands boaters shows, studying change expands the horizons and scope of our research questions, and provides better tools for predicting and preparing for the future.

References


Obstacles to Specialization


