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THE SOCIAL CIRCLE OF CATFISHERMEN:  
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF FISHING

by

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## NOTE

The use of the terms 'fisherman', 'fishermen', and 'outdoorsmen' is not intended to ignore the fact that women also participate in fishing and other outdoor activities. Rather, they are intended to be used merely as common terms to facilitate the flow of the paper and the conveyance of the contents therein.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Despite fishing's popularity both as a leisure and sport activity, the world of the recreational fisherman has only recently begun to be investigated by sociologists. While there are literally thousands of studies on various species of fish, there are relatively few studies on the angler. Thomas Dailey (1977) lists only 103 social and behavioral studies on the participants of recreational fishing in his annotated bibliography on the subject. This bibliography encompasses nearly all of the studies of recreational fishermen up to 1974. These studies primarily reflect quantified, descriptive accounts of the characteristics and motives of the fishermen in relation to recreational management. More recently, articles and papers have begun to define areas of further needed research.

#### Objectives

Many of the studies of fishermen and their recreational activity have attempted to assist recreational resource managers. The majority were aimed at gathering data on socioeconomic characteristics of anglers, what fishermen do, and motivations for the activity. These were often conducted by recreationalists and resource extension agents. Sociologists and other behavioral scientists occasionally conducted research on fishermen, but generally failed to go beyond socioeconomic activities, and motivational consideration. While these studies have provided useful information, certain misconceptions have developed. One major

misconception is that all fishermen constitute a homogeneous group. Another is the treatment of leisure as a residual activity which is left over after more important obligations are fulfilled (Bryan, 1976: 87). In addition, there is an increasing need for social science research which goes beyond the traditional emphasis of fishing research. "This development is a result of relatively recent recognition by fish and wildlife managers that many crucial issues take the form of 'people problems'" (Bryan, 1976: 83). The problems include the "...regulation and enhancement of wildlife resources for human benefits" (Hendee and Schoenfeld, 1973: 8). Also, "...out-of-control technology and growth have severely damaged outdoor recreation resources and make wise management of existing resources difficult" (Bryan, 1976: 83). Problems also exist on the management level.

In sport fishery management, as in many other endeavors, we possess a technical and economic capacity which drastically outpaces our social wisdom. We respond to what we perceive as a recreational need of society with a management program which changes the character of sport fishing. This change has an impact upon the desires and needs of the public which in turn influence future management. And so we track through history, trying to manage our resources to match social trends in the attempt. The chain process which sets the destiny of sport fishing is largely out of control (McFadden, 1969: 140).

The object of this research is not to directly confront any of the current issues in recreational management. Rather, an attempt is made to develop a base to assist future research aimed at solving current problems. This base can be accomplished by offering improvements and refinements of current approaches and typologies and by developing a framework to gain an understanding of the subjective world of fishermen. This will be accomplished by an extensive review of the literature to

provide specific areas of consideration and by examining these areas using a qualitative study of local catfish fishermen.

A second objective of the research is of a more esoteric nature. The subgroup of catfishermen is a subgroup that exists in society about which very little is known. The uniqueness of the subgroup in the world of fishing make the subgroup worth knowing about. In addition, the development of a framework for investigating such a subgroup can contribute to the area of qualitative sociology by providing a framework to investigate other subgroups in society.

The subgroup of catfish fishermen provide a unique approach to traditional studies of fishermen. In the history of the sport, the influence of European traditions have had a profound impact on fishing. Under the feudal system, hunting and fishing privileges were reserved for members of nobility (ORRRC, 1962: 7). The development of the sport centered around trout in Europe, and later, bass, when the species was discovered in America. The various writers of the 15th through 18th centuries (e.g., Isaak Walton, Charles Cotton, George Washington Bethune, and Thaddeus Norris) predominantly emphasized trout fishing and, to some extent, bass fishing (Waterman, 1975: 60-69). The art of angling in America got its background in Europe where English writers "...endeavored to make it a gentleman's sport" (Waterman, 1975: 60-61).

The cultural influence of the elites in fishing is still common in today's fishing. This cultural perspective has traditionally treated catfishes as an inferior species of fish primarily because of its feeding habits (i.e., a bottom feeder). The following poem from England exemplifies a typical cultural perception of catfish.



Oh, do not bring the Catfish here!  
 The Catfish is a name I fear.  
 Oh, spare each stream and spring,  
 The Kennet swift, the Wandle clear,  
 The lake, the loch, the broad, the mere,  
 From that detested thing!

The Catfish is a hideous beast,  
 A bottom-feeder that doth feast  
 Upon unholy bait;  
 He's no addition to your meal,  
 He's rather richer than the eel;  
 and ranker than the skate.

His face is broad, and flat, and glum;  
 He's like some monstrous miller's thumb;  
 Behold him the grayling flee,  
 The trout take refuge in the sea,  
 The gudgeons go on guard.

He grows into a startling size;  
 The British matron 't' would surprise  
 And raise her burning blush  
 To see white catfish as large as man,  
 Through what the bards call "water wan,"  
 Come with an ugly rush!

They say the Catfish climbs the trees,  
 And robs the roosts, and down the breeze  
 Prolongs his catterwaul.  
 Oh, leave him in his western flood  
 Where the Mississippi churns the mud;  
 Don't bring him here at all!

(Anonymous, 1940: 6)

Thus, the study of catfish fishermen offers a potential contrast to studies on trout and bass anglers. Further, the catfish is indigenous to Kansas and has a history of being a popular game fish in the state. By studying a non-traditional subgroup, a wide range of other possible subgroups who potentially have impacts on recreational management may be studied in the future. This would further add to the field of recreation.

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## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As previously noted, Dailey (1977) provides an extensive bibliography of the social and behavioral studies of fishing. Primary emphases of these studies have been on the socioeconomic characteristics of fishermen, what fishermen do, and motivational aspects of anglers. These have been adequately discussed in previous articles, thus only brief discussions of them will be made here.

#### Socioeconomic Characteristics

In an attempt to assist recreational management and planning agencies understand the needs of the fishing clientele, various data-based profiles of fishermen have been conducted. The profile includes age, sex, employment status, occupation, income, marital status, residence, etc. (e.g., see Addis, 1976; Bevins, et al., 1968; Braaten, 1970; Kirkpatrick, 1963; Nobe and Gilbert, 1970; Sofranko and Nolan, 1972; and Spaulding, 1970). The general socioeconomic characteristics of fishermen have been summarized by various studies. A general profile of the angler show that they are disproportionately males who are married, slightly higher educated, and in the early forties age category. They predominately have rural or small town backgrounds and began fishing as a youth.

#### The Fishing Activity

Recreational fishing generates a huge income for fishing related businesses. Approximately \$5 billion was spent on the sport by some 33

million fishermen. The average fisherman will spend approximately \$6.30 per day on fishing and will average 20 days of fishing per year. As Bryan further summarizes:

Most fishing is done in the warmer months during weekends, a relatively small percentage of the anglers catch a large proportion of the fish, the most successful fishermen fish more days and stay out longer when they do fish, the average length of trip ranges from four to five hours, and some anglers travel great distances in pursuit of the sport (Bryan, 1976: 84).

### Why Fishermen Fish

Other fishing studies have examined the social-psychological aspects of the fisherman. This includes the motivations which underlies the fishing activity. Of course, the primary reason for fishing is to catch fish. The "euphoria" and "tension release" emotional states associated with catching a fish has been developed by Spaulding (1970b). However, findings suggest that in addition to catching fish, reasons such as temporary escape, isolation, peace and quiet, and experiencing natural settings are important motivations for fishing. Kirkpatrick (1966) has even attempted to apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the activity. The motivations have been combined with other factors to gain a perspective on the satisfaction of the fishing experience (e.g., see Aukerman, 1975; Ballas, et al., 1974; Hampton and Lackey, 1975; and Moeller and Engelken, 1972).

### Critique of Past Research

While these studies on fishermen and their activity have provided a good base to form a profile, certain misconceptions on the subject have resulted. Most of the studies in Dailey's bibliography tend to treat fishermen as a homogeneous group of recreationalists. Data for

almost all the studies have come from surveys, questionnaires, formal interviews, and other quantifiable methodologies. As is the case with this general type of methodology, information from a sample is generalized to the larger population. However, in the area of fishing, this methodology has tended to obfuscate the variation and subgroups of fishermen. This is largely a result of a lack of theoretical frameworks and typologies for identifying different types of fishermen. New definitions, new theoretical frameworks, different methodological approaches, and further refinements of current research are presently needed to advance the 'sociology of fishing.'

Most of these criticisms of the literature have been noted by Hobson Bryan. Bryan has been the most prolific writer on the 'sociology of fishing' and should be considered one of the leading authorities in the area. He states:

The overview of findings reveals mostly a descriptive profile of fishermen. But the whys of angling behavior remain largely unanswered and the variations among individual sportsmen largely unexplored. Consequently, the social sciences have not been brought to bear effectively on the people problems of fisheries management in fresh and saltwater settings. Several factors are responsible. They fall under these headings: conceptual frameworks, premises, methods, perspectives, and mobilization of effort (Bryan, 1976: 85).

Recent research has largely been directed at developing a 'social science' impact on the 'whys of angling.' By focusing upon specialized, diverse subgroups of fishermen (e.g., trout and bass fishermen), Bryan has begun to develop a conceptual framework to classify the varieties of fishermen and has begun to dispel the notion that fishermen are a homogeneous group (Bryan, 1974a, 1974b, 1976, 1977 and 1979). In addition, Bryan stresses the importance of participant observation as a first-stage methodology.

In the early stages of developing a body of knowledge, additional insight and sensitivities gleaned from first-hand experience with the subject can be valuable. Moral: the sociologist who happens to be a fisherman might be preferred to one who isn't! (Bryan, 1976: 88).

The use of participant observation methods in recreational research has been advocated for at least ten years. Campbell (1970) noted several advantages of participant observation. McCall and Simmons (1961) describe participant observation techniques as including interaction with subjects in the field, direct observation of relevant events, formal and informal interviewing, and an open-end in the direction of the study. "These techniques provide the type of qualitative information which can produce an inclusive view of recreation as a process, as well as qualitative data in support of the study's objective" (Campbell, 1970: 227).

#### Recent Approaches

Some researchers in the field are beginning to develop the identified areas of concern. Adams (1979) introduces a framework, canonical analysis, for identifying fishermen. This is based on a micro approach which attempts to divide the recreational fishing market on the basis of demographic characteristics of fishermen and the types of fishing experience desired. While this approach may be useful in distinguishing individual fishermen characteristics, the 2,578 mailed questionnaires used to gather the data does little to distinguish possible subgroups of fishermen. The data is reduced in such a way as to obscure this distinction if an effort was made to make such a distinction. The apparent lack of participant observation techniques may account for the oversight. Although there are noted limitations on canonical analysis,

Adams does provide a passable framework for future research.

Hendee, (et al., 1975) has developed a participant observation study of recreational sport fishing in various 'wilderness' areas of Washington. Various socioeconomic characteristics and motivational factors were studied, and many previous quantitative findings on characteristics and motivations were supported. In addition, territoriality and conversations between anglers were observed. These areas offer further criteria from which fishermen may be categorized. While the study did not distinguish subgroups of fishermen, the use of participant observation methods was established as a viable approach to research in fishing.

The primary contributor to exploring the areas of concern identified by Bryan has been Bryan himself. Bryan has addressed many of the issues lacking in the sociology of fishing. He has shown that fishermen are not a homogeneous group, developed a typology based on recreational specialization, advocated and utilized participant observation techniques and research conducted by sociologist/fishermen, and emphasized areas for further research. However, there are some weaknesses in Bryan's efforts which can be addressed by the study of catfish anglers.

Bryan (1974a, 1974b) identifies two diverse subgroups of fishermen: professional bass fishermen and specialized trout fishermen. Tournament bass fishermen have developed fishing into a formalized sport complete with clubs having formal memberships, federations or leagues of state affiliated clubs, rules of competitions and tournament circuits complete with cash prizes. The season culminates with a 'super bowl' or 'world series' of bass fishing in which top bass fishermen are flown to a secret lake to determine the "King of Bass Fishermen" (Bryan, 1974b: 21). Like other sport celebrities, 'master' bass fishermen engage in formal and

informal advertising of various types of equipment ranging from fishing tackle to specialized bass boats. This has a tremendous impact on aspiring fishermen. "A corollary to the growth in tournament fishing has been the use of more and more specialized and refined equipment defined by the 'pros' as absolutely necessary if one is to be a serious bass fisherman" (Bryan, 1974b: 21). The tournament bass fishermen constitute a highly specialized subgroup of fishermen. In addition, the professional influence on other bass fishermen causes those amateurs to be specialized and more diverse than the 'average' fisherman.

The subgroup of trout fishermen is also addressed by Bryan. Trout fishermen have previously been identified as a possible subgroup (James, 1971; McFadden, et al., 1964; and Smith and Kavanaugh, 1969). However, Bryan (1974a) suggests that the subgroup of specialized trout fishermen may be distinct enough to be considered as a subculture of the larger society of sportsmen. According to Bryan, specialized trout fishermen constitute "...a group that has developed its own set of beliefs, values, customs, and practices that its members share but that are different from those prevailing in the large society of sportsmen" (1974a: 2). Association with the subculture is gained by those sportsmen who have "...gone through a series of stages in their fishing careers and outdoor experience of a necessary and sufficient nature" (1974a: 4).

Bryan builds upon the 'series of stages' in a fishing career to establish a typology of fishermen based on degree of specialization. The typology is centered around the term 'recreational specialization.' This refers to 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: 175). The continuum of fishermen found by Bryan are:

1. Occasional Fishermen - those who fish infrequently because they are new to the activity and have not established it as a regular part of their leisure, or because it simply has not become a major interest.
2. Generalists - fishermen who have established the sport as a regular leisure activity and use a variety of techniques.
3. Technique Specialists - anglers who specialize in a particular method, largely to the exclusion of other techniques.
4. Technique-Setting-Specialists - highly committed anglers who specialize in method and have distinct preferences for specific water types on which to practice the activity (Bryan, 1977: 178).

Bryan's emphasis upon the 'subculture' of trout fishermen and ensuing typology based on observations of that subgroup is based upon a fishing elitist perspective. Trout and bass fishing is generally considered to require tremendous skill in techniques. While these groups of fishermen indicate that fishermen are not a homogeneous group of sportsmen, there is an implicit tendency to relegate other 'lesser' types of fishing and fishing subgroups as unimportant or homogeneous. The following quotes cited by Bryan serve to illustrate the point.

Since the kindergarten of angling is still fishing with a pole and worm, and serious anglers generally agree that the progressive education of an angler culminates in stream fishing with a fly, it is only natural that the highest reaches of the literature should be concerned chiefly with this form of fishing (Gingrich, 1965: 481) (quoted in Bryan, 1974b: 2).

And as the fish come to the spring creek through preference, most of them descendants of those that have turned from the broad river, so do the fishermen come to such a shrine, speaking eagerly to those of their kind, having less to say to cruder fishermen -- Charles F. Waterman -- (quoted in Bryan, 1974b: 1).

The preoccupation with elite fishing also influences the typology of recreational specialization. The typology is predominately based on the premise of a series of progressive specialization in one's angling career. For Bryan, this progression culminates in the specialized technique of fly-fishing in a limestone spring stream (e.g., "Specialist fishermen by definition, prefer fly-fishing tackle" Bryan, 1977: 178). While this may be true for trout fishermen, this technique may not be utilized by those fishing for a different species of fish. The bass fishing specialist uses a variety of spin-casting techniques with various lures while the channel cat specialist may utilize a variety of special 'stink baits.' The method or technique which denotes a specialist has a direct connection with the species of fish which is the quarry of the subgroup.

Bryan (1974a) uses the term 'subculture' to describe the subgroup of trout fishermen. Although the term is relatively clear in the context in which it is used (i.e., the analogy comparing the world of sportsmen with the general society in which the subgroup of trout fishermen constitute a subculture in the world of sportsmen), there is potential for confusion and misunderstanding associated with this use. The term is misleading out of the context of the sportsmen's world. Studies in the areas of deviant behavior (Irwin, 1970), poverty (Waxman, 1977), and class (Mayer and Buckley, 1970) advocate a stricter use of the term than that used by Bryan.

For Irwin, the subgroups' systematic behavior will have no meaning outside its subcultural context. A comprehension and appreciation of the values, beliefs, and symbolic systems of the members of a subculture is a prerequisite to understanding behavior. In addition, the development

of a subculture requires that a group of individuals remain in interaction and/or communication over an extended period of time, thus enabling a re-organization of their beliefs, values, and symbolic systems around the particular circumstances of their common relationships. Such re-organization requires a protracted time period of interaction, a strong commitment to the group, a general congruence of the individual member's values and beliefs, and distinct qualities in the activities and interests of the group (Paraphrased from Irwin, 1970: 109-111).

Waxman (1977: 45-67) provides a thorough discussion of past and present uses of the term 'subculture.' He defines subculture as:

...the culture of a subgroup within a larger society which may be distinguished from that larger society and the other groups of which it is composed on the basis of that subgroup's characteristic patterns of behavior, lifestyle, attitudes, and values (Waxman, 1977: 49).

Similarly, Mayer and Buckley state:

We here use the concept of subculture to refer to a complex of interrelated learned beliefs, attitudes, values, and patterns of behavior common to a grouping within the larger society. These traits become generalized in symbols and thoughtways forming an ethos that reflects and is reflected by the details of group life. Most important, such traits are seized upon by other subgroups as bases for perceiving and acting toward members of the subculture, as determining their standing in the community, or as means to "hang people on their own peg." Some of the many class differences in subcultural "life style" recorded by research include differences in respect to type of residence, leisure and recreation, family life and ritual, church preference, sex mores and behavior, fashions, musical taste, drinking habits, and types of deviant behavior (Mayer and Buckley, 1970: 55).

The recent literature on subcultures is essentially advocating a strict and more precise use of the term than previously used. A subgroup of fishermen may have a unique set of behaviors, attitudes, values, etc., when compared to other fishermen; however, the generally diverse

backgrounds of the subgroup would probably render a diverse set of behavior, attitudes, values, etc., in comparison to the total society. That is, the subgroup may have similar attitudes toward fishing which may be distinct from fishermen in general, but they may have different ethnic backgrounds, political attitudes, religious philosophies, moral values, etc. Bryan does not show that the attitudes and values of the trout fishing subgroup transcends into the larger social milieu. Thus, the use of the term is technically incorrect and has potential for misunderstanding and confusion.

However, a subgroup of fishermen might be better understood if distinctions are made using some set of criteria. Since the term 'sub-culture' potentially illicit misconceptions, a different term would be useful. Georg Simmel's concept of the social circle provides a broad enough term from which to describe a subgroup such as fishermen. According to Simmel, "...each individual establishes for himself contacts with persons who...are related to him by virtue of an actual similarity of talents, inclinations, activities, and so on" (Simmel, 1955: 128). In addition, "...practical considerations bind together like individuals, who are otherwise affiliated with quite alien and unrelated groups" (Simmel, 1955: 128). The concept of the social circle is broad and flexible. It is broad enough to encompass individuals of the same gender while being flexible to also describe a family as a social circle, trade unions as social circles, and subgroups as social circles.

The flexibility of the social circle allows modifications to be made to make its meaning more precise in certain instances. The social circle can be thought of as a behavior system with a variety of elements.

However, the concept is flexible enough such that not all social circles contain the same elements. By defining criteria of elements in a specific social circle, the concept can have some continuity with other studies.

In the case of subgroups of fishermen, the subgroup can be distinguished as a behavior system consisting of a set of criteria. A.B. Hollingshead (1939) identifies three general criteria for distinguishing the general characteristics of a specific behavior system:

...(1) a group of specialists recognized by society, as well as by themselves - who possess an identifiable complex of common culture values, communication devices (argot or other symbols), techniques, and appropriate behavior patterns; (2) the acquisition by initiates of the body of esoteric knowledge and appropriate behavior patterns before the novices are accepted by the initiated; (3) appropriate sanctions applied by the membership to control members in their relations with one another and with the larger society, and to control nonmembers in their relations with members" (Hollingshead, 1939: 816-817).

Thus, while the concept of a social circle has relevance in a wide variety of situations, its meaning can be more rigidly defined for the particular subgroup under consideration. This allows the meaning to be defined from the onset and be devoid of misconceptions associated with other terms.

#### Conceptual Framework

Bryan and other researchers have noted a need to understand the subjective aspects the fishing activity has for its participants. This social-psychological aspect goes beyond the motivational 'whys' of the activity and delves into the subjective meanings the activity holds for its participants. In order to gain a better understanding of this subjective world, a framework which addresses the meaning the activity

has for its participants is needed. One possible approach is to adapt the legitimation process described by Berger and Luckmann (1966: 92-128). Although the legitimation process described by Berger and Luckmann pertains to a whole society, analogies can be made to apply to a social circle which contains the elements described by Hollingshead.

Berger and Luckmann describe legitimation as a process of explaining and justifying the experiences of everyday life. In a society, legitimation serves to integrate these new experiences and give meaning to them based upon previous experiences and meanings. These experiences and meanings become institutionalized by society through the legitimation process. This in turn gives a basis for action on the part of the individual. Legitimation makes "objectively available" and "subjectively plausible" these new experiences. It serves to integrate them into the institutionalized order. This occurs for all of the individual's experiences in society and is naturally quite complex.

Berger and Luckmann identify four levels of legitimation ranging from a simple base for legitimation to a very complex basis of legitimation. These levels, which will be discussed later, are applicable to a certain degree to the social circle as previously identified. Legitimation in this sense serves to enhance the meaning the activity has for the individual. Thus, by looking at the legitimation levels for the larger society and applying them to the activities of a specific social circle, one can grasp the meaning the activity has for its members.

Berger and Luckmann identify four levels of legitimation: incipient, theoretical propositions in a rudimentary form, explicit theories, and the symbolic universe. These levels provide different bases from which to assign meaning to the activity and new experiences

in the activity as well as integrate the meanings to form a base of possible action. Incipient legitimation is the simplest basis of legitimation and consists of a "...system of linguistic objectification of human experiences..." (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 94). The verbal expression of an experience gives meaning to that experience. Linguistic objectification allows those who have had similar experiences to more adequately express these experiences to others which serves to legitimize the experience. "For example, the transmission of a kinship [or fishing] vocabulary ipso facto legitimates the kinship [or fishing] structure" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 94). In this sense, a social circle's common language, argot, and other communication symbols serves as a "...foundation of self-evident 'knowledge' on which all subsequent theories must rest" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 94).

Elementary explanatory schemes such as legends, folk tales, proverbs, and other folklore provide the second level or basis of legitimation within a society and social circle. This gives further meaning to the activity and experiences within the activity by providing "...explanatory schemes relating sets of objective meanings...[which] are highly pragmatic [and] directly relate to concrete actions" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 94). For example, Kansas fishermen have proverbs which give the best conditions for catching fish. One variation of a common proverb is:

Wind in west, fishing best;  
 Wind in east, fishing least.  
 (Koch, 1980: 404).

This simple explanation may be used to provide meaning for why the fish aren't biting (i.e., the wind is in the east), or for why one is having good luck (i.e., the wind is in the west). This may or may not determine whether one will go fishing under certain weather conditions.