Towards an Understanding of Women’s Progressive Experiences in Cycling: From Sport Participation to Event Travel

Richard Buning, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
Heather Gibson, University of Florida

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Cycling is the second most popular recreational activity in the US, with approximately 46 million participants annually (Outdoor Foundation, 2014). However, USA Cycling, the US national governing body, reports only 14% of its more than 70,000 members are female (Larson, 2013). This gender disparity in US amateur competitive cycling further emerges at the professional level as women typically compete at fewer events for unequal pay with little to no media exposure (Macur, 2014). As a result, the Women’s Cycling Association (WCA) was recently created to advocate for the advancement of women’s professional cycling in the US and abroad (WCA, 2013). Surprisingly, the analogous sports of running and triathlon exemplify a more diverse environment than cycling with 57% and 37% of female participants respectively (USA Triathlon, 2014; Running USA, 2014) which makes this diversity issue perhaps rather unique to the context of cycling.

Outside of competitive cycling, although in the early days of cycling the sport produced a “cosmic shift in women’s private and public lives” (Macy, 2011, p. 78), numerous investigations show participation is heavily male dominated in contexts ranging from charity events (Snelgrove & Wood, 2010) to bike tours (Gibson & Chang, 2012). The sport of cycling is also inherently linked to active sport tourism, notably cycle tourism. Cycling tourism typically centers around travel to events such as bike tours (Gibson & Chang, 2012), charity affiliated events (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien, 2008), mountain bike races (Getz & McConnell, 2011), and road cycling races (Larson & Won, 2012). Similar to gender-based sport participation patterns, sport tourists tend to be predominately male (Gibson, 1998) and women’s experiences in sport tourism generally remain relatively unexplored by researchers (Mansfield, 2007). Although, recent efforts have been made to understand female cycling experiences in Australia (e.g., Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, Hinckson, in press; Fullagar & Pavlidis, 2012) little to no research has specifically investigated the sport of cycling and cycling-related travel in a US context in relation to gender. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of US women involved in cycling and cycling-related travel through a travel career perspective with a focus on constraints and enablers.

In an effort to organize all of the details of sport participation and active sport tourism related to events, Getz (2008) proposed a new concept grounded in the ideas of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992) and travel careers (Pearce, 2005) termed the event travel career (ETC). This idea explains that individuals progress through a career trajectory as they become initially involved in a sport, gain experiences, and eventually become devoted career participants of the sport through their active participation and event travel. Through this process the participants’ motivations, preferences, and travel behavior evolve. Developing this idea further, Buning and Gibson (2015, 2016) created the term active sport event travel career (ASETC), which is depicted through six progressive stages: initiation, introduction, expansion, peak threshold, maintenance, and maturity.

Although the ASETC provides a framework through which sport participation and travel can be studied, leisure involvement (including sport and tourism) is challenged with barriers and impediments to successful participation known as constraints (Jackson, 1988). Constraints not only limit participation, but also affect preferences for leisure activities as such both the lack of desire and awareness can be explained by constraints (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Still, in spite of these constraints individuals are able to participate through negotiation, which often requires modification of the participation in the activity (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). A constraints framework can also be paired with the idea of enablers to leisure (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993), or as Raymore (2002) suggested, facilitators to leisure which interact with constraints to explain participation. Although some work (e.g., Fendt & Wilson, 2012; Green & Chalip, 1998) has sought out to explore active sport tourism from a gendered perspective, further research is needed to reveal opportunities and reduce constraints for women to successfully enter into a sport
and progress. Moreover, as Shaw, Bonnen and McCabe (1991) suggested that for women, socio-structural constraints may be more powerful in understanding their choice of and participation in activities. Developing this idea further, Shaw (1994) suggested that leisure might be constrained for women by both physical and ideological barriers.

Due to a scarcity of empirical investigations on US women’s experiences in cycling, an exploratory qualitative grounded research approach is being undertaken. Individual in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide are being conducted with women involved in the sport of cycling and cycling travel from different ASETC stages and backgrounds. Following an approach undertaken in similar studies (e.g., Buning & Gibson, 2015; Lamont et al., 2012) the data will be analyzed following procedures associated with a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Data collection and analysis is ongoing and scheduled to be completed during Fall 2016.

The expected findings are anticipated to enhance our understanding of the participation experiences and constraints and negotiation strategies related to female involvement, participation, and travel within cycling. Specifically, the results will elucidate women’s experiences with initiation into the sport of cycling, progressive involvement, constraints, negotiation, enablers, attitudes, and travel behavior. Preliminary findings suggest that women face a rather overwhelming barrier to entry as they attempt to acquire basic knowledge and skills related to obtaining equipment (e.g., bike, clothes) and riding safely. However, a mentor with previous cycling experiences can help beginning women successfully negotiate this constraint. The complete findings will assist advocacy groups and cycling organizations in their attempt to recruit and retain female cyclists. Further, the findings will assist industry managers, event organizers, travel professionals, and national organizations to improve opportunities and reduce constraints for female involvement in programs, travel, events, and general participation.