Leisure Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ulsc20

Deviant Leisure: Rethinking “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”

D J Williams

California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA


To cite this article: D J Williams (2009): Deviant Leisure: Rethinking “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”, Leisure Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 31:2, 207-213

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01490400802686110

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Deviant Leisure: Rethinking “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”

D J WILLIAMS
California State University
Los Angeles, CA, USA

This article calls for a more thorough exploration of the concept of deviant leisure. Although deviant leisure often relies on psychiatric discourse as a primary explanation for participation, many forms of deviant leisure cannot be explained convincingly through accounts that focus on psychopathological motivations. Examples discussed herein include consensual sexual sadomasochism, self-identified human vampires, and radical body modification. Such forms of deviant leisure may be better understood by focusing on diverse social discourses and the properties of legitimate leisure experience.

Before completing a Ph.D. in physical education and recreation, I spent several years working as a forensic psychotherapist. I have assessed and treated murderers, batterers, alcohol and drug abusers, and sex offenders. As a clinician and researcher, I am interested in what I call forensic leisure science (Williams, 2006), the exploration of leisure within criminogenesis, correctional institutions, offender rehabilitation, and among forensics professionals. Despite common views that leisure is inherently positive while, conversely, deviant leisure often is related to crime, I have learned that disentangling the concepts of leisure, deviant leisure, and crime can be surprisingly difficult.

This complexity has become more apparent while studying “newer” forms of deviance that have escaped the attention of leisure scholars. I am curious about understanding deviant practices that are often assumed to be psychopathological, perhaps dangerous, with legal implications. In addition to expanding my knowledge about leisure and deviant leisure through work in correctional institutions, I have spent considerable time with sex workers, professional Mistresses, fetishists, self-identified human vampires, and radical body modification artists. My unusual field education has stirred thinking about the breadth of the leisure experience and how to approach the subject of deviant leisure. My purpose in this essay is to generate thinking about how to approach the concept of deviant leisure and its relationship to (legitimate) leisure.

I believe leisure scholars should rethink how deviant leisure is conceptualized. A special journal issue recently was devoted to the topic of deviant leisure (Stebbins, Rojek, & Sullivan, 2006), but more attention is warranted. Deviant leisure may be understood differently based on its theoretical positioning, but the implications of these possibilities...
have not been explored. Nevertheless, these implications can have dramatic consequences in the lives of people, including discrimination and in some cases legal sanctions.

Deviant leisure is typically viewed as behavior that violates criminal and noncriminal moral norms. The history of leisure in North America and Europe is connected with moral reform, and subsequently the parameters of legitimate leisure have been overly valorized. Deviant leisure may be a subset of leisure, which is informed by sociology and social psychology, but its roots are in deviance, and deviance has been medicalized. According to Conrad and Schneider (1992), the medicalization of deviance is not a morally neutral approach to gathering knowledge but rather reflects an epistemological shift from “badness to sickness.” Psychiatry and psychology contribute to how deviant leisure is perceived. Deviant leisure, then, may be understood quite differently depending on which strands of knowledge are emphasized (e.g., psychiatry, criminology, anthropology, sociology, social psychology). Some of these discourses overlap and cluster together better than others and some are in fierce conflict.

This recognition of the complexity of deviant leisure calls for a widening of what might constitute legitimate healthy leisure. What might be considered deviant in some social spaces appears to be perfectly normal in others, and vice versa. A broader definition can encourage recognizing and emphasizing the essence of leisure within deviant leisure, rather than necessarily piggybacking on dominant discourses of religion, psychiatry, and criminal justice. By retaining a focus on leisure, our field provides important new insights and understandings into various unconventional practices within our society. To illustrate how leisure sciences may broaden understanding of unusual practices, I offer a brief discussion of consensual sadomasochism (BDSM), human vampirism, and radical body modification subcultures as examples.

Consensual Sadomasochism (BDSM) as Leisure

Sexuality as a form of leisure is just beginning to be explored. Interestingly, in their emerging model of optimal sexuality, sexologists Kleinplatz and Menard (2007) included leisure properties such as flow, intense emotion, and transcendence. Popovic (2006) emphasized that sexual meanings and practices vary considerably across times and cultures and argued that “there is not one universal, but rather multiple (sexual) normalities” (p. 171). Many scholars recognize that sexuality is a fluid construct. Despite human sexual diversity as the norm, society strictly polices various boundaries and practices concerning the body.

BDSM (bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, sadism, and masochism) is a broad term to describe a diverse set of erotic practices that focus on power exchange between participants and/or intense physical sensation. Practices may include forms of role play, spankings, whippings and floggings, sensory overload or deprivation, temperature play (i.e., application of hot wax or ice), use of conventional sex toys, and any of several forms of intricate bondage. Participants are expected to follow the motto of “safe, sane, consensual” (SSC), although some groups use the phrase “risk aware consensual kink” (RACK). The overarching goal is for all participants to have a safe and enjoyable experience.

Although sadism and masochism commonly are assumed to be psychopathological by professionals and lay people alike, research on BDSM suggests participants are generally psychologically healthy and socially well-adjusted people. BDSM cannot be explained by an underlying psychopathology. Thus, some scholars rightly have called for the removal of sadism and masochism from formal psychiatric classifications of mental disorders (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005; Reiersol & Skeid, 2006). Nevertheless, BDSM participants (and practitioners in other alternative lifestyles, for that matter) sometimes face severe discrimination and harsh legal sanctions.
If consensual BDSM is not psychopathological, then what is it? What would motivate people to participate in such unusual practices? I believe that the BDSM lifestyle can be understood from a leisure perspective, particularly serious leisure. Consistent with qualitative research by Taylor and Ussher (2001), BDSM participants often describe their experiences using terms such as fun, play, an endorphin rush, an escape from the everyday routine, freedom, and spiritual. Many people in BDSM lifestyles spend hours planning events, making “toys” and equipment, learning, and practicing various activities. The BDSM community, like other alternative sexual lifestyles, has its own terminology. BDSM may be considered either serious deviant leisure or simply serious leisure. However, the “deviant” in deviant leisure does not necessarily refer to psychopathology. Both BDSM play and “vanilla” (i.e., conventional) sexual activity can be associated with healthy intimacy or pathology and violence.

BDSM experiences powerfully connect people and their stories to their bodies, and these experiences have the capability of helping to integrate fragmented identities. Surprisingly, and contrary to common stereotypes, the work of professional Mistresses seems to resemble mainstream therapeutic occupations such as leisure programming, licensed massage therapy, and psychotherapy probably more than common forms of sex work. Although professional BDSM play is designed to be erotic for clients, it is considered taboo for well-trained professional Mistresses to have sex with their clients.

With sex work, laws governing such practices vary considerably from place to place. Although agreement exists across developed countries that violence associated with sexuality is not to be tolerated, many people recognize that a monetary transaction for mutually-agreed upon safe sexuality (i.e., prostitution) is not inherently violent, just as paying a server for a restaurant meal is not necessarily violent. Depending on geographic location, the same paid sexual act could be labeled legitimate leisure experience in one place, but deviant leisure with psychopathological and/or criminal implications in another. Both sexuality and BDSM are complex phenomena, and broader perspectives that more fully acknowledge cultural, historical, political, and ethical factors are needed.

Human Vampires and Leisure

A large and diverse underground subculture of self-identified human vampires exists in many large cities around the world. Self-identified vampires generally do not believe they are versions of undead monsters rooted in folklore. Rather, these people often identify with various attributes of fictional vampires and/or they may feel a need periodically to take in extra doses of energy from time to time. Furthermore, many vampires recognize that the human condition is not always polished and sanitized as is commonly portrayed in society. The “darker side” of the human condition is not to be feared and avoided but managed. Like BDSM, vampire subculture has its own terminology and meanings, and vampires are expected to follow a code of ethics called “The Black Veil.” Some vampires, “sanguinarians,” consensually take energy from the blood of willing donors (usually partners), while “psychic vampires” utilize psychic energy. “Hybrids” draw energy from multiple sources. Vampire clans and covens often create their own mythos, fictional histories, and ancestries.

Although they are separate subcultures, there seems to be some overlap between the vampire and BDSM worlds. Play that produces exposure to blood sometimes occurs in both worlds, although the meanings around these practices differ. Erotic power seems to be at the core of BDSM and much of vampirism.

For some vampires, their lifestyle is rooted in specific religious beliefs (Herbert, 2002; Keyworth, 2002). However, although vampire religion might be classified as a form of
deviant leisure, it resembles mainstream Christian beliefs in several ways. Many Christians become “born again” in Christ, while vampires undergo a similar “awakening” process in the development of their beliefs. Both religions tend to believe in future lives beyond death, processes of spiritual progression, and leaders in both groups are called “elders.” Many mainstream Christian hymns are focused on the redeeming power of Christ’s blood, and the long-standing Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation teaches that followers literally consume Christ’s flesh and blood when they partake of the sacrament. When vampire beliefs and basic Christian doctrine are deconstructed, valid binary classifications of “deviant” and “legitimate” tend to disappear.

Self-identified vampires often are stereotyped and misunderstood based on religious, psychiatric, and forensics discourses (Williams, 2008). Vampirism in psychiatric contexts may refer to rare psychoses or parasitic psychological attachments. The term vampire has been applied to some of the most extreme cases of violent crime including cannibalism, necrophilia, and necrosadism. Given the common available discourses from which vampires are perceived, it is no wonder, then, that self-identified vampires remain underground for fear of being misunderstood. Once again, leisure science is capable of contributing to how self-identified vampires are understood. Like BDSM, vampire lifestyles seem to be creative, expressive forms of serious leisure that simply do not fit narrow social scripts.

I have been involved professionally in a case where violent criminals attempted to mislead forensics professionals by claiming membership in vampire subculture. However, vampire and BDSM subcultures generally promote safety precautions and seem to police themselves effectively. Both subcultures are careful in evaluating potential members. In my experience among multiple and diverse social groups, sufficient empathy for others seems to be most important in preventing and reducing violence and abuse.

**Radical Body Modification as Leisure**

Although body modification includes a wide range of diverse practices such as dieting, exercise, bodybuilding, and plastic surgery, much attention recently has been given to forms that are less popularized in Western society. These forms include tattooing, body piercing, and scarification (i.e., via cuttings or brandings). Like BDSM and vampire lifestyles, radical body modification is often (mis)understood by relying primarily on psychiatric discourses that frame various practices as mutilation with underlying psychopathology. Nevertheless, body modification groups exist that focus on transforming the flesh to better match internal beliefs and identities. Media accounts on body modification subculture rely on testimony of medical and mental health professionals who are believed to be experts on body modification (Pitts, 1999). A widely unchallenged assumption of many medical and mental health professionals is that body modifiers, like sadomasochists and human vampires, must be driven by unconscious psychopathological impulses. From a narrow perspective that medicalizes deviance, little consideration is given for cultural variations, individual narratives and meanings, and complex personal motivations.

Psychiatric literature is relevant to body modification issues, but other scholarly perspectives are also valuable to an understanding of these phenomena. Although psychiatric discourse often is assumed to be valid, it cannot convincingly explain modification. Yet, many businesses that supposedly seek creative and innovative employees require simple tattoos or piercings to be covered or removed or will not hire persons with such modifications. At the same time, plastic surgeons seem to keep busy performing facelifts, liposuctions, and female breast augmentations or reductions for their clients, many of whom are employed in the business world.
Postmodernism, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and leisure studies can help in understanding the complexity and diversity of body modification. A thorough review of research indicates a variety of reasons why people choose to modify their bodies, including spiritual, cultural, and emotional reasons; reflection or creation of personal narratives; and displaying resistance to hegemonic boundaries of physical expression (i.e., pertaining to beauty, gender, sexuality, creativity; Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappler, 2007). Unusual body modification practices challenge common Judeo-Christian and psychiatric teachings about the body.

Might radical body modification sometimes be leisure? Is it deviant leisure? I mentioned bodybuilding as a form of modification, and many would agree that bodybuilding could be viewed as legitimate serious leisure experience. What about extensive tattooing or scarification? These activities bring personal meaning, sense of identity, pleasure, adventure, and freedom to many. Stebbins (2001) discussed hobbies as a form of serious leisure. Interestingly, his description of project-based leisure (Stebbins, 2005) is a curious concept regarding cases of radical modification. Serious body modifiers generally have plans for how to alter their bodies to reflect their identities and thus, serious body modification has been referred to as “body projects” or “reflexive body projects” (Crossley, 2005; Shilling, 1993). Might these be new forms of leisure? Stebbins (2005) described project-based leisure as short-term and somewhat casual, whereas body-project leisure seems to be long term and serious. Radical body modification may be approached through a leisure lens and can produce new insights into how people think about leisure and deviant leisure, health and pathology, casual and serious leisure, and project-based leisure.

Like sexuality and BDSM, radical body modification informs the significance of personal experience as it connects with bodies and identities. I would describe my own limited radical body modification history (i.e., tattooing, scarification-branding, and flesh hook suspension) as part of my work as a researcher. But perhaps more important, I see these personal experiences as carefully planned leisure practices designed to connect me, as a unique embodied person, to significant life events and meaningful self narratives.

**Conclusions**

My intention has been to stir thinking about how deviant leisure is understood. Because the history of leisure sciences is associated with moral reform and deviance has become increasingly medicalized (Conrad & Schneider, 1992), an understanding of deviant leisure tends to rely heavily on Western Judeo-Christian, psychiatric and forensic discourses. Too often deviant leisure is assumed to be bad, pathological, dangerous, or criminal. I am not comfortable dismissing the literature from these areas, but rather welcome additional disciplines and theoretical understandings to add to the knowledge and practical (i.e., ethical, legal) navigation of complex phenomena.

Upon close examination, some forms of deviant leisure warrant designation as morally wrong, psychopathological, or dangerous. However, many forms of deviant leisure, when additional methods and disciplines are considered, may be viewed as legitimate healthy leisure experience. BDSM, vampire subculture, and radical body modification illustrate problems with explaining these unconventional worlds primarily via psychopathology. To me, the core of “deviant” in deviant leisure has less to do with morality, psychopathology, and dangerousness and more to do with something that is unusual, unconventional, or different.

The examples I described here are difficult for many to understand, yet approaching these subcultures and practices from a perspective that centers on dimensions of legitimate leisure produces new understandings regarding the motivations and meanings for those who
participate. Considerable incongruence exists between accounts that focus on psychopathology and the actual research on BDSM, vampire subculture, and radical body modification as well as other forms of deviant leisure. Currently, many scholars are searching for explanations that better fit the research. The field of leisure can provide reasonable explanations for why many are motivated to participate in such unusual practices. Approaching deviant practices from a leisure perspective is a valuable contribution that when conjoined with other perspectives, can help resolve important social problems. Contributions will occur by focusing on the dimensions of leisure as potential motivators for unusual behavior, not by repeatedly deferring to common dominant discourses.

Contrary to the view that expanding the horizons of legitimate leisure may lead to deviant leisure becoming obsolete, I believe this progression complicates but also enriches an understanding of both leisure and deviant leisure. The good and bad news is that the primary complication appears to be difficulty extricating ourselves from socialization that necessarily pairs deviant practices with immorality, psychopathology, and dangerousness. This socialization has been thorough and pervasive. Nevertheless, I am advocating that leisure researchers become more attuned to how social, cultural, historical, and political forces shape perceptions of deviance, and that we critically interrogate discourses that inform those perceptions. Deviance is not always as it appears. It can be creative, refreshing, and fun. It pushes and re-draws boundaries, often has its own language and meanings for existing words, and sometimes strengthens human connections and spirituality.

All sorts of practices that are considered unusual and unconventional (deviant) based on norms defined according to specific times and social spaces will remain. When critically assessed from multiple perspectives, some may warrant designation as pathological, dangerous, criminal, or immoral, while others may not. Deviant leisure exists, but scholars must expand their awareness of its range and complexity. It is time for leisure scientists to embrace the many fascinating varieties of deviant leisure.

References


