The SAGE Dictionary of Leisure Studies

Deviance

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Notwithstanding the term’s relative obscurity in everyday language, deviance, or more appropriately social deviance, has long held a fascination for students of leisure – if not leisure scholars. It is a concept much broader in focus than either ‘crime’ or ‘law-breaking’ which was developed in US sociology to describe any social behaviours or practices that deviate from those regarded as ‘normal’ within a particular society or other sociocultural milieu. To this extent social deviance signifies those kinds of leisure activities, interests and life-styles which are condemned by the ‘value consensus’ of any dominant culture as ‘wrong’, whilst implying that they also need to be socially controlled.

In the 1960s there emerged what at the time was a radically alternative way of interpreting social deviance. Edwin Lemert (1967) turned this essentially functionalist understanding on its head when he suggested that it is not deviance that precedes social control, but it is social control that invariably leads to deviance. Following Lemert's lead the 'problem' of social deviance now changed to asking questions about how and why any society deems it necessary to socially control the leisure behaviours of particular individuals and social groups more (and in different ways) than others. It is also in this sense that the problem of social deviance has been seen as very much a 'leisure problem' (Clarke and Critcher, 1985), particularly with regard to the activities of working-class youth, because these take place in ‘the streets, clubs and holiday resorts & the places where their leisure activity has been most resented’.

Until recently social deviance has not been theorized to any great degree in leisure studies. Rojek goes so far as to suggest that, ‘it is no exaggeration to claim that, throughout its history, it has effectively ignored the subject of deviance’ (1995: 83). However, Coakley (1998) has drawn on the concept in the sociology of sport to argue that it is generally understood either in absolutist [p. 58 ↓] terms – ‘it's either right or wrong’ – or in relativist terms – ‘it all depends on who makes the rules’ – approaches. Coakley represents the absolutist approach as functionalist, placing an emphasis on the identification of social deviance as a departure from a predetermined social norm. By contrast the relativist position is represented in an over-simplified and theoretically naïve fashion as emanating from conflict theorists vis-à-vis Lemert who, in Coakley’s over-simplistic view, presents deviance as a ‘label’ relating to certain behaviours or people.
who are identified as ‘bad’ or undesirable on the basis of rules made by those people in positions of power.

For Coakley, who appears to consider sport as being independent of its wider social context, the main problems with these two broad brush conceptualizations is that on the one hand they ignore social deviance which involves an over-comformity to rules and norms and on the other do not account for the ways athletes use these norms to evaluate both themselves and others. As a response, Coakley offers an alternative schema which draws on what he calls a ‘critical normal distribution approach’ to distinguish between ‘positive deviance’ involving overconformity or an unquestioned acceptance of norms and ‘negative deviance’ involving underconformity or a rejection of norms. These represent two ends of a continuum which in their extreme manifestations can be seen to lead to fascism (excess ‘positive’ deviance) and anarchy (excess ‘negative’ deviance) on either side of the ‘normal’ accepted range of behaviour. While undoubtedly showing a more sophisticated appreciation of the varieties of deviance in sport than many other studies, Coakley's approach is theoretically weak and ultimately too abstract, offering an objectivist, top-down analysis which essentializes certain types of ‘deviant’ behaviour and their sources.

While the ability to theorize social deviance in the sociology of sport has always remained limited, in sociology more generally the willingness to continue theorizing reached its highpoint in the 1970s. However, with the growing influence of postmodernism and cultural relativism by the late 1970s the sociology of deviance had reached a point in its history when it needed another kind of theoretical understanding, which could only be successfully written through a quite different language. This was because, as Sumner (1994) points out, with the shift to a more plural, postmodern world it was becoming increasingly untenable to make the case for the sociology of deviance.

In *New Perspectives on Sport and ‘Deviance’: Consumption, Performativity and Social Control*, Blackshaw and Crabbe (2004) reconceived the study of social deviance as a beginning enterprise, which not only enables us to consider that what it means to hold values is always open to question but also suggests that answering ethical dilemmas surrounding what is understood as deviance is made possible only by embracing and dealing with the complexity of the world of that which chooses to describe it. It is with this in mind that they place inverted commas around the concept of social ‘deviance’,
not only to remind their readers of its ‘undecidability’, its shape-shifting quality, but also to reflect the contested nature of its use value as it is contingently stressed in their writings.

According to Blackshaw and Crabbe, the world of leisure itself must also be understood as a wholeheartedly contingent set of worlds. Not a world somehow separate from the rest of society, but a series of postulated worlds in which taken-for-granted assumptions about the world we oversimply tend to understand as ‘reality’ – with its prevailing norms, values, beliefs, behaviours and actions – are often subverted, changed or distorted. Adopting Rorty’s position, which holds that any culturally grounded conceptualization of that truth needs to prove ‘itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons’, they argue that valuing contingency does not mean accepting the postmodern position that ‘anything goes’. On the contrary, it means that, without the obligation of having to make their work take on an essentialist position, leisure scholars can get on with the task of constructing their own narratives about the world, about ‘deviance’.

In other words, questions of what is or is not ‘deviance’ must be dealt with in the untidy realm of human interaction rather than in the tidy transcendental realm of universal reason. It is precisely because leisure scholars have this knowledge that we are in a stronger position to recognize and make explicit the ideological and the subjective to their understandings of social ‘deviance’. In this way Blackshaw and Crabbe demand a neverending dialogue between those who promulgate the most seemingly irreconcilable interpretations of social ‘deviance’ as well as a constant questioning of themselves, their own tacitly accepted assumptions and the institutions that surround their ideas. As they assert, what is perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn from this reinventing of the study of this contested idea as a beginning enterprise is to refuse the more comfortable role of bystander to take on the active responsibility of engaging in unearthing and understanding even the most fiercely contested understandings of what is or is not social ‘deviance’ in leisure.

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