

TURNING MONSTERS INTO PEOPLE: A REFLEXIVE STUDY OF SEX OFFENDERS AND LEISURE

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This arts-based study serves two interrelated purposes. First, it draws from multiple tales to illustrate reflexivity (and its benefits) between the author, research topic, and participants. Different forms of tales show multiple and diverse human interconnections and the complexity of understanding potential leisure among sex offenders. The importance of prioritizing reflexivity should not be underestimated, particularly when conducting research with populations that commonly are "othered" and sometimes demonized. Within a reflexive context, a poetic transcription from structured interviews with five sexual offender parolees is included to explore the possible essence of leisure as experienced by these men. The inclusion of evocative representations emphasizes commonalities of the human condition, yet also illustrates differences between people.

Ken Gergen (2001, p. 801):

*Although (postmodern) developments
In understanding
May seem opposed to
Psychological science,
They are not.*

Andrew Sparkes (2002, p. ix):

*My goal is to displace,
Not simplistically discard,
Classic forms of representation
Like scientific tales and realist tales.*

Laurel Richardson (2000, p. 5):

*Evocative representations...
Offer multiple ways of thinking
About a topic...*

Sherry Dupuis (1999, p. 46):

*I propose that we adopt
A reflexive methodology
In leisure studies.*

The above thoughts from prominent contemporary scholars provide methodological background for postmodern/poststructural contexts. Their views are philosophically consistent and each is important. From Gergen (2001) we learn that postmodernism and psychological science (indeed, all science) are capable of logical coexistence. Scientific methods remain extremely beneficial, even if traditional positivist assumptions behind them are rejected. Both traditional methods and

their fruits are deserving of postmodern critique and interpretation. Similarly, Sparkes' (2002) postmodern/poststructural view is that various research methods simply produce stories or "tales." The particular research method used shapes the type of tale that is told. No research tale is neutral or objectively real, but each privileges different things depending on the context and parameters that produce it. Finally, while Richardson (2000) reminded us that various evocative representations (or artistic tales) generate new insights, Dupuis (1999) has shown that we are always tightly connected to our research in multiple, but often unseen, ways. These perspectives point to new possibilities in understanding complexities of leisure, leisure science, and ourselves.

This paper draws from these perspectives in order to move us toward the exploration of leisure among a neglected population – convicted sexual offenders. This topic evokes strong emotions, and many people seem to have strong beliefs in how sexual crimes should be addressed by society. U.S. social policy is becoming harsher and more punitive in addressing sexual offenses. Few, if any, topics compare to sexual offending regarding how "us vs. them" boundaries are constructed and reinforced among people. Indeed, traditional research methods emphasize differences, rather than commonalities of human beings, within correctional research

(see Williams & Hanley, 2005).

Postmodern/poststructural perspectives question how boundaries are constructed and understood. Such approaches may enlighten how sexual offenders and their leisure experiences are understood, and how leisure scholars are linked to intricate psychosocial processes that shape research into this controversial but neglected area. The field of critical criminology often emphasizes commonalities of human experience when dealing with important criminal justice issues. Thus, an initial purpose of this paper is to bring to light reflexivity between the researcher and the topic, introducing readers to common personal and social tensions inherent to sexual offender issues. By illustrating reflexivity, I hope to show how we might begin thinking about the potential essence of leisure among sexual offenders. Hopefully, this unconventional project will provide insights into how leisure scholars might intersubjectively approach sexual offenders and their potential leisure while investigating scholars' own complex relationships and personal tensions to the topics and participants they study.

In order to highlight multiple social spaces and personal identities with them, this project is a limited compilation of different types of tales (personal/confessional, scientific, and poetic). Each tale positions the researcher in different ways, and each provides a unique contribution to better understanding sexual offender issues. Leisure as it may or may not relate to sexual offenders cannot be understood unless researchers become more aware of how they relate to these people and their broader social issues. Particularly, this small collection of tales considers the struggles and complexities of how people, including leisure professionals, perhaps might change their relationship with a largely despised population. The tales shared here echo how us vs. them boundaries are problematic, which can be significant in how leisure among sexual offenders is approached.

MY BEGINNING: A CONFESSORIAL TALE

I remember the experience well, and I doubt I'll ever forget it. It was autumn in the year 2000. I had been working for three months in a new job as a forensic social worker assessing and treating adult

sexual offenders. Although I had worked with offenders in a similar capacity for the previous four years, those were men who had ended up in the correctional system for committing violence, property, or drug-related crimes. My new clientele were more difficult. Sex offenders were, and still are, not only despised by much of the general public, but also the rest of the prison population. Apparently, even many clinicians cannot work with them. It seems to be common knowledge that sexual offenders are horrible – they are monsters incapable of change. They cannot be trusted. A part of me knew that, and I wasn't sure that I could work with them either. However, the pay at this new job was excellent and I needed money. Cautiously, I decided that I would give it a try.

Over three months at my new job had passed and I began to feel a change within me. Something was happening to me that I could no longer ignore. First, it was simply an irritation, but it quickly grew until it tore at my heart and fucked with my head. "I shouldn't feel this conflicted," I would remind myself. As a clinical trainee, I knew that I needed to talk about it with my supervisor, Teri. Fortunately, Teri was a warm and compassionate woman with considerable experience working with a variety of offenders. I had, and still have, a high respect for her.

Mustering what courage I could, I brought up my problem at our next supervision meeting. It was a little difficult to begin, and my words were awkward. "I...I'm having kind of a hard time with this," I began. "Something is happening to me. I'm connecting with some of my clients. This is different than working with other offenders. In my previous job we didn't work with offenders this extensively or for this length of time. Their transitioning process was much quicker, and I didn't get to know them this well. But now with sex offenders, it seems I have to know so much more about them. We dig deeper into their lives. I feel like I'm maybe starting to know them, really know them."

Part of me felt like I shouldn't be connecting this emotionally with offenders, but another part of me felt, strangely, that I should. How was I supposed to feel? Was there something wrong with me if I was beginning to feel empathy for them? Feeling empathy didn't mean I approved of sexual violence and victimization, did it? I already knew there was a difference between people and their behavior, but this difference seemed more difficult to live by when it came to sex offenders. Did it still apply? I felt a catharsis as I shared my feelings with

Teri. Of course, in hindsight it is easy to see how socialized I was about the supposed nature of these so-called predators.

Teri listened closely. She seemed to follow each of my words carefully. When I finished my brief confession, Teri nodded. A few seconds passed, but those seconds became an eternity. Finally, Teri smiled gently. "Congratulations – you are just beginning to understand. Yes, you should care about your sex offender clients and empathize with them! Their crimes are unacceptable, some truly tragic, but our job is to work with them as human beings to help them to not re-offend. Your difficult feelings are a sign that you are capable of becoming an effective clinician with these people." Wisely, she then shared a similar story of her own personal struggle and transformation when she began as a novice practitioner working in the same field. Sometimes treating people like people can be a difficult learning experience.

AN ESSENTIAL PART OF US: TRADITIONAL RESEARCH TALES

My experience coming to terms with developing empathy for sex offenders profoundly shaped my career and eventually contributed to an interdisciplinary research agenda that includes sex offender treatment issues. At that time I didn't realize how little I knew about sexual offending, and my knowledge mostly came from various popular myths. The scholarly literature includes other important tales, and many are in stark contrast to the popular tales I previously believed. In considering sexual offender issues, including leisure for this population, it is important to explore the diverse tales by which these people are perceived.

Quinn, Forsyth and Mullen-Quinn (2004) provided an excellent summary of the origins and some of the results of sex offender myths. The media sometimes misinterprets research and almost exclusively focuses on the few, most violent cases. There also has been an increase in media outlets, and thus far more attention now is given to unusual crimes.

Although sex offenders often are treated as a single entity sharing the same characteristics and motivations, these individuals form a heterogeneous group, and sexual crimes vary considerably as to the presence or absence of violence. Quinn and colleagues (2004) pointed out that in many U.S. states an "offender" can be prosecuted at age 17 or 18 for having consensual sexual relations with a 14-16

year old "victim." Although these individuals are subject to prosecution and the same reporting and management policies as violent rapists and child molesters, such consensual acts between people close in age are not considered crimes in many other countries. Still, many now simply view the term "sex offender" interchangeably with "sexual predator" – a term that was virtually unknown before 1985 and has skyrocketed in use despite observations that sexual crimes have not increased over that time period (Jenkins, 1998; Neuilly & Zgoba, 2006). Indeed, sex offenders differ from each other markedly, and variations in risk levels between those classified as sex offenders are considerable (Hanson, Morton, & Harris, 2003).

Research shows that sexual offenders, overall, have lower rates of recidivism compared to other classifications of offenders (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2001). Karl Hanson, a leading researcher on sexual offender assessment and recidivism, stated, "Even when we're talking with law enforcement officials, they'll guess demonstrated (recidivism) rates to be in the 70s or 80s, so the real rates of 10 to 20 percent surprise everybody" (as cited in Kersting, 2003, pp. 52-53).

Regarding the treatment efficacy for sex offenders, a comprehensive meta-analysis by Losel and Schmucker (2005) involving 69 studies and representing over 22,000 offenders revealed a sexual recidivism rate of 11.1% for treated participants compared to 17.5% for those untreated. In their extensive review of the literature in this area, Marshall, Marshall, and Serran (2006, p. 176) concluded that for them, "the evidence indicates that sex offenders can be effectively treated."

DO EMPATHY AND CARING MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Teri was a wise and experienced clinician. She knew that the therapeutic alliance, which includes empathy, warmth, and respect for clients, was important to therapeutic process for her clientele. She was ahead of her time. In the field of sex offender treatment we have been slow to consider therapeutic alliance, but recent scientific tales have supported Teri's clinical values and beliefs. These research tales have told us that the therapeutic relationship corresponds to improved treatment outcome (see Drapeau, 2005; Marshall, 2005; Marshall & Serran, 2004).

Interestingly, social policy regarding the management of sexual offenders seems to rely less on scientific tales and more on popular cultural tales rooted in fear. In the

U.S. mandatory reporting laws (Megan's Law) were developed in response to a horrific case that included both sexual assault and murder. Too often, sex offenders as a whole remain monsters or predators in the eyes of many of us, even when offenders have completed years of treatment programming. As a result, many sex offenders feel isolated and fearful upon re-entry into the community, sometimes subject to harassment, discrimination, and violence that may increase their risk for re-offense (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Some states recently made laws where child molestation itself, without additional violence, is punishable by death (Gibeaut, 2007). However, the first such case of child sexual assault (without murder) that resulted in a death penalty sentence (Kennedy v. State of Louisiana) was deemed unconstitutional in an appeal to the United States Supreme Court.

It is not the purpose of this article to include a comprehensive summary of the many scientific and realist tales on the subject of sexual offending. Nevertheless, the scientific stories cited herein illustrate an important point and should be helpful to many who are unfamiliar with this topic and its issues.

LEISURE, CRIME AND REHABILITATION

We know very little about the relationships of leisure to crime and rehabilitation among adult offenders from a leisure perspective. Some crimes may be viewed as forms of deviant leisure (see Gunn & Cassie, 2006; Rojek, 1999; Stebbins, 1996). However, the process of distinguishing between leisure and deviant leisure is framed by social discourses (dominant tales) and is thus highly problematic (Rojek, 1999; Williams, 2009; Williams & Walker, 2006). Regarding cases of repeated sexual offending, what might commonly be considered positive leisure experience, in contrast to deviant leisure, may function in conjunction with other cognitive-behavioral processes to further sexual offending (Williams, 2005). On the other hand, although some people may believe that offenders do not deserve leisure, positive leisure experience is compatible with existing offender rehabilitation theory in helping to prevent recidivism (Williams, Walker, & Streat, 2005). In summary, it seems that leisure could be important to both criminogenesis and rehabilitation. Research on this neglected topic is needed, potentially contributing to crime prevention thus benefiting many people.

CO-AUTHORING LEISURE AND LIVES: A POETIC TALE

Scientific and realist tales often counter widespread myths that demonize sexual offenders. Nevertheless, relying exclusively on traditional research tales unintentionally reinforces constructed boundaries and classifications. To supplement existing knowledge we need richer emotional accounts of offenders' leisure experiences that draw us into the worlds of others commonly perceived to be far different from ourselves. The inclusion of artistic research tales can help in recognizing human commonalities and stirring empathy for others, which may lead to improved collaboration on important social issues. For professionals it may be possible to understand better the intricacies of offender leisure in complex social spaces, and how leisure may be harnessed to help reduce and prevent sexual offending. Hopefully, such accounts will help readers to see leisure in new ways.

Through reflexive methods, bridges can be built and new doors opened to understanding ourselves and our leisure. Is it possible to welcome evocative tales to *feel* what leisure experience might be to offenders? What might we learn from such methods? How might our understanding of leisure in various social spaces be enriched?

To begin addressing these questions and in light of sexual offender issues represented in the previous tales, I have included a poetic tale to point us toward how sexual offenders may experience leisure. Poetic tales emphasize feeling with a text and may be used to merge readers' experiences with an account by others. Because sexual offenders commonly are assumed by many to be different from the rest of us, a poetic tale that merges experiences and acknowledges the commonality we share with marginalized people may be particularly useful in understanding an essence of leisure.

For the poetic account here, five adult male sex offender parolees at the final stage of sex offender psychotherapy voluntarily agreed to provide written responses to the following items:

1. How do you define leisure?
2. Describe your leisure at the time you offended. Was there a connection between your leisure and your crime? If so, describe that connection.
3. Describe your leisure now. Is there a connection between your leisure and your therapy? If so, describe that

connection.

Four participants were Caucasian while one was Hispanic, ranging in age from 37 to 65 years old.

These men were selected for several reasons. Each had been convicted of at least one serious sexual crime, which resulted in serving a long prison sentence (range = 4 to 13 years). Upon release from prison, each had completed sexual offender treatment at a halfway house. All participants were nearing the end of approximately one year of aftercare sexual offender therapy. Participants had worked with the researcher in the latter therapeutic setting for several months, and a good relationship seemed to have developed between us. Overall, these men had completed an average of five years of specialized sexual offender therapy. The best clinical judgment of the sexual offender treatment team suggested that these men had changed over time, and that they had progressed from being classified as high risk to re-offend to a status of low risk.

There are additional considerations in conducting research with sexual offenders, which include unique confidentiality issues, intent to cause violence, and the potential for disclosure of further unreported illegal activity (Cowburn, 2005). Regarding the latter, utilizing a structured format of a few carefully selected questions (in contrast to unstructured and semi-structured formats) reduces but does not completely eliminate the possibility of disclosure of illegal activity. Cowburn reminded researchers are obligated to report direct threats of violence to the appropriate correctional authority. Also, researchers should be aware that some participant responses could, if identities are known to those outside the study, intentionally or unintentionally lead to a variety of possible adverse consequences by others, including other offenders or correctional staff. Confidentiality for this group remains a priority, which is why further detailed demographic information is not provided. The development of this poetic account followed current research recommendations with regard to offender populations (Brunswick & Parham, 2004; Cowburn, 2005; Megargee, 1995).

Participants did not seem to be completely ignorant of the concept of leisure, yet they were not well versed in understanding professional perspectives on leisure. Current sex offender psychotherapy relies heavily on cognitive-behavioral techniques, and leisure programming had not been a core component of their treatment. I was interested in their perspectives of leisure, which are shaped by their broader life

experiences and the social discourses in which they participate.

Participants' responses to the above items were disaggregated, coded, and analyzed to uncover patterns and themes before being rewritten via a process that Glesne (1997) calls poetic transcription. Poetic transcription recently has been used by social scientists to emphasize commonality of human experience, reflexive process, spirituality, recognition that texts are socially constructed (and subjectively interpreted by readers), and generation of new ways of understanding (Baff, 1997; Glesne, 1997; L. Richardson, 1992, 1994; M. Richardson, 1998; Sparkes, 2002; Szto, Furman, & Langer, 2005).

Like Glesne (1997), in crafting a poetic tale from participants' written responses I restricted myself to using their words, not mine, to convey essences of themes embedded in the text. Nevertheless, I remained free to pull words from various places within the text and to highlight particular words, if needed (using capital letters or boldface print). The goal was to select particular lines of written text that seemed to powerfully capture and reflect the overall theme(s) embedded in that text.

Poetic transcription involves reducing large amounts of text to capture broader essences, yet allowing readers to insert their own experiences and meanings into essences contained in the result. For the researcher, this form of data analysis and representation requires substantial questioning and reflection. The researcher must consider how and why particular phrases or lines of text were selected, which includes a judgment about how specific phrases and combinations of phrases are likely to evoke powerful emotion and reflection within readers. The final product of this short poetic tale is a combination of participants' voices and my own. The task was to draw creatively from the words of participants to merge their voices (text content) with mine (interpretation and creative poetic arrangement) in a way that invites and facilitates human connection with readers' own experiences and meanings. Through this process, voices merge, barriers are lowered, and human compassion is nurtured. We are moved to a clearer appreciation of our common humanness, yet also a greater awareness of how each of us is unique.

LEISURE THEN; LEISURE NOW

*Leisure is time—
A time of freedom
Time that I can relax
Or do something fun.*

*I can act like someone else
And be happy
Before the stress comes back.*

*Leisure was time—
A time spent isolating myself.
I felt worthless
And wanted acceptance.
It was drinking,
And lots of drugs.
It was camping
In order to get close to my victims.
Leisure was picking up women
Just for sex.*

*Now, leisure is time—
A time with friends
Taking walks, hiking, going to church, or
Playing the guitar.
I keep myself from isolating
For I am with healthy people.
And this keeps me from re-offending.
I am bettering myself.*

*Leisure—a time of freedom,
A release,
An escape
From the reality of life?
Leisure—was and is, very important.*

A CONCLUDING TALE: FRAGMENTED REFLECTIONS

As in the autumn of 2000, I once again find myself in the midst of transformation. In this poetic co-authorship, there are important similarities between how my participants and I understand leisure, yet there are differences. We occupy different sets of social spaces, and we have different roles and experiences in the spaces we do share. These are framed by various tales about who we are and how lives are understood. These differences shape how we understand ourselves and others, as well as the complexity of human experiences such as leisure.

Nevertheless, a concept of time seems to be the centerpiece in how these participants view leisure. For them time seems to be where various activities can take place. The previous tales I tell herein purposely make reference to time and specific metaphors, which helps weave together a fragmented whole. Yet, it is now much clearer to me that I cannot understand time, freedom, and the relationship between the two in the same way that these participants do. These men have spent hour after hour, day after day, month after month, and year after year behind prison walls. Prison changes people forever. No doubt it also changes their current and subsequent leisure experience.

Following incarceration, these participants have reflected on life experiences through years of sex offender therapy. Their understandings are different from mine, yet I feel with them. My richer understanding of their experiences then becomes a part of me.

Not only is leisure time, but it is also "a time." Perhaps not only is it possible for the essence of leisure to be present across or through time in human lives, but personal experiences of substantial socio-cultural significance carve into us – deeply and forcefully – newly constructed time periods, segments, of how storied lives and leisure are, and will be, understood. For people in locked spaces, these segments are profound. And for many of us, these segments result from scars of violence that serve simultaneously to separate and connect all life experience to those profound occurrences. Still, I learn here that the essence of leisure is stable, yet leisure also fluctuates, sometimes markedly, in its texture, flavor, and morality of action. Leisure appears capable of helping to prevent re-offense; yet it also can contribute to sexual crime occurring in the first place. This poetic tale nudges us once again toward a realization that human beings can change and improve themselves, and leisure may be important to this transformation.

When considering how we understand leisure, like knowledge of other concepts and issues, I have tended to separate – probably far too much – dimensions of time, activity, and inner experience based on traditional tales that have produced my knowing. Rather, these concepts, like the human beings who experience them, are much more intricately and tightly woven together.

Consistent with positions of scholars like Gergen (2001) and Sparkes (2002), traditional research tales are important and should not be discarded; this should be especially obvious in matters of community safety. Such tales often privilege generalizations over details and provide valuable information. However, artistic research tales that lower barriers and open doors, thus bringing fallible human beings together also have much to contribute to the scholarship of both leisure and criminology. It is both possible and desirable to weave together scientific and artistic research tales, as I have tried to illustrate here, despite that every tale is necessarily partial and incomplete. Still, through welcoming multiple tales, knowledge can expand, lives may be enriched, and more people can be integrated into community.

To conclude, it is refreshing to see new research strategies, writing practices,

and ways of thinking enter the field of leisure (see Dupuis, 1999; Fullager & Owler, 1998; Glover, 2003; Giles & Williams, 2007; Lashua & Fox, 2006), including an entire special issue of *Leisure Sciences* devoted to creative analytic practice (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2007). Indeed, through knowledge gained from a wide variety of carefully crafted research tales, the realization that "leisure cannot be separated from the rest of life," (Henderson, Presley, & Bialeschki, 2004, p. 422) takes on richer meaning. May we use this knowledge to lower boundaries, expand our exploration of potential leisure among underserved populations, and make continual progress in turning ourselves into better people.

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