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## The Social Construction of Frivolity

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## Introduction

The sociology of leisure is a difficult discipline to define. Wilson (1980) describes activities included in the study of leisure and how each is dependent upon a variety of factors such as context, class and temporal placement. Activities such as hunting and fishing are work, but in other environments they are leisure. Regardless, leisure is a critical issue in people's lives and, therefore, is an appropriate topic for sociological inquiry.

The contradictory definitions of leisure noted by Wilson (1980), Parker (1975) and others suggest that leisure is a range of social phenomenon on a continuum more so than a discrete type of behavior (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1974). This continuum ranges between normative activities, such as work, and non-normative activities, such as deviance. Frivolity comprises one part of that continuum.

Frivolity is considered a harmless, unproductive activity outside the more structured activity of play. Huizinga (1950) in *Homo Ludens* notes that play is a "free activity standing quite consciously outside of 'ordinary' life as not being serious, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly." Frivolity, on the other hand, is more transitory and generally without rules or order.

## Historical Examples

Frivolity is found from society to society and throughout all historical periods. Unproductive, harmless activities abound at the fringes of normative behavior. In ancient Rome the winter solstice was marked by the festival of Saturnalia. The most popular of all Roman holidays, it included a relaxation of social and legal norms with the social order inverted and master serving slave and where all that is serious is barred (Penelope, 2012).

Within the Jewish tradition, the festival of Purim celebrates the struggle between Haman and Mordecai and evolved from a ritual of remembrance to one of parodies and excessive drinking (Purim Frivolity, 2012). Intemperate behavior and parodies of Judaism and the Talmud are reserved only for the time of Purim.

Christian festivals during the Middle Ages are most often seen as ludic rather than instrumental events (Gabbert, 2011). As expressive episodes these festivals are most known for their carnivalesque behaviors in which status, roles and traditional norms are suspended. These festivals legitimized periodic frivolity. Jesters, jugglers and other festival performers were exempt from many of the normative restrictions of the day.

Within the field of anthropology numerous examples of festivals and frivolity are found in primitive societies. Among the Tikopea and the Trobriand Islander of the South

Pacific, Firth (1936) and Malinowski (1922) provide examples of celebrations marked with frivolity and the suspension of normative restraints.

In Europe, the frequency of religious festivals and their commitment to carnivalesque behavior fueled the Protestant Reformation. The stress of aesthetic Protestantism on sobriety and individual responsibility for actions, along with the elimination of the symbolic icons of traditional Catholicism, challenged the harmlessness of frivolity and moved it from symbolic to sinful behavior (Weber, 2010).

To this day, frivolity is found at a variety of venues where non-normative behavior is tolerated and even celebrated within flexible boundaries of both public and private definitions. Instances of frivolity are seen at ball games, theme parks, resort communities and places of entertainment depending upon time, the social status of participants and the attitude of the public.

### Sociological Perspectives of Frivolity

Frivolity is a form of social action that is amenable to a variety of forms of sociological inquiry. The macro-level functionalist perspective focuses on the role that frivolity plays in meeting the integrative needs of a society or group (Parsons, 1961). This approach is consistent with the explanations associated with the previously cited anthropological case studies.

Frivolity or revelry is a mechanism not only for creating social solidarity within a group, but also for reducing systemic strain and stress. LaPierre (1938) stated that “the need for revelry would seem to be a consequence of the psychological tensions which are brought about by the maladjustment of the individual to his socially designated role.” Specifically, society provides for the satisfaction of this need through occasions for revelry. In primitive and modern societies, fairs, festivals, camp meetings and special places such as night-clubs and theme parks are some examples of places of revelry. Through frivolity, the person who is bored with the monotony of life and frustrated by traditional social restraints may secure a release from the normative in a socially structured and contained environment or event. The regularized festival or special event and the periodic orgy are simply socially provided devices for the discharge of tensions between members of a society and the impositions made upon them by that society (LaPierre, 1938). Thus, revelry or frivolous behavior functions at the individual level by providing a release from personal tensions and frustrations of conformity and at the societal level by serving as a safety valve to maintain the social system. LaPierre (1938) further notes, “When revelry occurs at socially designated times, the situation has its inception in social factors. This is the obvious case of harvest festivals, religious festivals, the Chinese New Year or Times Square, the primitive orgy or the old fashioned camp meeting.”

Frivolity as a response by the less powerful against the more powerful is a part of the conflict perspective in sociology. In their discussion of the nature of social classes, Marx and Engels (1975) identify frivolity as a luxury of the ruling class. The working class, in a constant struggle for survival, does not have the opportunity or resources to engage in behaviors or activities that do not contribute directly to their survival. The macro-social perspective of frivolity as a prerogative of the leisure class also is a significant component of Veblen's (1994) *Theory of the Leisure Class*. In the conflict tradition, this classic on consumption stresses class differences as fundamental to leisure activities, including extravagant instances of frivolity among the rich and powerful.

Frivolity, once the domain of the well-to-do in the classic Marxist tradition, is now a frequent component of protest by the less powerful. Humor and frivolity as tools of political dialogue emerged as a form of protest in the latter half of the twentieth century (Bos and t'Hart, 2008). Abbie Hoffman's use of the "politics of confrontation" in the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of tactical frivolity as a tool of political and economic ridicule by numerous counter-cultural and anti-capitalists groups in Europe and America illustrate the changing role of frivolity from a license of the upper class to a strategy of the revolutionary class. The use of frivolity as the antithesis of the structural legitimacy of the powerful was consistent with the emerging trend of deconstructionism in sociology (Derrida, 1980).

At the micro-social level, the symbolic-interactionist perspective views frivolity as a social construct. Scheler and Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann (1966) posit that society is characterized by the dialectical process between objective and subjective realities bridging the positivist and constructionist traditions. The constructionist perspective provides a different view of social behavior than that of the more traditional positivist view. Starting in the 1960s, in the field of deviance a number of sociologists held that deviance or any form of social behavior is defined not by any intrinsic quality but by the judgment of others (Thio, 2010). Howard Becker's (1963) theory focuses on the subjective experience, the interactional matrix of actors/observers and the labeling process as critical to the constructionist perspective. In a constructionist perspective of frivolity, the focus is on the definitional process and its consequences for the individual actor(s), the relevant audience and the social context of the act or event. Just like deviance, frivolity is in the eye of the beholder.

Frivolity in the interactionist perspective focuses on norms, roles, status and their influence on frivolity as emergent behavior. Consistent with this constructionist view of frivolity, emergent-norm theory hypothesizes that non-traditional behavior (such as that associated with collective action) develops in crowds as a result of the emergence of new behavioral norms in response to a precipitating crisis. For proponents of emergent norm theory, collective action includes all types of social behavior in which the conventional norms stop functioning as guides to social action, and instead people collectively

overturn or go beyond the normal institutional practices and frameworks of society (Turner & Killian 1987); new conventions form as part of the collective action. The basic suppositions of emergent norm theory are that collective action is rational, that collective action is a response to a precipitating event, and that the new norms of behavior appropriate to the collective action situation emerge through group processes without prior coordination and planning. First proposed by Turner and Killian in 1972, emergent-norm theory has grown out of two main traditions. The LeBonian tradition of thinking of crowds as normless entities and collective action as irrational behavior inspired Turner and Killian to think about how norms are instituted in crowds. In addition, symbolic interactionism and small group analysis contributed to a model of norms as developing through interaction. However, not all frivolity is collective in nature. In some instances frivolity can be found along a continuum of behavior from individual, solitary actions to group or even community-level behavior. Likewise, the environment influences the definition of this behavior and its consequences.

Viewing frivolity as a constructive typology facilitates the understanding of some of the important characteristics which define this behavior. As McKinney (1966) notes, constructive typologies represent continuums rather than discrete phenomenon. A simple two-dimensional model provides an opportunity to investigate frivolity both in terms of type of interaction and the context or environment of that interaction.

One dimension of this typology focuses on the type of interaction experienced. Different types of frivolity can be located along this continuum, from a spontaneous act conducted by a single or small group of individuals to a more structured or planned type of interaction. Along this continuum, the frivolity process reflects the social identity and status of the actors and the imputational specialists who define their behavior (Becker, 1974).

The second dimension of this typology focuses on the context or environment in which the action occurs. Ranging from informal to structured, the context plays an important role in defining acts as normal, frivolous, or even deviant behavior. For example, an unstructured and informal environment may allow a greater range of acceptance of a variety of forms of social behavior. On the other hand, highly structured environments may have definitional properties which would contribute to a more restrictive and conservative normative context. However, some special structured environments (theme parks, recreational communities or unique neighborhoods or even communities) may tolerate a wide range of acceptable, alternative behaviors and may even encourage some forms of revelry and frivolous actions and behaviors.

## A Typology of Frivolity

### Informal Environment

- \*
- \*
- \*

Spontaneous Interaction \*\*\*\*\* Planned Interaction

- \*
- \*
- \*

### Structured Environment

**Spontaneous and informal** frivolity encompasses acts of silliness and nonsense. While most acts of frivolity surround aimless play, those acts of frivolity that are spontaneous and informal are the most frivolous. Also, the unpredictable nature of frivolity provides a pressure-valve that can promote social integration (Odell, 1996). However, defining these moments is difficult due to their fleeting nature and casual occurrences.

Increased technology and social media sites have greatly impacted this type of frivolity. An example is the recent craze of “planking” (Flock, 2011). Planking involves lying completely flat and still as if mimicking a wooden plank. Finding the most unusual and creative place to “plank” your body is the goal of this game/craze - no rules, no order involved. A photograph of the plank is the only evidence necessary. Though the origin and founder of this game is still unclear, reports claim that this game has been around for approximately 25 years (Chang, 2011). Social media outlets and celebrities have helped promote this silly act into a media-captivating trend. Celebrities such as Tom Green, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, Chris Brown, and even Hugh Hefner have posted pictures of planking with online social media sites (2011). Sharing photographs and life events via social media also has introduced other examples of spontaneous and informal frivolity. Wedding parties, family groups, and friends all jump at the same time as a picture is being taken to mark this special moment. There are websites and Facebook pages dedicated to this form of frivolity where individuals can share individual and group shots of leaping bliss. This collective action is non-normative yet joyously uninhibited, and possibly more interesting than the traditional norm of smiling at the camera

Social gatherings and parties are often centered on spontaneous and informal frivolity. Themed events such as a tacky holiday sweater party encourage outrageous and ridiculous costumes. Such themes actually reinforce certain social norms by highlighting that which is seen as unacceptable.

**Spontaneous and structured** frivolity usually involves a group of individuals taking part in transitory, harmless, unproductive activities. This type of frivolity is special in that it is more structured. Social order and norms govern the expected behaviors and actions of this group. While the behaviors may certainly be outside the traditional social norms and may in some cases be seen as deviant by society, in the context of this spontaneous frivolity greater acceptance of such innovative social behavior is tolerated.

Dating back as far as the late 1600s, Mardi Gras celebrations included masked balls and festivals that preceded the religious atonement of Lent. Mardi Gras is a celebration of civic pride, religious tradition, and community identity. While the carnival season is very structured in its timing of Epiphany through Ash Wednesday, informal parades and spontaneous street celebrations are rooted in the celebrations. Gotham (2007) describes the early developments of Carnival and Mardi Gras “as a relatively spontaneous and indigenous celebration for local residents that included public masking, masquerade balls, rambunctious street parades, and widespread frivolity.” The traditional social norms of society are suspended during this carnival season. Vibrant costumes, masks, and beads become the official garb of the group. The fine line between socially acceptable behavior and deviance are often blurred. Frivolity runs rampant as party goers explore the rich New Orleans culture and embrace an atmosphere of celebratory gluttony and the boundaries of social propriety.

Many towns use festivals to celebrate local culture and history. Festivals are often seen as ludic, a form of play (Gabbert, 2011). Festivals, rituals, parades and street theatre are expressive events in which frivolity is not just sanctioned but encouraged, within the context of the event and specified time period. Memphis, TN hosts the World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest, and visitors from 50 states and foreign countries gather along the bank of the Mississippi River to experience a festival of food and entertainment. While this festival is centered on the art of grilling pork, entertainment includes “the Ms. Piggie Idol where the finest swine test their vocal skills, and grown men dress in tutus and snouts” (Memphis in May, 2011). Since World War II, festivals have proliferated with the explicit intention of encouraging tourism and promoting frivolity as a vital component of the cultural experience (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998).

**Planned and informal** frivolity is often seen in the context of other forms of leisure and self-expression. This type of play is very planned and organized, yet the environment in which it is expressed is very casual.

Dance has been a form of artistic personal expression, cultural rituals, and a means of non-verbal communication within all cultures dating back to mythological times and beyond. The use of collective dance in unusual places has brought about the practice of what is referred to as a “flash mob.” This group dance seems very spontaneous yet requires a great deal of planning and preparation. There is usually no special function besides social activity and fun. The social norms of the group are redefined during the event.

Sporting events bring a great deal of planned and informal frivolity to the surface. Fans may paint their entire face blue to show team pride, raise their arms high in the air in order to participate in the “wave” as it slowly inches around the stadium, or lock lips as the “kiss-cam” pans the crowd during a break in the game. Frequently, costumed characters race around the outfield between innings in pseudo sporting events, and team mascots engage in acts of silliness. Each of these acts represents a form a frivolity that is very planned yet informal. Jobs have been created to engage audience members in frivolous behavior. In the field of sports promotion, frivolous events have become a marketing mainstay.

**Planned and structured** frivolity is used by specific industries and organizations that have systematically commodified harmless, unproductive activities. Theme parks, for example, are extraordinary spatial and social forms which promote frivolity as part of the currency of the faux realities they represent (Lukas, 2008). In theme parks, the visitors are an important part of the social drama which is being merchandized as both entertainment and experience. The distinctive entertainment zones promote emergent yet structured behavior consistent with the symbolic space and the script of the planned scenario, be it heroic, frivolous or fantasy (Sorkin,1992).

Amusement parks like Coney Island promote various structured forms of frivolity within the context of individual rides. The screams and antics of the roller coaster riders are common examples of frivolity (Adams, 1991). The decorations which cover carousels represent caricatures of enjoyment and frivolity as acceptable in this place during the ride.

“What goes on in Vegas, stays in Vegas” reflects the promotion of planned and structured frivolity. It is no accident that this and other resort communities promote frivolity and alternative behaviors as acceptable in their environments. Labeled as an adult theme park, Las Vegas uses décor, architecture and interior design to create an overall experience that promotes behavior increasingly at the fringes, and at times beyond the boundaries of traditional and responsible behaviors (Lukas, 2007). Given the legend of frivolity, Las Vegas provides a structured environment conducive to the manifestation of planned emergent or frivolous behaviors.



According to Gragg (2010), in the 1950s Las Vegas hotels started using “bare bosom” shows to bring in new tourism. The city quickly followed by using sex in promotional materials and campaigns. In 1958, Bishop Robert J. Dwyer of the Diocese of Reno finally addressed the religious and moral concerns in the community when he stated it a “shocking thing to contemplate that Nevada should acquire the reputation of being a state which tolerates lewd and indecent entertainment, and attracts visitors on the strength of such an appeal” (Gragg, 2010). The “bare bosom” shows did not dissipate despite Bishop Dwyer’s concerns as “topless shows became a staple of the Strip’s entertainment” (2010). Frivolity prevails as the social norms of the larger society are suspended in Las Vegas as topless showgirls swing from the ceiling and dance strategically uncovered in feathers and sequins.

British royalty has recently been affected by the alternative and frivolous behaviors that are promoted in Las Vegas. Naked pictures of Prince Harry playing a strip billiards game during his August 2012 stay splashed across the headlines of magazines and the Internet as the mantra of “What happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas” was quickly ignored (Morris, 2012).

### Summary

Leisure is a continuum of behavior from normative to deviant. Some forms of leisure reflect widely shared cultural norms while others reflect only marginal or sub-cultural acceptance. Within this continuum, we label some harmless forms of non-traditional behavior frivolity. The social construction of frivolity is tempered by time, place, social class and tradition. In addition, frivolity can be a two-edged sword, defining the abnormal as normal or the normal as abnormal.

Anthropologists document the functional nature of frivolity as a safety-valve to the pressures of conformity. Sociologists explore how patterns of interaction are altered or suspended in response to special events defined as periods of frivolity. Likewise, students of popular culture study the emergent norms, behaviors and the social definitions associated with carnivals, festivals and special environments dedicated to frivolity.

The social construction of frivolity takes a variety of forms. The Typology of Frivolity presented illustrates this diversity by classifying types of frivolity along the dimensions of types of action and its context or environment. Frivolity is a form of leisure and is defined and constructed within the cultural tradition of the society in which it is found.

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