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# Lecture- 36



## LECTURE 36:

**SUBCULTURAL THEORY** Subcultural theory was first developed by sociology scholars at the Chicago School in the 1920s. The Chicago School explored the existence of deviant behavior and discussed deviance as a product of social problems within society. The Birmingham School added to subcultural theory, investigating the ways in which individuals joined groups that participated in collective forms of deviance, referred to as subcultures. For contemporary theorists, the concept itself is controversial, and some align with a “post-subculture” perspective suggesting subculture no longer describes the collective activities. Sociologists’ continue to study subcultures in order to uncover why subcultures form, why subculturists choose to engage in deviant group behavior, and what subcultural activity can tell us about society as a whole. The Chicago School The Chicago School defined subcultures using a deviance framework with a heavy emphasis on an ethnographic and empirical approach to their research (Williams 2007). The majority of the contributions that emerged from the Chicago School centered around addressing the question of why certain groups are more likely to engage in crime or deviant behavior, with research focusing on immigrants, African Americans, and the poor working-class (Williams 2007). Additionally, the Chicago School theorists analyzed deviance within the context of social interactionism and thus labeled deviant subcultural/gang participation as the result of social and environmental problems rather than individual personality traits/genetics such as poor individual choices, moral failings, or psychological disorders. Burgess’ chart of urban areas in Chicago in the 1920s based off of human ecology theory. In 1922, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess from the Chicago School developed a “human ecology” theory comparing social life to biological organisms. They claimed that social groups and institutions function together for the stability of the social group as a whole. When conflict, change, and competition arise, people attempt to accommodate or adjust to new conditions, with society eventually returning to equilibrium. Issues such as technological innovation and economic change can cause social disorganization, which in turn can result in deviance. For example, gangs and other delinquent groups arise due to the social strain of having to access legitimate resources in illegitimate ways. Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942) extended this theory with their development of the social disorganization framework for deviance, in which they claimed that deviance and social instability are first and foremost a result of geographic location, as residential instability tends to be highly concentrated in specific areas. Additionally, Edwin Sutherland and Donald Cressey (1934) expanded the Chicago School proposition that an individual’s social environment impacts likelihood for delinquency with their differential association theory. The main implication of differential association is that techniques and justification/rationalization for criminal deviance are learned, specifically from intimate friends and family members (Adler & Adler 2006; Sutherland & Cressey 1934). As such, tendencies toward deviant behavior are not determined at birth, but develop over time as peer social groups shift from more normative to more deviant friends. The Birmingham School The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham emerged in the mid 1960s with the goal of explaining the emergence of youth subcultures, such as Teddy boys, Mods, Skinheads, and Rockers, in post-World War II Britain. There, a group of sociologists led by Richard Hoggart set out to examine the various aspects of the working-class subcultural youth. Previous research done by Hoggart (1957) and CCCS member Raymond Williams (1958) catapulted the Birmingham subcultural studies into a more focused genre (Nwalozie 2015), and through this CCCS scholars developed several informal hypotheses that remained at the center of their work up until the school’s closing in 2002. First, CCCS scholars saw subcultures as undeniably class based, as they reported that the majority of subculturists they researched appeared to be young, lower-middle class white males (Williams 2007). Additionally, CCCS theorists suggested that what brought subculturists together was a collective desire to “act out” in resistance to hegemonic, mainstream cultural values (Haenfler 2014). Frustrated over socio-economic roadblocks to achieving a better standard of living, working class youths subsequently joined together by virtue of their marginalization from and resistance to the class structure. Lastly, CCCS researchers claimed that such resistance manifested itself most clearly

in the group members' spectacular styles and rituals (Haenfler 2014: 8). However, the Birmingham School saw subcultural symbolic rejection of mainstream bourgeois lifestyle as illusory (Hall & Jefferson 1976). In fact, CCCS scholars went so far as to say that not only does symbolic subcultural resistance have little to no impact on real change, but it may actually work to reinforce their low status in society (Willis 1977). A group of Teddy boys / Rockers, London 1979. Expanding on the work done by the Chicago School, CCCS scholars further explored the concept of deviance by highlighting implicit connections between culture and hegemony. Dick Hebdige (1979) argues that because subcultures stem from deviance, they usually consist of working-class cultures and individuals. Essentially, social groups manage their status problems by creating a new subculture and establishing new norms that do not conform to the dominant culture's norms. These new norms contain ideological meanings and have symbolic forms of resistance. Additionally, subcultures often take objects and styles of the dominant culture and appropriate them in order to demonstrate a new meaning. Despite the many significant contributions of the Birmingham School to subcultural studies, the CCCS faces significant criticism. In particular, many sociologists have criticized the CCCS for its overemphasis on resistance, class, and style, as well as its under-representation of any female or queer subcultures. Perhaps the most important limitation to the findings and approaches adopted by CCCS is their lack of any ethnographic research methods. Instead of approaching subculturists, CCCS theorists conducted their research via semiotic analyses of style from afar, potentially misinterpreting (or over-emphasizing) someone's style and practices.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SUBCULTURES

It is important to note that there is no one agreed upon definition of a subculture by sociologists. Subcultural theorists continue to expand and alter the definition of subcultures, as they investigate more subcultural groups and incorporate sociological theories of deviance into the subcultural framework. Thus, the definition of subculture is contentious. Some theorists (see "post-subcultural thought" below) even believe the concept has outlived its usefulness. However, a working definition is necessary for an introductory understanding of subcultures and subcultural theory. Thus, the characteristics of subcultures outlined below incorporate concepts and theories from the most prominent subcultural scholars, but by no means constitute a definitive "checklist" for determining what "counts" as a subculture and what does not. Photo of ICP members Shaggy 2 Dope and Violent J. Subcultures do not consist of formal leadership, formal membership, or any explicit organizational structure (Haenfler 2014: 16). Rather, subcultures have loose and informal participation, as the boundaries of who and what embodies a subculture are contested and fluid. Membership is not exclusive (Williams 2011: 41); subculturists can identify as part of the subculture and simultaneously interact with people in other cultural and social networks. Consequently, the boundaries between mainstream culture and subculture are often indistinguishable, as the two cultural domains can share ideas and coexist in the lives of individuals. The Juggalo scene serves as a good example of diffuse networks at play in a subculture. Juggalos are the fans of the band Insane Clown Posse (ICP). They possess their own shared identity, slang, style, and cultural meanings. Many ICP fans identify as Juggalos, attend the festivals, hang out with fellow Juggalos, and know the shared meanings and values of the subculture. However, they also take off their clown makeup, go to work, participate in other networks of social interaction, and learn other cultural meanings. This wide variety of cultural information from the "outside world" can in turn be shared with the Juggalo culture and vice versa. In other words, subcultures and other cultural networks interact with each other and adapt as they exchange meanings and values (Williams 2011: 41). Shared Distinct Meanings Subculturists not only share an identity, they also share values, practices, and cultural objects (Haenfler 2014: 17). For example, straight edgers value their community and their interpersonal relationships, they practice clean-living (substance-free), and they purchase objects of importance such as the most-popular hardcore punk albums. As subcultures emerge, distinct meanings form to define the scene's unique practices and cultural objects as well as to distinguish the subculture from mainstream culture. These meanings continuously grow and change as subculturists debate existing meanings and create new ones. Additionally, meanings are both created and learned through social interaction. The values and expected behaviors of subcultures often deviate in some way from the generally accepted norms of society (Dotter 1988). Still from the Paris is Burning (1990) documentary. For example, underground drag ball participants share a distinct set of meanings within their subculture. Underground drag balls

are competitions that consist of individuals, mainly queer youth of color, who perform different drag genres and categories. The ball participants share their identities both as queer youth of color and participants in the ball scene. As part of the ball scene, they also have knowledge of certain values, rituals, objects, and slang that are unique to the subculture. For example, the average person would not know what the term “realness” means, however, when one enters the ball scene, every participant knows the meanings and intricacies of the term realness. Furthermore, the value of queering oneself and expressing one’s sexuality at the balls, particularly in the 1970s, illustrates how the subculture deviates from mainstream norms and values surrounding gender and sexuality.

**Shared Identity** Many ethnographers argue that a collective form of self-identification is perhaps the most important distinguisher between a subculture and a simple social group (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Brewer and Gardner 1996; Fominaya 2010; Melucci 1995; Wendt 1994; Hodgkinson 2002). Outsiders often perceive the intense degree to which subculturists engage with and partake in their subculture as obsessive or unhealthy. However, the degree to which subculturists engage with their group can in fact be seen as a natural result of a distinctive sense of self in relation to their subculture. Indeed, a woman who has a child is not stigmatized for spending the majority of her day parenting the child, as motherhood is seen to be an important part of her identity. Juggalo with tattoos of different versions of the Joker card. However, unlike motherhood, an important part of subcultural identity is the collective aspect that subculturists find so unifying. As Turner, Hoggs, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987: 50) suggest, the formation of a collective identity involves “a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person.” Subculturists report feeling an innate sense of connection to and relationship with other members of their subculture, and do not necessarily require personal relationships among group members to feel said connection (Brewer and Gardner 1996). As such, it is important to distinguish between social groups that develop from common bonds (attachment to other group members) and subcultures comprised of people that share a strong common identity (Brewer and Gardner 1996).

Juggalos often report feeling a sense of deep subcultural belonging that transcends place as they are able to bond over the subculture being such a large part of their identities’, going so far as to refer to each other as “family.” Indeed, at the annual Gathering of the Juggalos, a universal sentiment is that, despite being strangers, “you can walk up to anyone and talk to them because it’s family” (Halnon 2014: 91). Outside the ICP concert scene, Juggalos are just as committed to upholding and reinforcing their collective identity, transitioning from strangers to “family” the moment they realize the other is a Juggalo. On a day-to-day basis, ICP gear and tattoo symbols signify to others their subcultural participation, thus making it easier to spot each other in a crowd. In this way, shared identity can be both internal and external; subcultural style is helpful for subculturists to identify one another, but is not necessarily itself an inherent characteristic of the shared identity. As social movements theorist David Snow (2011) once said, collective subcultural identity can often be interpreted as “a shared and interactive sense of ‘we-ness’ and collective agency.”

**Resistance** Resistance, either passive or active, to dominant hegemonic cultural values often accompanies subcultural participation in one form or another. Williams (2009) suggests that there exist three dimensions that comprise subcultural resistance. First, resistance may either be passive or active, based on participants’ intention to resist. The CCCS, for example, viewed subculturists as passive consumers. Second, resistance may exist at the micro or macro level, depending on what or for whom the resistance is directed. At the micro level, resistance may be developed as a psychological defense mechanism against bullies and peers, whereas macro level resistance is usually directed at politicians or policy makers, such as Christian Abstinence Youth Groups calling for a ban on birth control. Finally, resistance can be overt or covert, depending on if the actions of subculturists are interpreted by others as resistant. Whereas covert resistance is that which is intentional yet unnoticed by others, overt resistance is much harder to miss, as it, by definition, drives people to take notice. For example, when a Brony wears a colorful “I’m A Brony, Deal with It” t-shirt, he will more often than not succeed in bringing attention to his subculture.

**Marginalization** Fellow bronies with Darren McMullen. Subculture participants often consist of marginalized individuals who do not fit well within the dominant culture. As Howard Becker (1963) notes in his labeling theory, dominant social groups determine who the “out-group” is based on shared values and norms of the “in-group.” The

“in group” social groups are oftentimes the dominant culture that decide which values and norms the “out group” cannot perform. In contrast, the “out-group” might not have the same resources or practices as the “in-group” and in turn might fail to meet the norms and expectations of the “in-group,” thus making them deviant from the dominant culture. Since these individuals cannot meet the norms of the dominant culture and are labeled as deviant, they are marginalized from fully participating in the dominant culture. Shared marginalization is the idea that many subculturists can share the same “outsider” status despite having different backgrounds in mainstream society (Haenfler 2014). Likewise, subculturists can “choose” their marginalization as opposed to being structurally marginalized. For example, individuals participating in the rock subculture might wear their hair in a mohawk to purposefully raise the eyebrows of mainstream society. Mainstream society may originally marginalize those individuals for a specific aspect of their identity, however once they wear their hair in a mohawk, society marginalizes them for their participation in the subculture and its deviant style. “Bronies,” men who are fans the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, exemplify a group of marginalized individuals who make up a subculture. Bronies often find themselves marginalized by mainstream society because of how they break dominant culture norms by enjoying and having conventions focused on *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, a cartoon show targeted for young girls. Additionally, Bronies break dominant social norms by participating in the subculture and are often stigmatized by mainstream society because of individuals questioning their reasoning for being a part of the subculture.

**Stratification, Values, and Specialized Vocabulary**

A group of Harry Potter fans at a movie event. Subcultures create stratification systems in the same way dominant cultures do. The stratification system of subcultures is based on the continuously changing collective values within the group. Similar to dominant cultures, subcultures base stratification on cultural capital, symbolic capital, and authenticity. Cultural capital is based on how the individual follows the norms and practices of the subculture, symbolic capital is how much respect and legitimacy based on the individual’s status in the subculture. Authenticity, however, is a social construction that individuals must consistently perform in order to be a part of the subculture (Vannini and Williams 2009). An additional component of the stratification system and authenticity is the specialized vocabulary of the subculture. Specialized vocabulary illustrates the division between those in the subculture and those who are not, with certain words and phrases being understood by either all or a small percentage of the subculture (Haenfler 2014). Thus, specialized subcultural vocabulary demonstrates how much individuals are a part of a subculture and adds to the internal hierarchy of the subculture. An example of a subculture with many levels to its stratification system is the Harry Potter fandom, the community of Harry Potter fans who engage in Harry Potter themed activities. In the community, fans internally rank themselves on how devoted they are to the Harry Potter books and movies. For example, fans who have written fan fiction or actively participate in the Pottermore website would be higher on the stratification system than fans who only read the books and do not go to the movie premieres. Likewise, Harry Potter fans share a specialized vocabulary that is exclusive to the culture. Harry Potter fans often use the word “muggles,” a word meaning non-wizards in the Harry Potter books, to denote individuals who are not a part of the subculture and “Potterheads” to signify fans in the subculture.

**Post-Subcultural Thought**

Post-subcultural theorists suggest that subcultures either no longer exist or are simply little different from mainstream culture. They emphasize that mass consumption, diffusion of cultures through globalization, and the overall interconnectedness of people, places, and products across the world transform the ways subcultures manifest in the identities of individuals (Bennett 2011; Nwalozie 2015: 10). Consumerism influences subcultural communities by making subcultural products such as CDs and outfits available for anyone to buy; the community-based scenes are transformed into product lines. It becomes harder to differentiate between what constitutes a niche subcultural scene and what constitutes mainstream culture, as subcultural objects undergo commodification and commercialization. Furthermore, in an increasingly interconnected world, people have more freedom to pick and choose what subcultural identity they want to embody, whether that be through their style, mannerisms, or music taste. This freedom means that subcultural identities and participation are fluid rather than stable; in other words, there is less commitment to a particular scene. Whereas other subcultural scholarship emphasize how one’s background (socioeconomic status, race, gender,

geographic location, etc.) influences whether they join a particular subcultural scene, post-subcultural thought recognizes that globalization and diffusion of cultures allows for people of many backgrounds to pick and choose the scene(s) they want to participate in. Subcultural performance becomes more about consumerism and pleasure and less about resistance and shared identities (Bennett 1999). For example, the store Hot Topic allows teenagers to pick a scene and buy products that are part of this scene. The store distills the subculture down to its style. This enables teens from all walks of life to embody, for instance, the look of a punk kid without understanding the shared values and meanings of the punk subculture. Critics of post-subcultural thought point out that in fact many people do adopt subcultural identities and actively participate in the scenes even with the commercialization of their subcultural objects. Furthermore, while consumerism seeps into every aspect of life in society today, it does not prevent people from engaging in resistant activities (Haenfler 2014: 13). Subcultural participants still both resist and uphold mainstream culture and politics through their participation. By lumping all subcultural youth into this category of passive consumers who choose and transform their identities as they please, post-subculturalists fail to recognize the authentic self-identification that many youths experience