

The Origins of Subcultural Theory

As historical research on youth illustrates, down the centuries there have been gangs and groupings of young people possessing those characteristics which, in more recent times, have been referred to as 'subcultural' sensibilities. A case in point here is Pearson's (1994) account of the London 'apprentices' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who according to Pearson), 'were thought of as a separate order or subculture... Various attempts were made to regularize the conduct of apprentices, banning them from participation in football games, playing music, or drinking in taverns' (p. 1166; see also Pearson, 1983, pp. 190–4). A similar scenario is described by Roberts in relation to the Northern Scuttlers, a nineteenth-century gang based in the neighbouring cities of Manchester and Salford in north-west England. As Roberts (1971) explains, the Scuttler 'had his own style of dress – the union shirt, bell-bottomed trousers, the heavy leather belt, pricked out in fancy designs with the large steel buckle and the thick, iron-shod clogs' (p. 123). A non-British comparison is provided by German youth theorist, Detlev Peukert, in his study of the 'Wilden Cliquen' (wild crowds) of 1920s Germany. As Peukert (1983) notes, in addition to stylistically distinctive clothing, these youth groups also wore 'coloured bracelets, earrings and tattoos' (p. 67).

Precisely when the term 'subculture' was first used as a means to describe such visually and behaviourally distinctive sensibilities of youth is unclear. Tolson (1997) argues that, while not referring to 'subculture as such, the foundations of subcultural theory can be seen in the writing of Henry Mayhew, the nineteenth-century philanthropist whose research on poverty in London contributed to a new public awareness of the nature and origins of poverty in industrial urban settings. Mayhew's work, however, is not youths specific, and his allusions to 'subculture suggest a complex network of deviant practices utilized by the poor' as a means of survival in the course of their everyday lives.

It is this broader understanding of 'subculture that underpins its initial appearance in mainstream sociological work during the early twentieth century, when it became a key conceptual framework for the famous urban sociology of the Chicago School. Challenging the then dominant psychological interpretations of deviance by theorists such as Cesare Lombroso, which suggested the existence of a criminal personality' (see Sapsford, 1981), the Chicago School theorists argued that deviance, when studied in its socio-cultural context, could be shown to be a normal response determined by cultural norms, and not a symptom of psychological deficiency' (Frith, 1984, p. 40).

Chicago School theorists put forward a range of models to explain how deviant subcultures served to 'normalize' forms of deviant behaviour. Becker (1963) argued that deviant behaviour is the product of labelling, that 'social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular persons and labelling them as outsiders' (p. 9). Delinquent subcultures, according to Becker, become locked into a process of deviance amplification in which the initial negative responses of the dominant society result in such subcultures committing further acts of deviance, which in turn reinforces the stigmatization conferred upon them. Merton (1957) introduced the concept of 'means and goals' in a model that sought to explain deviance as a solution for groups lacking socially prescribed 'means' to obtain material and cultural rewards. According to Merton, deviant subcultures are deviant only inasmuch as they produce deviant means to acquire commonly-targeted social goals. Finally, Matza and Sykes (1961) contested the notion that 'deviant' subcultures will in each case resort to some form of anti-social behaviour. Instead, they argued, many such groupings are legitimate subcultures whose system of subterranean values, while deviant in that they offer non-conformist routes to pleasure and excitement, do not challenge or disrupt the dominant society as such.