

Subcultural theories and critiques



**ASSIGN
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Introduction

In this assignment, I have been asked to evaluate the main points of subcultural theories and critiques of them. In order to answer this question put to me, I will go on to describing exactly what a subculture is, I will then go on to state the different theorists who have given theories as to what subculture is, why it happens and how they may evaluate and apprehend it, showing their opinions throughout. I will then evaluate each theory and show the strengths and weaknesses of each, and throughout my evaluation I will be using plenty of references throughout to back up any points made, and finally go on to a concluding summary.

Firstly we must state what exactly culture is before we can delve in to any explanations of what exactly a subculture is. Williams suggests that there are many ways in which culture has been described and defined throughout history although the best way to define culture is that of 'particular way of life which expressed certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour' (Williams 1961: pg 57). There can be said to be many different ways in which a selection of society can be seen as a subculture, the first is that of reactive subcultures in which people feel a direct oppression from mainstream society and react against all that is seen as the typical 'norm'. There are also independent subcultures which are said to have complete separate, and that of their own, norms, values and beliefs than that of mainstream society. Brake also suggests that the best way to define a subculture is to suggest that it is like a 'culture inside of a culture'(Brake 1985). Further into his book he then goes on to suggest that 'Subcultures exist where there is some form of

organised and recognised constellation of values, behaviour and actions which responded to as differing from the prevailing set of norms.' (Brake 1985: pg 8).

In some circumstances the norms and values we share in day to day life with all of society are followed but not in the same way by all, therefore creating these subcultures. From the day we are born, we are already surrounded by a subculture lead by class and the particular ways of life in which a working class family may have may be in complete comparison to that of an upper class family. We are all brought up with complete different values of life and some people may see it more as tradition within their family, which is to be followed religiously. One example of this can be seen with the subculture of gypsies, where it is tradition to get married mainly by the age of 16, they live in caravans, statics, shallays and it is tradition for gypsies to attend the Appleby fair every year and even though this is not seen as the norms and values of everyone, it is to them. You could say that there are so many subcultures out there that it is impossible to state every one. An example of this could be that of what type of person you see yourself as and you religiously wear certain clothes to 'fit in' with a particular group i. e. Chavs, Hippys, Goths, Emos, Punks, Geeks, Popular, Tom Boys etc the list goes on. Another way in which people could suggest to support different values are that of homosexuality and the religions which oppose it as a sin of God. Longhurst et al argues that subcultures also arose from hegemony and quotes Clarke et al's statement that 'hegemony refers to the moment when a ruling class is able, not only to coerce a subordinate class to conform to its interests, but to exert a hegemony or total social authority over subordinate

classes.' (Longhurst et al 2008: pg244). As this was due to the fact that after the second world war a lot of reconstruction of the country as well as the economy was going on and the government, who mainly consist of white middle and upper class men, were changing the ways in which the working class lived their lives, and they took into account Cohens view that labour was being polarised and this meant that the wealthy were getting 'specialised, high tech, well paid jobs' and the poor were being forced to stay poor as they were only able to secure themselves 'dead-end, unskilled labour.' (Longhurst et al 2008: pg 243). These quotes show and tell us that the wealthy could see their jobs as a job and a career, however the poorer people could only see themselves as labourers, which in some cases may be used as a more generous term for skivvy, lackey, slave etc where they earn less money for doing a 'hard days graft' as you will, but yet the highly paid jobs are more than likely to be quite an easy job to do. Society in those days needed hard workers to do the labour jobs as those were the areas which needed upkeep however the areas the wealthy seemed to have jobs in would more than likely have no effect on society if it were to keep going or stop all together and therefore many are meaningless jobs but they are getting more money to do them. This is the kind of subjects in which set off the rebellions and therefore there was the creations of these subcultures in other areas than just class, but against governmental choices and the decisions they may have made which had an adverse affect on one class as it did on another, causing further friction between classes and we still see this going on today.

One of the main theorists to evaluate subculture was that of Albert Cohen and he mainly shows his theory of the subculture functionalist through his book called *Delinquent Boys : The culture of the gang*. In this book, his main points are that it is the clashing between that of the middle class and the 'delinquents' which was a harsh term produced by middle classes to describe the poor in order to portray them as being non educated with no intelligence and no drive to have goals in their lives. His view was linked to that of Merton's Strain Theory and Cohen, as well as Merton, argue that everyone has the same goals in life however the working classes never get the opportunity to actually go forward and achieve these goals. However where the two theorists differ, is how this revulsion of middle class culture leads to crime and law breaking behaviour. Merton has the view that because the working class do not get the chance to succeed in life, this then leads most down the path of crime and this is the main result of no success, suggesting that they have no choice in the matter, and that in order to survive they must turn to crime. Cohen on the other hand suggests that because the working class cannot have success in reaching goals in life, this then leads them to make up their own goals which involve crime and aggressive, law breaking behaviour (Cohen 1955 cite). Suggesting that they choose to break the law and commit crime and they see this as a way of life, and see nothing wrong with this. This subculture is reflected by Cohen to be the delinquent subculture with their own norms and values and their goals being to commit crime and it is seen as a positive thing to do, as if they reach their targets and goals by committing crime. The main goal for this subculture which Cohen suggests is to gain that of status by any means necessary, whether that be good or bad publicity and they don't care which way they are

portrayed by the media and other sources, as long as they are publicised and he suggests that these peoples key features are ' malice', ' negativistic'behaviourand ' non-utilitarian' behaviour (Cohen 1955 cite). ' Malicious behaviours are committed out of spite.... bullying of non delinquents.... Negativistic by believing that their behaviour is right precisely because it is wrong according to the norms of society.... Non-utilitarian as their activities do not produce a direct economic benefit.' (Regoli et al 2009: pg192). He also suggests that they have traits such as being very ' versatile', ' hedonists' and having great ' group loyalty and autonomy' never betraying one of the groups rules. ' Versatility is shown in their tendancy to dabble in many delinquent activities - stealing, vandalism, trespassing, truancy and so on.... Hedonism as delinquents are often impatient and impulsive... out for fun and don't take kindly to rules, scheduals or organization, nor do they plan ahead, study or practice. Future gains and goals are of no importance to them.... Group autonomy as they are close to other members of gang but hostile to outsiders.' (Regoli et al 2009: pg192-193).

This delinquent subculture was also separated not only from middle class society through social exclusion from the norm, but they were separated by sex as Cohen states in his book that ' male delinquency is at least four times as common as female delinquency.' (Cohen 1955: pg45). He also suggests that even though there is this subculture group which is apparent in order to try to gain a voice within the middle class society and to stand up for what they believe in and their rights as an English Citizen, there still never seems to be no resolution and that this battle will go on forever more ' some groups, which may sometimes be counted excessive, sub-cultural solutions

may not emerge, or particular individuals may not participate in them, Nonetheless, the problems of adjustment may be sufficiently intense and persistent that they still press for some kind of change.' (Cohen 1955: pg 71).