SUBCULTURES

Edited by Christopher T. Conner

STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

VOLUME 54

SUBCULTURES

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SITUATING SUBCULTURES

Christopher T. Conner

This special issue of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* explores the various ways the term subculture has been defined. At times some authors stretch the term to its breaking point, while other articles reflect a more classical usage of the term. These papers, as a whole, grapple with the fluidity and the complexity in maintaining analytical utility while advancing empirical studies of subcultures. As some critics claim, the term subculture lacks analytical specificity due to its overuse by sociologists (Fine and Kleinman 1979; Yinger 1960). To resolve this concern, some subculture theorists have argued for the development of the term "contraculture" or "counterculture," to differentiate between groups who actively resist the values of the dominant culture and those who do not (Fine and Kleinman 1979; Yinger 1960). They argue that the term subculture implies labeling from the outside, whereas contraculture or counterculture implies active resistance on the part of group members themselves.[1] While these articles do not necessarily resolve these issues, they do remind us that the continued study of subcultures can reveal sociologically significant insights.

This diverse collection of articles also illustrates the breadth and depth of the symbolic interactionist approach, and its strength in facilitating understanding. Many of these characteristics are found in some of the earliest subculture ethnographies written by members of the Chicago School, like *Taxi-Dance Hall* (Cressey 1932) and William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's (1918) *The Polish Peasant.* These early ethnographic studies approached the study of subcultures with different interests in understanding aspects of social life – some focusing on how cultural meanings became constructed internally (the self and identity), and others focusing on the role such groups play in the construction of the urban environment. The central thread running through this work was the important of identifying how meaning is constructed. Later studies, coming out of The Chicago School, also added some complexity to the field by emphasizing the role of external agents in creating subcultures (see Becker 1963). Even still, some saw the

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Chicago school's approach as elitist, and accused adherents work as having an astructural bias (see Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds 1975; Muslof 2016).

The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies (CCCS) sought to address the limitations of the Chicago School by focusing on material aspects of subcultures (fashion, dress and style). Style, for these scholars, was equated with political resistance, and could be used as a way to understand the structural forces giving rise to subcultures. Utilizing a neo-Marxist approach they contextualized subcultural experiences within a capitalist production system. For the CCCS, different subcultural styles could be read as resistance to dominant class values which were supplanted by an alternative value structure (Clarke et al. 1975; Cohen 1997; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1977[1981]). Commitment to subcultural values, antithetical to those of the dominant class, perversely reinforced the class position and background of those trying to engage in resistance (Willis 1977 [1981]).[2] While the CCCS offered an alternative model for understanding subcultures, they drew concerns that they had over emphasized the perspective of young males (see LeBlanc 1999; McRobbie 1991). This criticism also raised questions as to the whether or not the term subculture could be understood as a unified category.

In the 1990s and 2000s a new way of thinking about subcultures emerged giving rise to the notion of post-subcultural studies which attempted to move away from the structuralist underpinnings of preceding models. Post-subculture theorists criticized the structuralist "reading" of style as elitist and ethnocentric, but also problematic because of the instability of a constantly shifting milieu of popular culture. Instead theorists like Weinzierl and Muggleton (2003) proposed to rethink youth subcultures as "hybrid cultural constellations" with no serious boundaries between members of a subculture and the broader overall popular culture.[3] They argue that subcultures had become apolitical and their purpose lie only in hedonistic excess and consumption.[4] This perspective has not always been shared by scholars interested in understanding culture, but it has been influential in broadening how we think about subcultures.

While sometimes neglected by subculture scholars, those taking a cultural studies approach acknowledged the post-subculture critique, but focused on situating subcultures within specific historical moments (Agger 1992; Denzin 1992; Dickens 1994). Theorists operating in this framework drew upon the strengths of symbolic interactionism and critical theory to address post-structuralist criticisms (Denzin 1992:20). Specifically, they agreed that the nature of subcultures had changed since the 1960s. However, they disagreed that youth culture was only a conglomeration of free floating apolitical sign symbols with hedonistic tendencies. Instead cultural studies argued that the ongoing performance carried out by those involved in subcultures contained political potential (Conquergood 2013), but also reflected larger ongoing social change that their subjects may have been expressing (Gottschalk 1993).[5] Thus, they resolved the reductionist critique lobbied at the Birmingham and Chicago Schools, while also maintaining the sociological relevance for studying subcultures by considering the larger historical context (a la C. Wright Mills 1959).

OUTLINE OF THIS ISSUE

We begin with Stacy Smith's article on Dead Head subculture. Her article advocates for a more nuanced conception of identity that is historical, hierarchical and relational to idealized notions of the self. In so doing, Smith by passes arguments about the utility of the term "subculture" (Fine and Kleinman 1979; Yinger 1960), showing how the meaning behind the term evolves based on the participants views of themselves. Moreover, as the author argues, subcultures are performative and it is these performances which can make them political.

In "Separating from Hardcore Ritual: Considering Post-Traditional Religious Experience in the Contemporary Life Course with Ex-Straightedgers," Jason Torkelson shows us the ways in which former Straight Edgers draw upon their previous participation, as youth, in the subculture. Torkelson calls upon us to think about effervescence and communitas as more than situational phenomena, and to consider the ripple effect that they have on those who experience them. For the 44 former Straight Edger's in this interview study, subcultural participation is an important part of their identity even if they feel they are no longer welcome in those spaces.

While subculture theorists often explore what it means to be a member of a subculture, as part of a closed system, Bertan Buyukozturk explores the role outsiders play in helping with the construction of identity. Buyukozturk's article, titled "Constructing Communal Gamers: Gamers' Group Identity Work," draws upon a variety of interpretive theorists to shows how communal gamers utilize a variety of strategies to reconstruct their identities to counter negative stereotypes. In doing so, Buyukozturk reminds us of the way communal identities shape behaviors, relations, and how subcultures are used as a prism upon which the world is experienced. Moreover, Buyukozturk understands subculture as something constituted collaboratively through its performance – not unlike those theorists from the cultural turn described earlier.

Drawing upon a decade of ethnographic fieldwork, Green's article "You're Dancing on My Seat," reminds us that the participants shape the spaces they occupy just as they are shaped by them – and that subcultures are comprised of stakeholders with a variety of motives and perspectives that influence their development. For participants in Green's study, "a 'gay bar or nightclub' as a collection of multiple, sometimes conflicting places, both physical and symbolic, whose identity and reputation at any given moment may shift depending on the current occupants of the space." His article also reminds us that while consumption and hedonistic tendencies may appear to be the primary drivers behind spaces such as gay bars and nightclubs, these things alone do not provide the necessary meaning making systems that are in fact the reason for participation in these spaces.

In "Becoming an Ogre: Identity work as a Postmodern Leisure Subculture Activity," Nick Baxter analyzes American live action role playing groups to identify connections between the identity, subculture, and leisure literature. He illustrates in this article that role players engage in a complex construction of

character development and world creation within their leisure subculture. Through their interactive play Live Action Role Playing (LARP) players remind us to not neglect or treat identity as givens, but rather to interrogate how identity is created both for participation in a subculture and as part of subculture activities. By utilizing a symbolic interactionist approach informed by subculture and leisure studies literature Baxter highlights the layered identity work that LARP players engage in as part of their collective game play.

Shane Blackman and Robert McPherson in "David Matza from naturalism to cultural criminology" argues for David Matza as a forgotten figure within criminology, and applies his concept of "drift" to understand the behaviors of young adults' alcohol consumption in the United Kingdom. While class based theories of subcultures often propose that deviance is the result of social structure, the framework presented here restores agency to such actors. Moreover, as Matza argued, deviance and transgression are often a product of calculation by delinquent youth rather than misguided, or unguided, decision making.

In "The Backpacker Hostel in Central America: Experiencing Escape, Community, and Tourism," Marko Salvaggio provides a critical analysis of the backpacker experience. His study illustrates that while an idealized image of backpackers as care-free students traversing the countryside exists, that this is one of many narratives surrounding the quest for an "authentic" experience. Salvaggio also shows that while backpackers seek an escape into different cultures and social realities, they also engage in strategies to establish close personal ties with others and establish community. He also points to how the contemporary tourism industry is increasingly making this problematic for backpackers, as companies try to wedge themselves between participants and shareholders.

Jessica Strübel and Monica Sklar in "Fred Perry: Polos for All" remind us of the transformative power that subcultures have in using symbols, style, and dress to communicate subversive strategies. However, subcultures also appropriate style in what Dick Hebdige (1979) called "semiotic guerrilla warfare." In this article, Strübel and Sklar show how the Fred Perry polo shirt brand was transformed from a subversive style of dress by standard mod and Skinheads in post-war Britain, into a sartorial style in the 1980s by right-wing white nationalists. Today patriot groups, such as neo-Nazis and the alt-right, have continued to co-opt the subcultural style – altering its original meaning and inscribing it with racist and bigoted ideologies.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to work with the authors on these articles. Moreover, I thank them and the reviewers immensely for their patience. As with any project of this nature, I have enjoyed strengthening my relationships with other scholars and providing them with an opportunity to advance their work. It has also been an honor to work with the many anonymous reviewers, and I believe their diligence has resulted in an interesting collection of contemporary social life. My only regret is that there were some I had to leave behind.

NOTES

1. An example of a counterculture would be the 1960s protest movements, and the rave scene of the early 2000s (see Conner Katz 2020).

2. The ideas established by the CCCS have also been used by cultural criminologists (see Ferrell 1995; Ferrell, Hayward, and Young 2008; Muller 2019).

3. Other terms to reconceptualize the concept include neo-tribes (Bennet 1999, 2011), club cultures (Redhead 1990; Thornton 1995) and proto-communities (Muggleton 2000).

4. To say they are apolitical is to be guilty of the same elitism they accuse other paradigmatic models of committing.

5. It could just be coincidence, but the work of Judith Butler (1990) and Steve Seidman (1997) also reflect aspects of this argument that performances contain real political and transformative power.

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“WE DIDN’T INVENT THEM”: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG DEADHEADS

Stacy Smith

ABSTRACT

The deadhead subculture – centered around the band Grateful Dead – *has been active for 50+ years. Despite its longevity, academic work is sparse compared to other music subcultures. Given its durability and resilience, this subculture offers an opportunity to explore subcultural development and maintenance. I employ a contemporary, symbolic interactionist approach to trace the development of deadhead subculture and subcultural identity. Although identity is a basic concept in subculture research, it is not well defined: I suggest that the co-creation and maintenance of subcultural identity can be seen as a dialectic between collective identity and symbolic interactionist conceptions of individual role-identity.*

Keywords: Subculture; identity; collective identity; role-identity; deadhead; jam band

Fans of the band the *Grateful Dead*, known as “deadheads,” created a subculture that has existed for 50+ years and continues to draw new members (Pearson 1987). Although it is one of the oldest music-oriented subcultures in existence, the band enjoyed little conventional success. Deadheads were once stigmatized as a “deviant” youth subculture, and viewed as a threat to the American way of life by members of the dominant society (Paterline 2000). This stigma is also prevalent in academic research on the subculture: marginalized, but not rebels or victims, deadheads were not sanctioned as a worthwhile population to study (Adams 1998). Thus, when compared with other music subcultures (like punk, for

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example), relatively little peer-reviewed work has been published about deadheads (see Appendix A). In this article, I contribute to our understanding of the creation and maintenance of the complex, and enduring deadhead subculture and propose a refinement of subcultural identity.

Contemporary approaches to the study of subcultures often employ the symbolic interactionist perspective, casting subcultures as systems of meaning and subcultural membership as "a reflexive strategy to grapple with personal and collective challenges" resulting from modern society (Haenfler 2014:14; Quidley-Rodriguez and De Santis 2019). Deadhead subculture is well suited to symbolic interactionist analysis: fans and band alike agree that the subculture emerged through interaction between the two. "We didn't invent [the fans]," explained lead guitarist Jerry Garcia in a 1989 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine. "In a way, this whole process has kind of invented us" (Goodman 1989). The interaction that produces a subculture also produces *subcultural identity*. Yet, our current understanding of subcultural identity is flawed and merits examination: what is meant by "identity" is often ill-defined and thus left open for interpretation. By tracing the dialectic between the band and fans that created deadhead subculture, I contribute not only to our understanding of subculture formation, growth, and maintenance, but also add to recent attempts to better define what we mean by identity within subculture research (see Sarabia and Shriver 2004).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The deadhead story began in the 1960s: a turbulent era, rife with massive social change and social strife. Young activists in the New Left and the Civil Rights movement sought to change the world through protest and civil disobedience. Their counterparts in the hippie movement hoped that "dropping out" and creating alternative social structures would lead to a new form of society. The Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, California, previously occupied by beatniks, became the preferred destination for youth wanting to live as hippies (Miller 2012; Young 2010). Beats and hippies shared similar values: a focus on Eastern mysticism, free love, a rejection of capitalism in favor of voluntary poverty, and an eradication of barriers of "property, prejudice, and…[standards of] moral[ity]" (Echols 2002; Howard 1969:46). Hippie youth attempted to avoid capitalism by shopping at secondhand stores, sharing material possessions, and living communally (Didion 1968; Echols 2002). Everyone had their own "trip" or lifestyle in the Haight, and for many this trip involved drugs (Didion 1968; Sardiello 1994). The hippie movement would not outlast the 1960s as a cohesive whole. By the summer of 1967 – the "Summer of Love" – the hippie lifestyle had become commodified (Frank 1997). Vacationers dressed in boutique hippie clothing strolled along the Haight, sightseeing and hoping to catch a glimpse of a subculture that had already fled (Echols 2002).

The Grateful Dead and deadhead culture have deep ties to the hippie movement (Sheptoski 2000; Shank and Simon 2000). Original Grateful Dead band members Jerry Garcia, Mickey Hart, Bill Kreutzmann, Phil Lesh, Ron