



Teaching and Learning Guide for: Youth-Subculture Studies: Sociological Traditions and Core Concepts

J. Patrick Williams*

Arkansas State University

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Studies of youth subcultures have been carried out for decades from various theoretical perspectives (including functionalism, social ecology, neo-Marxism, deviance and labeling, cultural studies, sports and leisure studies) as well as from various methodological standpoints (e.g., deductive and inductive approaches, insider and outsider perspectives, ethnographic, historical comparative, and semiotics). The sociological study of youth subcultures thus offers a wide range of opportunities to bring together an interesting topic for young people and theoretical or methodological pedagogies.

Suggested books

The significance of youth-subcultural studies is evident in the plethora of current books on the topic. Here, I provide a brief summary of some recent books, as well as a few classics that should not be overlooked.

Cohen, Stanley 2002 [1972]. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (3rd edn). London, UK: Routledge.

This study of the infamous mods and rockers clashes in Britain in the mid-1960s focuses attention on the media's role in construction youth subcultures as deviant social phenomena. Its significance lies not only in its analysis of how the British media created a moral panic by stereotyping, exaggerating, and mishandling representations of youth, but also in its more general insight into the social construction of social categories such as 'youth', 'subculture', and 'deviance'. Readers of the third edition will benefit from Cohen's introductions to the second and third editions (both printed in the third edition), which give an updated analysis of the two concepts he originally proposed in his title (i.e., *folk devil* and *moral panic*).

Gelder, Ken (ed.) 2005. *The Subcultures Reader* (2nd edn). London, UK: Routledge.

This book represents the single most comprehensive collection of original research in youth-subcultural studies. The edited volume has 48 chapters divided into 8 thematic sections, each with its own introductory chapter (in addition to the 48), and covers a broad range of theoretical and empirical research.

Greenberg, Arielle (ed.) 2007. *Youth Subcultures: Exploring Underground America*. New York, NY: Pearson Longman.

Unlike some books on youth cultures or subcultures that develop theory at the expense of readability and engagement, Greenberg's edited volume is very friendly to less experienced social science readers. The contributed chapters are written both by professional scholars and undergraduate students. Greenberg has sought to avoid jargon- and reference-laden research and succeeded in developing a book that undergraduates, especially those who are not taking an entire course on youth subcultures, will find most useful.

Haenfler, Ross 2006. *Straight Edge: Hardcore Punk, Clean-Living Youth, and Social Change*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

In recent years, there have been several thorough ethnographic studies of youth subcultures. Along with Paul Hodkinson's study of goths and Lauraine Leblanc's study of female punks, Haenfler's book offers keen sociological insight into the contemporary culture of straight edge. His book frames the subculture in terms of its nonmaterial culture, its status as an agent of social change, and its masculine and feminine dimensions. It is well written and serves as a tool for engaging students on notions of gender and social change, especially.

Hall, Stuart and Tony Jefferson (eds) 1998 [1975]. *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London, UK: Routledge.

This is the classic edited text from the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, UK, which established youth-subcultural studies as a subdiscipline of both cultural studies and sociology. The editors offer a significant theoretical expose on the links between critical theory and youth subcultures. The subsequent empirical and theoretical chapters further express their collective stance, which although it has come under serious criticism over the years, is still a must-read for students of youth subcultures. Most of work relates directly to British youth subcultures of the 1950s to the 1970s and, therefore, may seem quite foreign to younger American readers. Teachers relying on this book may need to do some homework of their own to get up to speed on the substantive issues covered.

Hebdige, Dick 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London, UK: Routledge.

This book is considered by many scholars to be the quintessence of British subcultural studies. Hebdige takes a rather nonsociological view of subcultures in the book, emphasizing a humanist semiotic approach instead. Many scholars have criticized the book as unnecessarily

dense and devoid of the voices of subcultural participants, yet the author's insights into the cultural significance of style still make it a very significant text.

Hodkinson, Paul and Wolfgang Deicke (eds) 2007. *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures, and Tribes*. London, UK: Routledge.

This edited collection is based on a 2003 conference in which youth culture scholars discussed the relative utility of the subculture concept in the face of pressure from competing concepts such as scenes and neotribes. The book consists of a rather eclectic set of chapters that tackle both theoretical and substantive issues. While its weakness is perhaps its lack of coherence, this is balanced by its wide coverage of contemporary issues, including gender, race/ethnicity, commodification, and new media.

Huq, Rupa 2006. *Beyond Subculture: Pop, Youth and Identity in a Postcolonial World*. London, UK: Routledge.

Focusing on music cultures at the turn of the millennium, Hug offers a solid synthetic analysis of subcultural studies in the UK during the latter half of the twentieth century. She then moves through a series of case studies on various music genres – including bhangra, rave/club, hip-hop/rap, and grunge – as she attempts to articulate how the cultures that consume such music have moved beyond the 'subculture' label.

Leblanc, Lauraine 2001. *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

While many books look at core cultural dimensions of particular youth subcultures, Leblanc dedicates her book to young women's participation. Focusing on punk, she investigates the historical structures of the subculture that result in the marginalization of women, how female participants construct the significance of punk in their lives, and how they deal with males both within and outside subcultural contexts.

Muggleton, David 2000. *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford, UK: Berg.

Playing off the name of Dick Hebdige's famous book, this monograph offers a very different reading of youth-subcultural participation than classic CCCS texts. Muggleton takes an empirical rather than semiotic approach, using interviews and fieldnotes from his study of young people in Britain who dress in alternative fashions. His work offers new insights into the relations between youth culture, fashion, and identity.

Muggleton, David and Rupert Weinzierl 2003. *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. Oxford, UK: Berg.

This edited volume focuses on recent work by scholars working, for the most part, from a postmodern perspective. Rather than seeing subcultures as class-based, ideologically pinned or static, the authors collectively explore the more fluid and negotiated terrain upon with contemporary

Western youths live. The book would be best used for a graduate course, as much of the writing is relatively sophisticated.

Thornton, Sarah 1996. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan.

Starting with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Thornton moves into the world of rave/club culture to study how subcultural participants articulate their own form of status, power, and identity. Another significant dimension of the book is her articulation of the role various media (from mass to micro to niche) play in subcultural worlds.

Films and videos

As discussed by Leblanc (1998), films provide opportunities for students to practice casting a sociological eye on the world around them. While Leblanc's focus was on teaching ethnography, her substantive interests in youth and youth subcultures provide a useful discussion for teachers interested in teaching a course on youth subcultures. Over the years, I have used many films and videos, both in whole and part, either to emphasize a particular sociological concept, to provide documentary evidence of particular subcultural styles, practices, and worldviews, or to facilitate relatively safe student engagement with a topic that many of them might shy away from in a face-to-face context. In the following list, I will make reference to particular parts of my syllabus (further below) where the film/video might be most useful.

Between Resistance and Community

This is an independently made documentary film by Joe Carroll and Ben Holtman (2002) about the Long Island, New York DIY (do-it-yourself) hardcore scene. The documentary provides an in-depth look at the scene through the eyes of its members. It is full of raw footage of hardcore music shows and interviews with scene participants and offers a coherent standpoint analysis of the concepts of resistance and community (thus living up to its title). I typically use parts of the film in connection with the concept of resistance, as well as societal responses/reaction and identity/authenticity.

Merchants of Cool

Frontline's documentary of the relationship between cultural production and consumption emphasizes not only mainstream fashion, but specifically how cultural industries take advantage of young people that live on the cutting edge of style through basic marketing tools. The video is available online (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view/>) and is broken down into six parts. I sometime show parts 1–3 and 6 during a

single class in order to have time for discussion. The video is relevant to discussions of style, consumption/culture industries, authenticity, and media.

Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills

This is a lengthy documentary film about the so-called West Memphis Three: three young men who were convicted of torturing and murdering three boys in West Memphis, Arkansas, in 1993. The case surrounding the murders and trials remains highly contested, and to this day there are serious doubts by many as to the guilt of the accused. As the documentary shows, the West Memphis Three were heavy metal fans, one of whom dabbled in the Wiccan religion. While the film is too long for most classes, I used two sections of the film to highlight (i) the 'dominant' Christian culture of West Memphis and (ii) the attempts by prosecutors to create a strong tie between the defendants' appearance and style on one hand and Satanism on the other. The film offers students insight into the harsh reality of labeling, moral panic, and societal response (there is also a follow-up documentary entitled *Paradise Lost 2: Revelations*).

Quadrophenia

A film produced during the 1970s by the British rock band The Who, *Quadrophenia* looks back at the mod and rocker subcultures of the mid-1960s through the eyes of a mod. The film is best viewed in Section 2 of my course syllabus, while students are reading about the Birmingham tradition (in the USA especially, since many students have never heard of mods and rockers). Mods are cited repeatedly in the CCCS literature; thus, the film gives students something more tangible to engage. The film is particularly good and facilitating student engagement with certain subcultural concepts learned in Sections 1 and 2, including frame of reference, strain, homology, bricolage, and 'magical' solutions.

The Source

This documentary looks at the Beat culture. I use sections of the film to highlight the dominant American culture of the 1950s and how individuals who felt marginalized or otherwise nonnormative moved to big cities in search of other people who were similar. The film works well with a discussion of Albert Cohen's theory of subcultural strain.

The Warriors

Having attended a formal gathering of all the gangs in New York, a local gang called the Warriors are wrongly accused of assassinating a would-be gang lord and are forced to fight their way back home to Coney Island. The

film is full of stereotypical images of subcultural style and deviant behavior. This film fits in well with a review of the Chicago School, in particular a deviance or criminological approach to youth sub-cultures. The film offers insight into class, gender, strain, and the urban environment.

Other film titles and the subcultures to which they relate include:

- A Clockwork Orange* – abstract representation of subcultural deviance
- Afro Punk* – punk subculture and race
- American Hardcore* – punk and hardcore music subculture
- Another State of Mind* – early hardcore punk scene, highlights music
- Boyz in the Hood* – marginalized black culture that produced hip-hop and rap music
- Dogtown and Z-Boys* – skateboarding
- Dreadheads: Portrait of a Subculture* – new age travelers, deadheads
- Heavy: The Story of Metal* – heavy metal
- Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* – extreme metal culture, including death metal and black metal
- Punk: The Early Years* – history of punk
- Red Light Go* – Bike messengers
- Romper Stomper* – racist skinheads
- Sid and Nancy* – punk, focusing on The Sex Pistols
- SLC Punk* – punk
- Surburbia* – interesting mix of disaffected youth, mainly punk with skinheads and goths as well
- This is England* – looks at the intersection of racist and non-racist skinhead culture in the UK

<http://www.youtube.com> contains a vast collection of subculture-related material. I troll the site every few months looking for new resources to use in the classroom.

Sample syllabus outline

Course description

Youth as a social phenomenon arose largely as a cultural derivative of the industrial revolution in Europe and the USA and is now global. In the twentieth century particularly, youth became an object of sociological, cultural, and psychological analyses. The concept of 'subculture' has been used with various degrees of success to analyze youths' individual and collective behaviors. This course surveys some of the many strands of youth-subcultural theory during the twentieth century. It begins with early sociological work from the University of Chicago, followed by an overview of the cultural studies approach from the University of Birmingham, UK. It then moves on to examples of contemporary subcultural theory and research, focusing on a number of discrete sociological concepts and youth-subcultural groups.

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the course is to try and arrive at some consensus as to the worth of 'subculture' as an analytic concept as well as the various concepts that drive subcultural studies. The objectives of the course are: to familiarize students with various strands of subcultural theory in sociology and cultural studies; to review a variety of historical and contemporary youth subcultures as well as the concepts and methods used to study them; and to improve students' understanding of how and why youth subcultures emerge, exist, and change.¹

Section 1: Introduction to youth-subculture studies

Howard Becker 1986. Culture: A Sociological View

Sarah Thornton 1997. General Introduction to *The Subcultures Reader*, 1st edn.

Ken Gelder 2005. Introduction: The Field of Subculture Studies*

Section 2: American subculture studies

Ken Gelder 2005. Introduction to Part One: The Chicago School and Urban Ethnography*

Subculture as deviance

Paul Cressey 1932. The Life-Cycle of the Taxi-Dancer*

Subculture as strain

Robert Merton 1938. Social Structure and Anomie

Albert Cohen 1955. A General Theory of Subcultures*

The ethnographic study of subcultures

Howard Becker 1963. The Culture of a Deviant Group*

Ned Polsky 1967. Research Method, Morality, and Criminology*

Paul Hodkinson 2005. 'Insider Research' in the Study of Youth Cultures

Section 3: British subculture studies

Ken Gelder, 2005. Introduction to Part Two: The Birmingham Tradition and Cultural Studies*

Marxism and class

Phil Cohen 1972. Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community*

John Clarke et al. 1975. Subcultures, Cultures and Class*

The semiotic study of resistance

Tony Jefferson 1975. Cultural Responses of the Teds

Dick Hebdige 1979. Subculture: The Meaning of Style*

Section 4: Subsequent theoretical strands

Criticisms and Revisions

Gary Fine and Sherryl Kleinman 1979. Rethinking Subculture: An Interactionist Analysis

Stanley Cohen 1980. Symbols of Trouble*

New directions

Andy Bennett 1999. Subcultures or Neo-Tribes?

Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton 2003. What Is Post-Subculture Studies?

David Hesmondhalgh 2005. Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above

Section 5: Analytic topics

Style

Ken Gelder 2005. Introduction on Part Five: Style, Fashion, Signature★

Dick Hebdige 1983. Posing ... Threats, Striking ... Poses★

Jeffrey Kidder 2004. Style and Action: A Decoding of Bike Messenger Symbols

Resistance

Paul Willis 1977. Culture, Institution, Differentiation★

Kathleen Lowney 1995. Teenage Satanism as Oppositional Youth Subculture

Kristin Schilt 2003. I'll Resist You with Every Inch and Every Breath

Space and media

Ken Gelder 2005. Introduction to Part Four: Territories, Space, Otherness★

Peter Marsh et al. 1978. Life on the Terraces★

Iain Borden 2001. Performing the City★

Societal responses and reaction

Jill Rosenbaum and Lorraine Prinsky 1991. The Presumption of Influence

Claire Wallace and Raimund Alt 2001. Youth Cultures under Authoritarian Regimes

Identity and authenticity

Kembrew McLeod 1999. Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation

J. Patrick Williams 2006. Authentic Identity, Straightedge Subculture, Music and the Internet

Murray Healy 1996. Real Men, Phallicism, and Fascism★

Consumption and play

Jock Young 1971. The Subterranean World of Play★

J. Patrick Williams 2006. Consumption and Authenticity in the Collectible Strategy Games Subculture

Sharon Kinsella 2000. Amateur Manga Subculture and the *Otaku* Incident★

Assignments and projects

1. Portfolio project: *The portfolio project facilitates students' interaction with the theories and concepts being learned in the classroom.*

Over the course of the semester, you will be responsible for collecting and summarizing information about one subculture of your choice. I

will expect you to analyze the information you collect in a sociological manner, but we will practice this throughout the semester so that you should continually improve your analytic skills. During the second week of the semester, I will divide the class into several groups and each group will choose a particular youth subculture to study (e.g. punk, riot grrrl, goth, hardcore, hip-hop, skateboarding, graffiti, gaming). You will negotiate with other students to decide collectively what subculture you will study. Individually, you will be responsible for collecting and analyzing information about your topic as it pertains to theories and concepts being covered in class. To do this, you will first need to identify subcultural objects for analysis. These may include (i) a definition of the subculture you are studying, (ii) a song and/or music lyrics, (iii) a research article (historical, sociological, cultural, etc.), (iv) an Internet discussion forum, (v) an event at a local hangout, bar, or club, (vi) a zine, blog, or other publication, (vii) cartoon, album cover, or other art, (viii) journalistic account of a subcultural event, (viiii) a pop culture item (e.g. clip from television, magazine article), or (x) a video (e.g. YouTube) or documentary. Second, you will need to follow the course outline and use a specific theory or concept (e.g. hegemony, societal response, style, resistance, homology, identity, media, diffusion, class, gender) to analyze each item. By the end of the semester, your portfolio should consist of a minimum of 10 items that deal with your assigned subculture. Plan on collecting one item per week beginning in week 4. During week 3, I will show you some examples to get you started as well as bring in a completed portfolio from a previous student. You should not use the same type of subcultural object more than twice, nor should you use the same theory or concept more than twice. The purpose, as stated above, is to have you collect and analyze the information over time rather than collect everything in a mad rush during the last week. Every other week you will give a 2- to 3-minute summary of your most recent portfolio entry.

2. Group portfolio presentations: *The group presentation requires that students combine many different portfolio entries together and develop a coherent, analytically informed presentation of a specific youth subculture.*

At the end of the semester, your group will give a 15- to 20-minute multimedia presentation of whatever subculture you have been studying by combining the information collected in individual portfolios.

3. Film assignment: *The film assignment facilitates the development of the sociological imagination when consuming popular cultural treatments of youth subcultures. I reserve the university auditorium to give the students a fuller cinematic experience. Use the list of films and videos above and the course outline to decide what to show and when to show it.*

We will watch one film outside of class during the semester, entitled (name of film). In case you are unable to attend the film viewing, you

may rent or buy the film from a number of different sources. Make plans as soon as possible to be available to watch the film. Watching it at home is your prerogative, but watching it with other students will enable you to participate in discussion afterward. After viewing the film, you will write a (x)-page paper addressing specific questions that I will provide before the film begins (as one example, I often show *Quadrophenia* and ask that four specific questions be answered in their papers: (i) What aspects of the actors' lives are informed by CCCS theory? What aspects are informed by Chicago School theories? Link your answers to specific readings or citations when appropriate. (ii) How important is 'conspicuous consumption' for mods in the film? Be sure to give multiple examples of consumption as you answer the question. How does consumption relate to our discussion of style? (iii) In what way is the ending of the film 'magical', in the CCCS sense of the term? (iv) How do the concepts of hegemony, bricolage, or homology play out in the film? Pick one of them to discuss and use a detailed example).

Note

¹ In the sample outline below, I list only the readings I might assign to an upper-level undergraduate course during one semester. See my main article in *Sociology Compass* 1(2) for a much more detailed discussion of articles and chapters that might be used in each section. An asterisk (*) marks readings from Ken Gelder's *The Subcultures Reader* (2nd edn), listed above.

Reference

Leblanc, Lauraine 1998. 'Observing Reel Life: Using Feature Films to Teach Ethnographic Methods.' *Teaching Sociology* 26: 62–68.