

**On Being a Rude Boy in the Classroom:
Critical Pedagogy, Performance and Subcultural Theory**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the intersection of the transition to adulthood and subcultural participation through a retelling of embodied experiences from the perspectives of two men (the authors) with subcultural selves. Relying on performance theory, a writing-story method, critical pedagogy, and a symbolic interactionist conception of subcultural theory, we try to make sense of the second author's past self as a Rude Boy through its telling, while dealing explicitly with the cultural present that shapes it. Issues of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and subcultural affiliation are explicated, as are the contexts within which the tellings took place — an advanced undergraduate seminar on youth cultures and subcultures and the media attention surrounding the second author's graduation. Our goals are to highlight the personal and pedagogical outcomes of dealing academically with one's subcultural past, and to extend a critical micro-analytic approach to subcultural participation that empowers (without creating a hero out of) subcultural participants.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Performativity, Rude Boy, Singapore, Subculture, Symbolic Interaction

Jauhari: When I first entered Patrick's class, I knew right away that I would re-tell the tale of my subcultural past through the portfolio entries that were part of the coursework requirements. But this was more than *just* coursework; in re-telling my subcultural past, I was (re)creating a subcultural experience through a fresh lens. Piecing together the different parts, the line between the past and present was blurred — I was *re-living* my subcultural past, so to speak. Yet, this experience was something new, something different. It all started to make sense: the mockery from the teachers, the psychiatric evaluations, the nights my Rude compatriots and I spent chattering away on how fucked up adults are.

Introduction

Field notes, recollections of old memories, notes taken in class or while reading, discussions in and out of the classroom between teacher and student, reflexive moments in the minds of the authors.... These are the resources from which we piece together a narrative about the reinterpretation of subcultural experiences within the domain of education. We do this by analyzing a semester-long research project on youth subcultures. Patrick was teaching an undergraduate honors seminar in subcultural theory. Jauhari was a student—the only student in fact who self-identified as subcultural. During the semester, students had to collect data from a subculture of their choice and then analyze that data each week using specific perspectives or theories or concepts being discussed in the seminar. Having taught the class many times in the US, Europe, and Singapore over the last ten years, Patrick noticed that the course is different for those who identify as subcultural versus those who don't. For the subcultural kids, it's less about learning something new and more about learning to reinterpret important moments of subjective experience.

That is the point of our presentation today: it's our attempt to show how the classroom figures into the re-interpretation of subjective subcultural experiences. We began with Jauhari's essays on labeling, authenticity and gender and then reconstructed/re-imagined some of the interactions he had during the original writing process. In the dialogue that we will turn to now, Patrick embodies Jauhari's interactional partner, though in truth there were other partners, including many authors in youth culture and subculture studies and his fellow classmates.

Dialogue

Jauhari: In a recent conversation I had with my sister over dinner, I took the opportunity to discuss the topic of youth and adolescent behaviors since she is a teacher at a local secondary school. While my intention was to discuss adolescent

behaviors *in general*, I was surprised at how quickly the conversation turned into a discussion of “problematic” students. Commenting on a group of students who she deemed were “kids involved in the Goth and Black Metal nonsense,” the discussion inevitably meandered to my own experiences as a “problem” youth. I remember being frequently singled-out by my teachers for being “disruptive” and “inattentive” during lessons. In their eyes, I was a deviant because my outwardly disposition—the way I wore my school uniform and the way I spoke—did not manifest what was deemed normal student behavior.

Patrick: Stan Cohen (2002) brings up a very similar point when he says that deviance is neither intrinsic in an act nor a quality in a person. He also says that we should question the labels that powerful individuals in society use to frame certain people and behaviors as problematic. Howie Becker calls these powerful individuals “moral entrepreneurs” (Becker 1963) and teachers are certainly one type. They not only decide what is acceptable in the classroom, they often become the frontline enforcers of those norms. But they don’t act alone. As Cohen points out, there are many different kinds of “socially accredited experts” to support the teacher.

Jauhari: My sister made a comment that captures this process perfectly. She said,

Sister: “Remember the time when you had to attend counseling sessions?”

Me: “Yeah. Almost every other day.”

Sister: “Well, it’s the same for the students [who are involved in the Goth and Black Metal ‘nonsense’]. But you were more extreme! I remember Mama telling me that the Principal referred you to a psychiatrist for evaluation because your studies were okay but your behavior was not.”

I remember the psychiatrist asked me to bring my CD collection to one meeting, saying we could listen and talk about the music. But she just confiscated it all on the grounds that ska music was “dangerous.” I vividly recall her shock upon seeing the title of the first track, *Gangsters*, by The Specials. In retrospect, I realize that the psychiatrist assumed that ska was “dangerous” since she thought that it was not the usual MTV top-20 music that teenagers listened to. She took the song title at face value, assuming that *Gangsters* was a valorization of criminal behavior. I highly suspect that she never actually listened to the song.

Patrick: For me it was my father and not a psychiatrist, but the story is similar. I used his truck one night and accidentally left a Suicidal Tendencies cassette in the tape deck. I’ll always remember his reaction the next morning because it seemed so over-the-top to me.

Father: “Patrick, do you want to kill yourself?”

Me: “No dad. Can I have my cassette back?”

Father: “Then why do you listen to music about people wanting to kill themselves? The first song is called *Suicide’s an Alternative!*”

The whole title was actually *Suicide’s an Alternative/You’ll be Sorry*, but I knew I wouldn’t win a debate over the meaning of “you’ll be sorry.” Besides at that point he showed me that he had already pulled the tape out of the cassette. It hurts to lack the power to properly express your own interpretation of the music you love. In both our stories, the adults’ actions and the assumptions that underlie them highlight the meaning-making process that shapes definitions of deviance and the reactions that follow.

Jauhari: Paradoxically, the experience that I had with the psychiatrist further strengthened my resolve to be more deeply involved in the Rude Boy subculture—I wore the deviant label as a badge of honor to assert my subcultural-ness *vis-à-vis* the mainstream MTV students.

I see now that I wasn’t alone in all this. In fact, the subcultures literature shows how similar things happen all over the world. Ironically, in the course of their moral crusade to “save” me from what they perceived was a harmful path, I ended up feeling “abnormal”—the very opposite effect from what the psychiatric treatments were intended to achieve in the first place.

All this departed greatly from my own understanding of the Rude Boy subculture. I simply wanted to be *different* from the rest of the students. While outsiders equate being “different” with being “abnormal” or “deviant,” to be different as an insider is more about experiencing life outside of the labels imposed by the mainstream. For me, Rude Boy was an authentic, lived experience, not a label.

Patrick: What do you mean by “authentic”?

Jauhari: Back then, I certainly felt that I was authentic. I was different. I was a *Rude Boy* through and through. Never mind what the teachers said, they were a bunch of hypocrites anyway. One week during the course I was invited by a former fellow Rude Boy to a jamming session with a local ska band. I took the opportunity to take some field notes during the session and the late-night supper we had afterwards. What struck me as peculiar was the fact that throughout the jamming session, the lead vocalist Sam¹ kept insisting that the band was not just a ska band, but an indie band as

¹ A pseudonym.

well. When asked what he meant by indie, Sam simply replied, “not mainstream”. Our subsequent discussion revealed the importance of having one’s identity and actions seem as independent from mainstream society. When I pressed him on how the band was indie, we said:

Sam: We create our own songs. We play originals, you know. *He laughs.* I mean [being] original is what ska is all about right? The more original, the more Rude. Oh wait, you are no longer original. *We both break out in laughter.*

Patrick: It reminds me of something that I’ve heard said within the straightedge subculture: “If you’re not now, you never were.” What that means is that claiming to be straightedge is a lifelong commitment. If at any point you break the “rules” of the subculture or quit identifying as a member, then your authenticity is erased from the collective memory. You become labeled as somebody who was always just a poseur rather than as ever having been a “real” participant. This is how the boundary between insider and outsider is maintained. In your case, by saying that “real” Rude Boys are *indie*, Sam proves his own authenticity by calling yours into question.

Jauhari: Sam’s comment on why I am “no longer original” certainly got me thinking about my own subcultural identity. In hindsight, I realize that we Rude Boys see our subcultural identity as something tied up tightly with being Malay, being male, being young, and being disenchanting with the establishment, especially the education system. “Fuck school” was certainly a phrase that was repeated over and over again. Me becoming a university student and a graduate is counter-intuitive to what Sam perceives as an “authentic” Rude Boy. To him, I have not only lost my “originality,” I have even lost my ethnicity. I am a bird of a different feather altogether because I no longer exude that ethnicized masculinity that is integral to being a real Rude Boy.

Patrick: So part of why you are seen as “no longer original” is because you no longer play by the rules. That is ironic, but not surprising. A lot of subculturalists pride themselves on being critical. Not buying into mainstream, hegemonic culture. But the subculture itself fills in the gaps left by the group’s rejection of certain bits of the mainstream culture. Subcultures come to have their own hegemony.

Jauhari: Yes, believing in the totality of the subculture is the problem. One of my Rude Boy compatriots once said to me, “you walk, breathe, eat, shit, sleep ska. Ska is life. To be Rude is to be ska.” The problem with that mentality is that it becomes just as closed as what Rude Boys are supposed to be resisting.

Patrick: There is a classic article in the sociology of deviance in which Becker (1966) argues that we must choose sides when studying and/or teaching matters of structural inequality. Certainly the willingness to choose sides is part of critical pedagogy. To take my course means that students cannot just view subculturalists as deviant or outlandish or crazy. I push them to question deep-seated assumptions and myths that support their opinions and beliefs and to take some responsibility for trying to understand society as the problem for the subculturalist rather than the other way around (McLaren and Kincheloe 2007; Polsky 2005)

But we can go further still. Critical pedagogy can’t rest with taking the side of the subculturalist or with merely criticizing a system that alienates or marginalizes young people. Within the subcultures course I try to provide a healthy dose of scepticism and even criticism about what subculturalists do. I think critical pedagogy demands that we take account of our own actions and reflect on how we may create or support social inequalities rather than just assume that we are heroically fighting “the system.”

Jauhari: I found the need to do this when analyzing my Rude Boy past in terms of gender. For example, my interactions with other Rudies were definitely based on gender norms and stereotypes. The bulk of our group identity was anchored in the idea of Rude Boys first and Rude Girls second. I remember vividly how it was the girls who were the “official” booze shoppers. Hanging out in the wee hours of the morning around the City Hall area, alcohol was part and parcel of group life. Since nearly all of us were under legal age, it was the girls’ task to buy alcohol for the group at the nearest 24-hour convenience store.

Reflecting back, I realize that the gendered interactions were embedded in multi-layered and contradictory meanings. At face value, it was only “natural” that the girls did the shopping; I remember my best friend saying that it was “good training” for them on top of their Home Economics class in school. In one instance, I was chastised for offering to accompany one of the girls to buy alcohol. One of the guys suggested that I should “wear a skirt and panty hose” the following week, much to the delight of the group.

Patrick: Even in so-called “critical spaces” like academia there can be stigma attached to men who associate too closely with women’s work. Think of feminism and the looks men get when they claim to be feminists. So when you look at youth, culture, and the importance of establishing gender and sexual identities, it’s not surprising that you would feel chastened for not conforming to what your friends expected. Men who don’t adhere to masculine codes trade away some of their male privilege. That’s a difficult bargain for any man but especially for young men (Haenfler 2004).

Jauhari: Yea, there was a deeper layer to the gendered division of labor as well. Only later did I come to see how relegating the task of buying alcohol to the girls was pragmatic. We all assumed the store clerks would go easy on the girls should they be caught attempting to buy alcohol under age. But here's the contradiction: despite all our efforts to be masculine, we ironically shirked a task that would otherwise show our masculine bravado. I remember seeing male Skinheads and Punks who hung out in the same vicinity proudly exiting the convenience stores, beers tightly clenched in their fists, wearing proud smiles on their faces as if to say "look, I did it."

Meta-analysis: On meaning and method in subcultural studies

How we theorize about *lived experience* and how we experience *lived experience* are at odds.... We *experience* our lives as personal, emotionally meaningful, narratively knowable and tellable.... In growing numbers...people...tell the stories of their lives and feel the "magic" of shared feelings in a like-feeling community. [Yet] as qualitative researchers...we cannot...write from inside the heads of anyone but ourselves without losing credibility as ethnographers. We can only write "accounts"... [even while knowing] from our own lived experience that life as subjectively experienced is the key to understanding the cultural and the sociological.

[Richardson 1995:194-5, emphasis in original]

We've just tried to express some of the process through which subcultural kids reinterpret subcultural experiences within the context of the classroom. Rather than create a type of assessment of the research assignment or an ethnographic report on Rude Boys, we have embraced our own standpoints, recollections, and personal feelings—things that are often weeded out of academic work.

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