6

Subcultures and Deviance

J. Patrick Williams

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline a genealogy of the concept of subculture. My interest is in the degree of assumed connections between subculture and deviance, as well as with other related social scientific concepts such as marginalization, resistance and lifestyle. What I argue in short is that there has been a diverse set of uses for the term subculture that do not necessarily fit well with one another. Early work by Chicago School sociologists predates the term’s entry into sociology’s standard vocabulary but was nevertheless crucial in developing a cultural understanding of group meanings. Later, Birmingham School cultural studies cemented a Marxist, structuralist view of subcultures that has had perhaps the most influence on scholars researching subcultural studies. At the millennium, a concerted effort was made among some cultural scholars to move on to the study of the so-called post-subcultures. This effort had mixed success, with subculture remaining an oft-used term and with some scholars explicitly maintaining the validity of the subculture concept (see, e.g., Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003).

In all this, subculture’s relation to deviance has been mixed. While deviance was an implicit part of early American subcultural studies, the term has been missing in the British tradition, where continental theories of first class and then postmodernism have taken precedence. Of course, long before any of these academic strands emerged in the social sciences, people were writing about group cultures in terms of deviance and delinquency. Therefore, I begin the genealogy in the mid-16th century to suggest a literary (rather than social science) origin myth for subcultures.

I rely on an interpretive perspective that frames neither subculture nor deviance in terms of “things”, but rather in terms of processes of meaning-making. As the other chapters in this volume similarly make clear, an interpretive approach recognizes that deviance may be seen as a product of collective meaning-making whereby people construct the boundaries of acceptability and then enforce those boundaries in various ways. As such, deviance is a more complicated term than it first appears because defining a case requires understanding the meanings that people attach to the event, action or attribute being judged. Nevertheless, most people assume to know exactly what or who is deviant in a given time or place and have few qualms judging those who transgress moral boundaries.

Culture, on the other hand, is a term that many people have trouble defining. Raymond Williams (1983, p. 87) went so far as to claim that culture “is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”. One of the reasons for this complexity is its use “in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought” (ibid.), as I mentioned earlier. The subculture concept has been well-used to build a sociological understanding of deviance and delinquency. But it has also been employed by other scholars for other things, which has led to quite distinct traditions and uses of the term. My task then, as I see it, is to describe some of these different traditions of subculture scholarship and then offer some tentative answers to the question of whether subculture and deviance can or will remain useful to one another in social theory.

Subculture’s literary beginnings

Deviant subcultures were visible beginning in the mid-16th century via a new genre called rogue literature. This is not the standard origin myth for subcultures but is nevertheless significant, not least because it pushes the roots of subcultures back a few hundred years. Most research on subcultures frames 20th-century consumer society as the social milieu from which subcultures emerged. Yet as literary scholars and historians have demonstrated, early modern societies such as England manifested a clearly stratified social hierarchy with coinciding class-based culture. Thus another reason the idea of a roguesh beginning to subcultures is important has to do with the specificities of cultural difference. The rogue literature manufactured an imaginary criminal underworld for London’s growing metropolis, displacing dominant
notions of social hierarchy and order onto the growing populations of homeless" (Dionne and Mentz, 2004, p. 7). The rogue, a common and well-understood identity by today's standards, was created at that time as a foil for the upstanding citizens of both rural and urban England. From Gilbert Walker's *A Manifest Detection of Dice-Play* (1552) to John Aweley's *The Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1561) to Robert Greene's pamphlet series (1591a, 1591b, 1592a, 1592b) on cozening and coney-catching and beyond, rogues were manifested in a way similar to Simmel's (1921) "stranger" - members of society who were understood foremost in terms of their difference from normal society. However, whereas Simmel's stranger remained a dark silhouette against a bright background, the image of the rogue as a cultural icon was characterized in great detail.

The rogue comprised a number of different social lifestyles and roles, including card sharpers, pimps and prostitutes, cutpurses and other thieves and cheats. Stories ranged from cautionary tales of well-intentioned farmers visiting the city who were enticed by pretty girls into situations where modesty was compromised and only money paid to the girls' "brothers" and "uncles" could save his honor, to drunken gentlemen placing too much trust in strangers in the tavern, only to be robbed or murdered in dark alleys on their way home. Such diverse roles coalesced around their collective and cultural differences from those invited to read the pamphlets: "gentlemen, citizens, apprentices, country farmers and yeomen, that may hap to fall into the company of such coozening companions" (Greene, 1591a, p. 1). The tales were a mixture of fantastic crime novel and citizen education campaigns, using the rogue to simultaneously entertain and educate England's growing, literate, respectable classes about the devious methods through which the poor allegedly made their living. Through a steady supply of such stories across the second half of the 16th century, the rogue literature was the first to construct a relatively coherent vision of the cultural worlds of England's landless poor. This coherence of various character types as rogues was predicated on a narrow emphasis on deviant behavior and criminality. As Gelder (2007) notes, the historical record is replete with stories of criminals, slackers and others whose behaviors (or lack thereof) set them apart from respectable society, but it was

Elizabethan English literature that discursively constructed such characters in cultural terms, including their landlessness in a society where one's connection to land was a primary identifier; the development of argots and secret languages to hide the meaning of their talk from outsiders and the fraternities and communities they seemed inclined to subscribe to (ibid.).

In the 19th century, chronicling the cultural distinctiveness of England's urban poor was still seen as prototypical of subcultural scholarship. Several scholars have pointed to Henry Mayhew as the man responsible for bringing "a particular kind of social perspective, a 'sociological gaze', which [began] to emerge in the 1830s and 1840s" (Tolson, 1990, p. 114) to bear on the lived culture of London's working-class poor (see also Hebdige, 1988, pp. 19–22; Thompson and Yeo, 1973). Mayhew was a newspaper journalist who published a series of character profiles on representatives of various working-class cultures in the London paper *Morning Chronicle*, in 1849–1850 (subsequently published in 1851–1852 as *London Labour and the London Poor*). Like the rogue pamphlets, Mayhew's work was literary in scope – he earned his living by telling stories of interest to the literate classes. Yet unlike the rogue literature, which some have argued was based more on fiction than fact (see Dionne, 2004; Woodbridge, 2001), Mayhew engaged in what today would be called field work, moving through the streets of London observing the behaviors of those his society saw as deviant and collecting their stories through interview-like conversations with them. His work again brought to life groups of citizens who were more or less treated as subhuman by England's landed classes in everyday life. Andrew Tolson (1990, p. 114) argued that Mayhew's work, while liberal and reformist in nature, opened up "a range of approaches to the classification, supervision and policing of [these] urban populations."

Urban gangs and deviance

The range of approaches, methodologically and theoretically speaking, through which academics and social reformers might come to understand the inequalities and cultural diversity of urban environments became a shared focus among sociologists at the University of Chicago, who systematically studied the social dimensions of urban life in the early 20th century. Sociology at the University of Chicago meant the sociological study of Chicago itself. The city had emerged over the previous half-century from a small town of approximately 10,000 inhabitants in
1860 to more than 2,000,000 in 1910 and thus offered a useful setting for the development of empirically based urban research. A key player in the so-called Chicago School of sociology was Robert Park (1925, p. 26), who wrote that the rapid improvements in modes of transportation and communication had changed the social organization of modern cities such “that all sorts of people meet and mingle together who never fully comprehend one another”. For Park, such a lack of comprehension was dysfunctional, leading to a breakdown in social cohesion and hence to the coherence of smaller group culture rather than a homogenous urban culture.

Park, who had worked for years as a journalist, encouraged his students to leave the classroom and explore the city in order to “seek rich personal experience with the topics of their interest; to get inside the subject and even live it as far as possible” (Faris, 1967, p. 30). The development of urban ethnographic research became a key dimension of Chicago sociology and led to graduate students such as Paul G. Cressey, Frederic Thrasher and later William Foote Whyte and Howard Becker (among others) undertaking detailed empirical studies of urban subcultures. The hallmark of their subcultural work was an emphasis on deviant collective behavior. Numerous studies had found that most patterns of criminal behavior were acquired during the “youthful days” of criminals’ lives, and research into the origins of juvenile delinquency and deviance appeared to be of strategic importance for explaining social dysfunctions. Therefore, significant effort was put into the empirical study of deviance, not least because sociologists were convinced that the roots of deviant behavior were to be found in social phenomena rather than in biological or psychological profiles of delinquents, which was the common practice among physicians, psychologists and correctional officers. Frederic Thrasher’s (1927) study of 1,313 youth gangs in Chicago is one example of earlier sociological work on deviant subcultures and his goal was to map out the social processes that underlay gang behaviors. He noted that gangs originally formed through casual interaction but were subsequently integrated through conflict, presumably with people in other areas of the city. Thrasher characterized gangs in terms of routinized behaviors including “meeting face to face, milling, moving through space as a unit, conflict, and planning”, the results of which were “the development of tradition...esprit de corps, solidarity, morale...and attachment to a local territory” (Thrasher, cited in Faris, 1967, p. 73). Thrasher’s findings were explicit: gangs were not formed by psychological abnormality, but rather by sociability and a shared sense of adventure and excitement. These ideas were elaborated in case studies of delinquents as well. In The Jack-Roller, for example, Clifford Shaw (1930) noted that

the human being as a member of a social group is a specimen of it, not primarily, if at all, because of his physique and temperament but by reason of his participation in its purposes and activities. Through communication and interaction the person acquires the language, tradition, standards, and practices of his group. Therefore, the relation of the person to his group is organic and hence representative upon a cultural rather than upon a biological level. (p. 186)

Shaw used a narrative case study approach, but many performed ethnographic research into deviant lifestyles among the marginalized urban poor. Paul Cressy’s (1932) The Taxi-Dance Hall studied the social worlds of private clubs, popular in many large American cities of the day, where women were employed to dance with men. A young woman who worked as a “taxi-dancer” was so named because, “like a taxi-driver with his cab, she is for public hire and is paid in proportion to the time spent and the services rendered” (p. 3). One of Cressy’s concerns was how young women regressed through a taxi-dancing career, from dancing to some eventual form of prostitution before returning to “normal” society. Dancers tended to come from eastern European immigrant families, who clustered together in Chicago’s ethnic neighborhoods and whose career choices were relatively limited to things like rolling cigars or providing menial office labor. Taxi-dancing offered a temporary respite to young immigrant women’s dissatisfactions with their lives in home and neighborhood. Rather than surrender to immediate prospects of dead-end jobs or marriage, these women chose an alternative means of securing satisfaction in their everyday lives that was grounded in the desire for the excitement of the dance hall and the increased prestige that accompanied a job earning much more money than their mainstream peers.

These early studies tended to ignore the socially constructed nature of deviance, or at least they lacked an explicit emphasis on problematizing the relationship between such groups and normal society. Instead, the emphasis was on the function or dysfunction of culture and social action for solving the problems of modern life. One of the major functionalist theories of culture to emerge during this time was strain theory, which postulated that a society’s structure provided both cultural goals – aspirations that society’s members share – and institutionalized means of achieving those goals and that a society in perfect equilibrium would provide everyone with goals as well as the means to achieve them.
The problem was that modern societies were not in equilibrium and their social structures provided unequal access to the institutionalized means of achieving cultural goals. Disjunction between cultural goals and the ability to achieve those goals arose for some groups, which would seek alternative means to achieve those goals. For example, working-class youths who were socialized via mainstream culture to recognize the value and prestige associated with driving a new car, and yet could not foresee themselves having legitimate opportunities to own one by conforming to traditional roles (i.e., get a good job, work hard) were likely to engage in deviant behaviors that would enable them to satisfy the cultural goal, such as auto theft. In short, the psychological strain some people feel at being unable to achieve mainstream cultural goals forced them to engage in deviant behavior.

Merton’s theory of culture and deviance became crucial to many sociological studies during the 1940s. While Merton believed that marginalized groups would seek ways of overcoming strain in order to fit into the larger society, his student Albert Cohen argued instead for a more subcultural understanding of deviant behavior. In particular, Cohen emphasized a link between strain and a person’s frame of reference. According to Cohen (1955, p. 59), a subculture’s emergence required “the existence, in effective interaction with one another, of a number of actors with similar problems of adjustment.” From this perspective, the frustration some people experienced when they felt pressure to conform to dominant culture led to a reaction formation whereby they inverted sets of values and norms to legitimize alternative lines of action. Rather than struggle to meet society’s cultural goals, subcultures emerged that legitimated not achieving them. As Gibbons (1970) noted, this line of work on delinquent subcultures indicated that most lawbreakers...were members of gangs and peer association in which delinquent conduct was defined positively, young boys were inducted into lawbreaking by older youths, and juveniles were taught the skills of delinquency in much the same way that youths in socially-favored circumstances learn to become boy scouts or “good boys” of some other brand. (p. 113)

Cohen’s study renewed the vigor with which sociologists and criminologists investigated the relationship between subculture and delinquency. However, much of that work tacitly operated from the point of view that delinquency was an objectively real category. The reification of deviance and delinquency has continued with mainstream criminology and criminal justice studies, though more explicitly constructionist and critical traditions such as cultural criminology (Ferrell, 1999) have emerged to ensure the continuing debate about the role of culture in deviance studies.

Post-war consumerism and resistance

While the American tradition of subculture studies has typically been pegged to criminology, things were different elsewhere. The field of cultural studies emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, in large part thanks to the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. There, scholars from the social sciences and humanities had joined together to study various aspects of culture and society. Their first collective work, *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), represented a highly Marxist and structuralist “reading” of working-class youth culture that differed drastically from the American ethnographic tradition. The most significant differences were the rejection of the concept of deviance and the methods of field research in favor of the concept of resistance and the methods of semiotics.

The CCCS took its interest in resistance from Gramsci (1971), who is best known for his reworking of Marx’s theory of conflict through the concept of cultural hegemony. At its simplest, hegemony is the idea that the ruling class in any society seeks to maintain its power by gaining the consent of subjugated classes through cultural means. The quest for control, however, is never complete and those subjugated are always finding ways to resist the machinations of the more powerful. Althusser (1970) drew from, but extended, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, arguing for a more ideological conceptualization that explained how hegemony worked its way into people’s very conceptions of self, rather than limiting the theory to the realm of politics. He argued that it was hardly possible for people not to be socialized to accept power as a natural, commonsense structure that shaped their everyday lives because the most basic institutions in society – family, religion, education, work – functioned as sites of power and control. These institutions he called *ideological state apparatuses* and they offered insight into the structures responsible for socializing individuals.

Following Althusser, CCCS scholars sought to explain the emergence of youth subcultures in post-war Britain (not all subcultures across time and space). Accordingly, they believed that British subcultures represented working-class youths’ struggles for identity and collective consciousness.
in the face of conflicting cultural messages: one from their parents' working-class culture and another propagated by bourgeois culture. While Britain is known historically for caring a lot about class affiliation, the post-war national economy shifted in a way that simultaneously worked to destroy traditional working-class cultural forms and open up new opportunities for class mobility (Cohen, 1997 [1972]). The expansion of working-class jobs to rebuild the country, the restructuring of the urban landscape to deal with population growth and the ability of new media technologies such as television and vinyl records to disseminate popular youth culture all came together to create a conjuncture within which, according to the CCCS, consumption-based youth subcultures emerged.

Subcultures were not understood in terms of psychological strain or deviance, but rather as forms of collective, class-based resistance to cultural hegemony. Young people were torn between the threat of the destruction of their working-class heritage, on the one hand, and the allure of a middle-class consumer lifestyle, on the other, and reacted to this ideological strain by producing new styles that represented their liminal cultural positions. The teddy boy's Edwardian suit, the skinhead's shaved head and boots, the mod's pills and scooters — each became a homological icon of the tension between consumption and the ability of marginal groups to resist mainstream culture by rewriting the meaning of cultural symbols. Their resistance was conceptualized as economically impotent because it failed to improve their marginal positions in society. Symbolically though their resistance impacted dominant cultural institutions, which had to work actively to dismiss, marginalize or appropriate the resistant meanings (Clarke, 1976).

The emphasis on consumption and resistance represented a major methodological difference between the American and British traditions of subcultural studies. Instead of an ethnographic approach, CCCS studies were primarily grounded in semiotic analyses. The semiotician's job was to unpack the taken-for-granted meanings that were attributed to subcultural objects and practices. This unpacking required the semiotician to interrogate how taken-for-granted meanings were created, distributed and consumed. What CCCS scholars seemed to find, everywhere they looked, was that subcultures appropriated and inverted cultural meanings, often through the consumption of clothing, music and other leisure commodities. From this perspective, all meaning was ideology-laden and subcultural youths themselves did not always understand what their objects and practices "really" meant. Only the trained semiotician could see the ideological dimension of subcultural style.

Thus, in reading CCCS scholarship from the 1970s, one finds very little in the way of insight into the meaning-making processes of subculturalists themselves. Research, which was more of a humanities-style undertaking than social-scientific, was driven by a preoccupation with theories of class and by a seemingly willful ignorance of how youths made sense of their own experiences (see, e.g., Hebdige, 1979). Ironically, it has nevertheless come into its own hegemonic position within subculture studies, with new (especially British) generations of scholars constantly invoking the CCCS's origin myth.

Post-subcultural lifestyles

To paraphrase Gramsci, hegemony highlights that power is never a done deal. And though the cultural studies tradition has flourished since the 1970s, the CCCS's over-emphasis on the white male working-class subcultural hero and the methods used to theorize his identity and value have come under sustained criticism (e.g., McRobbie, 1980; Muggleton, 2000; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995; Williams, 2011). That critique was embodied in the early 1990s by club-cultures research, the goal of which was "to continue the...traditions of 1960s and 1970s CCCS, but in the very different theoretical and political environment of the 1990s" (Redhead, 1997a, p. 2).

Club-cultures research emerged in part because of the belief among some cultural scholars that acid house and rave music forms, which gained so much popularity among youths in the 1990s, facilitated the rebuilding of subcultural sensibilities within a distinctly more troubling political-economic era. Ravers and other types of club-music fans flocked to the safety of the club and the all-night party, much as Hecloigne's (1976) mod had a generation before. However, this new generation of youths was much less coherent in its alleged affiliations with class and style. In Redhead's view (1997b), the 1990s were better characterized through the lens of postmodernism — through pastiche, playfulness and irony. Many other scholars were quick to agree that the coherence, seriousness and ultimate impotence of the CCCS's subcultures were not adequate to describe the diverse array of alternative youth cultures of the 1990s. Redhead's (1993) prior work in dance culture had gone a long way in establishing not only the significance of music in what was called a post-CCCS perspective, but also in breaking down the assumed relationship between music preference, style and subcultural affiliation. Subcultural style was no longer understood as a representation of ideological strain among working-class youths. The styles of punk, mod,
skinhead and hippy, all of which could be found mixed together in rave clubs and parties, signaled “entirely new ways of understanding how young people perceive the relationship between music taste and visual style...revealing the infinitely malleable and interchangeable nature of the latter as these are appropriated and realized by individuals as aspects of consumer choice” (Bennett, 1999, p. 613). Club cultures represented a new era of youth hedonism, academically framed in a way that celebrated agency and affirmation rather than impotence.

The shift from subcultures to club cultures signifies an emerging alignment of youth studies with a post-CCCS sensibility that did not assume to speak on behalf of absent subcultural members, that treated subcultures as something more than a series of successive moments of “spectacular” resistance and that looked beyond an over-simplified us-versus-them portrayal of subcultures as “externally differentiated, yet internally homogeneous collectivities, existing in clear opposition to each other and to conventional [culture]” (Muggleton, 1997, p. 192). Sarah Thornton's book Club Cultures (1996) is a key study of the 1990s because it brought back key texts from the American tradition of deviance scholarship such as Becker's Outsiders (1963) and merged them with a more British version of subculture. Her study was the result of years of participation in and observation of clubbing activities, beginning as an outsider and ending as a more mature but knowledgeable insider, and she was concerned with understanding youth culture from an insider's perspective. Thus rather than characterize clubbers in terms of deviance, Thornton highlighted more emotional concerns such as the quests for authenticity and status. Such a perspective allowed the researcher to explore the functional, participatory and lived aspects of young people's material and non-material cultures in ways that outsiders would find more difficult. There was a conscious movement beyond simplified divisions between middle-class and working-class, high-brow and low-brow cultures, as well as reconsiderations of the role of media vis-a-vis as tools of the powerful for controlling problem youths.

Since the late 1990s, a number of British scholars have staked claims to one or another concept that attempts to better characterize youth cultural formations, just as American sociologists had done in previous decades. David Muggleton (1997) offered a vision of the “post-subculturalist” in his contribution to Redhead's (1997a) reader. Drawing heavily from postmodern theory, Muggleton's post-subculturalist wore style for its look alone rather than for any underlying meaning and revealed in the availability of cultural choices afforded by the decades of cross-fertilization and collapsing boundaries among youth subcultures after punk. Muggleton's work was followed by that of Andy Bennett, who introduced the concept of “neo-tribe” into youth subculture studies. Relegating subculture to “little more than a convenient ‘catch-all’ term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect”, Bennett (1999, pp. 599, 600) argued that youth “groupings which have traditionally been theorized as coherent subcultures are better understood as a series of temporal gathering characterized by fluid boundaries and floating memberships”. Like post-subculture, neo-tribe emphasized a general decline in the willingness of many young people to commit to a subcultural identity, preferring instead a more playful approach to youth cultural lifestyles. These ideas collectively moved beyond bifurcated conceptions of youth culture as either mainstream of heroically resistant and embodied a desire to theorize youths' cultural proclivities in less monolithic terms. To do this, its authors sought to reduce subculture to an outdated macro-oriented concept, too rooted in theories of class or deviance to fit alongside millennial conceptions of youth.

The deaths of deviance and subculture?

In the 21st century, cultural scholars have continued to weigh in on the relevance of “subculture” as a sociological concept. This has sometimes taken the form of re-summarizing criticisms of the concept as it was used by the CCCS (e.g., Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003) and other times by defending its continued relevance to social life while striving to refine its analytic utility (e.g., Blackman, 2005; Gelder, 2007; Williams, 2011). Beyond this, there are several academic fields within which subculture continues to be used analytically. In criminology, subculture is used often to refer to the transgressive values, styles and behaviors of delinquents, usually with an emphasis on class, race or gender (e.g., Hamm, 2004; Holt, 2007; Martin, 2009). Such work comes out of the American tradition of deviance and delinquency studies noted earlier. In cultural sociology, scholars such as Gary Fine have used subculture as an explanatory concept in the study of small groups (e.g., Fine, 1983, 2012; Fine and Kleinman, 1979). This work shares with criminology theoretical roots in early Chicago School studies of delinquent groups. However, in cultural sociology the subculture concept has broader analytical function by virtue of its emphasis on the universal creation of culture among interacting groups rather than a focus on non-normative values, beliefs or behaviors. Indeed, research on local activities and groupings that involve music, and that would have
previously invoked the concept of subculture, has gravitated toward the more useful concept of scene (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Kotarba et al., 2009), thus addressing Bennett's (1999) concern for “fluid boundaries and floating memberships”. There has also been continued use of subculture within the sociology of sports, particularly in terms of how sports may invoke subculturally relevant processes such as identity, consumption and resistance (e.g., Atkinson and Young, 2008; Donnelly and Young, 1988; Wheaton, 2000).

With the exception perhaps of the field of criminology, little of this literature uses the term “deviance” explicitly. I suggest three reasons for this. First, the social constructionist paradigm that arose in the second half of the 20th century called into question earlier studies that took deviance for granted as a universal function in society. Deviance is now recognized by most sociologists as a process or condition organized in the service of power. As such, there are few assumptions among researchers about the relative good or bad of the cultures being studied and therefore it is rarely assumed that certain cultures are or are not deviant. Even criminology has been impacted by the linguistic and cultural turns and is today a field where deviance is a contested terrain.

Second, the theoretical significance of the CCCS on subculture studies cannot be underestimated. A look at the social science literature on subcultures today reveals how many scholars derive their own conceptual frames from CCCS scholarship. And because the CCCS explicitly rejected a deviance approach to the study of working-class youth culture, many studies no longer rely on that older literature for insight. This has its own set of benefits and problems. On the problems side, the CCCS version of subculture is hegemonic in that few scholars seem willing to leave it alone. Flippant references to Resistance through Rituals (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) and Subculture: The Meaning of Style (Hebdige, 1979) are often used to justify the use of “subculture” without sufficient understanding of the theoretical and methodological baggage involved.

On the benefits side, there has been more research that takes an insider’s view of subcultural participation seriously, with the result that things once considered deviant are now being theorized as resistant or even heroic instead.

Third, much of the contemporary literature has shifted focus either toward the subcultures of marginalized or non-normative groups. The research on marginal cultures tends to rely on political-economic discourses where deviance is a tangential concept. And for those studies that frame subcultures in terms of non-normativity, concepts like resistance are preferred since the emphasis is more likely to be on insiders, who rarely use a term like “deviant” except as a badge of honor.

This shift toward insider research is perhaps the single most significant development in the field of subculture studies in the 21st century. As more individuals—who themselves participated in youth subcultures and were likely labeled as deviant by their parents, peers and other subscribers to mainstream culture—engage in the academic study of subculture, the story of the significance of subculture as a meaningful dimension of everyday life is retold time and again. This is consequential for subcultural theory, as W. I. Thomas (1928, p. 572) noted more than 80 years ago when he wrote that “if [people] define situations as real they are real in their consequences”. To the extent that being “subcultural” is positively meaningful to people, while being “deviant” is not, deviance and subculture will continue to drift apart.

References


The Death and Resurrection of Deviance
Current Ideas and Research

Edited by
Michael Dellwing
Kassel University, Germany
Joseph A. Kotarba
Texas State University, USA
Nathan W. Pino
Texas State University, USA

Critical Criminological Perspectives
Series Standing Order ISBN 9780230360457 hardback
(outside North America only)
You can receive future titles in this series as they are published by placing a standing order. Please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address, the title of the series and the ISBN quoted above.
Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS, England