

PARENT AND YOUTH CULTURES: Alternative Views

A critique of the work of Cohen, Cloward  
and Ohlin, Sykes and Matza

by

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Parent cultures and Youth cultures - Alternative Views

- the work of Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, Sykes and Matza

The Problem of Definition - this concerns the definition of the term culture and its derivative, - sub-culture and the relationship between them both.

Like all concepts in Sociology those of Culture and Sub-culture have been used in various ways and where explicitly defined their meanings have been numerous. The distinction between what is meant by culture and sub-culture is therefore the major problem.

The most extensive examination of the concept of culture has been made by Kroeber Alfred Louis, and Kluckhohn Clyde: (Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions, Camb. Mass 1952). They showed the extent of the term's use by surveying its definitions under the following headings - descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural, genetic. They found 164 definitions not counting the various statements about culture that number into thousands.

Any vagueness over the definition of the boundaries of culture will automatically extend to the term sub-culture. The so called Sub-cultural theorists of the late 1950s early 1960s produced a great deal of ambiguity in their treatment of these terms.

A.K. COHEN. Delinquent Boys: the Culture of the Gang 1955.

The first extensive use of the term sub-culture was by Albert Cohen in his book Delinquent Boys. His outline of what constitutes a sub-culture is not of a definitive nature since he regarded the task of defining culture and sub-culture as given. The novelty of applying the term sub-culture obscured the difficulties in using the concept at all. These difficulties are inherent in the use of the term sub-culture and do not refer just to Cohen's particular use of the term. The major source of confusion has been the application of sub-culture to a wide variety of phenomena including social class, neighbourhood or ecological area, and of course to the delinquent gang. To be more precise - the differences and similarities between the sub-culture of the delinquent gang and the wider social setting of racial group, neighbourhood or class faction have not been clearly delineated.

For Cohen sub-cultures are 'cultures within cultures' and would seem to have certain key components.

1. Distinctiveness - a distinctive way of life, possessing knowledge, beliefs, values, codes, tastes and prejudices of its own.

2. These are learned or acquired by interaction with those who already share and embody in their belief and action the culture pattern (i.e. the sub-culture).

3. It is also a traditional/historical pattern - the concept of sub-culture being applied to 'a way of life that has somehow become traditional among ... the boy's gangs that flourish in the delinquency neighbourhoods' of the cities. (p.13).

Cohen (& Cloward and Ohlin) sees the gang or sub-culture and the lower class not as isolated traditions but in relation to the middle-class or dominant culture. Cohen illustrates the status dimension of class position in society - the strains induced upon the lower class boy crystallise as problems of status. Cohen argues that in industrial societies status competition is settled by reference to objective criteria, such as educational advancement. However the W/C pupil finds himself in a school where he is judged by the M/C standards of self-reliance, good manners, deferred gratification, respect for property etc. His own working class values make him ill-equipped for competition in this situation; yet he has to some extent internalised the M/C norms of success. This dilemma is solved by joining with other status-troubled adolescents to form a delinquent gang in which status is solved with reference to more easily satisfied criteria. In a process of 'reaction formation' they invert M/C values and form a culture which is 'malicious, short term hedonistic, non-utilitarian and negativistic'. It relishes in vandalism, property destruction and hostility towards non-group peers, including adults.

#### Motivational Career in Cohen's theory

The links in Cohen's theory are then, internalisation of M/C standards → status failure at school → guilt and shame → reaction formation → context of delinquent sub-culture.

#### 2 Problems with Cohen's theory

1. 'How extensively have W/C adolescents internalised M/C cultural standards?'

Marton appears to assume that such internalisation has extended to include the whole population. Cohen retreats from this extreme position but makes a crucial error. To account for those boys who have made it to the M/C he makes a distinction between college boys who have benefitted from W/C parents who have attempted to instil M/C cultural standards and street corner boys who have not enjoyed such socialisation. The difficulty with this formulation is that it is the college boys who are vulnerable to the status problems that accompany failure to secure M/C success - yet it is the street corner boys who Cohen perceives as forming delinquent gangs. He is only able to explain the motivation of ex-college boys to delinquency. Insufficient attention is paid to the possibility that some adolescents resent the insults regarding their status whilst still denying the social and moral worthiness of the source of these insults (i.e. the M/C institutions - school etc.).

2. Cohen's theory, by characterising the delinquent sub-culture merely as the negation of M/C culture, fails to point to its close relationship with adult W/C culture. There is a great deal of difference between a culture which is normative in its own right and antagonistic to the M/C and one which is mere inversion of the culture it opposes. Rather, it should be seen as an accentuation of adult W/C culture (Miller, 1958).

CLOWARD, R.A. and OHLIN, L.E. Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs. 1960. Glencoe III, Free Press

Like Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin see the delinquent sub-culture in relation to the M/C or dominant culture. Cloward and Ohlin see the lower class boy as facing a problem of alienation (similar to Marton's Aromie concept) and they concentrate on the economic dimension of class. This problem comes about by differential opportunity. Cloward and Ohlin's

description of delinquent activity is different to Cohen's - it is mostly activity with a definite aim, the gain of wealth by illegitimate means. Further, they explain the sub-culture (following Marton) as a reaction to the blockage of opportunities to reach success, the goal of high income - and the resulting adoption of illegitimate means to achieve this goal. Delinquency is not a reaction to M/C standards but a "withdrawal of legitimacy from them." But like Cohen, they picture the sub-culture as existing in the form of a gang and regard membership as making certain kinds of delinquency mandatory.

Cloward and Ohlin also make an attempt to differentiate between different parts of lower class (see Cohen p.94) according to ethnic and neighbourhood background. They suggest that there are three types of illegitimate means. The ability to indulge in each depends upon local opportunity structures.

Firstly, the criminal sub-culture - this is to be found in stable W/C areas where youthful delinquency can be integrated with adult 'rackets' (organised crime). Where these opportunities do not exist, such as 'disorganised areas' (to use their term derived from the Chicago School in 1930s) of new immigration, there is a conflict sub-culture with emphasis on the delinquent winning by coercion the attention he lacks - 'rep' turf etc are valued. The third sub-culture caters for those boys who are double failures who neither have criminal opportunities or the possibility of gaining status in a conflict group - he retreats to a retreatial sub-culture of drugtaking.

Cloward and Ohlin's approach faces similar problems to Cohen's.

1. Again, there is the problem of internalisation - to what extent do W/C boys expect opportunities for advancement to the M/C? How far does the expectation vary through the class? For instance is it more predominant in the respectable or stable W/C. (N.B. Downes - W/C youths have a very limited horizon of expectation for advancement and aren't particularly bothered in getting - they dissociate from M/C values rather than oppose them because they are not let down by failure). Cloward and Ohlin state, "delinquents tend to be persons who have been led to expect opportunities because of their potential ability to meet the formal institutionally established criteria of evaluation and have not had these expectations realised" (p.117). It would seem that the stable working class boy is more subject to high expectations being shattered rather than the boy from the disorganised slum where (according to Cloward and Ohlin) there is a lack of relevant adult models to emulate - the slum is not just disorganised there appears to be a moral vacuum lying outside the penetration of the M/C consensus.

Cloward and Ohlin have a consensual view of society (derived from Marton). Working class adolescents are seen in relation to the dominant M/C standards. The differences within the W/C and parent-youth generational relations are not given sufficient attention. Finally Cloward and Ohlin's abstract or hypothetical sub-cultural types are difficult to empirically demonstrate.

Walter MILLER. Lower class culture as a generating milieu of gang delinquency, J. of Social Issues, 14 (1959) 5-19.

The work of Walter Miller is essentially a critique of the delinquent sub-culture concept. (Bordus, D. Delinquent Sub-cultures: Sociological Interpretations of Gang Delinquency, Annals. Vol. 338 Nov. 1961). Miller sees delinquency as a variant of traditional lower class behaviour. The delinquent gang is, he claims, not a legitimate

unit of study per se. Miller's theory is simply that lower class group delinquency, far from representing participation in delinquent counter-culture is the direct intensified expression of the dominant culture pattern of the lower class community 'a long established, distinctly patterned tradition with an integrity of its own.'

His work is based on exhaustive studies of lower-class life and gangs in Boston. Miller says that lower class culture crystallises around six focal concerns (rather than values).

Chart of Focal Concerns of Lower Class Culture

Perceived Alternatives (state quality, condition)

<u>Area</u> (1) <u>Trouble</u> : law abiding behaviour	law-violating behaviour
(2) <u>Toughness</u> : physical prowess, skill, 'masculinity', fearlessness etc.	weakness, effeminacy, timidity, ineptitude, cowardice, caution
(3) <u>Smartness</u> : ability to outsmart, making money by wits, shrewdness, adriotness in repartee	gullibility, making money by hard work, dull-wittedness, verbal maladroitness, slowness
(4) <u>Excitement</u> : thrill, danger, risk change, activity	boredom, 'deadness', safeness, sameness, passivity
(5) <u>Fate</u> : being 'lucky', favoured by 'fortune'	ill-omened, being 'unlucky'
(6) <u>Autonomy</u> : independence, freedom external restraint, esp. Superordinate authority	dependency, 'being cared for', presence of external constraint and strong authority.

These concerns lead the adolescent into a head on clash with larger society, whose legal code is underwritten by middle-class values. (In addition even where law abiding routes are available, he frequently takes the short cut illegal route to an objective simply because of the more immediate return and relatively smaller investment of energy).

Miller suggests that gang activity, is in part a striving to prove masculinity in a culture characterised by the female-based household whose main trait is a lack of reliance on the occupational performance of an adult male. The degree to which the street group engage in delinquent behaviour varies according to two additional focal concerns "belonging" and "status" - the latter especially is a striving for masculinity and "adulthood". The description of the lower class style of life 'written in its own terms' is the main virtue of Miller's position.

## Criticism

1. Miller tends to view the lower class too 'holistically' in both cultural and structural terms. Their way of life is somehow sealed from the impact of crucial M/C dominated institutions, (e.g. school, police etc.).

2. W/C Stratification. While Cohen recognised the intra-variability of W/C culture he did not go into detail about such differences. Cloward and Ohlin concentrated on the slum milieu and perhaps the lower sections of the 'stable' working class in metropolitan areas. (Cohen's work is more applicable to respectable W/C kids of school age in metropolitan and W/C communities in smaller population centres. Cloward and Ohlin's theory is more applicable to school leaving age and late adolescent delinquents in metropolitan slum areas). Although Miller tends to generalise the impact of lower-class culture to 40-60% of Americans, he really concentrates his theory upon the lower-lower-class. Thus all these writers recognise some intra W/C differences but we are still left with rather a simplified, abstract view of the W/C.

### Sykes and Matza

- Matza, D. (1961), "Subterranean Traditions of Youth" *Annals* Vol. 338, 102-118
- Sykes, G. & Matza, D. (1961) "Juv. Del. & Sub Values" *A.S.R.* 22 pp.712-9
- Matza, D. (1964), Delinquency & Drift N.Y.: Wiley
- Matza, D. (1969), Becoming Deviant N.Y. Prentice Hall
- Weis, J.G (1971), "Dialogue with David Matza" *Iss. in Crim.* 6 (1) Winter pp.33-53

Matza (and Sykes) sets out to criticise sub-cultural theory. His main concern is to emphasise the similarity between delinquents and the dominant society. He believes that the delinquent sub-culture is not merely an oppositional lower-class phenomenon. The existence of sub-cultures that require its members to commit crimes explains too much delinquency according to Matza. In fact delinquents commit only episodic crimes - they occasionally drift into them. The theory is that delinquency occurs because adolescents are in a state of suspension between childhood and adulthood - they are in a gap in the social and cultural structure where normal controls are loosened. They have anxieties about their identity as males and acceptance within the group (status) (here similar to Miller).

Sykes and Matza re-integrate the delinquent into society by a novel use of Veblen's theory of the leisure class. While the dominant order is largely governed by a work ethic it also has a subterranean value system - that of the leisure ethic. These writers say that the delinquent has values similar to Veblen's leisure class - the gentlemen of leisure. Delinquents are said to seek excitement, thrills, contempt for occupational advancement, and aggressive and verbal and physical assaults.

The claim is being made that the delinquent is not oppositional to the dominant order (as allegedly pictured in sub-cultural theory). 'The quality of the values is obscured by their context'. Thus the values in forming delinquency are similar to those in the wider society but are misplaced - the delinquent suffers from bad timing. The middle-class get their kicks through gambling and nightclubbing - the delinquents get their kicks through gang fights and theft etc.

## Problems

1. Are the values of delinquency the same as the 'subterranean values of leisure'? The means of the M/C employed to achieve certain valued goals and the goals themselves, cannot be separated as simply as Sykes and Matza do. In other words the values are not the same because they are expressed in a very different manner and context.

2. It can be argued that delinquents are oppositional in that the means employed to gain the valued goals are socially disapproved of and are heavily sanctioned against.

3. Further, the participation in leisure values is not simply a subterranean - a part-time indulgent spin off or alternative to the dominant work ethic, taking place at week-ends or holidays by the M/C and all through the week by delinquents. For instance violence in our society is not merely covert or subterranean. As Sykes and Matza recognise, there is a great deal of 'real life' violence in society, "... the actual use of aggression and violence in war, race riots, industrial conflicts and the treatment of delinquents themselves by police."

4. Is Sykes and Matza's explanation of delinquency as based on M/C leisure values 'better' than sub-cultural accounts based on resentment, frustration etc. to M/C values. Sykes and Matza's theory is not quite as different to sub-cultural theory as we (at first) were led to believe. They state, ... "it is possible that leisure values are typically converted into delinquent behaviour when such values are coupled with frustrations and resentments." Therefore they admit some kind of oppositional element in delinquent activity after all!

Further they say that the frustrations and resentments are not simply a matter of being "deprived in socio-economic terms" even though they admit that exposure to leisure (and its values) is patterned - it is presumably the perception of these socio-economic factors. Therefore Sykes and Matza make two additions to the model, -

"... we suspect that two variables are of vital importance, (a) the extent of identification with adult symbols of work, such as father; and (b) the extent to which the school is seen as providing roles to enhance ego, both now and in the future, rather than as an oppressive and dreary marking of time."

These suspicions are factors that sub-cultural theory has had a great deal to say about. It is difficult to see - in the final analysis - just what advance Sykes and Matza made upon sub-cultural theory.

5. What is the view of society in Sykes and Matza if they are trying to reject the M/C-W/C dichotomy in sub-cultural theory? They still see the M/C as the dominant or consensual pattern but emphasise the pluralism of American society. The M/C seems to be composed of various contending interest groups with the W/C as perhaps one of these groups.

## Conclusion

Sub-cultural theory requires a close re-examination at the present time - since many of the crucial questions it posed and tried to solve were dismissed or ignored in the Interactionist or social labelling approach of the 1960s.

The latter approach with its cultural pluralism failed to take account of structural and historical dimensions. Also by the focus on

social reaction (which is its main advance on sub-cultural theory) came close to losing sight of the phenomena or sub-culture under study ... it is not enough to focus upon reaction to the detriment of the action. As Burgess stated as early as 1931, ... "labels (are terms) which society gives to an offence and the offender which indicate disapproval and at the same time define the behaviour for purposes of punishment ... To label behaviour, however, does not serve to explain it. In fact, it may act to prevent understanding of the many different kinds of behaviour that may be covered by one term." (p.235 "Discussion" in The Natural History of a Delinquent Career, by Shaw & Moore 1931).

Sub-cultural theory confronted the question of the relationship between M/C and W/C value systems, although rather inadequately - society took on a consensual nature with the differences between classes being only implicitly stated. Divergencies from M/C goals and values were mainly located at the level of the delinquent sub-culture, which was simply an opposition to or withdrawal from these values and goals.

Further, some attempt was made to distinguish between sections of the W/C and the role of employment and education in explaining delinquency was outlined. (But not the role of lower level agencies of social control - e.g. police, welfare, courts - which concerned the Interactionists).

Finally some mention was made of the parent-adolescent relationship and the delinquents /or adolescents striving for forms of status.

### Problems

In the work of Cohen, and Cloward & Ohlin the abstract sub-culture constructs are not properly grounded in given contexts. We are not always sure just which parts of the W/C the theory applies to and the differing effects that education, race, parent-adolescent relations and social control agencies may have in them for explaining delinquency. In other words their motivational theories of delinquency seem to be aimed at one section of W/C youth - upwardly mobile, or at least in expectation, and their descriptions of W/C areas to another - slum youth.

The delinquent sub-culture was often seen rather rigidly or static - to some extent cut off from not only the M/C but its own W/C background. Matza's approach (in Delinquency and Drift) to the definition of a delinquent youth sub-culture is more helpful. He sees it as a more fluid and impermanent structure consisting of a number of friends and acquaintances who are not constantly committing infraction - delinquent acts or situations are one of a range of activities. Matza also pays attention to the inner dynamics of the group - the perceptions and definitions of group boundaries and solidarity current among its members.



THE MOTIVATIONAL-CAREER LINKS IN SEVERAL THEORIES  
OF YOUTH SUB-CULTURES

- B. ROBERTS

	DOMINANT OR PARENT CULTURE	ADOLESCENTS RELATION TO DOM. OR PAR. CULTURE	EFFECT ON ADOL. OF DOM. OR PAR. CULTURE	"PROBLEM" OF ADOLESCENT	RESPONSE OF ADOLESCENT	SOLUTION (OF ADOLESCENT)
A.K. COHEN'S THEORY	(DOM. CULT.) M/C - values of success - legit. goals pursued	internalisation of M/C standards	Rejection - status failure (at school)	Self-blame (guilt or anxiety)	Reaction formation (reversal of M/C standards)	Delinquent sub-culture content - "non-utilitarian, malicious and negativistic"
CLOWARD AND OHLIN'S THEORY	(DOMINANT CULTURE) M/C "	internalisation, - perception of / or real achievement of objective criteria of advancement	Rejection thru. blockage of opportunities on informal grounds	Blame placed on the system	Withdrawal of legitimacy	Association with others in similar position - search for status. 3 types of subc. possible - conflict, criminal, retreatist
PHIL. COHEN'S THEORY	(PARENT CULTURE) W/C CLASSIFICATION IN CONTRADICTION ← ——— → lumper mobile (manual) (white collar)	Contradictions in parent cult. (class faction) transferred to youth - class & oedipal conflict	Generational conflict between parents and youth	Stress	Attempt to transfer the contradictions to a symbolic level (a - sub-culture)	Association at solution thru. formation of a sub-culture that explores symbolically either up or down mobility
WALT. MILLER'S THEORY	(PARENT CULTURE) LOWER CLASS - Focal concerns - trouble, toughness, smartness, thrills, fate, autonomy	Member of a female dominated household - lack of male role model		Problem of identification (as male - as man, masculine)	Joining with others in a delinquent group	Pursuit & extension of traditional lower class focal concerns
SYKES AND MATZA'S THEORY	DOMINANT CULTURE M/C value system (also implicit pluralism) - "compromise betw. Protestant Ethic & a Leisure Ethic" (subterranean values)	In limbo betw. parental dom. & integ. into wk. & marriage. All add. of all classes, members (relatively) of a leisure class		Extent of ident. with work (dad) & of school to provide ego enhancement → frust. & resent. (not simply socio/econ)	Conversion of leisure values (thrill, agg. anti-work) into delq. when coupled with frust. & resent.	Pursuit/leisure values <u>inappropriately</u> (delinquent not oppositional - guilt handled by techniques of neutralisation)