

## EDUCATION RESEARCH AND YOUTH SUBCULTURE THEORY

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A recent article in Youth Studies Australia delineates a number of youth subcultures deemed to exist in some Tasmanian schools. The paper, entitled The times they still are a' changing: characteristics of Tasmanian adolescent peer groups (1992) and emanating from the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania, describes a variety of characters such as Bogans, Nerds, Skeggs, Jocks and Gothics - seemingly the modern equivalents to the Bodgies, Skinheads and Punks of yesteryear. It groups their styles of dress, musical tastes, language and forms of behaviour, and suggests that it was important for youth workers/teachers to be up to date in their knowledge of these kinds of social categories (Denholm, Horniblow & Smalley, 1992). This form of social research is by no means new. There exists a wealth of Australian sociological and educational research which employs subculture theory, Braithwaite and Barker's Bodgies and Widgies (1978), Pearson's Surfing Subcultures (1979),

Kessler et al's *Ockers and Disco-maniacs* (1982), Wilson and Arnold's *Street Kids* (1986), Walker's *Louts and Legends* (1988) to name but a few. Indeed, subculture theory has dominated youth research (both in education and elsewhere) from the mid-1970's onwards, when it was first popularised by writers from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (CCCS).

This position, utilising a series of ethnographies, is built upon notion of counter-hegemonic struggle and the attempts by post-war youth to magically resolve the social problems and contradictions created by their material conditions (Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1976). As such, the stylistic trappings of each subculture form part of a code by which the members communicate with the 'straight' world (Hebdige, 1976). Consequently, just as some young people in Britain have been understood in prescribed ethnographic terms for the past fifteen years (such as the Mods and Rockers), so now have a myriad of young Australians. In *Youth Tribes of Australia*, the Bulletin asked the question:

Gothics, mods, thrash punks, skateboarders, hip hoppers, heavy metal, surfies, dags ... What's the matter with kids today? (The Bulletin, June 14, 1988)

A generation of researchers have now been able to find some degree of causation and interpretation within the well-grounded tenets of the tried-and-tested

youth/problem/subculture paradigm - secure in the knowledge that just about everyone else has done the same thing.

However, this work has not been without its critics. It has been suggested that the only relevant variables in the subculture equation appear to be those of class and age, to the neglect of factors such as gender and race/ethnicity (McRobbie, 1980; CCCS, 1982). It has also been pointed out that subculture theory has often been guilty of

romanticising groups concerned, with the veiled inference that 'ordinary kids' are too drab or passive to warrant investigation (Clarke, 1982; Walker, 1985; 1986).

Finally, it has also been suggested that the CCCS position is fundamentally deterministic, not only in that the members are deemed to behave in certain ways and have certain values, but that by employing a model which ultimately regards the social formation as an expression of the division between capital and labour, leads to an understanding of ideology which is causally bound to economic interests (Coward, 1977). However, none of these criticisms go so far as to challenge the foundations upon which subcultural analysis is built. More recent theoretical developments (particularly those involving the work of Michel Foucault) have done precisely that.

It is not the intention of this paper to take issue with the underpinning neo-Marxist assumptions concerning hegemony, consciousness and culture. This has been done elsewhere (Tait, 1992). Rather, the intention is simply to problematise the use of subculture theory in terms of its totalising, normalising and dichotomising nature.

Firstly, within this paradigm, a diverse group of individuals are positioned as a discreet entity, seemingly with specific codes of behaviour and ways of relating to the outside world. That is, in spite of an often stated theoretical awareness that 'youth' is both piecemeal and historically contingent, this seems to have few implications for the degree to which it is still used in research as a stable, descriptive classification.

'Youth' does not constitute a unitary object. Rather, the concept of youth has been discontinuously constructed across a profusion of terrains and as such, it has neither a linear history nor a clearly demarcated present. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that, as a consequence, youth is therefore limitless in its scope. Rather, it has been produced as a governmental object at the intersection of certain legal, educational, medical and psychological problematisations. These would include, for instance, debates over legal definitions of consent and criminal liability,

changes in strategies regarding juvenile delinquency and concerns over venereal disease and public morality. Probably the most useful way of approaching youth is to recognise that it has emerged as a by-product of the growth of a society characterised by what Foucault refers to as 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1979). That is, youth is generated within interrelated strategies which manage the relations of 'time, bodies and forces' (Foucault, 1977, 157), and also sort, differentiate and categorise individuals.

Addressing these in turn: Foucault argues that contemporary society is, in part, characterised by techniques for taking charge of the time of individual existences. This does not simply extend to the rigorous demarcation of the working day. Rather, it is positioning individuals in relation to the pervasive division of time - the organisation of time into successive or parallel segments; the arrangement these segments into a graded, cumulative series of increasing complexity; and the connecting of these series into an overall, developmental plan. This is especially evident within contemporary schooling. As Foucault (1977) points out:

... disciplinary time ... was gradually imposed upon pedagogic practice - specialising the time of training and detaching it from adult time, from the time of mastery, arranging different stages ... drawing up programmes ... qualifying individuals according to the way they pass through these series (Foucault, 1977, 159).

Although Foucault uses an example from eighteenth century France concerning the subdivision of the processes involved in learning to read, the same logic forms the basis for all modern curricula, regardless of subject matter. Indeed, it is even evident in those programs directed at the sexual behaviour of youth. In the recent guidelines for the implementation of Human Relation Education in Queensland schools (1988), a ranked set of evolutionary categories have been developed, such that individuals are ranked within one of four classifications: early childhood, middle childhood,

adolescence and young adulthood. Specific capacities are then allocated in relation to these categories - capacities against which knowledge about sex can be graded.

Individuals in 'Early Childhood' display a 'natural curiosity' about sex and development, whereas individuals in 'Middle Childhood' are 'more consciously aware of their own uniqueness in their relationships with others'. Young people

undergoing 'Adolescence' are 'developmentally ready for a formal study of their physiological and emotional changes', and those demarcated within 'Young Adulthood' develop a 'personal responsibility for relationships'. Thus, youth can be understood as part of the process of sub-dividing and ranking time within a segmented (but linear and teleological) model. It becomes an artefact of disciplinary methods which characterise and utilise individuals according to the stage in the series they are moving through - the intention of these techniques being to produce an adults who can read, and adults who can manage their own sex.

However, in addition to the embedding/accumulation of time within the body, the implementation of disciplinary technologies also involves the sorting and classifying of individuals themselves. Primarily, this consists of the combined processes of normalisation/differentiation. For example, the 'child' initially came to be constructed as the object of knowledge within the institution of the school. Central to these mechanisms were the dual strategies of hierarchical observation and normalising judgement - procedures still axiomatic within contemporary education. These involve the pre-requisite assumption of formal equality between individuals (reinforced by the architectural and spatial arrangement), which results in a homogeneity through which norms can be compiled. The augmentation of these norms then permit an ever more rigorous web of governmental intelligibility by which individuals become increasingly differentiated. Consequently, with 'youth', it is now

possible (within a plethora of contexts, which do not necessarily specify the same object) to 'measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties, and to render the differences useful by fitting them to one another' (Foucault, 1977, 184).

As stated, the strategies by which individuals come to be constructed as object are numerous. Importantly, Nikolas Rose (1985) suggests that by increasing the complexity of the grid of norms against which young people were measured, it became possible to construct a scientifically legitimated correlation between two increasingly recognisable personages: the 'maladjusted schoolchild' and the 'juvenile delinquent'. It was from the various strategic concerns over objects such as these (also including the 'adolescent'), that 'youth' finally emerged in its own right.

Abnormal behaviour, antisocial conduct, neuroses, eccentricities, making friendships too easily or not at all, quarrelling or being withdrawn, grieving or fearing too much or too little - all these departures from the norm could be linked together as maladjustments, and as predictors of troubles to come (Rose, 1985, 179).

Operating in conjunction with these two prominent characterisations was a newfound vocabulary of normative disturbances and disorders - a vocabulary which still underpins those aspects of contemporary psychology directed at youth. Such problems, left untreated or unrecognised, are still regarded as preliminary indicators of future, more serious trouble. However, implicit within the structures of the modern family and school are the assumptions that these illnesses can almost always be avoided by acceding to the plethora of governmental practices and interventions designed as promoting the correct training of young people. However, such a totalising tendency is only one of the problems that this paper seeks to avoid. The sub-cultural approach to 'youth' is also essentially normative.

It is through the construction and demarcation of pathologies (such as the aforementioned 'maladjusted schoolchild') that social, legal, psychological and

medical norms can be reinforced. This process is especially evident when addressing the young.

It is around pathological children - the troublesome, the recalcitrant, the delinquent - that conceptions of normality have taken shape. ... expert notions of normality are extrapolated from our attention to those children who worry the courts, teachers, doctors and parents. Normality is not an observation but a valuation (Rose, 1990, 131)

As such, the focus on delinquent youth, and the categorisation of some of them into sub-cultures, is part of the process by which individuals are constantly measured and judged against a set of social norms. Irrespective of the intentions behind CCCS ethnographies, the very production of these cultural categories is necessarily normative - thereby adding to the catalogue of depictions of the delinquent, through which the desirability of the norm is augmented. Likewise, the construction of characters such as 'Bogans' creates yet one more scale, against which 'normal youth' can be counterpoised, measured and assessed. Indeed, the article on Tasmanian youth

actually delineates a group called 'Normals', giving a description of just what it takes to be considered 'normal'. Curiously, it also describes these individuals as 'people who do not feel the need to do the same as everyone else' - which is surely somewhat paradoxical.

However, the construction of such characters is not a new phenomenon, even if it is more brazenly normative than usual. These ethnographies can be placed alongside much older forms of observation and policing. For example, between 1850 and 1880, the 'masturbating child' was constructed as an archetypal object of knowledge within the sexual domain. This object not only acted as the benchmark against which the normal child could be measured, it also legitimated the intervention of

a growing network of specialist knowledges. Similarly, the 'adolescent' took shape in 1904 with the publication of G. Stanley Hall's massive text on the subject. This concept quickly became axiomatic to the way young people were understood and governed. Although it has been largely abandoned by the social sciences, 'adolescence' does still retain some currency within psychological and physiological discourses.

Briefly, a final tendency in this kind of research into 'youth' is that it has repeatedly supported its position by the use of global oppositions, such as domination versus subordination, resistance versus conformity, regulation versus expression and young versus old. In the case of the CCCS, the explanation for subcultures is based upon the complex relationship which is deemed to exist between dominant and subordinate social classes, between generations and between those who conform and those who do not. That is, subcultural members are portrayed as constantly striving for mechanisms by which to pierce their ideological and generational oppression and thereby create spaces for themselves. Furthermore, this form of resistance through personal expression is frequently contrasted against the conformity of the 'Normals'.

The Denholm et al. article exemplifies some of these criticisms. Not only are young people counterposed against adults, but the relationships that those young people have with adults are roughly polarised between characters such as 'Gothics' and 'Skeggs', who respectively 'avoid and hate adults', and 'oppose them bitterly as they represent authority', and 'Normals' who have a 'good to excellent' relationship with adults and even 'consult adults with problems'. This also illustrates a polarisation between those who are deemed to resist and those who are deemed to conform. Not only does this form of dichotomising pre-determine the conclusions of much of youth research, it also often masks the complexity of any given field of debate.

In conclusion, it is important to state that much good work has been done

in the area  
of youth and education. However, it is the contention of this paper that  
all too often  
research into 'youth' seems to involve the knee-jerk use of subculture  
theory. This  
is no longer adequate. The ideas and arguments which supported subcultural  
analysis  
have been largely abandoned within the wider arena of sociological debate.  
The work  
of writers such as Michel Foucault now provide a more fertile ground for  
understanding 'youth' than the repeated recourse to the romantic and  
redundant  
'rituals of resistance' described by the CCCS.

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