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The Online Learning Resource

Sociology




The Crime and Deviance Channel

Updates

Online Classroom Ltd
PO Box 104
Hinckley
Leicester
LE10 2WW
Registered in England Number 5896648

tel / fax: 0845-505-0664
www.onlineclassroom.tv
enquiries@onlineclassroom.tv

Recent Research

Treadwell, James (2008) "Call the (Fashion) Police: How fashion becomes criminalised": Panel Paper, British Criminology Conference

Treadwell's arguments key into a range of useful sociological concepts (from moral panics to police socialisation and labelling) and provide a more up-to-date set of examples that have more relevance to contemporary students than many of the examples currently used in A-level sociology.

Key Points

1. Identity: "Clothing-as-fashion" is a prime channel for the construction of identity in late / postmodern society. For young British urban males sportswear tinted with a hint of militarism is suggestive of more traditional form of masculinity at a time when some urban youth are denied traditional pursuits and avenues for making such masculinity (via work or involvement in sports leisure). The hoody and it's newer counterpart the goggle hoody epitomize many of the qualities urban youth would like to suggest that they possess – such as an association with extreme sports and therefore physicality.

2. Style: Rejects approaches to understanding "youth and crime" that focus on an "over-reading" of the meaning of style and signs (for example, the "Resistance through Rituals" analysis of youth subcultures). The main reason young people purchase and wear hoodies and goggle jackets is not symbolic resistance, but, paradoxically, conformity with stylistic convention. Thus, people buy certain styles in order to express their individuality but, in so doing, become part of a collective conformity to style. There are links here to both consumerism (not only the pressure to buy but also the idea of "expressing your individuality" through consumption) and the idea of "selling crime".

3. Selling crime: The hoody is part of a long-term trend for fashion industry to feed off crime; by selling fashions and styles that edge into "a criminal underworld" ("heroin chic" for example) the purchaser buys into ideas that provide a ready-made set of signs and symbols (about identities, lifestyles, masculinities and so forth). This is, of course, similar to how the wealthy use fashion – to demonstrate ideas about their wealth, status and the like.

Example:"The British clothing company *Criminal* drew much of its inspiration from the iconography of crime to sell its products. Its high-end fashion products were adorned with images of flick knives, baseball bats, knuckledusters and AK-47s. It also used images of graffiti and experimented with hiding identity with full zip hoody type garments. Such was the appeal of the brand that even with a 'no-advertising' policy it supplied to 1,700 stores and had developed a worldwide annual retail turnover of £10 million".

4. "Policing by attire": Historically, control agencies have had a long-held concern with offenders' fashion, particularly where these can be interpreted in terms of "disguise" – from the 18th century "Black Act" (it became a serious criminal act to "blacken the face") to contemporary concerns about "the hoody" and the "goggle hoody" jacket.

While crime is used to sell, paradoxically, some fashions and styles associated with crime are subject to an increased range of social controls. "Calling the fashion police" may be a cliché but "increasingly, we witness in city centres and public places, 'policing by attire' to an ever greater degree". This operates on two levels:

a. Official policing: With competing demands on their time the argument here is that the police use their "commonsense experience" and on-the-job socialisation that draws heavily on media-produced associations and relationships (see **Point 9** below). In this respect young, urban, working-class males are policed not just because of their behaviour but because of what they wear – and what this says to control agents.

b. Private Policing: "There really are fashion police – and increasingly they are employed by private security firms". Examples here are found in the exclusionary policies of public / private spaces such as pubs and clubs ("No jeans, no trainers…") and increasingly in spaces like shopping malls."These spaces are now 'hermetically sealed' private places where anything but the aesthetically acceptable is banished – and young men are the principal targets of **aesthetic exclusion**". This, in part, relates to ideas about:

5. Disapproval of socially excluded groups (such as "Chavs") based on their style and preference for vulgar and conspicuous displays of 'mainstream' fashion wear. The Bluewater shopping centre in Kent (like a number of others) stipulates it prohibits any persons 'deliberately obscuring their faces', although the garments it prohibits remain on sale in the centre itself. This links into:

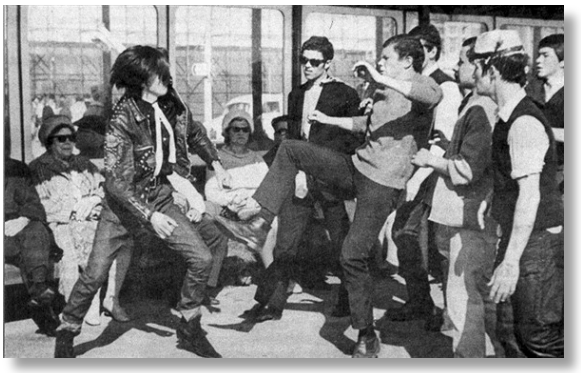
6. Fear of Crime: A related aspect of "fashion crime" is the use of the fear of crime to sell clothing (*Bladerunner* selling bullet proof and stab proof hooded garments aimed at those as young as seven) and:

7. Fear of Surveillance: While a lot has been written about the fear of crime, there's not a great deal at A-level on the fear of being watched (relating to issues of privacy, who has the right to it and who does not – something that again links into disapproval of the socially excluded). The goggle hoody can be seen as a reaction to the new extreme surveillance (such as the proliferation of CCTV) that now permeates British cities. Where control agencies increasingly try to survey urban populations, certain styles evolve as a counterpoint and way of evading surveillance. The hoody affords anonymity while functioning as an "alternate identity card".

Overall, the above can be generally related to two recurrent themes in A-level crime and deviance:

8. The idea of criminals being "viably different". Students may look at writers such as Lombroso (with his ideas about biological differences) but more contemporary example relates to style and fashion – the idea that what people wear (and, in particular, what some young males wear) marks them out for attention from control agencies.

9. The media and moral panics: Conventional examples tend to focus on groups that are not particularly familiar to a contemporary audience (Mods and Rockers anyone?). In 2007, "British newspapers began to report what they referred to as an 'alarming new development'…the growth in popularity amongst 'young wearers' of the 'goggle hoody'. Alternative descriptions included the 'super hoody'; 'gas mask hoody', and perhaps most interestingly *The Times* newspaper's label, a 'burqua for boys'". Ideas spread through blogs and website comment pages. Fashion starts to be linked to broader anxieties about youth and crime and, in particular a spate of fatal stabbings among young people



Part of Treadwell's conclusion is also useful as a general discussion-piece about crime, criminals and identity:

"If one wants to understand what a criminal looks like, we should think about the men in suits, the type that sit quietly behind the exclusionary and corporate practices could easily be regarded just as deviant. Sutherland ("White Collar Crime", 1949) long ago suggested something similar. It is for that reason I finish with this anecdote.

I know a 'professional shoplifter', though few people on the affluent street where he lives would recognise that this is his vocation. His house is well maintained, his car is a top of the range Audi TT. He, like businessmen, wears a suit to work, but in his case not because his choice of employment demands it. Rather, he does it because, he says, it distracts CCTV operators and the security staff. He will tell how they are far more interested in 'youths', 'scruffy looking sorts… you know smack addict types', and 'young moms with pushchairs'.

He knows that few are likely to closely scrutinise a well groomed man, even if he is stealing thousands of pounds worth of property.

Of course, such manipulation of popular perception is easy once one knows what to avoid looking like, and he has told me with no hint of sarcasm or irony that, 'the thing is mate, if people really knew what criminals looked like, then they might catch a few more of them'".

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