Youth Sub-Cultures and Styles.

In historical terms, the study of "youth cultures" is a relatively new of area of sociological analysis (the majority of studies are mainly post 2nd World War) for reasons which will, I trust, become clear. Early studies in this area were mainly produced by Functionalist sociologists (the dominant sociological perspective in 1940's / '50's) and tended to focus upon "youth" as a distinctive form of culture. For example, general themes in this "sociology of youth" tended to be things like:

> *• Youths holding norms and values that were significantly different to the norms and values held by their parents..*

> *• The idea that "youth" represents a period of "ambivalence" - a distinct phase in human social development that represents a transition period from childhood to full adulthood.*

The relatively modern nature of youth culture studies is not too surprising, given the fact that most sociologists tend to agree that the idea of "youth" is itself a relatively modern phenomenon - one that is characteristic of advanced industrial societies with well-developed educational systems.

> *Philip Aries, for example ("Centuries of Childhood",1962) argues that "youth" is a relatively "modern" concept. Aries argues that it was only from the mid 17th century that "young people" started to be seen as both dependent on adults and as having special characteristics of their own ("innocence" is one idea that springs to mind here - a concept that is still fairly current in modern societies). According to Aries, such ideas developed initially amongst the upper classes and, although Aries methodology has been heavily criticised (by, amongst others, Martin Shipman: see "The Limitations of Social Research" 1962), it is evident that "youth" - as opposed to "childhood" - is a concept that has only started to have significant meaning in the 20th century.*

> > *In psychology, for example, the concept of adolescence only started to become current at the end of the 18th century. Adolescence defined a period "between childhood and adulthood" and G.Stanley Hall ("Adolescence", 1904) provides the first 20th century discussion of the supposed relationship between adolescence and distinctive patterns of behaviour amongst young people.*

> *1.* *How would you define the concept of "adolesence"?*

Hall's work focuses upon the relationship between biological / chemical changes and human behaviour and represents an attempt to understand youth culture as a form of pathological response (in basic terms, pathology relates to the way in which social behaviour is related to biological development. For example, changes in body chemistry during puberty may theoretically produce behavioural changes in the individual - behavioural changes that the individual is relatively powerless to prevent / control). In this respect, Hall noted that the "problems of youth" included:

> • *Unbridled sexuality*
>
> • *Rejection of parents / teachers*
>
> • *Lack of concentration*
>
> • *Extremes of emotion / violence*
>
> • *Unpredictability.*

Deviant behaviour, therefore, resulted from chemically-based body changes in the transition from child to adulthood (hence the term pathological - youth behaviour explained as a "disease" caused by chemical changes in the body).

> *In addition, social conditions can aggravate this condition (confining children within the family / classroom etc. highlights behaviour as deviant when it is really only a case of "growing-up" - a natural process through which all humans supposedly pass).*

In the above respect, Hall was arguing that the concept of adolescence relates to the psychological problems associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood in modern societies - problems that only arise in these types of society because small-scale, non-industrialized societies do not develop a "transition period" between childhood and adulthood (for very good reasons that we do not need to go into here - see the "Family Life" and "Education" series of Study Packs for more details).

Hall argued that adolescence involved various emotional problems that were associated with such things as:

> *a. The break from family life experienced by teenagers.*
>
> *b. The development of independent personalities that starts to conflict with parental socialization.*

In this respect, Hall placed great emphasis upon adolescence being a time of emotional "storm and stress".

Hall's ideas have, as you might expect, come in for a great deal of psychological and sociological criticism (and I suspect the "problems of youth" he identified will appear somewhat laughable). We can look at some basic criticisms in the following terms:

> *1.Modern psychology and physiology (in common with sociology) view these "stresses" as social rather than physical:*

> *"Childhood" is a social concept relative in time and space.*

> *"Behavioural problems" may be the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy:*

>> *People expect teenagers to be "difficult" and act towards them accordingly. Where people associate the period of transition between "childhood" and "adulthood" with tension, emotional stress and so forth, the behaviour of "adolescents" is both interpreted within this explanatory framework and "unconsciously"(?) encouraged.*

>> *Thus, the interpreter looks for evidence of emotional problems in behaviour because that is what he / she expects to find. The absence of such "problems" may itself become a "cause for concern", (as, of course, may their presence).*

>> *The adolescent, taking his / her behavioural cues from the expectations of others (explained in terms of role play, development of self-consciousness / self- awareness - see the work of G.H.Mead ("Mind, Self and Society", 1936) for more information), begins to develop such behaviour because it fits-in with the expected behavioural patterns held by others.*

> *Not all teenagers experience these "problems"*

>> *Thus, whilst it is clear that chemical changes do take place, the degree to which they affect social behaviour appears to be culturally determined. For example:*

> *Schooling in Britain reflects supposed "biological categories" (5 - 11, 11 - 16) that are actually cultural categories (that is, not all human societies define the same age categories).*

> *2. There is little sociological evidence to suggest that "adolescence", in itself, is necessarily an "emotionally stressful" period in life. However, the increasing length of adolescence may produce tensions between biological and social aspects of development. For example, tension between physical sexual maturity and social norms governing sexual activity. It's possible to view youth cultures as a means of managing the resultant dislocation between emotional / biological / psychological maturity and social norms.*

3. These kinds of biological / pathological "explanations" of youth are methodologically flawed:

> *They begin by assuming what they should be concerned to test (the idea that "teenagers" are somehow "different").*

> *They then collect empirical evidence to support, rather than refute, their theory.*

The technical term for this form of theorizing is called "inductive logic" and it is an idea that we will explore more closely in relation to:

> *Positivist methodology.*

> *Durkheim and the study of suicide.*

To begin our look at sociological analyses of youth cultures and sub-cultures, the work of Geoffrey Pearson ("Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears", 1983) is a good place to start, mainly because Pearson's work gives us a solid historical perspective on the "recurrent problem of youth" in Britain throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Pearson argues that commonsense (non-sociological) analyses of youth deviance tend to have a number of characteristics:

> *1. They tend to define "the problem of youth" as one that is specific to the age in which we live. That is, the (mis)behaviour of the young is invariably seen as a novel problem - one that was not a problem in the previous generation.*

> *2. Side-by-side with this argument, Pearson notes, is that explanations of youth deviance develop around the idea that an idealized past is contrasted with an uncertain present. In trying to make sense of youth behaviour, people contrast deviant behaviour now with a "golden age" sometime in the past (usually "20 years ago" for some reason - probably a popular choice because it refers to the previous generation) "when youth deviance was not a problem".*

> *3. Given the confines of this perspective, explanations for youth deviance are given in terms of "things that are wrong now that weren't wrong in the past".*

Although Pearson clearly shows that, from the 19th century onwards each successive generation explained things in this way (which should, if nothing else, alert you to the fact that some contradiction and misunderstanding of the phenomenon is present here), commensense perceptions and themes persist.

> *Thus, the general perception of the "causes" of youth deviance may change (in the early 20th century comics were a bad influence on youth, whereas today it is videos that provide the bad influence - the technology changes but the song remains the same), but simple, repetitive, themes are always in evidence.*

For example, various commensense explanations include:

> *1. Lack of parental responsibility.*
>
> *2. The breakdown of the family (especially amongst the working class).*
>
> *3. The breakdown of authority and respect for the law.*
>
> *4. The breakdown of community values.*
>
> *5. The lack of discipline in schools.*
>
> *6. The "permissive society" (at the present, the 1960's represent our permissive society, but this theme reappears from time to time throughout our history).*
>
> *7. The (bad) influence of the mass media (television and film in particular).*

We can look briefly at some of these themes in various arguments surrounding the development of youth cultures in post 2nd World War Britain.

The defining factor involved in this group of explanations was the stress placed upon the significance of youth as being somehow "different" from adulthood or childhood - a culture (rather than a sub-culture). The difference between the two, for our purposes, is that culture refers to all young people, while sub-culture refers to particular groups of young people.

> *In this respect, there was a tendency to link the development of specific forms of youth culture to social change (which, as you might expect, involved the implicit use of concepts such as anomie and the more explicit emphasis upon the general socialization process - a traditional Functionalist focus, for example). Thus, taking a selection of these theories, various "causes" of youth cultures were identified as such things as:*
>
> > *1.Consumerism and affluence (especially post-2nd World War).*
> >
> > *2. The effect on children's socialization of the 2nd World War.*
> >
> > *3. Extension of education into the "teenage years" (youth seen to develop as a "transition phase" between childhood and adulthood).*
> >
> > *4. The effect of the mass media on teenage behaviour.*

We can briefly outline and evaluate these theoretical types in the following way:

> *1. Consumerism and Affluence:*
>
> > *Abrams, for example, ("The Teenage Consumer",1959) characterized youth culture as "affluence without responsibility" and focused especially upon "working class consumerism".*

The idea that affluence is linked to changes in behaviour is called the "Embourgeoisement Thesis" (basically, this involves idea that increasing affluence of working class leads to the adoption of middle class norms and values). Two points need to be noted in this respect:

a. This theory has been largely discredited by the work of Goldthorpe Lockwood, et al ("The Affluent Worker In The Class Structure", 1969).

In a study of "affluent workers" at the Vauxhall Car Factory in Luton they demonstrated major differences in the lifestyles, behaviour, social expectations and so forth of working class and middle class employees.

b. How affluent were young, working class, people in Britain in the late 1950's / 1960's?

Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend ("The Poor and the Poorest", 1965) suggest that the idea of a general affluence amongst all sections of society in Britain was largely a myth (just as it has been a myth in the 1970's and 1980's).

2. Effect of 2nd World War on socialization process of young:

Fyvel ("The Insecure Offenders", 1966) linked the absence of father during 2nd World War. with "incomplete socialization" (lack of parental control etc.) and "Cold War insecurity" (The Bomb!).

Thus, faulty socialization argument, linked with social stress (feelings of fatalism leading to stress upon hedonism), lead to youth cultures such as Teddy Boys. We have recently seen a reappearance of this theme in the political attack on single-parents (especially mothers) as being responsible for raising a generation of juvenile delinquents.

A problem here, of course, is that there is little evidence that "absence of fathers" can be linked to the behaviour of teenagers. In addition, the "problem of youth behaviour" seems to have existed both prior to 2nd World War and long after the supposed effects of "incomplete socialization" and "insecurity" should have diminished...

3. Extension of Education:

The extension of education to 14 / 16 (in Britain) led to young people seeing themselves as "different" - ie. going through a "special phase" in their development. This, it is argued, led to the development of specific types of youth culture that reflected the "special importance" that society gives to this period in life.

The idea that the extension of the period of schooling has helped to create a feeling that "youth" is a social category that has some meaning to both the people involved and adults has some currency - but it fails to explain the behaviour of all "teenagers". Why, for example, do some young people "conform" whilst others "rebel"?

4. Influence of Mass Media:

The mass media were seen as being responsible for "spreading the word" about youth culture. In effect, creating a national phenomenon by causing "impressionable and emotionally vulnerable youth" to copy the types of anti-social behaviour they supposedly saw in the media.

> *We have explored this, to some extent, in relation to hypodermic syringe model of media effects (see the "Media Effects" Study Pack).*

Such theories focused upon the way in which social and economic changes in society led to the development of specific youth cultures (and we can also note that they were, by and large, concerned with the concept of youth as a largely classless phenomenon - for example, the link between "teenagers" and "rock and roll" was seen as cutting across all social classes).

The "effects of the mass media" theory relies heavily upon the concept of "mass society" (the increasing "atomization" of society into a mass of individuals - something that we looked at earlier when discussing the origins of the "hypodermic syringe" model of media effects). This theory was popularized by the Frankfurt School (a group of Marxist sociologists that included Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Adorno and others.).

> *Such a theory tends to rest upon the idea that all societies have a basic cultural form (in Britain, this might include Classical music, Art, Opera and so forth) which is "debased" by a "mass culture" that panders to the lowest common denominator. What does, or does not, constitute "culture" is perhaps more a matter of subjective interpretation than sociological objectivity...*

2. *Identify other agencies of socialization in our society that might counter-balance the effects of the mass media*

3. *Explain why agencies of primary socialization (like the family) are likely to be more effective than agencies of secondary socialization (like the media).*

Functionalist Theories of Youth Sub-Cultural Development

Although the above theories owed varying degrees of debt to Functionalism, we can now turn towards a more-explicit analysis of Functionalist theories. When we looked, in an earlier Study Pack ("Theories of Deviance: 2. Structural Functionalism"), at basic Functionalist theories relating to crime and deviance, their main focus of attention was upon the concept of anomie. Functionalist theories of youth culture also, as you might expect, utilize this concept (albeit in a slightly different way).

> *Writers such as Talcott Parsons ("Essays in Sociological Theory", 1964) and Eisenstadt ("From Generation to Generation", 1956) begin with the fundamental assertion that the family is the primary unit of socialization in society. They contrast the characteristics of the family:*

>> *Emotional closeness,*

>> *Affection,*

>> *Traditional relationships,*

>> *Sharing relationships,*

> *with the characteristics of wider society (especially the world of work):*

>> *Self-interest,*

>> *Emotional coldness,*

>> *Judgements made about others on the basis of social status.*

The argument, in this respect, is that people develop patterns of behaviour (in effect, choices that we make in our relationships with one another. Most importantly from the Structural Functionalist viewpoint, these "choices" are specified for us by the culture within which we live - the structure of society "pressurizes" us into following these patterns).

> *As we move from one pattern of behaviour to another (from the family to work, for example) the concept of anomie comes into play because the movement from one institution governed by one type of pattern variables (family life) to an institution governed by another type (the workplace) would result in feelings of unhappiness, isolation and loneliness - we would not know how to behave properly in the new institution since we would be experiencing an "anomic situation".*

However, since Functionalists argue that society is a form of "living organism", it is forced to create ways of easing such transitions - to make them less traumatic and thereby eliminate the possible causes of anomie.

> *The function of youth culture, therefore, is to provide a "period of transition" between the family and work, for example.*

This is an elegant form of theorising because it seems to explain so much. For example:

> *1. The "modern" phenomenon of youth culture.*
>
> *Pre-industrial societies did not have the functional requirement of a period of transition between childhood and adulthood because:*
>
> > *The family was centre of economic production.*
> >
> > *People were not geographically mobile.*
> >
> > *An education system was not required.*
>
> *2. The involvement of boys rather than girls.*
>
> > *To some extent, this theory explains the apparent "invisibility of women" in relation to youth culture on the basis that it is generally men who experience the marked transition between the family and work. For women, the norm is the swapping of one set of affective relationships (their parents' family) for another (their own).*
> >
> > > *This is, of course, a highly debatable idea, one we will look at more closely in a moment.*
>
> *3. The transient (temporary) nature of youth culture.*
>
> > *Youth cultures are a "passing phase" not because people get fed-up with them, for example, but because as the teenager moves into adulthood (learns the norms, responsibilities and so forth associated with this new social status), youth cultures lose their function for that individual. Once the transition period is complete, youth cultures are no-longer functionally necessary and they simply disappear.*
>
> *4.Youth cultures as a "normal" aspect of modern society.*
>
> > *"Moral panics" about youth are essentially misconceived according to this point-of-view since youth cultures represent no threat to social stability. On the contrary, youth cultures must occur in a "healthy" society because they are functionally necessary. If youth cultures were suppressed, for example, wider social problems would be created (ones that really did threaten social stability). This idea of "functional necessity" (or functional prerquisite as it's somethimes called) is an important one in Functionalist theory that appears time after time in the analysis of social systems.*

Elegant as this theory is, there are a number of methodological problems involved:

1. Parsons' notion of pattern variables.

a. It is evident that they do not adequately describe reality. For example, status in modern industrial societies is not simply achieved. Such factors as gender and skin colour play a significant role, as does social class (especially family background).

b. Are all families characterized by the patterns Parsons' identifies?

As we shall see when we look at family life, it is difficult to subscribe to this rather "romanticised" view of family life. As Ann Oakley, a major (marxist) feminist critic of Parsons' view of family life has noted, Parsons' seems to think that the "idealized" portrait he paints of White, American, Middle Class, family life is a common experience in all families.

The radical psychologist, R.D.Laing has also gone so far as to suggest that the family is actually the source of many of the traumas that we have as individuals in later life - most people find the family such a traumatic, unhappy, experience that they cannot wait to leave it...

2. The Involvement of Women.

If Functionalist theory is to be seen as basically sound, it must follow that, as more women in modern societies come to see their primary role as wage earners rather than mothers, they too will require a "transition phase" involving youth culture. As far as it is possible to ascertain, this has not occurred (and certainly not in the form taken by male youth cultures).

3. It says little about the form that youth cultures take.

Because Functionalist theory tends to see stratification systems in terms of the concept of age set (basically the idea that social status is a function of both age and sex rather than social class), differences between social classes and youth cultures are de-emphasized.

The generalizations involved in this systemic theory (behaviour as a function of social structures) also fail to explain why some teenagers do not seem to get involved in youth cultures whilst others from the same social class become heavily involved.