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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT
VOLUME 4

TRIBAL PLAY

SUBCULTURAL JOURNEYS THROUGH SPORT

Edited by
MICHAEL ATKINSON AND
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EDITED BY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Tribal Play: Subcultural Journeys through Sport is the fourth volume in the book series 'Research in the Sociology of Sport'. The editors would like to thank the contributors for their willingness to share their research and their perspectives on the extent to which the various sport enclaves, subcommunities and collectivities they study are *subcultural*. We are also very grateful to the staff at Elsevier Press for their help in preparing this volume for publication.

JAI Press is an imprint of Emerald Group Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2008

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-7623-1293-1
ISSN: 1476-2854 (Series)

Awarded in recognition of Emerald's production department's adherence to quality systems and processes when preparing scholarly journals for print

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION: A SUBCULTURAL HISTORY

Kevin Young and Michael Atkinson

The concept of *subculture* is traceable at least as far back as 1945 in the United States (Lee, 1945). Although it had been used in sociology for many years in the United Kingdom also, sociologists did not begin to write about subcultures or youth culture on a widespread scale until after the publication of David Downes' *The Delinquent Solution* in 1966, and Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in 1973. To a large degree, the 1970s British subculture literature followed Michael Clarke's seminal 1974 paper "On the Concept of Subculture", in which the author summarised the apparent lack of concern over the concept in sociology: "... very little attention has been given to whether 'subculture' is a useful concept or whether it should be abandoned or broken down into a number of clearer components" (p. 428). Since that time, sociologists have committed considerable energy to exploring the usefulness of the concept of subculture. This is also true in the sociology of sport where the subcultural worlds of athletes and fans have been explored in some depth. Recently, scholars have become more critical of the concept, and many have questioned whether it has, in fact, outlasted its usefulness.

Tribal Play: Subcultural Journeys Through Sport
Research in the Sociology of Sport, Volume 4, 1–46

ISSN: 1476-2854/doi:10.1016/S1476-2854(07)00217-8

SUBCULTURE, CULTURE AND HISTORY

Any definition of subculture must be grounded in the broader concept of culture (Hebdige, 1979).[1] A brief discussion of culture is relevant here. One of the most basic problems with subculture theory is whether it is a "thing-like facticity" (Pearson, 1976: 2), or simply a reified abstraction created by sociologists. Although many definitions of culture are available, one of the most widely used is over a century old. In 1871, Edward B. Tylor defined culture as: "... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 1). Inasmuch as it sets down what people actually use these various elements for, however, the definition offered by Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts (1976: 10) is perhaps more adequate sociologically:

> Culture refers to that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give expressive form to their social and material life-experiences. Culture is the way, the forms, in which groups handle the 'raw' material of their social and material existence.

One of the most important factors to note when studying culture is the relation of the concept to the process of social reproduction. Willis (1978a: 172) reminds us that cultural forms are perpetually in flux:

> Culture is not ... static, or composed of a set of invariant categories which can be read off at the same level in any kind of society. The essence of the cultural forms in our capitalist society is their contribution towards the creative, uncertain and tense social reproduction of distinctive kinds of relationships. Cultural reproduction in particular always carries with it the possibility of producing ... alternative outcomes.

There has been a marked attempt since the work of the Chicago School of Ecology to differentiate between the notions of 'culture' and 'society', or between cultural and social systems (Gordon, 1964; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). Pearson (1976), for example, argued that each level is analytically distinct. Gordon (1947), however, had earlier ignored attempts to accommodate such a differentiation. He saw American society as a composite of groups preserving their own cultural identity. Similarly, Arnold (1970) argued that while the cultural elements comprising a subculture may differ somewhat from those of the dominant culture, they cannot differ entirely from that culture. In 1978, Willis (1978a: 174), rightly in our view, emphasised that culture and society "are part of a necessary circle in which neither term is thinkable alone".

THE CHICAGO SCHOOL OF ECOLOGY

In the 1920s and 1930s, the general focus in sociology shifted from journalistic accounts of social movements to empirically oriented examinations of the social and cultural antecedents to deviant, and especially youth, behaviour. Sociologists began to show interest in youth as an urban social problem, particularly those living in the impoverished ghettos and slums of American inner cities. At about this time, Robert Ezra Park and his colleagues at the University of Chicago undertook 'appreciative' research on the features of urban styles of life, developing a basically anthropological approach into a critique of prevailing social conditions. Fundamentally, their belief was that social interaction in such settings was structured by the ecology and, quite literally, the physical layout of the world.

The ethnographic studies of the relations between neighbourhoods and youth lifestyle undertaken by the Chicagoans were heavily empirical, and were based primarily on the interview and participant-observation techniques as research methods. The 1920s and 1930s saw Park and his colleagues produce copious fieldwork data on what came to be called 'the social ecology of the city'. This included "... research into the distribution of areas of work and residence, places of public interaction and private retreat, the extent of illness and health and urban concentrations of conformity and deviance" (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973: 110). For the Chicagoans, 'natural' boundaries were considered to be those of urban neighbourhoods and ethnic group residence, particularly since Chicago was, at this time, experiencing rapid waves of migration.

Park and his colleagues adopted a model based on the natural realm and applied it to the city. As in plant life where different species exist in the same habitat, human beings were seen to be living in a state of 'symbiosis'. Brake (1985: 30) wrote: "The social scientist's task was to seek out the well-ordered, mutually advantageous equilibrium known in plant life as the biotic balance, which was postulated to be present in urban life". The implications of such a model for the sociological study of deviant behaviour was, around this same time, set out by the American sociologist R. K. Merton (1938: 672): "Our primary aim is to discover how some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in nonconformist rather that conformist conduct". Thus, beginning from a model of a healthy symbiotic society, a logical extension of their model led the Chicagoans to argue that some environments: "... by virtue of their parasitical existence on the overweening social organism and their isolation from its integrative culture – are pathologically disorganized" (Taylor *et al.*, 1973: 113). Consequently,

through, for example, the unexpectedly high migration of an ethnic group or groups to a new neighbourhood, it was now seen as possible that the social organisation of the new neighbourhood could be disrupted, and that new collective behaviours could evolve in response to social change.

It is clear, then, that Park and his colleagues recognised the existence of differentiated social structures, conflicting sets of norms and values, even within the context of a single community. The proposition arising from this is that delinquency in these neighbourhood areas is a normative form of behaviour supported by mixed sets of values helping to develop differential learning environments, hence providing space for apprenticeships into both deviant and 'respectable' patterns of behaviour.

Examples of the empirical work thus emerging from the Chicago school were Nels Anderson's (1923) *The Hobo*, Harvey Zorbaugh's (1929) *The Gold Coast and The Slum* and Paul Cressey's (1932) *The Taxi-Dance Hall*.[2] The impetus such studies had lay primarily in opening doors for new explorations of the social implications for the city of struggles over ethnicity, power and styles of life, particularly in that rapid migration gave rise to socially problematic urban areas or 'transitional zones'. Those and other studies were based predominantly on examinations of single ethnic groups (Suttles, 1974: 27).

It was the American criminologist Edwin Sutherland (with Cornwell, 1937) who, from these studies, introduced the concept of 'behaviour systems' to account for the types of groups formed in zones of transition. Sutherland's notion of behaviour systems, placed within a larger theory of differential association, proposed that while individuals are bound by certain constraints which determine social action, they have at the same time the power to exert a free will. So noted Sutherland, although the structural precipitants may be readily available for the individual, in the final analysis it can only be his/her choice to become, for example, a marijuana user, a thief, or a truant.

At a time when significant developments were being made in explanations of behaviour systems (Hollingshead, 1939), Gordon (1947) introduced the first definition of 'subculture'. It was a simple definition, suggesting that American society was comprised of a variety of smaller groups preserving their own cultural integrity. Unfortunately, rather than assisting in improving explanations of crime and deviant behaviour, through its basic emphasis on population segments and a lack of practical applicability, Gordon's definition arguably hindered further breakthroughs in the field. With the publication of *Delinquent Boys* in 1955, however, Albert Cohen made efforts to develop studies of careers and occupations made by Sutherland & Cornwell (1937), Sutherland (1939) and Hollingshead (1939) into a theory of delinquent subcultures. It was a more comprehensive explanation than Gordon's,

particularly in its efforts to state the conditions under which subcultures emerge or fail to emerge, and the content of subcultural *solutions*.

To some extent, then, we can see that the study of what we now call subcultures has its origins in the work of the Chicago School and wider considerations with culture, including its sub-component elements of, for example, race/ethnicity and social class. Since the early stages, the concept has taken on considerable developments and throughout much of the twentieth century became "a central analytical tool in social psychology" (Shibutani, 1955: 562–569).

DEFINING SUBCULTURE

It is regrettably unusual for sociology to produce a term that is readily understood by both scholars and laypersons. While the concept of subculture is probably no real exception, its immense popularity over the years arguably elevated it to one of the most frequently used sociological concepts by persons outside the academy.[3] Unfortunately, such a trend has not been accompanied by any common understanding of the term, or by a precise and widely accepted working definition of what people mean by *subculture*.

Although the term was first used by McLung Lee in 1945, it was not until 1947 that Gordon presented its first formal definition. He defined the concept in terms of its population aspects:

> ... a subdivision of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional or rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual. (p. 40)

Donnelly (1980) noted that since (and including) Gordon's original definition, subsequent definitions fell within three distinct categories:

1. An emphasis on the population segments of subcultures, such as class or ethnic groups.
2. An emphasis on the deviant or delinquent aspects of subcultural behaviour.
3. 'Neutral' definitions, such as global definitions of the term, including glossary and dictionary definitions.

Gordon's definition is perhaps the foremost example of the first group. Others are very similar. Broom & Selznick (1973: 76), for example, emphasised the inter-connectedness between subcultures and the local community, suggesting that the typical subculture is: "... based on residential, ethnic or social class

conditions. These subcultures tend to be [co-existent] with the local community and thus provide a setting for the entire round of life".

It is, however, with reference to deviance or delinquency that the concept has been most frequently applied, and examples in this regard are legion (Atkinson, 2003). Studies in this category consider the social organisation of deviance and question whether subcultures provide the antecedents or outcomes of deviant behaviour. Presenting subcultures essentially as a form of 'detachment', Berger & Berger (1975: 132) contended that entering the subcultural environment necessarily involves adapting or reconstructing already acquired knowledge, beliefs and values in the 'cognitive separateness' of smaller (and more deviant) groups:

> The person who retires from the social stage into religious, intellectual or artistic domains of his own making still, of course, carries into this self-imposed exile the language, identity and store of knowledge that he initially achieved at the hands of society ... If one finds others to join one in such an enterprise, one can in a very real sense create a counter-society whose relations with the other, the 'legitimate' society, can be reduced to a diplomatic minimum ... such counter-societies, constructed on the basis of deviant and detached definitions, exist in the form of sects, cults, "inner-circles" or other groups that sociologists call subcultures.

The third category includes only a very general array of definitions, all with limited degrees of usefulness for sociology. For example, at one extreme we have the various glossary definitions of subculture such as that offered by Hagedorn (1980: 121). For him, a subculture is comprised of "... more or less distinctive patterns, names, symbols, values and ideologies shared by categories or subgroups of a larger population". From this rather crude definition, one can move to longer, more thoughtful, but still quite general definitions within the same category. Bullock & Stallybrass (1979: 609), for instance, proposed that subcultures are comprised of

> ... a body of attitudes, values, beliefs and natural habits, shared by the members of a particular group or stratum within a society, which has significant determining effects upon them as individuals, and is distinguishable from the commonly accepted culture held to be characteristic of the society as a whole.

With its general purpose and effect being somewhat unspecific, it seems reasonable to argue that such a category provides little more than a starting point of analysis.

With the existence of various definitional categories, it comes as no surprise that sociologists have been impeded by definitional problems and, although the concept has existed for decades in the discipline, there is still no common agreement on the term.

SUBCULTURAL BOUNDARIES

One important conceptual and theoretical issue dealt with in the literature is the 'boundary' problem; that is, where do subcultures begin and end? There is a tendency on the part of some writers to treat subcultures as explicitly separate entities – as Arnold (1970: 84) puts it austerely but usefully, "as though each was surrounded by a twelve foot high barbed wire fence".[4] Subcultural boundaries are frequently diffuse, however, and occasionally overlap; subcultures themselves almost always exhibiting elements of a larger, surrounding culture.

According to Arnold, the total culture can be seen as an amalgamation of all of the cultural elements subcultures have in common. Similarly, Gordon (1947) wrote that a subculture is a subdivision of national culture. There are conceptual problems with both approaches, however. If Arnold's contention were true, it would mean that we would be able to adequately identify not only all the elements that constitute a total national culture, but also the factors that distinguish subcultures. Such a proposition is that it is, in fact, possible for subcultures to extend beyond the limits of one particular nation. Some subcultures are internationally widespread, such as, for instance, the 'hip-hop' or 'rap' subcultures, rock climbing and other sport subcultures (the growth and development of which is often achieved commercially through, for instance, popular music, representations in film, or video games, etc.). So strong are the influences of these international subculture groupings that they seem only marginally restrained by differences of culture, religion, political systems, or language.

Although no adequate explanation has been offered for treating subculture as an isolated concept in sociology to date, some writers (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) have argued for the explicit distinctiveness between subcultures. If individuals actually live out large parts of their lives in subcultural settings, it seems at least plausible that the idea of multiple membership/involvement exists, with individuals participating in two or more subcultures simultaneously, serially, or both. This appears to be more realistic. As Cohen (cited in Arnold, 1970: 101) puts it: "One fascinating aspect of the social process is the continual alignment of groups, the migration of individuals from one group to another". The most practical theoretical suggestion thus seems to be that subcultures at the very least overlap and, as Arnold argues, have 'fuzzy' boundaries.

Michael Clarke (1974: 434) attempted to resolve the boundary problem by arguing that temporally a "hardening or a softening of specificity can take

place" with subculture boundaries. He provided a list of four specific processes that can occur:

1. A process of absorption or assimilation, where subcultural identity diminishes until it entirely disappears – e.g., the ebb and flow of athletes between different sports containing, and based on, different traditions and models of behaviour.
2. A process whereby subcultural identity is arrested at a certain stage due to changes in external resistance to it – e.g., the softening of stigmas regarding nudism or body modification in various countries.
3. A process whereby subcultural identity is amplified – e.g., football hooligans subject to stigmatising processes amplified by media reportage forming a subsequent more closely-knit consciousness (using the case of the Mods and Rockers subcultures, Stanley Cohen (1973) showed how this process can have violent consequences).
4. Subcultures operating in relative isolation from the rest of society – e.g., radical political and religious groups, or cults.

Clarke's contribution to subculture theory illustrates that subculture is a dynamic concept prone to change, growth or diminution, depending on its place in the community and specific social responses to it.

SUBCULTURAL EXCLUSIVITY

As subcultures have certain boundaries, they also represent varying degrees of exclusivity to members and non-members. Arnold (1970) and Mungham & Pearson (1976) noted that exclusivity refers firstly to the difficulty in attaining membership and, secondly, to the degree of commitment demanded of members, enforced by the dominant order of the group. For example, Bennet Berger (1971: 175) wrote:

> An upper-class, aristocratic subculture can be maintained in a hostile democratic environment to the extent that it goes on in places (territories) others can't afford to enter and to the extent that it is enclosed by a system of exclusive institutions ... The important thing to remember is that a subculture is made viable to the extent that territorial and institutional factors ... provide sustenance and support to its norms, insulate the members of the group from outside pressures and hence discourage, forestall, or minimize defection, i.e., mobility.

One factor emerging from a review of the literature is that the term subculture should not be applied loosely to just any collectivity of individuals. All too often it seems that writers have manufactured their