"A" Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Deviance and Social Control

Unit M6: Subcultural Theories

Introduction

Sub-cultural theories of crime and deviance can, perhaps, be seen as **developments** on explicitly **ecological theories** although, as we will see, they retain a strong theoretical undercurrent of **Functionalist assumptions** about the nature of the social world. While it's evident that the general focus on the nature of **cultural transmission** and its relationship to behaviour involves a relatively strong **Structuralist** thread, there is also involved a clear strand of theoretical thinking that resembles some more-explicitly **Interactionist ideas**.

In these Notes, therefore, the main aim is to give a brief **overview** of some of the **main developmental currents** in **sub-cultural theory**, coupled with a lead-in to Interactionist theorising. This will, I trust, become a little more clear once the information is introduced and considered.

Types of Subcultural Theory

As a way of structuring this particular discussion of sub-cultural theories, it might be useful to distinguish between two main types of sub-culture, namely:

>   a. **Reactive** and
>   b. **Independent**..

By taking these two ideas as a basic starting point, we can then look at a selection of writers working within each theoretical refinement of sub-cultural theory, by way of providing an overview of the basic ideas involved in sub-cultural theories of crime generally.

a. **Reactive Sub-Cultures:**

A "reactive sub-culture" is one in which the members of a particular sub-cultural group develop norms and values that are both a **response** to and **opposition** against the prevailing norms and values that exist in a wider (predominantly middle-class or "**conventional**") culture. In this respect, this **form** of sub-culture is sometimes called "**oppositional**" rather than reactive.

In the above respect, the first study we might usefully consider in the context of reactive / oppositional sub-cultures is one in which an explicit link to the work of **Merton** is made (although, as we will see, Merton tends to figure quite regularly - implicitly if not always explicitly - in the work of sub-cultural theorists.

In his book "Delinquent Boys", **Albert Cohen** was particularly concerned to explain two main ideas:

>   1. Firstly, the predominance of young males in statistics relating to criminal / delinquent behaviour.

>   2. Secondly, the cause of "non-economic" forms of crime (crimes of violence, sexual crimes, hooliganism and the like), that Merton, for example, did not attempt to confront in his elaboration of strain theory.

Suggest ways that the use of Official Crime Statistics to identify criminals / deviants might have methodological implications for a theory of deviance / delinquency?

If, on this basis, **Cohen's** work in relation to sub-cultural theory can be said to have a characteristic idea, this idea would be that of "**status deprivation**":

> Cohen argued, for example, that "status" was a desirable, valued, social commodity (in Merton's terms, perhaps, it was a "desirable end"). However, for certain groups of people, status was effectively denied to them because they lacked the means to achieve socially-approved forms of status (through such things as educational achievement, high-status work and so forth).

In particular, Cohen argued that **young**, **working-class**, **males** were effectively **denied** the opportunity to achieve status because:

> a. They invariably failed in the education system.

> b. This failure lead to eventual failure at work, insofar as they moved into low-skill, low-pay jobs after finishing their education.

However, although **denied legitimate means** (note the link to **Merton**) towards achieving status, young, working-class, males still **desired** it - and in such a situation, Cohen argued, they would attempt to satisfy this socially-created desire by finding other (**illegitimate**) means.

In relation to behaviour at school, status deprivation was resolved by the formation of primary groups (the most common form of which was gangs). By membership of such groups, young males were effectively attempting to do two things:

> 1. Firstly, to develop a structured group within which status positions could be created.

> 2. Secondly, to create exclusive groups within which individuals could satisfy their desire for some form of status.

In what ways might the membership of a "delinquent sub-culture" give people status?

In this respect, Cohen argued, it didn't really matter what specific form status took (for example, whether it was approved by authority or, as was usually the case, disapproved of by those in authority); what mattered was that an alternative social setting was created whereby young, working-class, males could define status on their own (group) terms.

For **Cohen**, therefore, **status groups** amongst "delinquent boys" were clearly **oppositional** in two senses:

> **Firstly**, their basic reason for existing was to develop a means of getting a desired social commodity (status / respect) that was denied to them by mainstream culture. Given that it was "middle class culture that was effectively denying them a sense of self-worth, it is hardly surprising that such sub-cultural groups should find themselves in opposition to the kind of norms and values perpetuated through the education system (respect for authority, unquestioning obedience, the denial of valid knowledge and so forth).

> Secondly, by opposing such sub-cultural groups were reacting to the situation in which such boys found themselves. In effect, Cohen is arguing that these groups would not need to develop (not the structural and Functionalist implications) if the education system (and, by implication, society as a whole) could provide alternative outlets for status satisfaction.

Thus, by experiencing feelings of rejection from both those in authority and the majority of their peers, boys, according to Cohen, develop a deviant sub-culture that coalesces around an explicit rejection of everything seen as "normal, decent and good". The particular form this rejection took was also significant, insofar as the juvenile delinquent sub-cultural group created a deviant identity out of a reversal of accepted forms of behaviour:

> Rudeness to those in authority.
> Lack of punctuality and adherence to school norms.
> Petty crime and vandalism.
> Violence.

In this latter respect, the ability to dish-out violence was a source of status within the sub-cultural group, as was the ability to take the expected violent response from those in authority.

For Cohen, therefore, it shouldn't be too surprising to find that those most likely to be involved in a delinquent sub-culture where those who were:

a. Lower class in social origin.
b. Educational "failures" (as seen in terms of the school authorities).
c. Socially disadvantaged / deprived.
d. Unlikely to "succeed" in the adult job market.

Thinking about point (d). above. Why might this be significant in relation to female responses to status deprivation?

To conclude Cohen's argument, we can note a number of things:

1. Delinquent sub-cultures arise as a response to status denial. If status is not denied, such sub-cultures do not arise. In this respect, the "solution" to the behaviour of delinquent boys would have to address structural problems relating to the organisation of education, work and so forth, rather than focus upon "abnormalities" in the psychology, cultural background or whatever of the delinquents themselves.

2. Delinquent sub-cultures have two main functions:

   a. The "personal":

      They represent an alternative social setting for status achievement.

   b. The "social or collective":

      They provide a means for both "coping" with and "getting back at" society (as represented by those in authority).

3. Although Cohen's work was carried-out in the 1950's in America, more recent studies have tended to demonstrate much the same sub-cultural forms of response amongst working class boys in Britain.

David Hargreaves ("Social Relations in a Secondary School", 1967), for example, conducted an **observational** study of **working class boys** in a **Secondary Modern** school. Working within a basically Functionalist (Durkheimian) perspective, Hargreaves argued that the **failure** of the education system to provide **integrating mechanisms** for working class children (in this instance boys in a single-sex school) resulted in the development of deviant sub-cultural responses.

In this instance, the boys in Hargreaves study were **reacting** to two basic forms of status denial:

   a. Firstly, the fact that they failed the 11+ exam and had to attend a Secondary Modern school that immediately marked them apart from their middle class peers (who, by and large, attended grammar schools).

   b. Their placement in the lowest streams within the school. Children with "behavioural problems", low academic ability and so forth found themselves in a common position within the school - disliked by both those in authority and their conforming peers.

Such boys were basically labelled as "double failures" (because not only did they attend a type of school widely-perceived as being for those who failed, they were also placed in the lowest streams), yet like everyone else they desired status. Where it was denied officially, they developed "unofficial" status groups. Since such children lacked any real power within the school, the only way to define and express status within the deviant sub-culture was through explicit opposition to school norms and values - disrespect to those in authority, disrupting the orderly flow of school life and lessons, explicit cheating (since they were not going to "succeed" there was little point in not cheating) and truancy.

Suggest reasons as to why attending a "Secondary Modern school" might mark children as "failures"?

In a more modern study - and from an explicitly **Marxist Conflict** perspective - **Paul Willis** ("Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs", 1979) argued that the creation of deviant sub-cultures amongst working class boys was **not** simply a response to such things as status denial. Such sub-cultures also represented an **organised**, **realistic**, attempt to come to terms with a **wider cultural world** that had already, by the time they had entered secondary school, earmarked the boys in Willis's study as "**failures**".

In this respect, sub-cultural organisation was an attempt to develop a shared set of behavioural guide-lines that stressed the importance of "having a laff", "mucking about" and so forth as way of making something that was largely intolerable tolerable.

As I have indicated, there are a number of problems we can look-at in relation to Cohen's work (if we take it to be generally representative of this branch of sub-cultural theory).

1. Firstly, the general absence in the literature of any reference to women and sub-cultural development. Two points arise here:

   a. Do girls not develop deviant sub-cultures - and if not, why not?

      One explanation - in terms of Cohen's ideas about status deprivation - is that, since the primary role for women in adult life in our society is that of mother / child-rearer, women will find status within the home / family. Career women, on the other hand, will find status through their work, thereby negating or subverting the need to create alternative forms of status.

   b. If girls do develop deviant sub-cultures, is their absence from the literature simply a result, as many feminists argue, the result of a sexist bias amongst (male) sociologists?

2. Secondly, it is not really clear, from Cohen's work, why particular boys (but not others) see deviant sub-cultures as an alternative form of status.

3. Finally, the preoccupation with the relationship between class and status tends to obscure the possibility that middle-class children also indulge in deviant activities without seemingly attracting the kinds of "delinquent" or deviant labels that are attached to working class children.

> One reason for this may be that, because of their outward show of basic conformity, middle class deviance amongst school children is more-likely to be individualised and rationalised as a "passing phase" or "falling-in with a bad lot" etc.

However, it remains evident that "**middle class deviance**" does not seem to figure very prominently (if at all) within the literature of sub-cultural theory - and we may have to look towards other perspectives (mainly Interactionist and Marxist conflict) for an understanding of why this should be the case.

Thinking about the kinds of norms and values that operate within a school, why might "middle class" children find it easier to escape being labelled as "delinquents"?

Legitimate and Illegitimate Opportunity Structures

A second form of "reactive" sub-cultural theory is presented by the work of **Cloward and Ohlin** ("Delinquency and Opportunity", 1961) in which they discuss the idea that what they call "**illegitimate opportunity structures**" run parallel in any society to "**legitimate opportunity structures**". What this rather complicated phraseology involves is a **variation** on **Merton's** "ends and means" (**Strain Theory**) argument.

In basic terms:

- People are socialised to value "success".

- Those who have the means to achieve success do so legitimately (they follow "legitimate opportunity structures" - education, work and so forth).

- Those who are denied legitimate means still desire success, so they pursue illegitimate means ("illegitimate opportunity structures" - crime, in simple terms).

However, while the debt to Merton is clear, Cloward and Ohlin attempt to take Merton's basic ideas and develop them into an explanation of **why** different social groups (specifically working class groups) **choose** to adopt **different forms** of deviance.

 In order to do so, they produce a model of illegitimate opportunity structures that has three basic elements.

1. Criminal Sub-culture:

This form of **sub-cultural response** involves the presence of three main conditions:

> a. A stable, cohesive, working class community:

>> In this respect, the potential criminal will be able to develop contacts within both the mainstream working class culture and the criminal sub-culture (for

example, stolen goods can be easily distributed through a wider mainstream culture that doesn't ask too many questions...).

b. Successful role models:

In this sense, there needs to be people of standing in the community who have "done well" out of crime. The young criminal can begin to model themselves upon such people - they represent tangible evidence of the fact that crime does pay and that crime is a potential route out of poverty, deprivation, low social status and so forth.

c. A career structure for aspiring criminals:

The importance of a stable community within which criminal enterprises can develop and flourish is significant here, since if a criminal sub-culture is to develop as a form of "illegitimate opportunity structure" it has to be organised in some way. In effect, it has to provide people with the opportunity for advancement ("promotion") as an alternative to the legitimate job market, for example.

2. Conflict Sub-cultures:

Where this form of stable, working class, community / criminal sub-culture doesn't exist, Cloward and Ohlin suggest that a second form of sub-cultural response is possible. Young males in particular, denied financial rewards, status and so forth in the legitimate job market and unable to join a criminal sub-culture respond by forming gangs, for example. This form of sub-cultural response tends to be highly-organised around specific criminal objectives (drug-dealing being an obvious example).

3. Retreatist sub-cultures:

Finally, for those who fail in both the legitimate and illegitimate job markets (where one exists), the only further option, according to Cloward and Ohlin, is a retreat into drug-abuse, alcoholism and so forth (with all its attendant forms of petty criminality).

Identify and explain the particular ways Cloward and Ohlin's sub-cultural theory is similar to Merton's strain theory.

As a form of explanation for the way in which people may "choose" to become involved in criminal behaviour, Cloward and Ohlin's form of sub-cultural theorising does have some merit:

1. It locates criminal behaviour within some form of organisational framework that is created and conditioned by people's experiences of - and within - the social world.

In this respect, criminal behaviour is seen to be a rational response to various forms of deprivation (physical, emotional and so forth), rather than simply seeing criminals as isolated, "evil", people who behave in a motiveless, destructive, fashion.

2. It goes some way towards an explanation as to why people develop different forms of deviant behaviour and identity.

However, there are also clear **problems** involved with this particular type of sub-cultural theory:

1. It assumes that everyone has the same basic goals in life (a fairly standard form of Functionalist assumption).

2. It doesn't really allow for the idea that people may have a variety of goals in life, some of which they manage to achieve and others which they fail to achieve. A major problem with this form of analysis is that it doesn't adequately theorise the role of ideology in the creation of goals (and its place as a means of rationalising personal failure).

3. A much more damning criticism, however, is the question of whether or not "criminal sub-cultures" actually exist outside of mass media fantasies (the "Only Fools and Horses" scenario). In Britain, for example, little evidence has been found to support the ideas that:

    a. Criminal sub-cultures exist.

    b. That they are founded within and supported by some form of stable, working class, community / culture.

4. Finally, in relation to "retreatist sub-cultures", it is important to recognise that "drug-abuse" takes many forms - ranging from the relatively communal use of drugs such as marijuana, ecstasy and the like, to the rather-more individualistic use of drugs such as heroin. In this respect, it's by no-means clear that drug-abusers, alcoholics and so forth are necessarily marginalised within society - alcoholism, for example, may take many forms ranging from the classic "down-and-out" alcoholic to the businessman who simply drinks as an extension of their working / social life.

b. **Independent Sub-Cultures:**

In this form of sub-cultural grouping the members of the group are held to adopt a set of norms and values which are effectively "self-contained" and specific to the group.

Where these values, in particular, differ from those of the wider culture within which the sub-culture exists, they may **not necessarily** (or consciously) be in **opposition** to such values. However, what such sub-cultural values represent is an "independent" product of - and solution to - the problems faced by people in their everyday lives.

An **example** of this type of argument is provided by Walter **Miller** in his article "Lower Class Cultures as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency", 1962. As the title suggests, Miller **rejects** the idea that delinquent sub-cultures arise as some kind of "**reaction**" to the pervasive, dominating, influence of "middle class value systems".

In its place, Miller argues that we should see delinquent sub-cultures as an **independent cultural phenomenon** that develops as an **extension** of lower - or working class - culture (as an American, Miller tends to use the term "lower class" rather than "working class").

In this respect, Miller is basically saying two things:

    Firstly, that it is possible to identify at least two distinct cultural groups; middle class and lower class. Each has its own distinctive set of basic values, beliefs, norms of behaviour and so forth, although it is evident that there must be some correspondence between the two - although what this might be is not specified.

Secondly, that lower class culture has certain values which do not exist within middle class culture. These he identifies as a number of "focal concerns" and it is from these that Miller argues the distinctive behaviour of lower class boys can be explained.

To what extent do you think it is possible to separate "lower class culture" and "middle class culture". Can you think of any norms, values, beliefs and experiences that might be characteristic of each type of culture?

Focal Concerns

Miller identifies **six "focal concerns"** of lower class culture and by looking at each in turn it should be possible to see how they may be applied to the study of delinquent behaviour.

1. Trouble

Lower class life tends to involve individual acts of violence. The lower class boy, therefore, quickly learns to identify "trouble" and how to handle it.

2. Toughness

The ability to handle "trouble" (perhaps to see violence as a means of resolving problems) clearly requires the need for toughness - the ability to "take care" of both yourself and your mates. Miller argues that the everyday experience of trouble and the need to exhibit toughness in your dealings with people is a basic characteristic of the lower class male experience.

3. Smartness

The ability to "look good" (especially on a night out) is a significant component of self-identity - if you look good then you feel good. There are perhaps two further aspects to this meaning of smartness:

a. It represents a way of impressing people (especially women).

b. It can be used as an exaggerated form of mockery in relation to middle class cultural values. The "Teddy Boy" phenomenon in Britain in the late 1950's, for example, involved the adoption, by working class boys, of an exaggerated, deliberately distorted, code of dress that reflected middle class norms and, by so doing, mocked such norms.

"Smartness" does, however, have another meaning - that of being clever or witty - and the ability to tell a good joke, make a funny comment and so forth is a valuable asset (especially in relation to "larking around" with your mates or trying to pick up women).

4. Excitement

The idea of "having fun" is significant mainly because Miller argued that, through their working lives lower class males were effectively denied much sense of self-expression. Only through their leisure activities could life become pleasurable, hence the emphasis by lower class males on "having a good time".

5. Fate

Lower class males tend to be fatalistic about life - mainly because their lives tend, almost by definition, to lack power or the ability to influence what happens to them. In this respect, fatalistic acceptance of a relatively boring daily work routine (they feel unable to change the way things are) produces a form of hedonistic leisure activity, whereby whatever happens is the result of "chance" or fate.

6. Autonomy

Related to this fatalistic acceptance of their lot in life is the desire for personal respect within their immediate sub-cultural groups. A general resentment of (middle class) authority figures who dominate their working life (and about whom they are able to do little of nothing) leads into the desire to exercise some form of freedom in areas where some control / power is possible.

As should be evident, Miller attempts to explain delinquency as an **extension** of these lower class focal concerns by arguing that the **social context** within which young, lower class, males exist leads them to adopt an **exaggerated** form of such concerns.

In this sense, if we combine youth with the search for excitement and respect through leisure (as opposed to work), we have a potentially explosive mixture which stands a high chance of attracting the attention - and disgust - of (middle class) authority.

As an extension of this basic idea, **feminist writers** such as **McRobbie and Garber** ("Girls and Subculture" in "Resistance Through Rituals" by Hall and Jefferson (eds.), 1976) have suggested that the **absence of females** from the sub-cultural literature may be explained by the different cultural attitudes and behaviour expected from girls. They describe this as the

"**Culture of the bedroom - experiments with make-up, listening to records, sizing up boyfriends...**".

Explain how (and why) the different socialisation and general cultural experience of girls might make them less likely than boys to participate in delinquent sub-cultures.

The following quotation, from **Moore and Hendrey** ("Teach Yourself Sociology", 1982) provides a more modern example of delinquent sub-cultural theory through the work of **Howard Parker** ("A View From The Boys", 1974).

"**Parker's study of the Liverpool gang provides a good illustration. The 'Boys' (as they call themselves) go for a night out. They aren't looking for any 'trouble' (fights), but should anyone hint that they aren't tough, or can't take their drink 'like men', the a fight ensues. On these nights out, the Boys' ability to pick up girls often depends on their wit and repartee (smartness) and they are always on the look-out for fun (excitement). They work hard to maintain some freedom in their daily lives (autonomy), beyond the control of teachers or foremen. Finally they are fatalistic about their lives in general and especially the economic and political influences on them (fate), over which they believe they can have no control.**".

There are a number of further observations we can make about sub-cultural theories in general through the work of various writers.

In his study of young, working class, males, **Peter Willmott** ("Adolescent Boys In East London"), argued that although he found evidence that such people lived "boring, dead-end, lives" and used deviant activities as a way of adding a certain level of excitement to their lives, there was little evidence to suggest that deviance was either:

Carefully planned, or

Based upon sub-cultural values.

What he argued, however, was that the crimes committed by working class males tended to more-visible than those committed by middle class males - and consequently more-likely to come to the attention of the police. Furthermore, because the police were aware (through their experience of policing) of this involvement in crime, they watched this group more closely and, of course, discovered evidence to confirm their observations.

David Downes also studied the behaviour of East End adolescents and found:

No evidence of Cohen's concept of "status frustration". Young, working class, males did not appear to show any resentment at their low social status.

No evidence of Cloward and Ohlin's contention that such people were resentful of their lack of legitimate employment prospects.

Downes argued that there was evidence to suggest that a lack of satisfaction through their work lead these young males to stress "leisure values". This made them more likely than their middle class counterparts to indulge in "exiting" activities that lead them into conflict with the law. For Downes, the deviance he found was unplanned, relatively petty and not evidence of any long-term commitment to crime...

SUB-CULTURAL THEORIES: KEY POINTS

Key Sociologists:

Albert Cohen: Delinquent Boys
David Hargreaves: Social relations in a Secondary School, 1967
Cloward and Ohlin: Delinquency and Opportunity, 1960
Miller: Lower Class Cultures as a generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency
Howard Parker: A view From The Boys
David Willmott: Adolescent Boys in East London (critical of sub-cultural theories)

Key Concepts:

Status deprivation
Legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures
Sub-culture
Culture
Reactive sub-cultures
Independent sub-cultures

Key Ideas:

Social Order is based on:

Ability of society to provide status opportunities for its members (access to legitimate status).

Ability of society to provide opportunity structures for its members .

Social Control based on:

Socialisation: Learning and acceptance of social norms and values.

Ability of society to develop and maintain legitimate status and opportunity structures for all members of society.

Legal norms and their enforcement.

Social Conformity:

Sub-cultural theories reflect Functionalist theories in the sense that they stress the learning of norms and values as a crucial variable in relation to crime. Working class deviance (especially delinquency) is seen in terms of it being a strong social reaction to such things as the denial of social status and legitimate career opportunities. thus, working class males, for example, want the same kinds of things that everyone else in society is socialised to want. When they are denied access to these goals, they develop alternative means to satisfy their desires (cf. Merton).

Again, deviants conform to certain values. The "problem" for society is one of ensuring everyone conforms to the norms by which these values can be legitimately realised. Thus, the social context of people's behaviour is significant and explains:

1. Why delinquency (as opposed to crime) tends to be a "passing phase" in the lives of young, working class, males (as they grow older they take-on greater social responsibilities - families, for example - and thereby their behaviour develops in a new social context).

2. Why young women rarely seem to figure in official statistics for crime (women are socialised into seeing the home, children and so forth as their main source of status achievement). Since all women can more-or-less attain this status, it follows that such things as status frustration, denial of legitimate opportunity structures etc., are not experienced by women. therefore, they do not develop the behavioural patterns of their male counterparts.

Non-Conformity:

Because people are seen as basically rational, their non-conformity to wider cultural values represents a calculated response to the behaviour of those in authority. Thus, the delinquent school-child trades-off the disapproval of teachers for the approval of peers. In this sense, conformity to school norms will get the child very little, While conformity to deviant norms will at least provide some form of social reward.

For theorists like Cloward and Ohlin, non-conformity to "mainstream" social norms is a result of the culture into which people are born. if they are socialised into a "deviant" working class culture, then they will exhibit deviant behaviour (in terms of wider cultural norms).

For Miller, deviant behaviour is the result of over-socialisation into cultural norms that conflict with wider (middle class?) norms.

Power:

In common with Functionalist and ecological theories, there is again little discussion of a possible relationship between power, deviance and social control.

Once again, sub-cultural theories tend to reflect the idea that there is a basic consensus in society over what constitutes crime and deviance. In addition, there is little, if any, discussion over how laws come to be created in the first place and little sense in which various cultures possess differential access to power in society. For example, although reactive sub-cultures are clearly oppositional in their impact, there is little or no analysis of the basis of the power which some groups clearly possess in order for such reactive sub-cultures to develop.