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Rethinking Subculture and Subcultural Theory in the Study of Youth Crime – A Theoretical Discourse

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Abstract

Subcultural theory is an invention of the Anglo-American sociologists and criminologists of the 1960s and 1970s. They chiefly refer to male urban working class youths whose behaviours are contrary to the dominant society. These youths are usually culturally identified with music, dress code, tattoo, and language. Whereas, it is assumed that subculture refers to lower subordinate or dominant status of social group labelled as such, yet, in societies where the Anglo/American cultural identities are wanting, it becomes difficult to recognise such deviant group of youths as subculture.

This paper argues there should be a rethink about “subculture” and “subcultural theory”. The rethink must ensure that youth subcultures are not benchmarked by those Anglo/American cultural identities, but should in the main refer to youths whose behaviours are oppositional to the mainstream culture, irrespective of the societies they come from.

Meaning of subculture(s)

One of the assumptions about “subculture” is the lower, subordinate, or deviant status of social groups labelled as such. These labelled groupings are distinguished by their class, ethnicity, language, poor and working class situations (Cutler, 2006); age or generation (Maira, 1999). These cultural and socio-structural variables make subcultures relatively homogeneous (Epstein, 2002). That is to say, subcultures must bear specific and similar cultural identities to qualify for the name, and they must also be particular to certain societies that labelled them as such. In most cases reference must be made to the Anglo/American youth subcultures, which dominated the whole idea of subculture and subcultural theory for many decades.

Phil Cohen (1972:23), one of the most influential British subcultural scholars describes subculture (s):

as so many variations on a central theme – the contradiction, at an ideological level, between traditional working class Puritanism, and the new hedonism of consumption; at an economic level, between the future as part of the socially mobile elite, or as part of the new lumpen. Mods, Parkers, Skinheads, Crombies, all represent, in their different ways, an attempt to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in their parent culture, and to combine these with elements selected from other class fractions.

Cohen has clearly indicated that subculture has many varied ways of describing it, which seem contradictory. Irrespective of all these different patterns, the overriding principle is the struggle of the membership to aim at solving the problem created by the dominant culture, which apparently has been considered the main object of subcultural formation. As Newburn (2013) argues, the emergence of subculture is not just to respond to human material conditions, but far beyond that, they also represent a symbolic appraisal of the parent culture in which “style” was considered a form of resistance. Similarly, Jones (2013) stresses that the subcultural activity of youths is a manifestation of political reaction to the dominant culture from which such youths considered themselves excluded.

Since the 1990s, the term subculture has been used in a much broader perspective to explain any group of people who adjust to norms of behaviour, values, beliefs, consumption patterns, and lifestyle choices that are distinct from those of the dominant mainstream culture (Cutler, 2006). According to Gelder (2005: 1):

Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do, and where they do it. They may represent themselves in this way; since subcultures are usually aware of their differences, bemoaning them, relishing them, exploiting them, and so on. But they will also be represented like this by others, who in response can

bring an entire apparatus of social classification and regulation to bear upon them.

Gelder's definition takes into account the distinctiveness between the groups themselves on the one hand; and mainstream society on the other. The groups feel marginalized because of their life situation, hence they decide to exhibit negative behaviour. Gelder also reveals how the entire society views these groups, and especially the way they categorize and isolate them as "subcultures". Yet subcultures share elements of the main culture, while at the same time different from it (Brake, 1987: 6).

In the generic sense, the term subculture could be applied to any group of individuals whose behaviour differs from the rest of society. For example, we hear about occupational subculture (Trice, 1993; Downes, 1966; Brake, 1985); religious subculture (Gay & Ellison, 1993); consumer subculture (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995); drug subculture (Cutler, 2006; Cohen & Sas, 1994), immigrant subculture (Brake, 1987); internet or cybercrime subculture (Adeniran, 2008; Kahn & Kellner, 2006), police subculture (Waddington, 1999; Blumenstein et al, 2012), and so on. This wider description of subculture has come to the attention of some scholars (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2006; Cutler, 2006) who query its utility, hence their call for a reconceptualisation or replacement of the term. This new conceptualisation, it is argued, captures the changing sensibilities and practices of subcultural forms (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2006) in relation to youth groups who are now being referred to as "channels or subchannels"; "temporary substream networks"; "neo-tribes" and "clubculture" (see Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2006).

While this reconceptualisation project does not receive the outright approval of scholars like Hodkinson (2002), it is apparent that some of these confusions can be clarified once there is a recognition that different concepts are often used to abstract varied aspects of social reality, and that they can be used interchangeably with subculture to refer to a variety of youth cultural formations (see Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2006), that may have either a criminal or non-criminal connotation. A criminal group of youths is indicative of criminal subculture, which bears on the dominant culture. Therefore, a reconceptualised idea of subculture must have "relative distinctiveness", provide a sense of "identity", a level of "commitment", and the relative "autonomy" to operate (see Hall & Jefferson, 2006; Hodkinson, 2002).

Evolution of subcultural theory and theorists

Subcultural theory and theorists have a unique Western origin. For more than half a century, subcultural theory has increasingly influenced the study of youth crime (Young, 2010). In doing so, it has developed two waves on the two sides of the Atlantic - a liberal or structural-functionalist American current of the 1950s and 1960s; and a Marxist British version of the late 1970s (see Young, 2010; Newburn, 2007; Blackman, 2005). The former started at the Chicago School, while the latter originated from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham (CCCS) (see Young, 2010).

In 1892, the University of Chicago decided to establish a Department of Sociology, with Albion Small as its founding head. Since then the School has had a great influence

on criminological thought (Newburn, 2013). By the 1930s, the Department was already actively vibrant in ethnographic studies. Eminent scholars like Walter Reckless, Fredrick Trasher, Everett Hughes, Robert Park, Edwin Sutherland, Clifford Shaw, Henry McKay, Louis Wirth and Gerald Suttles engaged in the study of immigrant and minority communities, the city's entire population and their criminal behaviours (Newburn, 2013). These scholars came to a conclusion that crime is necessarily a social problem rather than an individual pathological issue (Lilly et al, 2011). As Short (2002) admits, the best Chicago legacy to criminology which has evolved, is still evolving, and hopefully will continue to evolve is the project on Human Development in Chicago Neighbourhoods, which has led to the study of different aspects of crime and delinquency affecting the area, not excluding the youth groups who may come together to form subculture (s).

The Chicago School first used the concept "subculture" in their explanation of delinquency (see for example Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Cohen (1955) went as far as developing Merton's anomic propositions in his seminal work, *Delinquent Boys*. He argued that a large group of male adolescents had developed a culture, with its norms, values, and expectations contrary to the dominant culture. This subculture emerged when youths from lower socio-economic status families struggled to achieve success. When compared to youths from middle class society, those from the lower class had disadvantaged academic backgrounds. Their inability to achieve success brought about their involvement in a subculture where they could find success and status enhancement. So, this subculture refused middle class values such as academic achievement, courtesy and delayed gratification (see also Nihart et al, 2005). Cohen concludes that this delinquent subculture is "non-utilitarian", "malicious" and "negativistic" (Cohen, 1955: 25) because it is used by status-frustrated youths as a hit-back mechanism (Macdonald, 2001: 33). Therefore, from the point of view of the youths themselves, their conduct is to be considered as meaningful (see Clubb, 2001).

Miller (1958) further developed the work of Cohen by identifying what he refers to as "focal concerns" of the lower class culture. He uses "focal concerns" in preference to "value"; and they include: trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate and autonomy. Apparently, the "focal concerns" are a reflection of working class traditions rather than working class frustrations (see also Macdonald, 2001: 34). For Miller, middle-class norms and values are not subculturally relevant. What is relevant, he argues, is that members of the subculture conform to the distinctive value system of their own working class culture (see also Macdonald, 2001: 33). This implies that people's circumstances in life may push them to adopt certain measures or patterns of behaviour, which may be beneficial or not. Miller put this question: why is the commission of crimes a customary feature of gangs? His answer is: street youths are motivated to commit crime by the desire to achieve ends, status, or conditions which are valued, and to avoid those that are disvalued within their most meaningful cultural milieu, through those culturally available avenues which appear as the most feasible means of achieving those ends (Miller, 1958: 17).

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) improved on the groundwork established by both Cohen and Miller, namely the kind of environment that gave rise to delinquent youths (see also Nihart et al, 2005). As Cloward and Ohlin (1960: 86) maintain, adolescents who form delinquent subcultures, have internalized an emphasis upon conformist goals. Drawing on Merton's (1938) anomie-strain theory and Shaw and McKay's (1942) social disorganisation theory, Cloward and Ohlin argued that lower class boys were faced with inadequacies of lawful avenues of access to these goals and unable to revise their ambitions downward, they experienced severe disappointments, hence their involvement in higher levels of delinquency than middle and upper class youths (see also Nihart et al,

2005). Thus, unfavourable and disappointing expectation in life could determine delinquent behaviour as a viable option. Finally, Cloward and Ohlin outlined three typologies of deviant subculture namely: criminal, conflict, and retreatist.

British subcultural studies which flourished in the 1970s, was mostly pioneered by the CCCS, which earlier started in 1964, with the appointment of Richard Hoggart as its founding Director. Hoggart's influential work, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond William's work, *Culture and Society* (1958) became the foundational texts for British subcultural studies (Newburn, 2013). This year marks the 50th anniversary of the CCCS 1964-2014, and all this while, the CCCS has been fully involved in the study of popular culture and its impact on society. Like the Chicago School, the early Birmingham School focused on the link between the "deviant" sensibilities of youth "gangs" and the localities from which such gangs emerged (Bennett, 1999). Ecological studies of various parts of post-war Britain¹ found poverty as the main cause of delinquency, especially when combined with the absence of the father figure. In the 1950s, the absent or working mother came in for criticism. Child-rearing practices were compared, and working class life was seen as divided into "the rough" and "the respectable". Delinquency was found to have local traditions and values in underprivileged areas of Liverpool and London (see Brake, 1987: 59). An extreme situation was such that the so called "respectable" working class had no other option than to accept minor office jobs. This was because the working class became polarised following the replacement of the traditional skilled work with automation and machinery (Jones, 2013).

With the publication of the CCCS research, British studies of youth culture experienced two fundamental changes. Firstly, emphasis shifted from the study of youth gangs to style-based youth cultures, such as Teddy boys, Mods, Rockers and Skinheads, which from the 1950s onwards rapidly became an essential feature of everyday British social life. Secondly, in keeping with the central hypothesis of the CCCS, as noted above, the "local" focus of earlier youth studies was given up completely in favour of a subcultural model of explanation (Bennett, 1999). The initial Chicago School's premise that subcultures are critical to an understanding of deviance as normal behaviour in the face of particular social circumstances was reworked by the Birmingham School in their most influential work, *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976), to account for the style-centred youth cultures of post-war Britain. According to the CCCS, the deviant behaviour of such youth "subcultures" had to be understood as the collective reaction of youths themselves, or rather working-class youths, to structural changes taking place in British post-war society (Bennett, 1999).

In his assessment of the two subcultural waves mentioned above, Cohen (1980: vi) said: "Both work with the same "problematic" ... growing up in a class society; both identify the same vulnerable group: the urban male working-class late adolescents; both see delinquency as a collective solution to a structurally imposed problem" in the polity. These subcultures are known for their cultural identities (such as common language, code of dressing, and music) shared by popular subcultural groups like Teddy boys, Punks, and Hip hops. These cultural identities mark them out and distinguish them from any other group or groups. Such identities present what their behaviours look like among their memberships, which they exhibit with interest and at times frustrations. Their behaviours may be criminal and noncriminal, but apparently criminal behaviours are easily identifiable among youth subcultures. It is on this note that subcultural theorists have always insisted that they are better placed to explain criminal behaviour (Blackman,

¹Thanks to scholars like Mays (1954); Morris (1957); Kerr (1958) for conducting such studies.

2005), and no study of youth delinquency can easily be undertaken without recourse to many of their insights (Newburn, 2007). This is because subcultural theorists tend to consider the general nature of delinquency with an emphasis on youth gangs and groups instead of the individual deviant (Newburn, 2007). Thus, they place the group in the context of the entire society (see Young, 2010).

Delinquency is not about something individualistic, but refers to “gangs of boys doing things together, their actions deriving their meaning and flavour from the fact of togetherness and governed by a set of common understanding, common sentiments and common loyalties” (Cohen 1955: 178 cited in Gelder, 2005: 21). To be involved in group delinquency also implies that the individual takes delight and relief in the protective and sympathetic comfort of the group as he shares his experience of facing common tasks with them (Walsh, 1986). It is usually the group’s decision to get involved in crime, and acts in like manner. Even though the boundaries may not be well defined and the membership not specified nor does the degree of commitment, yet the subculture constitutes a definitive human association for those involved in it. It does not only involve a group of people but also a network of symbols, meaning and knowledge, which are linked with style that emerge in the day-to-day dynamics of criminal events and criminal subcultures (Ferrell, 1995).

In subcultural theory, deviant subcultures are construed not as pathological groupings of maladjusted people deficient of culture, instead they are understood as meaningful attempts to resolve problems faced by the people concerned (Young, 2010; see also Brake, 1985). As Cohen (1955) argues, all human action, not excluding delinquency, is an ongoing process of problem solving. Such problems may be located in the political, cultural, social and economic structures of mainstream society. Any attempt not to solve these problems is normally resisted, even with impunity, by the subcultural group involved.

Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) dealt with the issue of subculture in their seminal work, *Subculture of Violence*. They argue that the subculture is secluded and opposed to the dominant group due to the latter’s shared values which its members have learnt and adopted overtime. Such values create total disintegration and at times open aggression against the dominant group. It is also their view that violent crimes such as homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault emanate from the subculture overpopulated by male youths (1967: 298).

Contemporary criminologists have invoked the principles of subcultural theorisation in their various studies of youth offending, including armed robbery. For example, Jacobs and Wright (1999) interviewed 86 active armed robbers in St Louis Missouri (USA), on the impact of “street culture” on an offender’s decision to engage in armed robbery. They conclude that “street culture subsumes a number of powerful conduct norms, including but not limited to the hedonistic pursuit of sensory stimulation, disdain for conventional living, lack of future orientation, and persistent eschewal of responsibility” (Jacobs & Wright, 1999: 165).

Anderson’s (1994) most influential work, *Code of the Street*, reveals a somewhat disparity existing between two opposing camps. First, there is the inner city poor black American youths who get involved in criminal activities like mugging, robbery and so on, through formation of street codes as their moral guide for aggressive and violent criminal behaviour. Although Anderson did not refer to them as “subculture” but it is implicit, given their way of life. Recurring variables in society such as social injustice, poverty and

inequality may have motivated these youths to create their own group independent of the mainstream community. Anderson (1994) talks about another group known as “decent family” who are middle class oriented, and aligned to mainstream society. He argues that while families with a decency orientation are normally opposed to the values of the street code; they often reluctantly encourage their children's familiarity with it to enable them negotiate the inner-city environment. This largely helps to prevent violent clashes between the two competing camps.

Anderson's (1994) street youths have their code of dressing and manner of behaviour which make them quite distinct from the rest of society. They see themselves as victims of the larger society and so exhibit a differential attitude to law enforcement agencies and mainstream culture because they feel nothing is being done to support them in alleviating their social problems. It is this aversion to the norms of mainstream society that makes them a deviant subculture. In essence, criminal behaviour is often predicated on subcultural behaviour (Ferrell, 1995; 1999). However, not all subcultures are deviant or criminal-oriented. For example, Cohen & Sas (1994) in their study of cocaine use in Amsterdam identified a large pool of experienced community based cocaine users as non-deviant, as opposed to treatment clients, prison inmates, or prostitutes.

Criticisms of subculture and subcultural theory

To begin with, the notion of subculture has never really been adequately defined. Even when definitions are attempted, they are generically driven and without any connection with youth delinquency, which the concept purports to be addressing. As Bennett (1999: 599) stresses, “the problems of using ‘subculture’ is that it has sometimes been applied inexactly, becoming little more than a convenient ‘catch-all’ term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect”. It is little wonder that “subculture” has been used as an ad hoc concept whenever a writer wishes to emphasize the normative aspects of behaviour contrary to some general standard. The result has been a blurring of the meaning of the term, confusion with other terms, and a failure frequently to distinguish between two levels of social causation (see Yinger, 1960: 625-6 cited in Jenks, 2005: 7). Arguably, though, the random use of the term “subculture” to apply to those who live oppositional to the mainstream society as those who have no positive ideals to pursue, makes them all the more isolated from the larger society. On this view, their marginalization is simply intensified by their designation as a “subculture” (Jenks, 2005: 130), which becomes a sort of “label” on the group. Yet subcultural theory is obviously different from labelling theory.

Subcultural theory fails to clearly distinguish between “subcultures” and “gangs”. Every so often, it tries to merge the two together in the name of studying deviant criminal groups. For example, Walsh (1986: 19) makes this merger by arguing that the concept of “gang” and “subculture” are conventionally used to explain the cultural enclave in which the apprenticeship process occurs, stressing group support, both physical and in the sense of shared guilt or blame after events. In doing so, he begs the question about the authenticity of the so-called “subcultures”. It is important to stress that both concepts are different in every respect. Gangs are informally-structured “near groups” made up of a closely connected core with a looser network of peripheral members; whereas subcultures are the cluster of actions, values, style, imagery and lifestyles which through media reportage, extend beyond a neighbourhood to form a complex relationship with other larger cultures to form a symbolic pseudo-community (Brake, 1987). This distinction is obviously important if we are to avoid the misrepresentation of subculture as almost anything any person may conjecture. Otherwise, looking at the formal and substantive elements of “subculture”, if the term were to be introduced for the first time

now, it would be dismissed as inadequate (Clark 1974 cited in Brake, 1987) in the sense that every group may be regarded as subculture.

The subcultural approach is notoriously “overly deterministic” in its emphasis on the “peer group” or “gangs” or rather “group criminality”; but it tends to be silent about the place of “personal choice” and “free will” in criminal behaviour (Clubb, 2001). Being in a subculture or gang makes delinquent activity more likely by actively promoting it, nevertheless, this does not make deviant behaviour obligatory. Crime can still be committed for personal reasons rather than as a group requirement (Clubb, 2001; Williams, 1997). Crime causation is a matter for the individual to deal with without much concern for the group (Clubb, 2001). This also has been a favourable argument for Merton’s anomie theory. However, according to Sutherland and Cressey’s differential association theory (1978), the values which encourage peers to commit crime are learnt alongside the techniques to commit crime. When peers behave contrary to the group, they break away from the group’s solidarity. Group solidarity is a formidable and pivotal force as far as the subculture is concerned. Therefore, being overly deterministic is a subcultural “complacency” to perpetuate criminal behaviour among youths.

The claim of subcultural theorists to be better placed in the study of youth delinquency is overexaggerated, and indeed a monopolistic way of denying other theorists such as strain, control and labelling, their contribution to youth crime. Whereas subcultural theorists have a stake in explaining group delinquency, they are deficient in understanding individual criminality. Group criminality presupposes individual criminality, which may degenerate into peer delinquency in the form of a subculture.

Subcultural theorists claim that deviance could be better comprehended in social and political settings, but not as something drawn from biology or psychology (Newburn, 2007). In this connection, they visualise crime as something found around a people’s culture; (see Ferrell, 1999), but at the same time dissociating themselves from the classical theorisation of criminal behaviour as something “inborn” in people. Thus, subcultural theorists seem to delve into *argumentum petitio principii* (argument in a circle), and so lack the ability of a convincing hypothesis.

The issue of a group’s homogeneity makes subcultural formation utterly “selective” and strictly pro-western. Whereas it is utterly unnecessary to look for a homogeneous youth criminal population before grouping them into a subcultural form, but youths of different age brackets and multi-ethnic or multi-tribal backgrounds can still coalesce as a subculture to address what they perceive as youth problems in the polity. Considering this line of thought as somewhat credible, subcultures can then cut across national and continental frontiers so as to be better understood and defined appropriately.

There has been a consistent attack on subcultural theory for having only one vulnerable group of people in mind, that is urban male working class late adolescents (see for example Macdonald, 2001). This position of criminologists from both sides of the Atlantic has overdominated subcultural studies with a stereotype of the youthful offender. An all-important question is: why has a particular group of individuals remained the focus of subcultural theorists as those that can be associated with delinquency? Subcultural theorists should make a leap and extend their studies to various groups of youths in post-modern societies so as to understand the dynamics of youth delinquency. Criminologists from Africa, for example, must now rise to the challenge of creating their own school of subcultural studies instead of depending on the sort of “benchmark” set by both the Chicago and Birmingham Schools as a parameter for subcultural studies.

As part of that Western formulation, scholars (Redhead, 1990; Melechi, 1993; Miles, 1995; Malbond, 1998; Muggleton, 1997; Bennett, 2000) have argued that subcultures were created by subcultural theorists, not vice versa. That is to say, subcultural theorists determine what subcultures should necessarily represent. They label them with specific nomenclatures for easy identification. For instance, American theorists would answer the question about the delinquent by referring to the “delinquent subculture” involving coded honours based on “Rep” and the mobilisation of violence (Young, 2010). British theorists would talk about the Teds, Punks, Mods, and so on, by clearly defining their styles, thereby ignoring the lack of clarity of the actors involved (Young, 2010). In this sense, subcultural theory may be accused of being over-dominated by Western criminologists, and indeed so, especially American and British scholars, to an extent that any study of youth subcultures elsewhere must be influenced by studies from either or both countries. The danger is that subcultural theorists from both sides of the Atlantic end up glamorising delinquents by “popularising” them as Rep, Mods, Teds, Hip hops etc, with the end result that the criminal behaviours of youth subcultures are downplayed and accepted as part of the acclaimed “popular culture” where every behaviour is accepted as part of the societal norm.

Subcultures are male-dominated so much so that an emphasis on “maleness” is seen as a panacea for an identity that has been weakened by structural features (Brake, 1987). Perhaps the invisibility of girls’ subculture is because the very term “subculture” has right from the beginning, acquired such consistently masculine overtones (McRobbie and Garber, 2005). In this connection, men are regarded as more criminally-minded than women, hence the “absence of girls from the whole of literature in this area is quite striking and demands explanation” (McRobbie & Garber, 1976: 209), and very little seems to have been written about the involvement of girls in group delinquency (McRobbie and Garber, 2005); but whenever they are acknowledged in the literature, the focus tends to shift to their sexual attractiveness, thereby neglecting the holistic study of female group delinquency, which supposedly is a crucial element of research that can explore the gender divide in offending.

Subcultural theory has been accused of over-prediction with regard to delinquency. For example, among the poorest working class communities, crime is not ever-present in all individuals (see Newburn, 2007), yet subcultural theory makes a blanket assumption of criminalising everybody. In addition to that, critics maintain that subcultural theory is unnecessarily over-rational in an attempt to grant human actors a sense of making their history in a determinate world. Consequent to that is an unreflective bouncing off the conditions that beset such people (Young, 2010) hence the freedom to drift (Matza, 1964) into crime. For instance, the robber continues to rob, the alcoholic continues to drink and get drunk (see Young, 2010), so much so that a culture of crime is developed and animated.

The problem of subcultural theorisation is such that tends to split up a whole society when it talks about “deviants”, perhaps suggesting there are also non-deviants. This makes the deviants to claim a moral high ground for their actions, but at the same time finding faults with the mainstream society. Arguably, for the deviant, the mainstream is seen as deviant; whereas for the mainstream, the subculture is the deviant. This war of words is aimed at criminalising either side which might end up breeding anger and dissention between the mainstream and the subculture. In the end it is still the deviant subculture that appears to bear the label “subculture”. According to Jenks (2005: 129) “the idea of subculture can be employed to valorise the underdog, radicalize the dispossessed, give voice to the inarticulate but equally to marginalize and contain the deviant or non-mainstream”.

If by subculture we are referring to the well-known theory of the 1950s and 1970s, then it might not be feasible to employ it in the explanation of youth crime in Africa where age, state of origin, tribe, and geo-political zone do not fit with the homogeneous nature of subculture. Although cultural identities may be crucial to any subcultural formation, they seem to have been overemphasized by the theory, thereby overshadowing the study of criminal behaviour of youth subcultures.

Even if subculture remains the best way to explain more unconventional aspects of youth culture, it does not seem to offer much help for an understanding of the wide range of youth groups in the post-modern world (Cutler, 2006). By that weakness, subcultural theory has probably now, “run its course” (Jenks 2005: 145), become “superfluous” and “no longer relevant” (Chaney 2004: 36) and fails to provide “a useful description of young people’s social world or their experiences” (Karvonen et al, 2001: 393) in relation to crime. Therefore the concept requires a rethink in relation to youth crime.

Rethinking subculture and subcultural theory: Is post-subculture the panacea?

Subculture has been considered a redundant conceptual framework (Bennett, 2011). However opinions vary as to the reason(s) for this, but a somewhat generally held opinion is that the cultural identities of youths had become more reflexive, fluid and fragmented as a result of an ever increasing flow of cultural commodities, images and texts through which more individualised identity projects and notions of self could be fashioned (Bennett, 2011). Implicitly, cultural identities of youths have the tendency of emerging from isolationism and specific grouping to an overarching youth groups who are not so much concerned with specified cultural identities. In short, what might resultantly happen is a subcultural transmigration, cutting across cultures and countries, thus making subcultural groups less homogeneous.

Rethinking subculture brings about a rebranding of the concept, which Readhead (1990) initiated in the post-subculture project; an idea that was later modernised by Muggleton (2000). This post-modern perspective was expected to fill the gap created by subcultural theory, and or even to make-up for its limitations. Accordingly, Weinzierl and Muggleton (2006) attempted to get rid of the whole theoretical apparatus of the CCCS and create a new framework for the analysis of contemporary subcultural phenomena. Post-subcultural theory then came about as a more vehement rejection of the “theoretical orthodoxies of the CCCS”. It wanted an outright annihilation of previous conceptions of subculture, going so far as to argue that the term itself is no longer a useful description of the complex relationships between “post-subcultural formations” and the dominant culture with which they interact (Philpot, 2008).

Whereas post-subcultural theory seems to contribute much to the understanding of the cultural dynamics, which inform youth’s everyday appropriation of music, style and associated objects, images and texts (Bennett, 2011), it is loose to proffer a unified set of alternative, analytical and empirical concepts for the study of youth culture. On its part, subculture can be discredited for adopting a naive and essentially celebratory standpoint concerning the role of the cultural industries in shaping the identities and lifestyle of youths (Bennett, 2011). Since subculture is deemed unfit, postsubculture becomes a mere transformation of subculture in name, which failed to transform an understanding of youth cultural life. Some scholars (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006: 4) argue that empirically, post-subcultural studies tend to ignore the youth cultural lives and identities of less advantaged young people and that, theoretically, they aim at under-playing the potential significance of class and other social inequalities in contemporary youth culture.

Any neglect or total rejection of these variables is detrimental to the proper understanding of the conceptual framework – subculture.

Rethinking subculture and subcultural theory implies seeking alternative ways of using the concept and theory to address youth criminal activity globally. Rather than employ alternative terminologies such as post-subculture, which eventually became counter-productive and indeed repetitious of the classic subculture, a persuasive suggestion is that the useage of subculture and subcultural theory be widened to embrace a universal explanation of youth criminal life. The notion of globalization or rather the world being a “global village”, coupled with modern technology, may have a major role to play here, in the sense that youths of nowadays are far more informed by the social media networks to behave in similar ways. When in 1964, Marshall McLuhan, a renowned American Communications expert came up with the concept “global village”, he envisaged or rather predicted the world’s culture would sooner or later shrink or even expand as a result of a perverse technological savvy society, which may have exposed itself to instantaneous sharing of culture (Dixon, 2009). Since the Internet is the fastest mechanism for culture sharing, and of course, the Anglo-American societies also dominate the traffic; they also possess an overpowering influence on cultural identities, and tend to influence other societies around the world. In his study of the Canadian youth culture, Brake (1985) argued that many of their cultural forms were “borrowed” rather than “authentic”. For instance, the use of hip-hop by black Canadian youths from the Afro-American culture, or the borrowing of punk hairstyle from England by white youths. These identities are expressed through the use of clothing or the consumption of particular commodities rather than being substantively derived from aboriginal or class-based experiences. This can technically be described as hybridity which “... denotes a wide register of multiple identity, crossover, pick-'n'-mix, boundary-crossing experiences and styles’, reflecting increased migration, mobility and global multiculturalism” (Pieterse, 2001: 221).

Youths who are likely to engage in culture hybridization, may not necessarily be affiliated to a specific or known subcultural group but have the proclivity making either a good or bad impression in the environment they find themselves. A closer look at events of the recent uprisings and revolutions that brought about regime changes in some parts of the world, especially the Arab Spring, shows they were orchestrated by youths of those countries, who though behaved deviantly and violently too, and could as well be regarded as subcultures. They were simply motivated by what they saw other youths within the region did to address their looming societal problems. This tends to affirm that the latent function of a subculture is to express and resolve, albeit “magically” the contradictions which appear in the parent culture (Cohen, 1972: 23). The summation is that youths in various societies are not immuned from behaving alike for the reason that culture contact or interaction may bring about culture influence and or change.

Admittedly, cultural differences still abound, but the concept and theory of subculture should be open to address all deviant youths (male and female alike) of different cultures and societies, for the reason that, as earlier mentioned, variables such as age, sex, and peer group are universally invariant in predicting crime (see also LaFree, 1998; Warr, 2006) and other forms of deviant behaviours. Therefore then, when a group of youths in any culture or nationality behave contrary to the conventional norms of that society, they should qualify for the name “subculture”, whether or not they possess cultural identities. Even so, considering the global nature of society, cultural identities are becoming far more individualistic and seem to be loosing their specificity to a group; and may not say much about them because anybody can develop any type of identity, which may not necessarily infer that they belong to a subculture. For example, the “Mohican” hairstyle was mainly associated with members of the warlike tribe of the North American Indians,

but later taken up by the “punk culture” in Britain, who were anti-establishment at the time. These punks appeared to contradict all the codes their parents believed in and grew up with.

Secondly, the “Skinheads” of the 1970s Britain, were associated with white supremacy and racism, but later metamorphosed into different “political subcultures” which tend to possess racist connotations, such as the National Front (NF) British National Party (BNP) and the English Defence League (EDL). It is very striking that the styles exhibited by the punks and skinheads have become common fashion to some ordinary youths namely, Irish Travellers (Gypsies), Footballers, Artistes, children and others, in many parts of the world, including Africa. The ideology is just people wishing to have a hairstyle of their choice, and again the issue of individualism is underscored. The solution to their problem is far more expressed via style rather than involvement in criminal activity; hence the style of each subculture involves the creation of identities and images built upon objects adopted or borrowed from other cultures and eras (Newburn, 2013). By identifying them as subculture helps to break barriers and broaden the concept so as to allow for inclusivity of youths from different parts of the world.

Conclusion

The American and British understanding of subculture and subcultural theory has weakened both the concept and theory in accounting for a wider youth criminal behaviour because it refers to a selection of western youths with specific cultural identities such as language, music and style. Moreover, the usefulness of subcultural theory in the explanation of youth crime requires thorough scrutiny, in the sense that, rather than place emphasis on the explanation of youth crime, theorists tend to be trapped in the promotion of popular culture and glamorization of youth criminal activity. It has earlier been noted that with little or no attention paid to female youth subculture, subcultural theory tries to exhibit its unviability to fully offer explanation for the involvement of both male and female youths in crime.

The selfish claim of subcultural dominance in the study of youth crime for most part of the twentieth century, makes other criminological theories unimportant and irrelevant. Its self-acclaimed position as a specialized theory for the explanation of criminal behaviour of youths makes it ambitiously egoistic and monopolistic.

However, the employment of “post-subculture” for a change has failed to bring about any improvement on subculture, rather it only established catch phrases which are not far from what is already known about subculture. It was thought that an ascent to post-subculture could solve the problem created by subculture but the difference that exists between both concepts remains vague. What is found to be clear is the rebranding from “subculture to post-subculture”. The propounders of postsubcultural theory being disciples of the CCCS, still maintain the CCCS’ understanding of subculture, which is the obvious “male urban working class youths of post-World War II Britain”.

With that in mind, it is apparently that both subcultural and post-subcultural studies are in the same continuum, and as such, the obvious and inherent limitations of subcultural and post-subcultural theories call for a rethink, which would among other things champion the withdrawal from an over emphasis on specific cultural identities as found in the Anglo/American subcultures and focus more on a broader or rather holistic explanation of the criminal behaviour of both male and female youth subcultures in virtually other societies. That is to say, any behaviour of youths that is anti-mainstream society is to be regarded as subcultural behaviour.

Nevertheless, credit should be accorded both the Chicago School and the CCCS for their interest in the study of youth criminality in both sides of the Atlantic. Yet, both theories are seemingly unprepared to move further afield into the wider domain or rather global explanation of youth cultural life. Although no one theory may account for the

global explanation of crime, but this paper makes the case that subcultural theory should demonstrate a somewhat inclusivity of other youths from other backgrounds and cultures. That is to say, with the globalization of youth culture, aided by the digital age, youth subcultures can emerge in varied styles, from any mainstream society, as a deviant or criminal group, who may not just be suffering from status frustration as the Chicago School would claim, but far beyond that, who are poised to seeking answers to address their generational problems.

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