On the demise and morrow of subculture theories of crime and delinquency

DOI: 10.1080/0735648X.1997.9721588

3 authors, including:

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:
ON THE DEMISE AND MORROW OF SUBCULTURE THEORIES OF CRIME AND DELINQUENCY

J. Mitchell Miller, Albert K. Cohen & Kevin M. Bryant


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.1997.9721588

Published online: 10 Jan 2012.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 236

View related articles

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
ON THE DEMISE AND MORROW OF SUBCULTURE THEORIES OF CRIME AND DELINQUENCY

J. Mitchell Miller  
*University of South Carolina*

Albert K. Cohen  
*University of Connecticut*

Kevin M. Bryant  
*University of North Carolina at Pembroke*

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago subculture theory was described by a prominent theorist as "the dominant theory of crime in the current literature" (Agnew, 1991:283). Given the shrinking portion of empirical criminological research in the last decade wherein subculture has been the primary concept, that assertion certainly seems an overstatement. Nonetheless, the subculture perspective does have a long and prominent history in criminology, especially in delinquency and urban underclass contexts. It represented the forefront of criminological thought and research during the mid-1950’s and through the 1960’s before tapering off as a contributing factor in
explanations of delinquency and, to a lesser extent, adult crime. In this commentary we identify reasons underlying the decreased utilization of the theory so as to establish a reference point for assessing the current situation. We conclude with a focus on present and swiftly approaching social realities that will again make timely more general criminological theorizing rooted in the subculture.

**PREMISES OF SUBCULTURE THEORY**

Subculture theories of crime and delinquency rest on the rudimentary postulate that people internalize values and beliefs. The belief system then orients behavior toward one's environment. Some environments, however, are distinguished by atypical, criminogenic value and normative systems. If crime is not encouraged in these environs, it is at least condoned. Cultural variation is thus a fundamental assumption as is the power of conformity. Subscription to the unconventional is rewarded through increased social status and self-esteem denied subgroup members elsewhere in society.

The study of subcultures from a criminological or criminal justice science orientation is necessarily integrated with study of the legal process. While the production of law has been shown to by no means be aligned with the interests of the populace (Lynch and Groves, 1989), the criminal law is generally regarded (ironically, by the populace) as a product of a normative consensus, a parallel reinforced by both the myths and realities of democratic ideals (Lynch and Groves, 1989). The law thus denotes "conventional" or "dominant" culture. But an important, and again paradoxical, feature of the legal process is the disjuncture between the moral normative value system held by lawmakers and the "positional" norms of various societal groups.

Positional norms, defined by values correlated with combinations of class status, sex, age, race and ethnicity, religious affiliation and similar variables, are often underrepresented in the formal definition of authority. Repudiation of other's societal standards and norms, as specified in law and the rules governing social institutions, fosters greater group cohesion, thus amplifying differences between the value systems of the subculture and the larger society. Thus, another defining characteristic of a subculture is cultural conflict. Accordingly, it is important to make the conceptual distinction between subculture and population segment. The subculture values, of a gang for example, may intensify although membership is
reduced through criminal justice system actions. In short, normative conflict is inherent in social structure; subcultures are very much a manifestation of this conflict.

THE RISE AND DEMISE OF THE SUBCULTURE PERSPECTIVE

Subculture theories dominated criminological thought during the 1950s and 1960s. In stressing that deviant behavior was more or less normal for those within the subculture, several theorists built upon the initial efforts of Cohen (1955), Miller (1958), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), and Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967). Systematic descriptions of the generating processes and patterns of delinquency usually entailed ethnography and focused on group delinquency, often in a gang context (Bordua, 1961; Arnold, 1965; Kobrin, Pontel, and Peluso, 1967). Gangs, with their symbolic and collective features, epitomized a social problem of severe proportions: juvenile delinquency. Rebellious youth, associated with the emergence of the rock and roll era and aided by the appearance of automobiles into daily life, presented a new, visible threat to authority. Policing gangs was equated with addressing a larger issue and funding was available for social science attention to the problem. Major studies thus focused on the gang and both relied on and built upon subculture explanations of delinquency (Miller and Rush, 1996). In short, the rise of the subculture perspective was aided by the circumstances of social transition, a point that also explains, in part, its decline.

By the 1960s a number of interrelated social movements (including the civil rights crusade, anti-Vietnam protest, and the counterculture) were under way. In varying degrees they expressed the same themes: distrust and defiance of authority which was perceived to be used by elite factions to create and maintain hierarchy and exploitation of the weak. Criminology was profoundly affected by the spirit of the times. Its attention shifted from the construction of theory and the explanation of crime and delinquency to opposing the oppressiveness of the criminal justice system.

As bandwagon shifts to the political left transpired, labeling theory soon replaced the subculture explanations as the leading theory (Bookin-Weiner and Horowitz, 1983). The main thrust of labeling theory was that crime and delinquency are definitions and labels that are assigned to persons and events by operatives of the criminal justice system. Explaining crime
and delinquency, from this perspective then, is explaining the way in which the labeling process works, and how it singles out certain people for labeling and not others. In its more extreme formulations, labeling theory was not concerned with the explanation of the behavior we call crime and delinquency because criminals and delinquents were not assumed to differ very much in their behavior from other people. Rather, the real difference is said to be the degree of vulnerability to the labeling activities of the criminal justice system.

During this period of interest in labeling, theoretically oriented research on the relationship between crime and culture languished but did not disappear. More moderate versions of labeling theory propelled some research (e.g., research on gang behavior and emphasis on the role of official processing and labeling in the development of that behavior), but the leading cause of crime and delinquency was considered the criminal justice system itself (Werthman, 1967; Werthman and Piliavin, 1967; Armstrong and Wilson, 1973). Specifically, criminal and delinquent behavior was portrayed as a rational and justified response to social inequality and class oppression (Bookin, 1980).

Much of the contemporary literature of the period (1970s), not just on gangs but on social problems generally, was not only indifferent to subculture theory but was actively opposed to it. This literature included works such as Chambliss' *The Saints and the Roughnecks* (1973) that emphasized a "conflict" perspective which viewed the subculture theories as conservative. Social control was deemed reactionary because crime and delinquency were considered direct, reasonable, and even justifiable adaptations to injustice.

The rise of social control theory (e.g., Hirschi, 1969) did not seriously factor the subculture perspective either, though seemingly well-suited to do so (Bookin-Weiner and Horowitz, 1983; Vold and Bernard, 1986). The central elements of attachment to others, degrees of commitment to conventionality, daily routine, and belief in a moral order speak to why subcultures exist and have implications for criminal behavior therein. Ensuing research interests moved toward macro-level determinants of crime and further away from culture and group behavior. Consequently, subcultures were largely ignored until the mid-1980s when they were seriously connected with often gang-related drug and violence problems (Curry and Spergel, 1988).

While historical developments set into motion a chain of events that moved criminological theorizing away from the subculture, the theory was further marred by paradigmatic shifts in social science research
methodology. The rise of positivism delivered subculture theory a would-be deathblow. There was suddenly a disjuncture between the subculture approach and the new preferred theoretical-methodological symmetry: variable assignment, measurement, and analysis congruent with causality as established by levels of statistical correlation. Critics of subculture theory (e.g., Kitsuse and Dietrick, 1959; Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Kornhauser, 1978) focused on the growing belief that acceptable science must subscribe to particular precepts that subculture explanations did not meet. The theory could not, via a variable analysis format, be adequately tested. Beyond the operationalization problems thwarting concept measurement, there was the more fundamental restraint of tautological reasoning. It was argued that there was unclear separation of cause and effect. Did the subculture, as an independent variable, generate crime, the dependent variable, or vice versa? For many, the inability to answer this question satisfactorily rendered the theory obsolete.

By invoking the popular social stratification perspective in critique of subculture-based explanations of deviance, subculture as an explanatory concept was construed as "ultra-conservative." Similar to biological explanations that "blamed" crime on certain physical traits, subculture was erroneously deemed synonymous with class and race and thought to discount the import of external factors so relevant to the rise of the sociological criminology of the times. In many respects, this old argument remains, although in modified form, in the newer urban underclass theories that also typically define subculture as conservative - thereby again establishing polar continuums. In reality, the initial subculture theories weighed seriously the impact of class inequality which, today, may be a moot point. We can accept that subcultures exist, that they are criminogenic or, at the very least, crime infested, that they correlate with inequality, and that they reiterate. Gang and drug using subcultures have assumed a life of their own and have not proven responsive to efforts aimed at minimizing the social inequity thought to drive them (Miller and Rush, 1996). Were there really a "poverty causes subcultures of which crime is a characteristic" relationship, concentrated efforts that have sought to alleviate underclass problems would have yielded a modicum of improvement as indicated by lower crime rates in given areas, but for the most part, they have not. It is quite possible that social aid programs are counterproductive, that is, they are used to reinforce the subculture that is well defined and feeds off it irrespective of a person, as in the case of the use of food stamps as currency at the street-level of the illicit drug trade.
While historical developments and social science paradigmatic shifts in ideology and methodology explain the collapse of subculture theory in the early 1970s, the theory has been more recently hindered by the "political correctness" movement. In many respects, the notion of being politically correct is a furthering of the same themes introduced during the civil rights era. Attention and sensitivity to virtually any group that can be construed as being disadvantaged, at the hands of social structural forces beyond their control, adamantly discourages any ideology that avers responsibility for crime and other social problems within such groups. The policy implications drawn from a politically correct analysis of virtually any crime issue dislocates responsibility from offenders, instead promoting liberal responses such as increased fiscal investment in the disadvantaged and more rehabilitation and alternative sentencing for offenders. Subculture is thus diametrically opposed to "politically correct" social thought because: (1) the notion of sub indicates inferiority to and embarkation from the normal, (2) liberal policy implications imply that crime is not normal within the subculture but responsive to social condition - a view at odds with the very premises on which the subculture perspective rests, and (3) many disadvantaged or victimized groups contribute disproportionately to the crime rate - a racial reality construed as racist and therefore politically incorrect. Contemporary treatments of subculture theory evidence this spirit of political correctness. A recent test of Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s (1967) theory concentrated on refuting the premise of higher violence among blacks but ironically relied on proxy measures of subculture (Cao, Adams, and Jensen, 1997). In sum, it appears convenient (and popular) for liberal social scientists to invoke and "positivize" subculture concepts when it useful to do so, while simultaneously pointing to the "methodological inadequacies" of works supporting subculture theories.

The demise of subculture theory, then, can be explained as a result of three interrelated realities. The initial demise was propelled by 1970s social movements that made vogue a liberal ideology from which new criminological theories were developed. Coupled with these changes were paradigmatic shifts in social science research methodology that both were in sync with the newer theories and at odds with subculture explanations. The "problem" with subculture has been sustained more recently by the doctrine of political correctness.
THE FUTURE OF SUBCULTURE THEORY

Ironically, it is the reform of the liberal welfare state that may result in the revitalization of subculture theories. For decades, federal welfare programs (e.g., food stamps and AFDC) founded originally to provide a "safety net" for the disabled and orphans, have had the latent effect of creating intergenerational dependency on these programs. Moreover, welfare dependency has coincided with a moral malaise unprecedented in American history characterized by high levels of illegitimacy, divorce, and crime (Magnet, 1993).

The timeliness of the subculture perspective is also at hand because gang membership, and thus utilitarian crime, stands as a viable alternative to welfare dependency. Criminological theorizing, rooted in the subculture, has always been class-based and since welfare stands to be the most significant development impacting lower-class America, subculture factors will necessarily merit renewed interest from the social science community.

One can only envision the variation in the existing relationships between welfare, ganging, and crime and delinquency. Gang research has already reached an all-time high, evident in part by the 1992 creation of The Gang Journal. Indeed, the 1990s mark what is the "second era" of gang research in the social sciences (Curry and Spergel, 1988; Fagan, 1989; Frias, 1982; Hagedorn, 1988; Jankowski, 1991; Klein, Maxson, and Gordon, 1985; Majors and Billson, 1992; Miller and Rush, 1996; Vigil, 1988). Gang research is driven, in good part, because of belief that gangs are deeply interwoven with numerous social problems of catastrophic proportions such as institutional racism, unemployment, familial disruption, education and, of course, crime.

Those currently crafting gang theories look to the earlier subculture era for comparative purposes. Alleged shortcomings of cultural theories, such as those discussed above, often serve as points of departure for establishing alternative theory. A debate has emerged that centers on whether the underlying causes of gang formation and behavior stem from cultural deficiencies or socioeconomic factors. Accordingly, contemporary gang-based theory is frequently categorized dichotomously: subculture vs. urban underclass.

There is a general reluctance on the part of social scientists to address the shortcomings of underclass and similar social philosophies. This reluctance stems from the proliferation of cultural diversity objectives
throughout academia generally and the social sciences in particular. There is a tendency to avoid defining and analyzing gangs and similar social problems in a manner that may be labeled racial (and especially racist), even in light of well-documented racial or ethnic realities (Cummings and Monti, 1993). As Miller (1990:277) observes:

"The social context of gang life and the social characteristics of most gang members entail a set of extremely sensitive issues involving social class and ethnicity that are highly charged in U.S. society, and evoke strong passions."

Neglect of the influence of race consequently shifts attention to class, nowhere more apparent than in underclass models that excuse crime within ethnic subcultures as an attribute or expression of inequality. The subculture position, however, also focuses on class rather than race, as prominent underclass theorists have observed (Wilson, 1985; Hagedorn, 1988). Portrayals of subculture theory as conservative or racist, while simply not true, augment the underclass approach that is more sympathetic to current liberal ideology. The real difference between the two outlooks, however, is not one of race vs. class, but of causal sequence and resulting policy implications.

Underclass theory is attentive to a causal sequence that erroneously misplaces subculture. Because social inequality is believed to generate ganging, implications for policy are to alleviate blocked economic opportunities and conditions of institutional racism. Despite rhetoric of addressing root causes and cultural investment through diversification, the prescription remains continuation of social welfare programs. If subculture theory is correct and history any indicator, such a strategy will not work.

Social and fiscal resources were previously spent on lower class problems during the 1960s in the "War on Poverty" but met with little success. Liberals bemoan the lack of government resources channeled toward the gang problem despite substantial social and economic investment in "Head Start", gang intervention and like youth service programs. Though problematic, numerous private sector agencies also service a gang clientele. An examination of sixty such programs well evidence that "the nation's failure to remedy its gang problems is not attributable to lack of effort" (Miller, 1990:267). Failed attempts to remedy or even allay social inequality as a means of addressing the U.S. gang problem, then, are not entirely a result of too few nor unequal distribution of resources.
Clearly, the totality of these efforts, public and private, are akin to shooting an elephant with a sling-shot, but it is also logical to expect some return on gang problem investments. Instead of realizing even a modicum of improvement, the reverse appears to be the case. In inner-city areas where social programs for the disadvantaged or underprivileged are centralized, gang-related problems of drugs and violence have not tempered but continue to spiral.

The debate over the determinants of why we have gangs may be an ambiguous point in regard to whether gang policy will be social support or social control oriented. Almost four decades ago, it was submitted that a subculture will become self-perpetuating once created (Cohen, 1955). Likewise, we were warned that eliminating poverty will not necessarily reduce lower-class delinquency (Miller, 1958). But now that welfare block grants are forthcoming, the focus will shift to their impact.

Subculture theories are typically characterized by sociological criminologists as ideological reinforcement for selective law enforcement, in this case, the targeting of minority youth. Because the culture of gangs today clearly encourages crime, there is little doubt that police key on symbols, signals, and other visible indicators of gang activity. However, this is a matter of police responding to a problem where it is most apparent and not necessarily a reflection of a polarized ideological position wherein cultural awareness is a means to biased ends. While it will be important to remember the origins of the theory in what is sure to be a wave of oncoming theoretical attention to subculture, it may be more consequential to avoid blind acceptance of the negative, biased, “ultra-conservative” stereotype from which the theory has suffered. In looking for new relationships between subculture and crime, it is also important that researchers realize that realities may not appear acute, at least at first because the reforms will occur in phases. But when they have taken effect, we predict a gradual, then more pronounced, increase in utilitarian crime in the urban underclass.
REFERENCES


