10.1 Subcultural challenges and challenging subculture: on interpretation and meaning-making outside of the West/Global North

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Abstract

While debates within Western/Northern academic circles over the value of the subculture concept are relatively salient, there continues to be a relative lack of international voices on the role that 'subculture' may play in conceptualizing the everyday lives and realities of various cultural phenomena around the world. This paper introduces a themed session that brings together a set of papers that identifies and challenges existing biases in subcultural theories from positions outside the West/Global North. It first discusses the variety of ways in which contemporary scholarship utilizes the subculture concepts. It then raises the challenge of using a Western/Northern concept for research on what are clearly global, or at least non-Western, topics. Finally, it briefly introduces the work of the other three panelists, situating them within an interpretivist framework. The subsequent papers in this KISMIF session then raise discussions based on their own research on underground music scenes in Portugal, Korea, and China.

Keywords: Asia, interpretivism, subcultural studies, subcultures.

1. Introduction

The title of this paper, "Subcultural challenges and challenging subculture," is intended to draw attention to two interrelated but distinct dimensions of contemporary subcultural research, both of which are rooted in the recognition that there are indeed challenges related to subculture studies today. The point of this paper and the others that make up this KISMIF panel session is to confront some of these challenges by digging into and assessing the *meaning* of subculture as it is used by scholars in their research. In particular, the panel papers collectively question some of the assumptions that are often implicitly embedded in subcultural theory and the subculture concept due to their emergence within the English-speaking West or the Global North.1 While the other papers in this panel will look in some detail at empirical examples in which "subculture" is used within non-Western/non-Northern contexts, this paper will set the stage by saying a bit about subculture as a social-science concept and promoting some analytical reflection on its use as an interpretive frame or tool.

2. Subcultural Challenges

"Subcultural challenges" addresses how subcultural theories and methods have been called into question in a variety of ways since their emergence in the early 20th century. For the sake of brevity, I will focus here only on challenges within the last twenty-or-so years, which have come from a variety of sources, including

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sociology (Bennett, 1999), youth studies (Miles, 2000), music studies (Hesmondhalgh, 2005) and elsewhere. These critiques invariably refer to one version of subcultural theory, put forth by scholars working at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies [CCCS] in the 1970s. *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson, 1976) and/or *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Hebdige, 1979) are typically cited as exemplars alongside a now well-rehearsed set of criticisms. These challenges, which I label as *external challenges* because they consider subculture to be an inadequate concept, are further couched within larger discussions related specifically to youth, music, and/or style—topics assumed to be central to subcultural scholarship.

A key external challenge, mounted via post-subcultural theory, rejected the materialist and structuralist assumptions of CCCS subcultural theory and instead proposed alternate concepts built upon notions of cultural fragmentation, identity pastiche, and consumer lifestyles (see contributions in Bennett, 2004; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003). Post-subcultural theories' underlying assumptions were, in their own turn, also criticized by scholars who saw the pendulum as having swung too far from structural neo-Marxism to equally extreme versions of postmodernism (Blackman, 2005; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006) that marginalized or ignored various issues including shared meaning-making, collective identity and action, power and inequality in favor of subjectivity, consumerism and style surfing. Since then, post-subcultural theory has given way to a more balanced perspective in which subculture continues to hold analytic utility (Bennett, 2011; Blackman & Kempson, 2016; Gelder, 2007; Williams, 2011). But on what grounds? To answer that question, we need to look at how the subculture concept is being used by scholars today.

To get a sense of contemporary subcultural scholarship, I analyzed how the concept has been used in recent empirical studies. Limiting my search to the last three years (2018-mid 2021), I scanned the first three pages of results on Google Scholar for peer-reviewed publications utilizing the term *subculture* in the title. There were many relevant studies, from which I pulled the following nice examples for scrutiny.

- "Rap, Islam and Jihadi Cool: The attractions of the Western jihadi subculture" (Jensen et *al*., 2021)
- Class S: appropriation of 'lesbian' subculture in modern Japanese literature and New Wave cinema (Shamoon, 2021)
- "On the use of jargon and word embeddings to explore subculture within the Reddit's manosphere" (Farrell, Araque, Fernandez et *al*., 2020)
- "Sang subculture in post-reform China" (Tan & Cheng, 2020)
- "An Exploration of the Involuntary Celibate (Incel) Subculture Online" (O'Malley et *al*., 2020)
- "To love beer above all things": An analysis of Brazilian craft beer subculture of consumption (Koch & Sauerbronn, 2019)
- "Grime: Criminal subculture or public counterculture? A critical investigation into the criminalization of Black musical subcultures in the UK" (Fatsis, 2019)
- "Global online subculture surrounding school shootings" (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018)
- "Understanding death, suicide and self-injury among adherents of the emo youth subculture: A qualitative study" (Trnka et *al*., 2018)

I did not read the papers before selecting them; only the titles and enough of each abstract to ascertain whether they represented social-science or humanities research (rather than biological research for example, wherein subculture has a completely different conceptualization).

While all the studies use the term subculture in their titles, they differ notably in their engagement with the concept. In one direction are four studies that explicitly link subcultures to deviance, violence, and/or criminality. Farrell et *al*. (2020) study males from a diverse set of backgrounds and with a diverse set of reasons who interact through social media in ways that promote violence against women. They do not provide a definition of subculture. Instead, they write that subcultures "often promote hate and have sometimes been linked with hate crimes, radicalization, extremism and terror attacks" and work on the premise that subculture's function "to respond to hegemonic culture" (Farrell et *al*., 2020, p. 222). Similarly, O'Malley et *al*. (2020) do not define subculture, but set up the argument that "the belief systems of extremist groups are similar to deviant subcultures in that they form as a reaction to or rejection of societal norms" (O'Malley et *al*., 2020, p. 2) and that males who "experience significant personal distress" in mainstream relationships gravitate toward subcultures in "attempts to find meaning in their alienation" (O'Malley et *al*., 2020, p. 3).

Trnka et *al*.'s (2018) research frames subcultures as being contrary or unacceptable to mainstream culture, for example through linking emo subculture to "death, dying, suicide, and the mutilation of body parts" (Trnka et *al*., 2008, p. 337). Finally, Raitanen and Oksanen's (2018) study of online school shooter communities argues that "subcultures have shared values and cultural practices, that their members use symbols and signs to identify with one another, and that they do so to subvert the norms of dominant or mainstreams society to at least some extent" (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018, p. 197). So despite a lack of clear definitions, the authors sensitize reader readers to the idea(s) that subcultures are characterized as radical, extreme or deviant and that their existence or position is reactionary to some larger culture.

Each study investigates how participants make sense of the world, though the subcultures are typically framed as problematic insomuch as they enable, or legitimate symbols and meanings implicitly defined by the mainstream as illegitimate. Trnka et *al*. (2018) focus on data that portray their participants as troubled individuals and utilize a variety of valanced terms and concepts such as "suicidogenic" and "peer contagion" that paint a distinctly negative and homogeneous image of individuals and collective experiences labeled as subcultural. The other studies however do not frame subculture in homogenous terms. In fact, in highlighting the diversity of subpopulations that inhabit various online communities, Farrell et *al*. (2020), O'Malley et *al*. (2020) and Raitanen and Oksanen's (2018) each seem to work against traditional subcultural frameworks by lumping subpopulations with diverse interests and experiences together. Farrell et al.'s research suggests a shared culture, but for the others there is not much to suggest that community members share values, practices, or even the meaning of subcultural symbols (e.g., Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018, pp. 203-204). What is clear is that these studies rely predominantly on etic definitions of subcultures—i.e., it is the researchers who decide to categorize phenomena as subcultural and not necessarily individuals within the communities or groups being studied. These four studies also frame subcultures in terms of social problems: either the subculture is a problem that needs to be understood and then overcome by mainstream society, or the subculture is recognized as serving a problem-solving function for those who participate in it, even if it is still undesirable to mainstream society. Their focus on collective (rather than individualistic) deviance and problem-solving is foundational to subcultural theory as developed within American sociology and criminology in the early 20th century (Barmaki 2016, Cohen 1955), long before the CCCS's theories of class and style. Notably, three of the four focus primarily on Western white males and the problems they pose in their own societies.

To the contrary, the other studies I selected deal with other groups and cultures, and in different ways. Like the studies already mentioned, Jensen et *al*. (2021) deal with a phenomenon that is at face value highly problematic in the West—Islamic jihad. However, they rely on a CCCS rather than criminological version of subcultural theory as they analyze music via notions of stylistic and ideological dissent, highlighting "the collective agency involved in subcultural stylistic creativity" (Jensen, 2021, p. 3) instead of portraying jihadi rappers as social problems. Likewise, Fatsis (2019) refers to Grime subculture as "rebel music" and a DIY ethos that articulates "the incompatibility of 'Black culture' with mainstream norms and values." Unlike the studies mentioned above, these focus on the intersections between Western subcultural theories and non-Western phenomena. Fatsis describes Grime's emergence from Black immigrant music genres, while Jensen and colleagues describe the processes through which hip-hop music bridges "Western street culture and jihadi culture…making jihadism or jihadist articulations of dissent attractive or fascinating for (some) Western youths" (Fatsis, 2019, p. 10).

Continuing away from the West/North, Tan and Cheng (2020) import Western conceptualizations of subculture into an Asian context. They study the Chinese government's top-down discourse promoting positive attitudes and actions among the citizenry to frame the "*sang*" youth subculture. Sang (丧) is a Chinese word that communicates "defeatism, disenchantment and disconsolation" (Tan and Cheng, 2020, pp. 86-87-89) and is symbolic of some young people's belief that they need "an antidote to unrealistic positivity" promoted in Chinese society; a positivity that ignores many of the problems young people face in the country today (Lu, 2021). Sang subculture is not something you can see on the streets or at the club. It is instead a style of social media text represented through internet memes, which nevertheless resonates with the idea of subculture as collective ideological resistance to "the 'endless pressure' of living in stultifying urban environments that are shaped by a lack of opportunities and negative experiences" (Fatsis, 2019, p. 451).

The final two articles continue a consideration of subculture outside of the West/North. Koch and Sauerbronn (2019) "explore craft beer consumption in Brazil using a sociocultural approach that recognizes that products or consumption activities may serve as

a basis for interaction and social cohesion" (Sauerbronn, 2019: 2). Following Schouten and McAlexander (1995), they promote subculture as "an analytic category that can lead to a better understanding of consumers and the manner in which they organize their lives and identities" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) This draws attention to the active field of subculture studies in business and marketing, which seems to align in some noticeable ways with both CCCS subcultural theory and post-subcultures studies, particularly in their shared focus on consumption and style as identity-markers. Finally, Shamoon's (2021) study of "shōjo bunka" (少女文化 or "girls' culture") also deals with the relationship between subcultures and cultural commodities. A sexual culture that developed in the early 20th century among teenage Japanese girls attending single-sex secondary schools, shōjo bunka supported sexual intimacy among girls during the years in which there were mostly cloistered from boys and thus from pre-marital heterosexual relations. While not an example of a sexual subculture, Shamoon writes, the subsequent commodification and "exploitative representation" (Shamoon, 2021, p. 27) of shōjo bunka practices in mainstream literature and film throughout the mid-20th century unintentionally facilitated the later growth of fan cultures and then gay subcultures within Japan. This study, like the one on craft beer, highlights the continued growth of the subculture concept in relation to consumer practices, while maintaining some analytical interest in consumption, style and identity.

What stood out to me among these nine studies were the broad range of empirical topics on the one hand, and the common concepts and analytic concerns on the other. In a review of two research collections published in the 2010s, I noted that subcultural studies were increasingly focused on identity, history, marginality, and social media (Williams, 2019). In this sample, we can see that much of the data come from the internet and social media sources. Identity and collective problem-solving among groups defined as marginal/peripheral to the mainstream are also visible, but those themes seem subsumed under larger analytic categories, from criminality and violence on one end of the spectrum to leisure and consumer practices on the other end. Except for the article on craft beer, all the studies utilize "subculture" in connection to some sort of social problem. Some frame the subculture as a problem for society, while others frame subculture as a collective problem-solving mechanism. Many of those problems are framed in ideological terms, with a clear demarcation between subcultural phenomena and a so-called "mainstream" or "dominant" culture. At the same time, however, some studies seem to create boundaries and lump groups or categories of people together in ways that are not well supported by the data. Music and style are relevant only to a minority of cases, despite being themes that many scholars presume to be central to subcultural theory.

In sum, the variety of topics and analytic frames suggests that subculture continues to be used across a variety of social-science and humanities-oriented research on distinct, non-normative and/or marginal cultural phenomena. Not only is there continued use of "Chicago" and "Birmingham" versions of subcultural theory, but these theories are being developed and modified to study more international topics. The challenges that subcultural studies have faced, both from the hegemony of the CCCS model and from outside, continue to be met and to varying degrees overcome.

3. Challenging Subculture

The variety of way in which subculture is frame in the studies above suggests that there is a need among scholars to be conscious of how we conceptualize subculture in theory and research. Is it helpful to invoke the term without defining it or delineating it from other concepts, for example? Does or should subculture refer to violence, consumption, shared values, personal identity, problem-solving, style, or some combination or above, or yet other terms? "Challenging subculture" refers to these *internal challenges*, namely, the responsibilities of subcultural scholars to be clear and reflexive in their research practices as they utilize or develop the concept in analytical useful ways. As suggested by the quick review above of some recent studies, early American sociological concerns about marginality and social control have led to a rich tradition in which subculture is used to study deviance, criminality, and extremism. This model has been exported to research around the world (e.g., Hazlehurst & Hazlehurst 2018). Likewise, the British cultural studies tradition has had an immense impact on contemporary studies of youths, styles, and music alike. The question then becomes whether or how subculture is useful for analyzing phenomena that may not easily fit into past conceptualizations.

The conceptual relevance of subculture within the Western projects of modernity and postmodernity is in no small way part of the mythology of contemporary subcultural studies (Williams 2020). As something that was originally imagined and developed among scholars working in English-speaking, first-world countries

(Cohen, 1999[1972]; Gordon, 1947), the subculture concept was developed to fit with specific sets of theoretical predilections and empirical preoccupations (e.g., Clarke et *al*. 1976; Ferrell, 1999). The dominance of earlier theoretical frameworks can sometimes be seen in contemporary studies, for example when a scholar positions youth cultural scenes in former Soviet republics as "peripheral" to an assumed British center of global youth/ music culture (e.g., Allaste, 2015). On the other hand, the concept is being extended or reworked to consider different phenomena from what was typically considered subcultural in the 20th Century (e.g., Christopher et *al*., 2018; Dulin & Dulin, 2020; King & Smith, 2018; Tabrani, 2019; Woo, 2015). For subculture to continue to be used fruitfully by scholars, it may be best to clarify how it functions as a concept before worrying about the contents of the concept itself.

The value of subculture seems clearest when understand it as a *sensitizing* concept. As Blumer (1969:143) argued,

> **Theory is of value in empirical science only to the extent to which it connects fruitfully with the empirical world. Concepts are the means, and the only means of establishing such connection, for it is the concept that points to the empirical instances about which a theoretical proposal is made.**

In this regard, "subculture" is not something that should have fixed or rigid boundaries, nor should it exist primarily as a formalized, abstract theory that is only applied to the natural world in a deductive fashion. Instead, the concept may be grounded in empirical data and checked/modified/developed in terms of the behaviors and/or experiences of those to whom the concept is applied. The concept then would *sensitize* scholars to specific (and varied) types of social and cultural phenomena and processes. A sensitizing concept, "which gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances," differs from what Blumer called definitive concepts, which "refer precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes and fixed benchmarks" (Blumer, 1969, pp. 147-148).2 In his study of nerds, geeks, gamers and fans as subcultural phenomena, Woo (2015) argues that subculture is a valuable concept not because of any formal theory or operationalized definition, but because "it has face validity [and is] phenomenologically real for members" of self-identifying subcultural groups. I would extend this point to bring the researcher into the interpretive frame as well: subcultural theories function to the extent that researchers use them to sensitize themselves to cultural phenomena that are either experienced as subcultural by research participants, or that otherwise help them frame empirical findings within a larger field of subcultural scholarship. These are reiterative approaches in which "subculture" may be applied but is always contextualized, often modified, or even bracketed by researchers (e.g., Williams & Kamaludeen, 2017) to improve collective understandings of relevant phenomena in everyday life.

The three other KISMIF papers included in this panel session, building upon the same interpretivist premises, further draw our attention to how subculture is used to study group meanings and practices outside the West/ North. While a variety of uses no doubt occur, for the sake of brevity I highlight only two possibilities here, namely when subculture is exported as a Western concept to non-Western/non-Northern locations on the one hand versus when it is reconfigured as a more indigenous or "Southern" (Connell, 2007) concept on the other.

The former seems to be somewhat common, especially among scholars who receive their doctoral training at universities in English-speaking, Western countries. Subcultural theory is learned in terms of its Western histories and traditions and then applied as an interpretive frame in a variety of local contexts (e.g., Bestley et *al*., 2021; Hazlehurst & Hazlehurst, 2018). Studies of heavy metal and punk culture in South and Southeast

Asia for example (Hannerz, 2016; Liew & Fu, 2006; Quader 2016), tend to have implicit concerns with concepts developed by Western scholars in analyses of Western cultures, such as hegemony, resistance, cultural capital and authenticity. On the one hand this is not surprising, given that the subcultures being studied are exported from the West. Further, in each of the studies just mentioned the authors do recognize and engage the significance of Western subcultures' unique glocal instantiations. On the other hand, subcultural concepts remain largely intact and explanatory. Focusing on the CCCS's collective theoretical predilection for seeing resistance, El Zein (2016, p. 91) argues that "the activities that readers of this literature are encouraged to notice are (exclusively) the ones that can be seen to indicate resistance." His point more generally is about the extent to which one's analysis of empirical data is influenced by the hegemony of Western theories.

El Zein's paper is part of a larger move among non-Western scholars to openly question the extent of Western biases upon which subcultural theories may rest. In their introduction to a volume on Arab subcultures, Sabry and Ftouni's (2016, p. 2) ask some important questions, including whether we can "uncouple the term 'subculture' from the specificity of its etymological roots and its appropriations [*sic*] in research in the UK and the US, or [whether] 'subculture' is a universal category that discloses itself in similar ways, regardless of the differences in historical moments or cultural geographies." They go on to suggest that, despite its lexical roots in the English language, it would be a mistake to essentialize the concept in terms of a single "set of concepts and modes of inquiry emergent from within Euro-US academe" because this would overlook "the revisions, transitions and translations that subcultural studies underwent" (Ftouni, 2016, p. 5). The three other papers in this KISMIF session delve further into this issue.

Just as Sabry and Ftouni lump Europe and America together as a hegemonic knowledge-producing space, Paula Guerra's paper, *No More Heroes: From Post-Subcultures to a Critical Return to the Notion of Subculture in the Global South*, also offers "a critical application of the concept of subculture outside its Anglo-American comfort space." According to Guerra, she began her concerted effort to study youth cultures in Portugal—a southern European country with a very different national history than that of the UK or US—by asking the question: what comes after Hebdige? While seeking to integrate sociological and cultural studies perspectives on subculture and related concepts, Guerra follows the CCCS's lead by focusing analytically on resistance as a form of subcultural politics, but does so "on a Southern scale," thereby seeking to map out "similarities and differences" as well as "distances and affinities" between Portugal and its Western/Northern counterparts, where resistant subcultures were first theorized. Despite the mythological status that British subcultural theory may hold here, Guerra nevertheless seeks to make distinct sense of the emergence and experience of subcultural resistance from a Portuguese perspective since the 1980s.

Jumping from Southern Europe to East Asia, Hyunjoon Shin's paper, *A Travel to the Point of No Return? The (Re) signification of 'Sub' in late-20th Century South Korea (and East Asia)*, keeps attention on the significance of the subculture concept outside the West/North, but shifts focus from concerns with subcultural experience to a broader, structural consideration of language. Shamoon (2021, p. 29) notes that "while the English loanword 'subculture' (サブカルチャー, sabukaruchaa) [...is] frequently used in Japanese today, the meaning...is slightly different than in an Anglophone academic context." Shin takes this idea further, noting first that languages built upon pictographic, ideographic, or other non-Roman scripts make precise translations difficult. Second, he explores the cultural interpretations that accompany linguistic translations, highlighting how Asian cultures have quite different notions of "sub-" and it's correlates such as social class, power, marginality, deviance, resistance, and so on when compared to English meanings.

Finally, Jian Xiao's paper, *Reflecting on Subcultural Theories in the Interpretation of Chinese Punk Research*, reflects on some of the conceptual limitations of "resistance" and "authenticity" as Western concepts when conducting subcultural research in China. Xiao points out how resistance developed as a quite different concept in communist China, making it difficult to utilize as a subcultural concept (in CCCS terms), not least because the punk musicians she studied were often confused when she used the term due to its sensitive nature vis-à-vis Chinese authorities and censorship practices. Similarly, "the application of authenticity...can be more problematic since the punk phenomenon is imported to China from the West." On the one hand, Chinese punk may not be authentic in Hebdige's (1979) use of the term since it came after the international commodification of punk music and styles. Yet on the other hand Chinese punks authenticate themselves and their actions through relevant Chinese philosophies such as Zhuangzi or Laozi in "doing nothing" (无为而治) as much as they do through sartorial strategies.

4. Conclusion

The world is a very different place than it was when either the Chicago or Birmingham Schools were theorizing subcultures. The differences have been fueled by globalization, characterized by Appadurai (1990) as the increasingly fast and complex flows of people, technology, money, information and ideas. These processes may have disrupted traditional forms of community, shared meaning and collective practice—concepts upon which classic subcultural theories were built—yet those phenomena do continue to exist. In many cases they are enabled by globalization and in other cases they form as collective responses to it. Subcultural theory was developed within the West/Global North, yet it is more and more common to see it applied to phenomena in other parts of the world. The four papers in this KISMIF session demonstrate not only that subcultural scholarship may be fruitfully conducted around the world, but that such scholarship continues to develop a robust appreciation for the interactions between theory and context.

Endnotes

Like with "subculture," I don't intend to use these terms in any essential or objective sense. They do not refer to real boundaries between parts of the world, but rather are representations of some of the significant divisions that have been constructed through lay and academic theories of social and cultural difference.

The CCCS's theory of subculture, while I think sensitizing in its original intent, has often been (re)framed by critics as relatively definitive in nature, not least because of the insistence on class, style and ideology as "necessary" explanatory components.

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