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Book Review

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The theoretical study of subcultural groups in relation to juvenile delinquency has been a subject of interest for American criminologists and sociologists over the last century (Bordua, 1961). Perhaps, one of the most influential theoretical approaches to juvenile subcultures was the work of Albert K. Cohen. Cohen was the first criminologist to offer a theoretical perspective on juvenile crime, based on an integration of several sociological theories such as Sutherland's differential association theory, Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory, and Robert Merton's anomie theory. Albert K. Cohen's book, *Delinquent boys: The Culture of the Gang* (1955), was the first work that tried to explain how a delinquent subculture emerges and spreads through certain sectors of society (McShane & Williams, 1999).

In *Delinquent boys: The Culture of the Gang* (1955), Cohen noted that delinquent subcultures were the most extensive form of criminality in American cities, especially among lower-class males. Acknowledging that the concept of delinquent subculture itself was not a new one, Cohen tried to give a plausible explanation of the process by which the subculture was created and the way it was adapted to the child. That is, he tried to fill in the gap in the cultural transmissions theories integrating them with psychogenic theories, which viewed delinquency as a way of overcoming a problem of adjustment. Moreover, Cohen attempted to explain why the delinquent subculture exists rather than why a particular individual belongs to it. With such an interesting theoretical integration, it is hard to understand why Cohen did not expand upon his theory by applying it to the individual level. Thus, it will be essential to know not only why subcultures rise and take over, but also why problems of adaptation and adjustment are so vital to the development of individual criminality, in order to create policies and programs that aim to prevent the formation and expansion of juvenile delinquent subcultures.

Following his effort of integrating several criminological and sociological theories, Cohen reviewed predicaments from other theories. He noted that “disorganized” areas are marked by their own social organization, and that Merton’s theory of *anomie* is empirically unable to explain criminality. Consequently, Cohen believed that only an integrative theory of delinquent subcultures would be able to explain delinquency on a macro-theoretical level. “The Facts the Theory Must Fit” include the concentration of delinquent subcultures in the lives of working class boys, and the characteristics of delinquent subcultures. Thus, Cohen characterized them as “non-utilitarian, malicious, and negativistic” (Cohen, 1955, p.25). He exemplified gang theft, which does not have any utilitarian consideration because they usually steal “for the hell of it.” The delinquent subculture is malicious and negativistic in the sense that its members manifest contempt and defiance toward the established societal norms and seem to enjoy the discomfort of others. Also, Cohen asserts that delinquent subcultures are versatile because they did not specialize in particular deviance, unlike many adult gangs and individuals. Cohen believes that delinquent subcultures are characterized by “short-run hedonism.” That is, delinquent boys have little interest in long-term goals, and follow an impulsive approach to deal with everyday life. In his characterization of juvenile criminal subcultures, Cohen assumed that all street-gangs have the same goals, motivations and patterns of behavior. Following studies on juvenile gang composition and behavior it has been shown that different gangs have different goals and characteristics that make the unique. For instance, Huff (1989) classified gangs based in their activity: Hedonistic gangs (drugs); instrumental gangs (property offenses); and, predatory gangs (violent crimes).

Cohen offers the reader a general theory of subcultures by adopting the psychogenic’s arguments about “mechanisms of adjustments.” In Cohen’s opinion, all actions taken by humans

were an effort to solve problems that the individual encountered in his or her daily existence. Every individual is embedded in different environments and situations that limit how they can confront problems and/or what they can do to solve them. Hence, each individual perceives each problem in a different way, which is influenced by subjective factors and external influences—such as social or personal moral standards. Thus, Cohen notes that even when one individual tried to solve a problem by using illegitimate means, the solution was either satisfying or not, depending on the manner that guilt was eliminated by a change in moral standards. Social problems do not have the same meaning for different individuals because they are perceived in relation to the individual's position in the social class system, as the opportunities for attaining economic and social success are not evenly distributed in society. Consequently, some individuals seek new cultural forms that allow them to create their own solutions for their problems through a process called cultural innovation. Consequently, individuals start subcultures through cultural innovation, joined by others with similar problems of adjustment looking for support and approval and new solutions to their problems. In sum, Cohen affirmed that the delinquent subculture is related to working class boys, their problems of status and adjustment and self-conception. In his theoretical model, Cohen did not provide a plausible explanation of the process in which, individuals with problems of adjustment get together to form a delinquent subculture. In other words, all humans have differing degrees of difficulties adapting social environments and their standards. Thus, why do some juveniles join gangs, and others do not when they all have problems of adjustment? Once again, a micro-level explanation is needed to fully understand the processes and development of juvenile delinquent subcultures.

Further, Cohen discussed the relationship of social classes with the emergence of subcultural groups among juveniles. Cohen argued that although working class boys did not

necessarily have more problems of adjustment than middle class boys did, it was conceivable that there was a correlation between social environment, the delinquent subculture influence and the kind of problems working boys face. Since boys are directly related with their family's social status, they do not have any choice other than to accept their social classification. Thus, they perceive themselves as members of a family rather than individuals. The social class that the boys ascribe to, will determine the types of problems and experiences they will have in their lives. Accordingly, the values of the lower working class are highly related to restricted aspirations, short-term goals, lack of planning, training and educational goals. Unfortunately, lower class boys are measured with what Cohen calls "the middle-class measuring rod", which refers to the process in which a working class boy begins to function in school, church and other middle-class-controlled institutions and encounters the middle-class values. He receives a great deal of rejection, disapproval and punishment. This is what Cohen refers to as the problem of status deprivation, which comprises the main problem of adjustment to which juvenile delinquent subcultures serve as a solution (Bordua, 1961). There is a problem of conceptualization in Cohen's argument regarding the measuring-class rod concept. Have all teachers, priests, school officials and others internalized middle-class values? What about those teachers and school officials that specifically work with students in lower-income areas? In his argument, Cohen over-generalized and assumed that all individuals coming in contact with juveniles outside their environment measure them by middle-class standards. Obviously, not all teachers or school officials want to deprive their students from obtaining an education just because they come from a lower-class background.

Finally, Cohen explained what the delinquent subculture has to offer the working class boy. The delinquent subculture provides the working class boy with a new status criteria that

they can meet (in lieu of the middle-class status criteria). Cohen presented three alternatives to respond of the working class boys to the status problem. First, they can desert “the corner-boy” way of life for “the college-boy” way of life. Second, the working class boy can accept his way of life and make the best of it. The third and final alternative is the delinquent response, where the working class boy rejects the middle-class standards. When the boy rejects the middle-class standards, he uses aggression legitimized and supported by others in his same situation in order to defend the subcultural norms. This process constitutes what Cohen called the “reaction-formation” model. Cohen’s typification of working class boys’ reactions is too broad and ambiguous. In fact, he does not offer a clear explanation of the first two alternatives of response to status problems, which could have a very high policy-related value in order to prevent juvenile delinquency and to diminish the influence of delinquent subcultural groups (gangs).

In conclusion, *Delinquent boys: The Culture of the Gang* (1955) was an important addition to the body of criminological theory, and is especially appealing for those criminal justice practitioners and scholars interested in juvenile justice issues. Although Cohen’s theory was well-argued and organized, Cohen failed to establish a link between juvenile delinquent subcultures and individual processes within the group members. That is, individual-level explanations of problems with adjustment and status were not offered by the author even though they may be crucial to obtain an overall picture of the nature of boys’ gangs and their activities. Without these explanations, policy-decisions can not be made in order to augment the gap between theoretical perspectives of crime and applications in the field.

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