NOTES ON THE STATUS OF THE
CONCEPT SUBCULTURE [1970]

THE RECENT EMERGENCE of various folk concepts should entice us to re-examine our notion of subculture. I am speaking of such concepts as 'scene,' 'bag,' and 'thing.' The popular use of these indicates that there have been significant shifts in the phenomenon to which subculture refers. Generally, in sociology, subculture has referred to a subset of patterns recognized by social scientists. The use of the metaphors above indicates that it is presently becoming a subset of patterns that the ordinary man recognizes and responds to. This changes the phenomenon in many essential ways, some of which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Before turning to the contemporary phenomenon, let me briefly analyze the cognitive status of subculture in its two major uses. In the first systematic definitional treatment of subculture, Milton Gordon defines subculture as a subset of cultural patterns carried by a population segment [see Chapter 3]. He argues that it would be useful to divide the American society by ethnic, economic, regional and religious variables into segments with unique subcultures. The division into cultural units is somewhat-arbitrary, however, since the variables applied do not necessarily relate to other subsystems. These are not necessarily subcultures which are attached to particular social structures or are recognized by anyone except the social scientist applying these variables.

In another of its major uses — subculture as a small group or the patterns carried by a small group — the question of the cognitive status of the concept in the minds of its carriers is likewise ignored. In this version, which traces back to the Chicago deviance studies [see Anderson 1923, Thrasher 1927, Shaw 1930, Shaw 1931, Sutherland 1937, Shaw et al., 1938], but which received its major developments in the 1950s [see Cohen 1955, Cloward and Ohlin 1960, Becker 1963], the problem of whether or not the group which is carrying the subculture or whether a larger group who comes into contact with it recognized the distinct set of patterns is never
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considered. In fact, in his milestone treatment in *Delinquent Boys*, Cohen seems to assume that the distinct set of patterns does not extend very far. He feels obliged to explain the emergence of each new set of patterns [see Chapter 4].

Subculture as a social world

In an early treatment of concepts related to subculture, Tamatsu Shibutani actually supplied a conception of subculture which is highly adaptable to the contemporary phenomenon. He did not, however, use the label. He suggested that *reference groups* should be viewed as *reference worlds, or social worlds* which are not tied to any particular collectivity or territory [Shibutani 1955]. He also pointed out that persons could simultaneously or alternately identify with more than one social world. Though Shibutani did not call social worlds or reference worlds subcultures, this is one of the ways in which subculture has been viewed. Subculture, rather than the subset of behavior patterns of a segment, or the patterns of a small group, is often thought of as a social world, a shared perspective, which is not attached firmly to any definite group or segment. It is this version which we will adopt here to make sense of contemporary subcultural phenomena in the United States. One dimension of social world as a subculture which Shibutani did not make explicit must be emphasized: the social world can be and often is an explicit category in the minds of a broader population than social scientists and the group carrying the subculture.

Subculture as an explicit life style

People today are becoming more aware of the existence of subcultures, variant life styles or social worlds, and are more often structuring their own behavior, making decisions and planning future courses of action according to their conception of these explicitly subcultural entities. Concrete evidence of this emerging trend is the appearance of several folk metaphors which refer to styles of life as things. The most current of these is the 'scene.' This metaphor in its present folk usage — such as, in the phrases: 'make the scene' and 'that's not my scene' — refers mainly to a style of life which is well known among insiders and outsiders to the scene. In the first phrase 'make the scene,' the scene usually has a definite location and is transitory. It is something which is occurring at a particular time and place. In the second phrase, it refers to a more permanent life style. The usages share three connotations: (1) The style of life is recognized as an explicit and shared category. In other words a particular scene is well known among some relatively large segment. It must be to be a scene, since the term connotes popularity. (2) There are various styles of life available to a particular person, since there is always more than one scene. (3) Finally, one's commitment to a particular scene is potentially tentative and variable.

Two other metaphors which reflect the explicitness of life styles are 'bag' and 'thing.' The phrases 'that's not my bag' and 'do your own thing,' for instance, both reflect that the life styles are being seen as entities.
American subcultural pluralism and relativism

Of course, these metaphors are only used in the daily speech of a small minority. But a larger segment, perhaps a majority, hears them, at least in the mass media, and recognizes their meaning. This is just one indicator that we are generally aware of the 'subcultural' pluralism of the American society. Perhaps twenty years ago most people took American culture for granted and assumed that it was the same for everyone (with a few obvious exceptions, of course, such as Indians, foreigners, and 'deviants'). Presently, however, because of the mass media, behavioral scientists' exposés of deviant subcultures, geographical mobility, and higher education, a larger segment of American people have recognized the extent of cultural variation in the country. Accompanying this realization is a shift in one's conception of his own values and beliefs. One may no longer take the 'goodness' or the 'rightness' of his own culture or subculture for granted. In effect, he is beginning to experience subcultural relativism.

Subculture as an action system

Increased subcultural pluralism and relativism have effect two important changes in the nature of interaction of the ordinary man. First, one's beliefs, values and cultural meaning have become explicit categories of action. Furthermore, the ordinary man tends to conceive of these categories as a set making up a whole - a lifestyle or cohesive social world. So in a sense persons in interaction are involved in comparing, sharing, negotiating and imparting cultural patterns. While they are doing this they attempt, because of a general human concern for order, to bring the cultural components into a consistent relationship and to maintain boundaries around the system. It may be stated, therefore, that the subculture has become a concrete action system.

Being on

The second manner in which interaction is changing is that persons are more often 'on.' All action categories are becoming more explicit and the person is more often a self-conscious actor. In an article on the dramaturgic model Sheldon Messinger and others suggested that life is not like a theater [Messinger 1962]. They stated that natural interaction is unselfconscious and the actors did not conceive of themselves as actors in a role. The dramaturgic model is useful, they argue, as an analytical tool, but we must remember that it is seldom a concrete model. They did point out, however, that in some life contexts it approaches concreteness. For instance, the Negro is 'on' when he is in the company of whites and the mental patient, who is constantly under the surveillance of judges, is 'on' most of the time. I would like to suggest that with the growing recognition of subcultural pluralism, the increase in subcultural relativism and the emergence of cultural categories as explicit action categories and as a cohesive system, more persons are finding themselves judged by outsiders and finding themselves marginal. They are
increasingly ‘on.’ They more often see themselves as performers in various ‘scenes’ and are becoming more aware of the dimensions of their various performances. Life is becoming more like a theater.

Summary

In former treatment of the concept subculture the cognitive status of the concept in the minds of the folk was not addressed. This is now highly important because subculture is becoming a conscious category at the folk level. The widespread use of the metaphor ‘scene’ reflects this trend. American people are becoming aware of the subcultural variation in their society and are experiencing subcultural relativism.

This subcultural pluralism and relativism is having two important effects on everyday interaction. One’s values, beliefs, and cultural meanings are no longer taken for granted. More often one is involved in consciously comparing, negotiating and sharing these with others. Furthermore one tends to bring these components into some logically consistent relationship, and therefore, the subculture is becoming an explicit and important action system.

Secondly, action categories in general are becoming more explicit. One is more often conscious of himself as an actor in scenes. Life is becoming more like a theater.

Notes

1 Viewing culture or subculture as explicit categories or as an explicit entity in the minds of the folk sidesteps a particularly troublesome dilemma. This is the problem of circular reasoning in employing culture as an independent variable or explanatory concept. For instance, Edwin Lemert has remarked that ‘inescapable circularity lies in the use of culture as a summary to describe modal tendencies in the behavior of human beings and, at the same time, as a term designating the causes of the modal tendencies. The empirically more tenable alternative is that only human beings define, regulate, and control behavior of other human beings’ [Lemert 1964: 5]. But if the folk are making the cultural summary and then defining, regulating and controlling behavior of other human beings on the basis of their cultural summary, the concept takes on independence or explanatory weight.

2 ‘In a later treatment of subculture in his book Assimilation in American Life, Milton Gordon relates this use of subculture to ‘subsociety’ which contains ‘both sexes, all ages, and family groups, and which parallels the larger society in that it provides for a network of groups and institutions extending throughout the individual’s entire life cycle’ [1964: 39]. I find these subsocieties to be rather vague entities, however. Some communities and some ethnic segments may take on the dimensions of a subsociety, but many segments which he has designated as carriers of subcultures by his variables do not seem to.

3 The belief in the consensus of American values and beliefs was reflected in R. K. Merton’s theory of anomie introduced in 1938. Merton suggested at that time that Americans generally shared the same culturally defined goals, purposes and inter-
ests’ [Merton 1938: 673]. It is also revealing that in the 1950s and 1960s this assumption in his theory is one which has been most often questioned. For instance, see Lemert [1964: 64–71].

In a collective statement as an introduction to Toward A General Theory of Action, Talcott Parsons, Edward A. Shils, Gordon W. Allport, Clyde Kluckhohn, Henry A. Murray, Robert R. Sears, Richard C. Sheldon, Samuel A. Stouffer, and Edward C. Tolman write that ‘the cultural tradition in its significance both as an object of orientation and as an element in the orientation of action must be articulated both conceptually and empirically with personalities and social systems. Apart from embodiment in the orientation systems of concrete actors, culture, though existing as a body of artifacts and as systems of symbols, is not in itself organized as a system of action’ [Parsons et al. 1951: 7].