

A Detailed Journey into the Punk Subculture: Punk Outreach in Public Libraries

Introduction

It has been my experience that a misunderstanding of the punk subculture has led to a group of young adults who are not being served by the public library. There is some argument that punk no longer exists - that it was a brief epidemic of angry youths that burned itself out quickly because it couldn't survive with its philosophy of "no future" long enough to spread its ideology; therefore librarians don't need to be concerned about them. In my view, this is not true. In this paper, I will offer a detailed introduction to the punk subculture for those who know very little about it. I will describe their history, symbols, beliefs and value system to give a good sense of who they were and continue to be. I intend to show that Punk exists as a community filled with some troubled, yet highly intelligent and creative young adults that libraries should be aware of so they may begin the difficult task of attracting them into the library. In conclusion, I will discuss some of the problems surrounding inviting a group of people into the library whose major belief system necessitates the denial of convention, tradition and belonging to the status quo.

I have been struck by the number of people who look at me strangely when I tell them my Master's paper topic for library school is a cultural study of the Punk subculture. After some thinking, I realized that I was getting the strange look for two reasons. For one, there is a lack of understanding about what a punk is and second, people do not understand how a cultural study fits into the realm of libraries. It took some thought and a lot of fine-tuning even for me to figure out its relevance to the field of library science. I

knew it was there, but how best to go about expressing it? I have thought long and hard over this and can't get past the feeling that librarians above many others should have a fundamental understanding of the diverse cultures that exist within their surrounding communities. Without an understanding of the community, a library has the difficulty of appealing to strangers.

Can a library ever not want to attract a segment of the public? Is there more benefit to the library by not appealing to punks? The punk subculture contains many problematic elements for a library, beyond marketing techniques which is beyond the scope of this paper. To understand punk is to know that its adherents are destructive, angry and anti-social, forming bonds only with each other which sometimes results in hostility toward others. Where is the balance between what the library can offer and gain by the patronage of a subculture versus what the punks can gain from the library? These problems must be addressed before anyone can determine how best to appeal to a group such as the punks. In order to begin a paper that relies so heavily on an understanding of subcultures, I find it necessary to review some of the literature as it pertains to them in general before moving into my discussion of the punk subculture.

History of Subcultures

The term subculture first came into use in the 1940's, but the definition has changed very much since then. Most authors have agreed that "subcultures are groups of people that have something in common with each other...which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups" (Thornton, 1). Thornton, in the Introduction to the *Subcultures Reader*, offers the most insightful glance into the realm of subcultures, so I rely heavily on her arguments. Many groups of people have similar things in common that set them apart from others, but we do not call them subcultures. The most

obvious would include religious or political affiliation. Groups exist, according to Thornton, in communities, societies and cultures. So what sets a subculture apart? It is helpful to define these three terms and then discuss a subculture in relation to them.

“Community” is often defined as a permanent location built on ties of familial or neighborly kinship. We all grew up in communities, whether in the country, the suburbs, the city or a hundred places in between. We understand that a community can be a city block of row houses in Philadelphia, a suburban apartment complex in Cary or a housing development in Cleveland. Inhabitants shop at the same markets, send their kids to the same schools and may even have similar interests about the quality of the water flowing through their taps or whether or not it is acceptable to hang out on the front doorstep.

While some subcultures boast of offering a “family” to its members, (for example, the Harley Hogs motorcycle gang), the majority of subcultures, according to Thornton are “apart from their families and in states of relative transience” (Thornton, 2). While subcultures do have territories, they “are more often characterized as appropriating parts of the city for their street (rather than domestic) culture” (Thornton, 2). Paul Corrigan supplies an apt example of such a subculture in his essay, “Doing Nothing” (103). The essay “testifies to the intense activity which is involved in the common pursuit of ‘doing

Corrigan, 103). The act of doing nothing begins with picking a place in the city like a street corner and then just waiting. To those around it looks to be a complete waste of time. But soon someone in the group, out of boredom, picks something to do. Normally the resulting activity is destructive. Name calling, fighting or smashing in windows are the examples Corrigan supplies. According to Corrigan, the “Doing Nothing” group is a subculture made up entirely of youth which brings us back to Thornton’s description of a subculture that states that most are typically youth oriented. The only exception she offers is the motorcycle gang subculture and some of the hippie

subculture.

The second term, “society” is also made up of groups of people who share commonalities. However, “society” according to Thornton implies officiality from bureaucratic recruitment to official badges and uniforms. What sets a subculture apart from society is that it is generally informal, though some do require initiation and “looking” the part, as is apparent in the Punk subculture. The idea of “looking the part” is one of the cultural factors of the punks that I will discuss later.

The third term that can be defined as a group of people who share something in common with each other is “culture.” However, placing a “sub” prefix on the term culture implies that, while part of the culture, a subculture is subordinate to the parent culture, an idea that is much discussed in the literature. A subculture, a smaller part of the dominant culture lives within the dominant parent culture. The members of a subculture, then utilize many of the same services, consume many of the same goods, operate within the same legal system (even though they may not believe in it) and walk the same streets. Even the subcultures that rebel against the status-quo are not separate from it. Such rebellious subcultures according to Levine and Stumpf “exist outside the main culture, while illuminating central features of it” (433). For this reason subcultures that rebel are often called reflective subcultures. A reflective subculture is different from the “outlaw” subculture of the motorcycle gangs and the “alternative” subculture of the hippies. (Levine and Stumpf, 433). So while there may be argument about whether or not a subculture is subordinate, it is agreed that a subculture is a part of the dominant culture and helps set its philosophy.

There is more to be said about a subculture than what Thornton offers in her three main definitions. Also useful in defining a subculture is its reliance on class distinction. Michael Brake, in the preface to his book Comparative Youth Culture, writes that

“subcultures arise as attempts to resolve collectively experienced problems resulting in contradiction in the social structure” (Brake, ix). Very often the problems needing to be solved are political or social. Youth subcultures often rise up out of the need for change and in reaction to the stresses of a down-spiraling economy or a bleak looking future. This would explain why many subcultures are comprised of low to middle class urban youths who are reacting to the stress of entering a workforce that has no jobs to offer.

From the literature, then, we can say that subcultures have at least seven major determinants setting them apart or clarifying their differences from communities, societies or cultures. It has been shown through the writings of Thornton, Levine, Stumpf and Brake that subcultures are groups that:

1. have something in common.
2. have different beliefs than the “normal” or dominant culture.
3. are often in the state of transience.
4. are generally informal in structure.
5. are youth oriented.
6. are subordinate to the dominant culture.
7. are reliant on class distinction.

The Punk culture that literally exploded with multicolored and tattered clothes and hair onto the dreary landscape of Britain in 1976 had each of the above seven elements that set them apart from community, society and the parent culture. The inclusion of the seven elements and the distance from the parent culture means that Punk can be defined as a subculture.

History of Punk in England

Britain has been the home of many youth subcultures throughout its recent history.

The Teddy Boys, in their Edwardian suits and short cropped hair, looked like respectable youths. Their style was reminiscent of 30's high fashion. Yet, they fought and raised trouble on the streets in direct paradox to the way they looked. The Teddy Boys played with stereotypes in the way that they "looked" the part of the clean cut ideals of England in the 50's and 60's, but then surprised everyone with a violent street fight or a rash of robberies.

Next were the Mods and Rockers of the 60's. These were music and style conscious subcultures that rode around on decorated scooters or tough looking motorcycles. Factions of both subcultures fought with each other in order to gain "turf" on which to hang out. The Mods valued American consumerism and aspired to be the upper class, although they played with the symbols of the dominant culture. "The conventional insignia of the business world - the suit, collar and tie, short hair, etc. - were stripped of their original connotations - efficiency, ambition, compliance with authority - and transformed into 'empty' fetishes, objects to be desired, fondled and valued in their own right" (Hebdige, 136). In contrast, and the reason for the countless turf wars, the Rockers "acted out an assertion of working class values" (Stratton, 183). The Rockers, in their leather jackets and on their tough looking bikes were outwardly against this sort of blatant consumerism. They did not aspire to the same upper class ideals.

The next subculture of any importance were the Skinheads who were extremely political in nature. Due to the decreasing economy and the influx of foreigners, skinheads revolted with racist and militant tendencies toward anyone who did not fit in. Normally, those who did not fit in were foreigners with whom England's citizens had to compete for jobs. The skinheads were nationalists who wanted to keep Britain pure by discouraging foreigners from immigrating. Often this discouragement took the form of incredible violence enacted in the name of England against those same foreigners.

The punk subculture literally outgrew the “skins.” The first punks in the mid 1970s separated from the Skinheads due to the punks’ anti-establishment ways. Unlike the Skinheads, Punks were against nationalism and government of any organized kind. The punks also did not believe in racism. With seemingly opposing viewpoints, the punks found their own way. But the Punks didn’t only grow out of their aversion to the skinheads. There were a whole slew of other political, social and environmental factors that led up to the development of the punk culture that is complete with a social identity and defining cultural factors that helped to structure their world.

In the mid 1970’s England underwent a recession. “England’s crisis had become what Stuart Hall calls ‘the articulation of a fully fledged capitalist recession, with extremely high rates of inflation, a toppling currency, a savaging of living standards, and a sacrificing of the working class to capital’” (Savage, 229). From this recession came upheaval in the relatively stable lives of the British. This upheaval was particularly stressful to the young who saw their working class parents go from having steady jobs to having none. “One only had to look at the decaying inner cities to realize that poverty and inequality, far from being eradicated, were visible as never before” (Savage, 229). England was suffering from the belief that the country was being invaded and the citizens were being uprooted and left to die. Muggings, strikes and letterbombs were all seen as “a concerted, even orchestrated assault by a multitude of minorities that threatened to swamp the majority” (Savage, 229). This view of foreigners as infiltrating enemies threw England into believing in greater social ills. Conspiracies abounded about what was happening in the government to allow the recession to continue.

In addition to the political problems in Britain, another factor acted as an omen of bad fortune. The summer of 1976 was unusually hot and dry in England and Scotland. A heat wave fully engulfed the country and families that might have been able to take a

holiday out of the sun in the past, were forced by poverty to remain at home. There seemed to be no escape from the fear of the recession and the death of an environment that was usually lush. “By late August, columns of smoke...dotted the landscape like warning beacons” (Savage, 229), and Britain was fearful of the foreboding elements that seemed to take control.

To make things worse, Britain was used to growth. During the 1960's “upper middle class liberalism...had been nourished” (Savage, 230). The fact of lost jobs and a welfare state prevailed. People were frightened and felt trapped in a prison-like state in which they did not have the financial freedom to fight back. The shift from "having" to "not having" made people feel helpless and hopeless and the youth living in Britain were not oblivious to this fact. Many youths were angry at the government and society for relying on a government that was unable to help its own citizens and protect them from these hardships.

The punk movement grew out of this drab and dark environment ready to challenge the status quo and show their contempt for government, society and tradition. “Political and social (even behavioral) extremism seemed very attractive as a way out of this impasse” (Savage, 230). Punk was the natural progression of things. Punk’s main philosophy centered around the idea of shock value accentuated by anti-establishment ideals. Punks were contemptuous of the society around them and attempted to create a more ideal and honest environment that was not hooked on the status quo. The original punks took everything to the extreme: their clothes, their hair, their drugs, their music and their behavior. They were a youth subculture based on doing the complete opposite of every acceptable thing they could think of. They picked the most horrific elements of the past and incorporated symbols of the horrors in their style. They were anti-racist, yet wore swastikas and Nazi arm bands. They were anti-religion, yet wore crosses. They mixed

symbols and styles to shock and horrify onlookers. Punks hung out at railroad stations and bus stops so that the “normal” society would see them. Their statement was to be seen and to stand in the face of tradition in order to mock it.

Punks believed that if the economy could fall it was because it was based on a faulty foundation. They hated the government and thought the only way to live was to make your own rules on a personal level with no regard for the collective. They were anarchists who thought chaos would help to sort out the mess and put things in a natural order. Yet, for all of their concentration on chaos and the jumbling of symbols, punks had a culture of their own.

History of Punk in America

The trends that helped shape punk in England were mirrored in the United States in the 1970s. "Economically the 1970s ushered in an age of diminished opportunities, as the energy crunch and oil embargo of 1973 and early 1974 depressed industrial production and cut the real income of the American workforce" (Bindas, 83). By 1980, it was clear that another recession was on its way. While the angst that kids felt about their futures was obvious, the American punk movement would concentrate less on the working class issues and more on their music.

While it is believed that the Punk movement began in England in 1976 as a reaction against a dwindling economy and bleak future, America heard the first stirrings of a fast, loud, stylistically simplistic music that began with bands like the New York Dolls, the Ramones and Blondie in the early 1970s. These bands tended to attract a fringe culture that had subcultural tendencies. However, the punk image that incorporated the symbols and beliefs of the subculture, such as the colorful hair, the torn-up clothing, and the swastikas and crosses didn't gain popularity in America until the very end of the 1970s and

the early 1980s. There were differences between English punk and American punk in both the culture and the music. At the end of the 1970s, "record companies and producers were advising that the new music showed the punks trying to better fit into the preferences of the American consumer" (Bindas, 84).

The Clash, one of the first English punk bands, found that their American fans "adopted the punk look and not the ideals" (Bindas, 84). It was well known that early American punks were normally attracted to the subculture for its symbols, not for its substance. Perhaps the fact that the "average punk rocker in the U.S. came from a middle class background" (Bindas, 85) meant that the average American punk rocker did not understand and couldn't relate to punk in the same way as kids who were raised in an environment as dreary as England was in the years after World War II. This might explain why early American punk music attempted to sell into the mainstream by becoming "new wave," a highly energetic and danceable mix of music whose lyrics tended toward love and courtship and less toward political or social causes.

Music known in America as hardcore "emerged in the early 80s, first in LA, then elsewhere, mainly in reaction to the commercialization of punk" (Ward, 163). Hardcore, with all of its allusion to pornography is not to be mistaken in that they both "aspire to identical ends - 'going all the way,' 'nothing left to the imagination.'" (Ward, 163). Hardcore was the American reaction to punk and what punk had become earlier in America. The bands, often set up in garages with friends sharing similar mindsets, attempted, and succeeded, in making a type of music that alienated them from others. Threats, name-calling, and just plain ugly words were thrown around to show their solidarity with others who felt just as destructive. Hardcore in New York was equally harsh in nature, especially in Lower Manhattan where urban decay and grit were the prime motivators for kids who were looking for something to do. New York hardcore tended to

get back to some of the original motivators of British punk in that it was politically and socially motivated by the crime and injustice that was seen on the street.

The Culture of the Punks

Within the punk subculture there exists a whole set of cultural factors that help to set it apart from the surrounding society. Even though punk is considered a reflective subculture, illuminating central features of the dominant culture (Levine and Stumpf, 433), punks can still be viewed as a group of individuals with their own culture, values (or lack of values), structure and philosophy. Punk also exhibits other narrower cultural factors such as language and style. The punk culture shows signs of being socially active, and in some ways have influenced the community. They have a definable philosophy further expressed by their art, symbolic objects and folklore. They have taboos that speak to their boundaries and encompassed in the boundaries exist gender and age issues. Their view of outsiders as “others” further accentuates their cultural boundaries. In order to have a complete view of punks as a culture I will discuss each of the above cultural factors as they pertain to the punk movement.

Punk is anti-establishment, anti-status quo, anti-institutional and anti-religious. They believe in anarchy, freedom of the people, destruction of tradition and a basic truth that exists beneath all of these societal constraints. One of punk's main goals is to challenge, both actively and passively, what the dominant society sees as truth: the monarchy (in England), marriage, government in general, etc. The challenge was to get to a more authentic sense of the truth. If punks can get beyond the parent culture's sense of what is true, it opens up a whole new world. “If nothing was true, everything was

Greil Marcus in Lipstick Traces (6). In this desire to go beneath the truth of the parent culture, punks are in essence sorting through that culture in order to make

their own way. Each of these ideas helps to define the Punk world view or philosophy. Each of the institutions and traditions they are against defines every other aspect of their lives. When you pick apart a punk, you don't find chaos, but a very well established and defined code that colors everything from their clothes and hair to their behavior and social activity. "The subculture was nothing if not consistent. There [is] a homological relation between the trashy cut-up clothes and spiky hair, the pogo and the amphetamines, the spitting, the vomiting, the format of fanzines, the insurrectionary poses and the 'soulless,' frantically driven music" (Hebdige, 137). With some idea of what makes a punk tick it becomes easier to tell why a punk looks and acts like a punk.

Style, according to Hans-Georg Soeffner in The Order of Rituals, defines much of what Punk is. The well-ordered code of the punk might look like it is haphazard and dirty with no thought put into it to the general observer, "but if one looks closer, one will realize that this first impression is deceptive: the seemingly tattered and shabby garb is carefully put together and arranged" (Soeffner, 55). Soeffner continues his observations by stating that "Punk is the elaboration of a specific aesthetic of the ugly" (55). The idea of the ugly, or what some might consider obscene, also serves to explain why punks choose to wear offensive body jewelry, such as safety pins as earrings and face rings, swastikas and crosses as pins and painted emblems.

As I stated earlier, punk is a reflective subculture and it employs shock value in every aspect of life. The style of punk can also be viewed as taking the symbols of the dominant culture, mixing up their meanings and then applying these symbols to their way of dress. For instance, the use of swastikas and crosses, while on the surface showing a loyalty to the neo-nazi movement or some religious group, in reality serve only to offend the mainstream. "The swastika was a symbol of contempt employed as a means of offending the traditional culture, but it was actually devoid of any political significance"

(Fox, 380). Their clothing serves to set them apart from the dominant culture. Offending the mainstream, by their use of symbols in dress, seems to be the key motivation for the punks. "The punks wore clothes that were the sartorial equivalent of swear words, and they swore as they dressed - with calculated effect...Clothed in chaos, they produced Noise in the calmly orchestrated Crisis of everyday life...a noise which made (no) sense in exactly the same way and to exactly the same extent as a piece of avant-garde music" (Hebdige, 137).

Many of the theorists who write about the look of the punks imply that it is a culture of style. The culture of style implies that it is devoid of any other cultural factor. Greil Marcus attempts to show the reader that the ugliness of punk is more than a fashion statement. It began as a way of life for kids who had no "beauty" to display. "The punks were not just pretty people...who made themselves ugly. They were fat, anorexic, pock-marked, acned, stuttering, crippled, scarred, and damaged, and what their new decorations underlined was the failure already engraved in their faces" (Marcus, 74). Today, this idea of ugliness is not quite so literal. Some punks may be physically attractive, but in attitude and dress they promote the "ugly" quality. According to Marcus, every aspect of style for the punk adds credence to the other cultural factors that make up punk. Clothing and the use of horrific symbols as jewelry speak to their philosophy. Punks wear the sign of the anarchists (an "A" surrounded by a circle), not to necessarily say they are anarchists, but to imply that they hate the idea of organized government. They wear the cross and the swastika to shock outsiders. They wear safety pins to hold together tattered clothing in order to symbolize the decline of government and society (Pearson, 291). Scarification, mutilation and tattooing are also common as a reflection of the decline. The rainbow color of their hair serves as further decoration and the altering of reality and the separation from society (Hebdige, 179).

The language of punk gives meaning to the movement (Widdicombe, 271) and the most visible sign of their language comes in the form of music. Punk music serves as a language to align their philosophies and give punks a place to rally in clubs and at punk functions. "If we were to write an epitaph for the punk subculture, we could do no better than repeat Poly Styrene's famous dictum: 'Oh Bondage, Up Yours!' or somewhat more concisely: the forbidden is permitted" (Hebdige, 138). Everything thought of as questionable or objectionable by the dominant culture, not just in music, is fair and preferable game for the punks.

The music, while singing the belief of the irreverent punk band, the Sex Pistols, "No Future," also gives a purpose and a feeling of acceptance among youths who feel alone and unloved by the world. In the music there is hope. "What remains irreducible about this music is its desire to change the world...The desire begins with the demand to live not as an object but as a subject of history --to live as if something actually depended on one's actions--and that demand opens onto a free street" (Marcus, 5-6). The music seeks to prove that all of the popular institutions that the punks are asked to accept by the dominant culture are false, ideological constructs.

The style of punk music is reflective of the clothing. It is raucous, tattered and held together by a rhythm made up of as few as three chords. One might be reminded of the safety pins that hold together their tattered clothing. The music is also offensive many times, as is illustrated by the story of the Sex Pistols' first television performance where they used the word "fuck" on the air. This was so obscene that the Sex Pistols were seen as a threat to the state and were denounced by the Queen. Even when one of their songs hit number one on the billboard charts, it was shown by a blank space at the #1 spot. Some workers whose job it was to package the album in the factory refused to do so (Marcus, 14). Using the Sex Pistols as the most obvious example, punk music serves to

set the punk culture even further apart from the mass culture.

It is interesting to note, however, that early punk music influenced society regardless of its inherent obscenity. Major record labels fought with each other in order to be the first to sign punk bands, the most popular being the Sex Pistols and the Clash. What is surprising is that the music that inspired such revulsion could be such a potential money maker. But what is equally surprising is that punk bands allowed themselves to be signed to major record labels at all, considering their severe distaste for the mainstream. Joel Schalit offers at least a partial explanation for this paradox when he writes, "Instead of advocating the overthrow of capitalist relations of production, punk insists on reverting to an early form of capitalist development which emphasizes the necessity of the imagination, skills, and hard work of the entrepreneur as opposed to the blindness and stupidity of the corporation and the bureaucrat. In this light, punk appears as a critique of mass culture instead of a critique of capitalist culture" (29). This paradox is important to understand, since even to this day it is considered selling out for punk bands to sign with a major record company. Knowing that punk is against mass culture, but promotes, or least accepts capitalist culture, helps one to understand that punk bands signing with major record labels or buying into the fashion of the punks are not really selling out when looked at from this perspective. The clothing style and the music remain two of the most visible original influences on mainstream culture.

The music of punk is also its folklore. Punk remains as the defining music of a subculture. In "God Save the Queen," the Sex Pistols ranted their ideals for all of England to hear, that is until it was banned due to its untimely (or timely, as the punks would see it) release of the single during the Silver Jubilee - the Queen's 25th year on the throne. The lyrics define both how the punks viewed the world around them, as well as how they viewed themselves. "God save the queen / The fascist regime / They made you a moron /

A potential H-bomb / God save the Queen / She ain't no human being / There is no future / In England's Dream / God save the Queen / We mean it man / We love our Queen / God Saves / Don't be told what you want / Don't be told what you need / There's no future.../ When there's no future / How can there be sin / We're poison in your machine / We're the flowers in your dustbin / We're the future / Your future" ("God Save the Queen"). With no future as a major philosophy, there are also hints at no past. With no past comes no influence from outside sources because the outside sources simply do not exist for the punks (granted this is a paradox in that punks were very influenced by the outside world, or else they wouldn't be a reflective subculture). Therefore their folklore is created internally by the musicians who believe and understand the idea of authenticity and the truth of the pure or primordial thought that inspired all other thought. Punks believe that since they have no inspiration, they are free to choose how to live, what to write, and what to believe. They are free to be authentic - to have their own ideas and thoughts without regard to the society around them.

Sue Widdicombe, in her article "'Being' versus 'Doing' Punk: On Achieving Authenticity as a Member," speaks directly to this idea of authenticity. She addresses how the Punk subculture defines itself in relation to other groups that exist on the fringes of their culture, such as the poseurs or weekend punks who take to the subculture simply because it is fashionable or somehow cool. Most specifically Widdicombe states that punks "admire those...members [who] exhibit genuine commitment to certain values" (264). According to Linda Andes, "An individual must be able to display expert knowledge of punk culture and especially of punk music to be perceived as authentic by members of the subculture" (217). Punks also show their authenticity by not accepting those who do not live the lifestyle of the true Punk, which normally centers around hanging out on the street, looking the part, believing the philosophy that would set them

against popular culture, and knowing the significant events that lead to the punk movement. Even some people who look like punks and wear the clothes and symbols are ridiculed by the punks as being weekend punks or poseurs with no loyalty to the cultural sentiment that makes up the punk movement.

However, there is a problem in defining what a true punk is even within the punk community. There are people who believe in the basic tenets of punk, but who don't look the part. Often these are older punks who have outgrown the juvenile "rebellion for rebellion's sake" mentality. Andes states that these punks are still respected by the younger punks because they know enough about the subculture to maintain authenticity. As a benefit of age and experience, these older punks often know much more about the culture than the younger group. Another paradox is that Andes found in her research that a lot of punks who believed they knew who was authentic, chose only their friends as the authentic punks along with a few old-timers that may or may not have been in their circle of friends (215). However, this concept seems to have been developed in Andes view of the American Punk scene, not the English scene.

Punk's view of outsiders helps establish the boundaries of the punk movement. We already know that punks are against everything that is accepted by the popular culture. Since they hated popular culture, they also hate those who fit into this culture. It is for this reason that any time punk culture is infiltrated by outsiders (especially when their clothing is touted as fashionable), it does an internal shift. "Whatever official fashion picks up from punk design is immediately abandoned by the punks by way of a counter movement, and reformulated as antifashion" (Soeffner, 54-55). No matter how comfortable punks are with their original style, "there is a general attitude among punks of the need to create and maintain their own distinctive style" (Fox, 379).

People who merely dress the part are on the other side of the boundary that make

up punk, as are those punks who can hide their punk styles by combing their hair in a more acceptable fashion in order to keep a job. The “contempt for authority and the conventional culture was, in fact, such an essential value for punks that if one expressed prosystem sentiments or support for the present administration, one would not be considered a member, no matter how well one looked the part” (Fox, 379).

True punks often live on the streets or relied in the punk squatter communities that are set up throughout cities with a punk presence. They live in squalor, squeezed into an abandoned apartment or building with as many as twenty five other punks. The jobs they accept are normally “outside the system, such as musicians in rock bands, or artists. (Fox, 379), but many are unemployed. Viewing this deprivation, popular culture has seen punk life as the same as a vagrant’s life. For the punk, however, this view is not true. In Kathryn

Constructions of Deviance, she quotes a punk as saying, “Punk set me free. It let me out of the system. I can walk the streets now and do what I want and not live by the demands of the system. When I walk the streets, I am a punk, not a bum” (379). This view of a punk as separate from all of societies ideas of reality further defines their boundaries. The only taboo within punk culture seems to occur when punks step outside of the boundaries and sell out to the mass culture by getting a job inside of the system or promoting some other idea that was not punk.

What normal society deems unacceptable, punks nourish. What normal society deems perverse, punks cultivate. The behavior of punks is often revolting, sometimes even to themselves, but punks have the ability to be revolted by their own actions and at the same time enjoy the impact of the behavior on the public. In addition to the body jewelry and tattoos that I already spoke of, punk musicians, especially in punk's early years (most notably Sid Vicious from the Sex Pistols) could be seen cutting themselves with razor blades on stage in front of their audience of willing onlookers. Some bands vomited on

stage or spit on their audience. According to Marcus in Lipstick Traces, this is a sign of spreading the filth that is a very common theme in punk culture.

Drugs also play an important role in Punk culture. “[Drug use] symbolized the self-destructive, nihilistic attitude of hardcores and their desire to live outside of society’s norms” (Fox, 379). The physical damage caused by the self-mutilation and drug use speaks volumes about how much angst was present in post-war Britain’s working class youth. That drugs still play an important role in a large percentage of modern punks might hint that today’s youth still feel the some of that original angst. A modern punk attempts an explanation for his drug use, “It is kind of like a competition, a show-off thing....seeing who has the most guts by seeing who can burn his brain up first. It is like a total lack of care about anything really” (Fox, 379).

Even with the self destruction, it seems that at least one writer sees some religion in punk. Hans-Georg Soeffner discusses the religion of the punks that I just briefly touched on earlier. “The usual sermon [is absent]. And there are generally no speakers, spokespeople or leaders. What remains is a group of disciples without a master...Punk represents religiousness without God and, thus, is an invisible sort of religion....God has been replaced by the group itself — for them, intact nature is destroyed, a hereafter is not imaginable, past paradises are lost and future worlds of salvation are not to be hoped for” (Soeffner, 61). Transcendence and hope are linked only to the here and now. For this reason, I believe the punks have such a strong desire to be authentic, real and in touch with a natural order. But if punks believe in a Christian religion, they would have to give up their ideas of “no future.” Reaching a state of authenticity would require a leap of faith, and that too, would not fit in with the punk philosophy.

Age and gender are two aspects of punk culture that take up a much smaller role, though a fair amount has been written about them. Even though punk is viewed as being a

youth subculture, there are still hints of punk generations. In Sue Widdicombe's article she interviews both young and older punks and comes to some interesting conclusions. It seems that older punks (those older than 16 or 17 or with at least two years of punk involvement) view younger punks (those younger than 16 or involved for less than one year) as being less dedicated to the original concepts and ideals of the Punk movement. The older punks expressed that they felt a closer connection to the essence of punk by virtue of knowing more about the original movement. The older punks fear that the younger punks are involved only because of the style and music of punk, not for any of the original causes.

Some younger punks are critical of older punks, especially as it relates to the older punks having jobs and families (and therefore selling out). But, there are many young punks who admire the older punks for being able to maintain the punk lifestyle even while walking so close to the boundary. Older punks in some instances act as role models for the younger punks. It is important to note that the age difference between the young and the older is often no more than five years.

Gender exists as one cultural factor that does very little to separate itself within punk subculture in England. Punk, according to Fox, is one of the most androgynous groups of people. "There was no real distinction between male and female fashions" (Fox, 376). Torn jeans, tee-shirts, leather jackets and big black work boots were common. An argument can be made that this sort of clothing is masculine, but one has only to look at the other side to realize that the males use face make-up and arrange their hair with everything from hair spray to crazy glue holding up the spikes. While this may seem like a reversal of sex stereotypes, the truth is that both sexes dress the same without regard to a feminine or masculine punk "look." Some current trends in punk style have shown men wearing long skirts with combat boots, but this is mostly an American translation of punk

style without regard to the more political and social motivations that helped shape the way some working class youth dressed in Britain in the mid 1970s.

However, in the literature written about the American punk scene, gender plays a much more important role. Young females are often attracted into the punk subculture because they sense they may find a home there. "Messages are delivered to girls which tell them that Punk culture will embrace their desire for escape and help them survive...Punks offer a social place for girls who want to escape. Punk girls can experience hedonism and live a relatively 'adult-free' life," (Pfeffer, 61). Not only is there the sense of freedom for girls in the punk subculture, but with many of them coming from troubled families, or simply being young women who have experienced negative attention due to their female attributes, "[punk women] have used their punk style to deal with a shared range of oppressive experiences common to all women and to combat sexual propositions by men in public, thus allowing them some 'space' to negotiate their gender relations with men" (Brake, 177). Even though young punk women feel they have found a home in the subculture and to outsiders it seems as if there is unity among female punks, "inside the subculture the punk world has reproduced their basic...antagonisms, rather than conditions which will unite women across common gender interests" (Brake, 178). Women may feel like they have found a home, but this home is really no different in regards to social structure than what most of them are used to. "Even in Punk subculture, young women are expected to maintain an allegiance to their men, regardless of their sexual demands or junkie behaviors" (Pfeffer, 62).

Normally females get involved with punk because they have boyfriends in the group or because they like the style, for the aforementioned reasons. Most of the young women still live at home with their families, and therefore remain on the fringes of the subculture. Of those young women who have more completely immersed themselves into

the subculture by living in squatter's buildings, they take on a distinctly feminine role of care-taker or house keeper. The young women also often take on the role of nurse in the event that one of the male punks is high or drunk or been in a fight. Therefore, "the distinctive types of activities that females engage in, and the parental supervision they are subjected to limits subcultural participation" (Baron, 2009). Punk is highly masculine in its penchant for destruction, but with shifting gender roles and more young women becoming involved in gangs, there seems to be a larger attraction to the punk subculture for its values (or lack of values). According to the research of Rachel Pfeffer, young women who have been in very violent gangs in California have switched their allegiance over to the punks because they offer a more hospitable and free environment in which to live, regardless of the "ideology of male supremacy" (Baron, 2009).

Punk Today

What perpetuates punk? Why does it continue more than 20 years later? Soeffner argues that "the answer is simple: Punk has no message. Punk as a way of life and a lived style is the message...[Punks] demonstrate a unified moral --albeit costly and risky—...lifestyle (65). Today, punk has a different face and connotation. No longer are the most visible punks the working class punks of Britain in the 70's. (As a matter of conjecture, it might be argued that the British punks of the 90's are more influenced by America's style based punk culture than their own working class culture which faded quickly in the early 80's). The most visible punks today seem much more concerned with image, art and music than with working class philosophy.

Susan Willis writes about the punk movement in the Chapel Hill area in the late 80's early 90's. Willis uses her daughter as an example of the punk style, but states that her daughter uses it as a costume. The idea of style as costume, according to Greil Marcus,

goes against the very thread of punk philosophy. Today's punk as illustrated by Willis shows punk as style based, devoid of any real political or even social meaning. "Hardcore ideologies are styles whose codes of meaning are manipulated and disputed as are the elements of fashion and the brands of music" (Willis, 374). The idea of the authentic is denied and the 'being' versus 'doing' of Widdicombe's essay becomes only 'doing' for Willis and her daughter and the punks they have observed in Chapel Hill.

Even though vomiting onstage and walking around in a drugged out stupor aren't normally considered attractive life choices and these behaviors are not chosen for their "stylistic" draw, it is easier to understand the motivation behind choosing this life style for a beaten down working class youth who knew what it was like to have nothing. The punk of today, or rather the punks that Willis introduces, with their obnoxious behavior makes it more difficult to understand their motivation. Using drugs as an escape makes less sense when punks are escaping the suburbs as opposed to escaping street life. Today's punks are a paradox made up of a series of suburban behaviors that don't seem to be motivated by the same issues of the original punk movement. The view presented by both Willis and Fox left me to remember a quote I read recently on a bathroom wall in a club here in Raleigh. "Punk's not dead; it lives in the suburbs with its parents."

However, I am not convinced that this suburban view of punks is completely accurate. It is true that there are punks in the suburbs, but according to another article by Stephen Baron, more than 70% of today's punks have at one time or are currently living on the streets. The fact that many of them come from middle class backgrounds does nothing to convince me that they are involved in the subculture for stylistic reasons alone, "but may instead be a result of the social problems of youth..." (Baron, 214). Punk beliefs are as difficult to pin down today as they were in 1976, but the truth remains that most punks are young adults who have issues or problems that the punk subculture helps them

deal with. The aspect of punk culture that becomes important for professionals to deal with is this delinquency. Knowing some of the social and cultural reasons why punk surfaced in England and the United States helps us deal with some of the more disturbing issues of the punk subculture.

Contributions

I don't mean to imply that all punks are delinquents and I certainly don't mean to further the misconception that punks have not contributed anything to the world. Punks, as a subculture of angry youth have done a lot to raise the consciousness of those with the power and ability to do something about some of the social and political injustices the punks react against every day. Punk, more than anything else relies on the tenet of "Do It Yourself," (DIY). This self-reliant belief has spurred many punks on to do great things. Many punk musicians from the 1970s continue to be active in the music business. The Ramones, a popular American Punk band, still records albums. The Sex Pistols, sans Sid Vicious who committed suicide in 1979, did a comeback album in the early 90s. Legs McNeil, a popular American punk musician has gone on to write several books on the punk subculture that are invaluable to understanding the influences of this dynamic culture.

In addition to the famous musicians, punks today still create garage bands in which they write, perform and record their own music. Many punks, sick of the hyper commercialist culture of major record labels, along with the fact that major record labels did not want to promote groups "that appeared to promote radical politics...which centered around a critique of every day American life" (Schalit, 27), have created their own companies that promote themselves and other local punk bands.

DIY has sounded a call to punks who feel that the status-quo does nothing right.

Instead of standing passively by and letting someone do it wrong, they have decided to band together and do it right, albeit, right from their perspective. These aren't just kids who have problems in themselves, but rather kids who see problems that need to be righted in the world. Oftentimes they aren't on the right track. Early on, the Sex Pistols and the Clash felt that England was still threatened by fascism even so many years after Hitler tore through. Their songs simply (or not so simply) illustrated that fear. Today, kids in bands use their music to express their fears, concerns and problems in a world that tends not to listen to those who look and act differently. Perhaps the world does not listen because they don't understand enough about punks not to be threatened by them.

Throughout the years since punk first began, they have been involved in political activities. In the earliest history of English punk, the Socialist Worker's Party organized "Rock Against Racism," whose goal was to "fight the influences of racism and fascism in rock music" (Dancis, 60). The Socialist Worker's Party also organized demonstrations against the National Front, "a neo-fascist organization that has attempted to blame black and Asian immigrants for Britain's deteriorating economic position" (Dancis, 61). Both of these organizations sought to organize black and white working class youth and found punks to be major contributors to the cause.

In America, while punks had "no political presence as such" (Goldthorpe, 49), they did get involved with activities that promoted activism first in the form of squatter's rights and later in the form of Rock Against Reagan. In San Francisco, a group consisting of punks and others gathered to protest a nearby nuclear weapons research lab and later "as a part of a day of action ...a suburban affinity group organized its own Hall of Shame Tour through downtown San Francisco" (Goldthorpe, 51) to protest taxes that supported nuclear weapons. "These actions had a subcultural character more about outrage than outreach" (Goldthorpe, 51), but the protests did serve to contribute to the solidarity of the

punks in California.

The solidarity of punks is easily witnessed in any small town or large city that has a punk following. If another group of punks comes to town, they are quickly invited to stay with the local group. Punks are a family to each other, no matter how dysfunctional they may seem. If you are a punk, you always have a home, no matter where you go. These punks have come a long way from the "Doing Nothing" group that Paul Corrigan wrote about in his article on street youth subcultures.

In addition to what punk individuals have contributed, punk as a belief system has also inspired a way of looking at life that encourages creativity and the freedom and necessity of making up your own mind about troubling social issues. In two articles, educators promote the ideals of punk subculture in getting kids to think outside of typical classroom behavior. Geoffrey Sirc discusses his ideas that punk ideology would do a lot to urge students to be creative in their writing and expressing of themselves. In 1975, the Committee on Classroom Practices states "there was no doubt in the mind of anyone attending this meeting that the improvement of writing instruction should be the theme of this [report]" (Sirc, 9). That college composition was in a state of severe lack could not be denied and Sirc discusses why he believes that the study of the punk ideology would advance the cause of good writing and communication.

In support of the article by Sirc, Seth Kahn-Egan offers a vision of what the punk classroom would look like. Even though much of punk ideology is based on self-loathing and hate, Egan was able to modify the characteristics so that instructors could "maintain some civility in our classrooms...provide a philosophical direction useful in guiding us to a new kind of course, one in which we teach critical discourse that is more proactive than deconstructive" (Kahn-Egan, 100). Kahn-Egan came up with five principles of punk that would be beneficial for any instructor to cultivate in students:

1. The Do-It-Yourself ethic, which demands that we do our own work because anybody who would do our work for us is only trying to jerk us around.
2. A sense of anger and passion that finally drives a writer to say what's really on his or her mind.
3. a sense of destructiveness that calls for attacking institutions when those institutions are oppressive.
4. A willingness to endure or even pursue pain to make oneself heard or noticed.
5. A pursuit of the pleasure principle, a reveling in some kind of Nietzschean chasm.

These five principles of punk show a sort of delinquency, but they are tempered with positive idealistic principles that would do a lot to advance the cause of any teen who feels they have no original voice. To look at it this way, taking out the delinquent parts of punk ideology and stressing the importance of an individual's right to have his/her own opinion portrays punk in a new light. Perhaps these kids aren't just yelling or creating a mockery of their surroundings to offend, but to be heard on important issues - issues that are being neglected by the status quo. Are punk issues any less important than those that are expressed with tact?

Punks in the Public Library

Punks bring with them a large and dynamic history along with aspects of delinquency and extreme creativity and intelligence. Libraries have the opportunity to tap into the punk subculture and offer services that are just as unique as the punks. While traditional methods of appealing to the public will fall flat with the punks, there are other types of services that may be provided that can offer an environment conducive to fostering the growth and well-being of such a delinquent subculture. While every service

provided for a group of teens with problems will need a certain amount of thought into public safety, the risks associated with serving this group of kids does not outweigh the benefits for both the library and the punks themselves.

Since the library is often a very traditional establishment, often with ties to local or state government, punks may not feel comfortable using the building for anything other than the bathroom it provides. For this reason, librarians need to be creative in developing services that will appeal to them without hinting that the library is trying to change punks or make the movement “cool” for the surrounding community. The first step for the library is aligning itself with the punks outside of the library building. This could be by creating a “band night” (or afternoon) where punk bands are given space in the parking lot to perform their music for an audience. Since the library would not be promoting their internal services, punks may be more likely to get involved. My experience has been that punks love the chance to play their music for an audience of excited onlookers regardless of where that is. If this works out and can become a regular event, punks might begin to look upon the library more favorably, even if it is “run by the government.” Library staff could make rounds to talk to various punks in order to find out if they read and what sort of books they like.

At this point, the library may begin offering reading lists to punks after compiling a bibliography of titles that appeal to them. Histories of music, books written by other punk writers and musicians, along with a variety of other materials will give punks a reason to go into the library. Once punks have entered the building for reasons other than delinquency, the librarians really have the chance to talk with them and offer alternatives to just hanging out on the streets. Often the alternative will be to read or get involved in some of the community programs the library offers that might help give voice to the various concerns punks have about their community around them.

Once reading lists are compiled and community service projects start reflecting the needs and wants of this subculture, the library may reach out into the punk community via other channels (word of mouth, fliers, alternative radio announcements). In this way, punks can get involved and expend some of their energy on positive things and begin to feel that they have a voice and that voice is not only being heard, but being respected and valued. I can't help but think that a group of kids who aren't used to positive and encouraging attention might actually benefit from the library taking some time and effort to devote to an often misunderstood and misrepresented group of young adults

Conclusion

Libraries have the task of appealing to many facets of the community. Some of these segments are not as easy to serve due to their inherent difficulties, whether it be a physical handicap, an emotional handicap, the homeless, the rowdy, or the illiterate. Just because a population exhibits a challenge does not mean the library can ignore their existence. When viewing the punk subculture as it exists today, whether the kids are from suburban families and are well-cared for or from dysfunctional backgrounds and living on their own, we may see many different things. Many people can't get past the obnoxious behavior to see that many of these kids are smart, have wonderful imaginations and need some place like the library to cultivate their talents.

What I have attempted to do in this paper is show how punk developed, what separates punk from other segments of the population, and pull out some of the contributions punk has made to society. From here, librarians can determine whether or not they can or should provide services to a population that may cause them some problems, but may also give them a valuable perspective on the world.

With an understanding of the importance of the punk subculture on the history of

music, sociology and anthropology, librarians can also be sure that their collections offer a representative sample of research works on punk in order to satisfy others who may wish to do their own studies on punk.

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