An Ethnographic Study of Punk Rock in Western Michigan: Identity in a Youth Subculture

Robert P. Pomeroy
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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF PUNK ROCK IN WESTERN MICHIGAN:
IDENTITY IN A YOUTH SUBCULTURE

by

Robert P. Pomeroy

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Department of Anthropology

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 1986
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF PUNK ROCK IN WESTERN MICHIGAN:
IDENTITY IN A YOUTH SUBCULTURE

Robert P. Pomeroy, M.A.
Western Michigan University, 1986

This thesis presents an ethnosemantic analysis of the punk rock subculture of western Michigan. Assertion of personal identity is demonstrated to be the underlying principle which organizes punk terminology for their music, cultural environment, and members of the subcultures. An analysis of punk song lyrics, visual style, and verbal style demonstrates that this assertion of identity is accomplished through opposition to the dominant American culture. Punk rock can then be understood as a subculture of cultural rebellion which allows its members to assert their individuality through violation of culturally accepted aesthetic values.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the people whose support and encouragement helped make this thesis possible. Dr. William Garland, my major advisor, encouraged me to pursue a field project as my thesis and provided guidance throughout this endeavor. Dr. Erika Loeffler provided the initial catalyst for this thesis in her Cultural Anthropology Seminar and provided insights which allowed me to grasp the full meaning of ethnosemantic theory and its application. Dr. Robert Jack Smith provided the critical review of my work needed to bring what I learned from my research to the printed page in an acceptable form. Dr. Robert Sundick provided assistance with the word processing program when I was hopelessly mired at the terminal. The faculty and students of Western Michigan University's Anthropology Department provided a fertile and supportive environment in which to learn and grow. A special thanks goes to Bob Hay and Mark Cooper-Smith of the Squalls for their assistance in Georgia. This thesis is dedicated to two very special women, my mother, Valeria Pomeroy, and Michelle Seldon.

Robert P. Pomeroy
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INTRODUCTION

This master's thesis is about the cognitive world of the punk rock subculture in a southwestern Michigan community and how this subculture is related to the dominant American culture. In this thesis I will use ethnosemantics to describe the cognitive classifications used by punk rockers to order and understand their world. I will use these classifications and elements of verbal and visual style to examine the ways in which they define the subculture. I will restrict this discussion to the issue of identity in this subculture, within a limited geographic area, and leave other economic, interpersonal, and symbolic issues to be analyzed in other papers. Here, only the cognitive aspects of this subculture and what these aspects can tell us about contemporary American culture will be considered.

American culture includes many complex and competing interests. Rather than having one easily identifiable culture, America is made up of many different ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and special interests. Some of these groups, such as native Americans and Cubans, have cultures which originated independently of the dominant American culture. These ethnic groups are part of American life but retain important beliefs and values of their culture of origin. This is why distinct ethnically based cultures within a larger culture are referred to as cocultures (Van Willigen 1986:70). In contrast, subcultures are derived from a dominant culture upon
which they are dependent for their frame of reference and internal meaning as well as subsistence. In America, punk rock is a youth subculture derived from the dominant American culture.

The ethnosemantic approach to ethnography developed out of anthropological linguistics. The approach is based on "the proposition that different cultures, like different languages, have their own special rules and logical structures" (Crane and Angrosino 1984:125). Learning what the logic and structure of a culture is from the informant's perspective should allow the ethnographer to, ultimately, participate in that culture as a native would. Using the terms and categories that members of the culture use is preferable to imposing the ethnographer's own ethnocentric categories on a culture (Sturtevant 1972:132). Ethnosemantics provides a more objective approach by substituting the ethnocentrisms of the informants for those of the ethnographer (Spradley and McCurdy 1972:19) and using those insights to discover the concerns which motivate members of a culture. The ethnographic description which results should approach the way members of that culture define their own identity, environment, and lifestyle (Spradley 1970:69).

Ethnosemantics has been taken to extremes where the researcher becomes enslaved by the formal scientific aspects of the methodology. Berreman (1972:229) argues that the results produced by ethnosemantic research are of questionable value if not disciplined by clearly defined goals and supplemented by other methods to avoid becoming lost in the internal world of the informant. Harris (1968:581) argues that basing ethnography entirely on the perspective of the
insider can lead to distortions of the description. The informant may understand his or her behavior in terms of an indigenous cognitive framework, while their actual behavior incorporates things beyond this cognitive framework. Sturtevant (1972:158) concedes that a full-scale ethnosemantic study of a culture may never be done because of the many years that would be required to complete the fieldwork and the many thousands of pages required to report on every aspect of insider knowledge. Berreman (1972:229-230) argues that such an ethnography probably would be no better than any other ethnography that has been produced using other theoretical approaches, but agrees that the ethnosemantic approach can be effectively used for small domains of knowledge to promote further inquiry.

An example of the effective use of the ethnosemantic approach is Spradley's 1970 ethnography of Skid Road alcoholics in Seattle. Spradley applied the ethnosemantic approach to the homeless men who frequented the bars and lived in the area of Skid Road. He used insiders' knowledge of Skid Road life to develop a model which he used to explain the adaptive strategies these men used to survive. Friedl (1979:65) has used the ethnosemantic approach to demonstrate the effects of culture change on Iranian weavers through changes in color terminology. Ethnosemantic theory and methodology are effective for the development and testing of hypotheses about cultural phenomena.

This thesis is intended to provide data for an understanding of how punk rockers perceive themselves and their world and thus to provide a basis for further research. This is important because the
popular image of punk rock has been based largely on outsiders' impressions of the subculture. The insights gained here may also have practical applications for those concerned with this subculture by providing a more useful model of punk rock than currently available.

Data were collected through participant observation, informal interviews, and analysis of independently produced fan magazines called fanzines. The research for this thesis was carried out over a four month period in the winter of 1986 in a major urban center in western Michigan. For two years prior to this project I had been an active member of a nonprofit organization which sponsored New Wave concerts. During the summer of 1985 I conducted supervised fieldwork on punk entrepreneurs in Michigan and Georgia with several nonprofit organizations which promote punk and New Wave concerts and publish fanzines, as well as people who put out their own records. This thesis is based on the data collected in western Michigan only. Although comparative data from several geographic areas would be desirable and may be incorporated into future studies, collection of such data was beyond the time and financial constraints of this thesis. I do not feel this will limit the usefulness of the analysis presented. From my limited dealings with the punk musicians who came through western Michigan and those I met in Georgia, I know that there is a punk subculture which is national in scope. There are also important regional variations in the subculture which could be productively analyzed in a more comprehensive study.
The research for this paper was conducted in compliance with the guidelines established for human subjects research by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board. It was monitored by the Institutional Review Board and by my thesis advisors. I have avoided using names of places, organizations, or individuals in order to ensure confidentiality and my informants' anonymity.

My primary informants were members of voluntary organizations which promote punk rock concerts or publish locally oriented fanzines. The members of these organizations were primarily male and female college or high school students between the ages of 17 and 35. I attended meetings of these organizations and as many area punk rock concerts as possible. While at meetings and concerts I spoke informally with punks, listening for elements of speech which were unique to the subculture. Using what I learned from attending these events, I developed ideas which I further investigated in informal interviews with individuals and small groups. I concentrated on identifying terminology in natural context and focusing meaning through informal interviews. I also used locally produced fanzines as a form of personal documentation. These fanzines were useful as source material and as an additional context from which meanings could be clarified.

Punk rock is not uniquely American. There are punks in most cities of Europe and Asia as well. In all its manifestations punk centers on a form of music and associated styles and fashions. This thesis cannot deal with the complexity of this subculture in all of the forms in which it occurs. Rather it will describe the elements
of punk ethnosemantics and style which are important in forming group identity for the members of this subculture living in a small area of western Michigan.

The punk rock subculture is made up primarily of adolescents and young adults. Van Gennep (1960), Mead (1949), Montague (1978), Jenkins (1983), and others have looked to youth as a means of explaining how the larger culture functions. The socialization of young people has a strong influence on what kind of adults they will be and underscores central values of their culture. The study of youth subcultures became a useful analytic tool in England after the Second World War. Social scientists found that the spectacular youth cultures that have manifested themselves over the last forty years reflect important issues in the culture at large (Hebdige 1979:63). In their analysis of such subcultures as the teds, mods, rockers, and hippies, these social scientists have identified elements common to all of these movements which they used to develop theories for describing subcultures.

Brake (1980:1) notes that youth itself has been viewed as a social problem, with the young men representing a kind of folk devil. Young people are in a position where they are expected to conform to both their parents' expectations and the expectations of the culture at large through its socializing institutions (Clark, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts 1976:15). This dual expectation may create conflict, which if not resolved can lead to feeling stigmatized. Characteristically, individuals respond to this feeling of stigmatization with some or all of the following: resentment, dissociation, self-hatred,
and psychological damage (Brake 1980:4). Generally, people seek ways to deal with feelings of stigmatization through:

1. **Delinquent subcultures** expressing dissatisfaction through antisocial or criminal avenues.

2. **Cultural rebellion** through which dissatisfaction is expressed through avant-garde artistic forms, personal style, and lifestyle variations.

3. **Reformist movements** which seek to accentuate similarities between the dominant culture and the subordinate group and thus bring the two closer together.

4. **Political militancy** which attempts to raise group consciousness and unify the subordinate group into a class unto itself (Brake 1980:5).

The solutions subcultures offer are of a "magical" rather than of a real nature (Brake 1980:16). Subcultures offer the illusion of being able to escape the demands of the dominant culture but they characteristically must manifest their independence in leisure time activities (Clark et al. 1976:15; Hebdige 1979:95). Insofar as they are able, these subcultures create a meaningful alternative to the demands of the dominant culture through the reworking of the "profane cultural wastes of society" (Willis 1978:5). Subcultures offer a way for people to deal with their marginal situation, but it cannot sever their ties to the dominant culture. It is because youth subcultures arise to solve the specific complaints of a group at a specific time that many youth subcultures tend to be transient social phenomena.
(Clark et al. 1976:14). As the problems which put pressure on young people change, so do their responses.

The punk subculture is a cultural rebellion according to Brake's (1980) definition. Dissatisfaction with the dominant culture are expressed through music, fashion, and verbal style. The primary function of this cultural rebellion for its members is the expression of personal identity as defined in opposition to the dominant culture. Punk rock does not have the independent cultural references available to members of cocultures and so can only be expressed in terms of its opposition to a dominant culture.

Subcultural groups all over the world choose their most compelling underlying concern for dealing with their specific set of problems. Ware (1978) has shown how popular music in West Africa served to promote national identity over tribal identity, and Riddle (1978) shows the unifying effect of traditional music in San Francisco's Chinese community. Newton (1972) demonstrates that costume and manner were the primary concerns of female impersonators, while Partridge (1973) argues that the most cohesive element of the hippie ghetto was the communal use of marijuana. Spradley (1970) finds that the Skid Road alcoholics understood their lives in terms of survival strategies. The American punk subculture uses music to focus its concern over identity. In the following pages I will examine some of the ways in which languages and musics serve as the focus for ideas and expression of concerns in the punk subculture.
WHAT IS PUNK?

Throughout this paper I will be using the terms punk and punk rock to refer to this subculture, providing an easily identifiable way in which to refer to this group, even though terms punk and punk rock are not universally accepted within the subculture. I am using these terms because no other term has a specific enough meaning or wide enough acceptance to be useful as a general reference. Some people see punk as a uniquely English thing which existed from 1976 to 1979. Other people see punk as an ongoing tradition which knows no national or cultural boundaries. The variations which are accepted as aspects of, or related to, the musical style of punk rock, are summarized in Figure 1. It is evident from this chart that punk rock is not a monolithic entity.

The Music

Most of my informants prefer to call the music they listen to alternative or underground music. These broad cover terms allow the individual to include all the variants possible in this subculture and to avoid the stigma that the general public associates with the term punk rock. For descriptive purposes these terms do not have much value, but their use does allow the individuals to assert their differences in preference without eliminating possibilities within the range of the cover term. As one informant describes it, "Just because we like this (punk rock) doesn't mean we don't like other
Figure 1. Taxonomic Definition of Music Styles.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Straight Edge</th>
<th>Skate Punk</th>
<th>Speedcore</th>
<th>Skinhead</th>
<th>Oi</th>
<th>Death Rock</th>
<th>Industrial</th>
<th>Cow Punk</th>
<th>Garage Rock</th>
<th>Techno Pop</th>
<th>Neopsychedelic</th>
<th>Retro Rock</th>
<th>Rockabilly</th>
<th>Rap</th>
<th>Ska and Reggae</th>
<th>Jazz</th>
<th>Folk</th>
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music, like classical... It's not that we hate everything else, it's just that this is our favorite kind of music."

Alternative music generally refers to any form of music not regularly played on commercial radio stations. Underground music has a wide scope also, but it is usually limited to mean noncommercial forms of rock music. Punk rock is generally accepted as a cover term for all those musical forms which can be traced to the original punks of 1976-1979 and for the music of that specific time. What is still classified as punk rock is generally music which is confrontational, abrasive, and challenging to the listener. This is in contrast to those styles called New Wave, which are melodic, ear pleasing, and often associated with other musical traditions. The term New Wave is viewed by many as an artificial creation of record companies which were interested in marketing those elements of the original punk movement which were considered to have commercial potential. As Hebdige (1979:25) points out, punk claimed descent from a wide variety of sources, producing a rather unstable mix with elements always threatening to return to their source. The creation of the New Wave genre allowed the soul, reggae, and various rock influences to filter through punk and achieve a market.

The elaboration of musical terminology indicated in Figure 1 can be understood as a result, in part, of the natural elaboration of the musical genre over time and also as a reaction to the acceptance of punk elements by the mainstream rock audience. As elements of the original punk music became incorporated into mainstream rock, the members of the subculture seeking to maintain their uniqueness
redefined their form of punk rock as hardcore punk. Further elaborations have followed the acceptance of elements of hardcore by the rock mainstream. The terminology reflects changing musical styles and the need on the part of members of the subculture to define themselves as different from that which is acceptable by the larger society.

Thus, we see that punk rock was refined into contemporary hardcore. (Some informants maintained that hardcore is the independent invention of punk rock in America.) Hardcore is characterized by songs that are loud, short, and fast, with words that are shouted rather than sung. Hardcore, as a musical style, is subdivided into separate genres based on personal and political values and minor variations in delivery. Skinhead and oi bands tend to concentrate on racist and sexist themes and ideas of the superiority of the working classes. Straight edge bands emphasize themes of personal responsibility, while skate punks are concerned with their position as skateboarders. Speedcore is primarily concerned with the form of delivery (very fast) and has been somewhat successful in attracting a following among fans of heavy metal rock.

Death rock and industrial music are direct descendants of the experimentation fostered by the original punk movement. Death rock is often atmospheric music with dense, murky sound and lyrics about doom, despair, and the inevitability of death. Death rock shares themes such as horror movie story lines with other forms of punk and New Wave, but is much slower paced and more moody than other genres. Industrial music places primary value on experimentation and the use
of nontraditional instruments (power tools and sheet metal) and "found" sounds (tape recordings of common sounds such as doors slamming, water dripping, or cars starting). Industrial music owes a debt to such avant-garde composers as John Cage, who experimented in compositional form and musique concrete in the 1950s and 1960s (Rockwell 1983:52).

The musical styles associated with New Wave are for the most part adaptations of preexisting musical forms. Some of these are revitalized forms of genres from other eras. Psychedelia was originally popular in the late 1960s and musically simulated the sensory distortions experienced on psychoactive drugs. Garage rock was originally an idealization of amateurism in the 1960s. Retro rock seeks to revitalize rhythm and blues-based music, originally popular in the 1950s, as do the rockabilly revivalists. Through this revitalization, these genres find a new audience.

Some forms are the application of punk aesthetics to other musical styles. For example, cow punk applies punk ideas about song structure and style of performance to country music themes and instrumentation. Ethnic music like Jamaican reggae and ska and the rap music of urban American blacks can be appropriated by white musicians and brought into the New Wave fold. Technology alone can serve as the basis of a genre, when electronic instruments are used to the exclusion of all other forms as in techno pop.

The taxonomy just described is based on ideal forms. In actuality, it is often difficult to make clear distinctions among forms. Many bands will play several kinds of music over the course
of their careers or may combine several of these styles in their repertoires. For example, the Bad Brains from Washington, D.C., alternate between straight hardcore and straight reggae. Many informants are reluctant to use these terms to classify any given band, but find them useful and even necessary to describe different forms of music and bands, using these terms so that comparisons can be made. This taxonomy should be understood as a frame of reference rather than as a strict phylogenetic classification.

The Scene

The punk subculture has its own way of describing the people, places, and events which are important to them. The entire punk community is known as the scene. The scene does not refer to specific places, because in most communities in western Michigan, for example, there are no commercial establishments catering to the punk market or even areas of a city where punks tend to live. This contrasts with Partridge's 1973 study of hippies who were concentrated in one area of a city, or with Athens, Georgia, which has two bars providing an outlet for local alternative music. The scene is an ambiguous term used to refer to any activity related to the punk subculture taking place in a city. A scene is described in terms of its activity, whether it is large or small and in terms of the kinds of punk who dominate the population. Figure 2 provides an overview of the elements that constitute a scene.

People are the most important element in any scene. The characteristics of the punks in any area will influence the kind of
## The Scene

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Shows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punks</td>
<td>Clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Rented Halls</td>
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### People
- Nazi Punks
- Skinheads
- Hardcore Kids
- Straight Edge
- Vegetarian Punks
- Peace Punks
- Skate Punks
- Preppies
- Greeks
- Jocks
- Stoners
- Posers
- Fashion Punks

### Shows
- All Ages
- Over 18
- Over 21
- Rented Hall
- Theater
- Gym
- Ballroom
- Kiva
- Cafeteria
- College Radio
- Public Radio
- Record Stores
- Fanzines

Figure 2. Taxonomy of the Punk Cultural Environment.
scene that community will have. In communities where there are nazi punks or skinheads, there are often violent disruptions at shows and harassment of other punks and nonpunks by these groups. Nazi punks are affiliated with neo-nazi and other white supremacist organizations and seem to operate as gangs. Skinheads usually hold racist and sexist views and are violent but are not associated with formal organizations. I never personally encountered members of these factions of the punk community. My informants and punk fanzines indicate that these factions are common only in very large urban centers like New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Gains 1986:57). My informants tell me that even in these cities, there are few nazi or skinhead punks in relation to others members of the subculture.

Young and inexperienced members of the subculture are referred to by older members as hardcore kids. These young people tend to be extreme in their manners and in their appearance. Hardcore kids tend toward excess by being too aggressive or combative. They have not been socialized to the unwritten and unspoken rules of the punk community. Hardcore kids are tolerated by older punks, even when they slamdance too aggressively or are overly rude, because most people in the subculture went through the same phase. Those who do not quickly learn what is acceptable behavior will find themselves ostracized and, in extreme cases, barred from shows.

Straight edge punks place a high value on self-reliance and responsibility. Ideally, straight edge punks do not smoke, use drugs or alcohol, and do not have sex. While the straight edge philosophy
appears puritanical, its motivations are not religiously based. Rather, their philosophy is based on the principle that one should be responsible for his or her own actions and health. The prohibitions are thought to ensure the ability to make responsible decisions and avoid unwanted problems.

Vegetarian punks are often outspoken about their decision not to eat meat. Some of these people are also straight edge, but many are not. Some vegetarian punks are active in their opposition to vivisection, while others are motivated by the health benefits of a meatless diet. There are also many punks who are vegetarian, but who are not as militant about it as those who identify themselves as vegetarian punks.

Peace punks are concerned with and outspoken about peace and justice issues. Many of the peace punks oppose United States foreign policy in Central American and South Africa and domestic spending for defense. Peace punks express these concerns through their music and by involvement in organizations concerned with these issues.

Skate punks are active and accomplished skateboarders. The skater subculture and the punk subculture meet through these individuals and to some extent merge. The national skateboarders' magazine Thrasher runs stories about punks who are champion skaters and about bands that support skating. The magazine has put out a compilation tape of skate punk music. Skateboards are a common sight at punk events.

Death rockers are highly visible members of the subculture because they often wear entirely black outfits, very dark makeup, and
make their skin look pale. Death rockers show a fondness for symbols like death's heads, crucifixes, and spiders, and often are dedicated fans of horror movies. While these people cultivate a morbid image, few of them seem to take it completely seriously.

Punks do not live in an isolated world of their own but regularly must interact with other people at work, at school, and in the streets. The punks recognize the array of personalities commonly found in high schools and colleges: preppies, Greeks, jocks, and stoners. (Preppies are well dressed, upper middle class conservatives; Greeks belong to fraternities or sororities; jocks are athletes; and stoners use a lot of drugs.) All of these nonpunks interact in a negative way with punks. All of these people tend to treat punks as inferior and avoid or ridicule them. Jocks and stoners tend to be more aggressive and will occasionally accost punks in public or even disrupt shows.

Posers and fashion punks are particularly disliked by punks because they infringe directly on punk territory. Posers come to punk shows and try to pass as punks. They know about punks only through media-generated stereotypes and try to masquerade as punks. Posers tend to be overly violent and are often destructive. Posers make no effort to learn what is acceptable in the punk subculture because they do not really want to be part of it. Fashion punks copy punk fashions without any interest in the music or other aspects of the subculture. Once enough fashion punks have adopted a given piece of punk fashion, it loses meaning within the subculture.
Fashion punks have helped reduce the importance of clothing and hair styles as important symbols within the subculture.

All of these classifications of people, both punk and nonpunk, are idealized stereotypes. These definitions and this taxonomy should be seen as a reference guide rather than as a definitive description. In practice these terms are used loosely. An individual can have characteristics of several of these types at once or adopt them sequentially. Likewise, outsiders can be incorporated if they wish to be, and punks sometimes leave the subculture and adopt the values of one of the outside groups.

The institutions which support the punk subculture by playing their music, selling their records, writing about their bands, and hosting their shows are vital parts of a scene. The most important of these supporting structures are the shows. Punk rock shows are held in two types of facilities, clubs and halls. Clubs are privately owned establishments licensed to sell alcoholic beverages. These establishments usually have established nonpunk clientele which they do not want to alienate by booking punk rock bands too regularly. The punk audience also tends to be younger than normal club patrons, with a significant number being under the legal drinking age. Therefore, when clubs do book punk acts, they have four options on how to cope with the large number of young people these shows attract:

1. They may decide not to sell alcohol at all and have the show open to all ages.
2. They may hold two shows, with the earlier being an all age
that admits minors and does not serve alcohol and a later show for 
over 21 patrons at which alcohol is served.

3. A compromise format has a restricted over 18 show which 
admits some minors and allows alcohol to be sold to those over 21 
years old.

4. They may restrict admission to those over 21 only.
The owner can choose any of these options. The clubs look for a 
strategy which will maximize their profits from hosting such a show 
while minimizing complications. The owners will often prefer to 
avoid the complications of punk shows altogether.

Most punk shows are held in some kind of hall. Rented halls 
are owned by individuals or private organizations which lease their 
facilities for an evening. These facilities may or may not have a 
liquor license and be able to sell alcoholic beverages. Most of the 
time shows at rented halls will be all agers, and alcohol of any kind 
will be prohibited. The decision about the kind of show it will be 
is made by the people promoting the show. Another option obtains 
when shows are put on in a college- or university-owned facility. 
These shows are always all agers and always prohibit alcohol consump-
tion. The kind of facility used depends upon what is available at 
that school.

Relatively few punk bands can attract over 1,000 people to a 
show and can be booked into a theater. These shows are rare. More 
common is the practice of having bands play at private parties held 
at peoples' homes. These events are usually considered social events 
and not real shows.
Other supportive facilities which are part of the scene are college and public radio stations that play punk music on a regular basis and the record stores that sell punk records. Also important are the ephemeral, locally produced fanzines and the few national publications which report on the punk movement.

The vitality of a local scene depends on all of the elements in the scene. To have a "good" scene, there must be people to attend events, places to put on shows, and support from the record stores, radio, and fanzines. Many scenes exist in less than perfect environments, and the area I worked in was no exception. Less than perfect conditions make it difficult for punks to get together and enjoy their preferred form of entertainment, but do not prevent a scene from developing.

Verbal and Visual Style

In addition to the subcultural classification of music, people, and events, a knowledge of local bands is an important element in identity in the punk community. Knowing something about the bands which play in the area shows dedication and a commitment to the scene. Band names reflect the often rude verbal style used among punks, as well as their humor. For example, a band named Murder of Crows projects a rather ominous image but is also a pun on the name of the more popular group A Flock of Seagulls. Both names refer to a group of birds, yet the punk name sounds disturbing. Band names may also reflect the calculated shock value heard in punk conversations. The band names, for example, Butthole Surfers, Dayglo Abortions,
Coagulated Child, or Millions of Dead Cops, reflect the cultivated irreverence of the subculture.

Verbal style is often confrontational. Punks like to use vulgar and graphic language in descriptions and comments. Conversations are often punctuated by insults and confrontational remarks. These remarks do not offend members of the subculture but are returned in kind. Joking among punks often sounds threatening, too. Their humor tends to be scatological, sexually explicit, and politically irreverent. Large-scale disasters and personal misfortune which make the national news are often used as the sources of joke material. While other people express concern over incidents like the space shuttle explosion and the president's cancer, punks will be laughing at these events. This verbal style reinforces the outsiders' impression that this subculture is made up of delinquents because their style is explicit and places revered icons of our culture, such as church, family, and the presidency, in profane contexts.

Identity in the punk subculture used to rely heavily on visual appearance. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was fairly easy to identify someone as a punk because of shocking clothing and hair styles. These styles have, by and large, been incorporated into mainstream fashion so that they are no longer unusual and have less meaning for the punks. There remains a semiform of work boots, jeans, T-shirt, and leather or jean jacket that is often worn by punks. Likewise, very short hair and mohawks are still popular, but even these are being worn by nonpunks.
Generally, punks will tend to wear vintage clothing purchased at secondhand stores. Informants stressed that they shopped at these stores not because they lacked money, but because they were looking for "interesting" clothes. Both men and women may wear multiple earrings, have pierced noses, or have tattoos. Many active punks show no outward indication of belonging to the subculture, and there are nonpunks who dress in punk styles. The significance of style in the western Michigan punk community has been on the decline for several years now. The only fashion rule that really applies is that punk style cannot be currently fashionable. This rule is often also violated by punks since they place a high value on doing and wearing what they want regardless of what others think.
PU N K I D E O L O G Y

Verbal and visual styles are outward indications of membership in the punk subculture. Analysis of terminology used to identify the cognitive geography of the subculture provides us with a feeling for the diversity that exists within the subculture. This, however, gives us only a partial understanding of what gives the punk subculture its distinctive identity. To learn more about the ideological aspect of punk, I analyzed the lyrics to 145 punk rock songs composed over the last six years by regional and prominent national bands. This analysis identified major themes found in this sample which reflect the concerns of subculture members. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. Conversations with informants lead me to think that this sample is an accurate reflection of the concerns of local punk rockers.

After completing my analysis of punk rock song lyrics, I suspected that there was a major thematic difference between the content of punk rock songs and songs that are heard on commercial radio and on the popular cable television station, Music Television (MTV). I conducted a random sample, without replacement of songs played on western Michigan rock radio stations and on MTV over a two week period in April 1986. In my sample of popular songs I used 75 songs. I selected this sample size because at this level I was reaching the limits of popular radio formatting. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.
Table 1
Major Themes in Punk Rock Songs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political or social corruption</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of nuclear war or military intervention</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticonformity</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horror movie themes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasted human potential</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antidrugs or antisex</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love songs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human potential</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antifundamentalism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No future</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>145</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The songs used in this sample were by local and regional musicians and some prominent, nationally known bands. Analysis was for major theme assessed subjectively by the author.
Table 2

Major Themes in Popular Songs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love songs</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock and roll</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The songs used in this sample were taken from western Michigan rock radio airplay and the Music Television (MTV) cable station over a two week period in April 1986. Analysis was for major theme assessed subjectively by the author.

The concerns expressed in punk rock songs demonstrate anxiety over contemporary social and political issues. Contemporary society is depicted as being in a dismal condition with the powerful serving their own interests, the poor and weak ignored, justice twisted to serve special interests, and young people used as pawns. There is a general feeling that people are commodities, useful to work in factories and fight wars for the powerful but not capable of thinking for themselves. The solution offered in punk songs is to take
responsibility for one's own action, to think intelligently and
fulfill one's potential or die. In contrast, over 70% of the songs
in my sample of popular songs dealt with interpersonal relationships.
The popular songs which did deal with social issues were the all-star
benefit records which deal with social issues in an oblique manner.

There is a strong feeling that sexual activity and drug consump-
tion as ends in themselves are unhealthy. Drugs impede the ability
to make important decisions, and sex should be avoided unless one is
prepared and willing to accept the possible consequences. Rather
than being moralistic, the objection to sex and drugs put forward by
punks is based on practical concerns, with the freedom to choose
always being left open.

A central value in the punk subculture is self-reliance, which
is manifested in their songs, commercial institutions, and tastes in
films. Almost all economic activity in the punk subculture takes
place outside the traditional realm of the American entertainment
industry. Almost all punk bands put out their records on small,
independently owned record labels. Most punk magazines are very small,
local fanzines. Punks tend to be fans of horror movies, experimental
art films, or porn (although not necessarily all three genres).
Punks are attracted to these films, in part, because they are usually
made by small independent film makers operating outside the major
movie studios, just as punk music operates outside major, mainstream
record companies.

Anarchy is often mentioned as the political philosophy of punk
rock. While some punks understand the intellectual traditions and
historical development of anarchy and are dedicated anarchists, they are few in number. For most punks who call themselves anarchists, anarchy means no rules. These people feel that they have no power or influence in the current system and that they would be better off no matter what happened. In this frame of reference, anarchy is the blind hope that things would be better if only the (corrupt) rules could be rewritten.

Some punks see anarchy as philosophical justification to do anything they want to do. These people will use their anarchist beliefs to justify destruction of property, hurting people, irresponsible behavior, or causing problems for other punks. When confronted, they will respond by reasoning, "Well, that's anarchy." One dedicated anarchist informant called this interpretation of anarchy "adolescent rebellion raised to the level of dogma."

The usage of the concept of anarchy by punks can be seen as a form of intellectual bricolage. In the same way that the bricoleur used the same tool for a variety of functions (Levi-Strauss 1966:16), punks use the idea of anarchy for a wide range of philosophical purposes. Through this intellectual bricolage, many competing and even contradictory interpretations of anarchy coexist in uneasy detente. This multiple reinvention of the concept of anarchy has made it function not so much as a philosophy as a symbol for many alternate possibilities. People can see in anarchy anything they want to see. Many of the punks I talked to felt that anarchy had become a useless concept. They recognize that they must deal with the real world and that anarchy does not really offer any constructive way to deal with
that world. The idea of recreating the world from scratch is seductive but as one musician put it, "It (anarchy) doesn't pay the bills."
PUNK AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Punk is expressed in western Michigan primarily as a form of cultural rebellion (Brake 1980:4) seeking to vent frustration and anxieties through artistic expression and stylistic iconoclasm. The punk subculture purposely contrasts with the dominant American culture. Its aesthetics and values express a dissatisfaction with the parent culture, but it is dependent on that culture for most of its basic needs. Due to the nature of the styles adopted by punk rockers and the form their artistic creations take, it may appear to outsiders that this is a delinquent subculture. But while the music and personal styles adopted by western Michigan punks are sometimes crude and confrontational, their purpose is merely to provoke a reaction and affirm personal autonomy. The apparent antisocial aspect of western Michigan punk is primarily a veneer of rebellion not really intended to cause harm. In some cities there are truly delinquent elements in the punk subculture (Gains 1986:57) but, as I stated earlier, I have not encountered this punk manifestation personally, here in western Michigan.

The punk subculture cannot be a reformist movement in Brake's classification (1980), because the subculture would lose its distinctiveness if the similarities between it and the dominant culture were to be accentuated. Punks accentuate the differences between themselves and the dominant culture. Without this opposition to the dominant culture, there would be no purpose in punk music, fashion,
and style. The primary purpose of the subculture is to give young people a dramatic way to demonstrate that they are not like everybody else.

English punk was born out of high youth unemployment and an inflexible class structure (Hebdige 1979:65). American punk also responds to social concerns, but the primary motivating factor appears to be boredom. One of the common motivating factors for becoming a member of the punk subculture is a dissatisfaction with the range of creative outlets available to young people. Informants stated that their initial motivation to seek out punk rock was based on a desire to experience something new. They were tired of the lack of variety in popular music and mass media, popular entertainment. The politically conservative atmosphere of contemporary America is reflected in the leisure sphere by what they consider to be the homogenization of entertainment options. We have seen in Table 2 that popular music offers very little thematic variety, when compared to punk rock. Popular music is also limited stylistically, when compared to the range of musical styles called alternative music. American punk offers an escape from the homogenized, everyday world of school, work, television, and radio.

Jacobs's (1984) study of suburban shopping centers illustrates the homogenization which has occurred within the leisure sphere of American life. Jacobs found that malls strive to be a place where "nothing unusual ever happens" (Jacobs 1984:110). "The mall filters out environmental discomfort and abrasive social particles such as ethnic and racial groups, persons exhibiting bizarre or otherwise
unruly behavior and the more generally criminal and undesirable elements of all sorts" (Jacobs 1984:94). Malls homogenize the social environment and seek to homogenize the commercial element as well by leasing to national chain stores as much as possible. This practice yields familiarity and complacency.

Jacobs describes mall society as an approximation of Durkheim's "society of saints," where even the smallest deviance becomes a major breach of decorum (1984:110). One of the activities teenagers in mall society enjoy is looking for "weird" people, "people who dress funny. People who don't dress the way we do" (1984:111). Mall society is a projection of white, middle class, suburban, American culture. It is this same white, middle class, suburban culture from which American punks emerge.

Entering the punk subculture a young person willingly accepts what Brake (1980:1) describes as folk devil status. Decorum is violated, and the constraints of everyday life are altered. The ways in which decorum are violated are not random but are inversions of values widely held in American culture. Imagery of alienation, death, and despair are in sharp contrast to the nostalgic image of hippies as positive exponents of peace, love, and optimism. Barnett (1983:8) argues that the adoption of these negative images is a manifestation of youth rebelling against parents who were adolescents or young adults during the 1960s. I would extend Barnett's argument by pointing out that a significant portion of the punk rock community falls outside the relatively narrow range of persons born of parents who were hippies. The negative imagery used by punks is a more general
reflection of disillusionment with nostalgia over what, in retrospect, is seen as the idealism of the 1960s and the actual social and political conditions which have come into existence since then.

Punks choose clothing and hair styles which are purposely out of date or clash with current popular styles. Conformity in fashion, as expressed through the popularity of designer clothing and the popularity of dress for success seminars is actively resisted by punks who choose to get their clothes from secondhand and vintage clothing stores. Punks who dress in this way make use of the profane cultural wastes of society (Willis 1978:5) to project their own identity through the rejection of the styles and associated values of the dominant culture.

By accepting folk devil status, punks enter a status removed from their peers and exist in a state similar to that Van Gennep (1960:107) calls "liminality." As in a rite of passage, members of the subculture learn a new language (or at least jargon), have a change of costume, alter their hair style, and may even undergo body mutilation (ear piercings, nose piercing, tattoos, or just minor abrasions from slamdancing).

Unlike the rites of passage Van Gennep discussed, entering the punk subculture may be for an indefinite time period. While in this phase, the individual is able to explore ideas and forms of expression which are normally off limits. Punks focus on their fears and anxieties and, through their music and dance, can do something about them. The solutions found in this form are of a "magical" nature. Harris (1981:165) suggests that the popularity of religious cults and
television evangelism is a desperate attempt to find solutions to worldly problems through spirituality. While many average Americans seek "magical" solutions in the form of variations on accepted religious doctrine, punks create their own secular magic with which they address their problems.

Most punks realize that they will eventually have to be reincorporated into the parent culture. Eventually, it will be necessary to seek employment and conform to the expectations of others to a greater extent. This does not mean that these individuals will necessarily sever all ties to the subculture, but they will have to be less externally obvious and fit their activities in the subculture into their lives as members of the larger society.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have used ethnomethods to analyze the cognitive categories used by punk rockers to organize and understand their world. These categories primarily differentiate musical styles and individuals from mainstream rock music and other people. The underlying concern which makes these distinctions relevant is the need of individuals in this subculture to assert their individual identity through opposition to accepted values in the dominant American culture. That punk identity is defined by reference to the dominant culture demonstrates that it is subordinate to the dominant culture and cannot claim cultural equality as a coculture might. The underlying principle which organizes punk classifications and the artistic, fashion, and verbal styles used clearly defines punk rock as a subculture of cultural rebellion.

Punk music and personal style in speech and dress serve to reinforce the individual's identity through opposition to the accepted conventions of the dominant culture. The music violates accepted standards of melody, speed, and length, while the lyrical content expresses concerns not often dealt with in popular rock music. Verbal and visual style are often confrontational through their violation of accepted standards of fashion and good taste. Punks willingly accept the status of folk devil as a means of defining their own identity.

The concern for establishing personal autonomy is expressed ideologically through a nebulous concept of anarchy. The usage of
this concept within the subculture allows justification for a wide range of ideological positions with their only unified aspect being opposition to the social and political status quo. Punks express their concerns through their music, which deals largely with doubts about social and political conditions and the anxieties of coming of age in uncertain times.

The punk subculture serves its members by offering an alternative to what they perceived as a limited array of leisure activities available for adolescents in contemporary American culture. It asserts the value of personal initiative by encouraging individuals to do something about their situation. Through punk, the work ethic is transformed into small-scale ventures to put on concerts, publish fanzines, and put out records. Punk distorts values that are valued in the parent culture and displays them in ways which are frightening to the parent culture. Through this distortion, punks project their own fears and anxieties in their songs and styles, while the parent culture sees its own fears physically manifested.

The assertion of identity by punks need not be detrimental to individuals or society at large. Some manifestations of punk rock express positive values of personal responsibility, social conscience, and physical restraint. However, these values are often expressed in ways that are superficially disturbing. Parents and officials who must deal with punks will find that this subculture, while provoking more concern than other forms of expression common to adolescents and young adults, is not inherently a problem. Understanding that there is a great deal of variation within this subculture and that
many of these variations are essentially benign, will give parents and others concerned with the punk phenomenon a rational perspective from which to evaluate the behavior of punks they may observe.

I intend to use the insights gained from the research presented in this thesis to examine other aspects of the punk phenomenon. My understanding of the cognitive aspects of punk identity will allow me to carry my analysis to interpersonal relationships within the subculture and between punks and their parents. I would also like to apply my understanding of punk to the behavioral aspects of the subculture, such as slamdancing, and the economic activities of punk entrepreneurs. This thesis can foster a deeper analysis of the symbolic aspects of this subculture. Comparative work on the regional manifestations of punk will yield a better understanding of the subculture and the ways in which local circumstance influences the expression of punk rock.
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