

Milton M. Gordon

THE CONCEPT OF THE SUB-CULTURE AND ITS APPLICATION [1947]

ONE OF THE FUNCTIONS of any science, 'natural' or 'social,' is admittedly to discover and isolate increasingly smaller units of its subject matter. This process leads to more extensive control of variables in experiment and analysis. There are times, however, when the scientist must put some of these blocks back together again in an integrated pattern. This is especially true where the patterning reveals itself as a logical necessity, with intrinsic connections which create something more, so to speak, than the mere sum of the parts. Specifically, in the social sciences, this patterning is necessary where the impact of the nexus on the human being is that of a unit, and not a series of disconnected social situations. This chapter represents an attempt to delineate such a nexus by a logical extension of the concept of culture.

American sociologists, on the whole, have seemed reluctant to extend the concept of culture beyond the point where it has already been developed and more or less handed to us by the anthropologists. We hear an occasional reference to 'urban culture,' or 'rural culture,' or 'the culture of the middle class,' but these references have seemed to represent sporadic resting places of semantic convenience rather than any systematic application of the term to well defined social situations. Broadly speaking, we have been content to stop the concept of culture at national boundaries, and engage in our intra-national analyses in terms of the discrete units of ethnic background, social class, regional residence, religious affiliation, and so on. It is the thesis of this [chapter] that a great deal could be gained by a more extensive use of the concept of the *sub-culture* — a concept used here to refer to a

sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but *forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an [integrated impact] on the participating individual*. No claim is made here for origination of the term. Although its use has apparently not been extensive enough to merit it a place in the *Dictionary of Sociology* . . . a recent and perceptive use of the term has been made in a paper by Green, where he speaks incidentally of 'highly organized subcultures,' and, in connection with the question of neuroses, phrases a query in the following manner: [Since in modern society no individual participates in the total cultural complex totally but primarily in a series of population segments grouped according to sex, age, class, occupation, region, religion, and ethnic group — all with somewhat differing norms and expectations of conduct — how do these combine in different ways to form varying backgrounds for individual etiologies of neurotic trends? [Green 1946: 354]]

Green, by implication, uses the term 'sub-culture' and 'population segment' interchangeably. Nomenclature is relative unimportant so long as it is consistent, but we prefer the former term since it seems to emphasize more directly the dynamic character of the framework within which the child is socialized. It is a world within a world, so to speak, but *is* a world. The emphasis in this [chapter], then, is simply on the unifying and transmuting implications of the term 'sub-culture' for such combinations of factors as ethnic group, social class, region, occupation, religion, and urban or rural residence, and on the need for its wider application.

A primary and major implication of this position is that the child growing up in a particular sub-culture feels its impact as a unit. For instance, the son of lower-class Italian immigrants, growing up in New York's upper East Side, is not a person who is simultaneously affected by separable items consisting of ethnic background, low-economic status, and a highly urbanized residential situation. He is a person whose environmental background is an interwoven and variegated combination of all these factors. Each of the elements has been somewhat transformed by virtue of its combination with the others. This fact must be taken into consideration in research procedures dealing with environmental backgrounds and their effects. A corollary of this position is that identically named factors in different sub-cultures are not interchangeable. Thus being a middle-class Jew is not the same thing as being a middle class Gentile except for the additional factor of being Jewish.

A wider use of the concept of the *sub-culture* would, in the opinion of this writer, give us a keen and incisive tool which would, on the one hand, prevent us from making too broad groupings where such inclusiveness is not warranted (we would, for instance, refer not so much to 'the Negro,' as to 'Southern, rural, lower-class Negroes,' or 'North, urban, middle class Negroes,' etc.), and, on the other hand, enable us to discern relatively closed and cohesive systems of social organization which currently we tend to analyze separately with our more conventional tools of 'class' and 'ethnic group.'

The writer, for instance, has been interested to observe in the city of Philadelphia a not entirely cohesive, but unmistakably present, sub-culture composed of members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), and ranging in class position from upper middle to upper-upper. More conventional objects of sociological attention, second and third generation Jews, would seem, for the most part, to be neither 'marginal men' in the Park and Stonequist phrase, nor competitors in the social class system with white Gentiles, but rather members of highly integrated 'marginal sub-cultures' (called marginal here because, like the 'marginal man,' these sub-cultures composed of the descendants of immigrant Jews lie somewhere between the immigrant culture and the native Gentile culture and contain cultural contributions from both) whose variable elements are size of community, of residence and social class.

A distinction must, of course, be made between separate sub-cultures and separate units of the same sub-culture. Thus lower-class white Protestants in one medium-sized New England city would presumably belong to the same sub-culture as lower-class white Protestants in another medium-sized New England community hundreds of miles away, though each group would constitute a separate unit. Whether lower-class white Protestants in a medium-sized community in the Middle-West would form a different sub-culture is a more difficult point. The question of whether variation of one factor is sufficient to set up a separate sub-culture would have to be answered empirically by a field study of the community situations in question.

A comprehensive application of the sub-cultural concept to the American scene would, in time, lead to the delineation of a fairly large number of sub-cultures of varying degrees of cohesiveness and with varying patterns of interaction with each other. Among the many further research problems which such an analysis would pose, six of particular interest to the writer are mentioned here:

1. How do the various sub-cultures rank on a scale of differential access to the rewards of the broader American culture, including both material rewards and status?
2. How is the experience of growing up in a particular sub-culture reflected in the personality structure of the individual? Is there a portion of the personality which is roughly equivalent to a similar portion of the personality of every other individual who has matured in the same sub-culture, and which might, then, be referred to as the 'sub-cultural personality'?
3. In what way are identical elements of the national culture refracted differentially in the sub-culture? We have been prone, perhaps, to assume uniformities which do not entirely exist. Football, to male adolescents of one sub-culture may mean the chance to hawk programs and peanuts and make some money, to those of another, enthusiastic attendance at the High School game on Saturday afternoon, and to those of still a third, inviting girls up to the campus for a houseparty week end.

- 4 What are the most indicative indices of participation in a particular sub-culture? If any one had to be singled out, the writer would offer speech patterns (particularly pronunciation and inflection) as at once the easiest to 'observe' and the most revealing. Clothes would probably rank next in indicativeness and ease of discernibility — contrary to casual opinion, for men as well as women.
- 5 What explains the 'deviant,' that is, the person who does not develop the sub-cultural or social personality characteristic of the particular sub-culture in which he was born and nurtured? An interesting question here is whether there are particular combinations of biological characteristics which would adjust more or less easily to the sub-cultural personalities specifically demanded. What about the above average in intelligence and sensitive boy, for instance, born into a sub-culture of low-status and rather rough behavior patterns? or, conversely, the son of professional parents who cannot make the grade at college but would much rather be out tinkering with the motor of his automobile?
- 6 In upward social mobility, does a change of 'sub-cultural personality' invariably accompany acquisition of some of the more objective indices of higher status, such as wealth or more highly valued occupation? If not, what stresses and strains result? This last question . . . is a most interesting one, and, in the growing literature on social mobility, [it] has barely been touched.

Note

- 1 Henry Pratt Fairchild, ed., *Dictionary of Sociology*, New York, 1944; the nearest concept in the *Dictionary* is that of the 'culture sub-area,' which is defined as 'a sub-division of a larger culture area, distinguished by the comparative completeness of the development of a particular culture trait, or the comparative readiness with which such a trait will be diffused' (p. 83). The emphasis here is obviously on area — physical contiguity, which factor may, or may not, or may only partially be present in the *sub culture*. Thus groups of lower-class white Protestants may live in different sections of the same city. Or middle-class Jews may be scattered over a medium-sized city and still form a [society entity] . . .