

What is Subculture?: *Identifying and Exploring Subcultures on Campus*

Authors: Dr. Elizabeth Burkhalter, Irvine Valley College, and Teresa Ryan, California State University, Dominguez Hills

Resource Type(s): Class Activity

Subject Area: Introduction to Sociology, Culture

Class Level: 100

Class Size: Any

Language: English

Instructions

Abstract:

Students are usually able to understand the concept of culture and identify dominant cultural groups. Yet many struggle with understanding how the concept of subculture is an “unnatural break” from the dominant culture (Hebdige 1979). This activity helps students understand the concept of subculture and recognize the existence of subcultures in their everyday lives.

Subculture is defined as cultural patterns that set apart some segment of a society’s population (Macionis 2007). Students are introduced to the concepts of culture, ideology, hegemony, and subculture through lecture. Then, working in groups, they collaborate to create a short video describing a subculture on campus.

Objective 1: Define and understand the concept of subculture. Students describe how certain groups are categorized as a subculture by explaining the general definition of subculture and identifying its distinguishing characteristics.

Assessment 1: The student-group video should:

1. Provide a general definition of subculture and its identifying characteristics.
2. Introduce the subculture used as the “case study” in the video.
3. Identify the symbols (logos, images, etc.), style, objects, language, activities, rules, rituals, mores, or behaviors that characterize the subculture. Students should reflect on the dominant culture and how these characteristics help set the subculture apart from other groups either on campus or the general society.
4. Describe what the subculture represents (i.e., what is the “message” of the subculture).
5. Describe how the subculture represents a challenge to dominant culture (i.e. in what way- now or in the past- is it an “unnatural break”). Is it still an oppositional subculture?
6. Discuss if the subculture has been disempowered or reincorporated into society (i.e. how is it subject to cultural hegemony).
7. Include group members’ names and show each group member.

Objective 2: Practice research techniques and sociological methods.

Students practice introductory research methods such as: data collection (e.g. content analysis, observation, interviewing, etc.), analysis, and dissemination of findings.

Assessment 2: The student-group video should demonstrate students have identified and used information sources on campus and, if available, public sources (e.g. online content, school website, social media, etc.) to conduct their research.

1. Does the video explain the sources that were used to describe the subculture?
2. Does the video use an appropriate data collection method (interviews, observation, content analysis, etc.) to learn about the sub culture?
3. Did students analyze and disseminate information about their subculture?

Objective 3: Developing the Sociological Imagination. Students practice sociological thinking by identifying and then explaining campus subcultures. This process helps students reflect on how the subculture connects to their own experiences and those of their fellow classmates.

Assessment 3: Students demonstrate the use of their sociological imagination by:

1. Identifying a subculture on campus (which students may or may not be connected to), describing it, and explaining how it differs from the dominant culture in their video projects. By allowing students to focus on a subculture of their choice (campus groups do not need to be official campus clubs or organizations), students practice making sociological connections between the groups they interact with on campus, either directly or indirectly, and the sociological concept of subculture.
2. Watching the videos their classmates created and posting five reactions that demonstrate critical thinking to these videos in the discussion area of Blackboard. The instructor may want to review Bloom's Taxonomy or Costa's Model of Intellectual Functioning for words to use when asking critical thinking questions. We heard students remark that prior to doing the exercise they did not realize how many subcultures were on campus and how many they belonged to. Some said they did not realize certain groups were subculture or even groups on campus. And a few questioned if some of the featured campus groups in the videos fit the definition of a subculture, thus sparking additional conversation on what is and is not a subculture.

Students were not limited to identifying "official" campus groups, but they could identify any subculture they found present on campus. This brought a new awareness to students who might have noticed signs of the subculture, but were not necessarily familiar with the group. An example of this is import car culture. Many students said they noticed these types of cars in the parking lot on campus, but did not know it was a subculture until it was featured in a group video. Importantly, students need to make comments on Blackboard that reflect critical thinking. This can be done by asking questions or making comments about the video that engage lecture or

reading material. If this is not emphasized students may make comments such as, "Great video!" or "I learned so much about this group".

By the end of this activity students should be able to:

1. Identify subcultures and their distinguishing characteristics and key concepts related to them.
2. Practice the sociological imagination
3. Practice research techniques
4. Engage in collaborative work

Method:

This activity was used in a Sociology 101 class to augment sub culture learning. Video as a learning tool can be used in other classes as well. For example, an Introductory Research Methods class could use the activity and have students document the steps taken in a research project, or if used in a Social Problems class, students could upload a personal video describing a social problem. Students were given two weeks, working in small groups (4-5), students create a short video (2-3 minutes) about a subculture on campus. They should use information they find on campus and, if available, public sources (e.g., online content, school website, social media, etc.) to create their videos. Instructors should remind students that they are engaging in a class activity to practice research skills and should not give the impression that they are conducting approved research. Permission to film public spaces should be sought when necessary and students should not disrupt classrooms or general activities conducted on campus.

Students are encouraged to be creative in their presentations and can include images, videos, narratives and music to create an accurate picture of the subculture. I-Movie, Flip-a-gram, You Tube video editor, Power Point, etc. are easy to use tools (some are free) that will help create the presentation. Once the information is collected, it should be edited into a 2-3 minute video presentation. The video should be titled and uploaded to Blackboard. Make sure that the video and post includes each group members' names. Once videos are uploaded, each student will watch and comment on them (we set a minimum of 5 comments). We recommend instructors follow up the online discussion with a short in class discussion, during which you may clarify Blackboard comments and receive feedback from students regarding the process. Some technical difficulties were encountered with the video uploads to Blackboard. Students used a variety of tools to create their videos which resulted in different video formats. This made viewing some videos more time consuming and difficult to view. Some students found it easier to download each video then watch it, as larger files took a significant amount of time to buffer while viewing online. One way to avoid this potential problem is to have students preview their videos in Blackboard after uploading. Another possible solution, if acceptable, is to post the videos on You-Tube and insert the link to Blackboard. This will eliminate the need to download the video.

Grading Rubric

The assignment is worth 15 points. Grading across the rows, students earn one point for each component completed.

| Points per component completed | Objective 1: Define subculture | Objective 1: Case study of a campus subculture | Objective 1: Video Content | Objective 2: Research Methods | Objective 3: Discussion Comments | Total Points Possible |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|-----------------------|
| 1 | A group in society that is set apart from the dominant culture. | Students identify the symbols, style, objects, language, activities, rules, rituals, mores, or behaviors of the subculture (e.g. Dress, clothing, language, symbols such as logos, etc.) | Names of all group members are included in the video and all group members are present in the video | Students demonstrate research methods by including one of the following in their video: quantitative data, interviews, content analysis, or observations. | Comment 1 provided thoughtful discussion and/or reaction to the video or another comment. (Thoughtful discussion displays evidence of critical thinking) | 5 |
| 1 | It may be considered an "unnatural break" (Hebdige) and may be oppositional to the dominate culture. | Students describe what the subculture represents (e.g. why is the campus group considered set apart from the dominant culture). | Presentation of the subculture in the video is audible, clearly visible, creative, well organized, and in general well put together. | Students explained their source and properly cited it. | Comment 2 provided thoughtful discussion and/or reaction to the video or another comment. (Thoughtful discussion displays evidence of critical thinking) | 5 |
| 1 | | Students discuss how the subculture represents a challenge to dominant culture (e.g. in what way- now or in the past- is it an "unnatural break") and if it is oppositional. | | | Comment 3 provided thoughtful discussion and/or reaction to the video or another comment. (Thoughtful discussion displays evidence of critical thinking) | 2 |
| 1 | | Students discuss if the subculture has been disempowered or reincorporated into society (e.g. how is it subject to cultural hegemony). | | | Comment 4 provided thoughtful discussion and/or reaction to the video or another comment. (Thoughtful discussion displays evidence of critical thinking) | 2 |
| 1 | | | | | Comment 5 provided thoughtful discussion and/or reaction to the video or another comment. (Thoughtful discussion displays evidence of critical thinking) | 1 |
| | | | | | Total Points Earned | |
| | | | | | Points Possible | 15 |