

You Just Like Me 'Coz I'm Good in Bed

Perspectives on female subculture in the 1970s

Evalyn Charalambous

The 'Sharps' were a working class subculture of the 1960s and 70s, who differentiated themselves from the mainstream by exaggerating its more conservative aspects. Sharpie culture was predominately masculine and patriarchal. As Bessant (1995 pp.15-31) observes, Sharpies were preoccupied with 'looking sharp' and asserting their masculinity through drinking, fighting and sexual posturing. Although female Sharpies engaged in fighting, their role was seen as subordinate to their male counterparts. I identified as a Sharpie. I wore the Conti cardigan, the high-waisted Staggers jeans, and the platform shoes. My friends and I smoked, spat and swore. We intimidated soft targets at school and disgusted adults on trains. We danced in the Sharpie style, listened to Sharpie music, wagged school, and engaged in petty shoplifting.

But we weren't part of a gang – not like 'real Sharpie chicks'. We believed the girls in gangs were seriously tough 'molls' who got themselves pregnant or locked up in prison. I was frightened by the socially perceived consequences of gang participation. Sharpies were seen as deviants and delinquents by social commentators and mainstream culture.

According to Adler (1985), while male delinquency was considered to be the product of broader social conditions, female delinquency was problematised by many sociologists in terms of physical or psychological pathology. Adler remarks that delinquent girls were thought to be inherently predisposed towards sexual misconduct (Klein 1973), emotionally deprived (Pollack & Friedman 1969), physically unattractive (Cowie, Cowie & Slater 1968) and intellectually inferior and manipulative (Thomas 1923). In common with previous generations, some Sharpie girls did, and some Sharpie girls did not, have sex. Mac's memoir (2010) confirms that sexual promiscuity was not a condition of entry into the subculture. Moreover, unlike many girls that 'put out', those who resisted were often respected enough to be made girlfriends.

Subcultural theory, first promulgated in the 1920s by the Chicago School also linked deviance to a psychological strain felt by marginalised youth (Williams 2007). However, since the Chicago School sociologists studied urban male populations, it may be argued that its relevance is negligible when applied to the role of Sharpie girls. There is no evidence to conclude that the majority of girls who participated in Sharpie culture were marginalised or were experiencing psychological stress beforehand. Studies would need to be undertaken to investigate any correlations. According to Mac (2010), some female Sharpies came from stereotypically 'normal'

homes. Alternatively, subcultural theory based on neo-Marxist notions of resistance – developed, by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s, and augmented by feminist writers such as McRobbie (1978) – may also explain Sharpie culture and girls' participation within it. The theory posits that through differentiation of style and rituals, working class youth demonstrated their resistance to the culture of both their parents and the middle-class mainstream (Williams 2007). The working-class origins of the Sharpies, their devotion to their adopted style and their aggressive and visible presence on urban streets appears to support this view (Stratton 2012).

Mac comments on how girls were readily accepted into the subculture, provided they embraced the style and practices. This culture was set by the boys. Girls dressed like the boys and acted like the boys. They drank and vomited, engaged in graffiti-writing and other forms of vandalism, brutally attacked rival girls (particularly if they moved in on their man), and joined the boys in intimidating the general public (Mac 2010). However, just as neo-Marxist assumptions about class consciousness within subcultures might be regarded as spurious, girls' involvement as an act of resistance against female patriarchal stereotypes – posited by feminist sociologists such as McRobbie (1978) – fails to consider the subordination of women within such subcultures which amplifies mainstream patterns of patriarchy (Walker 2012). According to Mac, Sharpie girls did not play 'the pinnies' (pinball machines), ask boys to go out with them, or give them friendship rings. That was the masculine role. Girls fixed the boy's 'Staggers' if they got ripped in a fight, or cut the boy's hair when it grew too long (Mac) If girls' motivation for joining Sharpie subculture was simply the subversion of the feminine homemaker role, why did they so readily accept and indeed, actively promote – their subjugation within the group? One feasible explanation may be that the rebellion was a temporary aberration designed to shock parents for a period, yet ultimately to be discarded in favour of mainstream patriarchal patterns.

By the 1970s, when I became interested in the subculture, Sharpie style had gone through a period of diffusion and defusion¹. Whereas in the 60s, Sharpies invented their own style by patronising specific stores, 70s Sharpies were the heirs of an established culture. The market responded with off the rack clothing and mainstream groups such as Skyhooks and AC/DC were endorsed by Sharpies (Taylor 2004). With the widespread defusion of the style, it may be argued that groupings evolved into what Bennet (2000) refers to as neo-tribes, whereby membership was fluid (Boogarts-de Bruin 2011). For example, young people could be Sharpies at school, sports jocks in the afternoon, football fanatics on Saturdays and churchgoers on Sundays². Mac describes the routine attendance of Sharpie friends at her parents' picnics, being a bridesmaid at a wedding and attending Salamanda (home designer clothing) parties and football matches. She also confirms that membership was not restricted to one gang.

Furthermore, many Sharpie groups were founded on school friendships and a widespread abhorrence of education (Bessant 1995). Adler (1985) highlights the complex social networks within the schoolyard, asserting that peer pressure was, and remains, a dominant driver of identity formation. I myself was attracted to Sharpie culture through peer relationships developed at school. I was picked on at primary school because I made what was perceived by others to be the wrong choice of friend when I first arrived in our neighbourhood. On moving into secondary education, I deliberately chose a girls' high school three suburbs away where I was virtually unknown. It gave me the opportunity to re-invent myself. Sharpies ruled the school and

I became one of their pack. McRobbie & Garber (2000) suggest that identification with one's peer group is also played out in the home, particularly for girls. They assert that because girls tend to be more closely supervised than boys, their identity is formed by rituals that take place within the bedroom. Girls from middle-class (as well as working-class) homes adopted the Sharpie style, acting up in the schoolyard or playing loud music in their bedrooms to divorce themselves from parental values (Adler 1985; McRobbie & Garber 2000).

Subculture is defined as a distinct network of behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes existing within a larger culture (Macquarie University 1998). The Sharps may be awarded subcultural status because their extreme rituals separated them from the mainstream, even though post-subcultural theorists might argue that group members adhered to other identity narratives depending on their engagement within the wider community. Nevertheless, Sharpies adhered to a collective identity expressed in uniformity of style and ritualistic practices. However, the culture celebrated and inflated conservative masculine values, in which feminine identity was not afforded an equal independent status. Girls occupied a subordinate role as reflected within mainstream patriarchal culture.

References

- Adler, C 1985, 'Theories of female delinquency', in Borowski, A & Murray, JM (eds), *Juvenile Delinquency in Australia*, Methuen, Sydney.
- Bessant, J 1995, 'Hanging Around the Street: Australian Rockers, Sharpies and Skinheads of the 1960s and early 1970s,' Routledge, London.
- Boogarts-de Bruin, S 2011, *Something for Everyone – Changes and choices in the Ethno-party Scene in Urban Nightlife*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.
- Delbridge, A & Bernard JRL 1998, 'Subculture', *The Macquarie concise dictionary*, The Macquarie Library, NSW.
- Jaques, A 2001, 'You Can Run But You Can't Hide: The Incorporation of Riot Grrrl into Mainstream Culture', *Canadian Women's Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 46-50.
- Mac, J, 2010, *Rage: A Sharpie's Journal, Melbourne 1974-1980*, [self-published] Julie Mac, Melbourne.
- McRobbie, A & Garber, J 2000, 'Girls and subcultures' in A McRobbie, (ed), *Feminism and Youth Culture*, MacMillan, Hampshire.
- Stratton, J 2012, 'Bodgies and Widgies', in R White, (ed), *Youth Subcultures: Theory History and the Australian Experience*, Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Tasmania.
- Taylor, T 2004, *Top Fellas*, Surefire Productions, Northcote.
- Walker, L 2012, 'Girls Schooling and Subcultures of Resistance', in R White, (eds.), *Youth Subcultures: Theory History and the Australian Experience*, Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Tasmania.
- Williams, JP 2007, 'Youth-Subcultural Studies: Sociological Traditions and Core Concepts', *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 572–593.

About the author

I decided to return to study in 2011 because I no longer enjoyed teaching (at primary level) and needed a career change. I chose to study sociology and politics, as I am interested in power relations and the effects such interactions have on social structures and on individual lives. Returning to study after twenty-seven years has been a stimulating challenge.

¹ Diffusion & defusion is a process by which subculture is absorbed by mainstream culture. Moral panics concerning subcultural practices dissipate over time as the market is flooded by the subculture's signifiers (Jaques, 2001, p.46).

² Neo-tribes are gatherings of youth that are both temporal and fluid. They do not last long and the boundaries are porous allowing members to slip in and out of them (Boogarts-de Bruin, 2011, p. 23).