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Powerlessness in Adolescence: Exploiting Heavy Metal Listeners¹

Bruce K. Friesen

In his classic study on adolescence, James Coleman (1961) suggested that the development of the secondary school system in industrial society, particularly in the post World War II years, produced the age and geographical segregation that provided a breeding ground for a distinctive youth subculture. Popular music was viewed by Coleman as an expression of this adolescent subculture which provided a catalyst necessary to unite young people, and allow them the ideological freedom to develop a collective identity of their own.

Empirical research conducted since Coleman's analysis has failed to substantiate the existence of thematic homogeneity in popular music. In fact, since the 1960s popular music has consistently grown more diverse in terms of the increasing number of styles and genres of music that receive radio airplay (Anderson et. al., 1980; Tanner, 1981; Hirsch, 1971). Since adolescents increasingly identify each other in terms of what type of music they listen to (Chapman and Williams, 1976:61), popular music today creates the conditions where several subcultures may consequently develop in response to this musical diversity. Etzkorn (1976:20) summarizes by saying:

Within delimited social contexts certain musical forms become clearly associated with specific social groups, and are practiced within them to the exclusion of alternatives. These specific musical forms are socially learned and transmitted within delimited social groups in ways comparable to those characteristic for other values and certain non-material cultural practices. Group-specific socialization practices offer a key to the analysis of the maintenance of specific musical culture.

This elaboration of musical genres has led to the identification of some musical styles as deviant. One style of music frequently identified as deviant is most often referred to as "heavy metal."² The subcultural activity surrounding the consumption of heavy metal music is frequently associated with the more "seedy" side of humanity. *The Economist* (1985:25), for example, described heavy metal as:



Bruce Friesen, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Sociology

Voice: (813) 253-3333 ext. 3464
Fax: (813) 258-7237
BFriesen@ut.edu

401 W. Kennedy Boulevard ■ Tampa, FL 33606-1490 ■ www.ut.edu

all the best,
Heego!
Regards,
Bruce F.

...a raw, loud and violent type of music. Its excesses are justly notorious—Mr. Blackie Lawless, a singer with a band called Wasp [sic], abuses a semi-naked girl on stage while wearing a chainsaw codpiece. A violent attitude to sex is often taken in the lyrics; an extreme example is 'Eat me alive' by Judas Priest, which is alleged to deal with forced sex at gunpoint.

Such "allegations" perpetuated by the rock music press and other moral entrepreneurial agents allow the "deviant" label to be applied continually to the heavy metal genre of music. Heavy metal, then, provides an interesting case study in the relationship between popular culture and deviance.

The heightened media attention on heavy metal facilitates the application of a deviant label to this genre of music. However, labeling heavy metal as such does not negate the possibility that values promulgated in the heavy metal subculture are "truly" deviant; in the sense that they differ from those of mainstream society.

Adolescent Subcultures and Deviance

In general, adolescents and their subcultures have been labeled in negative ways. They have been portrayed as rebellious, immoral, unappreciative, irresponsible, and rude (Rice, 1981; Barr, 1971; Drane, 1973; Feigelson, 1970; Gerzon, 1970). Yet most empirical studies concerned with normal adolescents indicate that the majority are not rebellious, not politically active, not resistant to the values of their parents, not at the mercy of their emotions, nor even in turmoil (Adelson, 1979, pp. 33ff). In a recent major survey which surveyed 3,600 Canadian youth, Bibby and Posterski (1985:23-24) concluded:

We do not mean to minimize the potential of youth minorities to have a cultural and political impact on our societies. However, we would underscore the fact that even in this period of such publicized societal disaffection on the part of youth, the values and related lifestyles of the majority of young people were largely untouched....Our survey has found that those terminal and instrumental values deemed most important by adult Canadians are also held by a solid majority of young people.

If adolescents generally support values that are congruent with those of mainstream society, why then are their subcultures labeled deviant? Georg Simmel (1955) offers some insight. Simmel's work (restated by Coser, 1964) suggests that deviance and the conflict it engenders performs positively in society in at least five interrelated ways.³ First, when no external enemies exist, deviants exposed within the society can be used as scapegoats, serving to unify the general populace who do not deviate in the same manner. Secondly, since deviants are viewed by society at large with disgust and contempt, it adds a dimension of security and stability to the identity of the conformers, who perceive themselves to be morally superior and somewhat self-righteous. Kai Erikson (1966) argued that this distinction is, in fact, an essential need of society. Behaviors will continually be redefined as deviant in order to fill the need of having someone inferior with whom to compare.

Thirdly, assuming one can make the distinction between "healthy" and "harmful" deviance, non-conformity can serve as an early warning signal that something is wrong with the social system, and can help the society avoid potentially larger faults that could cause more damage at a later time. Both Simmel and Coser reinforced the idea that deviance in a society is healthy unless it attempts to seriously undermine the basic fabric of society.

Fourthly, the social change that is encouraged by certain forms of deviance may begin a process of progress and adaptation to new and largely acceptable norms and values in a given social system. Certain people in the past who were labeled deviant (such as Ghandi or Martin Luther King) encouraged social change in a fashion that is presently evaluated as positive.

Finally, assuming that certain behaviors can actually "let off steam," minor forms of deviant behavior may lead to fewer problems for society in the long run, since pent up frustration and aggression can be expressed in smaller rather than larger deviant behaviors. Prohibition was abolished partly due to this philosophy, since government leaders were willing to accept certain social consequences of legal alcohol consumption more readily than the problems of "bootlegging," organized crime and the like.

In other words, society increases its solidarity as certain social groups are labeled deviant. On the one hand, adolescents appear to be an intimidating group to label since they have numerous resources at their disposal. Adolescents are highly idealistic, have an abundance of energy and a surplus of free time. Yet despite these advantages, adolescents remain one of the most powerless groups in society. They are largely unsophisticated, and lack the knowledge or tact necessary to defend themselves effectively against any moral type of attack. Their dependency upon authority is crippling, since any attempt at criticizing the status quo is quickly quelled by parents who lean towards a more conservative viewpoint. In addition to this economic and emotional dependency, adolescents' lives are heavily regulated by teachers and the secondary school system. Elaborate control systems are maintained to ensure conformity to time schedules, attendance, and the like. And, in addition to these structural confines, most adolescents are in a crisis period of life, attempting to build their own self-esteem and make career decisions instead of trying to ward off moral attacks. Because many of them are likewise barred from obtaining more powerful positions in society (i.e. those that drop out of school are largely determined to fill only blue-collar positions), adolescents remain a relatively powerless group within society, and have frequently found themselves or their cultures to be the focus of a moral entrepreneurial attack. By labeling those who listen to heavy metal as deviant, then, society continues to function successfully.

At the same time, adolescents who choose to involve themselves with heavy metal also benefit from this relationship. Because many people are fearful of or intimidated by deviant groups, adolescents so labeled acquire status and power through these means. Heavy metal adherents experience power when they observe others stepping into stores or walking to the other side of the street to avoid a confrontation. This is a power applied only

at the interactive (as opposed to structural) level, but it is an attractive and desirable status given adolescents' otherwise powerless position in society.

While heavy metal participants welcome the "deviant" stigma, most resent the "delinquent" label which often accompanies an application of the former. Headbangers recognize the term "deviant" as connoting "different," and the term "delinquent" as implying "criminal." While the criminal element is a part of the heavy metal scene, most of the participants do not take part in it.

Aspects of Heavy Metal Culture

To investigate this relationship, research was undertaken to find to what extent and in what ways the heavy metal subculture "deviates" from mainstream society.⁴ While observing various activities and interactions in the scene it became apparent that certain things are highly valued among heavy metal adherents.

Music

Heavy metal enthusiasts maintain that music is a big part of their lives. This is consistent with recent findings: Bibby and Posterski (1985:33) found that some 90 percent of teenagers indicated that they listen to music "very often." Next to friendship, music was noted to be the greatest source of personal enjoyment. It appears that the high value heavy metal enthusiasts place upon music is something they have in common with other adolescents.

Along with the high level of enjoyment that headbangers receive from listening to their type of music, a keen defensiveness exists as well. In many cases heavy metal adherents displayed a strong dislike towards those who criticized their music on moral or aesthetical grounds. One female adherent commented:

I have a couple of friends that I said, "Here, I'll put on some [heavy metal] ballads for you," and they said, "no, it will hurt my ears," as if it's going to corrupt them or something. Shit, I mean, even Bruce Cockburn [easy-listening artist] swears in his songs. If there's a few harsh words in metal, what's the difference?

Reactions by adherents to others' dislike for heavy metal music range from relativism ("each to his own") to acts of antagonism. Turning up a stereo in a public place after someone has voiced criticism is often cited as a favorite antagonistic reaction.

Existential Pleasures

While studying the heavy metal subculture it became obvious that many topics of conversation center on various types of existential pleasures. These pleasures are in contrast to the long-term goals of "normal" society that involve deferred gratification. Getting drunk, driving fast, "doing" drugs, having sex and "partying" are examples of existential pleasures. Getting a university degree, saving up for retirement and taking yearly vacations

are examples of deferred gratification. Over half of the conversations among headbangers deal favorably with existential pleasures. Bibby and Posterski (1985:19) found that almost six in ten young people desired a "life of excitement," but that excitement "took a back seat" to more conservative values of companionship and love. Similar values were expressed by heavy metal adherents. Matza and Sykes (1961:715) have also pointed out that "the values of a leisure class seem to lie behind much delinquent activity." When engaging in leisure activities, members of mainstream society also adopt values that appear to conflict with those values held at other times. Leisure participants may express a rejection of the work ethic, and may engage in conspicuous consumption of material goods and existential luxuries. For members of society in general, the transition between work and leisure value-systems is not seen as contradictory.

Headbangers also make a sharp distinction between work and leisure time. Older participants are better able to articulate this difference than are younger headbangers, but by high school the majority of heavy metal adherents identify their involvement in the subculture as a leisure activity (although some of the activity is carried out during school hours). Thompson (1969) suggests that "deviant" leisure pastimes were viewed by employers in the past as a potential disrupter of productivity because they act as a "counterthesis" to work. In the heavy metal scene, however, participants are quite able to differentiate between necessary duties in the "outside" world, and enjoyable activities engaged in apart from work or classroom. Leisure activities are purposely selected to provide a break from the routine of the week.

Further qualifications need to be made regarding existential pleasures. Most of the talk in the scene dealing with deviant activities is never put into action. There is frequent talk about having sex with a stranger of the opposite sex, for example, but the vast majority of participants leave the scene with the same friends with which they enter. This expression of deviant fantasies appears to be an accepted "rhetoric of deviance" among heavy metal adherents. When questioned about the practice, participants describe such discussions as a verbal exercise of venting frustrations. By describing such fictitious adventures, headbangers reaffirm to themselves and others their commitment to the leisure values of the subculture. Such discussions are also cathartic, in that they reduce high frustration levels caused by the discrepancy between what participants want to have happen and what really occurs.

A certain amount of illegal activity does take place in the scene, particularly in the form of soft drug consumption or purchasing (eg. marijuana, hashish, hashish oil). However, because observation of the heavy metal subculture was made almost exclusively at places of leisure, it is likely that observations of such activities were more numerous than would have been recorded when observing heavy metal adherents at other times. Adolescents and young adults are generally the heaviest users of marijuana, and non-students (i.e. high school dropouts) use marijuana more often than

students (Stebbins, 1988:150). It is likely that such illegal activity is carried out to the same degree in other adolescent leisure subcultures as well (see Chambliss, 1973). This fact was emphasized by one adherent:

We are no more delinquent than anybody else. Preppies and all others drink as much as we do, do as many drugs, and have as much of the criminal element in their kind as we do in ours. As a matter of fact, I know a few thieves [sic], and their favorite type of music is Top 40, not heavy metal.

Short-Term Job Preparation

For those listeners highly involved in promoting heavy metal music, the desire to be close to the music business often dictates the amount and type of education they seek. Most career positions in the music business (such as sound engineer or audio technician) require short-term training courses that many committed listeners involve themselves in. This is not to say that adherents of heavy metal are determined by their association with the music to limit their education. Rather, serious heavy metal adherents are more likely to want jobs that require such education.

Gender Expectations

One of the most distinctive aspects of the heavy metal subculture is the different expectations which exist for males and females. Males and females conform to these expectations in order to be evaluated as "cool" or "alright." Failure to conform to such expectations results in a range of sanctions; from a ridiculing of the behavior or person to ostracism from the group. For the most part, males conform to extremely rigid roles. Males are expected to emulate certain characteristics (eg., aggressiveness, independence) in their image, demeanor and argot, and are also expected to practice behaviors that disassociate them from anything feminine. Females, on the other hand, are allowed the option at times to display certain male qualities in addition to female characteristics.⁵

One obvious characteristic expected from males in the setting is "toughness" or "ruggedness." Toughness is expressed in the gait of many participants, wearing leather studded arm or wristbands, and walking with arms and legs slightly spread to make one look larger than normal. Toughness is also demonstrated by the lack of physical intimacy between males. Males come in contact with each other only through carefully mediated symbolic actions of support; such as a gentle punch on the shoulder, a special handshake where one person's hand clasps the other person's thumb, or a hand held high in the air while an approaching male does the same, slapping hands as they meet (a "high five"). Any other physical contact, even suggested, is negatively viewed. One headbanger, for example, relayed a story of a homosexual proposition on the street:

That's as bad as Grady jumping in this car, he's hitch-hiking and this car drove down the side of the road. Jumps in, buddy in a big Cadillac, and he says, [effeminate voice]: "Where're you going?" Grady, six foot four, right? Looks down at this guy, [deep bass

voice] "I'm going down the street to get some gas." [effeminate voice] "Uh, do you mind if we stop around the corner a little bit? I've never had anybody as big as you before." And Grady just put his head through the window on that side; just nailed him; just cold-cocked him on the side of the face. Pushed his head right through the window on the other side. "You flaming faggot," he says, "stop this car."

Stories such as these, whether true or concocted, stress the behaviors expected of males.

Other observed traits of males included aggressiveness, independence, and desire for non-committal (i.e. self-oriented) sexual relations. While male traits are viewed by males and females more positively than female traits, females are evaluated by males in the setting more by physical appearance than expected behaviors. Participants commented in interviews:

Male 1: "Metal girls are sexy. They get dressed up in the shortest skirt, and they usually have long legs..."

Male 2: And they usually wear the tightest spandex.

Male 3: But they're not always sexy; they're more wild.

Male 1: No they're not always sexy; they're more of a wild creation that is tolerable and acceptable, right? Little old ladies look at them and go "Little slut," but Dad goes "Oooh."

Male 3: Yeah, and swerves the car.

[Laughter]

The males in the setting also agree that "chicks" are there not because they enjoy the music, but because they want to "get a guy." The "pure" male motivation of being involved with the music for its own sake enables them to accord women a position of lower status. Since the heavy metal subculture is organized (however loosely) around a genre of music, appreciation of the music is the central value of the subculture. As one participant put it:

Male 1: They [females] like the musicians, whereas the guys like the music.

Male 2: But that's what the women are there for [to get a guy], it carries on the teen idol bit but for metal.

Male 3: That's chauvinistic.

Male 2: Okay, it's chauvinistic, but that's what I see, you know, like the girls at the Helix concert all backstage.

Male 1: Yeah, but girls are girls.

Male 2: Okay, girls are girls.

The distinct masculine identity in heavy metal is also reinforced by the recognition that few women listen to "thrash" metal; an extremely fast and aggressive form of heavy metal music little known outside of the subculture.

Male 1: Women don't like a lot of thrash. They don't like a lot of the intensity. They like a lot more mainstream stuff. It's all guys. You go to a thrash show and you'll be looking at about a 90 percent male turnout.

Male 2: But if you go to a show like Ratt you'll be looking at about 75 percent women.

These types of distinctions made by males reinforce masculine character traits that distinguish them from females.

While females are socialized into accepting these gender distinctions, it appears that they often downplay them through their own interpretations of their involvement in the scene. Females explain such differences in terms of individual tastes rather than male or female differences. For example, one female commented:

I don't like all of that thrash stuff, I don't know what it is, but it just doesn't turn me on. I'm sure that there are other chicks that enjoy the stuff, but it's just not for me.

Because of the stigma that is attached to getting involved in the scene for reasons other than music, females likewise tend to practice a certain amount of role distancing to try to demonstrate their "pure" attraction to the music. However, such role distance behavior is also evaluated on a personal rather than social level. One female commented:

Like, a few friends of mine who are working in bands or whatever, for them to turn around and say, "Oh fuck, the groupies are here again," like, I have to laugh you know, but then I kind of have to go "Don't fucking think that of ME," you know, because that's the last thing I want thought of myself... But some of them chicks with the lace around the ankles and the spandex and chains, like THOSE chicks, look at THEM.

While male adherents to heavy metal tend to emphasize the differences between the sexes, then, females tend to downplay them. This may be due, in part, to the stigma generally associated with female gender traits. These inconsistencies are not radically different than those of traditional society. In some cases gender presentations seem to be an extreme but logical extension of society's traditional gender expectations. What appears to be deviant is not the values, but the symbols that are used to express such values. Long hair on males, for example, is viewed in traditional society as effeminate or iconoclastic rather than masculine. Within the heavy metal subculture, however, long hair is a symbol of freedom, autonomy and, at times, virility for the male. These are values traditionally associated with masculine behavior (Chafetz, 1974; Freudiger and Almquist, 1978; Thaxton and Jaret, 1985). While these symbols seem somewhat extreme at times (eg. a "dog collar" worn by a male with 8 inch spikes sticking out of it), it should be remembered that the majority of adherents are adolescents. Adolescents are not confined by conventional social statuses and careers that demand a certain attire be worn. In society, adoption of such traditional symbols are socially accepted as presenting masculinity or femininity in proper ways.

In the heavy metal subculture it is the symbols rather than the values that deviate from mainstream society.

The Views of Key Insiders

Interesting insights were also gleaned by conducting in-depth interviews with heavy metal participants. Heavy metal adherents recognize the successful attempts of the media and others to label their music and subculture as both deviant and delinquent.

Male 3: I'll tell you one thing. Any shit happens between four preppies and one headbanger and the headbanger will come out the big loser with the cops and everything... You even see it downtown in the arcades and everything... Preppies never got harrassed... The jock preps and those guys, they got enough money they're fuckin' around with more drugs than the headbangers are. You go in there, the cop sees the headbanger—"open up your cigarette package" [to check for marijuana cigarettes or "joints"]—that kind of shit.

Some adherents to heavy metal are drawn to the music because of its distinctiveness; it helps to give them a feeling of individuality. Soon, they are labeled deviant by dint of their association with the heavy metal subculture. For others the deviant identity is acquired through "hassles" with police and other established groups in society, and their attempts to label headbangers as such.

It is not unusual, then, to find headbangers (particularly males) identifying themselves as deviant.

Interviewer: Do you view yourselves as deviant?
[Pause, then laughter]

Male 2: YES! To sum it up from a song from Metallica, "Am I evil?"
[several say at the same time] "Yes, I fucking am!"
[laughter].

However, the large majority of headbangers do not accept the delinquent label that entrepreneurs also attempt to apply.

Interviewer: Do you view yourselves as delinquent?
Male 1: No.
Male 4: No.
Male 2: No.

Interviewer: Do you think there are some people that listen to metal that are delinquent?
Male 2: Sure, but there are people who listen to Wham! [mainstream group] who are delinquent too.

Male 1: And there's people who listen to country music too who kill people all the time. Music, I don't think, has any bearing on a person's brain, or what they do, or how they function.

Heavy Metal Re-examined

This empirical examination of the world of heavy metal presents a look into an adolescent subculture traditionally perceived as deviant. Data gathered through field research has produced evidence to indicate that the activity surrounding heavy metal is indeed subcultural, and that participants share a collective definition of the scene they share. But a close examination of the values in the scene reveal that heavy metal participants do not adhere to values that are contrary to those of society. While the symbols used to express such values do indeed deviate from traditionally accepted means of symbolic communication, the implied messages are similar to those espoused in conventional society.

The stigmatization of the heavy metal subculture as deviant, then, is a classic example of the labeling process. In an attempt to develop an individual identity or acquire personal power, many adolescents involve themselves in a subculture perceived to be deviant. While this stigmatization can result in a change of status to "deviant," such a change is not always permanent. Many adherents to heavy metal never get involved beyond the most popularized versions of the music or dress. After oppressive structural constraints of parents, home or school are left behind (through graduation from high school, for example), heavy metal musical preferences are often replaced by an interest in more mainstream styles of music. Still, others develop a sincere appreciation for the aesthetics of heavy metal music, and continue consuming the music even after high school. Several older participants confessed that their interest in heavy metal music had become a secret past-time which they hid from co-workers for fear of ridicule or ostracism.

There are two important societal advantages to labeling adolescents in general, and heavy metal adherents in particular, as deviant. The first advantage is that it is a status that is removed simply with the passage of time. As adolescents grow older they are perceived to "grow out of" their deviant ways; the preference for heavy metal music is either abandoned or concealed. Members of society do not attribute this change in musical tastes to the removal of the structural constraints adolescents experience. Rather, the general public interprets this transition in moral terms. Those who renounce their interest in heavy metal are viewed as former delinquents who have since discovered the error of their ways. Societal members then gain a permanent group to stigmatize as deviant without forcing any one person to live with the consequences of that label for life.

The second advantage of labeling adherents to heavy metal deviant is that the basis of this labeling at first appears to be classless. While there is evidence to indicate that adolescents from blue collar homes may become more involved in heavy metal than others (Tanner, 1981; Brake, 1985), identifying deviants on the basis of musical preference tends to confound the class issue and helps ensure that a "false class consciousness" is

maintained.

In the past, ethnic groups, homosexuals, the handicapped, and women have been among the favorite minorities in society to label deviant, in that a separate set of distinctive behaviors were expected from each group. With the growing concern over human rights legislation, however, moral entrepreneurs must be much more careful in stigmatizing such groups publicly in order to avoid legal prosecution. Adolescents still remain one group that is not protected by law against such discrimination. From a purely functional standpoint, the continuation of this practice may indeed aid society through the positive ways in which deviance can function. On the other hand, one may choose to take issue with the seemingly arbitrary way that powerless social groups are differentiated. These groups suffer humiliation and ostracism because a deviant label is applied to them for the purpose of the common social good. Where adolescents who have chosen to listen to heavy metal are concerned, this appears to be the case.

Notes

¹This paper reports on part of the findings of a larger study (Friesen, 1986). I would like to thank Dr. Robert A. Stebbins for his helpful comments on this paper.

²While punk music could also be considered a "deviant" style of music, the political nature of the punk movement has generally appealed to young adults more than adolescents.

³These five functions are summarized in James Teevan, ed. (1982:69).

⁴To develop a grounded theory around the research question, participant observation was used for data collection (Becker, 1970; Lofland, 1971). A quantitative content analysis of the lyrics of two-hundred eighty two heavy metal songs was also conducted. The reader may consult the larger study for further information regarding the content analysis.

A heavy metal adherent or "headbanger" (as they are inclined to define themselves) was operationally defined as a person who had: 1) a tendency to select heavy metal as his or her favorite type of music; and 2) a propensity to define himself or herself as a "headbanger." Field research was carried out between July 1985 and July 1986 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada; a city with a population in excess of 600,000. The heavy metal scene was entered a total of 57 times and included concert arenas, nightclubs, a cable television station, musician's union concert hall, a band practice room, junior high and high school buildings, and home parties. Informal interviews were conducted with 43 different participants in the scene, 29 of whom were male. To conclude the research, semi-formal interviews were conducted with six informants heavily involved in the heavy metal subculture.

⁵For example, "aggressiveness" was an expected and desired characteristic of females when males viewed them in the erotic role. The behavior was seen as appropriate as long as it was oriented to the satisfaction of the male (i.e. other-oriented) rather than the female (i.e. self-oriented). At times females were expected to threaten or even engage in physical violence if another female threatened to "make a play" for a boyfriend or male companion. Such activity demonstrated commitment and faithfulness to the male; values which are traditional in nature.

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