Exploring Why Individuals Choose to Belong to Punk Culture:

A Qualitative Investigation

Cassandra R. Barrett

Dr. Kathryn Burleson

Warren Wilson College
Abstract

Currently, there is a lack of understanding both in psychology literature and in the dominant culture as to why individuals choose to belong to punk culture. This study uses semi-structured interviews to help bring understanding to the internal and external factors that lead a person to this choice. Six participants from the Asheville area (3 female, 3 males) with a median age of 25.7 were recruited using the snowball sampling method. Interviews were recorded with a handheld recorder then transcribed for data analysis. Data analysis revealed eight relevant themes which occurred in each interview. Further analysis led to a theoretical model supported by a diagram, which help to explain why individuals choose to belong to punk culture.
Exploring Why Individuals Choose to Belong to Punk Culture:

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Often times when people hear the word punk, images of misanthropic youth with green mohawks and studded clothing come to mind. A definite stereotype exists where punks are assumed to be young males who use extreme forms of expression to rebel against their parents and society. They listen to punk rock music, drink beer and mosh at punk concerts. This stereotype of punks characterizes them as being defiant and reactive. In social psychology literature, people’s tendency to stereotype is known as the out-group homogeneity effect. The out-group homogeneity effect can be best described as people’s tendency to assume that people who belong to the out-group (the group other than that to which they belong) are mostly the same (Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). What happens as a result of this tendency is that people will form stereotypes about the nature of others belonging to an out-group. This tendency will continue as long as people are not exposed to more information regarding the actual individuals within the out-group and can lead to unfair treatment of those individuals.

What led me to my interest in this research was moving to Asheville, North Carolina and confronting individuals who did not meet the common stereotypes of punks. The individuals I met were mostly above the age of 25 and were equally male and female. In my interactions with them, they did not come off as reactive, rebellious or defiant. In fact, it was quite clear that their decision to live apart from mainstream culture and form their own community was a conscious and thought-out decision. What struck me even more was what punk culture appeared to represent for these people. Punk was not just a type of music they listened to or a manner of dressing- it appeared to be a whole philosophy and way of being. Part of that philosophy involved living outside of mainstream culture as much as possible, which is quite different than
the motivations of most people. I was fascinated to find out what it was about individuals that led them to make the decision to belong to punk culture. I decided to make it a psychological inquiry, to find out the inner and outer mechanisms that lead a person to make this choice.

Before examining literature specific to punks, it will be helpful to begin broadly by examining literature on sub-cultures, community, self identity and social identity. This will provide a better context in which to understand the literature related to punks. Afterwards, a review of punk literature will examine one study on the straightedge sub-culture and another study that investigates individuals belonging to punk culture from a psychoanalytic perspective.

**Sub-Culture**

Clarke (1974) conducted an in-depth analysis of sub-culture by examining and defining its different qualities. He lays out four aspects that can be used to help define a sub-culture: *size*, *specificity of boundaries*, *inclusiveness and identity*, and *the dynamics of boundary specificity*. The first aspect, *size*, looks at influence. In terms of influence, a sub-culture can never be so large that it is able to dominate. Once the majority of people in a society follow the norms and practices of a given group, the culture of that group prevails and thus becomes the dominant culture. To be defined as a sub-culture, the culture cannot be dominant.

Another aspect used to define a sub-culture is the *specificity of boundaries* (Clarke, 1974). These are the specific ideologies, beliefs, or practices that are part of a sub-culture and what differentiate it from the dominant culture. They usually take the form of shared struggles, values and opinions which act to unite and create identity within a sub-culture.

The third component Clarke (1974) used to define a sub-culture was, *inclusiveness and identity*. An important part of understanding and defining a sub-culture is looking at how much the members within a sub-culture define themselves by the sub-culture itself. Identity within a
sub-culture can be so strong that it affects a number of aspects within the member’s lives. Examples would be locations where an individual spends their free time, the people they associate with, and the type of work they choose to pursue.

The last aspect used to define a sub-culture is the dynamics of boundary specificity (Clarke, 1974). Over time, sub-cultures often go through phases. At times a sub-culture may be very popular and at other times it may fall out of favor all together. This is what is referred to as the hardening or softening of specificity. An example of hardening would be when a certain sub-culture is amplified by the media, which helps to sharpen the boundaries of what defines the sub-culture and creates sub-culture self-consciousness. An extreme example of softening would be when a sub-culture dissolves all together.

All of the qualities Clarke describes (size, specificity of boundaries, inclusiveness and identity, and the dynamics of boundary specificity) to define what a sub-culture is provides a basic framework in which we can better understand punk culture. The most important note is that the punk community is a sub-culture that its participants feel apart of, and being a part of this community helps to create their identity.

Community

To better understand the importance of community to individuals within the punk sub-culture, Sense of Community or SOC (sometime referred to as PSOC or psychological sense of community) and Inclusion of Community in Self (ICS) are reviewed. SOC has been a large area of research within social psychology yielding dependable results across culture and across time (Chavis & Pretty, 1999). SOC was first put forth by Chavis in 1986 and includes four dimensions: shared emotional connection, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and membership. Subsequent empirical evidence further defines these four dimensions (Mashek,
Cannaday, & Tangney, 2007). The first dimension, *shared emotional connection*, is described as the sense of connection community members feel with one another, with the knowledge that they share a common community and value system. *Influence* refers to the perceptions that community members have of their ability to influence local government and political activities. The third dimension, *integration and fulfillment of needs*, captures the notion of how community members perceive their group’s ability to work together and the support that members will receive individually from their group. *Membership* is the last dimension and is defined as the sense of belonging to a community (being a member). These four dimensions help describe the factors that lead a person to experience a sense of community and might help us better understand individuals belonging to the punk community. It is apparent from the description of SOC that the sense of connection a person feels from their community, the level of agency they feel they have in the more dominant community, how well their needs are met, and a sense of belonging are all important factors that fulfill emotional and social needs. We can apply these concepts to individuals belonging to punk culture.

Reviewing past literature on SOC, it became apparent to Mashek et al. (2007) how important a sense of community and social connectedness was to individuals. This knowledge, combined with their research on the already established Inclusion of Others in Self scale (IOS), led them to develop the Inclusion of Community in Self scale (ICS). The IOS model (which ICS was based on) was developed by Aron, Aron, & Smollan in 1992 and is a model that describes the process by which people take on the identities, perspectives, and resources of others with whom they have relationships with. The ICS model takes the IOS model one step further to describe the process in which *community* becomes a part of self. The ICS model is specifically interested in measuring the construct of *community connectedness*. In order to capture this phenomenon, a
Venn diagram (similar to that found in IOS) is used so that participants can relate how much they identify community as a part of self. The closer neighboring circles are to one another, the more individuals perceive community as a part of self. Mashek and colleagues used their model on a group of 190 college students and a group of 297 prison inmates and found statistical support that ICS was able to accurately measure community connectedness and that community was a salient aspect of self. This research can help us better understand how the punk community possibly provides the experience of community connectedness and is part of the self concept.

Self Identity and Social Identity

Other research examining the concepts of self and community is found in self identity and social identity research. Self identity is usually described as a person’s self concept or how they perceive themselves (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje 2002). Social identity characterizes another aspect of self- how people perceive themselves in relationship to a social group (community) they feel they belong to. Ellemers and colleagues conducted research that focused on the relationship between social identity and self identity. Examining previous research on the personal self versus the collective self, Ellemers and colleagues found that most research implied that the collective self submits to the personal self. Ellemers and colleagues dispute this view, providing evidence of cases in which people submit themselves for the greater good of their group. An example they use is an animal rights activist who risks their own well being for the sake of their cause and the activist group they belong to. This shows how powerful social identity can be.

Ellemers et al. (2002) prefer to conceptualize personal self and social self as factors that influence each other rather than delineate which is more dominant. Based on their literature review, they conclude that a substantial amount of research clearly indicates how social identity
has a powerful affect on a person’s perceptions, emotions, and behavior. This last sentence from Ellemers and colleagues study is most relevant to this research and implies that belonging to punk culture and forming a social identity (most often as being a punk) would greatly impact an individual’s perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. It will be interesting to see how belonging to punk culture affects its members on a personal level.

*Straightedge Culture*

Now that we have reviewed how sub-culture, community, self identity and social identity relate to punk culture, we can move on to review research focusing on punks and punk culture specifically. The first study examines the straightedge culture, which is a subset of punk culture. (Straightedge culture is different than punk culture in that it is centered around the ideology of abstinence from drugs, alcohol and promiscuous sex but is the same in that both cultures listen to punk music. Some argue that straightedge is a classification of punk.) Since the two cultures are so closely related, it will be helpful to see how research on the straightedge culture might relate to punk culture. Relating back to the out-group homogeneity effect mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Wood (2003) wanted to challenge the normative concept that identity within a sub-culture is homogenous. To conduct his research, Wood used qualitative methods to examine the identity within the straightedge youth sub-culture using non-probability, purposive sampling technique to recruit 20 participants. His participants were self-identified straightedgers ranging from 18 to 37 years of age. The study consisted of semi-structured interviews that were crafted to explore themes of identity. The themes Wood focused on were *individual interpretations*, *differing degrees of identity*, and *different ways in which people transition into their identity*.

Results showed that though straightedgers shared a similar philosophy of abstinence from drugs, alcohol and promiscuous sex, *individual interpretations* of the straightedge sub-culture
were found (Wood, 2003). The definition of what constituted a drug (ex: caffeine) differed as well as what was considered promiscuous sex (ex: sex before marriage). In addition to differing interpretations of straightedge sub-culture, *differing degrees of identity* within straightedge sub-culture also emerged. For some people, music related to the straightedge scene was a major part of their identity, whereas for other participants who didn’t like the music, straightedge music was not a part of their identity. Another theme that emerged from Wood’s study was the *different ways in which people transition into their identity* as being straightedge. Some people felt that there was no transition at all and that they had always been straightedge; becoming part of the straightedge sub-culture only seemed to affirm their preestablished identity. For others, becoming straightedge was more of a reaction to their previous identity. If they had problems with drugs or alcohol for example, straightedge seemed like a path out of that lifestyle and a more positive life choice. Wood’s (2003) study concludes that the identities of people within the straightedge sub-culture are complex and varied rather than being homogenous and suggests that similar findings would be found in all sub-cultures.

Comparing the results from Wood’s research to punk culture we might also expect to find that the interpretations of punk culture will vary amongst individuals, that how much a person identifies with punk culture will also vary as well how individuals transitioned into their identity as punks. We can expect that identity within punk culture will most likely be heterogeneous rather than homogenous. This knowledge could help dispel the out-group homogeneity effect and minimize stereotypes, as suggested by Ostrom and Sedikides (1992).

*The Schizoid Dilemma of Punks*

In addition to research focusing on identity within a sub-culture, other studies have tried to understand individuals within a sub-culture from a psychoanalytic perspective. The research
conducted by McAllister (1999) was the only piece of psychoanalytic literature found that focused on punks specifically. As a framework for better understanding punks, McAllister used the concept *schizoid dilemma*. He believes that by understanding the concepts of the schizoid dilemma, therapists will have a useful tool in order to better understand and assist their clients that belong to punk culture.

McAllister (1999) describes that the *schizoid dilemma* is characterized by emotional detachment resulting from a young child’s unmet needs from a caregiver. Children having their needs unmet by the caregiver leads to the belief that other people, besides their caregiver, will also fail to meet their emotional needs. Relationships thus become a source of anxiety and the child expects that others will disappoint them, which leads to the distrust of others. As a defense mechanism, the child emotionally detaches and convinces her/himself that others are not worthy of their love. Their emotional need for others is repressed which results in detachment, loneliness, alienation and often bitterness. (McAllister refers to these individuals as schizoids.)

McAllister (1999) reports that another common defense mechanism used in addition to detachment is intellectualization. As a result of intellectualization, higher functioning schizoids will commonly pursue artistic and intellectual endeavors. They are in general more perceptive and creative than the average person. Schizoids are also looked at on a spectrum, from high functioning to pathology, where leaning toward the side of pathology they tend towards more detachment, less emotion, and more intellectualization. And though they appear emotionally detached, they sometimes experience emotion intensely. Interestingly, compared to others, schizoids have fewer but longer lasting and more meaningful relationships.

McAllister (1999) uses the concept of the schizoid dilemma as a framework for better understanding individuals belonging to punk culture. The first aspect he reviews is shock and
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appearance. Mohawks, purple hair, spikes and leather are examples of the physical characteristics some punks display. Using the schizoid dilemma, McAllister deduces that the extremeness and shock value of the punk aesthetic is used to push the mainstream away, creating a barrier between the punk individual and others (Lamy & Levin, 1985). McAllister suggests that this runs parallel with the inclination of schizoids to detach from others. His other interpretation of the punk aesthetic is that it is a deliberate attempt to challenge the mainstream to look beyond appearances. Within the framework of the schizoid dilemma, this is characterized by the intellectual trait of schizoids.

McAllister (1999) also uses the schizoid dilemma as a framework for understanding what he refers to in punk culture as their deliberative cynicism and mockery. Like schizoids, McAllister asserts that punks are often disillusioned and cynical, believing that the American dream is futile. Though this would normally lead to depression in most people, McAllister states that just like schizoids, the sense of futility punks experience leads to grandiosity where they feel a sense of contemptuous superiority for their ability to see the futility in life that others cannot see. This leads to mockery and contempt for the mainstream. It is very common for punks to chastise the aims of the middle-class and big business towards material wealth. They see mainstream values as being decadent, obsolete and repressive (Lamy & Levin, 1985). So, like schizoids, the contemptuous superiority of punks leads to the mockery of those who are unable to see the futility of life.

The last aspect McAllister (1999) compares between schizoids and punks is detachment. (Detachment was discussed earlier as a defense mechanism for children who are neglected- the concept of detachment discussed here is in relation to schizoids and punks as adults.) McAllister suggests that underlying the shocking appearance, cynicism and contemptuous mockery of
punks, lies detachment. McAllister relates the disposition of punks to schizoids, who take the stance of a distant observer. Instead of taking action, punks reflect on the world in a cynical manner. They stand back and mock others. They don’t try to change the world because they see any attempt to do so as futile. They remain detached and sustain their sense of superiority. Their defense mechanism of detachment prevents them from being disappointed but they are also deeply cynical and bitter. McAllister notes that sometimes as a way to cope with their disillusionment and loneliness, punks will engage in substance abuse.

McAllister (1999) uses the schizoid dilemma to compare the personality attributes of schizoids to punks. He also used the schizoid dilemma as a framework for understanding three aspects particular to individuals belonging in punk culture: shock and appearance, deliberative cynicism and mockery, and detachment. Based on previous studies mentioned (Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992; Wood, 2003) it’s fair to assume that not all punks will express these characteristics. Though not every individual will meet McAllister’s criterion of a schizoid, it is possible that some will. It will be interesting to see if the results from this study find personality attributes similar to those discussed in McAllister’s research. If in fact similar results are found, then (as McAllister suggests) using the schizoid dilemma paradigm might be a useful tool for therapists trying to council individuals belonging to punk culture.

In review of the literature, we have found a framework to better address the research question, “Why do individuals choose to belong to punk culture?” A review of sub-culture helped put in perspective that as a sub-culture, punk culture is probably something its members feel a part of and is most likely an important part of their identity. Reviewing literature on community, we found that a sense of community is important and provides individuals with emotional and social fulfillment. Based on this, it is likely that punk culture provides its member with a sense of
community. We also found that individuals include their community in their concept of self
(Inclusion of Community in Self) which leads to community connectedness. Being part of the punk community, its participants most likely experience a feeling of community connectedness and consider the punk community to be an aspect of their self. We also reviewed literature on the relationship between self identity and social identity finding that social identity has a major influence on an individual’s perception, emotions, and behavior. It is likely the social identity, as related to belonging to punk culture, impacts its members on an individual level in a powerful way. After reviewing the broader literature on groups and identity we narrowed in on literature specific punks. The first piece of literature focused on straightedge culture and specifically focused on how aspects of identity vary within a subculture and found that identity is not homogenous. Because straightedge culture and punk culture are so closely related, it is likely that identity within punk culture varies also. The last piece of literature reviewed was on the schizoid dilemma of punks which used the schizoid dilemma as a framework for better understanding individuals belonging to punk culture. Though we do not want to assume that all individuals belonging to punk culture will meet the schizoid dilemma criterion, if validated, it could provide a useful tool for therapists.

Though a good framework has been established for addressing the research question, the amount of literature specific to punks is still sparse. This study seeks to understand the individual and social factors that lead an individual to choose to belong to punk culture. This research question is important for a few reasons. Because individuals within punk culture are not very well understood by both mainstream American culture and within psychology research, the lack of understanding may lead to the out-group homogeneity effect. This has the potential of creating
stereotypes and the unfair treatment of individuals belonging to punk culture. A better understanding of individuals within the punk culture could prevent this from happening.

This research might also help us gain a better understanding of what significance belonging to punk culture brings to its members. Reviewing past work on the significance of community to self (Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Mashek, Cannaday, & Tangney 2007), it is clear that the social groups people belong to have a profound impact on not only a person’s identity, but also on their emotions, beliefs, and perceptions. It will be interesting to learn what community means to individuals belonging to punk culture.

Overall, this research will help minimize our stereotypes about individuals belonging to punk culture and will add more knowledge to the fields of social, identity, and community psychology. This research might also add validity to the past research on punks (McAllister, 1999), perhaps encouraging therapists to use the schizoid dilemma as a tool for helping their clients who belong to punk culture (though it is not anticipated that all individuals will meet the criterion laid out by McAllister since homogeneity within punk culture is not expected).

Methods

Participants

Based on the obscure and hard to reach nature of the punk population, 6 participants from the Asheville area were selected using the snowballing technique. The snowballing technique was initiated by the help of two of my colleagues who belong to the Asheville punk culture. One colleague is a 24-year-old male and the other is a male age 32. Through the snowballing technique, both male and female participants covering a range of ages were accessed. Participants were a minimum of 18 years old.
Materials

Consent forms were given to the participants prior to the interview (Appendix A). The interview consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions (Appendix B) and a few demographic questions (gender and age). During the interviewing process, a handheld recorder was used to record the conversation. Interviews were transcribed on a standard computer. In addition to interviews, field observations were also used.

Procedure

Individuals from the Asheville punk sub-culture were contacted by one of my colleagues and asked if they might be interested in participating in a study. At this point a brief verbal description of the aims of the study were described. If the individual expresses interest in becoming a participant, the individual was told about the consent form they would need to sign to participate in the study. The colleague had a consent form on hand (Appendix A) incase the individual had any specific questions in regards to its contents. If the individual was still interested in participating in the study, consent to be contacted directly by myself to set up an interview was requested. Preference for phone or email contact was also requested. Once consent for contact was obtained, I contacted the potential participant (in the method of their preference) to set up an interview location and time.

When I initially met the participant, I greeted them and thanked them for their interest to participate in my study. I then handed them the consent from to review and sign. Once the consent form was signed, I refered back to the consent form to verify whether they requested to use an alias so I knew how to refer to them throughout the interview. At this point, the participant and myself found a comfortable place to sit and the interview began.
A handheld recorder was present to record the interview. The interview questions (Appendix B) were used as a guide but interviews were allowed to take their own course especially if tangents and deviations led to important information for the study. The participant had the option of skipping an interview question or ending the interview altogether (which was discussed in the consent form). Once the interview was completed, the participant was thanked for their participation and be reminded of the importance of their participation. They were also reminded of my contact information incase they wished to discuss the study or their interview experience any further.

Data Analysis

There were three major ways in which the data was analyzed: coding the data, creating a theoretical model by which to understand the data, and providing a pictorial model to help support the proposed model. The most basic level of analysis was coding the data. This is a process in which themes are identified and a code word is chosen for each theme found. Up to ten code words may be chosen to identify ten different themes relevant to the data. Once code words are chosen, the interviews will be reviewed so that themes may be identified and coded for. The process by which themes are coded for involves reading the interview transcript until a word or phrase that relates to one of the preestablished themes is found. Once a word or phrase is found, it is underlined and the appropriate code word is placed in the margin next to the indicated word or phrase. So for example, if my code word is ‘family’ relating to the theme family connections, every time I run across the word brother, siblings, parents or come across a phrase that alludes to the theme of family connections, I would underline either the word or phrase and write the word ‘family’ in the margin. Then I can go back and see how many times the code word ‘family’ appears in the margin.
Once the process of coding was completed for each interview transcript, the frequency of codes were counted for each individual transcript and then calculated for all interview transcripts combined. It is important to note that identifying the code frequency is a tool to help get a better grasp on the data. It is not the sole means for understanding the relationship between themes or addressing the research question. It is simply a process in which the researcher can become better acquainted with the various themes and how often they occur in the data. More emphasis will be placed on the other modes of analysis.

Once the research was coded, the next level of analysis lead to a proposed theoretical model to address the research question. This was achieved by a considerable amount of thought using inductive and deductive reasoning. This is the point in which the researcher begins to interpret the meaning of the different themes found and how they relate to each other. Using a theoretical model helps to explain the interaction of themes that were identified during the coding process. Discovering how themes interact and relate to one another often requires reading between the lines to get to the heart of the research question.

To help explain the proposed theoretical model, a pictorial diagram was created to help illustrate the relationship between the themes. This is a useful aid for both the researcher and people reading the research. Sometimes the relationship between themes may sound complex. Putting the themes in a picture format helps to add clarity to the relationship between the different themes and how the themes relate to the research question.

Results and Discussion

*Codes, Themes, and Frequency*

A total number of 6 participants were interviewed, 3 female and 3 male. Ages of participants ranged from 20 to 32 with a median age of 25.7. Coding of the interviews resulted in 8 code
words depicting different themes. The codes used were: Community (C), Creativity (Cr), Different (D), Fun (F), Justice (J), Individual (I), Psychological Stress (PS), and Substance Use (SU). Frequency of codes for each interview and the overall frequency for each code can be observed (see Table 1). Below is the list of codes and the themes they identify, ordered by frequency (from most to least) with examples of how words were coded.

1. *Justice* (Theme: A Strong Sense of Justice)

Justice was coded 47 times throughout the data and was the most frequent theme. Participants often expressed this theme by using words such as: equality, activism, racism, politics, and injustice. The phrase: “…anarchists and like kind of egalitarian vision of how governments and communities should be structured,” is another example of how Justice was coded.

2. *Psychological Stress* (Theme: Previous and Present Psychological Stress)

The second most frequent code was Psychological Stress, which occurred 29 times. Words used to express this code were: conflict, hurt, angry, dissatisfaction, and abuse. A phrase used to express Psychological Stress was: “Most people, well I mean most people I know in general, but especially most punks I feel like have had really traumatic childhoods.”

3. *Community* (Theme: Community)

Community occurred 28 times. This code was expressed with words such as: collective, belonging, community, friends, and network. One participant expressed this code with the following phrase: “Starting out, it was pretty much street kids and traveling kids that I hung out with. You know, a sense of community- working together to make this place a better place. It was just hanging out.”
4. **Independent** (Theme: Independent Nature)

Independent occurred 24 times throughout the data. Participants often expressed this theme by using words such as D.I.Y. (Do-It-Yourself), independent, themselves, nomadic, freedom, and yourself. “I guess in the punk mind set it would be, just doing everything all by yourself,” is an example of a phrase used to express this theme.

5. **Different** (Theme: Being or Feeling Different)

The frequency for Different and the code Fun were equal, both occurring 22 times each. Words used to express the code Different were: alien, weird, awkward, goofy, and different. One participant expressed Different by saying, “…especially since most people come to punk because they feel alienated and they feel like such a social awkwardness…” Responses similar to these were found in many interviews.

6. **Fun** (Theme: Having Fun)

The code Fun also appeared 22 times throughout the data. Words that were coded as Fun were: spontaneity, show (as in concert), traveling, fun, and adventure. A quote that expressed Fun was, “We used to have street parties all the time downtown.”

7. **Creativity** (Theme: Creativity)

Creativity appeared 15 times and was coded with words such as: expression, art, creative, making, and playing (as in playing an instrument). One participant said, “Creating, just in general feels really good,” to express the code Creativity.

8. **Substance Use** (Theme: The Use of Drugs or Alcohol)

Substance Use occurred 12 times. Participants often expressed this code by using words such as: beer, alcohol, drugs, smashed, and junkie. To express this code, one participant said:
“Experimenting with drugs and shit. Which I don’t do drugs anymore. I smoke some marijuana every once in a while.”

Note: Since this research focused on punk culture, two themes were assumed to be present and as a result were not coded for. The two themes not coded were dissatisfaction with mainstream culture and music. A further analysis of the data revealed both themes to be present. The relevance of these themes will be discussed in subsequent sections of the results.

Theoretical Model

After reviewing the eight themes identified and giving a substantial amount of thought to the research findings, I have come up with a theoretical model to help explain the research findings and addresses the research question. This will be aided with a pictorial diagram. There are three major components involved in this theory. First is the central characteristics, which explains personality attributes that are common to punk individuals along with similar experiences of psychological stress. The second component, shared values and beliefs, describes the common ideologies in punk culture and how they relate to one another. The central characteristics combined with shared values and beliefs leads to the last component community. This component discusses the significance of community to individuals belonging to punk culture.

Central Characteristics

1. Personality

One way of addressing why individuals choose to belong to punk culture is by examining what qualities these individuals have in common. It’s important to emphasize that not all individuals belonging to punk culture are the same, but might share some of the same qualities. I believe one thing that is common to many individuals belong to punk culture is a sensitive nature. This is indicated on Figure 1 with the word ‘Sensitive.’ Reviewing the codes and their
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frequencies, Justice (representing a strong sense of justice) was the most frequent code \( (f=47) \) outnumbering the second most frequent code, Psychological Stress \( (f=29) \), by almost double. This demonstrates that a strong sense of justice is a critical factor in understanding why individuals choose to belong to punk culture. Reflecting on this, I started to enquire why the individuals I interviewed reflected this common theme. That in combination with some of the other common themes identified (i.e. psychological stress & creativity) led me to what I consider to be the core of this phenomenon: Sensitivity. One participant shared:

“But the way that people treat each other it affects me really deeply, you know. Even just like being somewhere in a city or wherever. Being on a bus- going somewhere or whatever. When things are happening around me, I take a lot of notice and it really affects me.”

I believe that many individuals who belong to punk culture are by nature, sensitive. It is very important for me to clearly define what is meant by ‘sensitive’ in this research. The dictionary gives multiple definitions for sensitive; one definition in particular best expresses how ‘sensitive’ is being defined here. The dictionary definition states, “quick to detect or respond to slight changes” (Dictionary, 2007). I think this accurately describes what is meant when I describe individuals belonging to punk culture as ‘sensitive.’ Their strong sense of justice, I believe, is due to the injustices they perceive in the world around them. This refers to the detection aspect mentioned in the dictionary definition of ‘sensitive.’ In addition to detecting injustices they perceive around them, I believe that individuals belonging to punk culture also demonstrate the responsive element described in the dictionary definition. I believe the response to injustices that these individuals perceive is expressed emotionally, often through indignation, but through other forms as well (as was captured by the theme psychological stress).
In addition to sensitivity, I believe that *being or feeling different* (indicated in Figure 1 by the word ‘Different’) is also central to the personality of individuals belonging to punk culture. *Different* was the fifth most frequent code \((f=22)\). Half of the participants shared accounts of how even when they were children, they always felt weird or different than others. One participant stated:

“Even at like nine and ten, I remember being like, ‘I feel like an alien. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.’”

Another participant said:

“And, I don’t know, I was always just sort of a weird kid.”

Even at a young age, these participants didn’t feel like they fit in with the norm. It’s interesting because I’ve heard punks accused of trying to be different. Based on my results, being different seems less intentional and more just how some of these individuals naturally are. I think this also helps explain why they would chose to be separate from mainstream culture and belong to punk culture. Punk culture embraces difference and treats this quality as something to be proud of.

In addition to feeling or being different, another quality that I believe is central to individuals belonging to punk culture is an *independent* nature, expressed through the code *independent* \((f=24)\). This is indicated on Figure 1 with the word ‘Independent.’ One participant related a story from their childhood:

“When I was a kid, I never really, even when I was like 4 years old, I would always walk six or seven steps behind my mom. I just never wanted help to do anything. I just wanted to do it myself. I wanted to do it my own way and figure out for myself what the best way to do things was.”
So even as a child, this participant reported having an independent nature. Another thing that leads me to conclude that individuals belonging to punk culture are independent natured is the emphasis on D.I.Y., or Do It Yourself. The idiom D.I.Y. is a common word found in the punk vernacular appearing in every interview, often multiple times. D.I.Y. is the attitude of self-sufficiency, which is so prided amongst members of the punk community. One participant described the attitude of D.I.Y. by stating:

“A lot of people are dedicated to living as independently as possible or as independently as they want to live. Building their own houses. Traveling outside of greyhound. And, so I think it’s a degree of independence. Independent thinking.”

By reviewing my data and based on the interactions I had with my participants, it is clear that being independent is want of the central philosophies to individuals belonging to punk culture.

II. Psychological Stress

Another central characteristic of individuals who belong to punk culture is the type of psychological stress they experience. Psychological stress is indicated on Figure 1 as a circle that surrounds the three personality attributes previously mentioned. Psychological Stress which was the second most frequent code \((f=29)\), reports both psychological stress experienced in the past and experienced in the present. The psychological stress experienced in the past is best characterized as a *history of hurt*. Four of the participants interviewed revealed their perception that most people belonging to punk culture come from a background of hurt. This involves broken homes, neglectful parents, abuse, and the loss of a loved one. To quote one participant:

“I would say a lot of people deal with- some have dealt with divorce or domestic abuse or drug abuse in their families or other things that make us, um volatile in some ways.”
A different participant stated:

“Most people, well I mean most people I know in general, but especially most punks I feel like have had really traumatic childhoods. I mean really- or grown up in areas where if they hadn’t found something different, they would have been either like suffocated or like fucking suicidal.”

These are just a few examples of quotes found that indicate a history of hurt from individuals belonging to punk culture. Punk culture is characterized as being insular, and the history of hurt helps explain this. It is difficult for individuals who have been hurt in the past to trust people easily.

The other type of psychological stress that individuals experienced in the present can best be described as anger. The theme of anger was expressed with many different words such as hostility, frustration, or rage. Many participants reported feeling anger and frustration with the injustices they perceive around them. Others described anger as simply an emotion that a lot of individuals in punk culture experience. One participant stated:

“I think it’s those values that I’ve already stated but I also think it’s generally people that have anger in their lives. There’s a… it falls into a category where there’s a lot of love but there’s a lot of rage too.”

Sharing the feelings of anger also helps explain what unites individuals in the punk community together. They have a shared experience of the world.

*Shared Values and Beliefs*

Moving on from the central characteristics, the next stage of the theory describes the shared values and beliefs and how they relate to one another. Looking at Figure 2, surrounding the central characteristics you will see the beliefs and values expressed as the themes: *Strong Sense*
of Justice, Dissatisfaction With Mainstream Culture, Creativity, Do It Yourself, Music, Fun, and Substance Use.

I. Strong Sense of Justice

I believe the sensitive nature of punks (their ability to pick up on changes in the environment) and their own experiences of wrongs acted on them leads to a strong sense of justice. As already mentioned, I believe that a strong sense of justice experienced by individuals belonging to punk culture is due to the injustices and unfair treatment that these individuals observe happening around them. Especially for those individuals that do come from a history of hurt, a strong sense of justice would probably be even more pronounced. By having experienced maltreatment themselves, they are more likely to empathize with the mistreatment of others.

II. Dissatisfaction With Mainstream Culture

The strong sense of justice experienced by individuals belonging to punk culture helps explain their dissatisfaction with mainstream culture. Because they are perceptive to what is going on in their environment and have a strong sense of justice, they are often frustrated with what mainstream culture, perceiving it to lack egalitarian values.

III. Creativity

Creativity is another central theme in punk culture and is very much respected. Creativity also links back to sensitivity, sense creativity and sensitivity are understood to be connected. Creativity is celebrated in punk culture and is expressed in a variety of ways including appearance, music, and art.

IV. Do It Yourself

Creativity can also be expressed as Do It Yourself. D.I.Y. can be expressed as making your own clothes or your own music. It also ties back to the central characteristic Independent. As
already discussed, the independent nature of individuals belonging to punk culture and D.I.Y. go hand in hand.

V. Music

As one would assume, music is an important theme in punk culture. Music relates to creativity as a way of expression. It also relates to psychological stress as a possible means of releasing intense emotions. Some participants related how going to a good punk show helped them work some of their anger out.

VI. Fun

Music also ties into the next theme, fun. Fun is a major part of punk culture. Music is one way in which individuals in punk culture experience fun. Because of their creativity, individuals in punk culture seem to come up with an endless variety of ways to have fun. This involves traveling, going to shows, having pot lucks, and partying.

VII. Substance Use

Having fun sometimes also involves substance use. Drinking is very common in punk culture, and less frequently is the use of drugs. Substance use is often a way for people in the punk community to party and bond. Substance use can also take the form of substance abuse where some individuals in punk culture might experience alcoholism or drug addiction. This probably ties back to psychological stress and is a means for coping with negative emotions from past experiences of pain.

Community

Looking at the last part of the diagram in Figure 3, you can see that Community is the backdrop to this whole phenomenon. Community is the third part of the proposed theoretical model and can be described as the external factor that leads a person to choose to belong to punk
Why Individuals Choose Punk

culture. Community is important to individuals belonging to punk culture because their community is a place where they as individuals who share a common personality type, a common history, and a common set of values can come together. Especially by feeling different than mainstream society and having come from a past history of hurt, the punk community provides a safe haven and a place where its members are understood. A theme which appeared in every interview, was how enriching belonging to punk culture was for its participant. Half of the participant reported that punk saved their lives while other participants reported on the healing aspect of punk culture. There are a couple of quotes that really help bring this theme to light:

“Outcasts: Because wherever you were going, it wasn’t working. I think we’re all just heart broken and trying to figure out how to survive and how to find our brothers and sisters and make it through. I think that what keeps people (in the punk scene) has definitely got to be a solid community that’s willing to work on their shit, willing to be inclusive.”

Another participant stated:

“And I also feel like I love my life now. Like whether it saved it or not literally, I think what I’m doing- like what I want to do and all of the things that I am doing are so freaking awesome. And I think that like becoming punk and being exposed and involved in punk culture is like the only thing that could have possibly brought me to where I am, you know.”

As humans and social creatures, community is important to most everyone. But it is especially important to individuals belonging to the punk community who don’t feel accepted or understood by mainstream society. And because of the common history of hurt that a lot of individuals belonging to punk share, the punk community is extremely important because it provides a space of healing and bonding over shared experiences. I believe sharing a common
Why Individuals Choose Punk

history of hurt is part of what brings these individuals together to form a community. It’s a unique experience they have in common that bonds them.

In addition to providing a place of safety and understanding, the punk community is also formed by a shared set of beliefs and personality attributes. As mentioned earlier, a lot of individuals in punk culture are sensitive and have a strong sense of justice. This leads to strong ideologies about how they believe the world should be. This includes themes such as anti-racism, egalitarianism, feminism, gender politics, and sometimes anarchy. Sharing a common set of values also unites these individuals.

The punk community is also a place where its members independent and creative natures can be expressed. Part of being independent is the sense of not wanting to be constrained or tied down. This is often why having fun is so important to the punk community. Having fun is an act of being uninhibited and free. Having fun also ties into the creative aspects by creating art and music. Creativity also involves self expression. And creativity and independence unite to form the Do It Yourself philosophy that is so central in the punk community. D.I.Y. encourages creative, out of the box thinking and is fulfilling for individuals who prefer to be reliant on themselves.

It was very clear to me from analyzing my data and simply by the interactions I had with my participants, just how important the punk community is to its members. This result was unanticipated and has very positive implications. It illustrates how community is a form of therapy for a lot of individuals who belong to punk culture. I believe this knowledge helps us understand why individuals choose to belong to punk culture.
Summary

The research question proposed at the beginning of this study was, “Why do individuals choose to belong to punk culture?” To explore this question, semi-structured interviews were conducted in hopes of bringing greater understanding to the internal and external factors that lead a person to choose to belong to punk culture. Eight themes were found to help explain some of the factors common to individuals belonging to punk culture. The themes found were *a strong sense of justice, psychological stress, community, an independent nature, being or feeling different, having fun, creativity, and the use of drugs or alcohol*. These themes were further explored and a theoretical model was proposed to answer the research question.

It is believed that there are *central characteristics* that help explain why individuals choose to belong to punk culture. Theses characteristics include the *personality attributes* of being sensitive, an innate sense of being or feeling different, and an independent nature. The other central characteristic that helps explain individuals who belong to punk culture is *psychological stress* expressed as past experiences of hurt and present feelings of anger. The central characteristics help explain some of the internal reasons why individuals choose to belong to punk culture.

Other reasons why individuals choose to belong to punk culture is because of a shared set of values and beliefs. This is explained in the second stage of the theoretical model where the beliefs and values are expressed as themes and the way they interact in explained. The themes expressing beliefs and values included: *a strong sense of justice, dissatisfaction with mainstream culture, creativity, do it yourself, music, fun, and substance use*.

The central characteristics combined with the shared set of values and beliefs led to the last stage of the theoretical model, *community*. The meaning of community for individuals belong to
punk culture was explored and gets to the heart of the research question. Community was an important reason why individuals choose to belong to punk culture because it’s a space where individuals with a shared personality, a shared history, and shared beliefs can come together to heal and be understood. Community also provides a space where individuals belonging to punk culture can express things they value such as fun, independence, and creativity.

The literature review also helps provide a further theoretical framework in which to understand the research findings. The literature reviewed on sub-culture matched what was found in these results (Clarke, 1974). As expected, individuals belonging to punk culture found their sub-culture to be an important part of their identity and something they felt they belonged to as was suggested by

The literature found on community is also supported by the research findings. Individuals belonging to punk culture met the criterion of a Sense of Community (SOC) which included: *shared emotional connection, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and membership* (Chavis & Pretty, 1999). Individuals belonging to punk culture experienced a shared emotional connection based on a shared history and value system. Influence was expressed through the activism which participants reported being involved in. Needs were definitely met as was expressed through participant’s reports of what the punk community meant to them. And it was clear that by being involved in punk culture, one was a member of that community. These four factors led to emotional and social fulfillment, which SOC predicts.

These finding also correlated to the other aspect of community in the literature view, Inclusion of Community in Self or ICS (Mashek, Cannaday, & Tangney, 2007). Being a member of punk culture was an important part of the participant’s identity. Belonging to punk culture was central to who they were and the activities they engaged in.
Research results can also be compared to the literature on self identity and social identity (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje 2002). The social identity related to belonging to punk culture had a profound impact on self, specifically the participant’s perceptions, emotions, and behavior. In terms of the perceptions, because a shared ideology is a major component of punk culture, belonging to punk culture impacts a person’s perceptions. Belonging to punk culture also impacted its members emotions as was exemplified when participant’s reported punk having saved their lives. Very positive emotions were expressed as a result of belonging to punk culture. Behavior was also impacted by the traditions of punk culture to play music, create, and have fun.

As was expected, research findings were also comparable to those of Wood (2003) who found members within straightedge culture to be diverse. This research did not focus as much as different interpretations of identity, as was done in Wood’s research, but the same conclusive statement can be made, that individuals within punk culture are not homogenous. Even though the theoretical model proposed in this research states central characteristics, individual differences do exist.

One area of past research that was not validated was the findings of McAllister (1999). McAllister proposed that individuals belonging to punk culture can be understood through the schizoid dilemma which characterizes them the following three criteria: shock and appearance, deliberate cynicism and mockery, and detachment. The participants in this study did not meet the descriptions laid out by McAllister. This may be due to the fact that the participants were selected in Asheville which is known to be a progressive town that is involved in activism. Participants reported that many subset of punk culture exist and that other types of punks existed that had a more futile attitude, matching the description of McAllister. Maybe other subsets of punk culture would express the traits described by the schizoid dilemma.
Strengths

Past experience is often depicted as one of the weaknesses of qualitative research, but in reality it can also be a great strength. It should not be assumed that all previous experiences will have a negative biasing effect. Previous experience can also be valuable for interpreting data results. For example, imagine a research project in which the researcher is studying how people cope with the loss of a loved one. This is a case where if the researcher had previously experienced the loss of a loved one themselves, they may be better at identifying the processes in which their participants are going through. This is a situation in which personal experience (as some call bias) is advantageous to the research. I believe that many of my personality attributes match those of individuals belonging to punk culture and gave me a special insight into this community. I also believe that my previous interactions with individuals belonging to punk culture, before this research began, gave me a better sense of punk culture in large. I believe that by sharing similar qualities to some of the participants and by being acquainted with some individuals from the punk scene in Asheville, I was able to tap into an culture that is otherwise insular and hard to access.

Limitations

Though my previous experience may act as a strength, my personal history and individual beliefs could have had a biasing effect on the interpretation of the data as well. With this knowledge, I made a concerted effort to frame my interpretation in past psychological research and theory. Another limitation was the sample size, demographic, and recruiting methods. My study involved six individuals from the Asheville area that were recruited via the snowball method. This is a relatively small sample size that possibly captured only one facet of the punk community since participants were recruited from other participants. As mentioned earlier, the
why individuals choose punk community consists of many subsets. future studies might look at punk communities in different geographical locations with larger sample sizes. being that the punk community is so insular, i relied on previously known individuals to tap into this culture. my first two participants, who initiated the snowballing process, were acquaintances of mine prior to the research. it was imperative that the initial participants knew me on a personal level because otherwise, recruiting participants might not have been possible. admission into the punk community does present a challenge for future researchers who are interested in exploring individuals belonging to punk culture. in regards to the data analysis process, the coding method i used should have avoided personal bias but it is possible that bias still entered in. having a second coder would have been helpful.

benefits

this paper began by discussing the out-group homogeneity effect and how individuals tend to make broad assumptions about individuals in the punk sub-culture, stereotyping them as reactive, rebellious, and defiant (ostrom & sedikides, 1992). this research shows that individuals within the punk culture do not match theses common stereotypes. it has been shown that though certain personality traits and common histories factor in, belonging to punk culture is still a choice that individuals make due to their dissatisfaction with mainstream culture and the benefits they receive through a shared community. though this research proposes underlying principles to explain why individuals choose to belong to punk culture, it maintains that individuals within the punk culture are diverse. this helps dispel the out-group homogeneity effect and lessen the chance of stereotyping and thus unfair treatment towards individuals belonging to punk culture.

another benefits of this research is a deeper understanding of counterculture groups and why/how they form. since the majority of individuals do associate themselves with mainstream
cultural, it is important to understand why some individuals don’t. In this research is was revealed that countercultures such as the punk culture exist largely due to the dissatisfaction with mainstream culture. Many individuals within the punk community are sensitive to the what they perceive as the injustice taking place within America. They do not identify with American values are ways of living and choose to create their own codes of values and ethics.

Possibly the greatest benefit of this research is the understanding of how important the punk community is to its participants. A place of safety and understanding were descriptions given to the punk community due to many of the participants explicitly stating that punk saved their lives. The punk community is a place where its members, whom are often sensitive and share a past history of psychological stress, can come together and feel safe and protected. It is a place where they are understood and where other people share their same values. As humans, we are social beings and having a community in which we belong to is imperative to positive mental health. The punk community definitely provides a positive space where its members can bond based on shared ideologies and histories and gives them an opportunity to create the type of lifestyle and network that they feel has meaning and is beneficial to their individual development.
References


Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Warren Wilson College
Swannanoa, North Carolina

1. TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY

Exploring Why Individuals Choose To Belong to Punk Culture: A Qualitative Investigation

2. PROJECT DIRECTOR/INVESTIGATOR

Name: Cassie Barrett
Telephone Number: (828) 545-6175

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Kathryn Burleson
Telephone Number: (828) 771-2093

3. THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to understand why individuals choose to be a part of the punk rock scene. This study also aims to find out the perceptions of people in the punk rock scene regarding mainstream culture and American society.

4. PROCEDURES FOR THIS RESEARCH

As a participant in this study, interview questions will be asked and recorded with a handheld recorder. To protect your identity, an alias of your choice can be used during the interview. [This alias will be used in the research paper as well unless you specify otherwise. If you choose to use your real name for the interview, your real name will not be used in the research paper.] Interviews can be expected to take anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour. You can skip any interview question or terminate the interview at any point.

5. POTENTIAL RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS

Questions asked during the interview will probe into your personal values and opinions and may result in the feeling/experience of strong emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, etc. You are not required to answer all questions and are encouraged to voice your concern if the interview is causing you discomfort. Again, you are allowed to skip interview questions or terminate the interview at any point. If you wish to discuss these or any other discomforts you may experience, you may contact me at the phone number listed under #2 of this form. You may also contact Dr. Kathryn Burleson.

6. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU OR OTHERS

Currently, a lot of stereotypes exist about the punk rock scene and individuals who belong to it. This study aims to get to the root and the real reasons individuals choose to belong to the punk rock scene and what their true feelings and relationship are to mainstream American culture/society. The finding of this research could help people understand both Punk and American culture better.
7. GENERAL CONDITIONS

• I understand that I will not receive compensation for my participation in this study.
• I understand that I will not be charged additional expenses for my participation in this study.
• I understand that I am free to decline to participate or withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in this research project at any time without adverse consequences.
• All information collected will remain confidential except as may be required by federal, state, or local law.

8. SIGNATURES

I have fully explained to _______________________________________ the nature and purpose of the above-described procedure and the benefits and risks that are involved in participating in this study. I have answered and will answer all questions to the best of my ability. I may be contacted at (828) 545-6175.

____________________________________     ________________
Signature of Principal Investigator   Date

I have been fully informed of the above-described procedure and the benefits and risks that are involved in participating in this study. I have received a copy of this entire document. I have voluntarily given permission for my participation in this study. I have chosen to use: (Please check below and indicate a name if you prefer to use an alias.)

☐ An Alias: ______________________________________

☐ My Real Name

If an alias was chosen, do you give permission to cite your alias in the research paper?

☐ YES  ☐ NO

____________________________________     ________________
Signature of Participant or   Date
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How did you become part of the punk scene?
2. What do you think sets the punk scene apart from mainstream culture?
3. What is your opinion of current American culture/society?
4. Do you think mainstream culture effects you? If so, how and/or in which ways?
5. Do you try to avoid mainstream culture?
6. What are some of your strongest personal values?
7. What are values that are common to the punk scene?
8. What do you think draws individuals to be a part of the punk scene?
9. If mainstream culture adopted punk values, what would your attitude be towards mainstream culture?
10. Why are you a part of the punk scene?
Table 1

*Code Frequencies For Each Transcript and Total Pooled Data*

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Figure Captions

*Figure 1.*
Central characteristics of individuals belonging to punk culture.

*Figure 2.*
Shared values and beliefs.

*Figure 3.*
Community as the backdrop.
Figure 1

Psychological Stress

- Independent
- Sensitive
- Different
Figure 2

Why Individuals Choose Punk

- Fun
- Substance Use
- Music
- Do It Yourself
- Creativity
- Dissatisfaction With Mainstream
- Psychological Stress
  - Independent
  - Sensitive
  - Different
- Strong Sense of Justice
Why Individuals Choose Punk

Figure 3

Psychological Stress

- Independent
- Sensitive
- Different

Fun
Substance Use

Music
Do It Yourself
Creativity
Dissatisfaction With Mainstream

Strong Sense of Justice

COMMUNITY