

## 26. Culture Creation and Diffusion Among Preadolescents

idioculture

1. multiple group memberships
2. weak ties
- 3 structural roles
4. media diffusion

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In this selection, Gary Alan Fine examines the relationship between social structure and the development of distinctive subcultures within a society. He illustrates how culture is created within interacting groups with the example of Little League baseball teams. Members of such groups commonly recombine and revise elements of their previously known and shared culture. They thereby create distinctive systems of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs, or what Fine calls "idiocultures." He also explains how items from such group cultures spread to other groups through existing channels of communication or social linkages.

However, Fine observes that social-structural divisions are barriers to communication among groups. For example, children tend to interact more freely and openly with older children than with adults, blacks tend to interact more freely and openly with other blacks than with whites, and so on. Novel cultural items consequently spread horizontally or geographically within such social-structural segments of a society more rapidly than they spread vertically between them. A common result is the development of distinctive subcultures within the various segments of the society. Members of those segments of society come to share a distinctive system of knowledge, behavior, customs and artifacts, and, therefore, a common identity.

Although Fine limits his attention to pre-adolescent boys, the processes of culture creation and diffusion that he describes are not limited to them. Those same processes are involved in the development of distinc-

tive class, ethnic, and occupational subcultures. They are also processes that perpetuate social-structural divisions. The development of distinctive subcultures among the various segments of a society is yet another barrier to communication across social-structural divisions. Interaction among people who share similar understandings is far less stressful than interaction among people who do not. Therefore, we generally prefer to interact with "our own kind." In other words, social-structural divisions often lead to subcultural divisions that encourage the interactional reproduction of those very social-structural divisions.

For three years, I spent springs and summers observing ten Little League baseball teams in five communities, as they went through their seasons. I observed at practice fields and in dugouts, remaining with the boys after games and arriving early to learn what their activities were like when adults were not present. As I came to know these boys better, I hung out with them outside the baseball setting, when they were "doing nothing." . . . By examining Little League baseball teams and pre-adolescents generally, it should be possible to understand part of the dynamic process by which all cultures are developed by means of small group cultures. . . .

While culture may be studied on several analytic levels (the society, subsociety, or small group) I . . . begin . . . at the most "micro" level—the group. . . . Every group has its own lore or culture, which I term its *idioculture*. . . . Idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group, to which members can refer and that serve as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, thus being used to construct a social reality for the participants. This approach stresses the localized nature of culture, implying that it need not be a part of a demographically distinct subgroup but rather can be a particularistic develop-

ment of any group, such as Little League baseball teams. . . .

An idioculture consists of particular examples of behavior or communication that have symbolic meaning and significance for members of a group. Although the list is not exhaustive, phenomena classifiable as idioculture include nicknames, jokes, insults, beliefs, rules of conduct, clothing styles, songs, narratives, gestures, and recurrent fantasies.

The specific content of an idioculture is not created at random. . . . Although culture emerges from group interaction, prior knowledge and past experiences affect the form these cultural items take, although not the specific content. Since members know other idiocultures (or latent cultures) through previous or concurrent memberships, the range of potentially known information may be extensive.

In Sanford Heights, a ball hit foul over the backstop is known as a "Polish Home Run." Such a cultural item would have been meaningless had it not been for latent cultural items—what a home run is, and the symbolic opposition of hitting a ball straight over the outfield fence and hitting it over the backstop. In other words, hitting the ball over either *end* of the field is a "home run" (and this was not said of balls that curved outside a foul line). This item also required a knowledge of social stereotypes—that "Polish" is an ethnic slur implying "backward" or "incompetent." Without this cultural knowledge, the identification of such a foul ball as a Polish Home Run could not have become part of the culture of these preadolescents. Likewise, referring to players on the basis of their uniform color as a "green bean" or "chiquita," as was done in Hopewell, suggests that cultural elements are dependent on prior knowledge.

Creativity poses no particular problems since creativity is not *de novo*—rather, it reflects novel combinations of previously familiar elements. . . . These recombinations may be given different meanings from that of their constitutive elements by group members. Players on the Maple Bluff White Sox developed a dress code

loosely modeled on observation of major leaguers, although not identical to it. Before one Dodgers' practice in Sanford Heights, several players were hanging on the backstop at the practice field, while one of their teammates shook the fence as hard as possible, an activity he termed the "Chinese pain shake," a phrase apparently created spontaneously. While the term may never have been uttered before, its antecedents exist in the speaker's latent culture—notably the association of Chinese with torture (e.g., the Chinese water torture) and the earthquakes that had affected China during this period, to which this activity was similar. Thus, the creation of this cultural item, although seemingly an idiosyncratic construction, can be interpreted in terms of previous knowledge. The term for that behavior "makes sense" in our culture. . . .

I now focus on cultural transmission in larger social units [and] ask how preadolescent culture can be relatively similar across communities. . . . It is self-evident that contemporary Western societies are not culturally homogeneous. Nations are split by divisions, such as ethnicity, religion, class, occupation, and age. Social-structural divisions correspond to divisions in the knowledge of societal members. The cultural massification in America has not yet wiped out the vitality of specialized cultures. These societal segments have been termed subsocieties, and the knowledge they share is their subculture (Fine and Kleinman 1979). . . .

The subculture construct serves as a gloss for communication within interlocking groups, and for knowledge and behaviors shared by these groups. . . . Information can be shared by individuals on two analytically distinct dimensions I term *horizontal* and *vertical*—metaphors borrowed from the study of social structure. The horizontal dimension corresponds to the geographical region in which [information is shared]. . . . Vertical diffusion represents the extent to which [knowledge] has permeated segments of society, defined structurally rather than geographically. [For example], some vocabu-

lary is known only to a particular group or class within society, while other items are known more widely. Although class distinctions are frequently schematized in terms of their vertical organization, with higher classes being layered on less prestigious ones, the analysis of this vertical dimension uses altitude metaphorically. This vertical dimension includes, not only class distinctions, but groupings by occupation, race, religion, and age. . . .

The existence of a cultural element in several groups suggests communication. While the preadolescent community in a local area can be treated as a closed system, the members of this community interact not only with each other; even at this age, these communities are connected with others through a set of *interlocks* or social linkages. These connections take a variety of forms and can be analyzed in terms of either individuals or groups. Individuals, for example, may share membership in several groups simultaneously or sequentially. Groups connect with other groups through mechanisms, such as intergroup communication (i.e., communication from one group to another), multi-group communication (communication from one group or a single individual to a number of groups—as in the mass media), or communication between groups by non-members, who have a role status that requires or encourages such communication. Through these interlocks, cultural information and behavioral options are diffused, resulting in the creation of a shared universe of discourse. I conceive of this social network, rather than the demographic age boundaries of preadolescence, as the referent of the term *subculture*. Not all preadolescents are knowledgeable about “preadolescent culture,” while some early adolescents and social scientists are.

### **Multiple Group Membership**

A direct mechanism for the interchange of culture within a population results from the fact that people may belong to several groups simultaneously. Cultural elements that are found in one group can easily be

introduced into other groups through overlapping memberships. This is evident in the modern preadolescent's busy schedule—boys may belong to several youth groups in areas outside of their local neighborhood. For example, one boy in Bolton Park attended a gun-safety school which met in another suburb. A boy in Sanford Heights missed a week of the season because of an outing of boys in school patrols. Sports, contests, or summer camps allow the preadolescent to meet peers from all over the region—or the nation (e.g., the Boy Scout Jamboree or the National Spelling Bee). A cultural item can be transmitted readily, if it meets the idiocultural criteria necessary for introduction to the group to which the boy belongs. . . .

When boys return from their adventures, local friends are eager to learn what happened; these personal narratives are a source for the introduction of culture, particularly preadolescent “deviance,” such as sexual talk and aggressive pranks. The idea of a *swirly*—sticking a boy's head in a toilet (either clean or unflushed) and flushing—was learned by some Sanford Heights youngsters attending a summer hockey camp in northern Minnesota; one of them almost had that prank pulled on him.

Interchanges among groups in which individuals participate simultaneously are less dramatic, but the new cultural item may be mentioned when relevant. Preadolescents who belong to several groups characterized by few joint members provide a crucial linkage for the spread and alteration of cultural traditions. Memorable cultural products, such as song parodies, spread quickly. These are among the first things individuals perform when they enter another group. Diffusion is motivated by the perceived value of the information. . . .

### **Weak Ties**

No matter how dense or tightly knit their social networks, boys are likely to have acquaintances outside the groups in which they are most active. . . . My data do not allow me to assess the precise extent to

which these weak ties are found among children. Because preadolescents do not have easy access to transportation, and because their telephone calls are dialed at the discretion of parents, their acquaintances outside their community are limited compared to those of adults; but they do exist.

The geographically mobile child may maintain friendships over many miles, and it is not uncommon for a boy's former friends to be invited to visit. The childhood pastime of corresponding with pen pals is another example of this same phenomenon. Likewise, the distant (spatially and genetically) cousins who populate American extended families give children others with whom to compare their life situations and cultures. . . . Family visits are common, particularly with preadolescent children who are old enough not to create too much trouble but young enough to be willing to be shown off and to have no choice but to accompany their parents. At these visits, children may meet kin their own age; if these kinfolk live elsewhere, the child may be exposed to novel preadolescent culture. Since children's culture has regional and local variation, kinship ties provide a mechanism by which cultural traditions jump geographical chasms. For example, Barry Rymer, a twelve-year-old Sanford Heights Little Leaguer, was visited by his ten-year-old cousin from a farm near Mason City, Iowa. Although he was teased about being a farmer with "dirty fingernails," he and Barry's friends traded cultural information. For example, instead of calling girls "mutts," the Iowan male subculture calls these creatures "hogs" and uses "moron" rather than calling someone "sick" (field notes, Sanford Heights). Information was traded that may have provided cultural options for Sanford Heights preadolescent boys and for those in Mason City. . . .

Closer to home, a preadolescent boy may know several adolescents or young adults who are willing to tell him about sensitive topics—sex, pranks, insults, etc. A major font of this information is older brothers (though for some topics, older sisters can perform this function). Some

older brothers felt a responsibility to their siblings to teach them those cultural traditions helpful for achieving status among the younger boys' peers. Although siblings may not be "close friends" (particularly since they run in different social worlds), these elder siblings are sources for the continuation of cultural tradition. Children without elder siblings learn from those preadolescents who have them. Likewise, a seventh-grade boy may become attached to an older schoolmate who will take him under his wing, and the younger boy will then inform his peers.

Consider the spread of the slang expression *zoid*. *Zoid* was defined by its originator as referring to a boy who is a "loser," or who has a poor reputation and is not a member of any group (as in the sarcastic put-down, "You're a zoid, ya know it?"). The word was created by a twelfth-grade boy in Sanford Heights and spread to his regular baseball friends. One of this ninth-grader's friends had a sixth-grade brother playing Little League baseball. This boy added *zoid* to his vocabulary. When the forty-eight twelve year olds were interviewed after the season, eleven other boys said they had heard the term.

### ***Structural Roles***

A third way in which cultural information spreads within a social system is through individuals who perform particular structural roles in intergroup relations. These are individuals who are not part of these groups but have contacts with them. In terms of preadolescent lore, relatively many individuals have the potential to serve in this capacity. . . . Camp counselors, for example, tell ghost stories and mildly off-color anecdotes for the amusement of their campers. In turn, preadolescents may teach this guardian some of their culture. If the camp counselor is with these campers for two weeks and then a new set of campers replaces them, the counselor may become a key linkage of diffusion of preadolescent lore. Although he is not a full member of the group, his role allows for diffusion of lore. . . . While the

primary role obligation of counselors is not the diffusion of preadolescent cultural traditions, this is an indirect result of their multi-group contacts. These adolescents link groups that lack direct ties. Little League coaches, who work with the same boys over several seasons with 50 percent turnover each year and may coach other sports, also may spread preadolescent lore.

### *Media Diffusion*

The fourth pattern is transmission through the mass media. Television, radio, and films each play a large role in children's lives, and the fact that the media are either national (as in the case of network television and films) or responding to national influences (as in the case of Top 40 Radio or local television programming) implies that the culture displayed by these outlets is relatively uniform. Many groups of preadolescents are simultaneously affected by a single communicator (or communicating group). The effects of a popular television program on children's culture should not be underestimated—as underlined by numerous references to the Fonz or Kojak during this research. One pair of friends named themselves Starsky and Hutch after the television characters. While I was conducting research, the film *The Bad News Bears* was distributed nationally. Boys frequently referred to the film to describe their experiences, and so, a Hopewell boy challenged another boy, invoking the film's memorable line: "Stick it where the sun doesn't shine." Another boy referred to one of Hopewell's teams as the Bad News Bears because of their lack of athletic skill. In the film, the Bears improved to the point that they nearly won the league championship, but the *meaning* of the Bad News Bears in children's interaction is of a team filled with incompetents who curse and belch. . . .

Audiences for media productions are not limited by age alone. These raw cultural elements will generally be viewed by other groups; however, the way in which this culture is used is a function of age and

social status. In the case of *The Bad News Bears*, the insults in the film fit the preadolescent culture of aggressive insults, many of which have anal overtones. One might expect that the elements this age group selected from the film are strikingly different from those of their adult guardians. The film ostensibly is about the dangers of over-competition and adult involvement in youth sports. Although accessible to all, media productions are not consumed by a random sample of the population but are selected on the basis of prior interests—interests that reveal the boundaries of the subculture.

These four types of cultural linkages or interlocks illustrate possible transmission mechanisms and together explain how a culture of childhood in American society is possible, even when geographical mobility is restricted and in the absence of child-sponsored media.

### *Identification*

. . . [T]here are considerable differences among groups of children as to what they know and what they believe is appropriate behavior—one feature that leads to childhood cliques. Even at preadolescence, a boy finds himself with several cultural models available. These models are known by the preadolescents and discussed openly. For example, at one school in Bolton Park, kids are classified as to whether they are daredevils (kids who get into trouble), jocks, or burnies (burn-outs—preadolescents who smoke, drink, and use drugs). Most Little Leaguers consider themselves jocks and, like some older athletes, scorn the burnies (field notes, Bolton Park). Three boys who attended the local Bolton Park parochial school told me that in their school there are three groups of kids: rowdies, in-betweens, and goody-goodies (or Holy Joes)—not surprisingly all considered themselves to be in-betweens. Similar groupings were found in other schools. These distinctions caution against assuming the existence of a homogeneous children's culture and emphasize the importance of understanding the child's identification with his own group. Being part of any subcultural system re-

quires motivation and identification with those who are members. Values, norms, behaviors, and artifacts constitute a subculture, only if individuals see themselves as part of a community whose members give meaning to these "objects." Being classified in a particular age category is not by itself sufficient to predict cultural orientation.

Individuals, even during preadolescence, may identify with specific groups of which they are members or with the large social categories to which they belong (the subsociety). In terms of preadolescent identification, the orientation tends to be directed toward the interacting group or institution (the team or group of friends and even, in some cases, the community). "Class" consciousness has not fully developed by this age, although it does as the child becomes an adolescent and begins to see himself explicitly as a member of that socially defined subgroup. . . .

[The fact] that preadolescents increasingly spend time with their peers has implications for the development of identification of oneself as a peer. . . . The role of peers is indicated by the time-budget study I conducted in Sanford Heights among twelve year olds shortly after the season. When I asked about the previous Saturday (after the season ended), the sample claimed to have spent an average of 4.4 hours with friends but only 3.8 hours with parents. While this is not a significant difference, it does suggest that these boys have moved from their parents' orbit. The changing activity patterns of children permit the development of a preadolescent subculture—a subculture that involves identification, as well as shared content. The age segregation found in American society (Conger 1972) is part of this process in that, not only do children spend less time with their parents, but historically they have come to spend less time with all adults who might provide non-peer identification.

The media and adults typically define preadolescence as a social category about which generalizations can be made; members of that age category come to think of themselves in relation to stereotypes offered by older members of the community.

This identification with peers, sponsored in part by adults, leads preadolescents to adopt behavior patterns and artifacts defined as particular to their age group.

#### The Threads of Culture

One of the threads running throughout this analysis . . . is the process by which preadolescent culture—and by implication, all cultures—is created and becomes connected to a group. . . . There is [also] a world beyond the small group. Culture spreads outside of its community of origin, lodging itself in numerous communities and spreading within them. I argue that a subsociety is comprised of numerous interlocking groups in which members identify themselves collectively as a meaningful social segment; a subculture is composed of those cultural traditions that flow through these social networks and that are perceived by members of the subsociety and by outsiders as being particularly characteristic of this social segment. . . .

We are each part of various socially and personally defined societies with their own traditions and values. Although a subculture will be more diffuse than an idioculture of a group that is characterized by face-to-face interaction, it is more definable than a national culture. If we understand culture as disseminated through social relationships, we can then examine these meaningful connections in order to understand the patterns and variations of tradition. . . .

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