



## Introducing Journal Corner

Welcome to the first 'journal corner' where we offer curriculum friendly summaries of papers published in the BSA journal *Sociology*. These are accompanied by an informal interview with one of the authors. Papers selected for this column will be free to download for a period of time.

In this issue we look at Jon Garland's 2015 article – [‘It Felt Like a Little War’: Reflections on Violence against Alternative Subcultures](#) – written with Neil Chakraborti and Stevie Hardie.

Before we get to this, it is worth briefly thinking about the nature of contemporary youth subcultures. While not every young person is part of a 'subculture', there are plenty of examples of different subcultural groups around today that you may have heard of or may even be a part of. Social media is an increasingly common way that young people participate in and express their membership of a subculture. As well as goths, punks, emos, 'indie kids' etc. other examples include:

- Cottagecore – old fashioned, rural 'whimsical' aesthetic and interests, a return to a so-called simpler and more rustic time.
- Dark Academia – a love of learning, particularly beyond traditional subjects and a framing of learning as 'cool' rather than 'nerdy'; an interest in literature, art and classical subjects.
- E-boys and e-girls (e-kids) – evolution of 'emo' subculture to combine elements of Japanese and K-pop fashion. Stylised and internet savvy. Gender and mood fluidity.
- VSCO girls – casual beach aesthetic, 'low key' vibes and artistic, unique and creative culture. Eco-friendly and environmentalism.

Social media and other contemporary trends may mean that there is more fluidity both within and between different groups and, some would even argue, an end to the idea of *sub*-cultures; instead, different group aesthetics and identities are part of mainstream culture.

Hopefully this will inspire wide-ranging and critical discussion about the implications of Garland and colleague's paper at the current time.

Best wishes  
The Editors of *Sociology*

## Summary of article

In our first journal corner, we look at [Jon Garland's 2015 article – 'It Felt Like a Little War': Reflections on Violence against Alternative Subcultures](#) – written with Neil Chakraborti and Stevie Hardie. This was an important contribution to hate crime research that considers violence experienced by people who belong to 'alternative subcultures' (e.g. groups typically defined by the appearance and dress of their members and the music they like), looking both at the types of violence they experience, as well as its impact. Using data from one of the largest studies conducted into hate crime, they show how these groups have experienced a range of different forms of violence that can have long reaching effects. Importantly, as well as broadening the definition of hate crime to consider a wider range of subcultural groups, they also explore how identity (and the combination of multiple identities) can place someone at most risk of being targeted. As such, this paper touches on a number of important sociological issues of direct relevance across the curriculum: culture and identity, crime and deviance, and research methods.

*Culture and identity:* The article engages directly with the notion of subcultures and how these can form an important part of an individuals' identity. Whilst they briefly describe the origins of these ideas from research into classic subcultural groups like 'skinheads' and 'teddyboys', the focus is primarily on their more recent incarnation in the form of 'alternative' subcultures. The term 'alternatives' here is a potentially broad category – often defined based on appearance (clothes and hairstyle) and music - and can include groups like goths, punks and emos who come from quite different social backgrounds. This makes clear that subcultures come in many different forms, with the key defining characteristic being 'difference' from 'the norm' and their delineation of those that are part of the group from other people in society. The article also demonstrates their importance within society, with the police adapting their approach to hate crime specifically to acknowledge the ways these group identities can foster tensions and lead harm being perpetrated toward them. Importantly, the article also shows that people define their own identities in complex ways, and that often it is in the combination (or *intersection*) of these identities (e.g. being both trans *and* goth) that can place someone at most risk of being targeted.

*Crime and deviance:* hate crime is of increasing interest to sociologists of crime and deviance but poses specific challenges because it does not exist as a separate form of crime, rather it is a definitional label attached to existing actions. In other words, violence, for example, is already illegal but if it is targeted to a particular type of person or group then it may become a hate crime. The differences in how hate crime is understood are explored within this article. Early notions of hate crime tended to focus on how it particularly affects those with a past characterised by discrimination (e.g. ethnic and religious minorities). There have since been efforts by the police to broaden focus to different types of groups, who may not necessarily have been discriminated against in other respects (e.g. white, often middle class, members of alternative cultures like goths). The article also demonstrates the potential *reach* of hate crime, with a considerable number of those interviewed reporting some experiences of crime that were often "accompanied by verbal abuse that indicated that the incident had been triggered by some form of animosity towards their subcultural appearance" (p.1071). The impacts of these crimes is also important, with research into hate

crimes often arguing that these crimes can ‘hurt’ more than traditional forms of offending specifically because they target identity. Here, the authors talk about a range of emotional and physical reactions experienced by their respondents. Moreover, it isn’t just the victim/s of the crimes that are affected – other members of the subculture can feel at risk as well. Hate crime has therefore been described as a ‘message crime’ because it sends a message to the group as a whole that they are doing something wrong and might be targeted.

*Research methods:* The findings of this study are from a large scale mixed method project – the Leicester hate crime project – that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more detailed picture of the experiences of hate crime victimisation. The quantitative data in the project comes from a *structured* survey interview where the same questions were asked of each respondent and response options were pre-determined by the interviewer. This survey was completed by more than 1,100 people living in Leicester that had experienced hate crime, allowing the researchers to quantify the extent of victimisation and count the forms of harm experienced by these respondents. However, despite being a large sample, the nature of the population being studied – vulnerable and often marginalised members of society that are targeted because of their identities – meant it was not possible to collect the data using a probability (random) sampling approach. Instead, the researchers used various targeted strategies to access participants including attendance at hate crime meetings and community centres. As a result, it is difficult to assess how *representative* its views are of all victims. The qualitative data came from *semi-structured* interviews with more than 400 people, enabling a more in-depth picture of what individuals experienced and how it made them feel. It also allowed the researchers to explore notions of identity by considering specific examples of victimisation in more detail. The qualitative data also included 62 life interviews where a much more comprehensive picture of individuals’ experiences of hate across the lifecourse could be explored by asking participants to talk about their life stories and memorable events. It is this life interview data that is used in this article.

## **Interview with Professor Jon Garland**

*Jon is currently a Professor of Criminology at the University of Surrey. He is also a member of the British Sociological Association, a Trustee of StopHateUK, on the Board of the International Network for Hate Studies and on the Steering Committee of the British Society of Criminology Hate Crime Network. Alongside his research into hate crime, Jon is currently working on the ESRC-funded project 'Doing Porridge: Understanding women's experiences of food in prison | University of Surrey' and the British Academy-funded 'Food, Families and Visiting Rooms in a Women's Prison' with colleagues Maria Adams and Vicki Harman.*

### **Can you tell us why you did the research?**

I began to research hate crime 20 years or so ago. Before that, I'd mainly researched issues of racism and anti-racism, particularly in the contexts of how these issues played out in the countryside and also in sport (football). It was during these projects that I became aware of other significant problems of bias-related victimisation too, such as homophobia and disablism, and became interested in researching those, too. I therefore decided to broaden my victimisation studies to include all of the five victim strands that are protected by specific hate crime legislation ('race'/ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, transgender status).

The research that informed the 'Little War' paper, into the targeted victimisation of alternative subcultures, was actually part of a much larger study, the Leicester Hate Crime Project. This was a two-year project based in the city of Leicester and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which examined the nature, extent and impact of hate crime upon victims. It looked not just at the five recognised victim strands mentioned above but at all of the types of harassment and violence directed at anyone due to hostility towards their identity. It aimed to see if those types of victimisation resembled the 'officially recognised' strands of hate crime & if so, to consider whether they should be recognised as such in law, too.

I was especially excited to be part of the team that undertook the Leicester Hate Crime Project as I'd become increasingly concerned about the impact of hate crime upon victims and was keen to gather empirical evidence about it. At that time there wasn't a great deal of research into hate crime victimisation, let alone into the targeting of alternative subcultures, so as a research team we realised we could break new ground with our work. I'd also got to know Sylvia Lancaster very well over the years and this increased my passion for this strand of research too. Sylvia, who sadly passed away in April 2022, was the mother of Sophie Lancaster, who was attacked and killed by a group of teenagers seemingly due to their hostility towards her alternative, 'gothic' appearance. In the wake of Sophie's murder, Sylvia set up the Sophie Lancaster Foundation, which campaigned to get attacks upon alternative subcultures officially recognised as a hate crime strand. The case made a huge impression on me, and I became determined to investigate this type of targeted victimisation to see what kind of evidence I could uncover about its nature, frequency and impact.

### **Why did you do it this way?**

The research team felt that the best way of uncovering the nuances of this type of victimisation was through focus groups and face-to-face interviews with those from alternative subcultures. If we'd conducted just a survey of alternative subcultures it would have helped us gain a broad idea of the experiences of those from that background but we really wanted to detail of what people had been through. We managed to recruit over 60 participants from the goth, punk, metaller, skater and emo communities and the findings from these helped us to gain an in-depth understanding of people's lived experiences of being targeted because of hostility towards who they are. Some of those experiences are outlined and assessed in 'It Felt Like a Little War'. Some were very vivid and quite emotionally difficult to hear, and often I'd have to 'decompress' immediately after interviewing victims in order to calm myself down.

### **What do you remember most about it?**

This was a fascinating piece of research for me to undertake and quite challenging, too. As a lifelong mod I'd perhaps been a bit wary of mixing with subcultures such as metallers who were sometimes viewed as the 'enemy' when I was a teenager! I was a little wary of attending a metal festival, for example, which I did as part of the project in order to meet and talk to metal fans about their experiences of being targeted. Everyone I met was warm and welcoming to me, not at all bothered about my own subcultural background and keen to learn about the research. I was invited to interviewees' houses where we discussed the impact of the verbal abuse and violence they had experienced. Some of the things I heard really shocked and moved me, and I've thought about the issue of the targeting of alternative subcultures in a different way ever since.

### **Do you think it is still relevant today?**

Yes, I think the research is still very relevant today. Anecdotal research indicates that the targeting of alternative subcultures remains a significant issue, something which is evidenced by the fact that 18 police forces now record attacks against alternative subcultures as hate crimes. Having said that, when the Law Commission published the much-anticipated findings from its extensive recent review of hate crime laws in 2021 it concluded that it would *not* recommend that alternative subcultures be recognised as the sixth official strand of hate crime victims, citing a lack of a substantial body of evidence that indicates that the targeting of alternative subcultures is prevalent in society. Undeterred, the Sophie Lancaster Foundation is currently working with alternative communities to provide such evidence.