Subcultures Vs. Countercultures: The Manson Family Cult

Different cultures are present in every society throughout the world. Many believe that the existence of cultures is crucial for members of societies to be able to exercise their freedom, whether that is freedom of speech or expression. On the other hand, cultures may be viewed as detrimental for society because they may put “limits” on what we can “think or do” (Wadsworth, ?). Subcultures and countercultures are examples of social worlds that exist within societies, but are formed and brought together through common ideas or beliefs.

A subculture is described as a group of people who come together to form a specific social environment with its own established set of values, norms, practices, and beliefs. Those who are a part of subcultures live in mainstream society, as well as their own subculture. Subcultures live cordially within mainstream society, but are brought together by a common idea or belief.

Countercultures are types of subcultures that consist of groups of people who live incompatibly with mainstream society. Counterculture’s norms and values are extremely different compared to those of mainstream culture and these countercultures often create their own communities that live by their own rules and norms. Countercultures are commonly formed by groups pushing for change in society or people who resist the mainstream norms by living outside of society.

When I think of subcultures, I think of motorcycle clubs because they are notorious for having their own set of rules, while living simultaneously within the law (sometimes). Perhaps the most popular motorcycle club of them all is Hells Angels. Hells Angels Motorcycle Club is an example of a subculture because it consists of a group of individuals brought together by a common interest, motorcycles, who live within mainstream society, but have their own set of values and norms. I first learned about Hells Angels as a young child because I would often see it’s members travelling together and would always be able to recognize them due to their vests that show they are members of the club. Like many subcultures, Hells Angels always represented their own culture by wearing an article of clothing that shows they are a part of it. Many members of Hells Angels even have tattoos that solidify and show their commitment to the club. First discovered in San Bernardino, California in 1948, Hells Angels subculture has gained so much popularity that it now has 467 charters in 59 countries throughout the world. Although it has become very popular since it was first created, Hells Angels is not a subculture that is easy to become a part of. Some of the guidelines to becoming a member of Hells Angels includes: having to travel at least 20,000 km a year via motorcycle, you must own your own bike that is up to Hells Angels standards, and you must be a male. Even if you fit all the criteria, your chances of becoming an official Hells Angel are slim. Once becoming a member, there are many rules to follow such as: members are required travel as a group (if one gets pulled over by law enforcement, they must all pull over), members are never allowed go out without wearing their “colors” or vest, members may never talk to the media or public about their codes or other members, and they must ride in their assigned order (just to name a few). Similar to many subcultures, there are most likely secret rules and guidelines a Hells Angel must follow as well. If I was to assume why Hells Angels was formed as a subculture it would be that a group of friends decided to form a group dedicated to their passion to riding motorcycles. Despite the specific guidelines and rules they must follow, the main aspect of what makes Hells Angels a

subculture is their shared dedication to motorcycles. Similar to many subcultures, especially those that differ a great deal from mainstream society, Hells Angels is often stigmatized by society for being “deviant,” or simply living by a different set of norms.

When I first learned about countercultures, my mind immediately went to The Manson Family cult. Growing up in Southern California, a ten minute drive from the Manson Caves, I was constantly exposed to discussions surrounding The Manson Family. The Manson Family was a cult of about 100 people led by Charles Manson in the 1950s and 60s and comprised of people who often experimented with hallucinogens and committed acts of violent and non-violent crime. The Manson Family is most known for killing at least seven people under the direction of Charles Manson, who would manipulate and brainwash his followers, mostly young girls, to do whatever he asked of them. Like many countercultures, the “family” did everything together and even lived together at an abandoned ranch in Southern California. While living at the ranch, Charles Manson created a strict set of rules and guidelines for his followers to obey such as: no member was allowed to be in the possession of books, watches, calendars, and clocks, no member was allowed to wear eyeglasses because it would limit them from “seeing the world in its natural state,” members were often forced to have sex with Manson and other members, and members were forced by Manson to participate in burglaries. Charles Manson created his cult with the goal of starting a “race war” among Americans. His plan was to start a race war that would result in African American’s being victorious and while this war would take place, Manson and his family would live in secret until it’s end when they would eventually take the rule over African Americans. This deranged idea was the reason for the creation of The Manson Family and would eventually be the cause of death of many innocent people at the hands of the Manson Family. When imagining why the Manson Family was formed as a counterculture, I can presume that it was created by Charles Manson as a form of rebellion against mainstream society. America in the 1960s was in no way a racism-free society, but an idea of a race war went extremely against the mainstream culture in that time period. Charles Manson created his own counterculture, or “family” as a way to gain attention for his cause or goal. What makes the Manson Family a counterculture instead of a subculture is that it’s members were dedicated to creating a “race war” in America in the 1960s. While subcultures are comprised of common interest and beliefs while living peacefully with mainstream society, countercultures are created to disrupt society’s norms and values and create change, such as a race war. I chose to discuss Hells Angels and the Manson Family as examples of a subculture and a counterculture because of my fascination with the two groups. Being from California, I often had exposure to many motorcycle gangs but developed a particular fascination with Hells Angels because of their distinct presence; even as a young child I knew when I was around a Hells Angel. With my parents and grandparents all having grown up in Southern California as well, I constantly heard stories about Charles Manson and his family (my grandma is even convinced her car was stolen by them in 1968).

Although I focussed on a subculture and a counterculture that were created/ resided in California, there are a countless number of subcultures and countercultures throughout the world. As I previously stated, our society would not be nearly as functional if it weren’t for the existence of subcultures and countercultures. Although I discussed the Manson Family as a negative counterculture, there are plenty of countercultures whose goals are to create a positive change in the world and the same goes for subcultures. Subcultures and countercultures are created for people as a place for them to belong with people with similar ideas and goals, whether those ideas and goals fit in with mainstream society or not.