

Pop Music in the Social Problems Classroom: Its Use to Illustrate Claims-making in a Juvenile Delinquency Course

Glenn W. Muschert*
Miami University

To begin, a student in my juvenile delinquency class played the song “I Don’t Like Mondays.” The first lines were:

*The silicon chip inside her head
Gets switched to overload.
And nobody’s gonna go to school today,
She’s going to make them stay at home.
And daddy doesn’t understand it,
He always said she was as good as gold.
And he can see no reason
‘Cause there are no reasons
What reason do you need to be shown?
Tell me why?
I don’t like Mondays... (Boomtown Rats 1979).*

After the class listened to the selection, the student explained that the song was written about 16 year-old Brenda Ann Spencer who in 1979 went on a shooting spree in a California elementary school, killing two adults and wounding eight children and a police officer. Further, the student explored how the song illustrated the psychological, social, and mass media dimensions of the incident. For the semester, we began most class sessions with a student playing a song.

Outside of the classroom, many students consume pop music, often including themes about crime and other social problems. Such pop cultural representations of the social phenomenon of crime can serve as a set of claims for comparison with the social scientific claims. Sociological research has demonstrated a rhetoric of violence in popular music (Armstrong 1993), and this paper reports on the results of attempts to integrate a social constructionist claims-making approach within the context of a juvenile delinquency course through the inclusion of pop music in the classroom. While the specific application reported here appeared in delinquency course, this exercise may also be fruitful when used in a variety of social problems courses.

Prior to the first class session, students entering social problems-related courses have been exposed to numerous claims about the existence of various social problems. In the juvenile delinquency course, I attempted to integrate a social constructionist theory of social problems research into the pedagogical approach.

* Please direct all correspondence to Glenn W. Muschert, Assistant Professor, Criminology Program Coordinator, Miami University, Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Oxford, Ohio 45056-1879, 513-529-1812, muschegw@muohio.edu

Constructionists examine the discourse about social problems, in this case delinquency, in order to understand the rhetorical process through which claims-making behaviors lead to the creation and maintenance of social problems (Best 1995: 1-10).

The purpose of the exercise was to advance one of the goals of the course: that students learn to identify and evaluate the differences between social science claims and pop cultural claims. Over the semester, students selected and played pop music about delinquency, and the themes in these songs were subsequently analyzed as an alternative set of claims to the social scientific course content. The songs served as a student-selected sample of statements about youth crime, and became a basis for comparison between competing pop cultural and social scientific claims about delinquency. This paper reviews the discussion among scholars of teaching and learning regarding the use of pop music in the classroom, and then moves into a discussion of the mechanics and efficacy of this particular application. Ultimately, this exercise helped develop students' critical thinking skills, as evidenced by their ability to evaluate multiple claims regarding the nature of delinquency in society.

LITERATURE

Popular music is a pervasive part of contemporary life, and students are typically quite familiar with one or more genres, including rock, rap, and country. Among scholars, there has been some ambivalence about the merits of popular music (e.g., Walczak and Reuter 1993:121; Kotarba 1994). The use of pop music to teach sociology is not new, and the discussion has included its use in courses to illustrate a variety of sociological concepts in a variety of sociology courses (Elterman 1983). Music can illustrate concepts in classical theories (Ahlkvist 2001); race, class, and gender-based stratification (Martinez 1994); alienation, socialization, and conflict theory (Walczak and Reuter 1994); and deviant behavior (Martinez 1995; Walczak and Reuter 1994). In addition, the use of popular music as a pedagogical tool has been suggested in a number of courses, including introductory sociology (Ahlkvist 1999; Albers and Bach 2003; Walczak and Reuter 1994), stratification (Martinez 1994), deviance (Martinez 1995), and social theory (Ahlkvist 2001). Some have gone as far as to suggest that popular music may be an instructional asset to nearly any sociology course (Reuter and Walczak 1993).

Those utilizing music in sociology courses have employed varying methods (see Reuter and Walczak 1993). While sociologists have utilized popular music to teach numerous courses using a variety of approaches, most previously reported teaching methods have played music that was selected by the instructor. In a previous study, while noting the effectiveness of the method in general, researchers noted that their students suggested, "the instructor should allow students to select and analyze songs, and should ask them to make classroom presentations" (Walczak and Reuter 1994:267). Taking this hint, I assigned students to select songs themselves. The technique described here attempted to stimulate the students to engage in a cultural analysis of the rhetoric of violence present in the selections, something akin to the

Sociological Imagination

method employed by Ahlkvist (1999) who used heavy metal music as a central theme for teaching cultural analysis in introductory courses.

PURPOSE AND METHOD

The author used this exercise in two sections of a senior-level undergraduate juvenile delinquency course taught at a medium-sized Midwestern state-assisted institution, during the 2004-05 academic year. The two sections enrolled a total of 50 students, of whom roughly 80% were completing an academic concentration in criminology. At the beginning of the course, students were instructed that, on a rotating basis, each student would have to bring a song related to juvenile delinquency, and that they would have to play it for the class. (See Appendix A for a copy of the instructions for the assignment.)

On the second class day of the semester I demonstrated the technique. I chose to play “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana, which is regarded as the quintessential song by the quintessential band of the early-1990s grunge youth subculture. I distribute the lyrics, and played the song which began:

*Load up on guns and
Bring your friends
It's fun to lose
And to pretend
She's over bored
And self assured
Oh no, I know
A dirty word*

Hello, how low? (repeated)

*With the lights out it's less dangerous
Here we are now
Entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now... (Nirvana 1991)*

When the song ended, I explain that I selected the song because it captured a subcultural moment for many youth of Generation-X. Because subcultures and peer groups are one focus of delinquency studies, the song was relevant because it expressed the worldview of the members of an historical youth movement. By way of this demonstration, I explained to students that they should start to think about selecting a song of their own to play for the class.

Following the demonstration, I circulated a sign-up sheet. Given the size of the class and the sixteen week semester, I was able to schedule one student per class period, and the student audio presentations were held at the beginning. Students were

Sociological Imagination

required to distribute copies of the song lyrics, and to prepare a brief written statement about why they chose the song they played. Following explanation of the relevance of the song, the presenting student fielded questions about the song and acted as discussion leader. In all, the exercise required approximately ten minutes per class period, although discussion often could have lasted longer. Sometimes, it was possible to segue into the scheduled topic for the day.

Given the sensitive topics mentioned and often potentially offensive content in pop music, it was necessary to spend a brief time discussing the risks of offending the sentiments of their fellow students. I informed students that I would not censor the content of their presentations, and that it was their responsibility to consider the impact they might have on other students.¹ For example, some songs contained some of the following potentially offensive types of content: foul language; racist, homophobic, or misogynistic language and themes; violent themes; or the glorification of delinquent behavior. Despite these, the exercise has been tested over numerous semesters at three public universities, and there have been no reports of students being offended. Perhaps students were more tolerant of the choices made by their peers than they would have been had the instructor made the selections.

Students were graded credit/no-credit for the exercise, which counted for 5% of each student's final grade. Toward the end of the semester, the class took a half hour of one session to reflect on the varying claims made in the two varieties of claims. In addition, I included this exercise within a test question on the final exam. At the end of the semester, prior to the final exam, students responded to an assessment questionnaire, on which variables were measured on a five-point ordinal scale, with the responses from zero to four indicating strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, and strongly agree, respectively. Response to the questionnaire was voluntary, and the response rate was 23 of 26 (88.5%) for one section and 22 of 24 (91.7%) for the second section, or 90% overall.

EVALUATION

Analysis of the assessment data indicated that the exercise was an effective component of the juvenile delinquency course, and that it was a useful tool in advancing the goal of sensitizing students to the existence of multiple claims about the social problem of delinquency. First, the assessment indicated the audio exercise positively contributed to the classroom atmosphere. Students tended to strongly agree about this effect, and the median response for both sections was four. This finding corroborates previous findings about the positive effect of music on the classroom environment (Martinez 1994: 263).

Sociological Imagination

Table 1: Median Responses on Measures of Effectiveness in Delinquency Course

Measure	Section A (n=23)	Section B (n=22)
Was an effective part of course	4	4
Had a positive effect on the classroom atmosphere	4	4
Helped student reflect on course content	3	4
Helped illustrate multiple facets of issues	4	3
Helped students learn about delinquency	3	4

Note: The measurement scale ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Second, the audio exercise appeared well-suited to the juvenile delinquency course. Typically, students strongly agreed that the exercise was an effective part of the course, and moderately to strongly indicated that it helped them to learn about juvenile delinquency. In addition, students reported that the audio component of the course aided their learning in general because it helped them to reflect on the course material, and to see multiple facets of delinquency phenomena.

Third, the assessment indicated that the exercise positively contributed to the achievement of the stated course goals, both individually and as a whole.ⁱⁱ In particular, it was encouraging that students positively evaluated the ability of the exercise to contribute to its intended learning outcome: That the students understand the difference between social scientific perspectives on delinquency and pop cultural representations of delinquency. The median shows that students strongly agreed that the exercise helped them understand the differences between the theories of delinquency studied in the classroom and the common sense claims contained in the sample of pop music.

Table 2: Median Responses on Effectiveness in Advancing Course Goals

Measure	Section A (n=23)	Section B (n=22)
Helped achieve the learning goals of course	3	3.5
Helped understand social scientific versus pop cultural perspectives	4	4
Helped understand social scientific perspectives about delinquency	3	4
Helped understand cultural focus on delinquency in society	3	4
Helped understand the causes of delinquency	4	3.5
Helped understand the juvenile justice system	3	3

Note: The measurement scale ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Sociological Imagination

In addition, students on average agreed that the exercise moderately to strongly helped them to understand the cultural focus on delinquency, and that it helped them to understand the causes of delinquency. Students were similarly positive in rating the exercise's ability to help them understand social scientific perspectives on delinquency and the workings of the juvenile justice system. In all, the assessment suggested that the exercise was generally beneficial to the course in juvenile delinquency, and that it was effective in advancing the stated course goals.

DISCUSSION

The assessment indicated that, after participating in the exercise, students became better at evaluating claims about juvenile delinquency presented in pop music, and in comparing these with social science claims. Evaluating multiple, and often competing, claims about the nature of delinquency in society was consistent with the social constructionist study of juvenile delinquency as a social problem.

For example, one student played the following lyrics, excerpted from the song "The Anatomy of a School Shooting,"

*The anatomy of a school shooting, shotgun under my trench coat
Columbiners did it, dead spoke – blood red soaked
My mind consume the doom as I walk through the school
15 people killed and over 14 wounded
My name is Eric Harris, I was forever harassed, and outcast
You fuck with us and now me and Dylan is puling out gats
I've been wantin' to murder people
Suicide is played out, if you gonna die, take people with you... (Ill Bill 2004)*

In the delinquency textbook and a supplementary text, students read about school shootings. The student's selection of the song and her statement demonstrated that she reflected on the course material and the song's message. In her statement to the class, the student wrote,

What could have possibly gone through the heads of those two boys that day? No one but the shooters will ever know, but "Anatomy of a School Shooting" gives one the view of how such a horrible tragedy could occur – anywhere. The idea in the song is not to condone the actions, but to question the society of surrounding that could push a person to that extreme.

The comment showed that the student was cognizant of the importance of the sociological context of delinquent acts, and that she considered the messages conveyed in the pop song. This typical example illustrates that the student had evaluated multiple claims about the school shooting phenomena.

While the overall exercise may have been useful as a teaching tool, it was not without its potential pitfalls. The intended learning outcome for the exercise was that

students would learn to understand the difference between varieties of claims about delinquency, but its unintended consequence may have been that students sometimes reified the authority of the textbook and other sources of social scientific knowledge about delinquency. When asked whether the exercise helped them to understand social science perspectives on delinquency, students responded that the exercise was moderately to strongly useful. This suggested that students ultimately may buy into the authority of social science sources of knowledge about social problems, rather than understanding social science as a set of claims itself. As an effort to move beyond the “textbook world” (Westhues 1991), this teaching technique may have fallen short of its goal, however I viewed this as an opportunity to redouble efforts to emphasize that the pure social constructionist perspective does not privilege some claims over others. Indeed, the point of the exercise in advancing students critical thinking skills was that they were encouraged to learn to evaluate multiple claims about social problems.

In addition, other issues that arose during the implementation of the learning strategy suggested that students hesitated to question cultural and legal issues related to the sample of music selected by the group. First, nearly all of the songs were commercially produced, and therefore the pop cultural sample examined in class had been filtered through a corporate layer. Even selections from urban hip hop music, with its aura of coming from the streets, and country music, with its grassroots feeling, were produced in corporate studios in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, or Nashville. Second, students frequently brought “burned” copies of compact discs to class, revealing that many students may have violated copyright laws. Some of the burned copies might have been fair-use copies of legitimately purchased discs, although some undoubtedly were illegal copies. The irony, once pointed out, did not escape the students, however no one seemed bothered by the legal issues raised. The irony was perhaps deepened when we considered the tendency for students to play music that discussed violent acts, while ignoring electronic copyright violations and other forms of property crime. Should these ironies arise in the future, instructors may also view these as teaching opportunities.

In sum, using pop music in the delinquency classroom proved effective in communicating the claims-making process behind the creation and maintenance of social problems, and the assessment indicated its usefulness in student academic development. Having students select songs themselves was fruitful and engaging, and the unintended, but not unexpected, consequence of the activity was the establishment of a high level of rapport among students. The activity described here may also have useful applications in other social problems-related courses or components of other social constructionist courses covering criminology, drugs and alcohol, environment, family, gender, gerontology, inequality, mental health, race, and sexuality.

Appendix A: Assignment

**Juvenile Delinquency
Audio Presentation**

Students have the opportunity to complete the audio exercise. Bring an audio cassette or CD to play for the class. Each day at the beginning of class, one student should bring a song to play for the class. Music should be relevant to the course topic of juvenile delinquency, or to the specific topic of discussion that day. Students should take this exercise seriously, as it is integral to accomplishing a number of our course goals. The professor will distribute a sign-up sheet for the audio presentation.

The following are the requirements:

1. Bring copies of lyrics for the class members (25).
2. Prepare and submit a written explanation for your choice of song.
3. Make a brief verbal statement about your song.
4. Be prepared to field questions about the song, and answer any questions.

Note to students regarding offensive material in pop music: This classroom is an open forum for examination of issues relating to juvenile delinquency. Many songs cover sensitive topics or contain language that some people find offensive. Please understand that as instructor for the course, I will not censor student's choice of song to play for this exercise. Please reflect on your selection carefully, and please consider that others might reasonably be offended by some songs. If you believe that your song might be offensive to others, please mention this prior to playing it. Students not wishing to be offended may leave the room while the song is played.

REFERENCES

- Ahlkvist, Jarl A. 1999. "Music and Cultural Analysis in the Classroom: Introducing Sociology through Heavy Metal." *Teaching Sociology* 27:126-44.
- . 2001. "Sound and Vision: Using Progressive Rock to Teach Social Theory." *Teaching Sociology* 29:471-82.
- Albers, Benjamin D. and Rebecca Bach. 2003. "Rockin' Soc: Using Popular Music to Introduce Sociological Concepts." *Teaching Sociology* 31:237-45.
- Armstrong, Edward G. 1993. "The Rhetoric of Violence and Rap in Country Music." *Sociological Inquiry* 63:64-83.
- Best, Joel. 1995. *Images of Issues: Typifying Contemporary Social Problems*, Second Edition. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Boomtown Rats. 1979. "I Don't Like Mondays." *Fine Art of Surfacing*, Sony.
- Elterman, Howard. 1983. "Using Popular Music to Teach Sociology." *Teaching Sociology* 11:529-38.
- Ill Bill. 2004. "The Anatomy of a School Shooting." *What's Wrong with Bill?* Psycho-Logical Records.
- Kotarba, Joseph A. 1994. "The Positive Functions of Rock and Roll Music for Children and Their Parents." Pp. 155-70 in Joel Best (ed.) *Troubling Children: Studies of Children and Social Problems*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Martinez, Theresa A. 1994. "Popular Music in the Classroom: Teaching Race, Class, and Gender with Popular Culture." *Teaching Sociology* 22:260-65.
- . 1995. "Where Popular Culture Meets Deviant Behavior: Classroom Experiences with Music." *Teaching Sociology* 23:413-18.
- Nirvana. 1991. "Smells Like Teen Spirit." *Nevermind*, Geffen.
- Reuter, Monika and David Walczak. 1993. *Songware II: Using Popular Music in Teaching Sociology*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
- Walczak, David, and Monika Reuter. 1993. "Using Song Lyrics as Text." Pp. 120-52 in Monika Reuter and David Walczak (eds.) *Songware II: Using Popular Music in Teaching Sociology*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
- . 1994. "Using Popular Music to Teach Sociology: An Evaluation by Students." *Teaching Sociology* 22:266-69.
- Westhues, Kenneth. 1991. "Transcending the Textbook World." *Teaching Sociology* 19(1):87-92.

Sociological Imagination

- i This posture toward censorship may not be appropriate at all institutions. In particular, certain religious or other private institutions may impose restrictions on course content. A possible variation would be to require students to play “radio edits” of songs, which would maintain common standards of decency.
- ii The stated goals of the juvenile delinquency course were as follows: By the end of the semester, students should understand:
- Social scientific perspectives on juvenile delinquency.
 - The difference between social scientific perspectives on delinquency and “common sense”/pop cultural perspectives.
 - The recent cultural focus on delinquency and the victimization of youth in society.
 - Institutional causes of delinquency, including family, schools, and peer groups.
 - The juvenile justice system, including police, courts, and corrections.