A Comparative Study of Youth Culture and Delinquency: Upper Middle-Class Canadian and Swiss Boys

EDMUND W. VAZ
University of Waterloo

and

JOHN CASPARIS
State University of New York at Binghamton, U.S.A.

Whether or not the youth culture is a universal phenomenon we do not know. There is so little reported research on the subject outside of the United States that hearsay is apt to be our best source of information if we enquire about the topic elsewhere. Similarly, the comparative study of juvenile delinquency is just beginning (see R. and J. T. Cavan, 1968). What we know of delinquency in non-English speaking countries is limited usually to the illegal conduct of lower-class boys (R. and J. T. Cavan, 1968; Juvenile Delinquency in Post-War Europe, 1960; La Délinquance des Jeunes en Groupe, 1963). The presence of a youth culture and the extent of delinquency among boys from upper socioeconomic strata remain largely a mystery (cf. Coleman, 1961; Bernard, 1961; Vaz, 1969). Perhaps these boys are better behaved, less aggressive and hostile. Perhaps they do not as often run foul of the law. On the other hand, perhaps they have not yet been researched.

This paper is a cross-cultural step in this direction. It attempts an initial analysis of comparative data on selected dimensions of the youth culture among upper middle-class Canadian and Swiss boys. This includes their parent/peer orientation and also the frequency of their dating and other "social" activities; secondly it presents comparative material on the attitudes of these boys towards common adolescent situations and on their self-reported delinquencies. Discussion proceeds according to the comparative development of a youth culture and the social roles of these boys.

In April 1963 data on the self-reported delinquency and youth culture activities of boys were gathered from five coeducational high schools located in four Canadian communities. Anonymous questionnaires were administered to

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1,639 white, high school boys aged 13 to over 19 years in grades 9 through 13. Data were collected on delinquency, peer/parent orientation, attitudes, values, and the participation of youths in legitimate peer-oriented activities. Two high schools were located in a medium-sized city of about 100,000 population, and two in suburban townships of an industrial city of over 250,000 people. The fifth high school was situated in a small town immediately outside the same city. The schools were located in mainly middle-class areas, and although the communities vary widely in size, each comes under the influence of the nearby metropolis. Vaz (1965: 52-70) has reported elsewhere the specific conditions under which this research was conducted.

In June 1966 anonymous questionnaires were administered to 514 boys attending four schools in the Canton Graubünden, Switzerland. The schools included a Kantonsschule, a secondary school located in the town of Chur, a secondary school and a private boys’ Gymnasium situated in a village nearby. The questionnaire (previously used in the Canadian study) was translated into German and the items revised and made applicable to the Swiss scene. Subjects ranged in age from 13 to over 20 years. Data on the small number of boys over 19 years are not included in this paper. The conditions under which this research was carried out parallel closely those of the Canadian project. The material presented in this paper stems from these two projects.

The Canton Graubünden is one of the most traditional, least industrialised and urbanised Cantons in Switzerland. Chur is the capital of the Canton and in 1960 had a population of 24,825. It is a rapidly growing Swiss town with a decennial growth rate of 28.1 percent, and gains by in-migration at the expense of the small rural villages in the mountains which have been steadily losing population through out-migration.

The religious composition of Graubünden is not markedly different from that of its capital or from that of Switzerland. In 1960, 55.3 percent of Chur was Protestant, 46.3 percent Roman Catholic. Of the boys studied, 72 percent are Protestant, 23 percent Roman Catholic.

Linguistically Graubünden is somewhat special since 26 percent of its population speak Romanisch, whereas less than 1 percent of Switzerland speak this minority tongue; 16.1 percent speak Italian compared to 9.5 percent for all of Switzerland. German is the major language and is spoken by 56.7 percent of the Canton compared to 69.3 percent for the country. In Chur, German is spoken by 83.2 percent of the people and is in daily use. Less than 11 percent speak Romanisch, and 7.5 percent speak Italian. Under 1 percent of the Canton speak French which is considerably less than for all of Switzerland. The schools

1 This was accomplished with the help of two German adolescents newly arrived in Canada who were familiar with the “style of life” of German and Swiss teenagers. Also one of the authors is Swiss born and was educated in German.

2 One example of Graubünden’s traditional and conservative milieu is seen in the results of the 1963 elections to the Canton council. The Socialist and Communist candidates together polled 6.2 percent of the vote, while in Switzerland generally they polled 28.8 percent, and in the industrial city of Basel they polled 36.2 percent, see Girod, 1965: 51.