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Chastising and Romanticising Heavy Metal Subculture: Challenging the Dichotomy with Figurational Sociology

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Chastising and romanticising heavy metal subculture: Challenging the dichotomy with figural sociology

Abstract

This research posits that heavy metal music is part of what Elias (2009) refers to as a 'civilising process'. He argues that as society becomes increasingly integrated we are faced with an increasing web of interdependencies and relationships where a growing intricacy is needed in order to manage ones emotions. Elias and Dunning (2008a) argue that a result of increasing restraints and the routinisation of social relationships sport and leisure has attained a greater importance in society allowing for the generation and release of mimetic emotion. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews of heavy metal fans in Dublin, Ireland it was found that ceremonial rituals such as 'moshing' are able to occur as a consequence of the unwritten fan code of behaviour and the influence of external controls which contribute to the construction of a unique environment which allows fans to experience a 'controlled de-controlling' of emotions. Heavy metal culture, rather than representing a potential caveat to Elias's civilising process is in actual fact an example of the process of informalisation and reflective of society's increasing need for excitement which has yet to be really examined in the context of music subcultures. It is argued here that the figural sociology framework represents an alternative approach to studying music subcultures due to its emphasis on historical configurations, developments in the individual psyche, and the importance it attaches to the role of the relatively detached researcher. The role of the researcher in particular is outlined in this paper in the context of studies which have considered both the dangers of heavy metal and the romantic ideologies of the subculture.

Introduction: Attracting the detractors

Weinstein (2000) describes how heavy metal subculture is unique in that it has provided one of the few contexts in which the conservatives of the right and the cultural liberals of the left have shared a common enemy. Admittedly, the liberal left's problems with metal have more to do with the aesthetics of the genre and its apparent failure to use the culture to engage in any meaningful political rhetoric. This issue has been debated and discussed in depth before (See Walser, 2004) and as such there is no need to go into it in detail here. The point however is the general negativity that is directed towards heavy metal can be found from a variety of perspectives and philosophies. In this paper I will examine conservative critics of heavy metal who view it as a threat to the moral fabric of our society and have hence attempted to censor it. This will involve a discussion concerning the role of the PMRC (Parents Music Resource Center) in 1980s America when heavy metal was at its most popular. I will use the arguments of the right and general perceptions of heavy metal in conjunction with my own experiences of the subculture (as an outsider) through participant observation and semi-structured interviews to theorise the seemingly controversial rituals and practices of the heavy metal scene. This will be done in the context of Norbert Elias's (2000) figurational sociology.

Heavy metal and the civilising process

Elias (2000) argues that in society a more controlled and continuous sense of self has developed in the context of increasing interdependencies, the rising levels of class integration, and in the comparative equating of the classes. He claims that in post medieval times changes in the standards of etiquette and manners and the advancement of 'shame' were symptoms of the increasing social restraints and inner control. This process Elias argues is a consequence of the emergence of complex networks of social interdependencies and the influence of social processes such as state formation. As we become increasingly integrated we must learn how to control our emotions and behaviour in order to participate in modern society. In such circumstances, Elias argues that society is engaged in what he refers to as a civilising process.

This framework represents an interesting context in which to study heavy metal music subculture. Kong (2006: 107) observes how heavy metal music has been classified in the media as 'uncivilized and savage, reinforced by the performativity of slam dancing, characterized as violent.' It would seem that the violence and aggression that is synonymous with heavy metal would represent an example of a de-civilising process. This is certainly the

argument from the PMRC. Chastagner (1999), Lynkwiler and Gay (2000), Weinstein (2000), and Wright (2000) have all documented the outrage that has surrounded the music genres of heavy metal and rap and in particular the role that the PMRC has played in attempting to blame such music for corrupting the youth of America during the 1980s and early 1990s. The PMRC essentially saw heavy metal as a threat to the moral fabric of society and link what they perceive as the 'uncivilised' characteristics of the music to the social problems of teenage suicide, murder, sexism, racism, drug abuse and violence. Lynkwiler and Gay (2000: 67) describe how they sustained a large media campaign which 'portrayed heavy metal music as dangerous' in that it glorified a lot of these issues and Weinstein (2000: 264) suggests that 'much of the public believed that heavy metal was disgusting and dangerous, if not downright evil.'

Societal woes: heavy metal and moral panic

The level of mistrust and panic that heavy metal caused in America even resulted in the prosecution of Heavy metal musicians. Richardson (1991) describes the high profile cases against Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest. In the case of Osbourne, his song 'Suicide Solution' was blamed for the suicide of a nineteen year old teenager and for Judas Priest it was alleged that their music was responsible for the suicide of one teenager and the attempted one of another. At the heart of these cases was the issue of subliminal messages. This argument from the prosecution in such proceedings prevented them from being dismissed in court as subliminal messages are not constitutionally protected under the free speech act. Although these cases were eventually dismissed it demonstrated the power of organisations such as the PMRC in that they could orchestrate court proceedings that could potentially hold heavy metal musicians responsible for the suicides of the fans of the music.

The court cases and the media attention genres such as heavy metal received at this time has all the features of what Cohen (2002: 1) describes as a 'moral panic' which he defines as a

condition, episode, person or group of persons [which] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

It makes perfect sense that heavy metal would induce a moral panic. The behaviour of the fans and the groups was by all accounts new and extremely different than anything which had

come before it and it is easy to understand how the music's morbid, aggressive, and anti-religious themes would be considered a threat to American values. What is interesting however is the role of the 'socially accredited experts' in establishing a discourse that positioned heavy metal as a threat to societal values. In the midst of the PMRC campaign psychologists such as Paul King (1988) testified in court and argued that there was a correlation between mental illness, drugs, and listening to music such as heavy metal. His argument stemmed from research which found that eighty-three percent of his patients listened to heavy metal. This issue of cause and effect is controversial in studies of heavy metal. Quantitative based research conducted by Stack et al. (1994), Lacourse et al. (1999), Scheel and Westefeld (1999) and King all identify the link between heavy metal and the list of well known suicide indicators. Lacourse et al describe some of these indicators that have been linked to heavy metal as alienation, and substance abuse. In terms of substance abuse it was found that adolescent heavy metal fans were more likely to drink alcohol or use drugs than non-heavy metal fans. As a consequence of this, it was suggested that they were more likely to commit suicide because of their dependence on alcohol and drugs.

Alienation is a theme that is common in Arnett's descriptions of heavy metal fans. 'Heavy metal is a reflection of the alienation that many adolescents feel as a result of the lack of instruction provided to them by their culture, including family, school, community and religion' (Arnett, 1996: 17). It is because of this disaffection that they seek out music such as heavy metal and Lacourse et al. argue that the fans as a result are more likely to engage in a form of hero worshipping when they find something (heavy metal music) that communicates to them and resonates with their own personal sense of estrangement. This in addition to the greater emphasis that they place on their peer group (i.e. other metal fans) will supposedly lead to the increasing likelihood of suicide. They insist that an over-reliance on peers is indicative of problems in an individual's identity formation which can then result in substance abuse. It is evident that a lot of the connections here are tenuous at best. Another example comes from Stack et al. who use a sample of youth suicides and found that fifty percent of the adolescents had been subscribing to heavy metal magazines. This is indicative of some of the research that has been carried out on suicide and its connection with heavy metal. There is obviously an assortment of other factors that can contribute to the decision of a young person to take one's own life. In the case of Stack et al. it is alarming that they believe there is a significant correlation between magazine subscriptions and suicide considering that it was one of the most popular genres of music at the time. It could also be

quite possible that fifty percent of the suicide victims liked pop music but using the same cause and effect strategy does not seem to fit here. It is clear that there is an agenda to link heavy metal with suicide and this could potentially skew the findings.

Scheel and Westefeld (1999) have cited the possibility that many of these fans may have nursed suicidal tendencies before their interest in heavy metal developed. This raises questions of whether heavy metal in fact attracts people with these inclinations and whether the music consequently has a positive or negative effect on the fan. The positive effect of the music would relate to any cathartic effect that the music elicits. Arnett (1996) in particular describes the emotional catharsis that many of the fans he interviewed experienced in their listening of heavy metal. It would seem that if depressed fans were drawn to heavy metal that it would be a matter of how they interpreted the lyrics and sounds of heavy metal that would determine if it would have a positive effect on their sense of alienation or a negative effect which conservative critics would suggest. This is where the dichotomy between conservative critics such as the PMRC and heavy metal defenders exists. An example of this is highlighted in the interpretation of the Ozzy Osbourne song 'Suicide Solution'. On the one hand conservative critics suggested that this song is encouraging fans to kill themselves whilst on the other Weinstein (2000: 250) interprets the song as a warning of the dangers of alcohol as a solution. Weinstein bemoans the conservative critics who she claims are incapable of understanding puns or metaphors.

Making sense of the panic

Through examining the details of this particular episode of societal moral panic it begs the question of whether it is heavy metal that is an example of a decivilising process or the actual reaction to the subculture itself. Rohloff and Wright (2010: 411) conceptualise moral panics 'as short-term, partial decivilizing processes that occur within (and partly as a result of) civilizing processes'. Rohloff (2008: 70) compares the symptoms/outcomes of a moral panic with the characteristics of a decivilizing trend. She argues that the initial concern occurs because of the perceived lack of action from a governing body, the creation of 'scapegoats' or 'folk devils' is reflective of a decrease in mutual identification, and that a decrease in reality congruence is evident in times of moral panic as there becomes a decrease in rational decision making and assessing of the situation and its possible solutions. She also contends that the disproportionality of moral panics and the increase in perceived danger is a direct result of the enhanced specialisation and differentiation of roles within society. In other

words, in modern society there is a large amount of trust that is placed on individuals who specialise and become experts on certain topics to inform. This is in fact a civilising trend and an example of how a civilising trend can facilitate a decivilising trend. This is most certainly seen in the PMRC's attack on what they saw as profane music. Assortments of so called experts such as King (1998) were drafted in to validate their concerns over heavy metal. This could only have contributed to this decivilising trend. It is argued here then that the societal reaction to heavy metal at the height of its popularity in the 1980s and during certain instances such as the Columbine shootings or the recent Arizona killings can be construed as decivilising processes. However this does not tell us enough about the heavy metal subculture. In the next section I will present a more reality congruent picture of heavy metal from within the scene.

Role of the researcher: detour via detachment

The critical focus regarding heavy metal detractors in this paper raises questions over how research is conducted. It has already been discussed how the tenuous relationship between certain cause and effect elements in quantitative studies have implied a certain level of bias towards connecting heavy metal fandom and adolescent suicide. Rohloff and Wright have suggested however that research into moral panics can become biased if the phenomenon under question is presumed to be a needless panic in the first place. It could also be the case that in defending their subculture from the detractors' authors such as Weinstein (2000) could be accused of romanticising or mythologising the heavy metal music scene. Though this is understandable in consideration of the attacks that heavy metal has received from both the right and the left it does potentially leave open the possibility that heavy metal academics can favour their own passionate connotations of the music when it comes to analysis. An example of this is when Weinstein compares the stigmatisation of heavy metal fans to the persecution that homosexuals and African Americans have experienced in America. In going this far to defend her subculture it becomes difficult to then take her descriptions of the heavy metal scene completely seriously. For example if we are to look at a ritual such as moshing which will be discussed in this paper; it is apparent that Weinstein's love of heavy metal endows her analysis with an element of romanticism and political bias. In her description of the live event she affords heavy metal a special status over other genres of music and writes that

it is an ecstatic experience, a celebration of heavy metal where the metal gods rule from the stage as cultural heroes...at the point of perfection, time stands still and one feels that one belongs to a higher reality, far away from the gray, everyday world (Weinstein, 2000: 231).

Consequently it was felt that my own position as a researcher would be vital. I had a unique position in this research from the start in that I knew relatively little about heavy metal music and had a lack of feeling towards the genre either negatively or positively. In addition to this I charted the development of the subculture historically in order to understand how the rituals developed and what their significance was. It was difficult to avoid the romantic connotations of comradeship and brotherhood that the interviewees contorted and additionally the potential pitfall of becoming too attached to the fans. I sought to avoid this in observation where the ritual was observed following Dunning's (1992) concept of 'secondary re-involvement'. I would participate in rituals such as moshing but I would do so sporadically so as not to become too routinised and emotionally involved within the scene. I would then question the fans either informally at a concert or formally in an interview to make sense of anything I witnessed in participant observation. Additionally this research is taking place in Dublin, Ireland between 2008 and 2011 so there has not been anywhere near that same level of panic or anxiety that surrounded the metal scene in America in the 1980s. Bennett (2001) has commented on Arnett's study of young heavy metal fans claiming that his book was an example of academics trying to buy into the anxiety that was felt in the country at the time with regards metal. It is felt here that these issues have contributed to a relatively objective position (compared to previous studies concerning heavy metal), although it is right to point out that no researcher can ever successfully attain a level of complete detachment in the research process.

The issue of involvement and detachment is a controversial subject in figurational sociology. Feminists such as Hargreaves (1992) have criticised figurationalists particularly in the sociology of sport for failing to adopt any ideological focus to research and for suggesting that research can be carried out without compromising objectivity. Hargreaves however is basing these assumptions on a misreading of the figurational conception of the involvement-detachment balance in research. Elias or Dunning never claimed to adopt a completely neutral or value-free stance in their research as Hargreaves suggests. Liston (2007: 635) writes 'involvement-detachment is fundamentally a relational issue. It is, therefore not possible for a sociologist to be entirely detached from that which s/he has in common with all other human beings'. The problem is however that there has been a lack of empirically informed studies which inform us of figurational sociology and its methodological practice. To understand more about this issue see Dunning (1992), Liston (2007), Elias (1956), and

Colwell (1999). In the next section I will discuss my findings in an effort to bridge the dichotomy that is evident in previous studies of heavy metal subculture.

The civilising of the mosh pit: Making sense of the anarchy

As the song came to an end it broke into another fast chorus where the guitarist held up his instrument high above his head as he worked his fingers down the fret board. The singer/rhythm guitarist joined him playing his in a similar fashion rocking his head back and forth at his band mate. As this was going on I looked down at the pit which had formed into a circle. There was a gap in between the circle that the fans took it in turn to run into and shoulder another fan. This happened for a couple of minutes as I could see the fans near the front manoeuvring for room as they moved their fists above their shoulder and wave them back and forth in the direction of the stage. It was at this time that the singer shouted into the microphone "I want to see more of them fucking circle pits Dublin". The band then broke into an extended version of the chorus and I could see people crowd surfing. One man in particular was moving across the top of the crowd quickly and as he was passed into the front of the pit one of the bouncers reached in and batted him down with his hands before he got over the barrier that separated the stage and the pit. I saw another young man who had a shaved head, his t-shirt tied around his waste wearing combats step onto the two people's hands either side of him and jump on top of the people in front of him. They kept him up by pushing his backside up as the people in front of them passed him along with their hands (Field notes 28/2/10)

This was an extract from my initial observation of the heavy metal scene. What followed during my actual participation were elbows in the head and a steep learning curve of the ways of the pit. The interviewees also describe the potential dangers of the pit. Antony talks about seeing people at gigs walking around with blood all over them, Rory describes fearing for his life when he was squashed within a mosh pit, Pam speaks of getting her lip split open, and Ali argues for the merits of wearing a protective cup and helmet in a mosh pit. It was evident from my observation and the stories of the interviewees that the mosh pit can be an unquestionably dangerous setting. However this type of behaviour is allowed to occur in this unique environment because of the combination of the internal 'code of behaviour' of the fans and the external controls of the band and the security at the concerts. The creation of this structure provides a platform for the fans to express anger, aggression, and physicality in a configuration which allows for a 'controlled, de-controlling of emotions' (Elias 2008: 44).

Internal controls and the process of informalisation

The internal controls of the mosh pit refer to the unwritten code that all fans are aware of and this researcher had to learn swiftly upon entering this environment. The fans are conscious of

the dangers of entering the pit and Antony insists that if you participate in this ritual you should know what to expect and expresses little sympathy for those who get hurt. It is implied that if one abides by the unwritten code one will be safe. Donnachadh describes the etiquette of the mosh pit and how it carries no greater risk than any other type of music gig: 'Everybody knows the rules...nobody is in the mosh pit to hurt anyone you are there just to bang off each other and you know if somebody goes down you pick them up'. The mantra that if anybody falls over they are picked up is a sentiment that is expressed frequently by the fans interviewed. This idea looks to ensure the safety of the pit whilst concurrently it reinforces the sense of comradely fans feel by partaking in these rituals together. This is the number one rule in the pit but the participants also inform me of other intricacies. Spitting, elbowing, punching and trying to hurt anyone in anyway are not allowed. The code is reinforced by the potential punishment of exclusion or physical violence that is handed out to fans that don't adhere. The participant observation and interview data however suggests that the 'code' is not as strictly followed at larger heavy metal concerts. This bares similarity to Le Bon's (2001) work on crowds. Le Bon claimed that individuals tended to act more randomly and uncivilised in bigger crowds. It could however just be simply due to the greater physical restraints imposed by the larger weight of the crowd.

The description of the etiquette that is present in the heavy metal subculture is interesting in the context of the civilising process. In documenting changes in the individual psyche from the middle ages to the end of the 18th century, Elias uses manners and etiquette books. Elias argues here that as we have become more and more integrated as a society we have become increasingly restrained in our actions and emotions and this is reflected in the manners and etiquette books which reflect the shift in our modes of behaviour. It would surely seem to be the case that seemingly violent, openly emotional, unrestrained metal rituals such as 'moshing' or the 'wall of death' would represent a caveat to Elias's civilising process. Although diminishing standards in etiquette and manners appear to contradict one of the central arguments of the civilising process this is not the case. The relaxation of standards that we see in heavy metal in fact calls for an increase in one's self control. The configuration of the scene requires the restraint of emotions and the incorporation and adaptation of a social code that is continuously evolving. Heavy metal subculture is not the anti-thesis of the civilising process but an example of it at work through the process of what Wouters (2007) refers to as informalisation. This aspect of the civilising process was introduced in an effort to understand the relaxing of restraints in twentieth century society. Wouters argues that the

growing influence of the lower classes led to their looser and more informal manners being incorporated throughout society. What heavy metal fans are experiencing is an emancipation of emotions as there becomes a growing tolerance for foul language and public displays of emotion within modern society. Kilminster (2008) examines counter culture behaviour and argues that 'outsider' groups feel the need to differentiate themselves as the interdependencies between groups and social classes become increasingly integrated. These groups subsequently separate themselves by engaging in alternative music and experimenting with sex and drugs or in the case of heavy metal violent religious imagery or aggressive rituals such as moshing or crowd surfing.

Wouters observes that the conventions of human relations become increasingly flexible and less routinised as power relations transform. As a result we are bound to deal with an increasingly shifting network of social relationships through developing a more complex method of regulating one's self. This can be witnessed in the heavy metal scene where the participants have to possess a number of additional social skills to deal with the new and complex situations the metal scene provides with its idiosyncratic unwritten codes of behaviour. In participant observation one had to gain experience in the mosh pit quickly in order to avoid injury and fit in with the other fans. The alternative behaviour of participants in heavy metal culture does not represent the loss of self control but in fact calls for individuals to develop a greater level of self restraint in an environment that is situated in a complex web of social situations and relationships.

External controls and the curtailment of excitement

Heavy metal rituals are also subject to external controls. This includes the varying degree of security and supervision that is present at heavy metal events and the influence that the band has on the actions of fans at a live performance. These factors all contribute towards the unique environment of the mosh pit. A heavy metal gig or concert can be a dangerous environment and as a result there is security and rules and regulation in place to make sure people don't get hurt. There was again a polarisation between the small event (a gig) and the large event (concert). At the larger events there were restrictions concerning the amount of alcohol consumed, moshing was officially banned, and the bouncers would stop individuals from crowd surfing. There would be overall a greater attempt at controlling the fans. However these restrictions failed to stop people from getting drunk, moshing or crowd surfing. There were bouncers present at the smaller events but they made no effort to stop any

of the heavy metal rituals that occur at a live event. It was the presence of the stricter internal 'code of behaviour' that prevented the mosh pit from getting out of control. It is the band who exerts the greater external control over the crowd. Kieran explains how 'you do what the band tells you. If the band tells you wall of death the; wall of death or what have you.' The 'wall of death' is a ritual which is dictated by the metal bands. David tells me how when the band Lamb of God start the opening chords of the song 'Black Label' the crowd automatically separate into two sides and prepare for the song to break into the chorus. This could be viewed as a consensual signal which is used by the fans to enhance the sense of physicality and aggression. This is the case in some of the live performances I witnessed. It can be seen that the band don't necessarily have to direct the crowd verbally. They can dictate the crowd through the tempo and structure of the songs they play. The fans may know how to act in certain parts of songs through experience but the band has the responsibility of orchestrating the rituals through their music.

They opened with a very high tempo fast song with the singer screaming. The song then slowed down in the middle with focus altered to a tense drum beat and bass riff building the song up, which gets the crowd going. They seem to know what is coming and then as the music gets a little bit quicker and then quicker again they launch in a violent chorus where the lead singer screams at the top of his voice. The crowd then begin to mosh near the front of the stage gathering in a circle of around fifteen people barging into each other with their shoulders (Field notes 2/2/10).

The above extract is similar to the description of football matches Elias and Dunning (2008a) present in their figurational sociology of sport. They observe the distinct pattern of figurations that the two teams who play against each other conjure up and depending on the circumstances of the match this creates a certain level of tension for the watching audience. An example of tension being released is cheering or jumping up and down when a goal is scored. This is comparable to the way in which metal fans and musicians build up the tension in a song by starting a song slow and building the tension both in the song and in the mosh pit before it is released when the chorus breaks in. Elias and Dunning claim that for sports such as football spectators and participants have a far better scope for releasing tension. There is a greater connection between motion and emotion. They had suggested that sport was inimitable from music in that sense. It is apparent however that heavy metal music incorporates a similar relationship between movement and feeling.

Elias and Dunning (2008b) argue that the greater need for leisure and the emergence of rule based sports is a reflection of an emotional need within western society. It has been discussed how with the increasing web of relationships and interdependencies there has been a greater

than ever intricacy to how one manages their emotions and their behaviour. Elias and Dunning insist that it is important that we find ways in which to express such emotions.

Dunning (1997: 482) writes that

The high degree of routinization in which people in large numbers are subjected to a complex of externally and internally imposed controls...such people need sports and other more or less exciting leisure activities in order to experience a pleasurable upsurge of emotions an enjoyable “de-controlling of emotional controls”.

It is through the unique structure of the sporting field that individuals or groups can express emotion and engage in what Elias and Dunning describe as the ‘quest for excitement’. They are in essence suggesting that sport and leisure provide a form of catharsis. I argue that this also occurs at heavy metal performances, where the combination of internal and external controls allows for the fans to generate and release tension. What is needed however is a greater understanding of what it is about the everyday lives of the fans that attracts them to the ‘excitement’ of heavy metal. This is an issue that will be discussed in future papers.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I challenge how we conduct research of youth culture and popular music. I argue that heavy metal is an example of how political ideology or romanticism can interfere with our knowledge of the subculture. This was demonstrated in the discourse of dichotomy that was evident in the conceptualisation of heavy metal as evil in American society on the one hand and the subsequent defence of the scene from its detractors which has resulted in a romanticised and mythologised visualisation of heavy metal subculture on the other. It is suggested that by engaging in the figurational concept of a ‘detour via detachment’ one can potentially paint a more reality congruent picture of music subcultures. This was a position that the researcher attempted to take on in this study in an effort to present a more scientific, less romanticised understanding of heavy metal and its rituals. It is felt that in doing this it allows for an understanding of the subculture in the context of structural changes in society in conjunction with transformations in the individual psyche and our modes of behaviour. It is suggested here that the figurational sociology of sport offers a new alternative framework for examining music subcultures, especially heavy metal with its propensity for physicality, aggression, and emotional catharsis. This research has taken tentative steps towards adopting such an approach but what is missing is a detailed historical analysis of heavy metal over the last forty years to examine the changes in the scene and in the modes of behaviour regarding the fans. This can be done in a similar fashion to Elias’s examination of manners and

etiquette books but in substituting these books for heavy metal magazines or forums to evaluate how codes and rituals have evolved.

In the opening exchanges of this paper the question was asked of how heavy metal culture with its reputation for violence and Satanism fits in with Elias's concept of 'civilising'. Surprisingly, in examining this issue it was the reaction to metal and the moral panic that accompanied it that was found to be indicative of a decivilising trend rather than the subculture itself. Rohloff and Wright have suggested that moral panics create a decrease in mutual identification which can result in irrational decision making. This certainly seems to be the case when one thinks of the authority that was awarded to supposed experts such as King who among others have contributed to the moral panic concerning heavy metal with the casual linking of the subculture to adolescent suicidal tendencies. Heavy metal subculture was in fact revealed to be an example of the process of informalisation. It was found that to fit in with the culture one has to attain the appropriate social skills to adjust to the complex modes of behaviour that heavy metal fans engage in. This is particularly evident in the mosh pit where one had to learn the unwritten code which emphasised the aspects of self control that were needed in order to lose control.

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