

## MUSIC AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS IN THE CLASSROOM: INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY THROUGH HEAVY METAL\*

*This article demonstrates that popular music's potential as a tool for teaching interactive introductory sociology courses is enhanced when a cultural analysis of a specific music genre is incorporated into the classroom. Using this type of analysis as an integrative course theme promotes active learning as students apply sociological ideas to explain empirical reality. Using heavy metal music as an example, I present a two-part model for integrating a cultural analysis of this music and its subculture into the introductory course. Students first conduct a sociologically grounded cultural analysis of heavy metal music. Then they expand this analysis during the rest of the course by applying new concepts, theories, and research to explain this cultural object sociologically. The article's final section discusses the application of this model in a range of class contexts and provides student responses to its use in an introductory sociology course.*

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NUMEROUS AUTHORS HAVE commented on the use of cultural objects to promote interactive learning in sociology courses (Bonomo 1987; Burton 1988; Cosbey 1997; Groce 1992; Laz 1996; Metz 1983; Sullivan 1982; Tolich 1992; Ziskind Berg 1992). Films, novels, short stories, and television programs have proven useful for illustrating sociological ideas and providing interesting narratives to which students can apply theories and concepts. When students learn sociology through music, songs and lyrics are commonly confined to illustrating sociological concepts and theories. In the model described in this article, music offers students the chance to harness concepts, theories, and research findings to analyze cultural objects, much like a cultural sociologist. They learn sociology through the process of explaining a cultural phenomenon.

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This article describes how music can serve as an object of cultural analysis in the introductory sociology course. First, I review the advantages of an interactive approach to the introductory course and the use of music as a teaching tool in this context, suggesting that music can do much more than illustrate concepts and theories. Using the example of heavy metal, I argue that a cultural analysis of one music genre provides an integrative course theme and fosters active learning. Next, I describe how to involve students in a cultural analysis of heavy metal music and offer examples of how instructors can help students to apply sociological ideas to extend this analysis throughout the course. Finally, I offer suggestions about how to apply this model in diverse class contexts and discuss student responses to my use of this approach when teaching the introductory sociology course.

### MUSIC AND ACTIVE LEARNING

#### *An Interactive Approach to Introductory Sociology*

A sustained critique of the conventional, lecture-based survey course in introductory sociology emerged in the 1980s. Lenski

(1983) and McGee, Vaughan, and Baker (1985) argued that the typical introductory course was seriously misguided and a major contributor to the discipline's declining popularity among students and its negative public image. Teachers of introductory courses were criticized for failing to make sociology relevant for their diverse audience, for the shallow "encyclopedic quality" of the survey course, and for their reliance on passive learning methods. Proponents of interactive approaches to teaching the introductory course advocate depth over breadth, the development of unifying themes, and a greater commitment to student involvement and active learning. Rather than approaching the introductory course as an overview of an academic discipline (the graduate school model), Sundgren (1994) suggests that introductory sociology instructors can best serve students by "emphasizing the importance of sociological knowledge as a tool for survival in a complex world, and teaching the sociological perspective in a way that will enhance our students' education and their ability to think critically about what they read and see" (p. 348). Others advocate organizing the introductory course around an integrative theme that provides a coherent structure, narrowing the range of conceptual tools employed and focusing on a few central issues. Barger (1987) describes the way "modernization" can be used as a unifying theme that helps "tie together what it is that sociology seeks to do" (p. 88). Meanwhile, McGee et al. (1985) discuss how "the corporate realities of everyday life" and "social awareness" can be used as themes relevant to students. Other sociologists believe that narrowing course content around a theme is vital for the promotion of critical thinking as a course goal (Mayer 1986). Many sociologists hail active learning as essential for transforming the introductory course. Hamlin and Janssen (1987) describe active learning below:

Rather than the teacher presenting facts to the students, the students play an active role in learning by exploring issues and ideas under

the guidance of the instructor. Instead of memorizing, and being mesmerized by, a set of often loosely connected facts, the student learns a way of thinking, asking questions, searching for answers, and interpreting observations. (P. 45)

A pivotal element in active learning is the opportunity for students to apply sociological ideas to the explanation of empirical reality and social issues that face them (Hale 1995; Lenski 1983; McGee et al. 1985; Wilson and Reiser 1982). References to sociology as a "tool" are ubiquitous in this literature, highlighting the belief that the goal of the introductory course should be "to assist students in building a small, but well-equipped tool-kit with which they can become familiar enough to apply the concepts to analytical problems" (Mayer 1986:252). Others note the importance of encouraging introductory students to think critically (Shepelak, Curry-Jackson, and Moore 1992) and practice the sociological imagination (Brouillette and Turner 1992; Mathisen 1989; O'Flaherty 1992). Interactive approaches to teaching sociology promote these goals (Hilligoss 1992; Smith 1996), and I hope to demonstrate that a cultural analysis of music is a useful way to achieve them.

#### *Using Music in Sociology Courses*

A handful of articles discuss sociology instructors' use of music and lyrics to illustrate concepts and theories. Walczak and Reuter (1994) describe the ways music aids in the teaching of introductory sociology, while Theresa Martinez addresses applications for courses in theory (Burns and Martinez 1993), deviance (1995), and race, class, and gender (1994). In addition, the contributors to Reuter and Walczak's *Songware II: Using Popular Music in Teaching Sociology* (1993) describe techniques for using music to illustrate concepts and theories across a wide range of sociological sub-disciplines. Following Elterman (1983), the conventional approach has been to use lyrics of songs played during class to foster informal discussion and underscore the rele-

vance of sociological insights. Those using music in their teaching believe that this illustrative approach is quite successful. Martinez (1994, 1995) reports that her use of popular music helps to facilitate class discussion, creates a unique learning environment,<sup>1</sup> and encourages students to question their "common sense" assumptions.

Students in Walczak and Reuter's (1994) introductory course responded positively to the illustrative uses of song lyrics. Martinez's (1995) comparison of departmental teaching evaluations suggests that students enjoyed her use of music to foster class discussion. As a technique for encouraging student involvement and interest in class discussion, the illustrative use of popular music remains a strong pedagogical approach. However, its limitations should also be noted. Although students make the links between song lyrics and sociological concepts and theories, if the instructor selects the songs for specific illustrative purposes, students can view the music selection as biased (Martinez 1994) and narrow (Walczak and Reuter 1994). More generally, this approach depends largely on a consideration of song lyrics, leaving the audio-visual and subcultural dimensions of the cultural objects unexplored (Walczak and Reuter 1994). Finally, as Martinez (1995) suggests, the use of music in sociology classes would benefit from greater integration with other learning experiences, such as group assignments and analysis/reaction papers.

Rather than just using songs to illustrate sociological concepts and theories, I propose an approach whereby students learn sociology as an analytical tool. In the illustrative approach, the music itself, as a cultural object, is not of central concern once students have grasped the concept or theory it illustrates. In contrast, an analytical approach makes the music an object of sociological inquiry, giving students practice in using theoretical, conceptual, and empirical tools to make sociological sense of it. This approach offers students a more active-learning experience than the illustrative

technique. It allows music to be used as an integrative theme for the course and makes music an integral, rather than peripheral, part of the learning experience. Focusing on one music genre allows the class to systematically apply their expanding stock of sociological knowledge to understanding cultural objects sociologically. Using music as the object of a cultural analysis, rather than as an illustrative tool, minimizes the difficulties associated with the latter approach. Although the instructor selects the music genre for the class to analyze, students have significant latitude in directing the cultural analysis, shielding instructors from complaints of biased or limited musical choices. The analytical approach also extends the pedagogical value of using music in the classroom beyond a reliance on song lyrics by allowing students to view music through multidimensional cultural objects produced and consumed by people embedded in particular cultural and social contexts. Finally, the use of written assignments and small-group work helps to integrate music into the structure of the course.

"Life, death, sex...Beer, maybe" (Spheeris 1989). With these words, Dave Mustaine, leader of the heavy metal band Megadeth, sums up the essence of a loud, aggressive, politically incorrect music that epitomizes low culture for many Americans. While hardly unique to heavy metal, these enduring preoccupations, and the "proud pariah" status of its fans, make this music an ideal cultural phenomenon for introductory sociology students to analyze. I use heavy metal music because of the prevailing negative stereotypes about its fans and performers, and because it is often outrageous and shocking—guaranteed to evoke strong (usually negative) feelings and high student interest and involvement from the outset. Another useful characteristic of this music for pedagogical purposes is its longevity: heavy metal music spans 30 years and has met with considerable commercial success, maximizing the likelihood that students have been exposed to it. Students can examine heavy metal as a music-based subculture. It con-

tains distinct symbolic boundaries and musical conventions that novice culture analysts can easily grasp.

### ANALYZING HEAVY METAL MUSIC IN INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY

#### *Course Organization: Heavy Metal as an Integrative Theme*

Following the suggestions of advocates of a more interactive introductory course, I organize my introduction to sociology class around heavy metal as an integrative theme, emphasizing depth over breadth and promoting active learning. The Appendix outlines the topics and readings typically covered in the course. Instead of a conventional textbook, I use short monographs, like Charles Lemert's *Social Things* (1997), to introduce the practical relevance of sociological thinking and selected articles from a reader (Ferguson 1996) to provide examples of professional sociological scholarship. As shown in the Appendix, the course begins with an introduction to the sociological perspective through the interactionist paradigm that culminates in the analysis of heavy metal music. In the second part of the course, I address sociological theory, applying Marx and Durkheim's ideas about modern society to heavy metal. In the final portion of the course, I refine previously covered ideas in the context of several pressing social issues: rationalization, stratification, gender, and race. After its initial introduction as the object of cultural analysis, I use heavy metal as a recurring case study, which provides continuity and regular opportunities for students to expand their analysis of this music using concepts, theories, and research that the course introduces during the semester.

#### *A Cultural Analysis of Heavy Metal*

After several weeks discussing the sociological imagination and its application by interactionist sociologists like Erving Goffman, I lead students through the basic steps of a cultural analysis. This analysis proceeds in three phases and requires approximately two

75-minute class meetings. The cultural analysis of heavy metal is based on a conceptual framework that Griswold (1994) describes as a "cultural diamond." Representing the cultural object, social world, creator, and receiver as the four corners of a diamond, and tracing the six links between them, provides an heuristic diagram for introducing the essential questions sociologists ask when studying culture. Drawing on other theoretical and methodological frameworks for cultural analysis (Gottdiener 1985; Griswold 1987; Johnson 1986), I alert students to the sociological nature of cultural objects and challenge them to consider heavy metal as the outcome of people's action in concrete social circumstances, rather than of some inevitable process of cultural evolution. Swidler's (1986) metaphor of culture as a "tool kit" is also valuable for explaining how people use cultural objects as resources for developing "strategies of action" and for highlighting the dynamic relations among individuals, society, material culture, and non-material culture.

At the outset of the cultural analysis of heavy metal music, I involve the students by asking them to examine the visual imagery found on heavy metal album covers and CD sleeves. Small groups of students collaborate to find key visual symbols among the materials that I hand out in class.<sup>1</sup> I give students 15 minutes to familiarize themselves with these materials, and each group must identify at least five highly redundant symbolic elements—typically consisting of the color black, religious symbols, evil-looking fig-

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<sup>1</sup>These materials come from my own collection and the college radio station's music library. An adequate collection of older heavy metal LPs can be compiled quite inexpensively from used record stores. These LPs have the added benefit of providing larger graphics than CDs or cassettes. While more recent recordings are less likely to be available on vinyl, the vast quantity of heavy metal music released during the 1980s and early 1990s and the recent commercial slump in heavy metal music guarantee the availability of used CDs and cassettes at reasonable prices.

ures, skulls, scantily clad women, long hair, and so on. The hands-on aspect of this first phase allows students to set the agenda for subsequent analysis so that their immediate concerns and questions can be addressed. Although the manifest purpose of this phase of the analysis is to introduce students to a dimension of heavy metal music that we will subsequently seek to explain sociologically, working in small groups, students have a chance to express their (usually strong) opinions about this music. In addition, those who are more familiar with it can share their insights and experiences.

The second phase of the cultural analysis is designed to demonstrate that “cultural objects and the people who create and receive them are not floating freely, but are anchored in a particular [social] context” (Griswold 1994:14). Through a discussion-based lecture, I map out the music’s historical and social development, playing brief taped excerpts (about two minutes) of representative songs to illustrate heavy metal’s musical conventions and lyrical themes. Incorporating scholarly work on heavy metal music (Breen 1991; Harrell 1994; Straw 1990; Walser 1993; Weinstein 1991), I draw a fundamental distinction between *physical* and *psycho-social* heavy metal music, and I describe both “classic” and subsequent variants of each type. Throughout this second phase, I emphasize that power is the defining concept in heavy metal. Physical metal emphasizes masculine strength, prowess, potency, and toughness, while the psycho-social themes address the abuse of power, the potentially liberating power of the “dark side,” and heavy metal as an empowering antidote to the psychological strains of modern life. Beginning with the physical dimension, we listen to the music of such metal progenitors as Led Zeppelin (1969) and early “cock rock” bands like Deep Purple (1972) and UFO (1979). I contrast classic metal, with its British working-class roots and blue-collar sentiments, with the “lite metal” of Extreme (1989), Scorpions (1984), and Ratt (1991), who softened the metal sound and broadened its appeal in the

1980s. To introduce the psycho-social variant, I play excerpts from songs by bands like Motorhead (1979), Iron Maiden (1982), and Black Sabbath (1970), which illustrate this brand of classic heavy metal. Meanwhile, the music of speed, thrash, and death metal bands like Megadeth (1994), Slayer (1994), and Necrosant (1992) illustrate the darker vision of metal in the 1990s. This second phase of the cultural analysis demonstrates that heavy metal is, as Walser (1993) argues, a discourse in which visual, sonic, and lyrical dimensions work together to “speak to” fans of this music, while simultaneously expressing their lived experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams. I round out our initial information session by showing clips from the documentary film *The Decline of Western Civilization II: The Metal Years* (Spheeris 1989), which chronicles Los Angeles’ heavy metal scene and the state of heavy metal at its commercial peak in the United States. I use some of the film’s interviews with fans and artists, along with the Megadeth segment that ends the film, to shed additional light on heavy metal’s discourse and the social background of fans and performers.

The in-class discussion of heavy metal is supplemented by information that students have found on the Internet. I ask students to explore Web sites for a specific heavy metal artist and to summarize their findings in a short paper. They must include print-outs of the relevant material they uncovered. This assignment provides another opportunity for students to have input into the cultural analysis and produces rich information that they can share in class as discussions ensue about the sociologically important link between cultural objects and the social world. Particularly interesting and useful are the comments from heavy metal fans regarding their favorite artists and the artists’ reflections on their music. This information provides insight into the range of meanings circulating in the heavy metal discourse and provides additional information on the social backgrounds of the music’s creators and receivers. In addition, students get a sense that

they are unearthing new information (I describe it as qualitative data) and making a unique contribution to the class's collective excavation of heavy metal. By the end of the second phase of the cultural analysis, students have an awareness of the social and historical circumstances behind the particular sub-types of heavy metal. They also have a more informed understanding of what this music means to artists and fans. At this point, the class is ready to apply their knowledge of heavy metal to a sociological explanation of the visual symbols they identified at the outset.

In the final phase of cultural analysis, the class focuses on the fans of heavy metal music in an effort to trace the social contexts within which the fans receive this music. Simplifying Griswold's (1987) methodological framework, I ask students to develop a sociological "profile" of an "ideal-type" heavy metal fan. Students draw on the information gathered from our class discussion and their Internet search in order to develop a composite that will help us explain the significance of the central visual symbols in heavy metal. Students are charged with individually developing a fan profile using the format shown in Figure 1. Each of the four dimensions in this table corresponds to one of the phases of "explanation" that, according to Griswold, must be taken into account by the cultural analyst (p. 26). The outcome of a completed table is, in Griswold's terms,

a "reconstruction of intentionality" or a "brief" for a given social actor, in this case, the heavy metal fan. This final phase of the cultural analysis provides students with the experience of taking the same steps as professional sociologists who study culture.

The cultural analysis concludes as students test the explanatory power of their profiles by returning to the core visual symbols they identified earlier. Now they must try to determine the significance of heavy metal's visual symbols for fans of this music. Returning to their small groups, students take on the challenge of explaining the use of one redundant visual symbol to the rest of the class by sharing their individual fan profiles and using them to determine the symbol's likely relevance within heavy metal's cosmology. This discussion clarifies the connections between the visual symbols, sonic conventions, and lyrical themes and fans' "horizon of expectations" (Griswold 1994:83-85), promoting a sociologically grounded explanation of this music. Once they see the correspondence between their "ideal-type" heavy metal fan and the music as a cultural object, students realize that culture is like a tool kit, a resource from which people choose the "tools for living" that help them make sense of their social experience.

Through the initial immersion in cultural analysis, students learn that heavy metal is more than the mindless music of

**Figure 1. Sociological Profile of a Heavy Metal Fan**

Demographic Categories <sup>a</sup>	Social Groups <sup>b</sup>	Local Sensibility <sup>c</sup>	Social/Cultural Experience <sup>d</sup>
Gender:			Economic Standing:
Sexual Orientation:			Political Power:
Race:			Cultural Status:
Age:			Time/Place:
Education:			Other:
Occupation:			
Other:			

<sup>a</sup>Demographic Categories: What is the basic social location of the "ideal-type" heavy metal fan?

<sup>b</sup>Social Groups: With what human groups, organizations, and associations is the heavy metal fan likely to be involved?

<sup>c</sup>Local Sensibility: To what kinds of values, beliefs, ideals, and folkways is the heavy metal fan committed?

<sup>d</sup>Social/Cultural Experience: At a more general level, where does the heavy metal fan "fit" into society at large?

“disaffected losers” (a common response in phase one). Rather, they begin to understand this music as a cultural adaptation to particular social circumstances, a point driven home in Gaines’ (1991) ethnographic account of the lives of the heavy metal-loving “burnouts” of Bergenfield, New Jersey (see Appendix, section I). As one student commented in her write up on Iron Maiden Web sites:

I always assumed that heavy metal music had no real value and was only for people who dropped out of high school and had no ambition to succeed in life. Listening to those clips you played in class made me start to rethink my attitude, and visiting the web sites only reinforced that change.

Once students come to appreciate heavy metal’s cultural significance as “something that tells you where you came from and where you’re going; a force that nourishes, heals, imparts life-wisdom, enriches one’s inner life, sensitizes the human spirit, and generally makes life habitable” (Reynolds 1997:109), they are ready to apply sociological ideas to expand this cultural analysis in new directions. While the cultural analysis is pivotal to the course, students must understand that this approach is neither representative of sociology as a discipline, nor is it the only way that sociologists study culture. Organizing the class around topics and readings that represent sociology’s methodological, theoretical, and topical diversity and integrating discussions and illustrations of other ways to study culture—such as semiotics, ritual analysis, ethnography, and organizational studies—ensures that students are introduced to the discipline and able to appreciate this type of cultural analysis.

#### *Expanding the Cultural Analysis of Heavy Metal: Applying Sociological Ideas*

The cultural analysis described above serves as a foundation for subsequent integrations of heavy metal during the remainder of the course. This section offers some examples of how the cultural analysis of heavy metal music serves as a unifying course theme and

provides opportunities for active learning. Each application, highlighted in the Appendix, uses heavy metal as a case study to which students can apply concepts, theories, and research. In each case, playing additional song excerpts and examining lyrics (passed out in class) and visuals (CD sleeves and album covers) stimulate class discussion. I also incorporate material gathered by students in their Internet assignment and use video footage and written assignments to keep them actively involved in expanding the aforementioned cultural analysis. Each time students return to the analysis of heavy metal, the goal is to advance their understanding of heavy metal’s form and content as a cultural object by examining the links between the four corners of the cultural diamond from different theoretical, conceptual, and empirical angles. In the process, students gain a deeper understanding of theories, concepts, and research because they must apply them to heavy metal music and can consider their utility for themselves.

*Theoretical headbanging: Marx and Durkheim take on heavy metal.* Would Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim have been fans of heavy metal music? When introducing classical theory in the introductory course, I try to give students a sense of the historical roots of the Marxist and Durkheimian traditions and demonstrate the continued relevance of a concept that lies at the heart of each theory: alienation and anomie. In the case of Marx, I link a discussion of students’ own alienating work experiences to expressions of anger and frustration found in heavy metal music. In much psycho-social heavy metal music, this rage is often directed at the powerful, whose greed and hypocrisy are blamed for social injustice. Sometimes these critiques are aimed squarely at capitalism, as in Queensryche’s “Spreading the Disease” (1988):

Religion and sex are powerplays  
 Manipulate the people for the money they pay  
 Selling skin, selling God  
 The numbers look the same on their credit cards  
 Politicians say no to drugs

While we pay for wars in South America  
 Fighting fire with empty words  
 While the banks get fat  
 And the poor stay poor  
 And the rich get rich  
 And the cops get paid to look away  
 As the one percent rules America

Faith No More's "War Pigs" (1989) and Rage Against the Machine's leftist melding of metal and rap (1992, 1996) also take aim at the same targets as Marx (the inside cover of their *Evil Empire* album even features a collage of leftist tomes). The subsequent discussion centers on the degree to which such social criticism parallels that of Marx and whether this music has the potential to combat false consciousness. Reconsidering heavy metal in light of Marx's theory helps students question heavy metal's unrelenting cynicism and fatalism. It also helps students explore the reasons that these themes resonate with people who feel acutely alienated and drawn to music that rages against the "powers that be."

I begin the discussion of Durkheim by asking students whether heavy metal might serve to guard against anomie in modern society. Songs like AC/DC's "For Those About to Rock" (1981), Saxon's "Rockin' Again" (1985), and Judas Priest's "United" (1980) can serve as examples of the way heavy metal music evokes feelings of belonging and shared commitment to the music and its performers. Heavy metal concerts further emphasize this collective feeling, described by Weinstein (1991) as community-building rituals. A series of heavy metal concerts held in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s provides a particularly vivid case of this unifying function. A clip of AC/DC performing "For Those About to Rock" (Isham 1991) at a huge outdoor concert in Moscow makes a poignant point about the bond that unites heavy metal fans and performers. During this clip, the camera pans the jubilant audience who celebrates its newfound cultural freedom, embodied in heavy metal music, by singing along, pumping fists in the air, giving the metal salute (considered by some

to be the sign of the devil), and swaying together in unison. In light of the subsequent structural breakdown in Russia and ethnic conflicts springing up across the former Soviet Union, heavy metal in this context offers a particularly salient case study for discussing Durkheim's concern with containing anomie and reinforcing social bonds in modern societies. For students learning about sociological theory for the first time, the opportunity to apply these new ideas to understand an increasingly familiar cultural object makes Marx and Durkheim's analyses of modernity more relevant and prepares them to appreciate each tradition's legacy in contemporary sociological scholarship.

*Cultural inversions of power by the powerless.* Beginning with stratification, each topic in the final section of the course includes an application of theory, concepts, and research to heavy metal music. I focus my coverage of stratification, on poverty, using ethnographic studies by Anderson (1990), Duneier (1992), and McLeod (1987), to help students see how structural economic deprivation affects individuals at the level of habitus. In different ways, each of these studies shows how people cope with or resist class (and race) discrimination through deviant strategies based on inversions of the dominant culture: McLeod's "Hallway Hangers" turn to drugs and crime; the inner-city African Americans studied by Anderson learn the often violent, "code of the streets;" and the "sitting buddies" observed by Duneier carve out a culture of mutual respect in the midst of this street culture. Heavy metal music, as a cultural resource of the relatively powerless, also features symbolic inversions, particularly of the sources of power. Discussing death metal, Harrell (1994) explains:

Power is after all largely a matter of positioning. And the way that rock music in general, and death metal in particular, places the group, the fan, and the ideology in opposition to the entrenched values of society...serves to elevate the metalhead to a position of moral superiority....Embracing symbols, attitudes, and terms that many traditionally regard to be "of the



powers of evil” is also an empowering technique since it revolves around bold exploration rather than fear of cultural evils. (P. 101)

Heavy metal’s fixation on evil can be understood as a condemnation of legitimate sources of power that may oppress and alienate heavy metal fans. Given heavy metal’s popularity among less affluent youth, the dark side of heavy metal can now be explored as a way for the disaffected to strike out against society by symbolically inverting what the mainstream holds sacred, a process described by Weinstein (1991) as “transvaluation” (p. 262). Listening to songs like AC/DC’s “Highway to Hell” (1979), Slayer’s “Hell Awaits” (1985), or Judas Priest’s “Touch of Evil” (1990) and reexamining the visual representations of evil in heavy metal, with an understanding of the effects of powerlessness and economic deprivation on people’s lived experience, is a powerful catalyst for discussing the ways structural inequality shapes heavy metal’s discourse and the cultural tool kits available to lower-income people.

**Heavy metal and the iron cage of rationality.** Heavy metal’s inversion of good and evil parallels the music’s criticism of the institutions of modern society. Many heavy metal artists express the pessimistic view that society is out of control and that the inherent logic of “the system” threatens individual freedom. To highlight this dimension, I ask students to apply Weber’s analysis of rationalization and Ritzer’s (1996) critique of “McDonaldization” to the music. The graphics on many heavy metal albums represent the tension between technological modernity and humanity. For example, the artwork on UFO’s *Obsession* (1978) album vividly contrasts individuality and bureaucratic conformity, while Sepultura’s *Chaos A.D.* album (1993) depicts a descent into a mechanical/organic hell. The blurring of nature and technology is depicted on the cover of Judas Priest’s *Painkiller* (1990), while the faceless dwellers of a bleak metropolis are featured on Sacred Reich’s *Independent* album (1993). In addition,

songs by death metal bands such as Brutal Truth’s “Regression/Progression” (1992) and “Planet Graveyard” by Deceased (1992) dwell on the environmental, social, and psychological devastation wrought by modernity, while Metallica’s ironically titled “...and Justice for All” (1988) describes the irrational side of formal rationality:

Justice is lost, justice is raped, justice is gone  
Pulling your strings, justice is done  
Seeking no truth, winning is all  
Find it so grim, so true, so real  
Lady justice has been raped—Truth assassin  
Rolls of red tape seal your lips  
Now you’re done in

Weber’s metaphor of the iron cage is also reflected in the common heavy metal theme of the rebellious individual’s struggle against a repressive social order, such as those depicted on concept albums like Queensryche’s *Operation Mindcrime* (1988) and Rush’s *2112* (1976). Applying Weber’s and Ritzer’s theories to heavy metal reveals an important sociological side of heavy metal’s discourse, which questions the supremacy of industrial society and exposes the dark side of modernity. The parallels between the ideas of social theorists and heavy metal artists help students understand that heavy metal is not just “mindless rebellion” or music for “troubled kids,” and that the form and content of this music require sociological explanations.

**Hot chicks, baby girls, and she-devils: Sex, gender roles, and heavy metal.** Depictions of women in heavy metal music are almost universally sexist and in some cases misogynous. Women are represented as one-dimensional sex objects, the embodiment of evil, or childlike virgins. To broach the topic of gender roles, I ask students to consider possible reasons for heavy metal’s generally derogatory depiction of women. Typically, some students (usually male) formulate a defense of the music on the grounds that it reflects either natural or social differences between the sexes, or it is “harmless entertainment,” while others (usually female) condemn this aspect of the

music as degrading and stereotypical. This spirited discussion leads to the two-part question: How and why are women and men socially differentiated in our society, and how might a cultural object like heavy metal music provide a cultural resource for learning and practicing gender roles? Examples of heavy metal's construction of sexuality and gender roles can help students think about the "functionality" of differential male and female gender socialization under current social and economic conditions.

Useful songs for this topic include Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine" (1987), where the woman in question is a virginal, childlike being and W.A.S.P.'s "Ball-crusher" (1985), which depicts women as emasculating nymphomaniacs. Sexuality is similarly simplified and equated with males' physical domination and objectification of women, as in AC/DC's "Let Me Put My Love Into You" (1980), or Motley Crue's "She Goes Down" (1989). According to Weinstein (1991), "What heavy metal takes seriously is power" (p. 35). The struggle over the "second shift" work in the dual-income families studied by Hochschild (1989) exemplifies a power struggle between men and women that helps students understand why heavy metal music empowers males at the expense of women. Concepts from Hochschild's study, like "gender strategy" and power "balancing," can be applied to heavy metal to help reveal how the music's representations of women and sexuality relate to adolescent gender socialization and men's resistance to changing gender roles in the face of socio-economic restructuring.

***Menace to society: Heavy metal, rap, and race.*** An interesting relationship exists between heavy metal and rap music. Both music genres have a similarly low cultural status (Bryson 1996) and are popular targets of moral crusaders (Garofalo 1997), yet heavy metal is associated with whites and rap with African Americans. According to Binder's (1993) analysis of media depictions of the two genres in the United States, rap music is framed as a greater cultural threat to mainstream society than heavy metal, a

difference due largely to racial stereotyping. Instructors can use this connection to show how race often overrides class status. According to Feagin and Sikes (1994), middle-class African Americans can not always use their class to avoid racial discrimination, while heavy metal's racial association with whiteness elevates it above rap music in mainstream media discourse. At this point, I do not return to heavy metal music. Rather, I highlight some of the similarities between rap and heavy metal, focusing particularly on the marginal social location of traditional creators and receivers, recognizing that the commercialization of both genres has involved a diversification of artists and audience, and the obsession with power. Playing excerpts of rap songs that parallel some of the central themes in heavy metal is a useful way to introduce this connection between the two cultural objects. Too Short's "I Ain't Nothin' But a Dog" (1992) offers sexist depictions of women. "Amerikkka's Most Wanted" (1990) by "gangster rapper" Ice Cube illustrates rap's transvaluation of violence and justice, and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" (1990) reveals rap's radical critique of the white power structure.

The object in this final section of the course is not to embark on an analysis of the rap genre, but to show that similar social forces are responsible for both heavy metal and rap, and that both can be conceptualized and studied as types of oppositional or resistant culture. As Martinez (1997) asserts, rap can be understood as a "valid and strident form of oppositional cultural expression" where "rap lyrics narrate a biting distrust, disillusionment with, and critique of major societal institutions and government" (p. 279). Indeed, heavy metal and rap allow fans to symbolically express resistance to dominant cultural forms, ideologies, and identities: a process whereby marginalized people—such as the working-class, women, and gay and lesbian youth—use music and other signifying practices to make "noise" (Hebdige 1979:133) that challenges society's symbolic order (Fuchs 1998; Redhead 1997; Wald 1998).

*Written Assignments*

In addition to the Web search described earlier, I use two written assignments to encourage students to expand our collective cultural analysis on their own terms. First, at the end of the theory section, I introduce Robert Merton's functional approach through an exercise described by Levin (1994:94-97). After giving them time to practice this approach in small groups, I ask students individually to conduct a functional analysis of heavy metal music and write an essay. They must discuss whether or not this music is functional for our society and various functional alternatives that might take its place. This assignment allows students to create their own theories (they are typically anxious to do this) as they systematically consider the interaction of culture and social structures. Second, during our discussion of gender roles, I ask students to view *Dream-worlds 2: Desire, Sex, and Power in Music Video* (Jhally 1995) and to write a reflective essay on their own use of music as a cultural tool for developing a repertoire for "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). This film examines the semiotics of music video channels, arguing that music videos promote a dangerously narrow range of sexuality. This topic has clear relevance given our class discussion of heavy metal's representations of women and sex. This effective assignment helps students look beyond their common sense explanations for their musical preferences. They often express considerable surprise, and sometimes embarrassment, when they reflect on music's possible influence on reinforcing gender strategies that contradict their espoused gender ideologies (see Hochschild 1989).

#### USING A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MUSIC TO TEACH SOCIOLOGY

Using heavy metal as an example, I have shown how music can demonstrate cultural analysis and be used as a case study for applying sociological ideas. In detailing how I integrate a cultural analysis of heavy metal music into my introductory class, I offer a

model for instructors interested in using this music in their teaching and for those who wish to have students analyze other music genres. In this final section, I address applications of this model and discuss student responses to my use of music analysis in the classroom.

*Applications*

The implementation of the cultural analysis of music raises concerns regarding the application of this model and the types of classes that would benefit from this technique. First, using the references cited, especially Weinstein's (1991) sociological survey, instructors can easily acquaint themselves with the social and historical background of heavy metal music in order to put audiovisual examples into a sociological context for students. In fact, instructors can use their relative ignorance about the music itself—the expertise of the dedicated metal fan is neither necessary nor desirable to implement this model—to encourage students to take the lead in the actual analysis, while guiding students toward sociological explanations of this music. However, a successful integration of the heavy metal analysis into an introductory course does require a working knowledge of the music. Instructors need to be familiar enough with heavy metal to lead student analysts toward tenable conclusions. They must convince students that they are not ignorant of heavy metal music. In short, the success of the heavy metal analysis depends as much on instructors' openness to an interactive classroom environment and their ability to make the sociological imagination real to students, as on their expertise regarding the music.

Instructors who are unwilling or unable to integrate a heavy metal analysis into their introductory courses to the degree described above might consider implementing a scaled-down version of the model. These instructors could reduce the number of corners and links in the cultural diamond studied in the initial cultural analysis. For instance, this analysis could be confined to textual analysis, exploration of the fan sub-

culture, or consideration of heavy metal's historical development. A second approach would involve reducing the number of subsequent applications of the cultural analysis, such as using it only to introduce the major sociological paradigms. While the former approach allows for significant reduction of the cultural analysis, it reproduces the problems inherent in one-dimensional cultural analyses (see Gottdiener 1985; Griswold 1987). The latter approach retains the complete cultural analysis, but curtails the subsequent application and elaboration, reducing the scope of ideas marshaled to make sociological sense of heavy metal.

Instructors who seek to integrate music into their classes, but prefer not to use heavy metal, can adapt the cultural analysis to other music genres, particularly those associated with contemporary youth subcultures. While they may lack some of the pedagogical advantages of heavy metal, genres like rap, punk, techno, and various types of rock music certainly provide vivid commentaries on the dimensions of (post)modern life that introductory classes commonly cover. Thanks to a growing interdisciplinary literature on popular music, and a proliferation of music Web sites on the Internet, instructors can easily learn enough about a music genre to allow them to assemble the music and visual materials needed to conduct a cultural analysis in class. Sociologically oriented books have been written on music ranging from rap (Kelley 1994; Rose 1994) and punk (Laing 1985; Savage 1992) to progressive (Macan 1997) and alternative (Felder 1993) rock, and techno/rave music (Thornton 1996). Since the proposed model for teaching sociology through a cultural analysis of popular music relies heavily on student involvement, instructors should carefully consider their choice of music genre to ensure students' interest.

A second issue concerns the application of the cultural analysis model to different introductory class formats and other sociology courses, and how student composition might effect its implementation. Although I typically have 20 to 30 students in an introduc-

tory class, a cultural analysis of music is appropriate for larger classes. In large classes, song excerpts can still be played during class, but visual images may need to be projected using slides or computer presentation software. Students in larger classes may also benefit from greater use of written assignments and listening sessions outside of class (recordings placed on library reserve). This will help to keep them engaged in the cultural analysis, since, without discussion sections, participation in collaborative analysis may be limited.

Other topics commonly covered in introductory courses can also be used to explain heavy metal. For example, the application of key sociological ideas to different dimensions of society can be explored through the heavy metal analysis. A section on deviance might apply Becker's (1963) work on moral entrepreneurs to understanding how heavy metal became the target of a symbolic crusade by the Parents Music Resource Center (P.M.R.C.) and conservative religious groups during the 1980s. Coverage of the political-economy could include an examination of heavy metal's discourse on power using insights from class-, state-, and elite-oriented approaches. It might also include comparisons to representations of the pluralist perspective on power, politics, and inequality found in mainstream pop and country music. Finally, heavy metal could help introduce sociological work on family and religion by asking students to consider the wider implications of social rituals. Building on Levy's (1992) technique for teaching about family rituals, students could examine the concert hall alongside the dinner table or church as a site of ritual performance.

While introductory sociology lends itself especially well to the integration of a music analysis, this approach could be applied in courses on social theory, social problems, and race, class, and gender where stimulating sociological thinking for application to contemporary issues remains a prime objective. My experiences using variations on this approach in other courses, and the literature on the use of music to illustrate concepts and

theories, suggest that an analytical use of music is a successful pedagogical tool in these contexts. I employ a cultural analysis model in my cultural studies course, where progressive rock music serves as a vehicle for introducing and applying concepts, theories, and debates within this lively interdisciplinary terrain. While facility with cultural studies' analytical tools is a key objective in this course, the format is similar to the one used in introductory sociology: students conduct an initial cultural analysis that increases in sophistication as the instructor introduces new concepts, theories, and research. My sociological theory course features a more modest cultural analysis. Drawing on Martin's (1995) application of sociological theories to popular music, the class analyzes Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) album using the ideas of various classical and contemporary theorists. While I have not applied the model in this context, a cultural analysis of music may be particularly well-suited for use in courses on gender and sexuality. As Reynolds and Press (1995) remind us, popular Western music never strays too far from sex and women, making a wide range of music genres fruitful targets of analysis when teaching topics like feminism, gender roles, and violence against women.

The majority of students in my classes are white, many come from rural backgrounds, and many are first-generation college students. A growing minority are returning, "nontraditional" students. Their exposure to heavy metal music through their children, and through their own experiences as adolescents in the 1970s and 1980s, often provides an interesting contrast to that of the younger students. The troika of geography, race, and class makes it likely that most students in my introductory course are somewhat familiar with heavy metal music, though few admit to being fans. However, student knowledge about the music is not necessary because the analysis is designed to inform them about the music from a sociological point of view. Even if heavy metal has not been an immediate part of students' cultural experience, as

may be the case in more ethnically diverse classes, it is likely that they will have at least a stereotypical view of the music and its audience, thanks to high-profile media coverage of the music's alleged associations with teen suicide and Satanism. In my experience, the most "metal-illiterate" students' curiosity usually motivates the cultural analysis, particularly once they get beyond their common sense understanding of this music and its fans.

### *Student Responses to Heavy Metal in the Classroom*

Student responses to my use of heavy metal in introductory classes over the last five years suggest that the cultural analysis model is highly effective as an integrative theme in the interactive classroom. Course evaluations offer anecdotal evidence that the cultural analysis approach is popular with the majority of students, promotes active learning, and facilitates a clear understanding of sociological ideas and their applicability to contemporary social issues. First, students consistently mention how interesting and engaging they find the heavy metal analysis and how it helps them to relate to sociological perspectives and ideas, even if they were unfamiliar with the music:

It was an interesting approach to the topics we were learning about because we could relate to it.

I liked and enjoyed it. I'm not a fan myself, but it has been very interesting to explore the world of heavy metal.

I think it's a refreshing change of pace. [The music] is also disturbing.

A refreshing way to learn about society and subcultures without your nose in a book.

It was a good way to make sociology very easy to relate to.

I loved it! It was exciting, woke me up, and connected well with the concepts.

Second, students indicate that the cultural

analysis helps them develop a sociological understanding of this music and culture in general. As many contributors to *Teaching Sociology* have noted, a vital task in sociology courses is to “make strange” students’ familiar environment, allowing them to see things more sociologically. Students frequently describe how the cultural analysis of heavy metal revealed this cultural phenomenon in a whole new light:

[The analysis] helped because it dealt with a type of music I’m so unfamiliar with that I was used to stereotyping it, but I have different views now.

It helped to show that these people are alienated and that they are not as crazy as we might think. I not only learned how to do cultural analysis, I also learned that things are not always what they seem.

I think it fits [into the course] great! It’s better than sitting and stereotyping groups that people will get offended by.

I thought it was an interesting way to learn about why people belong to the groups that they belong to.

I thought that heavy metal put an interesting twist into the class because I never really thought about why artists might do what they do and what effects it has.

[The analysis] showed how to pick a part of a culture by looking at the [fan’s] surroundings and influences.

After understanding an “ideal type” heavy metal fan I was able to do a cultural analysis of heavy metal music.

Finally, students comment on the value of using sociological concepts, theories, and research to analyze heavy metal.

The exercises were very helpful and gave me a firm grasp on sociological cultural analysis.

Heavy metal gave me something tangible to think of and study. I do not care for the music itself, but I think it was helpful in understanding and relating the concepts discussed. [This]

became more apparent as we started applying the concepts to it.

I enjoy having one topic to relate ideas back to. It helps me gain a clearer understanding. I think music (music associated with young people) was a good choice.

I like putting the theories to work, or using them in some context that I am, at least vaguely, familiar with. It also brought Marx and Durkheim and Weber’s ideas into the present.

The most direct feedback from students on my use of music comes during the initial cultural analysis. The enthusiasm of most students increases dramatically once I hand out the heavy metal materials for their preliminary analysis. They sustain this level of enthusiasm throughout this section of the course, which is indicated by the high level of involvement in class discussion, the number and quality of questions raised, and frequent dialogue among students. The majority of students hold strong opinions about heavy metal music, which helps them to quickly overcome the preconception that the instructor has a monopoly on sociological knowledge. Spontaneous debates about the meaning of visual symbols and lyrics, the distinctions between “good” and “bad” metal, and stereotypes about “metalheads” often draw in previously reserved students and help to convince the skeptics that sociology may actually have some relevance to their lives. Students get especially engrossed while listening to the music, tapping their feet, singing along, and reacting vocally and physically to songs they do or do not enjoy. These spontaneous responses provide me with grist for subsequent discussion because I can call on individual students to elaborate on their response to a particular song, and the class can discuss the possible reasons for people’s different reactions to the same music. This is particularly important because it provides me with an opportunity to reiterate how “history” and “biography” interact to shape musical tastes and the ways individuals interpret heavy metal music and lyrics,

which serves as an introduction to the fan profile that caps the analysis.

The only consistent critical feedback I have received comes from a few students who question the narrow range of music used in the class. Some students think that I go “overboard” with the heavy metal analysis and would prefer that we analyze a wider range of music and cultural objects. I seek to minimize this sentiment through the written assignment where students discuss their own music preferences and by encouraging students to compare other music genres with heavy metal as we go through the various applications. Student comments about the limitations of my selection of songs occasionally emerge, but because we are working with one music genre, this is less of a problem than an indication that they are thinking more deeply about the music and the connections and contradictions between heavy metal subtypes. The model is flexible enough to allow students to bring in music they feel may contribute to our analysis, and I can update my song illustrations to keep up with the evolution of heavy metal.

It is also worth noting the few minor difficulties that I routinely experience when using this model. Perhaps the most significant challenge is persuading some students to take the analysis of heavy metal seriously as a pivotal learning experience in the course, rather than as an amusing diversion. This attitude usually subsides as we expand the analysis using sociological ideas because students begin to realize that analyzing heavy metal helps them to learn the course material. Some students also have an initial aversion to the fan profile, which they complain will promote the stereotyping of heavy metal fans. This provides a golden opportunity to review the differences between stereotypical and sociological thinking, and given students’ frequent use of stereotypes, strengthens the case for a sociological analysis of heavy metal. Typically, once we get through the first application of Marx and Durkheim to heavy metal, the majority of students understand the logic of cultural analysis. By the end of the course, many

students have developed quite sophisticated sociological explanations of heavy metal, bringing up many of the same points made by scholars who have studied heavy metal professionally.

Conducting a detailed cultural analysis of heavy metal and integrating this case study into the format of an introductory sociology course, takes the use of music in the classroom beyond its common use as an illustrative tool. Based on student evaluations of their illustrative use of song lyrics in an introductory sociology class, Walczak and Reuter (1994) conclude that in future classes they “will move beyond the simple matching of lyrics to concepts, and will ask students to think more critically about the music itself, its cultural context, the political agenda of the performers and writers, and other points” (p. 268). Following up on these recommendations, I have developed a model that significantly expands the possibilities of using music in sociology courses. In my experience, asking students to conduct a cultural analysis of music keeps them actively involved in the learning process, increasing the likelihood that they will realize the practical value of sociology as a tool for living. The cultural analysis model described in this article adds music to the repertoire of teaching tools available for developing interactive introductory courses.

#### APPENDIX. COURSE SYLLABUS FOR INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY

##### I. SOCIOLOGICAL THINKING

###### A. The Sociological Imagination

(ST) Introduction, Chapter 1: *Imagining Social Things, Competently*, and Chapter 2: *Personal Courage and Practical Sociologies*

(MSL) C. Wright Mills: *The Promise*

(MSL) Donna Gaines: *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids*

(MSL) Kathryn Marie Dudley: *Dollars and Diplomas*

###### B. Socialization and Interaction

(ST) Chapter 3: *Practicing the Discipline of Social Things*

(MSL) Gwynne Dyer: *Anyone's Son Will Do*

(MSL) Robert Granfield: *Making It by Faking It: Working-Class Students in an Elite Aca-*

*demio Environment*

C. Cultural Analysis: Subcultures and Sociological Visions [ASSIGNMENT: Internet Search]

(MSL) William Lewis: *The Rastafari: Emergence of a Subculture*

(MSL) James R. Curtis: *Miami's Little Havana: Yard Shrines, Cult Religion, Catholicism, and Santeria*

## II. SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

A. Classical Sociology: Cracks in the Thin Ice of Modern Life [APPLICATION: Marx and Durkheim]

(ST) Chapter 4: *Lost Worlds and Modern Sociology*, Chapter 5: *Sociology and the New World Order: 1848-1920*

(MSL) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

B. Twentieth Century Sociology: Science, Politics, and Social Change [ASSIGNMENT: Functional Analysis]

(ST) Chapter 6: *Sociology Becomes the Science of Worldly Structures: 1920-1960*

(ST) Chapter 7: *Sociology Discovers Its Complicated Vocation*

(MSL) Herbert Gans: *The Uses of Poverty: The Poor Pay All*

## III. SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

(MSL) Mitchell Duneier: *Slim's Table*

(MSL) Robin Leidner: *Over The Counter: McDonald's*

## IV. SOCIAL STRUCTURES

A. Stratification: Race and Poverty [APPLICATION: Cultural Inversion/Transvaluation]

(MSL) Elijah Anderson: *The Code of the Streets*

B. Modern Social Structures: Rationalization and McDonaldization [APPLICATION: Weber and Ritzer]

(ST) Chapter 8: *The Mysterious Power of Social Structures*

(MSL) George Ritzer: *The McDonaldization of Society*

C. Gender Roles and Family [APPLICATION: Sexuality in Heavy Metal. ASSIGNMENT: Dreamworlds 2]

(ST) Chapter 9: *The Lively Subjects of Dead Structures*

(MSL) Judith Lorber: "Night to His Day": *The Social Construction of Gender*

(MSL) Kathleen Gerson: *No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work*

D. Race Matters: Privilege, Oppression, and Difference [APPLICATION: Rap and Heavy

*Metal]*

(ST) Chapter 10: *Well-Measured Lives in a World of Differences*

(MSL) Lillian Rubin: *Is This a White Country or What?*

(MSL) Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes: *Navigating Public Places*

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