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Beyond Social Cognition, Sensemaking, Moral Judgment, and Moral Panic: The Social Conditioning Field Architecture

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Abstract

The same environment can condition different behaviors. This article contends that this divergence emerges because environments are encountered within competing Social Conditioning Fields (SCFs), which are socially distributed configurations of meanings, norms, narratives, and behavioral expectations. A historical analysis of American conflicts surrounding popular music illustrates how one generation's threat environment can become another generation's identity environment. The analysis shows how competing SCFs can construct the same cultural environment as threatening, liberating, deviant, or normative, while allowing meanings and behavioral expectations to diffuse across social boundaries through subsequent generations. This framework extends behavioral field theory by positioning socially distributed conditioning as a mechanism through which environments acquire divergent behavioral significance, generating testable propositions concerning SCF competition, diffusion, generational transformation, and behavioral change.

Introduction

Environmental psychology has increasingly recognized that behavior emerges through complex relationships among people, environments, social identities, norms, and contextual conditions. Yet a persistent theoretical problem remains: conceptualizations of environment and behavior must account for changing personal, social, and physical contexts rather than treating environments as static conditions surrounding behavior; contextual changes can alter the circumstances in which behavior occurs (Clitheroe et al., 1998). Environmental spillover research has begun to examine how a change in one behavior can influence behavior in another context or domain, and these effects can unfold over time. Recent reviews indicate that spillover research remains concentrated on behavioral transfer, while temporal and contextual dynamics remain comparatively understudied (Behn et al., 2025). These developments point to a broader problem: environmental conditions do not acquire behavioral significance independently of how individuals and groups perceive, interpret, and evaluate them.

Social cognition provides a basis for understanding how individuals interpret social and environmental information, while sensemaking describes how people construct meaning from conditions that may otherwise be ambiguous or contested (Weick, 1995). Moral judgment further shapes these interpretations by distinguishing what is perceived as acceptable, threatening, legitimate, or deviant. Social norms function in part by establishing expectations regarding what people do and what people believe others ought to do, and these expectations can differ across social groups and contexts (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Cialdini et al., 1991; Vesely & Klöckner, 2018). Social identity and self-categorization likewise demonstrate how group memberships organize perception and behavior, including how individuals distinguish between "us" and "them" and assign meaning to social conditions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987).

The resulting divergence is consequential because these processes may operate differently across groups encountering the same environment. What appears as norm violation within one Social

Conditioning Field could constitute normative behavior within another. Competing fields may therefore produce not only different interpretations of an environment but competing expectations for what behavior the environment should enable, constrain, or represent. One generation's threat environment becomes another generation's identity environment.

This paper proposes the Social Conditioning Field (SCF) as an architecture for examining how socially distributed configurations of narratives, identities, norms, group memberships, shared meanings, and behavioral expectations shape the behavioral significance assigned to environments. The proposal builds on broader Lewinian tradition in which behavior emerges from dynamic configurations of person, environment, and social forces (Lewin, 1936; Sandelands, 1990). Recent applications of field theory similarly demonstrate that multiple and potentially conflicting social forces, including expectations, roles, and other contextual conditions, can be incorporated into a single theoretical account of behavior (Kump, 2023). The SCF does not claim that these individual components have been absent from prior field -theoretical or social-psychological accounts. Rather, it conceptualizes them as interacting dimensions of a socially distributed conditioning configuration, without positing a hierarchy among social cognition, sensemaking, moral judgment, identity, norms, narratives, or other constituent conditions, through which environmental conditions acquire behavioral significance for different individuals or groups. Related work in ecological psychology has likewise suggested that sociocultural norms can influence how environmental affordances are perceived and acted upon (Segundo-Ortin, 2024). The SCF extends this proposition by considering how broader configurations of narratives, identities, group memberships, shared meanings, and behavioral expectations can shape the behavioral significance of an environment.

The SCF can be formally represented as an extension of Lewin's (1936) formula of behavior as a function of the person and environment: $B_{t+1} = f[(Pp, Pv), (Ep, Ev) \mid S, \Omega_t]$. Lewinian field theory has also been used to conceptualize behavior and experience as temporally dynamic, as well as shaped by the interaction of past, present, and future conditions within the life space (Flisbäck & Bengtsson, 2024). The formula distinguishes the conditions present in an environment from the social conditioning through which those conditions acquire behavioral significance. *Pp* and *Pv* represent personal and social conditions through physical and virtual contexts, while *Ep* and *Ev* represent physical and virtual environmental conditions; *S* represents the Social Conditioning Field and Ω_t represents adaptive changes in the environment and its agents over time. The behavioral contribution of *S* may vary according to the strength, coherence, and configuration of the socially distributed conditions comprising the field. The formula does not imply that a given environmental condition produces the same behavioral response across individuals, groups, or time. Behavior emerges from the interaction of person, environment, social conditioning, and changing environmental conditions. This temporal formula also makes the recursive character of SCF explicit: conditions at time *t* shape behavior at $t + 1$, while resulting behavior alters the environmental and social conditions that become part of the field at subsequent points in time.

From this perspective, the relevant question is not whether an environmental condition directly causes particular behaviors, but how different social conditions influence the behavioral significance assigned to those conditions. Social cognition, sensemaking, and moral judgment may contribute to how individuals and groups perceive environmental conditions, construct meaning from them, and evaluate what those conditions represent or permit. When processes occur within different SCFs, the same environment may acquire competing behavioral meanings and expectations. What one group experiences as threatening, deviant, or morally unacceptable may be experienced by another as legitimate, affiliative, liberating, or identity forming. The resulting divergence can influence not only behavior within an environment, but behavior directed toward the environment itself, including efforts to regulate, transform, resist, or preserve it. SCFs can provide a framework for examining how competing social conditions can produce different behavioral relationships with the same environment.

The historical record of American music provides a useful case for examining this proposition. The controversies surrounding rock and roll, the Beatles, Woodstock, and the Vietnam War, heavy metal, Madonna, N.W.A., and Marilyn Manson illustrate recurring conflicts in which adults, youth, institutions, and cultural communities assigned divergent meanings to social and cultural environments encountered through music. These conflicts provide successive historical contexts through which the SCF can be illustrated: social and cultural environments were not merely encountered differently across generations; they were interpreted through different social conditions, producing different expectations about what those environments meant and what behavior they should permit or constrain. These conflicts sometimes culminated in efforts to label, regulate, suppress, or transform the environment itself. The case therefore provides a historical illustration of the central SCF proposition: environmental behavior may depend not only on what an environment contains, but on the social conditioning through which different groups encounter and interpret it.

The Social Conditioning of Moral Panic

The concept of moral panic may therefore require consideration of its boundaries. Not because the social reactions it describes are themselves unreal, but because such designations may be shaped by the social-cognitive conditions of the people who first identify, name, and institutionalize the phenomenon. Moral panic scholarship demonstrates how youth cultures and cultural practices can become constructed as threats to prevailing social values and subjected to processes of social control, including efforts to regulate or constrain behavior (Cohen, 1980). Moral panic literature also demonstrates how youth culture can become symbolic targets of broader social anxieties rather than being understood solely through observable behavior (Cohen, 1980; Garland 2008). From the SCF perspective, however, these reactions can also be examined as outcomes of social cognition, sensemaking, and moral judgment operating within particular social conditions. What appears to one generation as an irrational overreaction may appear to another as a legitimate response to genuinely threatening change to the social environment. In this sense, “moral panic” can become not only a description of collective behavior, but an interpretive judgment made from within a particular SCF. The scholars, policymakers, journalists, and cultural authorities who characterize a reaction as a moral panic

are themselves situated within social and institutional conditions that shape what they perceive as threatening, normal, deviant, or worthy of regulation. This does not invalidate the concept of moral panic; rather, it places the classification itself within the field of social conditions through which contested environments acquire meaning.

This creates a more complicated and potentially more revealing way to understand how societies define threat, legitimacy, and appropriate responses to contested environments. As younger generations move into positions of cultural and institutional authority, the social conditions through which cultural behaviors are interpreted can change, altering how behaviors and cultural forms that earlier generations sought to regulate are interpreted. The result is not simply the disappearance of moral panic, but a shift in who possesses the social and institutional authority to define what constitutes threat, what constitutes legitimate concern, and what constitutes acceptable behavior or culture. From a SCF perspective, this shift illustrates how competing fields may change over time as identities, norms, narratives, and institutional positions change. The classification of behavior or environment as threatening is itself shaped by the SCF from which the classification is made, rather than representing an observation necessarily external to the social conditions being examined.

Music as a Historical Case Study of Competing Social Conditioning Fields

The emergence of rock and roll in the 1950s provides an early illustration of how a cultural environment can become behaviorally contested through competing processes of social cognition, sensemaking, and moral judgment. Rock and roll acquired meanings that extended beyond the music itself through processes of social construction involving performers, audiences, media, commercial actors, and broader cultural change (d'Anjou, 2003). Its expansion through radio, records, concerts, television, and youth leisure spaces established new contexts for teenage participation and identity (Delmont, 2012; Lashua & Thompson, 2025), while its reception generated competing narratives concerning adolescence, social order, race, morality, and culture change (Tochka, 2023; Wald, 2026). The same cultural environment surrounding rock and roll could be encountered as entertainment, affiliation, rebellion, racial change, or a threat to the established social conditions through which it was interpreted. Research on the period demonstrates that rock and roll became intertwined with the emergence of youth culture while also intersecting with racial segregation, civil rights, and competing understandings of teenage identity (e.g., autonomy, affiliation, and acceptable behavior) (Delmont, 2012; Lashua & Thompson, 2025).

From an SCF perspective, the significance of rock and roll was not contained solely in its musical properties. Its behavioral meaning emerged through the interaction of the environment with the narratives, identities, norms, group memberships, and expectations through which it was encountered. Adults concerned with social order could interpret the music through existing narratives about juvenile delinquency, sexuality, racial change, or declining cultural standards, while young audiences could encounter the same social and cultural environment as a means of affiliation, autonomy, and emerging

identity. Historical evidence also demonstrates that responses to rock and roll were not uniform even among those who encountered the same period, illustrating why the SCF should not be treated as a generational category. The relevant distinction is not simply between “older” and “younger” generations, but between different configurations of social conditions through which rock and roll was made meaningful.

The cultural environment surrounding rock and roll was both conditioned by and conditioning of the broader social conditions in which it existed. As young people adopted the music, formed affiliations and identities around it, and participated in new cultural practices, those behaviors helped reshape the social conditions through which the music was subsequently interpreted. At the same time, adults, institutions, media organizations, and cultural authorities responded to those changing meanings by attempting to define what the music represented and what behaviors should be associated with it. Rock and roll therefore demonstrates the recursive relationship proposed by the SCF: social conditions shaped how the social and cultural environment was interpreted, while behavior within and towards the environment contributed to changing those social conditions. The cultural environment was not simply a product of competing social conditions; it became part of the process through which those conditions were reproduced and transformed.

What appeared to one SCF as evidence of moral decline or social disorder could appear within another as a legitimate expression of youth identity and cultural change. One generation’s threat environment became another generation’s identity environment.

The Same Environment, Different Fields

The emergence of the Beatles and the counterculture environment surrounding Woodstock further illustrates how musical environments became embedded within competing SCFs. The social conditions surrounding American youth had changed, and with them the narratives through which music, identity, authority, and national responsibility were interpreted. For Americans whose social identities and understandings of national responsibility were shaped by the experience of World War II, military service, sacrifice, and national unity could carry meanings that differed from those emerging among younger Americans confronting the Vietnam War (Schuman & Scott, 1989). Woodstock became associated with an alternative field organized around youth identity, countercultural affiliation, and opposition to the war, transforming the musical environment into a setting through which those meanings could be expressed and reinforced (Anderson, 2007). Music did not independently create these meanings. Rather, it became a cultural environment through which existing narratives, identities, moral judgments, and expectations could be expressed, contested, and reinforced within competing social conditioning fields.

This association should not, however, be understood as evidence that a generation shared a single SCF. Many Americans of the same age supported the war or volunteered for military service, demonstrating that historical conditions do not produce uniform interpretations or behavioral responses. Rather, the SCF provides a way to examine how different configurations of family history, identity, peer affiliation,

norms, narratives, and expectations could organize responses to the same historical environment differently. The Beatles and Woodstock therefore illustrate that competing fields need not correspond neatly to age or generation. They can emerge within the same population as individuals encounter shared historical conditions through different social identities, affiliations, narratives, and expectations.

The significance of Woodstock lies not in representing an entire generation, but in demonstrating how a musical environment could become a site in which competing narratives of identity, authority, national responsibility, and social change were made visible and contested. The same environment could therefore function simultaneously as cultural expression, political dissent, social affiliation, and perceived threat, as different groups encountered it through competing SCFs.

Heavy Metal and the Institutionalization of Threat

The controversy surrounding heavy metal in the 1980s illustrates how competing interpretations of a musical environment can move from cultural disagreement into institutional efforts to define and regulate perceived threats. The Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) argued that certain popular music contained material involving violence, sexuality, drug use, and other themes considered harmful to children, contributing to the 1985 Senate hearing on record labeling (U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 1985; Chastagner, 1999; Deflem, 2020). The controversy was not limited to whether particular lyrics were objectionable. It concerned what those lyrics represented, what influence the musical environment might have on young people, and whether institutional intervention was justified.

From the perspective of the SCF, the PMRC controversy illustrates how social cognition, sensemaking, and moral judgment can converge around a contested environmental condition without requiring a shared interpretation of that condition. Advocates for labeling could interpret particular musical content through narratives concerning parental responsibility, childhood vulnerability, sexuality, and social decline. The same environment could be interpreted by musicians and listeners through narratives of artistic expression, identity, autonomy, and resistance. The disagreement was therefore not simply over the meaning of individual songs; it reflected competing expectations about what a musical environment should permit and constrain.

Lawmakers and public institutions did not merely observe these conflicts; they sometimes became participants in defining what the contested musical environment represented and how it should be managed. Congressional hearings surrounding music and lyrics, particularly the 1985 Senate hearings associated with the Parents Music Resource Center, brought competing claims about youth, morality, sexuality, and the social effects of popular music into an institutional setting (U.S. Senate, 1985; Deflem, 2020). Such responses reflected attempts to address perceived threats by altering access to, or the social meaning of, the musical environment, consistent with the broader processes of social control described in moral panic scholarly discourse (Cohen, 1980; Garland, 2008). The significance of these interventions from an environmental-behavioral perspective is that they implicitly treated the

environment as something that could be modified in an effort to influence behavior. Yet those making regulatory decisions were not responding to the musical environment from outside it; their perceptions of threat and appropriate intervention were themselves shaped by the narratives, norms, identities, and expectations of their own SCFs. The same intervention could be interpreted differently by groups operating within different SCFs: what policymakers and cultural authorities perceived as necessary protection could be experienced by targeted audiences as suppression, stigmatization, or an attack on identity. The resulting conflict was therefore not simply between music and regulation, but between competing understandings of what the musical environment meant, what behaviors it enabled, and what forms of behavior and identity it should permit or constrain.

The 1985 Senate hearing involving Twisted Sister provides a particularly clear illustration of this divergence. The PMRC characterized the band's song "Under the Blade" as containing themes of sadomasochism, bondage, and rape, while lead singer Dee Snider testified that the song was written about the fear surrounding his bandmate's throat surgery (U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 1985; Chastagner, 1999; Hill & Savigny, 2019). The same musical work therefore acquired different behavioral significance within competing social conditioning fields: one interpreted through a narrative of sexual threat and youth protection, the other through personal experience, artistic intent, and identity. The disagreement demonstrates the SCF proposition without requiring either interpretation to be treated as inherently irrational. Each interpretation was embedded within a different configuration of social conditions that shaped what the environment was understood to represent and what response appeared appropriate.

Madonna: From Like a Virgin to Like a Prayer

The debates surrounding Madonna emerged within a social environment that had repeatedly been reshaped by decades of cultural change, including counterculture movements and evolving public debates over gender roles, female autonomy, sexuality, and women's public authority. Within that evolving normative environment, Madonna became a highly visible flashpoint where competing social conditioning fields contested the meaning of sexual expression and women's public identity, rather than originating those broader changes. From "Like a Virgin" (1984) to "Like a Prayer" (1989), the locus of controversy shifted, moving from debates over sexuality and femininity to conflicts involving religious symbolism, Catholic identity, and moral authority (Bradby, 1992; Freccero, 1992). This progression suggests that social conditioning fields are not fixed around a cultural figure or artifact; they can shift as the surrounding normative environment changes, allowing the same individual to become a different kind of perceived threat within a different social conditioning field. More broadly, this raises a theoretical possibility central to the SCF framework: during periods of rapid and sustained social change, social conditioning fields may change faster than corresponding social identities can consolidate, leaving overlapping and competing social conditioning fields operating simultaneously during transition. In this transitional space, competing SCFs may condition the norms, meanings, and expectations through which identities are formed and contested. Over time, identity configurations that receive stronger and more sustained reinforcement within a given social environment may become more strongly

consolidated, while competing configurations remain marginal or confined to particular social segments. SCF therefore offers a way to examine how changing social environments may not merely reflect social identity but actively condition the normative conditions under which identities become possible, reinforced, and consolidated within particular social contexts.

The Madonna examination illustrates how female cultural persona can be assigned threatening behavioral significance when interpreted within a social conditioning field organized around sexual morality, gender expectations, and perceived cultural disorder. Rosie the Riveter provides a contrasting illustration of how the meaning of a female cultural persona can be subsequently reinterpreted within a different social context. Although the wartime image was originally situated within a corporate wartime labor context, its meaning was later reframed by women's rights movements and became associated with female empowerment and feminist identity (Sharp & Wade, 2011). The significance of this transformation lies not simply in the differing characteristics of Madonna and Rosie, but in the changing social conditions through which each persona was interpreted. From an SCF perspective, cultural symbols therefore do not possess fixed behavioral meanings independent of context; rather, their behavioral significance emerges through the interaction of identities, norms, narratives, expectations, and environmental conditions (Hall et al., 2024). A cultural persona may consequently become a source of perceived threat within one SCF while becoming a source of identification and collective meaning within another.

Competing Social Conditioning Fields and Cultural Meaning

The emergence of N.W.A. and gangsta rap demonstrates how cultural meaning can become contested across competing SCFs. Straight Outta Compton (1988) emerged within a broader political environment shaped by racialized discourses of crime, surveillance, and law enforcement, while its reception occurred within broader racialized discourses of crime and law enforcement that could position gangsta rap as evidence of criminality and social threat (McCann, 2012; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Nielson, 2019). McCann argued that the album and its reception constituted a confrontation over the meanings of race, place, and crime, illustrating how criminality itself was contested within popular and political culture (McCann, 2012; 2017). From an SCF perspective, this distinction is consequential because criminality need not function solely as a characteristic attributed to a cultural environment; it can become part of the social conditioning through which that environment acquires behavioral significance. The same cultural object could function within one field as an expression of identity, experience, resistance, or authenticity, while within another it could be interpreted as evidence of criminality, disorder, or social threat. Dollinger's (2024) ethnographic study of young rap fans further demonstrates that these interpretations are not merely theoretical: young listeners evaluated gangsta narratives through perceptions of authenticity, lived experience, disadvantage, and the possibility of overcoming adverse social conditions, with criminality itself acquiring different meanings on the narrative in which it was embedded. N.W.A. thus illustrates how competing social conditioning fields can attach divergent meanings to the same cultural environment, producing different expectations for how that environment should be understood, regulated, resisted, or defended.

“Come As You Are”: Diffusion Across the Social Conditioning Field

Diffusion of subcultural meanings, identities, norms, and behavioral expectations does not require their shared understanding or preservation. The movement of alternative music into mainstream culture illustrates this distinction. In a 1992 interview, Kurt Cobain, lead singer of Nirvana, observed, “that idea has always been around in the underground,” even as Nirvana had “penetrated into the mainstream.” Comparing the process to the commercialization of the hippie movement, Cobain described people adopting its visible forms while failing to understand what those forms meant, observing that they “weren’t really hippies” and “really didn’t understand it.” He then applied the same observation to the “supposedly ‘alternative’ underground music scene.” (Cobain et al., 1992; Soulsby, 2016). This observation captures diffusion as a movement across a social boundary rather than a simple transfer of a subculture intact (Moore, 2025; Anderson, 2007). Subcultural forms could enter the broader cultural field, be adopted and reproduced, while the identities, norms, narratives, and behavioral expectations that organized them within the originating field were altered, contested, or detached from those conditions. The “Nevermind” album brought Nirvana’s music to listeners that had previously been unfamiliar with alternative and underground music, expanding the audience beyond the subcultural context in which the music had developed (Bima & Setyaji, 2024; Feldman-Barrett, 2024). Diffusion was not acceptance; it was the movement of socially conditioned meanings across a field boundary, where those meanings could be reconfigured. After Cobain’s death in 1994, the forms of grunge could be reproduced, but the cultural figure around which its identity had cohered could not.

The Seattle music environment demonstrates that this movement could also produce institutional conflict. The city’s Teen Dance Ordinance, enacted in 1985, imposed restrictions on venues where minors could attend concerts and dances, creating a prolonged conflict with Seattle’s music community. Krist Novoselic (of Nirvana), later became involved in the opposition to the ordinance and broader music censorship efforts, helping establish the Joint Artists and Music Promotions Action Committee (JAMPAC). Novoselic’s activism is a clear example of how actors within a cultural field could move from experiencing institutional regulation to organizing collectively to alter the conditions governing the field itself. Diffusion was not acceptance; it was the movement of socially conditioned meanings across a field boundary, where those meanings could be reconfigured. The Seattle music environment demonstrates that this movement could also produce, or at times, exacerbate institutional conflict.

Woodstock ’99 Reproducing the Environment Not the Field

Woodstock ’99 provides a particularly useful illustration of what can occur when cultural symbolism diffuses across a field boundary: the environmental conditions associated with an earlier cultural event may be reproduced even when the SCF that originally organized its meaning is not. Held thirty years after Woodstock ’69, the festival retained the Woodstock name and its cultural mythology while operating within a markedly different social, commercial, media, and cultural environment (Anger, 2025; Arnold, 2018). Vider’s (2004) analysis of the Woodstock ’99 riot demonstrates that communication, social categorization, and the establishment of norms within the crowd were consequential to the emergence

of collective behavior. Cramer & Donofrio (2025) examine the event through competing constructions of masculinity, violence, consumption, and mediated cultural meaning.

From an SCF perspective, the significance of Woodstock ’99 is therefore not that its music caused violence, but that the event illustrates how a shared physical environment can be organized by a social conditioning field substantially different from the one historically associated with the same cultural symbolism. The Woodstock identity was retained as a reference point, while the identities, narratives, norms, representations, and behavioral expectations through which participants encountered the 1999 environment had changed. The case consequently illustrates a central SCF proposition: behavioral possibilities are conditioned not by the physical environment alone, but by the social meanings and expectations organized within that environment. A field may become reconstituted when the conditions that sustain it are present, but those conditions cannot be assumed simply because the environment has been recreated. The environment could be reproduced; the field could not be assumed. This distinction also suggests a predictive implication: when an environment is deliberately recreated without evidence that the conditioning field supporting its original meaning has also been reproduced, the outcome should be treated as uncertain rather than presumed to follow the historical pattern. A field that does not re-emerge in one context may nevertheless return when conditions that sustain it are restored; its absence in the recreated environment does not mean that the field itself has disappeared.

Marilyn Manson and the Attribution of Cultural Threat

Marilyn Manson demonstrates a further transformation in the assignment of threatening behavioral significance to a cultural environment: the contested environment was interpreted not only as evidence of social disorder, but as a potential source of harmful behavior. Manson’s significance within this environment was also unusually recursive due to his public persona deliberately engaging the cultural fears surrounding youth, morality, sexuality, and social disorder. Wright (2000) argues that Manson constructed a persona whose identity was bound to being condemned by the culture around him, making his reaction to that persona part of the cultural performance itself. Following the Columbine High School shootings, these associations intensified as media accounts rapidly connected the perpetrators to goth and Marilyn Manson fan cultures, producing a broader wave of anti-Manson sentiment (Berres, 2002). Student accounts of Columbine describe social conditions surrounding nonconforming students were already structured by strong expectations of conformity. Madfis (2017) similarly cautions that the post Columbine attribution of violence to Gothic cultural affiliations risked transforming cultural preferences into threat indicators, potentially marginalizing students whose music, clothing, or subcultural affiliations were treated as evidence of dangerousness. Former students described goths and other outcast students as occupying the bottom of the school’s peer structure, with some describing frustration, isolation, and resistance to what they experienced as a demand for conformity (Larkin, 2007).

From the SCF perspective, the Columbine case illustrates a recursive relationship between social conditioning and environmental interpretation. The SCF had already assigned meanings to nonconformity before the shooting; the subsequent association of goth identity with school violence

altered those meanings by adding a new expectation of potential threat. The resulting social environment was then encountered by students and subcultural groups who occupied those identities, meaning that the dominant field's interpretation became part of the social conditions through which the targeted identities were themselves experienced and expressed.

Responses to that altered social environment could, in turn, become new behavioral information for the dominant field, potentially reinforcing its original interpretation of the group as threatening or deviant.

Cultural Conditioning Persists

The effects of earlier cultural conflicts may also persist beyond the episode in which they emerge. Repeated controversies surrounding popular music can become part of the interpretive environment through which subsequent cultural forms are encountered, providing social actors with established narratives about youth, deviance, parental responsibility, and cultural threat. The historical movement of rock and roll through heavy metal and into controversies surrounding Madonna and Marilyn Manson therefore suggests that social conditioning may accumulate across cultural episodes rather than disappear when individual controversy subsides. Wright (2000), for example, situates the Manson controversy within a cultural environment in which Baby Boomer parents had become established as dominant actors within mainstream musical culture while confronting the musical preferences of their children.

Intergenerational SCF Recursion

This possibility extends the recursive SCF proposition across generations. Herdt (2009) similarly describes how successive moral panics can become connected through broader processes of cultural anger, suggesting that narratives of threat and regulation may persist beyond individual controversies. Individuals who encountered earlier music controversies as members of a younger generation may later encounter new controversies as parents, cultural authorities, or institutional actors, carrying forward, modifying, or rejecting meanings produced through those earlier encounters. The resulting SCF may therefore incorporate social conditions of prior cultural conflicts that influence how subsequent environments are interpreted. What once appeared as threatening may become normalized, while new forms of cultural difference may acquire the threat meanings previously attached to earlier forms. SCF consequently allows cultural conditioning to be understood not only as recursive within a single episode, but as potentially cumulative across time, as prior encounters become part of the social conditions through which subsequent environments acquire behavioral significance and are themselves subsequently transformed.

Within these fields, Manson could therefore be interpreted differently: one field could treat his music and persona as evidence of cultural deterioration and potential influence on vulnerable youth, while another could experience the same environment as artistic expression, affiliation, identity, or resistance to established norms. These interpretations did not merely produce disagreement over meaning. They

produced different expectations regarding what should be done in response to the environment, including whether it should be monitored, restricted, condemned, or defended. The conflict extended beyond the content of Manson's music to competing assumptions about the relationship between cultural environments and behavior.

A further implication emerges when the contested environment is encountered by a group whose social identity is positioned as non-dominant while operating within a broader dominant field. The relative status of participants within a SCF should not be understood simply as numerical minority status, but as their relative authority to define norms, meanings, and behavioral expectations governing the wider environment. Under such conditions, behaviors characterized by the dominant field as deviant or threatening may acquire different significance within the competing field, including meanings associated with affiliation, resistance, or identity affirmation. The relationship can become reciprocal: the dominant field's characterization of the subculture as deviant becomes part of the social environment encountered by the subculture, while the subculture's subsequent resistance can become evidence within the dominant field's interpretation of that group as threatening or disorderly. Competing SCFs may therefore not merely produce different interpretations of the same environment; through their interaction, each field can become part of the conditioning environment of the other.

Manson therefore provides a useful culmination of the historical sequence examined in this case study. Across the preceding examples, contested musical environments were successively interpreted as expressions of rebellion, threats to morality, challenges to gender and religious norms, evidence of criminality, and, in the Manson controversy, potential contributors to violent or deviant behavior. The progression illustrates how SCFs can shape not only the meaning assigned to an environment, but also the behavioral expectations attached to that interpretation and the responses directed toward the environment itself. It also demonstrates the recursive character of the proposed architecture: responses directed toward an environment can alter that environment and the social conditions surrounding it, creating new conditions through which subsequent groups interpret and respond to it. The environment is therefore not merely a recipient of social conditioning; it can become part of the process through which the SCF itself is reproduced, contested, and transformed.

Boundaries and Social Conditioning Fields

The SCF is not proposed as a replacement for social identity, social cognition, sensemaking, moral judgment, or normative theories, nor is it synonymous with a particular group, generation, institution, or ideology. Rather, SCF refers to the configuration of socially distributed conditions through which an environment acquires behavioral significance for individuals and groups at a particular point in time. A single individual may therefore encounter an environment through multiple, overlapping, or competing social conditioning fields, while members of the same demographic or social category may occupy substantially different fields. The boundary of an SCF is consequently functional rather than categorical: it is defined by the identities, narratives, norms, meanings, expectations, and social relationships that collectively shape how an environment is interpreted and what behavioral responses appear possible or warranted. This distinction positions SCF as an integrative architecture rather than another account of

any single psychological or social process. This configuration does not require that its constituent processes operate in a fixed hierarchy or that any single component independently determines behavioral significance; rather, their interaction constitutes the conditioning field through which the environment becomes behaviorally meaningful. Because these socially distributed conditions can also be encountered through mediated and virtual environments, the SCF architecture is not limited to physically co-present social settings; such environments may likewise contribute to the meanings, identities, norms, and behavioral expectations through which subsequent environments are interpreted. Digital environments are conceptualized within the SCF architecture as one form of virtual environment rather than as a separate environmental category. Virtual environments may encompass digitally mediated experiences as well as other forms of mediated or non-physical interaction through which individuals encounter information, meanings, identities, or behavioral expectations.

These episodes differed in their specific claims and institutional responses, but they shared a behavioral field pattern: groups operating within different SCFs assigned different meanings and expectations to substantially similar cultural environments. What one field treated as evidence of threat or deviance, another could experience as expression, affiliation, resistance, or identity. Attempts to regulate the music therefore represented more than efforts to control content; they were efforts to alter an environment whose meaning had become contested.

Conclusion

Environmental behavior cannot be fully understood by examining physical or virtual conditions apart from the social conditioning fields through which those conditions acquire meaning. Across the historical cases examined here, music became behaviorally consequential not because particular sounds or performers produced a uniform response, but because different SCFs organized competing identities, narratives, norms, meanings, and behavioral expectations around the same social and cultural environments. What one field interpreted as threat, deviance, or disorder could be experienced within another as affiliation, resistance, expression, or identity.

The cases also demonstrate that these fields are neither fixed nor necessarily bounded by generation, institution, or physical setting. SCFs can compete within the same population, change as social conditions change, and interact recursively as groups respond to one another. Cultural meanings may also diffuse across field boundaries without preserving the social conditions that originally organized them. The movement from subcultural music into broader cultural environments, illustrated through Cobain and Nirvana and subsequently through Woodstock ’99, demonstrates why the reproduction of a cultural environment does not necessarily reproduce the SCF that gave the environment its earlier significance.

This distinction extends the interpretation of moral panic. A perceived threat is not simply an objective characteristic of an environment waiting to be recognized; its recognition, characterization or mischaracterization and institutional response are themselves behaviors occurring within SCFs. The

same recursive process applies to the groups being characterized as threatening. Once a dominant field assigns meaning to a subculture, that characterization becomes part of the environment encountered by the subculture and may shape subsequent identity, resistance, affiliation, and behavior. Competing fields can therefore condition one another.

The SCF architecture consequently provides a way to connect processes that are often examined separately. Social cognition, sensemaking, moral judgment, social identity, and normative influence remain distinct processes, but SCF places them within a broader behavioral architecture in which their interactions determine the significance an environment acquires for different actors. These processes are not arranged hierarchically within architecture; their configuration and interaction contribute to the behavioral significance assigned to an environment. The environment is not merely a setting in which behavior occurs. It is part of a dynamic social process through which meanings, expectations, and behavioral possibilities are continuously produced, contested, and transformed. This dynamic also suggests a potential early-warning application of SCF architecture. Changes in the configuration of socially distributed meanings, identities, norms, narratives, and behavioral expectations may become observable before corresponding behavioral or environmental transitions become apparent. Research on social tipping and norm change suggests that changes in social configurations can precede and help predict transitions in collective behavior (Andreoni et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2020). SCF provides a basis for examining whether changes within or between competing fields can serve as observable indicators of impending behavioral or environmental change.

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