Spectacular Youth Cultures and Ageing: Beyond Refusing to Grow Up

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Abstract

For decades, research on the subject of music and style subcultures has presented participation in such groups as a temporary manifestation of adolescence. More recently, sociologists have begun to examine the lives and identities of those who remain involved in so-called 'youth' subcultures beyond their teens and early twenties. This article examines the ways such work has begun to illuminate the role of enduring subcultural identities as part of the developing lives of older participants. Such work, I suggest, rejects simplistic understandings of older participation as a refusal to grow up in favour of a detailed focus on the relationships between continuing participation and other aspects of developing adult life, including career, family and the ageing body. Identifying core themes and debates while identifying areas for further work, I argue that this developing field of research addresses one of the primary criticisms of youth cultural research in the past, which is that such research has tended to examine leisure related affiliations in a fixed period of time and in isolation from the rest of participants' lives.

Introduction

When it comes to explaining music and style-based communities, the notion of the 'adolescent phase' has, it might be suggested, become so universal an explanation in popular consciousness as to be a cliché. And there is no shortage of academic support for the notion that such groups can be regarded as a temporary response on the part of young people to the complexities and insecurities of being a teenager. For Parsons (1949), the development of distinct or rebellious forms of youth culture had a functional role in easing the strains of the journey from childhood and adulthood. And as part of their explanations of the emergence of spectacular post war style subcultures, the theorists at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies identified the assertion by youth of age consciousness and, specifically, of difference from their working class parents, as a key component (Clarke et al 1976).

More recent work, on cultures as varied as hip hop, goth, skate, punk and club cultures, also has tended to characterise such groups in fairly narrow, age-specific terms. While sometimes this is left implicit, in other cases it is spelled out, as in Sarah Thornton's assertion that 'going to dance clubs is an integral part of growing up. It is a rite of passage which marks adolescent independence...' (Thornton 1995: 16). Thornton goes on to emphasise that enthusiasm to participate lasts only until the post-youth establishment of domestic self-sufficiency and long-term partnerships (ibid.).

The last decade, however, has seen the emergence of a small body of research attempting to examine an increasing tendency for people's involvement in 'youth' music and style communities to persist well beyond their teenage years (e.g. Holland 2004; Vroomen 2004; Bennett 2006; Smith 2009; Gregory 2009; Taylor 2010; Hodgkinson 2011). In part, such increasing longevity of involvement may reflect broader changes to the category of youth identified by scholars of the 'transition' from youth to adulthood. The trajectory of young people towards adulthood is, it is argued, increasingly prolonged and unpredictable as a result of delays in the taking on of commitments such as cohabiting, marriage, child-rearing and long-term careers, for example (Tanner and Arnett 2009; Du Bois Reymond 2009). It would seem logical that the maintenance of more 'youthful' approaches to life in these respects among twenty-somethings may connect to a propensity to continue one's participation in equally 'youthful' forms of leisure activity.

Yet something distinct from this also appears to be happening. A number of studies have detailed the continuing involvement in youth music or style cultures, not only of twenty-somethings with few adult commitments, but also those approaching or negotiating middle-age, many of whom by that point *have* taken on mortgages, families and careers – to say nothing of older bodies and self-identities. Rather than conceiving of enduring youth cultural involvement as a simple continuation of adolescence or refusal of adulthood, such work has started to illuminate the detailed ways in which older enthusiasts negotiate and adapt their participation in the context of lives increasingly focused to one degree or another upon adult priorities, orientations and responsibilities. In so doing, it offers a valuable examination of the relationships between leisure commitments and other aspects of people's lives and identities as they negotiate different phases of the life course.

Changing Participation

As Andy Bennett (2006) has pointed out, prior to the last decade, mentions of older participants in youth culture studies had a tendency to imply either that the participation of such individuals lacked any real substance (Weinstein 2000) or that, through continuing to be involved, they were indulging in a dubious form of age-denial (Calcutt 1998). In contrast, recent studies of older participants in youth cultures have focused upon the ways in which increasing numbers of people reconcile continuing involvement with the practical, physical and symbolic dimensions of becoming older. One of the themes underlying such research has been the extent to which such continued participation represents a continuation of elements of youthfulness or a transformation of participation consistent with practical and subjective manifestations of becoming adult.

Not surprisingly, in some respects, such studies do illustrate a continuing propensity to indulge in what might be regarded as youthful forms of behaviour (Smith 2009). Far from confining their participation to playing the occasional record at home, studies illustrate a good deal of involvement in what might be regarded as classic youthful activities such as dressing up, attending gigs and clubs, dancing, flirting and becoming intoxicated. In some cases this is particularly marked, as in Jodie Taylor's study of the Brisbane queer scene, where continued participation in an intensive dance music culture which also involved distinctive dress and fluid approaches to sexuality was interpreted by some of Taylor's older respondents as a defiant rejection of dominant understandings of growing up. One male respondent put it in the following way:

If I decide I want to wear high heels and make-up and mismatched fucked up clothes or a dress or something it's totally fine ... Then there's drug taking ... and sexual activity with pretty much whoever ... you can just modulate all that however you like, I don't think you're judged for that stuff (Taylor 2010: 903).

Despite such evidence, however, an underlying theme of most of the work carried out on older participants is that of a de-intensification of participation. Though they often remain important, then, nights out tend in the majority of cases to become fewer and shorter, while levels of intoxication, flirting and dancing often become less intense, as does, in many cases, the extremity of people's exhibition of subcultural style. Even in Taylor's study, drug taking tended to significantly reduce in its intensity as people became older and some respondents suggested the frequency of nights out had become lower too. Likewise, in his study of older punks, Bennett (2006) identified a tendency for participants to go out less often, as well as to spend their time at gigs watching and talking while younger participants moshed at the front. Bennett's punks also displayed their affiliation in more subtle ways than in the past, wearing somewhat more conservative clothing, but adorning themselves with the occasional tell-tale signifier such as a tattoo, a sewed on patch on a jacket or a shaven head.

Responsibilities: Work and Family

As Bennett indicates here, in part, such changes to people's involvement and image appear to have reflected the practical necessity of compromise in order to accommodate responsibilities such as work, family and children. In my own study of older goths, for example, the importance of work to respondents had become far greater than it had been in their younger years and this contributed to a de-intensification of participation, particularly in terms of frequency of going out and in the development of flexible subcultural appearances which could easily be adapted to the contrasting needs of a night out and a day at work (Hodkinson 2011). Likewise, Anderson (2009) discusses the ways in which attending night-time rave

culture events, which by definition required extensive daytime recuperation, became increasingly incompatible with 9.00-5.00 work for many older participants.

Nevertheless, various studies have indicated that work may be less significant as a cause of the 'toning down' of participation than commitments relating to family and children. Respondent references to family-related constraints on their own participation, to the ways having children has broadened their social networks or to friends dropping out of the subculture as a result of long-term relationships or children are not unusual (Hodkinson 2011).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, some studies also indicate that the impact of having children is gendered, to the extent that female participants can experience greater practical constraints and stronger pressure to tone down subcultural participation after the onset of parenthood than men (Gregory 2009, Holland 2004). In addition to direct practical constraints related to child-rearing, Gregory's research on female rave participants in Toronto indicated a tendency for participants to reduce the intensity of their involvement in the late twenties as a result, partly, of the *possibility* of becoming a mother in the future. General ideologies of adult femininity, then, seem to prompt some female participants to drastically reduce their practical participation in spectacular youth cultures before any of the realities of parenthood have even taken hold.

Nevertheless, studies also have shown how some participants have adapted to commitments of both work and family varieties in such a manner that they were still able to participate meaningfully (Bennett 2006; forthcoming 2012; Hodkinson 2011; Davis forthcoming 2012). In the case of children, this sometimes centres upon couples taking it in turns to go out or arranging childcare with relatives or babysitters, but there is also a clear trend towards people directly involving children in their subcultural lifestyle, not only through engagement with specialist music or other artefacts in the home, but also taking them to festivals and other child-friendly subcultural events (Smith 2009; Hodkinson forthcoming 2013).

Ageing Bodies and Age Appropriateness

Important though they clearly are, practical adult responsibilities such as those described are not the only features of becoming older that long-term members of subcultures come to terms with and make allowances for. The implications of ageing bodies and the ways participants adapt to them form the primary focus for several studies. In the context of groups centred upon intense physical activities such as energetic or aggressive dancing, the physical constraints of older bodies can result in a partial or full withdrawal from such activities and the adoption of less physically active roles (Anderson 2009). Following on from Andy Bennett's aforementioned observation of punks in his study, studies of hardcore punk (Tsitsos forthcoming 2012) and alternative rock (Gibson forthcoming 2012) have shown how, with some exceptions, older participants tend to spend greater time towards the rear of music events, leaving younger enthusiasts to dance, mosh or slam dance at the front. Meanwhile, in the case of competition-centred break-dancing or 'b-boy' culture, Mary Fogarty (forthcoming 2012) shows how, as their bodies became older, some participants shift away from dancing in competitions themselves and towards the role of training others.

The significance of ageing bodies in relation to the continued exhibition of subcultural style and image has also been the subject of considerable research. Samantha Holland's pioneering

work on the identities of older 'alternative' women (including goths, punks and others) is of particular importance here (2004). Holland describes a range of tensions experienced by alternative women between their desire to maintain an alternative appearance - whether through clothing, coloured hair, tattoos or piercings - and the increasing need as they became older, to develop identities which they and/or others regarded as suitable for middle-aged femininity. The theme is explored further in a more recent study involving some of the same interviewees in which Holland (forthcoming 2012) places emphasis on the awareness of the women of the ways they felt they were infantilised or ridiculed by others as a result of their continuing presentation of subculturally-coded appearances, including brightly coloured hair and piercings, for example, as they approached or entered their fifties.

Age appropriateness is also a theme of Joanna Davis' work (2006) on punk culture in the US, but this time the emphasis is on the collective ways in which music scenes establish norms of age-appropriateness, not least in relation to body and fashion. Davis outlines the construction by participants of successful and unsuccessful examples of ageing punk, establishing the importance of retaining a clear punk-oriented appearance at the same time as showing awareness and appreciation of one's age and of 'appropriate' ways to adorn oneself. The importance of avoiding age-inappropriate clothes or adornments was equally important in my study of older goths, with respondents frequently evoking the spectre of problematically dressed 'other' older participants to illustrate the point (Hodkinson 2011).

Ageing Identity and Community

Such findings are of great importance in illustrating how older participation may be more about growing up than retaining youth. And, of course, they relate not only to specific physical changes to the body but also to people's developing conceptions of self. In this respect, it is clear that older participants have a tendency to develop distinct identities centred upon their age and their years of experience within their groups and to differentiate elements of their orientation from that of younger, less experienced, participants (Simpson 2012). Bennett (2006), for example, describes the ways older punks in his study took on the conscious role of experienced 'forefathers', who had reduced the intensity of their own participation and were content to hand over the most outwardly spectacular, hedonistic forms of participation to a new generation.

The nature of the subcultural attachment of older participants also can become more personalised over time. In his study of straight edge, a clean-living, anti-drug/alcohol offshoot of punk culture, for example, Haenfler (2009) shows how, as participants aged within the culture, they tended to understand their commitment in individual more than collective terms. Where previously participation was centred on outward display of spectacular style and intensive community involvement, for example, participants outlined how their commitment to straight-edge ideals now expressed itself in a variety of more personalised ways as part of broader adult lives centred on a range of commitments. As Haenfler explains, people's identification remained strong, but straight edge sometimes became more internalised:

'most report being less engaged in collective expressions of sXe and more committed to their own lifestyle choices... straight edge changes from something they are part of to something that is part of them' (2009: 157)

Similarly, Bennett (2006) and Davis (2006) both suggest that attachment to punk tends to become more flexible and individualised as it becomes integrated into complex, multifaceted adult lives. And some suggest this could have implications for the how we understand punk and other similar communities. For Davis, the complexity and diversity of people's continuing sense of punk attachment as they become older adds weight to existing calls among some commentators to conceptualise music groupings such as punk using the term *scene*. This concept is deemed better able than other terms, such as subculture, to capture fluidity, internal heterogeneity and differential levels and types of individual involvement (see Bennett and Peterson 2004).

Leaving aside ongoing debates over terminology, however, it remains important not to underplay the range of evidence in these and other studies of more overt and committed forms of community attachment among some older participants. Such attachment may be particularly marked in situations where sufficient numbers of long-term participants have remained involved in the group that the growing up process itself becomes a collective one. Nicola Smith points out that, in contrast to some of the groups to feature in other studies, the UK northern soul scene comprises an enduring community comprising, for the most part, 'the same body of continuing participants' (2009: 430). Smith's research on the scene demonstrates how northern soul has become dominated by older participants and that their sense of attachment to the scene as a community has often remained as intense as their continuing social participation. Likewise, a core of strongly identified and actively involved participants between 30 and 45 are deemed to have formed the majority of the Brisbane queer scene in Taylor's research (2010), which offers little indication that such participants were retreating into more privatised forms of queer identity.

Similarly, in my own study of older goths, a substantial cohort of participants had remained involved in the group into their thirties and forties. Consciousness of being older and wanting to dress and act in a manner appropriate to their age was clear, yet many had continued to place importance on their exhibition of collective style, attendance at events and self-conscious articulations of community belonging. As a result of the increasing number of older participants, elements of the overall orientation and values of the scene itself were slowly changing, whether in terms of collective shifts towards particular age-suitable forms of clothing, shifting topics of conversation at events, or – most strikingly – the increasing presence of children as an integral part of some festivals. As I have suggested elsewhere, not only were these goths continuing to exhibit and live out collective forms of identity, they were, quite literally, growing up together (Hodkinson 2011).

The possibility that there are differences between groupings as well as individuals in respect of the orientation of older participants and the proportion of membership that they account for may sometimes connect to the distinct character of such groupings. The inherently political nature of punk-related scenes, for example, may make it easier to remain committed to ideals or goals through less spectacular and, perhaps, more individualised means as one becomes older (Haenfler 2009). To take another instance, the relatively longstanding embrace of dominant arbiters of success among goths may make it easier to reconcile continuing collective involvement with commitment to successful careers, for example (Hodkinson 2011). Equally, with respect to sheer numbers, it is clear that some groupings have proved better able than others to continue to recruit new generations of adolescent enthusiasts and, thereby, to place older continuing participants in the minority rather than the majority, something that may have significant implications for the nature of their continuing

participation. These and other possibilities warrant further investigation through comparative research, but it remains important not to over-generalise apparent differences between groups or to jump too quickly to conclusions as to the explanation for them.

What we can confidently conclude from the discussion above, however, is that across a range of groups the ways participants experience and perform consciously older identities serves to illustrate that their activities ought not to be interpreted as a simple attempt to cling onto adolescence or refuse to come to terms with their age but, rather, a particular approach to growing older and negotiating adulthood. Often, identification as an older participant may entail a more flexible and personalised form of attachment, negotiated alongside a greater range of other commitments, priorities and identities as people come to terms with their advancing years. For some, practical community participation may be particularly sparse, consisting of little more than an occasional festival or reunion. Yet there also remain striking examples of continued attachment among self-consciously older participants to the collective living out of their affiliations as adults. And sometimes, the collective negotiation of different stages of adulthood taking place amongst substantial numbers of older members has implications for the collective character of communities themselves as well as for the identities of individual participants.

Emerging Questions

Rather than being centred on trying to understand the retention or extension of youthfulness, then, research on older participants of youth cultures usually is centred on making sense of how people negotiate their continued involvement with adult practicalities, responsibilities, bodies and identities. In establishing this point, I have identified a number of the key themes of such early research. There are, however, a range of further questions that are beginning to form part of the developing agenda for research of older youth cultural participants. Below, I'll discuss some of the most important.

One of the strengths of research on ageing youth cultural participants is that it has the potential to make sense of the ways music/style cultures integrate within broader lives and identities. Yet understanding of the integration of older youth cultural participation with work, family and other aspects of life remains in its infancy. As research into such questions develops it is essential that researchers not only ask about the implications of adult priorities and responsibilities for the form taken by developing subcultural participation, but also about the ways long-term involvement in a spectacular youth culture might inform the approach individuals take to things like family life and work. Existing and emerging research into the ways individuals utilise subcultural knowledge, skills and capital in the choice and development of their career, represents an example. In some cases, for example, individuals develop careers directly connected to the subculture, whether as a subcultural musicians, promoters, record label owners, specialist clothes retailers and so on (O'Connor 2008). In others, skills or outlooks developed in the context of a youth culture may have a role in the development of careers or approaches to work less directly connected to the group.

Another issue for further exploration concerns relations between older participants and younger enthusiasts within the context of youth cultural communities and the ways cultural knowledge and experience are passed on. Some studies have illustrated how older

participants can adopt a paternal role, offering the subcultural knowledge they have acquired as a resource for younger participants to draw upon and taking on the responsibility for nurturing the collective future of the group (Bennett 2006). This mostly seems to occur informally within subcultural spaces or through older participants becoming involved in organisational activities of some kind, but it can also take the form of parents transferring subcultural capital to their own offspring within the domestic sphere (Smith forthcoming 2012) or the more institutionalised teaching of subcultural skills and/or ideas to younger participants or would-be participants (Fogarty forthcoming 2012; Schilt and Giffort forthcoming 2012).

Tensions between older and young participants, however, are not uncommon, with older participants often seeking to differentiate themselves from the naivety, exhibitionism and competitiveness they attribute to the young. Discourses of authenticity centred less on subcultural experience form the basis for such differentiations and for the continued claiming of subcultural status as an older participant. The collective direction that a subcultural group may be taken in by its youthful majority sometimes can be a further point of tension for older participants who may find it difficult to come to terms with increasing disparities between the subculture's current form and the ideal image they have of its character and significance during their own younger years (Smith 2009; Tsitsos forthcoming 2012). The manifestation of such relationships and tensions between old and young, however, is liable to depend on a number of factors, not least the size and influence of older and younger cohorts within a given group. Greater research is needed on such questions and this needs to include reference to the attitude and orientation of younger participants vis-a-vis their elders as well as the other way around.

The relationship between old and young connects to a further set of questions about the role of personal nostalgia in continuing participants' identities. I have already established that many participate actively and socially in the present, but bearing in mind that the vast majority first became involved in their adolescent years, to what extent is their current enjoyment centred upon a backward-looking orientation to those younger, formative days? In my study of older goths, the frequency with which participants would utilise the phrase 'back in the day', with the apparent implication that current participation was somehow less authentic or significant than that of the past, was striking. Meanwhile, although they were mixed in their precise tastes and orientations, many older goths still listened to music from when they were younger in preference to newer sounds, both privately and at nostalgia-oriented events they sometimes chose to attend (Hodkinson 2011). One of the most direct discussions of nostalgia in relation to ageing and youth cultures so far is provided by Nicola Smith (2009), who suggests northern soul fans in her study were caught in a tension between their ongoing present-day participation in the scene and their feelings of nostalgia for the past. Their continuing participation in the scene meant that nostalgic feelings related not to the loss of northern soul from their lives, but to the loss of their ability to participate in it as a young person, something which could be brought into sharp relief by encounters with younger fans in the present. The relationship here between nostalgia and authenticity is perhaps a key area for enquiry.

Questions about whether older participation is partially or primarily nostalgic, alongside evidence about the likelihood of de-intensification or personalisation of commitment also connect to the political significance, if any, of continuing involvement. Youth often is regarded by social theorists as a temporary rebellion against dominant understandings of the world and one's place within it, prior to eventual incorporation into dominant understandings

of full personhood with the embrace of the adult world (Blatterer 2007). And one does not have to be a subcultural theorist of the neo-Marxist variety to regard some of the activities of spectacular youth subcultures as transgressive of normative adult society in one respect or another. With this in mind, what ought we to make of the continuing participation of older participants within such groups or, in some cases, the domination of 'youth' cultures by ageing cohorts of enthusiasts? Does the continuing involvement of these enthusiasts constitute a challenge to dominant models of the life course and adulthood – or even an act more subversive of predominant expectations than teenage subcultural participation (see Holland 2004; Taylor 2010)? From another perspective, might the shift from hedonistic/spectacular forms of scene involvement to a greater emphasis on the furthering of subcultural ideals through more 'adult' channels sometimes lead to more direct or conscious forms of politics (see Haenfler 2009; Moore 2010)? Or does the drift towards 'toned down', personalised or nostalgia-oriented forms of participation, lived out as part of otherwise normal adult lives dominated by marriage, children and career suggest an establishment incorporation of subcultural lifestyles?

The transgressive or political significance of youth cultures invariably relates in some way to structural position as well as to cultural activities themselves. With this in mind, a further - and as-yet underexplored - area of importance concerns the relationship of older participation in youth cultural groups with social characteristics such as class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. The latter two have begun to be examined. As we have seen, Holland (2004) and Gregory (2009), among others, have in different ways illustrated the particular pressures likely to be faced by women who wish to remain involved in spectacular youth cultures and some studies have indicated that older female participants tend to be fewer, overall, than their male counterparts (Bennett 2006; Hodkinson forthcoming 2013), though more detailed exploration is required. Taylor's study of Brisbane's queer scene is also noteworthy in respect of the significance of older participation for social divisions relating to sexuality, particularly in respect of her argument that the scene's rejection of dominant heterosexual models of identity entails the transgression of hegemonic understandings of the life course, centred as they are upon heteronormative rites of passage such as marriage and children (Taylor 2010). There is a great deal more to be said on the subjects of gender and sexuality in relation to older youth cultural participants, but the most notable current gaps in the developing field concern ethnicity and class. Most studies to date have involved predominantly white groups and, although the literature does cover working as well as middle class participants, questions about the significance of class have been somewhat marginal, with only a few exceptions (e.g. Moore 2010). Especially given the useful emphasis placed by studies of older youth cultural participants on the connections between leisure and other aspects of adult lives, the development of such a focus would be of considerable value.

Conclusion

In this article I have provided a critical discussion of developing research on ageing youth cultural participants, including studies from Europe, America and Australasia. In particular, I have argued that such work demonstrates how, although it involves continued involvement in certain 'youthful' activities, enduring participation in youth cultures rarely should be understood as a simple retention of adolescence, less still a rejection of adulthood. On the contrary, participants typically negotiate their subcultural commitment with the development of identities, bodies, priorities and orientations which differentiate them from younger participants, including their former selves. With this in mind, I have offered comment on a

range of themes of importance to current and future work, including the relationship between participation and adult responsibilities, the ways participants adapt to older bodies and adult expectations and the extent to which participation remains collective and community-oriented or, alternatively, individualised or privatised. I also have identified emerging questions relating to the conceptualisation of older participation - from the role of nostalgia to the implications of adult involvement for understandings of subculture as resistance or rebellion - and have suggested some particular areas for attention in the future, particularly the significance of social divisions for ageing participation in youth cultures.

As well as being an important area of research in its own right, the study of ageing and youth cultures has the potential to inform broader understandings of the life course and adulthoods, including the relationships between work, family and leisure in people's developing trajectories through life. There are some possible lessons for general youth cultural research also. Over the last few decades, such research has been somewhat vulnerable to the criticism that it tended to examine music, style and leisure related identities and practices in a fixed period of time, and in isolation from the broader lives of those involved (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006). By explicitly focusing on the nature and significance of continuing scene participation as part of the broader development of the bodies, commitments, priorities and identities of those involved as they negotiate their way through different stages of the life course, the growing body of research into older participation in youth cultures offers ways to overcome this problem and, in doing so, to open up possibilities for the more rounded study of adolescent as well as older participation in such groups.

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