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Youth Cultures and the Rest of Life: Subcultures, Post-Subcultures and Beyond

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Abstract

Recent debate on the conceptualisation of youth cultures has been characterised as an irreconcilable stalemate between materialist defenders of a version of subcultural theory derived from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and post-subcultural theorists who favour more individualised understandings. This article suggests that, beneath this façade lies a more complex and reconcilable debate and that it may be time to move beyond the polarising presence of the CCCS as primary reference point for the discussion. Turning to substance, I go on to examine how enduring areas of disagreement within the debate can be resolved, establishing ways forward with respect to the interplay between spectacular groupings and individual pathways and the contextualisation of youth cultures, including with respect to material and structural factors. I advocate greater emphasis on the study of collective youth cultures as part of broader biographies as a way forward that can reconcile these substantive strands and draw together insight from across the subcultures/post-subcultures debate.

Keywords

youth culture; subculture; post-subculture; community; biography; identity

Introduction

Over the past two decades a debate has played itself out among youth studies scholars concerning the most appropriate way to study and conceptualise cultural practices and identities among young people. Argument has centred on the continuing usefulness, or not, of the concept of subculture. 'Post-subcultural' theorists repeatedly have drawn attention to agency, fluidity and individualisation in contemporary youth cultural identities, suggesting that subculture, with its implications - as they see it - of collective fixity and structural determinism, is a poor fit with such a scenario. In response, critics of post-subcultural theory have raised questions about its lack of attention to the relationship between youth cultures and broader social structures while defending the emphasis on this and other facets of the subcultural theories of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. According to a recent piece by Woodman and Wyn (2015) a 'stalemate' appears to have played itself out between these two positions.

This paper suggests the range of differences and commonalities between defenders and detractors of different forms of subcultural theory may be oversimplified by such a characterisation. While the debate often is reduced to one centred on the usefulness or not of CCCS-derived versions of subcultural theory, I suggest here that this may exaggerate the weddedness to the CCCS of those posited as its defenders while affording insufficient significance to ongoing uses of subculture that place greater emphasis on collective dynamics than on structural origins or symbolic resistance. An irreconcilably polarised façade unable to escape the shadow of the CCCS may also have functioned, I suggest, to mask substantial areas of possible common ground with respect to productive ways forward.

I propose that continued emphasis on the importance of collective forms of identity within youth culture and their significance for young lives ought to represent a common endeavour between subcultural and post-subcultural theorists and, in particular, that developing emphasis on studying collective youth cultural practices in the context of broader individual biographies has the potential to accommodate calls for youth (sub)cultural studies to do more to connect youth cultures to other aspects of life, including structural position.

PART ONE: A debate (still) centred on the CCCS

Post-subcultural theory as anti-CCCS theory?

Reflecting on the subculture, post-subculture debate, Andy Bennett (2011) warns of a widening schism between supporters of CCCS-derived versions of subcultural theory and scholars such as himself who subscribe to more individualised understandings of youth culture, with each forming a discrete body of research. As part of the same piece, Bennett responds thoughtfully to criticisms of post-subcultural theory, while strongly reaffirming his opposition to the term subculture, a position that also forms the basis for more recent contributions in which Bennett urges researchers of Australian youth cultures (2014) and scholars of young people's use of the internet (2015) to abandon their use of the term. I want to suggest this opposition to the use of subculture in any circumstances, and the observation of an irreconcilable debate, rest on an unnecessarily narrow and CCCS-driven conception of what subculture might infer.

Bennett's initial rejection of subculture in favour of an understanding of contemporary youth cultures as fluid, individualised neo-tribes (Bennett 1999), formed part of a broader body of scepticism within 1990s youth cultural studies about the neo-Marxist subcultural theories of the CCCS. The predominant framework developed at the CCCS, which has been elaborated repeatedly and exhaustively elsewhere (for example, Blackman 2005), had understood 1950s and 60s subcultures such as teddy boy, mod, skinhead and others as collective responses by post-war working class youth to their contradictory and subordinated position in post-war UK society. Subcultures, it was inferred, comprised coherent meaning systems that used the specifics of style to 'magically' resolve structural problems and articulate cultural resistance (Clarke et al 1976; Cohen 1972). Alongside Bennett, the range of scholars who queued up to denounce the Centre's approach focused their criticism on the apparent determinism in the interpretation of such groups as spontaneous expressions of class and on the characterisation of such groups as fixed, internally homologous sets of signifiers whose meaning could be interpreted through semiological analysis (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Malbon 2000; Miles 2000; Muggleton 2000; Redhead 1993). The marginalisation of young women, ethnic minority youth and of broader questions of both gender and ethnicity in the CCCS's analysis also formed part of the critique, as did the Centre's dearth of

empirical attention to the lived experiences and understandings of subcultural participants themselves (Hodkinson 2012; Sweetman 2014).

Much of the criticism parroted earlier attacks on the CCCS' predominant approach - including by CCCS members such as McRobbie and Garber (1977) and Clarke (1981), but the 1990s 'post-subcultural turn' (Bennett 2011) also drew on theories of social change. Not only was the CCCS' explanation questioned as an account of its time, but the expansion and development of an increasingly diverse and fluid post-Fordist consumer culture within late capitalist societies since then was argued to have rendered youth culture a thoroughly different prospect by the 1990s (Muggleton 2000). Influenced by elements of postmodern theory and the writings of Giddens (1992), Beck (1992), Bauman (2000) and Mafessoli (1996), post-subcultural theories focused on individual young consumers reflexively combining and moving between ephemeral, loosely bounded groupings in the context of an increasingly uncertain, individualised consumer society where the fixed and stable categories of the past were being replaced by more shifting, fluid identities. Consistent with this, in place of an emphasis on culture as a deterministic expression of class position, post-subcultural theorists indicated that youth cultural groupings had the potential to cross-cut or transcend rather than merely express structural positionings (Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2000).

For many, this necessitated the abandonment not only of CCCS subcultural theory, but also the concept of subculture itself, the latter deemed inseparable from the former. A plethora of possible replacement terms were proposed, most notably neo-tribe (Bennett 1999), lifestyle (Chaney 1996; Miles 2000) and scene (Kahn-Harris 2007), each emphasising porous boundaries, internal diversity, temporary commitment and individual movement between groups. Such is the extent of subculture's emphasis on fixity and boundedness, argued some, that it is not even appropriate as a descriptor for apparently best-case examples of spectacular youth culture such as goth and punk. Thus, 'there is very little evidence to suggest that *even the most committed groups of youth* are in any way as 'coherent' or 'fixed' as the term subculture implies' (Bennett 1999: 605 – my emphasis). Any hint of diversity, change or individual movement between or within groups, then, became sufficient to warrant rejection of the term. Dan Laughey, for example, suggests that elements of fluidity and overlap in the otherwise distinctive goth scene 'surely suggest that goths were not uniformly bound to a particular subcultural way of life...', rendering the 'continual application of the term "subculture"' to goths 'hardly justifiable' (2005: 50).

More fundamentally, it is argued that subculture remains irretrievably bound up with the particulars of the CCCS's neo-Marxist understanding of subcultures as homologically aligned sets of stylistic signifiers that express youthful class resistance and 'magically' resolve structural problems through collective style. Paul Sweetman rejects the notion that subculture can plausibly be retained whilst 'stripping it of its connotations', the latter taken as bound to the CCCS's 'whole framework' (2013: 2.5). Similarly, for Bennett, the specifics of the CCCS explanation cannot be extracted from the term and, in particular, subcultural theory, by its very definition, infers that individuals are "'held" if not "forced", together in subcultural groups' by their structural and social location (2011: 495).

Such a position, I want to suggest, reflects an unnecessarily narrow interpretation of subculture. The inference that the concept is so inflexible that it always must infer culture as determined by structure and cannot accommodate even the smallest measure of individual diversity leaves us with a caricature that few of its adherents would recognise. It also underestimates the complex, multifaceted history of subcultural theory (Blackman 2005; 2014). While the CCCS's contribution was of great importance, the subsequent binding of the concept to their framework is puzzling, not least since the diversity of subcultural theory is elsewhere acknowledged by post-subcultural critics. Bennett, for example, refers critically to the 'myriad ways' that subculture 'has been applied in

sociology and cultural theory' from the Chicago School onwards (2011: 497) – a justified observation but one that raises questions about his simultaneous call for us to reject the concept on the basis of its irrevocable weddedness to the CCCS.

The extent of the emphasis on rejecting subculture on the basis of so narrow a characterisation contributes, I suggest, to an unnecessarily polarised understanding of the subcultures debate. Just as the term subculture is deemed to be automatically associated with structural determinism, absolute fixity and the CCCS, so assertions of a widening gulf between subculture and post-subcultural theory seem to rest on the generalised characterisation of advocates of subculture as CCCS-derived class determinists. And this connects to a broader point, that the extent to which post-subcultural theory is defined and dominated by its relentless opposition to the CCCS has sometimes placed limits on its ability to develop meaningful alternative ways to make sense of youth culture. Paraphrasing Hesmondhalgh (2005), to repeatedly assert the importance of individual difference, agency and fluidity in place of the CCCS' focus on structure and fixity may only get us so far.

In the next section, however, I suggest prominent recent defences of aspects of CCCS subcultural theory may also have contributed to polarisation and stagnancy in the debate, through the extent of the emphasis they sometimes have placed on defending the Birmingham School.

Defending (but not advocating?) the CCCS

Critics of post-subcultural theory suggest its individualised approach to youth culture offers a complacent, over-celebratory understanding of youth cultural consumption that affords insufficient attention to the role of class and other forms of structural position. And the critique often is framed as a defence of the CCCS, the latter deemed to have been simplified and misrepresented by post-subcultural critics. For Shane Blackman (2011: 1), 'the postmodernist understanding of youth subculture... denies the immense diversity in the CCCS theorization', while Christine Griffin's ponders how the CCCS subcultures project's 'diverse and profoundly oppositional body of work came to be constituted as a uniform approach and even as an orthodoxy' (2011: 245).

The observation that the work of the Birmingham theorists has sometimes been over-simplified and its lasting significance underrated is probably justified, up to a point. Yet diverse bodies of work can retain clear prevailing orientations whose critique remains a legitimate exercise. In the case of the CCCS subcultures project, a central framework is clearly set out and developed in Phil Cohen's early working paper (1972), Clarke et al's fulsome elaboration in the introduction to *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976) (henceforth RTR) and aspects of Hebdige's early work (1976; 1979), amongst other places. And, importantly, for all the defence of the CCCS legacy, there is little appetite among most of the centre's defenders to preserve the specifics of this prevailing framework. Rather, as with a recent reflective piece by Jefferson and Hall themselves (2006: xii), we are invited, contra the individualism attributed to post-subcultural theory, to revive selected broad principles regarded as 'in the RTR tradition' such as a continuing emphasis on the political and structural significance of youth cultures (Blackman 2005) and attempts to understand their broader significance that are attentive to the role of class (Griffin 2011).

Establishment of the general significance of material position as an influence on cultural practices forms the primary focus for Shildrick and MacDonald (2006), whose self-proclaimed 'defence of subculture' questions the abandonment of CCCS theory while suggesting structural factors are neglected by post-subcultural theory's emphasis on agentic consumerism and middle-class lifestyles. Yet, the approach advocated bears little comparison with the CCCS's 'intellectual pyrotechnics' (S.

Cohen 1980) and there is little sign of the reading-off of class from style, fixed stylistic homologues or hegemonic warfare. Instead Shildrick and MacDonald refer positively to empirical studies that attend to the ways different forms of exclusion, disadvantage or structural identity can limit or influence forms of cultural expression and affiliation (e.g. Bose 2003; Hollands 2002; Nayak 2003; Pilkington 2004; Shildrick 2006). In terms of what it advocates, then, the contribution is less an endorsement of CCCS subcultural theory than a useful call for studies of youth cultures to broaden their outlook and take greater heed of the kinds of contextual and material factors focused on in empirical youth transitions research.

While key points of difference, remain, then, characterisations of the post-subcultures debate as a simple argument between post-subcultural critics who reject CCCS subcultural theory and defenders of subculture who advocate it are wide of the mark. More generally, the continuing presence of CCCS subcultural theory as a primary reference point for both 'sides' of the argument has, it might be argued, become a distraction that serves to artificially polarise the debate. I want to suggest that moving beyond the RTR shadow (Williams 2011) might expedite the identification of greater common-ground and of fruitful forms of forward momentum. In the next section I begin to do this through highlighting ongoing uses of the term subculture that do not draw especially strongly on the work of the CCCS.

Subculture without the CCCS?

While a particular version of the subcultures debate centred on the CCCS has been establishing itself in youth studies folklore, other researchers have continued to develop understandings of subculture that are less reliant on RTR. Such theorists have drawn on different aspects of subcultural theories of the past and present, including interactionist theories, selected CCCS observations and facets of post-subcultural theory, in the continued utilisation of subculture as useful academic currency for distinctive youth groupings with a clear collective character and, usually, a discernable sense of difference vis-à-vis a perceived broader society. Though such contributions differ, they are united in placing emphasis on the importance of distinct, collective groupings as part of youth culture and in envisaging these as more than merely raw materials to be harvested by ephemeral, multi-affiliated, post-subculturalists.

Williams, for example, proposes a broad understanding of subculture centred on symbolic interactionist thought. Recognising aspects of post-subcultural critiques while retaining an emphasis upon collective identity, he defines subculture as 'culturally bounded, but not closed, networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects and practices through interaction' (2011: 39). While more explicitly tied to interactionism as a particular framework, Williams' parameters are partially compatible with my own attempt to rework subculture in relation to ethnographic work on goths, through indicators of group 'substance', including shared identity, commitment, distinctiveness and a degree of autonomy with respect to spaces and networks. In essence, my suggestion was that, while they may be unsuited to many of the specifics of the CCCS's explanation, some youth cultures retain striking collective features not accounted for by an emphasis on post-subcultural fluidity alone, and broadly coherent with what I took to be common facets of subcultural theory (Hodkinson 2002). Ross Haenfler also brings together some common features across subcultural theory in signalling an emphasis on groups that stand out from what he understands as dominant forms of culture: 'a subculture is a social subgroup distinguishable from mainstream culture by its values, beliefs, symbols, and often, in the case of youth, styles and music'

(2010: 5). Though the use of 'mainstream' here may be contestable, Haenfler's approach is useful in specifying the importance of collective distinctiveness as a consistent theme of subcultural theory.

Writers such as Nancy MacDonald (2001) and Erik Hannerz (2015), meanwhile, focus on the subjective understanding of collective difference, boundaries and distinctiveness among subcultural participants themselves. Thus, for MacDonald, 'a subculture may be defined as that which *constructs, perceives and portrays itself* as standing apart from others as an isolated, defined and bounded group' (2001: 152, my emphasis). This emphasis on insider understandings and internal boundary work draws on Howard Becker's emphasis (1963) on internal subcultural ideologies and systems of classification, and connects with Sarah Thornton's (1995) development of this in relation to Bourdieu (1984) as part of her account of the role of subcultural constructions of an external 'mainstream' and internal hierarchies of 'hipness' as a mechanism for the strengthening of subcultural capital in 1990s club cultures. Hannerz's approach (2015), centred on complex constructions of self and other among Swedish and Indonesian punks in the construction their subcultural authenticities, draws upon Thornton and MacDonald's work, while placing emphasis upon the plurality of identities that can exist within a subculture.

Such approaches prompt a number of questions, including about whether definitions of subculture that are so broad and politically neutral remain sufficiently meaningful, which youth cultural identities would and would not qualify and what their designation as such might signify about their broader socio-cultural significance. Paul Sweetman's (2013) query as to the difference between 'subcultures' and the myriad other forms of collective identity, from model railway fans to golfing fanatics, may warrant consideration. Meanwhile, when it comes to questions of structure - in relation to class and also other factors such as ethnicity - such accounts could be vulnerable to the criticism that, even if such questions are not excluded, they are often left largely implicit. Anoop Nayak's (2003) use of a broad, flexible notion of subculture in his ethnographic exposition of 'Real Geordies', 'Charvers' and 'B-Boyz' (also characterised as 'White Wannabes') as distinct collective forms of white working class youth cultural identity in North East England provides a notable exception. Nevertheless, the continued deployment of subculture and enduring emphasis on distinct collective youth groupings in these non-CCCS-derived explanations forms an important strand of youth cultural scholarship that sometimes is marginalised in truncated summaries that mischaracterise subculture as tied, by definition, to CCCS-derived structural determinism.

At which point, I turn to a more detailed elaboration of key points of ongoing contention and dilemma in the subcultures debate. Through doing so, I pursue the contention that lines of agreement and disagreement are more complex than sometimes presented. I argue that a continuing focus on the importance and operation of distinct youth cultural communities and a developing emphasis on the context in which they operate offers the potential for much common-cause between 'opposed' commentators. These themes are then pursued further in the final section of the article, in which I explore possible approaches to the study of youth cultural participation as part of broader lives.

PART 2: Enduring Dilemmas and Common Ground

Beyond floating individuals and 'ordinary youth'

The status within youth culture of distinctive cultural groupings forms a key substantive point of ongoing contention. Although it does not deny the continued existence of discernable communities, post-subcultural theory's emphasis has tended to be on their ephemerality and porous boundaries,

the operation and significance of collective values or commitments eclipsed by a primary focus on the shifting sensibilities of individuals cross-cutting different affiliations (Muggleton 2000). Reflecting on recent research on music scene affiliations and the internet in the Goldcoast, Australia, for example, Robards and Bennett (2011) focus on the complex and partial group connections exhibited by young people and their tendency to avoid aligning themselves straightforwardly with any particular group. The youth cultural grouping, here, becomes merely a vernacular reference point and set of resources (styles, peers, practices) for the reflexive individual to selectively interact with and draw from (also see Robards 2015).

Separately, it is often argued, both by those influenced by elements of post-subcultural theory (Laughey 2005) and some who position themselves as defenders of the CCCS (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006), that youth cultures research places disproportionate emphasis on spectacular communities, to the exclusion of the cultural practices and identities of 'ordinary' young people. Raising further questions about the framing of their account as a 'defence of subculture' (Sweetman 2013), Shildrick and MacDonald's accusation against post-subcultural theorists in this particular respect seems to be that they have failed to move sufficiently beyond subcultural theory's fascination with spectacular music and style:

'the post-subcultural equation of youth culture with the stylistic exploits of minority music/dance "scenes" and "neo-tribes" – at the expense of the cultural lives and leisure activities of the "ordinary" majority is in danger of producing a distorted and incomplete portrayal of contemporary youth culture' (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006: 128)

The charge is rather broad-brush and its validity depends on what does or doesn't count as 'post-subcultural'. What is clear is that, whether post-subcultural or not, there is now a substantial and increasing body of work focused upon 'ordinary' forms of youth culture. Having been pioneered by McRobbie's seminal examinations of ordinary teenage girls cultures (1991), Jenkin's study of 'lads, citizens and ordinary kids' in Northern Ireland (1983) and Willis' examinations of the everyday creativity of 'common culture' (1990) the approach now boasts a wide range of examples, including Laughey's UK study of music tastes and identities based on inclusive school-based research (2006), Nayak's aforementioned exposition of a range of white working class cultural identities in North East England (2003), Lincoln's ongoing work on youth and private space (2012), research by Cantillon (2015) into Australian mainstream clubbing, Pilkington's extensive research on Russian youth cultures (e.g. 2004) and, of course, wide-ranging bodies of work on, amongst other things, youth and gender (e.g. Allen and Mendick 2013; Ward 2014) and youth and social media (Robards and Bennett 2014). It perhaps remains the case that in depth studies of youth, leisure and style that span the range of young people can sometimes be overshadowed by studies of spectacular music or style groups – perhaps because the latter are so visible and striking. Nevertheless, the primary exponents of the latter may not, in fact, be post-subcultural theorists but, rather, those who have sought to retain an explicit emphasis on subcultures – a further illustration of the complexities of the debate.

That continuing to pursue and expand this focus on ordinary youth cultures would be desirable is indisputable. Likewise, the continued examination of the reflexive navigation by individuals of multiple spaces, networks and taste-groupings in the construction of individual biographies is a clear area for further development. Yet greater emphasis on individual specificities need not to signal an end to continued understanding of the role of discernable forms of collective identity in many young people's lives. Abandoning substantive attempts to make sense of the workings and significance of such collective affiliations at the first sight of individual difference makes little sense when we could, instead, seek to understand the ways individual specificities and ephemerality coexist with aspects of stability and community that can influence and shape young lives. An interest in the interplay of

community cohesion and individual dynamics ought to comprise common ground between subcultural and post-subcultural theorists. We should, I would suggest, be pursuing, drawing together and integrating two angles of study, one focused on how individuals negotiate with, draw from and position themselves in relation to different groups and the other centred on how particular groups work and the ways their operation provides structure and direction to the lives, orientations and identities of participants.

And, notwithstanding the importance of 'ordinary' youth, a continued focus on the significance of spectacular, distinctive or deviant cultural groups can form part of this endeavour. Such groups may not be representative of all or most young people but, equally, this minority status is partly what makes them an important and valuable object of study. The relationship of such groups with the rest of society, the motivations and consequences of involvement, the operation and implications of collective values and practices, the ways participation is lived and felt, the role of different spaces, networks and artefacts and the ways such groups reinforce or challenge different sorts of societal values represent just a few of the themes we can and should continue to address. The study of 'abnormal' groups can tell us much about these groups themselves and their participants, but also has the potential to illuminate aspects of the broader society within which they operate, not only through obvious points of divergence and tension but also, as I have recently argued, striking similarities and connections with respect to the broader practices, motivations and concerns that can underlie spectacular or deviant facades (Hodkinson 2012). In this sense, a greater focus on 'ordinariness' in youth cultures is perfectly compatible with continuing emphasis on the spectacular and the marginal.

Whether or not we continue to refer to such groups as 'subcultures' may, depending upon one's perspective, be regarded as an argument of secondary importance here. Rather than relying on some variant of 'the groupings formerly known as subcultures', my own preference is to continue to work with the term subculture. Others will continue to disagree. Either way, it makes little sense to deny the continuing usefulness of various aspects of subcultural theories of the past and present - so long as we avoid unnecessarily narrow understandings of term - in making sense of such groups. From Becker's transactional emphasis on the dynamic between the value systems and collective consciousness of subculture and the perceived society outside it (1963), to Hebdige's recognition of the dynamics of commercial incorporation of subcultural styles (1979), to Thornton's exposition of the role of media and commerce in the construction of subcultural authenticities (1995) and Hannerz's deconstruction of the role of plural subcultural constructions of the mainstream in the development and performance of subculture (2015), subcultural theories continue to offer questions, tools and conceptualisations that can be applied fruitfully to substantive youth groupings and to the significance they have for individual lives and the societies in which they emerge.

Cultures in Context

One does not have to be a material determinist to recognise that, as a whole, studies of youth cultures in recent decades have not done as much as they might to address the societal contexts in which such groups operate, whether with respect to their broader socio-political significance or their relationship with the material circumstances and structural positions of participants. This partly reflects justified wariness about the speculative nature of such contextualisation in the case of Phil Cohen (1972) and Clarke et al (1976), who postulated, with little evidence, precise relationships between specific stylistic alignments and changing class identities as well as sweeping claims as to the ideological significance of such styles (also Hebdige 1976; 1979). Scepticism of the CCCS's theoretical approach prompted a turn toward immersive ethnography within youth cultural studies from the 1990s onwards and an unwillingness to veer far from observable insider experience (Hall

and Jefferson 2006). This included a number of 'insider' studies conducted by current or former members of the groups under the microscope (Hodkinson 2005).

For Paul Sweetman, such studies sometimes are insufficiently able to move beyond the lived experiences and understandings of insiders: 'just because insiders do not regard their actions as overtly political or transgressive, for example, does not mean that they should not be interpreted as such' (2013: 2.4). And, with the notable exception of gender and sexuality, which have been the subject of extensive commentary in recent youth cultures research (e.g. Brill 2008; Leblanc 2008; Pini 2001; Taylor 2010), such insider-oriented accounts have tended not to concern themselves as much as they sometimes might have done with class, ethnicity or other aspects of the social background of youth cultural participants, or indeed the implications of their cultural affiliations and practices for other aspects of their lives, including domestic life and education, career and material well-being. Equally, the move to insider research has had implications for which forms of youth culture become the subject of academic study, with a tendency to focus on middle-class identities apparently reflecting the predominant backgrounds of youth studies scholars themselves. Criticism that the active individual choice and agency emphasised in post-subcultural theory may be the preserve of more privileged youth, then, may warrant further examination (Hesmondhalgh 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006).

While there remains an ongoing dilemma with respect to the achievement of appropriate balance between attending to the structural and socio-political context of youth cultures and to the subjective understandings of participants, the desirability of achieving some such balance may be less an issue of dispute than sometimes assumed. Bennett suggests there is nothing in post-subcultural theory that precludes an emphasis on the connections between youth cultural practices and broader contexts, including structural aspects of participant's lives. The point of difference is rather that, in Bennett's understanding, even the most disadvantaged young people can use culture to respond to or subvert their marginalisation in a complex range of ways, rather than having their practices constrained or determined by class (Bennett 2011). Bennett's point connects to Dan Woodman's (2009) broader suggestion that theoretical understandings of individualisation sometimes have too quickly been read as disavowals of the significance of material disadvantage when their intention is to re-theorise - for better or worse - the ways social differences operate and are negotiated in light of social change.

Nevertheless, the emphasis in aspects of post-subcultural theory on youth culture as a vehicle for individual agency and choice retains the potential for complacency unless accompanied by greater empirical emphasis on how social and material position play themselves out in the realm of culture – and vice versa. And it is also important to include forms of cultural practice and affiliation representative of a greater range of backgrounds as well as, at times, to encapsulate a comparative approach to the material and cultural situations of differently located youth cultures, with respect to class, ethnicity, locality and a range of other factors (Nayak 2003). It is worth bearing in mind, here, that if recent research in the post-subcultures tradition has tended to have a white, middle-class bias, then studies that have placed greater emphasis on the culturally constraining impact of lower socio-economic position have understandably focused much of their attention (unlike the bulk of the CCCS work) on unusually disadvantaged or deprived young people and/or neighbourhoods (Shildrick 2006; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006). Notwithstanding the obvious value of such a focus, studies of youth cultures might also take heed of recent calls for attention to the 'missing middle' of youth studies or, put simply, young people from ordinary working class backgrounds (Roberts 2011) as well as those inhabiting the increasingly murky boundaries between working and middle-class.

Having set out here the need to do more to understand youth cultural identities in context and the value of reconciling the examination of individual and group dynamics and a focus on both ordinary and spectacular forms of youth culture, I go on in the final section to suggest how biographical approaches that study collective youth cultures in the context of the rest of young people's lives might provide one potentially fruitful way forward.

PART 3: Youth cultures and the rest of life

At its most basic level, studying youth cultures in the context of the rest of participant's lives suggests placing explicit and detailed emphasis on elucidating how participation in any particular cultural grouping connects to the range of other spaces, networks and affiliations of importance to participants, from other forms of cultural affiliation and peer groups to family, education and work. Amongst other things, such a focus would include the relationship between cultural affiliations and a range of intersecting structural factors which, in turn, may enable us to address, in an empirically grounded fashion, the broader significance of different forms of youth cultural affiliation, with respect to the kinds of circumstances they reflect, respond to or express and their broader impact on society.

Such an approach would also enable continuing analysis of the collective or subcultural dynamics of particular youth groupings to be connected with an understanding of the place of such groupings within broader individual biographies. In so doing, it would open-up both sides of the group-individual dynamic alluded to earlier: how young individuals draw upon youth cultural communities as part of the broader construction of their lives and how the orientation of individual lives comes to be shaped by various facets of their affiliation to such communities. Amongst other things, placing group participation within such a context may enable an appreciation of the ordinariness of various aspects of life, even for participants in the most spectacular of subcultural groups (Hodkinson 2012).

Where feasible, such an approach can go beyond the contextualisation of youth cultural participation at any moment in time and towards a dynamic emphasis on the connections of the present to pasts and futures, so that current practices are understood as part of 'whole lives', a notion posited by Omel'chenko and Pilkington (2013) as part of their reflections on recent Russian and East European youth cultures research. Neglected by the static analysis of the CCCS and by a good deal of subcultural and post-subcultural research in more recent times, an emphasis on pathways and biographies has the potential to bring into play crucial questions about (sub)cultural recruitment, stages of participation and developing relationships with and beyond the community in question, as well as about how such affiliations interrelate with developing pathways relating to domestic arrangements and work, for example.

An approach centred on pathways would, of course, draw on emerging understandings of the complexity of young people's trajectories being developed within strands of youth studies centred on material and domestic transitions (Du Bois Reymond 2009; Furlong and Cartmel 2006; Heath 2009). Shildrick and MacDonald's (2007) adaption of the notion of 'leisure career', whereby developing trajectories of cultural practices, spaces and affiliations are understood alongside and in relation to simultaneous transitions with respect to education and employment, offers glimpses of the potential of such an emphasis. By focusing on the detail of interrelationships between trajectories in different parts of life rather than regarding starting points as all-determining, Shildrick and MacDonald move towards an understanding of how cultural practices and affiliations can be enabled or constrained by progressions of life in material or structural terms. While class

background plays a substantial role in the application of the approach in their own research, the approach they advocate has the potential to capture the ways different structural facets of young people's starting points intersect with a range of more dynamic and shifting factors in explaining the paths their lives take.

Also of value in elucidating the relationship between structural and other factors as part of youth pathways is biographical work by Phil Hodgkinson and colleagues focused on the negotiation of early career training as part of the broader developing lives of ten respondents who were interviewed repeatedly across a period of 18 months (Hodgkinson, Sparkes and Hodgkinson 1996). Hodgkinson et al emphasise the complex development of career routes and pathways for their sample, emphasising the interplay between relatively stable periods of *routine* and *turning points* that entail noticeable changes of direction or priorities. Connecting career journeys with the rest of life, including the realm of culture and identity, is at the heart of an analysis that combines aspects of Bourdieu's understanding of class and habitus with Giddens' emphasis on reflexive subjectivities. Hodgkinson et al place particular emphasis on individuals' *horizons for action* – which entail a combination of external constraints and enablers (including social background and dominant institutions) and developing subjective perceptions derived from their evolving habitus. Through doing so, they establish a nuanced approach to the interplay of different facets of life in the past and present that recognises the role of structural background and developing identities embedded in changing networks and circumstances. Referring to the interplay between the two, Hodgkinson et al argue that: 'what is available affects what we perceive to be possible and what we perceive to be possible and what we perceive as desirable can alter the available options' (1996, p.3). While Hodgkinson and colleagues' focus was on pathways related to training and work, the careful emphasis on biography here and development of a balanced framework for thinking about the interplay between structure and agency offers a potentially fruitful way of thinking about the ways cultural journeys work and how they connect to the rest of life.

Developing such a framework in relation to cultural journeys also would draw on recent work in the post-subcultural tradition that, drawing upon Giddens' notion of the reflexive project of the self, focuses attention on the ways young people construct, perform, narrate and map their identities in relation to physical and 'virtual' forms of private space (Hodgkinson and Lincoln 2008; Lincoln 2012). Most recently, ongoing research by Lincoln and Robards (2014) uses the Facebook timeline as a device to explore with young people the continuities, changes and key moments in their lives as represented by what they and their peer group communicate via the site. Emphasis is placed both on the content of individual stories and the ways they are constructed, narrated and made sense of and the analysis draws attention to the ongoing re-evaluation of identity and re-placing of the self over time, sometimes gradually and other times through more dramatic moments of re-evaluation. Although centred primarily on subjective identity rather than career pathways, there are clear connects here with Hodgkinson et al's framework, not least in relation to moments of routine and turning points.

Connecting an emphasis on pathways with a particular focus on specific youth cultures or communities, recent research on the relationship between youth cultural participation and different forms of creative careers is also worthy of mention here. Such work is especially interesting in turning established understandings of the material/cultural relationship around by asking how cultural participation may (or may not) result in particular pathways with respect to career. Steve Threadgold's discussion, for example, of complex and precarious transitions from youth cultural participant to risky, precarious forms of career in the music and related industries, provides a notable example. Threadgold places emphasis on the translation of subcultural capital within the context of music scenes into cultural and potentially economic forms of capital within legitimate cultures of work – and on the various obstacles to such transitions (2014). Ongoing research into

creative and DIY careers by Miranda Campbell (2015) touches on similar questions, in thinking about youth cultures as possible spaces for the learning and sharing of potential career skills (also see McRobbie 1994), examining trajectories from amateur creativity to small business and identifying extensive obstacles to success.

Combining the sorts of approach described with specific emphasis upon collective groupings, developing research of ageing and youth cultures offers perhaps the closest current example of the contextualisation of affiliations to particular cultural and subcultural groups within broader lives and biographies. Such research places emphasis on the development of participation in 'youth' groupings as individuals become older, alongside and in negotiation with a range of other facets of life, from different peer groups to housing and family arrangements, to education and career trajectories, and ageing bodies and identities (Bennett 2006; 2013; Bennett and Hodkinson 2012; Hodkinson 2011; Holland 2004; Smith 2009). Such work has focused both on individual and collective trajectories, outlined various examples of routines and turning points and begun to explore the implications of ongoing cultural affiliations for the rest of life and vice versa. It is also notable for having brought together researchers from variously opposed positions in the subculture/post-subculture debate into an enterprise with an inbuilt emphasis on the placing of collective youth cultural affiliations into the context of broader biographies. Recent research of body modification subcultures by Derek Roberts shows particularly acutely how such an approach can draw connections between the material situation and background of participants and their cultural activities and affiliations in which they become involved (Roberts 2014).

This body of research is still in its infancy and would benefit, amongst other things, from greater conceptual working through of how material, institutional, social and subjective factors work together in the ongoing development of cultural journeys and the continuing role of communities. Perhaps developing application of concepts such as leisure career, evolving habitus and horizons for action, alongside thinking familiar to youth cultural studies relating to both the individual reflexive self *and* the workings of contemporary communities and subcultures, can take us further. Crucially, I would suggest, if we can connect individual biographies and pathways with an understanding of the significance of 'youth' communities for older subcultural participants, then we ought to be able to do the same for the ongoing and developing affiliations of adolescents themselves.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to move beyond what sometimes is characterised as a polarised subcultures/post-subcultures debate and towards an approach to the study of youth cultures that draws points of common interest into an emphasis on the role of youth groupings as part of broader biographies. I began by showing how characterisations of the subculture-post-subculture debate as an irreconcilable argument between defenders and detractors of CCCS subcultural theory obscures a more complex discussion - and that the continuing presence of the CCCS as the primary reference point for so much of the discussion may be contributing to the sense of polarisation and impeding opportunities for forward momentum.

Addressing core enduring areas of substantive disagreement, I attended to the need to balance increasing calls for emphasis on individual biographies and on ordinary young people with continued understanding of the significance of spectacular forms of community and the challenge of contextualising youth cultures with respect to their broader significance, particularly with respect to the connections between cultural identities and material and structural position. As a means of

pulling these different dimensions together, I suggest that the development of an emphasis on the study of youth cultures as part of broader biographies has much potential to harness and develop common strands between 'opposed' theoretical stances and to provide a nuanced set of understandings of the nature, role and significance of youth cultures in the context of the rest of life. While it merely offers one possible approach rather than some sort of all-encompassing magic bullet, the continuing development of such an orientation would combine an interest in the ongoing significance of groups and subcultures with attendance to the place of these within individual and collective biographies that encompass and respond to a range of structural and cultural facets of identity. Drawing on a range of examples, including recent research on ageing and youth cultures, I indicated how such an approach can draw fruitfully on emerging strands of research and theory located within both subcultural and post-subcultural theory and, indeed, both 'cultures' and 'transitions' traditions of youth studies itself.

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