After Sport Culture
Rethinking Sport and Post-Subcultural Theory

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The subcultural theory associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has received numerous and wide-ranging critiques. Debate has been particularly prevalent within sociological work on youth, music, and style, a context in which some commentators have rejected the idea of subculture, favoring more fleeting, transient socialites. However, these debates have rarely been considered within the context of the study of sporting subcultures. In this article, the author reviews the post-CCCS oeuvre, exploring the implications for the study of sporting subcultures, questions of individuality, difference, and collective identity, and the possibility and nature of cultural or subcultural resistance. The author evaluates Atkinson and Wilson’s proposition that bodily experiences or performances can resist constraints imposed by mainstream culture, illustrating this in the context of lifestyle sport culture. Thus, this article contributes to a revised agenda for the study of subcultures in sport.

Keywords: subculture; sport; subcultural theory; lifestyle; the body/embodiment

During the past decade, the idea of subculture as a theoretical concept, and analytical tool, has come under sustained critical attack (Chaney, 2004; Jenks, 2005). In particular, the subcultural theory associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has received numerous and wide-ranging critiques. This debate has been particularly prevalent within sociological work on youth, music, and style, a context in which many commentators have rejected the idea of subculture (Bennett, 1999; Muggleton, 2000; Redhead, 1993; S. Thornton, 1995), favoring more fleeting, transient communities, characterized by “fluid boundaries and floating memberships” (Bennett, 1999, p. 600). These approaches mark a new analytical approach to understanding the leisure activities of young people (Barker, 2000, p. 336).

Surprisingly, given the long-standing association between sport and subculture, these debates have been relatively absent within the context of the study of sporting subcultures. Several detailed reviews and critiques have outlined this association

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between sport and subculture (see Atkinson & Wilson, 2002; Crosset & Beal, 1997; P. Donnelly, 1993, 2000; P. Donnelly & Young, 1988). To summarize, despite a wealth of exciting and varied studies, early research in sport sociology often used subculture in quite descriptive, atheoretical, and ahistorical ways (P. Donnelly, 1981, 1985). As Crosset and Beal (1997, p. 77) have contended, most theorists “assumed” rather than “demonstrated” the “connections” between subculture and the dominant or parent culture’s values. More recent empirical work (through the 1990s) on sport subculture tended to be more critical, with symbolic interactionism and (British) cultural studies having a powerful influence, particularly via Peter Donnelly’s later work (P. Donnelly, 2000; Wilson & Sparks, 1996). Researchers have focused on the hegemonizing tendencies of incorporation and resistance and the apparent contradictions of sport participants’ behavior (see Crosset & Beal, 1997), highlighting how sport subcultures simultaneously resists and reproduces existing power arrangements (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002). Yet sport sociologists have not been that attentive to this “post-subcultural” theory. As Atkinson and Wilson (2002) contend,

Although this breadth of critical ethnographic work on sport is impressive, more contemporary “mainstream” approaches to studying subcultures, such as those adopted by McRobbie, Muggleton, and Redhead, are rarely acknowledged or implemented. . . . While the adoption of postmodern theoretical perspectives has become commonplace in the sociology of sport generally, seldom is this literature linked with sport subcultures research. (p. 381)

On the other hand, cultural studies and mainstream sociological commentators engaging with subcultures have often ignored sport, other than notable excursions into aspects of football fandom and culture (e.g., Armstrong, 1998; Giulianotti, 1995, 1997; Hughson, 1999; Redhead, 1993, 1997b, 2000), tending to focus on the spectacular aspects of youth cultures, with research being particularly prevalent on music, style, and dance cultures (e.g., essays in Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004a; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003a).

In this article, I respond to Atkinson and Wilson’s (2002) plea for sports sociologists to be more attentive to this post-subcultural theory by offering a critical review of this body of work, exploring some of the implications for the study of sporting collectivities, issues of identification, and their identity politics. I draw attention to underdeveloped areas in this subcultural work on youth, such as of mapping difference, especially in the context of racial and sexual or (hetero) sexual identities and their relationship to authenticity claims and exclusion processes in these subcultures, and the “corporeal realities underpinning the affective” enjoyment of subcultural participation (Sweetman, 2001, p. 194). I reiterate the need for better theoretical integration with literature on the body (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002), globalization (Carrington & Wilson, 2002), and the impact of poststructuralist debates around difference on how subculturalists experience identities. In so doing, I contribute to a
revised agenda for the study of sporting subcultures. My main point of illustration will be the bourgeoning explorations of so called “lifestyle sport” subcultures, by which I mean activities such as surfing, snowboarding, skating, and windsurfing (Wheaton, 2004a). My rationale for focusing on these activities is twofold. First, it is through studying lifestyle sport cultures that theoretical questions about how to conceptualize and map these cultures have been posed in my own empirical research and the work of colleagues with whom I have worked.4 Second, in recent reviews on sport subcultures, these “alternative sports” have been cited as particularly “productive” sites for subcultural studies (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002; Beal, 2002; Crosset & Beal, 1997). The first part of the article reviews post-CCCS work, and the second part explores the implications for sport post-subcultural research.

The Legacy: Spectacular Subcultures

The now seminal body of work theorizing the emergence of post–World War II British working-class youth subcultures during the 1970s—published initially under the Resistance through Ritual working papers, along with subsequent research by theorists such as Paul Willis (1990), Dick Hebdige (1979), and Angela McRobbie (1991, 1994)—has received detailed, wide-ranging, and sustained criticism.5 Nevertheless, it has had an important and sustained impact on the theorizing of sport subcultures (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002; Crossett & Beal, 1997), and in cultural studies more widely it continues to be the “benchmark” against which contemporary developments are measured (Muggleton, 2000, p. 4). My intention here is to highlight the major concerns as a basis from which to explore the post-CCCS oeuvre.

First is their overemphasis on the working-class structural position of the subculture’s members, who were almost exclusively White working-class males, to the exclusion of gender (McRobbie & Garber, 1976) and ethnicity (Nayak, 2003; Skelton & Valentine, 1998a). Feminist critiques have illustrated that male “opposition” tended to be celebrated even when it was sexist and racist, whereas cultures of femininity among adolescent girls, and the ways they negotiated incorporation into the gendered social order, have been ignored (see McRobbie, 1994; Skelton & Valentine, 1998b).

Second, they attempted to present youth subculture as tight coherent groups. Yet as Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts (1976) conceded, although subcultures are important, they may be “less significant than what young people do most of the time” (p. 16). The exclusively class-based analysis, and particularly the overemphasis on style as a form of resistance, has been replaced by analyses that emphasize youthful symbolic creativity (see McRobbie, 1994; Miles, 2000; Redhead, 1993; Willis, 1990). As Bennett (1999) argues, rather then working-class youth using commodities to resist structural changes, it could “be argued that post-war consumerism offered young people the opportunity to break away from their traditional class-based identities” (p. 602).
Third, are methodological critiques, centered on their use or overuse of semiotic approaches, downplaying more ethnographically based insights grounded in the meanings and experiences of those involved (Muggleton, 2000).

Last, it has been highlighted that the CCCS work was focused on the British context, tending to ignore cognate work in other locales, particularly “the (former) Empire,” Southeast Asia, and the Pacific (Brabazon, 2005, p. 37).

**Post-Subcultural Theory**

During the past decades, influenced by postmodern critiques of the increasingly fragmented and contingent character of culture and identity, subcultural accounts have been developed that have questioned, reworked, and reapplied the “70s Cultural Studies legacy” (Redhead, 1993, p. 2). Steve Redhead (1993) was the early protagonist of this post-subculture position recognizing the departure from “oppositional” youth styles in his study of British rave scene in the 1980s. Redhead, and the work emanating from researchers at the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture more widely, has been particularly influential in developing a postmodern critique of the CCCS. Another notable account of this first-wave post-CCCS oeuvre is Sarah Thornton’s (1995) study of British dance club culture. Although Thornton’s study has received some well-founded criticism in the past decade (see on), it remains a useful point of departure for outlining these post-CCCS approaches to “subculture.”

**Deconstructing Subculture**

S. Thornton (1995) articulates one of the enduring concerns about subculture, namely that it is a term of classification that does not exist as an “authentic” object but that has been brought into being by subcultural theorists (see also Redhead, 1993). Debates over the meaning of *subculture* have been prolific since the term was coined in the 1940s. Fine and Kleinman (1979), for example, list four “serious” limitations of the term that, in their view, render it unusable, and, in a contribution to this definitional debate from within the subfield of the sociology of sport, Crosset and Beal (1997) argue that the term *subculture* has been so diffusely employed in sports ethnographies that it has lost much of its “explanatory power.”

Implicit in using the label *subculture* is that a relationship of difference exists between the subculture and the mainstream culture to which most, if not all, members of that society belong. However, the mainstream is a perpetually omnipresent yet absent “other” that defies definition (cf. Fine & Kleinman, 1979; Williams, 1983), a difficulty that lies at the heart of discussions about the “distinction” of cultures and thus the appropriateness of subculture. With the increasing cultural fragmentation of contemporary late-modern culture (Chaney, 2002), this problematic has been intensified. As S. Thornton (1997) puts it,
What is a subculture? What distinguishes it from a community? And what differentiates these two social formations from the masses, the public, society, culture? These are obstinate questions to which there is no answer, but rather a debate. (p. 1)

Barker (2000) suggests that instead of asking what a subculture is, we should ask how the term has been used. In discussions about youth culture’s authenticity, authentic subculture has been defined in opposition to the “in-authentic,” mass-produced, commercial mainstream or dominant culture. At the moment of commercial or mainstream incorporation, subcultural styles, expressions, or artifacts lost their subcultural status and authenticity.

S. Thornton’s (1995) rejection of the CCCS theoretical perspective of subculture as “empirically unworkable” leads her to define subculture as “those taste cultures which are labelled by the media as subculture” (p. 8). She makes two points here that are central to the post-CCCS subcultural project and so are worth elaboration.

**Power Hierarchies Within a Subculture**

First, S. Thornton (1995) contends that comparatively little attention has been paid to the social and cultural distinctions or hierarchies within popular culture. Her theoretical framework highlights the importance of internal power hierarchies, or differential statuses, within and between subcultures. Through her engagement with both the Chicago school and Bourdieu’s (1984) work on distinction (the notion of cultural capital), she coins the term *subcultural capital*, not dissimilar from status in the subcultural theorizing by the Chicago school (see Gelder, 1997, p. 148). Thornton discusses how dance club cultures are marked by a series of distinctions, or authenticity claims, such as the authentic versus the phony, the hip versus the mainstream, and the underground versus the media. Subcultural capital, therefore, involves distinctions between “us” and “them” but also divisions within the culture; it is the basis of an alternative hierarchy that is underpinned by structural differences in gender, sexuality, race, class, and age (S. Thornton, 1995). Although it has been suggested that her use of subcultural capital is misleading given her lack of attention to social class in her own empirical work (see Carrington & Wilson, 2004), Thornton nevertheless points to the ways in which a complex politics of authenticity underpins these subcultural statuses.

**Youth Subculture is Formed Within and Through the Media**

Second, despite the “resilient belief” that “grassroots” or “authentic” subculture resists and struggles with a “colonizing mass-mediated corporate world,” S. Thornton (1995, p. 116) recognized that youth subculture is formed *within* and *through* the media. Commodity-orientated sport subcultures such as snowboarders, skaters, and windsurfers are illustrative of the way that the media and commerce have become...
central to the authentication of popular cultural practices and the complex and shift-
ing relationship to the seemingly co-opting force of global consumer culture. These
subculturalists have been “living out consumerist ambitions” since the sports incep-
tion (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003b, p. 8), yet as empirical investigations in these
subcultures illustrate, they are not simply victims of commercialism but mould and
transform the identities and meanings circulated in and by consumer culture
(Humphreys, 2003; Wheaton, 2005; Wheaton & Beal, 2003a, 2003b).

S. Thornton (1995) explores the role of the various forms of subcultural media
and the mass media in the creation, evolution, and performance of identity in these
“taste cultures.” Researching media consumption is critical as youth have a reflexive
and dynamic relationship with the subcultural media that serves as a crucial network
in the “definition and distribution of cultural knowledge” (p. 14) and identity. The
methodological and theoretical importance of subcultural media consumption in the
context of skating and windsurf subcultures has been shown by Wheaton and Beal
(2003a, 2003b). They illustrate that lifestyle sport cultures can be thought of as taste
cultures in which the specialist subcultural media play a central role in disseminat-
ing information about their activities to their members and the creation and circula-
tion of the symbols and meanings of subcultural capital.

A (Re)evaluation of Subcultural Style

It has been widely recognized that the CCCS tended to overemphasize the more
spectacular aspects of youth culture, often to the detriment of what the majority of
young people did most of their time (Miles, 2000; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995).
Miles (2000) rejects the CCCS’s focus on the symbolic aspects of subcultural con-
sumption. His work on changing youth lifestyles, champions the concept of lifestyle
to replace notions of subcultures and explores the importance of the meanings young
people have for the goods they consume in the creation of their individualized iden-
tities. Research on the conspicuous consumption characteristics of windsurfing
(Wheaton, 2003), skateboarding (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Wheaton & Beal, 2003b),
and climbing (Kiewa, 2002) has illustrated how the significance given to subcultural
style is often overemphasized and that subcultural capital is based around less-
visible characteristics such as attitude, sporting prowess, and commitment.

Muggleton’s (2000) Weber-inspired research on a range of stylistic youth subcul-
tures has been influential in reevaluating subcultural style. His empirical work
explores the subjective meanings and motives for those involved in various style cul-
tures in the mid-late 1990s, underpinned by theoretical questions about the influence
of postmodern culture on subculture, to explore if “subcultural stylists” have a “post-
modern sensibility” (p. 5). His research points to the “individualistic, fragmented
and diffuse sensibility” (p. 6) of the groups studied, their mixed class base, and “anti-
structure” sentiments.
Post-Subculture?

These postmodern trends, such as the breakdown of cultural or subcultural divisions and the proliferation and increasingly apparent fragmentation of youth style, have lead some commentators to abandon the idea of subculture (Bennett, 1999; Chaney, 2004; Muggleton, 2000). Redhead’s (1997b) terminology “subculture to clubculture” signaled the complexity of the social reality of youth, pop music, and deviance. In the emergence of rave came a mixing of styles that did not fit the rigid boundaries and categories used by the CCCS: “The same dance floor attracted a range of previously opposed subcultures from football hooligans to New Age hippies” (Redhead, 1993, pp. 3-4). In these spaces, the idea of grassroots authentic subculture cannot be sustained as binaries such as inside–outside, authentic–manufactured, and subcultural–mainstream collapse (Muggleton, 2000). Muggleton (2000) suggests that such an implosion does not reduce style to meaningless but can be read as signaling a change in emphasis. He describes the “post-subculturalists” who “no longer have any sense of subcultural ‘authenticity’” or commitment but move from one style game to the next reveling “in the availability of subcultural choices,” styles, and identities, marked by fragmentation and pastiche (p. 47). Muggleton’s work raises important theoretical questions that directly bear on the ways we understand the alternative status of increasingly commercialized (lifestyle) sport cultures, for example, how we understand, and assess, “resistance” in a postauthentic, postmodern world characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence and in which the dominant and alternative culture has become indistinguishable, questions I return to later in the discussion.

Neo-Tribes

Other theorists including Bennett (1999) and Malbon (1999) favor more fleeting, transient socialites, such as those offered by various interpretations of Maffesoli’s (1991/1996) and, following him, Bauman’s concept of neo-tribes. Neo-tribalism implies an alliance but a less cohesive unit than a subculture. As Bennett (1999) argues,

The term subculture imposes rigid lines of division over other forms of sociation which may, in effect, be rather more fleeting, and in many cases arbitrary, than the concept of subculture, with its connotations of coherence and solidarity, allows for. (p. 603)

Maffesoli’s (1991/1996) concept is underlined by his concern with describing the changing nature of relationships between individuals and groups of individuals in postmodern consumer societies and specifically the breakdown of class-based identities. Such an approach marks a shift from the class-based analyses of the CCCS to those suggestive of less-stable class, gender, and race-defined identities and groups.

Bennett’s (1999) theorization of urban dance music as neo-tribal formations, for example, is based on empirical evidence that suggests that these youth groups are not
as fixed or coherent as the term subculture implies but instead reflect the more unstable and shifting cultural attachments that characterize late modern consumer-based societies. Others who have adopted and adapted the concept of tribes to describe various postmodern collectivities include Malbon’s (1998, 1999) research on the ways space and identity intersect in clubbing and Hetherington’s (1998a, 1998b) work on alternative lifestyles such as travelers. Although it has been suggested that neo-tribal groups might include sports enthusiasts, few commentators of sport have empirically demonstrated this claim. Notable exceptions include recent work on football (soccer) supporters (Giulianotti, 1999; Hughson, 1999, 2002) and climbers (Kiewa, 2002).

Maffesoli’s (1991/1996) work, however, has been widely criticized for overlooking power relations. Neo-tribes suggest a postmodern “pick and mix” world of consumer choice in which we are free to choose identities, ignoring the structural constraints that underpin identity choices and create lifestyles. As empirical work on lifestyle sport illustrates, these choices are often not freely chosen; our sporting and lifestyle tastes are underpinned by forms of cultural and subcultural capital, which are structured by broader social identities (Wheaton, 2004a; see also Point 8 below).

Nevertheless, work on neo-tribes raises important questions and has provided valuable insights. Hetherington’s (1998a) theoretical work on the “emotional communities”—that for him constitute neo-tribal identifications (or bunds)—raises fruitful ideas about embodiment and performativity in the expression and politics of sporting identity, themes that I return to later in the discussion. Hughson (1999, 2002) also adopts Hetherington’s interpretation of Maffesoli in his study of neo-tribal soccer supporters. He refers to “expressive” football fans who “defy the dictates of sport officialdom” with regard to behavior in the stadium and appropriate fan identities (Hughson, Inglis, & Free, 2005, p. 194). Hughson et al. (2005) advocate neo-tribalism as a means of “considering collective models of resistance against the rationalisation of sport” (p. 104). They argue that work on neo-tribes need not be divorced from questions of power, that it can enable the theorist to look at class in a more dynamic way, exploring “how people make sense of class through expressions of cultural identity” (p. 103).

Definitions of Youth: (Post) Gen X

The CCCS’s definition of youth as a narrowly defined age category (typically 16 to 21) or a stage in a rite of passage (Brabazon, 2005) needs reconsideration; age is increasingly being seen as a stage of mind, an ideological category, with increasing numbers of us seeing ourselves as young (Redhead, 1997a). This sense of youthfulness is particularly evident in lifestyle sport cultures, where despite the media focus on teen males, participants span the generations and in some sports continue into retirement (Mintel International Group Limited, 2003, cited in Tomlinson, Ravenscroft, Wheaton, & Gilchrist, 2005). The Sea Vets windsurfing movement in the United Kingdom, which includes male and female windsurfers into their 70s, or the increasing visibility of so-called silver surfers, are apposite examples.
“Racing” and Gendering “The Argument”

“Masculinism,” as Nayak (2003) outlines, has “haunted subcultural theory since its conception” (p. 22). Some early post-CCCS feminist research built on McRobbie and Garber’s (1976) insights, challenging the accepted view of subcultures as inherently masculine (public) spaces and activities, investigating girls and women’s private and public leisure spaces (McRobbie, 1991; Pini, 2001). Despite S. Thornton’s (1995, 1997) theoretical approach to subculture that maintains that differences in gender, sexuality, class, and race often underlie authenticity claims and exclusion processes, the ways different feminine subjectivities compete for subcultural status are not realized in her own empirical work (Carrington & Wilson, 2004). Pini (2001) reproaches S. Thornton for failing to reveal the meaning of female participation. Her own feminist analysis of rave illustrates the importance and meaning of rave as a site for “new,” nontraditional, and empowering feminine identities (Pini, 1997, 2001); however, it fails to recognize—or enunciate—the specifically white femininities being articulated (Carrington & Wilson, 2004).

Thus, as Carrington and Wilson (2004) argue, the ways in which difference constructs social identities in youth subcultures needs to be recognized, particularly in the contexts of heterosexuality, race, and ethnicity, which are often absent from discussions of sporting and youth dance subcultures. Some innovative studies of Black youth subcultures are emerging (e.g., Alexander, 1996, 2000); however, despite the important influence of Black subaltern music on “white” dance music cultures, researchers exploring dance and music cultures have neglected to theorize the nature of racial construction in these spaces (Carrington & Wilson, 2004). That is,

How the processes of racialization mediate taste cultures, give value to certain styles above others, and how these are used to maintain, and occasionally challenge social hierarchies. (p. 71)

One notable exception is Nayak’s (2003) ethnographic study of white working-class youth in northern England. Unusually this project explores the role of sporting affiliations alongside fashion and music in the multiple styles of Whiteness he documents and how these preferences are “racially encrypted scripts” for the performance of young peoples’ cultural identities (p. 167). Through understanding the local specificities of (in this case British, northern) whiteness, a more sophisticated understanding of racism and antiracism strategy can be developed (Nayak, 2003).

Local Place and Global Space

A further strength of Nayak’s (2003) research is his engagement with the changing meanings of place and locality in the context of both global change and local economic restructuring. Geographical specificity is an important factor in subcultural studies, and although the negotiation of space for the expression of community and subcultural
identities can be traced back to both the CCCS and Chicago schools, the CCCS failed to consider the local and global variations in youths’ response to music and style (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004b, p. 8). Cultural geographers have also alerted subcultural researchers to map the ways in which power inequalities are played out and reproduced through space (Massey, 1994; Skelton & Valentine, 1998b).

Nevertheless, much of the post-CCCS research still does not adequately engage with youth cultural practices “outside of the ‘global core’” (Pilkinton, 2004, p. 119) nor adequately attend to globalization processes, that we are increasingly part of networks that extend way beyond our immediate geographical locales. Global flows are having an increasingly profound and complex impact on the meaning and nature of youth and sport subcultures as people, ideas, and commodities increasingly easily move across national boundaries. The expansion of media and technology has resulted in a proliferation of new subcultural spaces and expressions, from online fan communities to activist politics among new social movements. These processes have received an abundance of critical attention in the sport sociology literature (e.g., Maguire, 1999) yet are rarely discussed in the context of sporting subcultures, which have tended to be studied and conceptualized in their local contexts. Wheaton (2005) outlines pertinent issues for examining the articulation and impact of global cultural forces on lifestyle sport cultures in their local and trans-local contexts. As demonstrated in other subcultural contexts, the global flows of commodities, media, and images do not have a simple homogenizing influence on subcultures (Appadurai, 1996; Lull, 1995); hybrid trans-local cultures and identities emerge (Bennett, 2000; Carrington & Wilson, 2002), and subculturalists “re-shape” the images and meanings circulated in and by global consumer culture (Skelton & Valentine, 1998a).

There are also questions about the proliferation of media and technology and their effect on the subcultures of sport. The Internet has been conceptualized as providing a new resource for subversive and counterhegemonic activities on an unprecedented scale, such as mobilization by anticapitalist groups in (global) protest events (Bennett, 2004). It is also claimed that the Internet offers new forms of identity formation, with the potential to be more inclusive and democratic. Research is required to explore the significance of these new virtual subcultural spaces, such as online sport communities, fanzines, and gaming communities (see Wilson & Atkinson, 2005).

Diverse Theoretical Approaches

As outlined in the introduction to Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003a), and as evidenced in their collection of essays, researchers have moved away from the Gramscian-semiotic approach of the CCCS, returning to sociological approaches informed by ethnographic and qualitative methodologies, leading to the emergence of new methodological, theoretical, and substantive concerns. Theoretical insights from the works of Bourdieu and Maffesoli have already been highlighted. Poststructuralist debates, and particularly the work of Judith Butler, have been influential in developing an antiessentialist
approach to subcultural theory, emphasizing the fragmented and contradictory practices and nature of identities. Butler’s concern with subverting the apparent stability and naturalness of gender and sexual identities has been adapted to explore performativity in the ongoing construction of subcultural identities (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003b). Such an account is appealing for examining how masculinity and femininity is produced in popular culture because it acknowledges the reflexive process involved in producing gender in such contexts and the ambiguous, contradictory, and fractured process involved (Benwell, 2003).

But of concern in this shift away from class reductionism to postmodernism is the depoliticization of youth subcultures. As Martin (2002) reproaches in assessing post-CCCS contributions,

While the work of the CCCS was deeply politicized, cultural studies now lacks a sustained political agenda and tends to focus only on micro-politics. (p. 79)

At a time when youth protest activities, such as the antiglobalization movement, have bourgeoned, post-subculturalists have tended to under politicize youth formations (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003a). Future subcultural research must attend to both the micro political—the politics of every day life—and the macro political, particularly enduring questions of political economy and social stratification.

**After Subculture?**

In summary, post-subcultural studies have subjected the CCCS subcultural theory to rigorous critique. The concept of subculture has nevertheless survived as a “theoretical trope” in sociological work on youth, music, and style (Bennett, 1999). Although analyses based around concepts such as neo-tribes and lifestyle offer important alternatives to these approaches, they too have shortcomings and do not solve all of the issues of identification, nor their identity politics (Hetherington, 1998a).

Furthermore, the fact that subculture has been problematic in the study of youth does not mean that it is not useful as a conceptual tool (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995), nor does it render it useless in other contexts, such as sport, where subcultural membership is not restricted to “youth” groups. As Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004b) contend, we need to consider how flexible subculture as a term is, “how far it can be reapplied and re-appropriated in new ways—and, conversely, how far the CCCS’s use of the term might have forever predetermined its connotations” (p. 2). They also remind us of the essential “Britishness” of the CCCS concept of subculture, developed to understand specific aspects of British male working-class youth. Youth culture research in the United States, however, has wider influences, including education and deviance studies, and has remained far more sensitive to issues of race, culture, and locality (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004b; Miles, 2000). These have had an important influence in some studies of sports subcultures. Thus, although my review here is
focused on the post-CCCS work, there are other fields, where subculture as a concept has received critical attention, that also deserve attention. However, I now turn to the study of sporting subcultures within sport sociology, outlining some further possibilities for sport (post) subcultural theory.

**Sport (Post) Subcultural Theory**

In 2002, Atkinson and Wilson contended that sport sociologists had not been that vigilant to these post-CCCS theoretical approaches reviewed above. There are of course exceptions, some of which I have already highlighted; nevertheless, it is still largely the situation (in 2005) that many have not responded to sociocultural developments of the 1990s, changes that have transformed the nature of subculture and its meaning. In short, the concept of sport subculture needs critical and empirical scrutiny in the 21st century. Atkinson and Wilson (2002) cite in particular being attentive to the “contradictory nature of resistance in postmodern times” (p. 381), particularly conceptions of “subtle resistance” (see also Wilson, 2002) and how it can help to understand the relationship between “authenticity” and “the oppositional potential of subcultural groups” (p. 381). Resistance needs to be deconstructed, not dis-guarded (Ueno, 2003). Specifically, we need to ask who is the subculture resisting, where is the resistance cited, under what circumstances is resistance taking place, and in what forms is it manifest (Barker, 2000, p. 342).

The role of the (global and local) media and the shifting nature and expressions of subcultural affiliations and identities also need consideration. Are sporting groups and communities more coherent, more temporally or spatially stable, than stylistic-based youth groups? Do sports communities have the clearly maintained boundaries and identities implicated in early studies? How are these boundaries shifting and redrawn through contests over taste and status? Studies of lifestyle sport have illustrated that although sports subcultural groups have some shared values, participants experiences are not homogenous, nor are their identities fixed. As Muggleton (2000) suggests, we need to “establish a more fluid and de-centred identity that can account for subcultural mobility and movement” (p. 91), recognizing that subcultural identity can be usefully seen as a performance that is never fixed or determinate. Models that differentiate among different levels of subcultural membership, such as P. Donnelly’s (1981, p. 571) characterization of the horizontal stratification of an achieved subculture from the “core member” to the “outsider” (see also Stebbins, 1992), tend to evoke a static and essentialist model of identity (Wheaton, 2002) that fails to recognize the multiple ways in which difference or “otherness” is marked and measured and the ways identities are continually made or remade. As my own positioning in the windsurfing subculture I studied illuminated, insider and outsider shifted temporally and spatially, and “other positionality issues such as being a proficient windsurfer, a journalist, middle-class, a ‘girlfriend,’ and centrally being female, heterosexual and white” (Wheaton, 2002,
p. 253) also influenced my insider role in different ways in different situations, times, and contexts. Moreover, as Muggleton (2000) argues, such constructs of core membership often evoke a masculinist criterion of commitment, privileging the views of the “established”—who tend always to be the men—so “marginalising the sub cultural commitment of females” (p. 153).

Nevertheless, Donnelly’s model remains a useful tool for representing and delineating forms of identity in sports subcultures, but we should be attentive to warnings that such constructs are best thought of as constructed ideo-typical devices (Muggleton, 2000, p. 152). Individual members’ identities are much more complex and mobile than the concentric rings that P. Donnelly (1981) proposed, and in this sense the model needs to be conceptualized or reconceptualized in ways that emphasize this movement and flow.

Revisiting P. Donnelly’s (1981, 1985) early work, however, does remind us to think about the ways in which sport might be culturally specific, or at least different from subcultures based around characteristics such as youth. For example, conceptualizing the relationship between sports subculture and the dominant sport culture can help address the problematic of the increasingly fragmented mainstream, a distinction that as I have outlined is conceptually a barrier to the usefulness of subculture in other contexts such as youth cultures. The latter distinction (adopting dominant sport culture rather than mainstream culture) has been a useful distinction for exploring the emergent and residual aspects of sports subcultures (P. Donnelly, 1993; Rinehart, 1998), such as potential transformations in the gender order in so-called alternative sport (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Kay & Laberge, 2004; Rinehart, 2005; Robinson, 2004; Thorpe, 2005; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998; Young, 2004).

Continued empirical scrutiny in different subcultural contexts is required. Contrary to Muggleton’s (2000) subculturalists who resisted “interpellation into named subcultural identities” (p. 93), sport participants such as windsurfers, skaters, and climbers appear to have more stable and shared notions of their subcultures and forms of status and identity (Beal & Wilson, 2004; Kiewa, 2002; Wheaton, 2003). As Hodkinson (2002) in his study of the contemporary goth scene argues, the “bounded form” taken by the group he studied does not fit with the emphasis on cultural fluidity proposed by Muggleton and Bennett. Hodkinson (2004) documented “group distinctiveness, identity, commitment and autonomy” (p. 136) indicative of what he terms “cultural substance,” which he suggests should be conceptualized as a reworked version of subculture. The goths, like the windsurfers I studied, were characterized by a “particularly strong consciousness of group identity, and one that tended to cut across any perceived internal differences and subgroups” (Hodkinson, 2004, p. 144).

Thus, as in the study of youth, alternative sociological concepts to subculture, such as leisure lifestyles (Chaney, 2002; Miles, 2000) and neo-tribes (Maffesoli, 1991/1996), need theoretical consideration and empirical testing. In addition, other sociological concepts that have been usefully employed in the study of sporting
collectivities, such as Crosset’s (1995) use of subworld in research on professional golf, Wheaton’s (2003) use of serious leisure in windsurfing, and Waquant’s (1992, 1995) adoption of Bourdieu’s ideas in his research on boxing, need reconsideration.

Research on sport subcultures also needs to continue to be attentive to poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial debates around difference that have had a pervasive impact on feminist theorizing of sport practices (e.g., Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Cole, 1993; Scraton, 2001). Fruitful work has emerged in the different cultures in which women’s and men’s sporting practice takes place, with some research being attentive to issues of difference as a theoretical and political challenge, such as mapping the ways in which race, sexuality, age, and class work together in shaping men’s power and ability to “do masculinity” through sport (e.g., Carrington, 2000). Butler’s identification of the heterosexual matrix, the deconstruction of sexuality and gender, has been embraced by sports feminists, providing important insights about lesbian and transsexual identities (cf. Caudwell, 1999; Cox & Thompson, 2000).

However, these insights have not always been adopted in research on sporting subcultures, particularly in the context of male subcultures, where (male) researchers have often failed to recognize that “studies of male subcultures are primarily explorations of masculinity” (Brake, 1980) and in some cases have glorified laddish culture and forms of “heroic” masculinity (see also Free & Hughson, 2003). As David Morgan (1992) has noted, male ethnography often evokes its own “machismo.” In the context of lifestyle sport subcultures, although early work, such as Pearson’s work on surfing, failed to explore girls’ and women’s involvement in the subculture, from the 1990s approaches to theorizing identity have been influenced by these poststructuralist developments, considering how different, contradictory, and competing femininities and masculinities are constructed and exhibited in various lifestyle sport subcultural settings (e.g., Kay & Laberge, 2004; Kusz, 2003; Laurendeau, 2004; Macdonald, 2005; Robinson, 2004; A. Thornton, 2004; Wheaton, 2004b; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998). Nevertheless, the ways in which masculinity and particularly femininity is specifically articulated as heterosexual and white in these subcultures remains underexplored. As I have discussed in reflecting on how my own shifting identities helped to make sense of power relations in the windsurfing culture, my heterosexuality, and Whiteness, were often a “taken for granted,” naturalized, and thus hidden axis of my “insider status” (Wheaton, 2002, pp. 258-259). In summary, empirical research exploring how male and female subculturalists experience such racial and heterosexual identities, and how they are related to authenticity claims and exclusion processes in these subcultures, is underdeveloped.10

In summary, we must be attentive to the ways sport subcultural identities temporally and spatially shift and change, how individuals carve their own paths through subcultures (cf. P. Donnelly & Young, 1988), and the subculture’s dynamic relationship with the “parent culture” (P. Donnelly, 1993) and other subcultures. Research on skateboarding conducted during a 10-year period has illuminated transformations in collective identity in the skating culture since the mid-1990s (Beal & Wilson, 2004).
Analyses of sport subcultures need to examine the homogeneity and heterogeneity of experiences in and between sport subcultures, revealing the multiple and often conflicting identities of individuals and groups within the cultural formations. The experiences of all participants—young and old, marginal consumers and the core, of different experiences, genders, sexualities, abilities or disabilities, and ethnicities—need exploration, as does, critically, the ways cultural power is reproduced and contested. Studies of sporting subcultures should not be divorced from questions of power. We need to reformulate the macro-political context of subcultures while also recognizing the importance of micro-political dimensions, “a subcultural response that is neither simply affirmation nor refusal” (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003b, p. 13).

To address these questions, sport subcultures need to borrow from, and integrate with, theorizing in other areas of sport and mainstream sociological work. Important avenues of theoretical integration I have suggested in the course of this discussion include globalization, identity, and the politics of difference. In their insightful discussion of sporting subcultures, bodies, and resistance, Atkinson and Wilson (2002, p. 381) advocate the potential of work on the body, suggesting that despite the contemporary boom in research on embodiment, sport subcultural studies have not really engaged with embodiment in a sustained way (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002, p. 385; see also Loy, Andrews, & Rinehart, 1993). Likewise, post-CCCS youth researchers have also called for research that explores the “affective pleasure of subcultural involvements and identities” (Sweetman, 2001, p. 194). Examining research on lifestyle sports, some of which has begun to draw on post-subcultural theory and mainstream sociological approaches to identity and the body, illustrates the potential of this synthesis.

**Absent Bodies: Embodied Freedoms**

Although contemporary consumer culture is undeniably “fuelled by a hedonistic fascination with the body” (Turner, 1984, p. 112), much of the empirical research, particularly around biomedical aspects of athletes’ bodies and modes of femininity and the fitness industries, demonstrates the precedence—or coexistence—of discipline and surveillance of the body in late capitalism (cf. Cole, 1993; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Hall, 1996; Markula, 1995). However, can subcultural involvement “lead to the creation of new and potentially transgressive forms of embodied subjectivity” (Sweetman, 2001, p. 195)?

The dominant gaze in skateboarding has been described as bodies “in need of discipline and surveillance” (Macdonald, 2005, p. 97). Atkinson and Wilson (2002), however, suggest that subcultures such as skating and surfing can use bodily expression and performance to subvert—at least symbolically—this mainstream discipline and control. They contend that a creative skateboard trick may also be thought of as a form of “free expression,” a “temporary escape or sense of empowerment through movement” (p. 386). Thus,
In this instance, it is clear how, on one hand, notions of subcultural resistance could benefit from an increased sensitivity to a Foucauldian depiction of surveillance (Best, 1997), while on the other, a Foucauldian reading of the disciplined sporting body could be informed by a more succinct understanding of how subcultures actually do win space within ever-present social constraints. (pp. 386-387)

I will exemplify the potential of these insights in furthering our understanding of the nature and meaning of embodied subcultural identity and of subcultural resistance in empirical studies of lifestyle sports.

Most lifestyle sports emphasize the creative, aesthetic, and performative expressions of their activities (Wheaton, 2004a). Some practitioners refer to their activities as art or as a spiritual experience; the meaning of these lifestyle sport activities for the participants is found in their creative and self actualization potential (cf. Humphreys, 2003; Laviolette, in press; Rinehart & Sydor, 2003; Wheaton, 2004a). Although participants heavily invest in their lifestyles and identities, this commitment is a commitment to pleasure, what they called the “buzz,” the ecstasy of speed, being “at one” with the environment, the standing still of time. As Midol and Broyer (1995, p. 207) first observed, these are “playful practices” replacing the morality of guilt by a pleasure seeking grounded in the “here and now.” In contrast to capitalism’s temporal production, lifestyle sport time is immediate and discontinuous (Borden, 2001, p. 236). They value intense experiences and the “inner” or “felt” body—not the commodified, aesthetized, and disciplined body that many describe as symptomatic and expressive of contemporary consumer culture (Wheaton, 2004a). In lifestyle sport, the display of the toned (and tanned) “outer-body” coexists with hedonistic pursuit of pleasure or self-actualization (Wheaton, 2004a).

Participants often take physical risks, subjecting their bodies to long-term abuse and degradation. Stranger (1999) examines the aesthetic quality of surfing, arguing that the search for thrill is part of the self-transcendence experience. He explores how accounts of the nature of the thrill in this risk-taking leisure activity emphasizes ecstatic feelings of “oneness with the environment,” the “loss of self,” and “intense awareness of the moment” (p. 268). Stranger’s work illustrates the important contribution made by work on the sociology of the emotions in understanding the nature and meaning of such embodied sporting practices. Stranger is, however, critical of Elias and Dunning’s (1986) “quest for excitement” thesis, which, he argues, does not explain the thrill in such high-risk sport. He links surfers’ quest to the “postmodern mode of aestheticization,” how postmodern culture involves an “aesthetic of sensa-tion replacing the increasingly impossible demands of modernity for rational interpre-tation” (Stranger, 1999, p. 270).

Danger and excitement are embraced in the “go for it attitude” that characterizes many lifestyle sports activities, sports that often challenge restrictions based on safety. Climbers, BASE jumpers, and big-wave surfers literally “play with death” (Le Breton, 2000). Fiske (1989) argues that such attitudes to pleasure, freedom, and danger in surfing represent a potentially subversive challenge to mainstream culture. In his
analysis, such embodied pleasures that escape the norms of discipline and conformity are agents of subversion (p. 64). Fiske has received widespread criticism for his depoliticized, overly text-based celebration of the beach (for a detailed critique see Lewis, 1998) and the “cultural populism” underpinning his work more widely (see McGuigan, 1992). Yet despite his disproportionate emphasis on pleasure as transgression (Lewis, 1998), Fiske’s work nevertheless points to how power, as embodied in the surfers’ forms, can, albeit temporarily, subvert mainstream control. There are parallels here with youth subcultural research on clubbing that emphasizes the micro level, the performative, and the everyday. Malbon (1998, p. 27), like Fiske, draws on de Certeau (1984), seeing resistance not as a struggle with a dominant hegemonic culture but in the every day, through “losing your self.” As Wilson (2002) suggests, these forms of “trivial” or “escape” resistance experienced through seeking and experiencing pleasure are empowering but are ultimately resistance “that makes no difference” (p. 401).

In a similar vein, Lewis’s (2000, 2004) study of climbers illustrates that in a context where the commercialization and rationalization of adventurous leisure have left little space for risk and uncertainty, adventure climbers actively seek to maintain high levels of risk. These climbers, he claims, are “prepared to die for their leisure experiences” (Lewis, 2004, p. 81). For Lewis, the phenomenological experiences that underpin such embodied adventure practices highlight the continuing possibilities to critically engage with everyday life. Lewis draws on Lefebvre’s (1979) work on everyday life, which suggests that leisure space is not just an “escape” from everyday life, but a place for critiquing it. Lefebvre’s (1991) ideas are worthy of consideration. In his analysis of social space, he extends his ideas about the transgressive potential of leisure spaces, arguing that spaces of leisure—the every day and the body—constitute a potential vast “counter-space”; they show evidence of a “truly productive capacity” (p. 383). Lefebvre acknowledges that although, historically, these spaces have been assimilated into the capitalist system, leisure spaces are also contradictory spaces with a tendency for “transgression of users” (p. 385).

Lefebvre’s ideas are also embraced by Borden (2001) in his study of skateboarding as a critique of capitalist space. Borden suggests that the resurgence of urban (street) skateboarding in the 1990s was a performative critical practice that challenged the form and mechanics of urban life, confronting the social, spatial, and temporal logic of capitalist space. Street skaters actively reappropriate and redefine government, business, and commercial space in the city, they critique ownership, refusing to consume architecture as pure image, using it as “a material ground for action” (Borden, 2001, p. 239). Humphreys (2003) similarly illustrates how snowboarders in the 1990s faced with the “mainstreaming” of their activity, particularly via institutionalization into competitions such as the Olympic Games, reappropriated cultural space and identity through “soul boarding” or riding for intrinsic pleasure (Humphreys, 2003, p. 423), a form of symbolical subversion of the increasing institutionalization and corporatization of the sport and its culture.
These approaches point to symbolic, embodied, and performative ways in which lifestyle sports can be seen to subvert or resist mainstream norms or discipline, allowing the analyst to explore the “enabling” and “simultaneously the constraining” (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002, p. 386) aspects of their subcultural identities. As I have noted, there are useful connections to be made here with youth subcultural work on “affectual aspects” of subcultural involvement (Sweetman, 2001, p. 190), such as the “collective effervescence” experienced in rave or the “adrenalin rush” in becoming tattooed or pierced (see Sweetman, 2001), and with work in the sociology of the emotions more widely (Shilling, 2005). In these sporting contexts, resistance is not a struggle with dominant hegemonic culture but is located at the levels of the everyday (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 280) and the body. To understand the meaning and significance of these activities, we need to be attentive to the different ways in which resistance is interpreted, defined, and played out, moving beyond dichotomies of passivity or resistance (Wilson, 2002), body discipline or pleasure, freedom or control.

Conclusions

This article has offered a critical review of the post-CCCS subcultural theory, suggesting that research on sport subcultures must (continue to) be attentive to these developments and must attend to relevant theoretical insights in cognate areas. I have stressed the importance of globalization debates and poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial debates around identity and the politics of difference and, following Atkinson and Wilson (2002, p. 381), the potential of work on the body. Subculture needs to be put under empirical and theoretical scrutiny, but my contention here is that it should be revisited and reinvigorated, not replaced. My empirical research on lifestyle sport cultures, and the research of others with whom I have worked, suggests that although these groupings exhibit flux, dynamism, and change, for those who self-identify as participants, there is also a high level of stability and distinctiveness in the culture’s sense of collective identity and forms of status. Thus, while acknowledging the limitations and problems associated with the term subculture, an appropriation or reappropriation that takes on board the post-CCCS critiques of subcultures I have outlined, remains—contrary to recent claims (Chaney, 2004; Jenks, 2005)—a useful analytical concept in these sporting contexts.

Muggleton (2000), however, reminds us that academics have tended to reify the concept of subculture, that is, to treat it as a “real, material thing” that exists “apart from the lived reality of individual members” (p. 22). Studies of subcultures are “exercises in representation” (S. Thornton, 1995, p. 1), and classifications such as subculture, lifestyle, and neo-tribe are distinctions used to help in mapping the culture’s characteristics and to address questions of individuality, difference, collective identity, and lifestyle. In sport, as in other cultural contexts, we need to reassess the concepts we use, recognizing that “in a fragmented culture, the tensions between
diversity and conformity require newer sophisticated metaphors of representation” (Chaney, 2004, p. 48).

Notes

1. In his earlier work, P. Donnelly (1981, 1985) is influenced more by the classical subcultural sociology field than by cultural studies.

2. This absence reflects a wider trend in cultural studies, the marginalization of sport, a trend that was explored and systematically challenged by Andrew Blake in 1996 (chapter titled “Sport in Culture, Sport in Cultural Studies”). Nevertheless, despite sport being so deeply entwined in many aspects of contemporary cultural life (e.g., Tomlinson, 2001), the experience of sport rarely “receives the limelight” (Blake, 1996, p. 17).

3. Hughson, Inglis, and Free (2005) make a similar contention, also outlining the limited ways in which sport was considered by Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies scholars. The authors suggest that sport, in its institutional forms, represented “adult authority,” was by implication a “cultural activity to be associated with ordinary conformist youth rather than resistive subcultural youth, and therefore considered of limited importance as a form of youth culture” (p. 80).


5. See, for example, Brake (1985) and Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995).

6. Carrington and Wilson (2004) discuss S. Thornton’s use of subcultural capital, suggesting that it can be misleading to see it solely as a derivative of Bourdieu’s work, given that Bourdieu’s concept of taste was underpinned by a particular understanding of class (and the role of education in reproduction social class) based on his empirical work on French society. They conclude that given the lack of attention to social class in Thornton’s analysis and theorization, her use of the term is, at best, misleading, at worst, “merely a descriptive category.”

7. The subheader was adopted from Carrington and Wilson (2004, p. 71).

8. There are of course parallel debates here about typologies of fandom that have been prevalent in the discussion of football (soccer) supporters. See, for example, debates in Hughson et al. (2005) and Brick (2001).

9. Although beyond the scope of this article, Muggleton’s (2000) discussion of subcultural stratification and commitment or authenticity is worthy of greater debate, both in terms of his claim that there is “no objective portrayal of subcultural membership” (pp. 151-152) and the gendered implications of this claim. In an article published while this article was in press, Michelle Donnelly (2006) makes a similar contention in the context of research on “extreme sports” but regrettably does not engage with Muggleton’s more detailed argument, nor empirically evidence the ways in which different discourses of “authenticity” operate in such cultures, particular if marginal participants reject or resist discourses about their marginality. More widely, however, her article highlights some of the issues articulated in this article, particularly the fluid and fragmented nature of subcultural affiliations, that commercialization processes are central to authenticity discourses, and the need to problematize authenticity (see also Wheaton & Beal, 2003a, 2003b), and who gets to define it. She points to the ways struggles over authenticity are used to legitimize core experiences and “in-authenticate” and exclude others (see also Wheaton & Beal, 2003a, 2003b). Donnelly further argues that researchers need to focus on the voices and experiences of marginal participants in these activities—particularly those “in-authenticated” by the core—such as the forms of marginalized femininity discussed in Wheaton and Tomlinson (1998) and the occasional and nonparticipant consumers who are an important and numerically greater part of the “lifestyle sport-scape” (see Tomlinson et al., 2005).

References


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