

YOUTH AND CULTURAL PRACTICE

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■ **Abstract** The study of youth played a central role in anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century, giving rise to a still-thriving cross-cultural approach to adolescence as a life stage. Yet the emphasis on adolescence as a staging ground for integration into the adult community often obscures young people's own cultural agency or frames it solely in relation to adult concerns. By contrast, sociology has long considered youth cultures as central objects of study, whether as deviant subcultures or as class-based sites of resistance. More recently, a third approach—an anthropology of youth—has begun to take shape, sparked by the stimuli of modernity and globalization and the ambivalent engagement of youth in local contexts. This broad and interdisciplinary approach revisits questions first raised in earlier sociological and anthropological frameworks, while introducing new issues that arise under current economic, political, and cultural conditions. The anthropology of youth is characterized by its attention to the agency of young people, its concern to document not just highly visible youth cultures but the entirety of youth cultural practice, and its interest in how identities emerge in new cultural formations that creatively combine elements of global capitalism, transnationalism, and local culture.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a vast literature on youth cultures spanning many decades and disciplines, surprisingly little of this research was informed by anthropology until recently. To be sure, foundational ethnographies by Mead (1928) and Malinowski ([1929] 1987) established adolescence early on as a crucial topic of anthropological investigation, and as a result, issues closely associated with this life stage—initiation ceremonies, sexual practices, courtship and marital customs, intergenerational relations—have long been a focus of anthropological inquiry. But such research has usually approached adolescence from the perspective of adulthood, downplaying youth-centered interaction and cultural production in favor of an emphasis on the transition to adulthood. Thus anthropology concerned itself not primarily with youth as a cultural category, but with adolescence as a biological and psychological stage of human development. Now, however, shifts both in the discipline and in the world's cultures have expanded the range of anthropological inquiry, and as a result the field has seen much more investigation of youth cultural practices. From

this small but growing body of work, it is clear that anthropology is particularly well situated to offer an account of how young people around the world produce and negotiate cultural forms.

The anthropology of youth has been overshadowed by the much larger and more visible project of the sociology of youth. It is here that youth cultures and practices are most widely studied, albeit only within late modern Western societies, particularly Britain and the United States. These countries are associated with two different but related sociological approaches to the study of youth: The American tradition examines the concept of deviance and its social consequences in young people's cultural practices, and the British tradition examines highly visible forms of working-class youth identities using Marxist theories of culture and poststructuralist semiotic analysis. The latter approach—which provided the foundation for the field of cultural studies—has had the most profound influence on how youth cultures have been studied. But if adolescence as the central concept for anthropological research on young people is at once too broad (because universalized) and too narrow (because psychologized), then youth culture is too burdened by its historical ties to particular theoretical positions. The anthropology of youth now emerging concerns itself not with the restrictive notion of culture that dominated early work in cultural studies but with the practices through which culture is produced. This formulation includes practices associated with age-based cultures, but also those that locate young people as other kinds of cultural agents.¹

DEFINING YOUTH

It is a commonplace of much research on youth cultures and identities that the youth category lacks clear definition and in some situations may be based on one's social circumstances rather than chronological age or cultural position. In a given culture, preadolescent individuals may count as youth, while those in their 30s or 40s may also be included in this category. And youth as a cultural stage often marks the beginning of a long-term, even lifelong, engagement in particular cultural practices, whether its practitioners continue to be included in the youth category or not. Related categories like adolescent, teenager, or young adult provide a greater degree of specificity concerning age, but they also vary in their application across contexts. Moreover, potentially contrasting categories such as child, adult,

¹Due to space limitations, this article does not attempt a comprehensive survey of the vast interdisciplinary literature on youth and adolescence. In general, I have focused more on recent work and on work done within anthropology, as well as research in other fields that is directly relevant to central anthropological issues pertaining to youth. Inevitably, however, even some studies that meet these criteria have been omitted for reasons of space; those that are included are not necessarily the best examples of current research on youth but serve as useful illustrations of specific points. Because ethnographic research on many aspects of youth cultural practice is often surprisingly scarce, I have at times turned to nonethnographic work in my discussion of particular topics.

or elder may shift to incorporate members of the youth category, and conversely. Thus in Soviet Russia, the category of teenager was collapsed into that of child in official discourse, and adolescents' dependent status was symbolically enforced in a variety of ways (Markowitz 2000). Historical changes such as population shifts that increase or decrease the number of adolescents, and economic circumstances that prevent young adults from assuming a new status as wage earners, may lead to redefinitions of the category as well (see also Neyzi 2001).

Such classifications, of course, are often strategic and contested. Labels like *child soldier*, *teenage mother*, and *youth violence* are socially meaningful, authorizing the interpretation of biological chronology in social terms that may shift according to sociopolitical circumstances; thus preadolescent children accused of committing violent crimes may be classified as adults in the U.S. legal system; by the same token, young people in their 20s have been labeled *children* in discussions of child labor (Gailey 1999). Likewise, the classification of young people as "youngsters" in England has shaped the way that youth sexuality is understood and addressed by sex educators and healthcare providers (West 1999). Hall & Montgomery (2000) argue that the division between children and youth in Britain is associated with several other divisions: sympathetic versus unsympathetic public perception, attention within anthropology versus sociology, and emphasis on young people overseas versus "at home." It is likely that the division between youth and adult is organized in similar fashion.

Youth or adolescence is not a highly salient life stage in all cultures, although this is changing in many societies. Condon (1990) documents the emergence of adolescence as a social category and the adolescent peer group as a social structure among Canadian Inuits as a result of rapid economic and cultural shifts. In many countries, a new category of adolescence as a relatively recent and ongoing media construct creates teenagers as a self-aware age grouping and targets them as potential consumers (Liechty 1995, White 1995). But a well-defined category for young people is not necessarily the result of modernity; the Marquesan youth category *taure'are'a*, for example, is carefully distinguished from both childhood and adulthood on the basis of established cultural principles and ideologies (Kirkpatrick 1987, Martini 1996). Moreover, even teenagers in late industrial societies may not experience adolescence as a distinctive life stage (especially one characterized by carefree indulgence, as is often popularly believed), due to economic and other constraints that move them quickly into adult responsibilities, and also in some cases because of a lack of sharp age and role differentiation between young parents and their children (Burton 1997). Aristocratic girls in modern Japan were forced to forgo adolescence because at an early age they were committed by their parents to arranged marriages intended to strengthen family alliances. Unlike the young adults Burton studied, such elite Japanese women did not experience this lack as a deprivation until postwar cultural changes led to the end of the aristocracy (Lebra 1995).

Given these difficulties in defining youth in any general way, Durham (2000) proposes applying the linguistic concept of a *shifter* (Jakobson [1957] 1971,

Silverstein 1976) to the category of youth. A shifter is a word that is tied directly to the context of speaking and hence takes much of its meaning from situated use, such as the deictics *I*, *here*, and *now*. Likewise, the referential function of *youth* cannot be determined in advance of its use in a particular cultural context, and its use indexes the nature of the context in which it is invoked. As a shifter, then, youth is a context-renewing and a context-creating sign whereby social relations are both (and often simultaneously) reproduced and contested.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ADOLESCENCE

Where youth is a flexible and contestable social category, it has been argued on both biological and social grounds that adolescence is a cultural universal. As Schlegel (1995a) notes, sociologists have incorrectly maintained that the cultural category of adolescence is symptomatic of modernity, an assumption that overlooks the existence of similar categories in a wide variety of cultures, from nonindustrial to postindustrial. From this comparative perspective, the anthropological study of adolescence is a search for cross-cultural generalizations and variations in the biological, psychological, and social characteristics of this universal category.

Adolescence as a Life Stage

Western psychologists, who understand adolescence primarily as preparation for adulthood, theorize this period as a time of potential crisis brought on by the uncertainties of the physical and social transitions between life stages. A similarly physiological and psychological model of adolescence was a powerful influence on anthropological research on young people for most of the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., Fuchs 1976, Worthman 1987). Following Western psychological theories of youth, researchers propose general processes thought to be shared by individuals at this life stage regardless of culture, although these may be affected by specific cultural circumstances. Robinson (1997), for example, describes adolescence in general as a period of individuation and crisis, but one that—due to cultural shifts—presents special difficulties for Tiwi youth. And many scholars emphasize gender differences in the adolescent stage, in keeping with the perception that such patterns occur generally across cultures (Anderson & Anderson 1986, Condon & Stern 1993, Schlegel 1995b).

Given the influence of Western psychology, it is not uncommon to find explicit comparisons of adolescence in Western and other cultures. Such an overtly comparative stance is in keeping with the tradition established by Mead, who subtitled her enormously influential 1928 book *Coming of Age in Samoa* “A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation.” However, cross-cultural research does not currently rely on comparisons with an undifferentiated concept of “the West.” Schlegel & Barry’s (1991) extensive statistical analysis of the sociocultural dimensions of adolescence in nearly 200 societies around the world

represents the most comprehensive synthesis of what is known about the adolescent life stage across cultures. The most ambitious ethnographic undertaking within the cross-cultural framework is the Harvard Adolescence Project, which involves multidisciplinary investigations of the physiological and sociocultural dimensions of adolescence in seven different societies; four monographs reporting the results of the project have been published (Burbank 1988, Condon 1987, Davis & Davis 1989, Hollos & Leis 1989).

The emphasis on adolescence as a universal stage in the biological and psychological development of the individual usefully highlights selfhood as a process rather than a state, but it also inevitably frames young people primarily as not-yet-finished human beings. Indeed, for many years anthropologists studied adolescence almost exclusively as a liminal position between childhood and adulthood that is marked in many (but not most) cultures through some type of initiation ceremony (Schlegel & Barry 1979). Such ceremonies are means of socially managing, and indeed defining, this life stage in adult terms. While some coming-of-age rituals, like the Mexican American quinceañera (Watters 1988) and the U.S. high school prom (Best 2000), are shaped in part by youth themselves, most rites of passage that have been studied by anthropologists are in the hands of adult members of the community. The role of adults in the process of socialization is unquestionably a central element in the understanding of youth, yet the study of how adults guide adolescents into full cultural membership obscures the more informal ways in which young people socialize themselves and one another as they enter adolescence (e.g., Merten 1999).

Developmental Crises: Youth and Modernity

If many anthropologists of adolescence in previous decades concentrated on how adolescents around the world assumed new, culturally recognized roles through ritual activities that dramatized the liminality of youth (Turner 1969), the disappearance or alteration of these and other age-graded practices in the face of cultural pressures from without has raised a new question: What are the consequences of large-scale social and cultural transformations that disproportionately affect the lives of young people? This question continues to draw on the psychological foundation laid by earlier researchers, while emphasizing that cultural shifts are drastically revising the meaning of youth in many societies.

The impact of modernity and economic restructuring (“development”) on youth in societies previously organized in other ways is often thought to give rise to psychological stress of a kind not unlike that associated with youth in industrialized societies, who are claimed to undergo “identity crises” as they resolve psychic conflicts with their adult roles (Erikson 1968). The difficulties believed to be endemic to this stage of life, however, may appear to be compounded among adolescents in societies undergoing rapid cultural change because such young people also face tensions between tradition and innovation. This issue has been discussed most extensively with respect to suicidal acts among youth, the etiology

of which has been argued to be cultural rather than based in individual or family pathology.² While such phenomena are often at least partly ascribed to cultural traditions that may indirectly reinforce suicidal behavior, such as subordination of youth to elders and taboos against overt expressions of anger (Brown 1986, Minore et al. 1991), the emphasis of most studies is on the role of cultural contact and conflict in adolescent suicide. Thus the alarmingly high rates of suicide and suicide attempts by youth in some Pacific (Booth 1999; Hezel 1984, 1987; Macpherson & Macpherson 1987; Reser 1990; Robinson 1990; Rubinstein 1983) and Native American societies (Johnson & Tomren 1999, Novins et al. 1999), as well as in parts of Sri Lanka (Kearney & Miller 1985), have been attributed to cultural changes that disrupt traditional social roles and socialization processes. Despite this shared emphasis, specific patterns of suicide in each context are widely varied, and proposed explanations are likewise diverse: Among the suggested causes are the loss of traditional pathways of adolescent socialization, changes in family roles, and increased economic expectations coupled with decreased economic opportunities, or some combination of these (see Rubinstein 1992 for a critical overview of such explanations for the Pacific findings).

Other forms of psychological distress have been linked to the implementation of new educational structures among youth in changing societies. The stress of competition for educational access and the social mobility it promises has been cited as the source both of outbreaks of witchcraft-induced health problems among students in Botswana (Burke 2000) and of disordered and violent behavior caused by spirit possession among schoolgirls in Madagascar (Sharp 1990). However, such stress is also evident in more industrialized societies. In modern Japan, the diagnosis of "school refusal syndrome" medicalizes students' expressions of protest against perceptions of their inadequacy and morally frames this phenomenon within Confucian and capitalist ideologies of individual and family (Lock 1986).

These explanations for adolescent social crises have the merit of locating the cause of psychological or physical disturbance in specific social and economic processes. As O'Neil (1986) points out, social change in itself is an inadequate explanation for adolescent stress, which in turn is usually invoked to account for behavior perceived as problematic. But rapid social change need not be experienced as dramatic or unsettling by the young people living through it, as demonstrated by Markowitz's (2000) study of Russian teenagers during the period of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that youth are as often the agents as the experiencers of cultural change. Burbank (1988), for example, shows how adolescent girls, taking advantage of the opening provided by other social shifts, are transforming the traditional marriage system in Aboriginal Australia by choosing premarital pregnancies. Thus although young people's

²In this regard, the study of adolescent suicide in industrialized societies lags far behind research on youth in other cultures, focusing instead on psychosocial dysfunction (Gaines 1990 is one important exception). Because of its lack of engagement with ethnography and culture, I do not treat this large body of scholarship here.

experiences of potentially socially threatening phenomena are thought to be the result of dramatic cultural changes that create unprecedented psychological pressure, there is another, creative dimension to these responses to new cultural circumstances. It is in this sense that youths' socially transgressive actions may be understood not simply as culture-specific manifestations of psychological distress but more importantly as critical cultural practices through which young people display agency. In accounts of such phenomena, a number of researchers in fact foreground the tension between young people's agency and the structural power of social institutions, thereby complicating the view of stress as an individual psychological state to which the young, with their age-based psychic fragility, are unusually susceptible.

The understanding of adolescents as the age group most vulnerable to the radical shifts of modernization also raises questions about relations between youth and elders. From one perspective, intergenerational conflict, like psychological stress, is exacerbated by the internal conflicts that young people experience in the process of cultural change. The tension between the tantalizing promises of modernity and the expectations of tradition-minded adults may be thought to create resentment among the young people caught in the middle. Yet this too-easy explanation has frequently been called into question in anthropological research. Admittedly, youthful challenges to adult authority are widely documented, but the phenomenon is neither so wholeheartedly rebellious nor so intimately connected to modernity as this imagined scenario suggests. Researchers in a variety of cultural settings have found that the divisions between youth and elder, modern and traditional, conflictual and consensual are blurry and ambiguous rather than clearly differentiated (Gable 2000, Rasmussen 2000, Rea 1998, Sharp 1995).

Moreover, as with psychological stress, it is unlikely that rapid social change in itself triggers disagreements between younger and older people. Although modernity has deservedly received a great deal of blame for intergenerational tensions (as well as for the rash of other problems plaguing many societies), Leis & Hollos (1995) argue that cultural factors, such as kinship structure, may also affect how smoothly change is negotiated between generations. In fact, in a number of societies undergoing rapid shift, intergenerational tensions are rare (Condon 1987, Davis & Davis 1989).

The anthropology of adolescence thus considers development and change at two levels: individual and cultural. These levels interact analytically in the social staging of adolescence in particular cultural contexts in which the universal developmental arc of adolescence is shaped by historically specific processes of social, political, and economic transformation, as well as by existing cultural practices. Although researchers are careful not to imply that cultural change has a teleology, they are less careful about this point in discussions of the changes that young people experience (and bring about) in the adolescent period. In fact, it is precisely the teleology of the developmental process from adolescent to adult that motivates this research tradition. The issues addressed in such studies are certainly part of the study of youth, but they paint an incomplete picture. The lived experience of young people is not limited to the uneasy occupation of a developmental way

station en route to full-fledged cultural standing. It also involves its own distinctive identities and practices, which are neither rehearsals for the adult “real thing” nor even necessarily oriented to adults at all. These practices and identities, which might be classified as the concerns of youth rather than simply of adolescence, provide a firmer cultural ground on which to conduct research than the definitionally unstable terrain of adolescence alone.

FROM ADOLESCENCE TO YOUTH

In urging a scholarly shift from adolescence to youth, I am not simply calling for researchers to expand their scope from the teen years, puberty, or other chronological or biological measures of adolescence in order to incorporate the full range of ways that youth may be defined socioculturally. Indeed, many scholars are already taking this broader perspective in their work. Just as importantly, however, I want to interrogate the concept of adolescence itself, which contrasts and connects—etymologically as well as socially—with adulthood. *Adultum* is the past participle of the Latin verb *adolescere* “to grow (up).” The senses of growth, transition, and incompleteness are therefore historically embedded in *adolescent*, while *adult* indicates both completion and completeness (cf. Herdt & Leavitt 1998). This etymology is also reflected in the way in which the term adolescence has been put to use in the social sciences. This is not to say that the mere use of one term over the other determines analytic outcomes; as the discussion below demonstrates, work on young people’s agency and creativity may go under the label of *adolescence*, and research within the developmental framework may advertise itself as a study of youth. My concern is therefore primarily conceptual, not terminological, but it is important to note that the selection of either term is itself a theoretical choice.

Youth foregrounds age not as trajectory, but as identity, where *identity* is intended to invoke neither the familiar psychological formulation of adolescence as a prolonged “search for identity,” nor the rigid and essentialized concept that has been the target of a great deal of recent critique. Rather, identity is agentive, flexible, and ever-changing—but no more for youth than for people of any age. Where the study of adolescence generally concentrates on how bodies and minds are shaped for adult futures, the study of youth emphasizes instead the here-and-now of young people’s experience, the social and cultural practices through which they shape their worlds (see also Wulff 1995a). And where adolescence is usually placed in relation to adulthood, an equally salient group for youth may be other youth—that is, the peer group—and relevant age contrasts may include childhood, old age, and other culturally specific stages, in addition to adulthood.

The difference between research on adolescence and research on youth may be illustrated by surveying studies of two widely problematized and highly sensationalized topics within scholarship on young people: violence and sexuality. These two issues are often approached from an adult-centered perspective as social problems; whether young people are understood as victims or perpetrators within this general approach, they are positioned as responding to, not shaping,

cultural forces. Such an interpretation is challenged by research that takes seriously the fact that youth are cultural actors whose experiences are best understood from their own point of view.

Youth and Violence

The framing of adolescence as a psychological stage fraught with social problems is a prominent feature of a good deal of the anthropological work on youth violence. Hence, Sykes (1999) reports that youths in Papua New Guinea, unable to secure steady work, engage in acts of violence and excessive consumption; she argues that these acts produce alienation and strip the young men of identity. In a study of Chicano street gangs, Vigil (1988) takes a somewhat more positive view, suggesting that despite their violent activities, gangs provide a sense of self-identity and serve as a passage to adulthood. Yet it is clear from his discussion that this surrogate and illegitimate identity is held to be an inadequate replacement for legitimate cultural institutions such as the family or the school. Other researchers, by contrast, set the often sensationalistic topic of youth gangs and violence into broader perspective. Monsell-Davis (1986), cautioning against unremittingly negative representations of Papua New Guinean youth, points to the fact that many young people participate fully in village life, and some work on American gangs demonstrates that they are not simply symbolic substitutes for culturally approved social structures; more importantly, they function as one of the few avenues for entrepreneurship available to groups barred by race and class from other forms of capitalism (e.g., Jankowski 1991). Likewise, the understanding of identity in the problem-centered approach misses the crucial fact that the identity work of violence is neither anticultural, as Vigil would have it, nor acultural, as Sykes maintains, but is entirely cultural, if viewed on its own terms. Mendoza-Denton (1996) shows that for Latina gang girls, the capacity for violence, whether implied or enacted, is part of the production of a nonhegemonic femininity, while Leavitt (1998) argues that the violent practices of young men in Papua New Guinea should be seen not as rebellion against authority but as an appropriation of the authority reserved for political leaders through which a powerful masculine identity is constructed. Finally, Allison (2001) points out that some representations of violence in popular entertainment, often blamed for violent acts by youth, are conceptualized by fans as productive as well as destructive.

These differing perspectives on youth violence are especially clear in research on youth and war. West (2000) identifies two major strands in this scholarship. The first is a Western psychological approach that asserts that exposure to violence leads to youths' loss of innocence; proponents argue that such young people go on to perpetuate violence throughout their lives, whether as victims of violence or its (often coerced) perpetrators (e.g., Boothby 1986). The second approach centers on cultural agency and understands youth as able to adapt effectively to violent situations in culturally specific ways (Peters & Richards 1998, West 2000). Even when these two perspectives are combined, the romantic belief in a "lost generation" as the ultimate victims of war gives way to an analysis that recognizes

both young people's agency in wartime and its very real constraints (Assal & Farrell 1992). Thus as producers and recipients of violence alike, youth maintain their agency as cultural and political actors (Bernat 1999, Diouf 1996).

Youth, Sexuality, and the Body

As with youth and violence, discussions of youth and sexuality within anthropology have been largely of two types: one, in the tradition of Mead, that focuses on culturally specific sexual practices and the extent to which adolescent and premarital sexual activity is culturally discouraged, tolerated, or encouraged (e.g., Barry & Schlegel 1984, 1986; Hollos & Leis 1986; Lepowsky 1998; Whiting 1986; Whiting et al. 1986); and a second, from a more medical perspective, that examines how young people themselves view sexual activity (Eyre et al. 1998, Lackey & Moberg 1998) and sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS (Leclerc-Madlala 1997, Obbo 1995, Paiva 1995, Sobo et al. 1997). Although the former tends to be more culturally grounded than the latter, the growing use of ethnographic and qualitative methods in medical anthropology and related fields has helped to emphasize the cultural agency of youth (see also Schensul et al. 2000 and Way et al. 1994 on drug use by young people). Both anthropological approaches have great advantages over many traditional sociological frameworks, which view certain youth practices as pathological or deviant, especially those that threaten hegemonic systems of authority and economy. By contrast, perspectives from anthropology offer cultural and structural arguments to account for the same practices. Thus Zigman (1999) views teenage sex workers in Philadelphia as adapting to complex social and economic forces and therefore rejects arguments that locate the cause in the family or the individual. The small but significant body of anthropological work on youth and same-sex desire (e.g., Herdt 1989, Leap 1999) likewise challenges the pathologizing frameworks that have dominated discussion of this topic in other fields.

However, much of the research on young people's sexuality places it in the context of adult activities and concerns. This is clearly the case in discussions of pregnancy and youth. The problematization of teenage pregnancy, so widespread in American public discourse (Luker 1996), is not common to all societies and has arrived only relatively recently in some parts of the United States: Reservation Navajos report that teenage pregnancy was once a cultural norm but that it is now desirable for young women to delay pregnancy (Dalla & Gamble 2001). Nor is adolescent sexual activity necessarily discouraged everywhere. Among the Kikuyu, adolescents were traditionally taught sexual practices that would not lead to pregnancy, but the effects of modernization and Christianization have eliminated the age-grade system on which the transmission of these practices depended (Whiting 1986, Worthman & Whiting 1987).

As Burbank & Chisholm (1998) point out, it is not adolescent pregnancy itself but the community's response to it that creates a social problem. Nader & González (2000) document the economically motivated rhetorical construction of

teen pregnancy as an issue of “adolescent health” both locally and nationally by elements of the U.S. health care industry. This process of redefinition excludes from consideration young people’s (and all nonexperts’) views of teen pregnancy and prescribes a single appropriate community response. The operation of power illustrated here is therefore vital to the analysis of young people’s sexual and other cultural practices. But the operation of individual agency is equally important. Youthful pregnancy in many contexts is not simply accidental, but a potentially tactical act of identity. McRobbie (2000) reports that teenage mothers in economically depressed South Birmingham view pregnancy both as a confirmation of womanhood and as a legitimation of sexual activity because it enforces an image of monogamy. Pregnancy can also be a way for Aboriginal adolescent girls in Australia to assert their autonomy and reject marital arrangements made by their parents (Burbank 1987, 1988). However, at the same time that these young women gain a certain degree of sexual freedom, safe in the knowledge that their child will be valued by the community, they may also be constrained in the range of options open to them, whether through ideologies of romance, the reality of male violence, or their own use of substances that may injure their fetuses (Burbank 1995).

It is worth comparing sexuality to a second arena of highly adolescent behavior: eating, dieting, and body size. Unlike pregnancy, this topic is not widely researched by anthropologists; Nichter’s (2000) multi-method work stands as the most extensive ethnographic treatment of American girls’ body image.³ The virtue of Nichter’s approach over the survey techniques that dominate in adjacent disciplines is that the latter have led to reports of a dieting epidemic among European American girls that in fact vastly overstate the extent of the problem. Nichter found that girls’ cultural practice of “fat talk,” in which the speaker’s body is ritualistically problematized for a variety of interactional purposes, has no necessary relation to dieting or to negative body image, although white girls did tend to disparage their bodies more than girls of other ethnicities (see also Mendoza-Denton 1996, Parker et al. 1995). Such research demonstrates once again that practices often viewed as pathological are better viewed as sites of cultural agency.

The problem-based perspective on youth focuses on young people’s actions as social violations rather than agentive interventions into ongoing sociocultural change. By contrast, the best work on the challenges facing youth emphasizes their own acts of cultural critique and cultural production in the face of often untenable situations. This view has also been instrumental in developing alternatives to theories of sociology that define youth practices solely in terms of their deviation from adult social norms. The most important of these, the extremely influential Birmingham School of cultural studies in England, opened up new directions for the investigation of youth cultures within sociology. However, this perspective has itself come in for a good deal of criticism (see Lave et al. 1992 for a history of the Birmingham tradition and a constructive critique of its achievements).

³There is a small anthropologically oriented literature on other facets of youth and body image such as race (Bloustien 1999) and disability (Butler 1998).

THE BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL: SUBCULTURE AND STYLE

The study of youth culture began in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century as an outgrowth of criminology and delinquency studies within sociology; the concern was not with youth directly so much as with deviant subcultures. The Chicago School of sociology took a strongly ethnographic approach to these issues, focusing on the ways in which subcultures, especially those created by young people, constitute alternative systems of shared symbolic meaning for their members (Cohen 1955) that take shape precisely by being labeled *deviant* by members of the dominant culture (Becker 1963).

This perspective had a significant impact on the work that is often identified as the foundation of youth culture studies—that produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (Hall & Jefferson [1976] 1993). Influenced by Marxist cultural theory, the Birmingham School researchers shared with the Chicago School a focus on the working class but understood such youths' position as a result of material as well as symbolic positioning. Taking class as the foundation of youth culture, the newly emerging field of cultural studies focused primarily on youth cultural practices in late industrial urban British society (e.g., Mungham & Pearson 1976). However, some members of CCCS rejected the concept of youth culture altogether, replacing it with subculture, a term that they felt better emphasized the class positioning of such cultural formations (Clarke et al. [1976] 1993). *Youth culture*, however, is currently the preferred term of most researchers, not least because it allows for the inclusion of all youth in the study of culture, whereas the approach of Clarke and his colleagues very deliberately does not.

Unlike the Chicago School, the Birmingham School was not firmly committed to ethnographic methods. A favored technique was textual analysis of the media, through which researchers examined how “moral panics” are produced in media representations of youth (Cohen [1972] 1980). Another influential approach involved semiotic analysis of cultural forms (Hebdige 1979). Although theoretical concerns often overshadowed ethnographic details in such research, it combined a concern with cultural style and attention to economic consequences, thereby offering a clearer understanding of the cultural basis of class identity.

Nevertheless, one of the most widely read studies to emerge from CCCS was Willis's (1977) ethnography of a group of white working-class boys. Willis describes how these “lads” perpetuated their class position in the world of work by embracing an anti-school youth culture, in contrast to the “ear'oles,” who accepted the authority of the school and the goals of schooling. This focus on the practices of groups understood as distinctive and separate from one another came to typify work in the Birmingham tradition. Thus Hebdige (1979) offers a semiotic interpretation of white British working-class styles, including the teddy boy, the mod, the skinhead, and the glam rocker, arguing that they are different responses to black culture and racial politics. Style itself is theorized by Hebdige, and earlier by Clarke ([1976] 1993), as *bricolage*, a borrowing from Lévi-Strauss (1966) that is perhaps

the only significant influence of anthropology on the Birmingham School of cultural studies. On Clarke and Hebdige's reading, the *bricoleur* appropriates and combines existing elements in new ways to create a distinctive style. These acts of semiotic resignification subvert the meanings assigned to the appropriated objects within the dominant culture, often in ways that challenge class arrangements. Both the lads investigated by Willis and the working-class youths described by Hebdige are therefore understood as responding to the class-based subject positions assigned to them and as carving out distinctive semiotic spaces for themselves, although this dimension is much more fully elaborated in Hebdige's work.

The well-developed theory that characterizes the Birmingham tradition is both its strength and its weakness. Its engagement with a wide range of cultural theories fruitfully revised and extended American approaches to deviance and delinquency, but in privileging class in the analysis of youth culture, CCCS researchers and those who followed their example failed to take into account other crucial dimensions of young people's identities. For example, although Hebdige located white working-class youth cultures in relation to black culture, relatively little work on black cultural agency—as opposed to media representations of black youth (Hall et al. 1978)—was undertaken within cultural studies until much later (Gilroy 1991, 1993).

An early internal critique also pointed to the field's exclusive focus on male cultural actors (McRobbie & Garber [1976] 1993). Many scholars considered youth culture to be a male preserve almost by definition, and some even maintained that the primary purpose of such cultures is to work out issues of masculinity (e.g., Brake 1980). The problem is not that female cultural styles do not exist, but that they were not acknowledged as legitimate forms of culture. McRobbie & Garber note that the female-dominated teenybopper or preadolescent pop fan culture was often trivialized by male scholars as consumption-based and passive, in spite of its being highly agentive (see Rhein 2000 for a defense of teenybopper fan culture in Germany). Subsequent feminist research identified girls' trajectory into dating and marriage, but—like the work on their male counterparts—it did not address the full diversity of girls' cultural or gender styles (e.g., McRobbie [1977a] 2000).

Likewise, scholarly concern with "spectacular" or highly visible subcultural styles, as interpreted through the lens of semiotics, did not completely capture the range of orientations to gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity that youth may display in their cultural practices. This concern with the symbolic representation of identity, manifested in the investigation of music, fashion, and other cultural forms as semiotic markers, also often enforced a view of youth cultures as clearly bounded and distinctive from one another, even as their semiotic resources, through *bricolage*, were drawn from diverse and overlapping sources and contexts.

Some of these limitations have been remedied in the more recent work of Stuart Hall, one of the founders of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Hall's theorizing of "new ethnicities" redresses both the absence of racial and ethnic diversity in the early Birmingham studies and the rigidity of subcultural identity categories as initially conceptualized.

NEW ETHNICITIES

Although the notion of new ethnicities was first articulated in the context of film studies rather than the investigation of youth cultures, it was quickly extended to this latter domain. Hall's insight was that the strategic invocation of essentialized concepts of identity by black political activists in Britain was being supplanted by complex cultural blending both in representation and in practice. Following Hall ([1989] 1996, 1997), a number of British scholars embraced the concept of new ethnicities for the study of youth culture (e.g., Back 1996, Cohen 1999, Rampton 1999). Because such identities are not founded on static and essentialistic ethnic categories, but rather are emergent, hybrid, and local, the concept of new ethnicities can reveal nuanced social processes that the blunter tool of ethnicity could not expose. Such analytic work also has ample room for ethnographic methods, since new ethnicities are by definition locally constructed. Connections to anthropology are being reformed in other ways as well: Rampton (1999) revisits Turner's concept of liminality to develop the idea of new ethnicities as sites of cultural crossing, thresholds that young people move across as they carry on with their cultural business.

Although the utility of the concept of new ethnicities for promoting antiessentialist scholarship is evident, it should not be mistaken for a theoretical or political panacea. To begin with, it is not clear to what extent new ethnicities are really new or distinctive to late modernity and globalization, as Hall (1997) suggests. Cultural contact, appropriation, blending, and the resulting complex identities can be found in any number of societies, regardless of their relationship to modernity. The notion of new ethnicities thus seems to be not so much identifying an innovative cultural practice as urging a more delicate scholarly analysis. Nor is it clear how the framework would apply to cultures in which conceptions of ethnicity have very different meanings. Another issue that new ethnicities raise is the extent to which recent ethnic and racial configurations transcend historical patterns of racism rather than simply reinscribing them in less obvious ways. Here too, new ethnicities appear less than new: A number of researchers of race among British and American youth have noted that racist ideology and practice can exist side by side with cultural borrowing and even friendship (Back 1996, Bucholtz 1999a, Cutler 1999, Hewitt 1986, Schneider 1997; but cf. Wulff 1995b), and Hall himself is under no illusions that new ethnicities are synonymous with racial harmony. Finally, it is necessary to keep in mind that while the concept of new ethnicities may account admirably for current cultural practices in Britain—which has a small minority population and a relatively recent history of immigration—it takes on very different resonances in a country like the United States, with its long history of slavery and government-sanctioned racism and with its population quickly shifting, in the face of alarmist rightwing rhetoric, from predominantly white to “majority minority.” In fact, both in racially homogeneous and in racially heterogeneous school settings young European Americans may counter the constitution of ethnicities, whether new or old, among youth of color by positioning themselves as “cultureless” (Perry 2001). Thus the great strength of the new-ethnicities approach—its emphasis on

the local—should not be overridden by a desire to find racial convergence where more complex sociopolitical processes are at work.

Aside from some of the research on new ethnicities, much recent scholarship from a cultural studies perspective has lost even the Birmingham School's loose mooring of theory to ethnography. Some of the most influential work within cultural studies currently retains the Birmingham School's focus on music-based subcultures in capitalist societies, but it is now almost entirely historical and textual rather than ethnographic in orientation (e.g., Lipsitz 1994, Rose 1994, Ross & Rose 1994; but see Thornton 1995). Thus the participants in these cultures rarely come into view except in highly mediated ways. In many cases, too, cultural studies as currently practiced is virtually identical to popular cultural studies (Redhead 1997). As important as it is to investigate how youth cultures engage with both commercial and not-yet-commodified forms of popular culture, a full account of youth as cultural agents must look beyond these questions to understand the other ways in which youth styles emerge, the other dimensions of youth identities, and the other cultural practices in which youth engage. Most importantly, it must look not only to the United States, Britain, and other postindustrial societies for evidence of youth cultural practices, but also to young people's cultural innovations in other locations around the world.

YOUTH CULTURES OR CULTURAL PRACTICES OF YOUTH?

Although within cultural studies, youth cultures are understood as a response to the social class conflicts associated with industrialized societies, Lepowsky (1998) notes that nonindustrial societies may also have recognizable youth cultures. But even with this inclusion, the study of youth cultures, as productive as it has been and continues to be, is too limiting for research on youth from an anthropological perspective. Also necessary is an anthropologically based retheorizing of youth culture, in which static and inflexible cultural boundaries are replaced with the much more fluid and indeterminate collections of practices and ideologies that constitute culture in anthropology. In this way, social action that would not qualify as part of youth culture under the Birmingham School definition—for reasons of class, gender, or other factors—may be analyzed as a more dynamic form of youth culture: the cultural practices of youth. Such a recasting of youth research also serves as a corrective to some of the politically and ethically problematic elements of earlier approaches. Just as anthropologists have been drawn to the study of sexual practices among youth in non-Western societies, so too have spectacular and sensationalistic aspects of youth cultures preoccupied many sociologists of adolescence in industrial societies. Both groups have been accused of titillating readers at the expense of exploring other aspects of young people's lives. An emphasis on the ordinary, everyday activities in which youth engage, then, may act as an important counterbalance to previous work.

Research that contributes to these goals is already being done in a variety of fields. Both by critiquing the boundaries of traditional cultural studies research and by expanding them to include new groups, scholars in anthropology and related disciplines have begun to document the breadth of youth cultural production and practice.

Rethinking Resistance

The economic decline associated with deindustrialization in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s has often been cited as the reason for the emergence of oppositional and class-based youth styles. And as global economic restructuring continues, those whose entry into the working world has been deferred or rerouted have responded not only through the adoption of flamboyant styles but in other ways as well. McDermott (1985) found that a youth employment program established by the British government in this period served not to address the structural problems giving rise to high rates of unemployment or even to place young people in jobs, but to adapt workers to perform new kinds of work flexibly and without resistance. As Bridgman (2001) notes, even a job training program that emphasizes the dignity of teenage workers may clash with the reality of a work world that often strips young people of their agency. Despite efforts to produce a compliant workforce, resistance, or more properly, subversion, is widespread among youth in the workplace. Under conditions of underemployment and the lack of possibility of advancement, young American workers assert their autonomy through frequent job changing and rejection of the ideal of work as stimulating. Such solutions, however, are individual coping tactics rather than collective action (Willis 1998), in contrast to young people's challenges to workplace conditions elsewhere in the world (Mills 1999). Borman (1988, 1991) documents another tactic, "playing on the job," that allows adolescents to endure the tedium of routine work tasks. This practice recalls P. Willis's description of "having a laff" as a form of youthful resistance to school. There are thus many points of convergence between early cultural studies approaches to youth and employment and those taken more recently by anthropologists. But oppositionality takes many forms and may arise for many reasons in addition to or instead of class inequities.

Some scholars within the United States have suggested, for example, that a race-based oppositionality exists among students whose "involuntary minority" status (e.g., Ogbu 1988) makes academic achievement difficult. Fordham (1996) argues further that high achieving African American students must navigate carefully in order to avoid accusations of "acting white." But a number of scholars have challenged this claim, noting that many African American students are highly motivated to succeed in school (e.g., Hemmings 1996, Schultz 1996). If the oppositional identities of the "lads" and the "ear'oles" that Willis documented in England have counterparts in U.S. high schools, then, they necessarily differ on many key points due to differences in the local context. And the danger of framing oppositionality in terms of resistance is that identities are theorized as more dichotomous

than is in fact the case. Certainly a wide variety of oppositional youth identities have been described by researchers (e.g., Bucholtz 1999b, Eckert 1989, Leblanc 1999, Lowney 1995, Kinney 1999), but despite the rigidity of these categories in local ideologies, they often prove to be flexible in practice. Hemmings (2000) documents a U.S. urban high school clique of unusual diversity, in which socially marginalized students of different backgrounds came together in ways that both allowed for individuality and precluded violent opposition with other groups.

Thus the explanatory power of resistance becomes less adequate as youth identities move further away from the class-based cultural styles that the concept was designed to account for. Where within the Birmingham School tradition musical subcultures were often explicitly linked to a broader political and economic context, many analyses of contemporary subcultures are striking for their frequent assertions that aesthetics rather than politics dominates cultural practice, especially in cultural styles associated with the middle class (Diethrich 1999/2000, Jerrentrup 2000, Roccor 2000). But as Thornton (1995) argues, such musical cultures are better understood as founded on a politics of distinction, in which musical taste is tied not only to pleasure or social identity but also to forms of power. This is a very different kind of oppositionality than is implied by the concept of resistance, for it is based not on a rejection of a powerless structural position but rather on a rejection of an undiscerning mainstream culture. Nor have youth cultures entirely abandoned overt political action, as shown by the Italian squatting movement, which has given rise to countercultural social centers that are often politically as well as musically based (Wright 2000). But the direct form that resistance takes here is once again quite different from the symbolic resistance that cultural studies scholars have described. Rather than reading resistance into these situations, analysts would do well to be attentive to local meanings of such practices.

Youth and Media

If youth cultures have generally been the heroes of the resistance movement in cultural studies, the media have historically been the villains of the piece. Viewed primarily as a threat to the vitality of youth cultures as forums for authenticity and resistance, the media are targeted for the ideologies that they promote both about and to young people. While some scholars focused on negative and panic-inducing media representations of youth—a tradition that continues today (Giroux 1996)—as part of the latter body of work, popular representations of femininity aimed at teenage consumers, such as romance novels (Christian-Smith 1990) and fashion magazines (Finders 1996, McRobbie 1977b [2000], Talbot 1995), have been analyzed for their ideological construction of a culture of femininity based largely on romance, beauty, and the domestic sphere. Similarly, in Japan, the rise of “cute culture” in the 1980s (Kinsella 1995), associated primarily with young women, ushered in an era of cuteness in advertisements, fashion, and even handwriting. Young women’s widely documented trend away from highly gendered language use (e.g., Okamoto 1995) has also been associated with cute style

(Matsumoto 1996). In the context of modernizing societies, however, what is more immediately relevant than this ideological inculcation is the chasm between the representations of modern life presented by the media and the realities of limited economic opportunities for most youths (Miles 2000).

While youths' relationships to popular media are often associated with unattainable images and capitalist urgings toward consumption, media representations may also be a source of knowledge and agency. Fisherkeller (1997) found that young U.S. adolescents facing peer-group rejection often developed strategies and skills modeled on television in ways that negotiated rather than capitulated to hegemonic gender, racial, and social-class ideologies. In fact, commodification is not a barrier to the perception of authentic cultural practice: Despite the extensive commercialization of rave culture (Richard & Kruger 1998), many participants experience raves as sites of spiritual renewal (Hutson 2000). And media forms have been embraced by youth seeking like-minded others beyond the local community (Leonard 1998, Willard 1998). In any case, the relationship between resistance, authenticity, and cultural appropriation can be extremely complex. In the United States, body modification (piercing, tattooing, scarification, and so on) is understood by its practitioners both as a resistant desire that rejects capitalism—a "modern primitivism"—and as a therapeutic recovery of the authentic self (Rosenblatt 1997). Yet such practices also rely upon an unexamined construction of the exoticized cultural other, the never-to-be-modern primitive whose imagined existence authenticates these acts.

Styles of Appropriation

By contrast with the cultural appropriations that formed the basis of the Birmingham School's theory of style, or with those described above, many of the resources of present-day *bricoleurs* are in a certain sense self-appropriations—borrowings and adaptations of one's own cultural background to create new youth styles. The "Guido" cultural style of New York, for example, is predicated on Italian heritage but also involves a highly stylized performance of a particular commodified image of Italianness (Tricarico 1991). Dimitriadis (2001) describes how African American teenage boys in the Midwest used Southern rap music to construct a community around a nostalgic Southern tradition. Likewise, a great deal of cultural production among first- and second-generation immigrants to the United States involves a kind of neotraditionalism in which elements of the heritage culture are selectively appropriated and resignified. In the Indian American *desi* music scene in Chicago, diasporic and modern Indian musical genres such as film music and house *bhangra* are imagined as traditional (Diethrich 1999/2000; cf. Maira 1999). Such cultural forms lead to new ethnicities insofar as new panethnic identities emerge from this syncretic practice (see also Buff 1998).

New ethnicities, or at least new configurations of race and ethnicity, are also produced through acts of appropriation between self and other. Young people may negotiate in interaction among a variety of ethnicized and racialized subject

positions, to which they may or may not have a culturally legitimized claim. In this process, language is often a privileged resource for staking identity claims (e.g., Bailey 2000, Bucholtz 1999a, Cutler 1999, Jacobs-Huey 1997, Lo 1999, Rampton 1995). This is not to say that ethnic reification does not occur or does not affect youth; the multivalent identities of youth in the Hungarian minority of Slovakia have recently become problematized, and young people are now forced to choose a single identity position as ethnic purity becomes a central ideology of the Slovak state (Langman 1997). In addition, cultural appropriations depend for their success on notions of cultural ownership even as they appear to repudiate them. Such questions become more vexed as cultural resources move globally as well as locally.

The global spread of popular culture is often viewed as symptomatic of cultural leveling, yet many scholars have pointed out that how cultural forms are taken up and assigned meanings far from their places of origin is a process that involves creativity and agency, not unthinking acceptance of cultural products. The same cultural resource can be put to use in radically different ways. Hence rap allows underemployed youth in Tanzania to participate politically in public discourse (Remes 1999), while in Zimbabwe, it enables privileged urban youth to display personal aspirations through cultural style (Neate 1994). Global black culture also provides the stylistic resources for young Surinamese Creoles in the Netherlands to create a panethnic black identity (Sansone 1995). Although hip hop is currently the cultural form most widely appropriated into new contexts around the world (see M. H. Morgan, forthcoming), other musical styles may also be resources for local identity making. In West Africa, reggae serves as a mediating link between Africa and the African diaspora, and reggae forms often become re-Africanized in local contexts through the addition of traditional linguistic and cultural elements (Savishinsky 1994). This racialized coding of cultural styles is highly mutable, however. In her study of a multiracial high school in South Africa, Dolby (1999) found that white students embraced techno music as part of a “global whiteness,” but that when colored students began to participate in rave culture, racial divisions became less rigid as well. Thus cultural resources may be used locally in unpredictable ways.

CONCLUSION: GLOBALIZING YOUTH RESEARCH

Global youth research is not so much cross-cultural—a paradigm that is usually quantitative and comparative rather than qualitative and ethnographic—as it is transcultural or “multi-cultural” in the sense of Amit-Talai (1995). And some of the tools for the kind of work that is most urgently needed come from other disciplines, especially cultural studies. For example, the semiotics of fashion can be used to understand youth identities in the Congo, where the appropriation of European designer clothing is a political response to economic marginalization and to the prolonging of adolescence that is its consequence (Gondola 1999). Much like the teddy boys of England (Jefferson [1976] 1993), young Congolese *sapeurs* borrow

the external trappings of an unattainable class status in order both to challenge inequitable state structures and to claim a new social identity. Likewise, O'Collins (1986) notes the parallels between the moral panics associated with the youthful "hooligans" of postindustrial Britain and those associated with the "rascals" who disrupt Papua New Guinean society.

This is not to say that cross-cultural research, including cross-cultural research within a single society, does not yield insights of use for the global study of youth cultures; indeed, such scholarship may bring to light issues that are addressed in complementary ways by other approaches. For example, although Brake's (1985) comparative study of youth cultures of the United States, Britain, and Canada often errs in its details, it provides useful generalizations that can be ethnographically tested, as well as offering a reminder that global cultural forms are taken up in diverse ways in local contexts.

The most productive view of youth cultures and youth identities, then, must admit both the ideological reality of categories and the flexibility of identities; recent work, especially in anthropology, draws from theories of practice, activity, and performance to demonstrate how youth negotiate cultural identities in a variety of contexts, both material and semiotic, both leisure-based and at home, school, work, and in the political sphere. Anthropological scholarship in youth culture is also distinguished by its geographic range and its concern with the local, which militates against the broad generalizations about youth that have emerged from other approaches. Some of the richest avenues for the anthropological exploration of youth culture include the development of global youth cultures, the blending of traditional cultural forms into new youth-based styles and practices, and the possibilities for cultural production offered by new technologies. Anthropologists working in these realms emphasize that youth-based cultural practices continue to be local phenomena, even when they take inspiration from mediated cultural forms. Further, anthropology problematizes the taken-for-granted nature of both "youth" and "culture" in much youth culture research by emphasizing the fundamental instability of these shifters across cultural settings.

An anthropology of adolescence, then, is not the same as an anthropology of youth. And while both are necessary to a full understanding of young people's perspectives and practices in cultures around the world, the latter task is more pressing, both because it is a newer project that raises less investigated questions and because youth cultural practices are becoming increasingly salient and central to the organization of all human societies.

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