Researching Youth Subcultures: A Rights Based Approach

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Abstract

This article critically engages with the conceptualization of youth culture as a subculture, emphasizing the deficiencies of existing frameworks in addressing intersectionality. Highlighting the inadequacies of established categories such as adolescence and youth, the article proposes a novel perspective—contemporary children's culture. The author argues for an interdisciplinary, rights-based approach that places the child at the center, challenging traditional research paradigms and advocating for the active involvement of young people in the research process. The framework presented comprises three voices: institutional voices about children, institutional voices for children, and children's own voices. By looking into each, the article contributes to advancing research methodologies in the study of youth culture.

Keywords

youth culture, subculture, intersectionality, rights-based research, contemporary children's culture

Introduction

For Dick Hebdige, in his seminal 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style,* what makes something a subculture is its opposition to dominant structures of powers, its existence inside of the core while occupying the margins, and its opposition and active defiance through fashion, art, music, etc. to social norms and dominant ideologies from the periphery. Hebdige (1979) himself, and many of those to use his theories since, have long subdivided youth into a series of smaller subcultures, but childhood or youth itself is a universal category that is by its very existence–a binary and oppositional term to adulthood and therefore the lives of young people, the representations of these lives, and the inherent power imbalance that structures their

lives necessitate a recognition of *youth culture* as subcultural a priori[1]. A glaring omission from Hebdige's work are acknowledgements of intersectionality and how observing subcultures without a lens for gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and age (among other social variables) obfuscates the depth of inequity in power relations. And since subcultures exist primarily as a response to unequal power relations, as an organic channel of feedback to ideology, intersectionality as a research method cannot be over stressed. The same is true for any universalization of childhood, youth, or other category of classification.[2] If we begin from the premise that youth can be viewed as a subculture, what problems are immediately presented to us as researchers who wish to observe youth culture?

Problems of choosing a research path in studying youth as a subculture

The most obvious problem that arises from adults conducting research with children, is that as adult researchers we are immediately outsiders to youth culture and this limits our ability to hear youth voices (Gennaro, 2008). Hearing youth voices requires access to contemporary children's culture. But what is contemporary children's culture? I would argue that contemporary children's culture is the subculture of youth.

No actual definition of contemporary children's culture actually exists. Dr. Carole Carpenter coined the term when she first conceived of the idea of a Children's Studies as a degree option at York University around the turn of the millennium (C. Carpenter, Personal Interview, 10 September 2008). Since then, within the Children, Childhood and Youth Program at York University we now use the term to refer to a very particular moment in time and space, giving that moment structure, and its inhabitants a voice. As the phenomenon gathered steam, it became clear that "contemporary" need not be recent; that we can explore the characteristics of that moment and then make comparisons to where else it shows up across different times, spaces or places along a historical trajectory. Taking a holistic approach in terms of relative disciplines, contemporary children's culture is the exploration of children's real lives, at the present moment, in a very particular geographic space (noting that this space can also be virtual), while at the same time recognizing the real impact of the social construction of childhood on the lives of young people. In a mainstream dominated by adult narratives with respect to "who" and "what" children are or can be, contemporary children's culture provides youth-centric spaces and/or voices.

Forever located within existing adult culture, youth culture is largely deemed beholden to its older, more dominant counterpart – even in formative ways. Exploring stories that young people engage with provides us a sense of the cultural literacy, media literacy, and social literacy of young people's lives distinct from adult proclivities. All three of these literacies are vital to understanding contemporary children's culture, in tandem with an exploration of what I deemed back in 2008 to be (Gennaro, 2010a): the three voices of CCC (contemporary children's culture):[

1. Institutional voices, such as governments and NGOs (and how they talk about children).
2. Media texts (and how these institutional ideas are explained to children).
3. Children's own voices (what children themselves have to say about their own lives).

I will return to these voices and explain in more detail later. However, what is important

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1   For a clearer breakdown of the classification of childhood into subcategories see
Selling Youth: How Market Research at The J. Walter Thompson Company Framed what it meant to be a Child (and an Adult) in 20th Century America (Gennaro, 2010c).

2   To address this gap in Hebdige's work and more recent work on subcultures, see Gildart et al. (2020). "The contributors to this volume assess the main theoretical trends behind Hebdige's work, critically engaging with their value and how they orient a researcher or student of subculture, and also look at some absences in Hebdige's original account of subculture, such as gender and ethnicity."
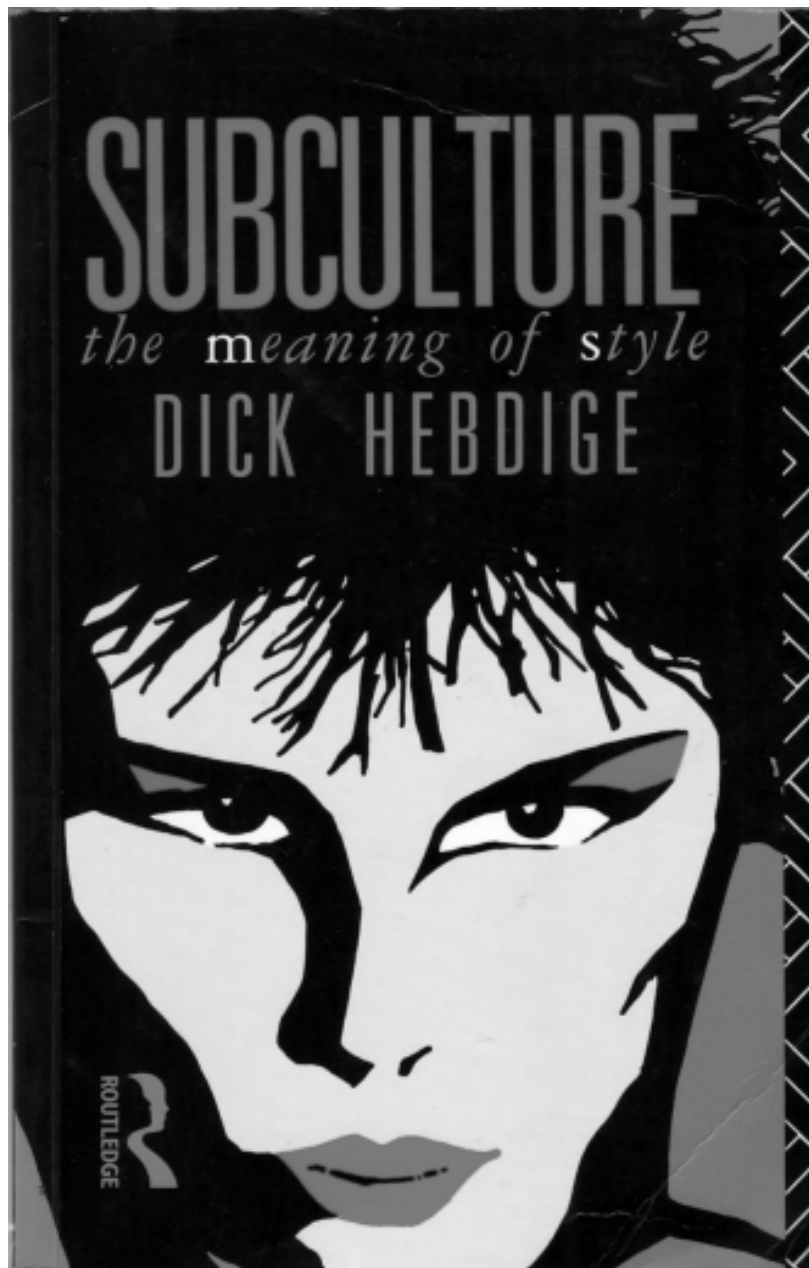
Figure 1. Cover of book "Subculture: The Meaning of Style" by Dick Hebdige

to note is that contemporary children's culture — or youth as subculture — exists at the nexus of these voices, as well as at the cross-over point between the real lived experiences of children and the social construction of childhood.

As researchers, we must overcome the problem of only hearing adult dominated voices and not accessing children's own voices. Hearing the voices of young people requires research methodologies where the focus is on young people as subjects and not as objects. This of course is in directly opposition to a century plus worth of researching young people in disciplines such as adolescent psychology. Adolescence was deemed by psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall and Sigmund Freud to be a time of turbulence, where competing selves needed to be re-organized, where a young person came of age, and where competing sexual urges needed to be controlled in order to function properly in society.[3] With this, adolescence became defined

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3   A full description of the history of youth and adolescence as a series of commercial, medical, and media discourse can be found in *Selling Youth* (Gennaro, 2010).

as a period of destabilization and adolescents became categorized as individuals in need of guidance. By this very definition, the subjectivity of young people is removed and replaced with an objectivity where adults dictate norms, expectations, behaviors, practices, and ideals that are deemed acceptable in any given social moment.

The classification of young people's lives into distinct categories further objectifies the lives of youth. Although terms such as adolescent, child, teenager, and youth have been used in academic disciplines, corporate plans, and medical fields to refer more directly to a category of individuals who have a specific set of attributes and functions, The United Nations defined children in its 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* as anyone under the age of 18 (UN General Assembly, 1989).

The categories of age and development that such terms associate with childhood are social constructions that have become so widely used and represented that they have become what Stuart Hall (1973) would call "naturalized codes."[4] Following Louis Althusser"s ideas of "obviousnesses" and Antonio Gramsci's explanation of how ideology is most dangerous when it becomes invisible, such that it is seen as normal, silly, or stupid, Hall (1973) uses the term "naturalized codes" to refer to the representation of an ideology that has become so widespread in our culture that we no longer process and analyze the symbol and instead simply accept it at face value (Althusser, 1970; Gramsci, 1929). Under this schema, terms like adolescent, teenager, child, and youth all represent an implicit ideology that has become so normalized that we no longer see the dangers inherent in them, structures of power they contain, and the ways in which they not only colonize children but deny them any access to channels of power. What I have written about on several occasions is that each of these categories, adolescence, teenager, youth, child, etc. are mirror reflections of the fears and anxieties of adults in a society, reflected in discourses about childhood and it is the hopes, dreams, and desires of adults in a society that are reflected too (Gennaro, 2010b).

Childhood is a social construction however discourse and representations of youth have real consequences in society. Adolescence is a category of discrimination in that a person's age and life positioning immediately reveal a whole category of subjective beliefs or stereotypes in the same way that a person's gender immediately implies a whole set of power relations. Although childhood is different from other social variables because it is a temporary space, the extension of this temporal space to a lifelong process is precisely the objective of the culture industries in the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence (Gennaro, 2005). Traditionally, research in this field has tended to be <u>on </u>children rather than <u>with</u> children, again, removing the subjectivity of young people from the very research process. Added to this has been an emphasis to conduct this research through "adult eyes" and therefore impacted by the nostalgia of a "rear view mirror" understanding of young people's lives (Gennaro, 2008). As a result, adolescence, youth, and childhood become socially constructed categories of distinction where relationships of power, domination, and inequality are continually contested. This process makes youth a subculture, and is why a rights-based approach to research with young people is required.

What is a rights-based approach?

A rights-based approach is a framework that seeks to place the child and the "Rights of the Child" as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child at the center of all interactions with young people. In much the same way the Article 3 of the UNCRC, referred to as "the best interest principle," articulates the need for adults to support young people by acting with their best interest whenever possible, a rights-based approach extends beyond this to ensure that as adult allies we act with an anti-oppressive, anti-racist, child-cen-

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4   See also David Morley (2019) *Essential Essays.*

tered, and intersectional frameworks when working with young people.

In 2010 I published an article "Globalization, History, Theory, and Writing" for the Society of the History of Childhood and Youth, which asked scholars of childhood and youth to consider how the forces of globalization have impacted our understanding of young people's identities, and their experiences as family members, students, workers, consumers, activists, vulnerable bodies, and citizens (Gennaro, 2010a). Drawing on the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's first chapter "Imperialism, History, Writing and Theory" from her groundbreaking text *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, I argued that any research on the lives of children must take a rights-based approach, which attempts to contextualize children's lives in a global framework of power, economics, and culture framed and dominated by Western Imperialism (Smith, 1999). In order to participate in any research with young people requires adults to take a rights-based approach and to use the "most adult status." This "most adult status" was in direct contrast to popular research methodology in the field at the time, which encouraged researchers to take the "least adult status." The goal of the least adult status was to balance uneven power dynamics by removing one's self as the adult researcher and their bias from the research process. In contrast however, a rights-based approach does not remove the adult, unequal power relations, or bias from the research process. Instead, a rights-based approach pushes social relations and inequity directly to the forefront, acknowledges it, and then actively works to overcome these obstacles to ensure the child, the child's voice, and the child's rights permeate the ideological apparatus that too often silent youth voices.

Method

This research employs a multifaceted approach to investigate youth subcultures within the framework of a rights-based perspective. Utilizing a blend of qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observations, and content analysis of cultural artifacts, the study aims to capture the nuanced expressions and experiences of diverse youth communities. Additionally, a critical analysis of institutional discourses, media representations, and children's own narratives contributes to a comprehensive understanding of youth subcultures. This methodological triangulation ensures a robust exploration of the complexities inherent in the lives, identities, and expressions of young people, aligning with the overarching objective of promoting a rights-focused lens in youth studies.

A rights-based approach is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of children's lives globally and stands as a reminder that exploring young peoples' lives requires a working through the three different voices of CCC.[5]

1. Institutional voices about children (IVACs)
- Describe who children are at any given social moment.
- Primarily occupy institutional spaces of government, education, health care or other social organizations.
- They order and classify.
- They describe what the social roles or functions of children are (including what social spaces children can or cannot occupy and the rules for participation in these spaces) at any given social moment.
- Young peoples' voices are largely absent from IVACS.
2. Institutional voices for children (IVFCs)
- Take the institutional ideas about children and tell them or explain them to young people.

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5   The ideas below are further explored in the forthcoming co-edited collection: *Young People and Social Media: Contemporary Children's Culture in Digital Space(s)* (Gennaro & Miller, 2021).

- Primarily occupy popular culture.
- They are didactic in nature.
- Whether it be books, television, social media, movies, literature, or video games, they are the conduit through which INSTITUIONAL IDEAS are disseminated to children.
- These do not define children's lives, instead they are how the world and their roles in it are explained to young people.
- Contested children's voices can sometimes be present here.

3. Children's Own Voices (COVs)

- When children take up the ideas of INSTITUTIONAL VOICES, they participate in their social world.
- The voices of young people are play based and largely dependent on media. Play is the actual rituals, practices, and actions, where young people engage with popular culture and media to name their world and in doing so speak back to the dominant.
- As a result, play is always by its very nature subversive.
- In digital spaces, this includes texting, apps, games, social media. It is through play that the actions of young people agree with or contest ideologies about their realities.

A rights-based approach requires adults and young people to work together as co-constructors to ensure that children's voices are also heard and that the research does more than perpetuate social norms and imbalances of power that dominate institutional voices for and about children. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith (1999) notes how research with indigenous communities posits a number of insider/outsider issues for research. Tuhiwai Smith argues that research is not simply an innocent and academic pursuit but always a reflection of the social and political ideologies of the institutions (and individuals) who design, request, support, fund, oversee, participate in, and ultimately publish the research project. This is why a rights-based approach is necessary. We can't erase the barriers of distinction and the social expectations and myths that accompany these. Therefore, as researchers, we must acknowledge them, make them overtly known, and work to create a space of dialogue in spite of difference that acknowledges the inequity of power, and the imbalance of representation versus reality, instead of working through a research paradigm that seeks to hide these in the pursuit of a more "truthful" or "expressive" research environment. Insiders are just that — those with direct access to the community or subculture as active members. Outsiders, like all adults who research with young people, remain always on the outside. This is why we must take "the most adult status" and work as allies to co-construct the research process with young people when exploring youth subcultures.

So what does a rights-based approach look like? Again, drawing on the wisdom of Tuhiwai Smith, here are the questions she suggests belong at the beginning of any research design for projects with Indigenous Peoples – all of these belong at the beginning of any research with young people for it to be rights-based:

- Whose research is it?
- Who owns it?
- Whose interests does it serve?
- Who will benefit from it?
- Who has designed its questions and framed its scope?
- Who will carry it out?
- Who will write it up?
- How will its results be disseminated?

Conclusion

Rights based approach requires co-constructing research with young people, ensuring their active participation and representation. Researchers should critically examine the ownership, interests, and beneficiaries of the research, emphasizing transparency and equity. We need to hear children's voices. We need to conduct research with young people not on young people. We need to have research that make visible the imbalances of power and power dynamics. We need a rights-based approach for researching youth subculture.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Steve Gennaro is a critical theorist, a youth rights activist, and a playologist. Professor in the Humanities department at York University (Canada). He explores the intersections of media, technology, psychology, and youth identity. He is one of the founding faculty for the Children, Childhood, and Youth Studies Program at York University in Toronto, Canada, where he has taught for nearly two decades. He was named to the Child Rights Academic Network in 2021 and appointed to the European Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in 2022. He currently works with Canada Soccer to help develop and deliver coaching training and licensing to ensure that every child always has the right to play.