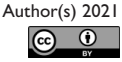
Article

SRO

Sociological Research Online
2023, Vol. 28(1) 58–72



DOI: 10.1177/13607804211006112
journals.sagepub.com/home/sro


The Subcultural Imagination: Critically Negotiating the Co-Production of 'Subcultural Subjects' through the Lens of C. Wright Mills

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Abstract

This article interrogates the following two concepts: the 'subcultural imagination' and the 'subcultural subject'. We explore debates surrounding the ways in which interactions between the researcher and participant produce knowledge, in order to further establish the critical contribution of subculture within sociology. This article draws upon the notion of critique and ideas of C. Wright Mills (1959) in order to demonstrate the potential of new forms of 'imagination' within subcultures research. We seek to show through ethnographic examples how researchers and participants can be engaged in co-production of fieldwork, analysis and writing within research at different levels of engagement. The article will cover four areas, all focused on placing 'imagination' at the centre of subcultures research: first, it critiques the postmodern post-subcultural position within youth cultural studies; second, it defines the subcultural imagination and third, it explores specific empirical examples of subcultural subjects and, finally, we shall address the potential for micro co-production.

Keywords

co-production, C. W. Mills, ethnography, sociological imagination, subculture, youth culture

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to elaborate two new concepts, that of the subcultural imagination and the subcultural subject, within youth cultural studies to support the critical contribution of subculture within sociology. Within the discipline, the concept of subculture has a long history relating back to the Chicago School of the early 1900s (Blackman, 2014). The theory of subculture has been applied within successive paradigms within sociology from behaviourism and functionalism (Cohen, 1956; Lewis, 1933) onwards each acting as a corrective to the previous tradition, the most recent of which is the postmodernist theory of the post-subcultural meaning of style (Bennett, 2020). The challenge of our approach is to combine the qualitative biographical approach of the Chicago School sociologists, with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (CCCS) advocacy of ethnography as a theoretical position (Hall and Jefferson ([1975] 2006)).

This article contributes to the renewed interest shown in the ideas of C. Wright Mills (1959) where the sociological imagination has become shorthand for critique in sociology. Our aim is to use the lens of C. Wright Mills focusing on biography, history and exchange to show how the sociologist 'crafts' the writing process through a creative interaction and interpretation to enable active dialogue and co-production. Thus, both new concepts, the subcultural imagination and subcultural subject, enter into the debate on the basis of a critique of the post-subcultural position. The subcultural imagination is a methodological device that enables researchers to use biography on an interactional basis to gain situated knowledge with 'subcultural subjects' (persons engaged in subcultural activities). Through ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher and participant construct and contest identities through insider knowledge, which is reflexive, dynamic and demanding. We seek to show through ethnographic examples how researchers and participants can be engaged in co-production of fieldwork, analysis and writing within research at different levels of engagement.

The article will cover four areas, all centred on placing 'imagination' at the centre of subcultures research: first, it critiques the postmodern post-subcultural position within youth studies; second, it defines the subcultural imagination; third, it explores specific empirical examples of subcultural subjects and finally, we shall address the potential for micro co-production.

CCCS theory of subculture and critique of the post-subcultural position

Here, we set out the theoretical position of subculture and its links to the subcultural imagination in opposition to the post-subcultural theory and its basis in a postmodern ideology. The critique of Hall and Jefferson's ([1975] 2006) subcultural theory began at the CCCS, with the work of Paul Willis (1972, 1978), although contradictorily, he continued to use the term in 1972 with the article: 'The motorbike within a subcultural group'. The revised edition of Stanley Cohen's ([1972]1980) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* asserted a 'mismatch' between theory and the lives of young adults accusing the CCCS of operating too much theoretical control. Both Willis (1990) and Cohen (2000) are supportive of ethnographic approaches and the employed the concept of subculture

in their writing. At the CCCS, Gary Clarke's (1982) *Defending Ski-Jumpers* offered a Weberian challenge to the CCCS subcultural theory and, in particular, Clarke used of the term 'tribe' later developed by post-subculturalist David Muggleton (2000) who put forward a Neo-Weberian theory of post-subcultural style and also Andy Bennett (1999, 2005) who briefly used the notion of tribe before later affirming his post-subcultural position. The British postmodern development of a post-subculture theory was popularised by Steve Redhead's (1990) analysis of youth and popular music. However, the term post-subcultural was not Redhead's invention; it derived from Iain Chambers (1987: 9) who first used the term 'post-subcultural styles' in relation to popular music. Chambers (1975) was also a contributor to the CCCS study *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1975/2006).

In the book *The Subcultural Imagination: theory, research and reflexivity in contemporary youth cultures*, edited by Blackman and Kempson (2016), applied C. Wright Mills' (1959) approach of the sociological imagination as a critical intervention into the subculture and post-subcultural debate within youth studies (Bennett, 2005, Blackman, 2005). The aim of the article is to apply the subcultural imagination as a form of critique, and to introduce the new conception of the 'subcultural subject' as a way to move beyond the theoretical impasses in the subculture debate. We argue that the subcultural imagination is an alternative space from which to construct a critique of the sociological theory of the post-subcultural meaning of style as advanced by Muggleton (2000) and Bennett (2020).

From the 1940s to the 1960s, C. Wright Mills (1959: 34) criticised functionalist social theory as devised by Talcott Parsons for being 'a clumsy piece of irrelevant ponderosity' and 'not readily understandable'. The attractive orthodoxy of functionalist social theory overwhelmed sociology for decades because it gave answers to social problems (Becker, 1963). Our aim is to identify connections between the approach of Chicago Schools of Sociology and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Acting in opposition to the dominant paradigm of functionalism, Everett C. Hughes (1963) from the Chicago School (as the 53rd President of the American Sociological Association on 28 August 1963) titled his Presidential Address to align with Mills' critique of the discipline: 'Race Relations and the Sociological Imagination'. Hughes saw Mills' idea of critique as the means to challenge the discipline of sociology for its hegemonic influence over research design and knowledge construction.

In UK sociology, opposition to functionalism emerged from the National Deviance Conference and, in particular, from an alternative position that of cultural studies which also launched a critique of sociology. First, Bryn Jones from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS, 1972) states, 'Mainstream sociology is dominated by official or authoritarian perspectives at the service of the present organisation of interest and privilege' (p. 3). This was then followed by Stuart Hall (1980: 20) who argued that the CCCS decided to 'break with sociology' because the predominance of functionalist theory had not only displaced the social from sociology but 'its premises and predispositions were highly ideological'. Martin Albrow (1986: 337) maintained that part of the popular appeal of sociology in the 1960s was its power of critique, but by the 1970s under functionalism sociology was losing its 'myth of heroic struggle' to cultural studies. Sociology was in danger of becoming conventional.

Similarly, we argue that post-subcultural theory under postmodernism aligns with classical neo-liberal ideology, the very essence of C. Wright Mills critical attack on American capitalism where individuals pursue entrepreneurial freedom of choice in the style supermarket (Blackman, 2004). We suggest that the post-subcultural theory cuts itself adrift from social structures, social divisions and the collectivity of young people's identity (Dedman, 2011; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). The emphasis of the post-subcultural argument based on individual consumer creativity enables people to forge their own identity, but the theorists avoid assessing the collective nature of subcultural practice and instead focus on the hybridity of consumerism, to posit the centrality of choice and individualism. There is a striking resemblance of Merton's theory of individual adaptation within consumer culture which has been relaunched by Andy Bennett (2020: 11) seeking to reverse a key figure of subcultural theory, by claiming that Dick Hebdige's (1979) '*Subculture* was itself in many ways a deeply postmodern study'. Muggleton and Bennett's post-subcultural position argues that youth style is expressed through individual consumption and lifestyle rather than its relations to production and struggle. We suggest that Bennett's theorisation of post subculture and 'attempted' realignment of Hebdige as a post-subcultural postmodernist intervention fails to locate Hebdige's roots as an 'ethnographic scavenger' influenced by at the Chicago School of Sociology under Park and Burgess (Blackman, 2020) and the British Deviance Conference of the late 1960s. Furthermore, neither Muggleton (2000) nor Bennett (2020) critically engages with subcultural theory's complex historical origin and development within sociology. In opposition to Bennett, Blackman (2020: 35) has argued that Hebdige's approach comes from within the naturalist paradigm with a commitment to subculture theory through a biographical and ethnographic lens. Subcultural theory has been robustly defended and revised in the US by John Williams (2011) with a symbolic interactionist's framework and in the UK by Paul Hodkinson's (2002) development of subcultural substance.

We maintain that the post-subcultural stance towards subcultural theory has mistakenly constructed the CCCS (Hall and Jefferson, [1975]2006) theory as being a narrow Marxist theory riven with determination and apparent fixity, this is both a distraction and incorrect (Blackman, 2014). The CCCS theory of subculture was described by Stuart Hall (1980:25) as a 'Complex Marxism' because it integrates diverse ideas from Roland Barthes, Althusser, Levi-Strauss, Lacan and Gramsci (Blackman, 2005). Although, *Resistance Through Ritual* has been rightly critiqued for its limited ethnographic studies of young people's culture (Bennett, 2003). We want to highlight that a key emphasis within *Resistance Through Ritual* was to place an advocacy role on ethnography, subjectivity and the imagination, which is detailed in the closing two chapters by Brian Roberts (1975) and Steve Butters (1975). Both crucially highlight the significance of the Chicago School's 'naturalistic observations' developed under Park and Burgess and also the development of the so-called 'Second Chicago School' through the work of Becker, Lindesmith, Goffman, Matza and Anselm Strauss (Fine, 1995). This is where we understand the ideas of co-production within ethnographic studies were tentatively explored, if somewhat under-acknowledged. Our critique of the post-subcultural theory is based on its foundation within postmodernism as an ideology of individualism (Eagleton, 1995: 68), or according to Noam Chomsky (2017) in an interview states, 'Postmodern thought

serves as an instrument of oppressive power structures'. Within sociology, post-subcultural theory lacks critique due to its reliance on postmodern sensibility and sees youth subcultural practices as a form of entertainment or nostalgia as Muggleton (2000) states subcultural identities possess 'no ideological commitment' they are 'merely a stylistic game to be played' (p. 47).

In contrast, the concept of the subcultural imagination seeks to restore the importance of social structures within sociological studies of youth subcultures, resting on a combination of the Chicago School's biographical approach and the CCCS commitment to what Raymond Williams (1989:161) described as 'the radical project' to increased democratisation of culture. The subcultural imagination is where researchers and participants share subjective experience and personal biography to inform the research relationship and the production of knowledge.

Theory: sociological and subcultural imagination

In this section, we explore further the connection between Mills' theory and our take up of the 'imagination' as a tool of critique within the discipline of sociology. Even though that C. Wright Mills' classic text was first published in 1959, we identify that it remains an inspirational source within sociology. Consider, for example, the contributions of Geoff Pearson's (1975) *The Deviant Imagination*, Paul Atkinson's (1990) *The Ethnographic Imagination*, Paul Willis' (2000) *The Ethnographic Imagination* and Jock Young's (2010) *The Criminological Imagination*. At the same time, we have seen the emergence of Scott, J. and Nilsen, A. (2013) (eds) *C. Wright Mills and the Sociological Imagination: contemporary perspectives.* John Brewer (2015) in *Social Science Space* delivered his support on the contemporary relevance of C. Wright Mills key thesis. *Plus, in November 2018 Sociological Review hosted*: 'Bev Skeggs Discusses the Contemporary Sociological Imagination with Les Back'.

These studies see the value of the Sociological Imagination as critique at the level of social and cultural theory and also methodologically whereby people's 'private troubles' become the subject of 'public issues'. Researchers of subcultures explore participants' relationships between events in their personal lives, identities, biography and their subcultural actions in a historical context.

In discussion with Bev Skeggs (2018), Les Back sees the *Sociological Imagination* as a political idea because it communicates to academics and also connections with people's discomfort about contemporary society. Mills offers us what he called the promise and a critique of sociology, a commitment towards not only improvement but also an optimism of culture where biography has agency and academics lives are central to theoretical production. Writing the sociological imagination during the dominance of the functionalist paradigm with its priority on equilibrium and dysfunctionality, there was little recognition of human creativity. It is the use of the concept of the imagination as a critique applied to orthodox sociological thought at the time drew incredible hostility, as John Brewer (2004: 328) states, reviewers 'panned it'. The dominant hegemony of functionalism saw little place for an imagination. Slowly, the popularity the Sociological Imagination was identified as an empowering tool for researchers to use in their biographical and intellectual intersections, and at the same time, to be able to go beyond personal experiences and observations to broader social and cultural issues.

The subcultural imagination is the process of reflecting upon what kind of knowledge youth studies researchers want to produce. Sociological ethnographic researchers are aware of their role in co-production with subcultural subjects to successfully roll out 'reflexive practice' within youth scholarship. Ethnographic work thrives on the researchers and participants active engagement and interpretation. For the Chicago School research was focused on 'human subjectivity' and 'creativity'. Palmer (1926: 347) argues researchers need to 'feel', Thrasher (1928) calls this 'rapport' and for Shaw (1930: 23), it was participants 'own story'. The subcultural imagination is at its most effective in the research relationship when engaged in creative thoughts and expression. We advance the concept of the subcultural imagination as a methodological tool by arguing for the importance of engaging with the idea of the subcultural subject as critically engaged with the researcher. For us, the subcultural imagination seeks to re-imagine the dynamic qualitative fieldwork practice where the researcher and the participants actively construct and contest their identities through insider knowledge (Hodkinson, 2005). We maintain that subcultural subjects possess what Bourdieu (1996) calls a field of sociological knowledge where both researcher and participant interact and also identify that co-production is a feature of ethnography in the sense that it is based on an exchange relation achieved through empathy. This research relationship is by no means easy and it can be fraught with struggle, danger, intimidation, thrills and pleasure. In the next section, we highlight a selected series of examples to show these dynamics in action.

Exploring empirical examples of the subcultural subjects

We focus here on the construction of the 'subcultural subject' – a person engaged in subculture – through using a selected number of examples from across a range of ethnographic studies. The methodological explanations within the examples mentioned have been published elsewhere Blackman (2007, 2016; Kempson, 2015). Within Blackman's (2007: 708) study on the 'New wave girls', there is use of a recording that the research participants made for him on their own initiative. Not part of something set up or arranged by the researcher but self-generated by the research participants themselves. Here ethnography is an exchange relation for example the gift of the recording is an act of co-production at the level of biography, friendship and critical engagement to promote analysis.

Kempson's (2016) study into zine culture highlighted the importance of listening to the ways in which research participants themselves can feel marginalised in the subcultures within which they engage, and how they might even perform more than one subject position within that space. This point was important in shaping the subsequent direction of the research and may not have become apparent, had a more structured or deductive approach to conversational interviewing been used. These ethnographic examples point towards a need for researchers to avoid interpreting subcultural subjects through fixed narratives by allowing contradictions and opportunities within fieldwork data to become legitimate evidence of the complexity of subjective experience. The subcultural subject is not fixed and should be studied according to the messiness of subjective relations.

During fieldwork with subcultural subjects, we have found that participants test and stretch our knowledge of the subcultural field. This was explored at an aesthetic,

emotional and stylistic levels when Blackman (2007: 709–710) attended a live gig of The Cure with 'New wave girls' and also went on holiday with the mod boys to an Isle of Wight Scooter Rally. The ethnographic intimacy of these fieldwork practice enabled participants to be 'natural', creating themselves, adding new experiences as lived extending the researchers understanding of the subcultural subjects at play. In return, the narrative account of this ethnographic adventure was published in the Mod boy's own zine titled *The Undecide*. During research into zine culture in the UK, Kempson (2015) found that many zine creators were, as anticipated, politically opposed to creating zines with the purpose of making a profit, but also that a surprising number of participants viewed this perspective as idealistic and unsustainable.

In Blackman's (2016) study, there is the example of young adults labelled as 'chavs', 'underclass' and 'aggressive beggars' who asked me to write a letter of reply to the Brighton Argus countering such identities. Blackman refused which left the ethnography in danger as the participants were highly charged about such incidents of 'being negatively labelled'. However, Blackman presented the idea of writing the reply together which offered increased agency and also enabled co-production. This fired up the participants to produce and their engagement was dynamic in acting out through words and posture their feelings. Kempson (2015) also found that some zine producers were wary of the academic gaze. This meant that the researcher focused on allowing the conversations to flow according to what the participants wanted to discuss, rather than forcing an agenda onto the interaction. The result was a mutually constructed series of perspectives that may not have occurred, had a more structured interview format have been followed. We have both found that the paradox of the subcultural imagination really begins to emerge in ethnography when asking questions cease. As previously described in Whyte, ([1943]1955: 303) *Street Corner Society*, he states, 'As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions that I would never even have had the sense to ask'. At the heart of the subcultural imagination is play, listening and responding.

In Blackman and Bradley's (2017) ethnography of headshops, an aggressive altercation took place inside 'skunkworks' resulting in him and the student participants hastily removing themselves from the premises. The subsequent debate in the street between the researcher and the participants centred upon 'insider knowledge' that cannabis was primarily understood as a 'relaxing drug', whereas 'spice' offered disruptive experience. The shared conversational exchange traded on biography, intimacy and the live excitement of the social experience.

The above subcultural moments include a complex series of negotiations and subjective positions, where researcher and participants are within youth cultural spaces seeking to make sense of that space, place and action (Farrugia, 2018). Critique, creativity and the imagination were touchstones for C.W. Mills (1959) in an effort to make sociology more meaningful and culturally relevant to people's lives and biographies. Warning against the uncritical utilisation of the concept of 'imagination', Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) argue that '. . . we have in the "imagination" a category that is simultaneously a category of epistemology and society, one that links knowledge to social agency and (social as corporeal) experience' (p. 324). Likewise, the subcultural imagination uses

Mills' (1959) work on biography, history and culture to make suggestions about the future potential of the concept of critical imagination. In terms of culture and society, the subcultural imagination sees young people as being able to think for themselves beyond the boundary of dominant social norms.

Attention to both biography and history can be brought together through creative interpretation and use of moments from insider researchers cultural background which continue to inform professional lives, as researchers. In this sense, the subcultural imagination is a field of knowledge to be applied within research settings. It can be used as a means of opening up news subjective categories by pointing out how dominant knowledge paradigms can shape understanding, and potentially exclude certain voices from the discussion unless a deeper reflection on the process can be achieved. Imagination in this context is not an exercise undertaken solely by the researcher alone, but is a process of subjective social negotiations and at the same time, we have to be aware of the power relations within research (Back, 2007). Particularly, in the context of ethnographic fieldwork, the subcultural imagination calls for the relationship between the researcher and the researched to be shared and, to an extent, blurred.

It was Malinowski (1916) who proposed that the theory of ethnographic fieldwork is defined through writing as a 'craft' which improves the ethnographic account (Leach, 1984: 1–2). For us, this means identifying how meaning is 'co-produced' between both researcher and participant, opening up a form of critical reflexivity that puts openness and exchange at the top of the methodological agenda. Uncritical adherence to dualities or power roles of gender, social class and ethnicity will reduce the capacity for a researcher to engage with new sensitivities, subject positions and potential forms of collaboration. For us, the Subcultural Imagination follows Clifford Geertz's (1973: 18) central preoccupation that the data should be seen as a moment of creative interpretation both in situ and away from the field, while also recognising and seeking to lessen the predefined boundaries of research, which C. Wright Mills saw as the hegemonic domination of the author as the constructor over the researched.

The subcultural imagination enables researchers to move away from the politics of ventriloquy (i.e. speaking on behalf of people) and to see subcultural subjects speaking for themselves (Blackman, 2016: 68). The ability to see your own positionality and to imagine alternatives is at the centre of the subcultural imagination to combine critical distance and physical proximity as a central feature of fieldwork subjectivity in ethnography (Corby, 2017: 293). The 'imagination' of research can be broadened by engaging with the space between the individual's perceptions, and the idea of collective subjective experience. In Max Weber ([1922]1978) essay 'Methodological Foundations' in *Economy and Society*, we see an opportunity for Weber's verstehen to enables us to develop the subcultural subject's insider point of view to be co-constructive in the struggle to develop an understanding of how subjective meaning is exchanged between the researcher and the participants (Tucker, 1965: 160).

Micro co-production and the subcultural imagination

In this section, we put forward to idea of micro co-production as a form of knowledge production undertaken though ethnographic fieldwork critically achieved through the

subcultural imagination. For us, the subcultural imagination is something that is worked on by the researcher and the participants in the fieldwork context where the end result may include co-production. Initially, we will look at the development of co-production within youth work and health research, which is borne from participatory research methods, but even here, it is not always clear what counts as co-production.

Co-production has a long history in youth work primarily understood as informal education. For Bradford (2015: 23) youth work has been an effective location of experimental co-production for many years. Co-production in radical youth work is focused on empowering young people and has been linked with Action-Based research where the key aim is development of self-esteem. During the 2000s, the JRF undertook a series of studies on peer research projects and research as empowerment. Co-production is not without its critics: Oliver, Kothari, and Mays (2019) urge cautions and speak of the 'dark side' co-production in terms of professional and academic risks. This co-production can be a potentially unstable arena for research in that young people's subcultural identity may be a personal or geographical space which they may perceive to be under attack or invaded (Robinson, 2010). Young people may be weary of researchers seeking closer alliances focused on identity.

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) (2015: 12) asserts that co-production is a key marker within health research and funding through people's involvement. Durose et al. (2012: 7) see co-production as a solution to social problems within communities to effect change as a 'moral argument'. Paylor and McKevitt (2019: 2) note a word of caution that co-production has become more mainstream, on the basis to improve health care outcomes through participation. The rise of governmental or institutional recognition of co-production for Clarke, Bainton, Lendvai, and Stubbs (2015) has limitations defined by the political context of its emergence from within neo-liberal managerialism. This is supported by Filipe, Renedo, and Marston (2017: 3) who warn co-production has become a policy response with intentional 'rebranding' what has gone before. Fashions in sociological research are apparent where involvement is upheld as the necessary goal from action research to co-production, for Beresford (2019: 16) at the heart of co-production is 'lived experience' which under neo-liberalism is of a little value because it is difficult to measure or count and may not follow government, or commercial priorities for research and funding.

For us, the key aspect of co-production is a significant shift of power between researcher and participant. It is this shift that was so keenly observed by C. Wright Mills (1959) when he set out the approach of blending intellectual life and biographical experience as the promise of sociology. We understand that co-production occurs within an exploratory social and cultural space through ethnographic fieldwork. We have sought to show that co-production enables relationships to form and new knowledge to be generated. The subcultural imagination works co-production through culture, values and subjectivity: it becomes alive immediately and is recognised by researcher and participant. In this sense, co-production blurs the relationship between researcher and participant and emerges through the close interactivities of fieldwork. At the same time, we recognise Bell and Pahl's (2018) warning about co-production and its apparent destabilising effect in academy and the urgency to 'to be alive to neoliberalism's attempt to capture and domesticate co-production's utopian potential' (p. 107).

Through the use of selective data, we have attempted to explore limited ethnographic moments of the subcultural imagination in practice which take place at a number of different levels between the researcher and participants. We see co-production as a way of performing the self which builds on already established reflexive sociological and youth studies. Our understanding of co-production has been influenced by feminist theory, for example, Ann Oakley (1981: 41) where her aim was to show the involvement of the researched and, in this sense, to blur the distinctions between researcher and participants. Yost and Chmielewski (2013) state, 'Feminist scholars have discussed the commitment to develop transparency in more open and less hierarchical relationships with participants to emphasize the importance of a mutually meaningful relationship between researchers and participants in the cocreation of knowledge' (p. 246). By challenging the hierarchal nature of the research relationship co-production within different fields of qualitative research can offer increased opportunities for the voices of the researched to be less mediated through what Mills saw as the dangerous authority of the researcher. In our examples of subcultural co-production, we are unpicking certain expectations and assumptions, but at the same time, we recognise the limitation of our involvement in the lives of our researched. At the centre of the idea of the subcultural subject is the potential for researchers to work with participants on a basis to share agency, through cooperation and respect (Blackman and Commane, 2012). Researchers can incorporate their understandings of subculture by reflecting on their own subcultural imagination through the intersection of subjectivity, power, place and the subcultural context (Colosi, 2016; Hollands, 2016).

During our fieldwork with different research participants, we have sought to enable a type of micro co-production through lived experience in a small way through seriousness, humour and pleasure. Amid fieldwork, co-production can occur and as researchers we responded to immediacy to act with emotion and commitment. For us, this is the real dynamic of Mills understanding of the 'craft' of sociology. We have sought to show that as sociological researchers we participate in 'crossover lives' through youth culture biographies through 'insider knowledge. This has a link to Mills' emphasis on the use of 'intellectual life' whereby researchers may construct knowledge with participants on the basis of reflexivity and imagination. On this basis, the subcultural imagination is a modest mechanism to bring about forms of micro co-production at different levels of the research process.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been twofold. First, we have sought to outline the concept of subcultural imagination as a methodological tool. Here, we unpacked the possibility of applying 'imagination' to the study of subculture by recognising how subcultures have been constructed within various theoretical traditions. We drew upon C. Wright Mills' ideas surrounding the complex negotiations of individual biography and history, and we asked to what extent researchers and participants are able to co-produce subcultural knowledge. We argued that the subcultural imagination builds upon a bridging of the contributions from the CCCS and Chicago School. Imagination, in this sense, is a means of recognising how structural inequalities impact individual biography. Subsequentially, we are concerned with how the individual is able to make sense of their participation in

subculture, and their participation in subcultures research: which we do not see as one and the same. We anticipate a field of subcultures research that can begin to bridge this gap.

Second, we have explored how the subcultural imagination enables a re-imagining of the subcultural subject as a product of autobiography and history. The subcultural subject is a person engaged in subcultural activity and expression. We have used C. W. Mills' ideas to argue for a re-commitment to understanding the ways in which subcultural subjects choose to engage in subcultural research. We have interrogated the well-documented problem of researcher-led ethnography that results in researchers speaking on behalf of participants. We further the argument that imagination as a methodological tool enables participants to contribute to the type of knowledge that is produced. The ethnographic examples we discuss in this article evidence the process of micro-co-production, whereby knowledge is constructed through a back and forth between the researcher and participants in an attempt to blur the boundaries between subcultural participation and the research context. This approach leads to a more in-depth dialectical type of knowledge about who the subcultural subject is.

Imagination is a critical methodological device that recognises how knowledge is produced through the micro communications between researcher and participant. However, its utilisation requires a clear explanation of the traditions and paradigms drawn upon by researchers. We have argued earlier that the post-subcultures debate constructs the subcultural participant as a neo-liberal subject concerned with individualism expressed primarily through consumer-autonomy. We, however, see value in retaining the more humanist approach of the Chicago school that saw the subcultural subject as a product of their environment and of the micro interactions of the everyday. Imagination, in this sense, means recognising the dialectic between researcher and participant and applying a critical reading of both subject positions as products of history, culture and environment.

Acknowledgements

The initial ideas for this article emerged from a conference at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Warwick in 2013. It was further elaborated in our book for Routledge titled *The Subcultural Imagination* published in 2016 and supported Professor Andy Furlong. For journal SRO, the authors would like to thank the reviewers of the article who offered detailed guidance and, in particular, they would like to thank one of the editors Kahryn Hughes for her continued encouragement and Sophie Belfield for support.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Date submitted 25 May 2019
Date accepted 4 March 2021