The Multidimensionality of Resistance in Youth-Subcultural Studies

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Abstract

Much sociological research has focused on the *exertion* of power, while the subfield of subculture studies has preferred to engage in the study of *resistance* to power. Acknowledging recent conceptualizations of resistance (and Einwohner 2004; Raby 2005), this chapter considers the relevance of subcultural studies in theorizing resistance, specifically by highlighting three dimensions along which the concept may be mapped: passive – active; micro – macro; and overt – covert. Reviewing research from the 1970s through the 2000s to show examples, I develop a conceptualization of each dimension, treating them not as sets of binary pairs, but rather as continua that co-exist and overlap.　My goal is to move beyond a typological approach to resistance by encouraging other resistance scholars to critically engage with these dimensions and to use, modify or reject them as we build a pragmatic theory of resistance's usefulness and consequences.

Introduction

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, power is realized as individuals compete to define the situations in which they act (Thomas 1923)[1]. Power is understood as a process (rather than a "thing") that comes into reality as humans interact with one another and try to affect how others define the world around them. From this perspective, power is therefore never fixed, but rather is always being negotiated or contested. As situations emerge, develop and morph, power is negotiated among social actors. Power shapes how we think, how we feel, and what we do, yet it is at the same time an abstraction, a concept that humans have created to make sense of our unequal access to material, cultural, social, economic, emotion and psychological resources. Taking a snapshot of power as it is realized in situations reveals its two-sided nature. On one side are those who have power or who are powerful. They may exert power explicitly through domination or force, or more subtly through "hegemony," the idea that the powerful maintain their position by convincing others that *their* definition of the situation is natural and benevolent (see Gramsci 1971). On the other side are those with less power or the powerless, the ones impressed upon to think, feel or act in ways others want, whether they want to or not. Insomuch as power is processual (i.e., constantly negotiated), it consists of both *exertion* and *resistance*.

According to Lilja and Vinthagen (cited in Kullenberg and Lehne 2008), social scientists have tended to focus on the exertion of power rather than resistance to it. Yet for several decades youth subculture scholars have tended toward resistance, studying the "underdogs" rather than those in control. Scholars of the 1960s counterculture saw resistance as representative of hope for the future (e.g. Marcuse 1969; 1970), while some current scholars see resistance as little more than an trite concept that legitimizes the consumptive practices of would-be rebels or as a useless remnant of subcultural "heroism" (see Weinzierl and Mugglegon 2003:6-9). Given these various ways in which resistance among subcultural youth has been theorized, that literature deserves closer attention by resistance scholars. My goal is to move beyond conceptualizations that simplify resistance as either passive or active, micro or macro, overt or covert.

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1 Symbolic interactionism is a micro-sociological perspective and method (Blumer 1969) grounded in the belief that humans act based on the meanings they attribute to things around them, including people, objects and environments. The "definition of the situation" (Thomas 1923) is a kind of temporary agreement among people about the social meanings associated with both the context and the identities of those present.

Instead, I will reframe resistance by briefly considering three distinct dimensions as demonstrated in empirical subcultural research and suggest that they serve as sensitizing concepts for future resistance scholarship. Space does not allow for an exhaustive review, but still I hope to uncover what often appear to be implicit assumptions about the nature of resistance in subcultural research.

Three dimensions of resistance in empirical subcultural research

From "obnoxious" hair styles and clothes to burning cars and smashing corporate windows, subcultural youths revel in how uncomfortable mainstream folk become when confronted with resistance. But analytically speaking, is a hair style any more or less resistance than a violent protest? What is each resisting, how and why? Resistance is not the only concept we might use to frame the social objects and practices that are meaningful in subcultural youths' lives. Their behaviors might as easily signify a pleasurable or playful phase of "rebellion" between childhood and adulthood, a moment of "deviance" from the norms of society, or a focused "contestation" directed against specific agents of control (Raby 2005). Their actions might instead represent a liminal aspect of their adolescence or a personal struggle with inequalities and injustices they experience in their everyday lives. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) argue that the core elements of resistance include opposition and action, yet scholars disagree about whether resistance must be intentional and/or recognized in order to qualify as such (see also Johansson 2008 on this point). While social scientists have considered a variety of behaviors as resistant, rebellious, deviant, or contentious, depending in part on their own academic and personal biases, I would contend that subculture studies has always implicitly recognized intent as a part of subcultural resistance. Either way, resistance and its sibling concepts are predicated on complex relationships between human actors and social environments.

Hollander and Einwohner (2004) and Raby (2005) have recently constructed typologies of resistance, boxes into which we can place moments of resistance and thus easily comprehend it. I find this approach problematic, not least because they develop mutually exclusive categories which do not necessarily represent the how the individuals involved might understand what is going on. I want to take a different track and suggest three *dimensions* of resistance:

<div align="center">
passive – active
micro – macro
overt – covert
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I use the term dimension in order to emphasize that instances of resistance occur on continua; these conceptual pairs are not binaries. Further, rather than place a would-be example of resistance into a box, this perspective recognizes that resistance may occur along multiple dimensions simultaneously. Thus these dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but may appear to be depending on how the researcher handles them.

Passive – Active

The passive – active dimension draws attention to the *intentions* that underlie youthful acts of resistance, rather than the consequences of those acts (see Hollander and Einwohner 2004 regarding intentionality). Theoretically, the more intentional an act of resistance is, the more agency is expressed by the individual or group.

At the passive end of the continuum we find theories of resistance linked to consumption, specifically resistance *through* consumption, which cultural studies work tends to refer to as resistance-as-appropriation. The consumptive aspects of youth-subcultural resistance were first theorized by the CCCS. On street corners, in dance halls, on the open road, and at weekend holiday spots, working-class youths created social spaces and stylistic practices that *to CCCS researchers* represented resistance to dominant culture. Their resistance, however, was "symbolic" rather than socio-economic (Clarke et al. 1976). The CCCS characterized youths' resistance in relatively passive terms, as something rooted in both the working-class consciousness of their parents and an emerging youth consciousness based on middle-class patterns of consumption. A skinhead's Doc Marten work boots, jeans, and suspenders, for example, represented an unconscious desire to reconstitute the traditional working-class community that was deteriorating around him (Clarke 1976a), while teddy boys' practice of street-fighting in Edwardian suits—bought second-hand in thrift stores once they had gone out of style among the upper class—represented the ideological strain he felt between his desire for mainstream recognition, status, and respect on the one hand, and his mean street working-class roots on the other (Jefferson 1976). "Resistance through rituals," the CCCS called it, but the rituals were framed as nothing more than appropriations of dominant cultural forms, where subculturalists reassembled mainstream

cultural objects with subversive meanings. In this light their resistance remained as impotent as it was spectacular, described as "magical" because it gave young people the illusion of fighting the system without much chance of improving their life-chances. Clarke, Jefferson, and Hebdige were especially quick to dismiss any concern with these young men's intentions, primarily because they began with structuralist, neo-Marxian theories that led them to assume certain truths about ideology and culture. Resistance occurred "at the profoundly superficial level of appearances" (Hebdige 1979:17), ultimately failing to improve young people's socio-economic lives.

Moving away from a pessimistic theory of resistance through consumption, we might look at Willis' (1977) study of working-class "lads" in the British education system or Lowney's (1995) study of a group of teenage Satanists in a small town in the American South. Willis showed through observational and interview data how the "lads" recognized that they were being sorted and educated according to middle-class teachers' expectations for their future abilities and opportunities and therefore developed a subculture that supported and even valorized acts of "opposition to staff and exclusive distinction from [conforming students through] the three great consumer goods supplied by capitalism…clothes, cigarettes and alcohol" (Willis 1977:17). Lowney similarly focused on students' "development of a Satanic style as an expression of their opposition to [the local dominant culture]" (Lowney 1995:477). Both studies emphasized how resistance was facilitated through specific acts of appropriation and ritual, yet they take us away from a passive view of resistance. Willis' study does so by looking inside the everyday lives of these working-class youths, where we can begin to inductively derive a sense of intentionality in their behaviors, while Lowney's probes the establishment and maintenance of a new self-concept that is validated by one's subcultural peers. Their use of ethnographic methods, rather than the semiotic and rhetorical methods preferred among CCCS scholars, gives each study of resistance more internal validity because each is able to articulate both the meaning and target of resistance from the point of view of the young people themselves. Both studies identify a social-psychological dimension of resistance and demonstrate its significance for the young people's sense of self, despite a lack of any social-status improvements in their everyday lives.

The situational strength of opposition through identification highlights what young people negotiate every day "as they work through dominant and rupturing narratives attempting in different ways to secure particular forms of authority" (Giroux 1994). It is a mixture of socio-

economic and educational impotence and psychological well-being, a middle ground between the passive and active poles of resistance.

Over the last decade, a tradition of "post-subculture" scholarship has attended to the contemporary dimensions of youthful practices and concluded that consumption rather than resistance is their hallmark (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Huq 2006; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003). Rave and club cultures of the 1990s, and others since, represent a new era of youth hedonism, reminiscent of the mods, yet academically framed in a way that celebrates a live-for-the-moment ideology before it bemoans youths' failures to improve their lot in life. examples of research that invoke a similar sense of ambivalence regarding consumption's relationship with resistance include Brown (2007) and Kates and Belk (2001). What these studies miss — and inadvertently dismiss in their summary statements about youth cultures today — is fact that there remain subcultures that are explicitly framed in terms of intentional social change (see e.g., Haenfler 2004; Phillipov 2006; Schilt 2003). With such actively resistant subcultures in mind, the remaining two dimensions I discuss will be viewed as continua that are already oriented toward relatively active resistance.

Micro – Macro

Once the intent or activeness of resistance has been established, one needs to ask where and how that resistance is directed. In her review of resistance scholarship, Raby (2005) distinguished between individualistic (or "heroic") and collective forms of active resistance, the former being relatively more "easily redefined or undermined" than the latter (p. 153). Rather than assume some simplified measure of resistance's success or failure, which is impossible since different acts of resistance have different intents and outcomes, I want to consider how the micro – macro dimension highlights the embodiment and expression of resistance at various levels of society[2]. Youth-subcultural scholars articulate micro – macro resistance through shared subcultural values, norms and beliefs, material and ritual culture, and/or collective identification.

Perhaps the most microscopic level of society is the social-psychological, where resistance is represented as an individual's rational choice and consequential behavior. Some scholars have attempted to tap

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2 The micro – macro dimension could also be used to analyze resistance at different spatial/geographic scales

or in different time frames, but space limits my discussion here to the social dimension.

into intent vis-à-vis resistance. For example, Leblanc's (2001) research on female punks focused "not only [on] resistant acts, but the subjective intent motivating these as well" (Leblanc 2001:18). But no choice is purely subjective. The choices punk girls make are rooted in socialization to the various small-group cultures in which they live (including punk) and thus their choices are couched in definitions about *what* should be resisted, *how*, and *why*. As a result, micro-oriented resistance can be perceived through singular instances of interaction. What readers see in Leblanc's analysis are not the motivations underlying behavior, but the self-conscious motives that account for why some girls become punk in the first place: refusal to adhere to normative gender and sex roles, including eroticism or demure behaviors, for example. In other words, while active resistance occurs at the micro-level of individual action and may be framed as social-psychological, it is supported by a meso-oriented subcultural "frame of reference" (Cohen 1955).

The meso-level of subculture refers to the stratum consisting of small groups, organizations, and social networks, which are held together through "communication interlocks" (Fine and Kleinman 1979) that may or may not be antagonistic to mainstream culture. Subculture scholars conceptualize meso-level resistance as that which targets peer and other identifiable groups. Returning to Lowney (1995), her analysis showed a collective, though informal, effort by members of the Coven to resist the overtly Christian and sports-oriented high school culture that marginalized them. Similarly, Haenfler's (2004) study of straightedge youth (who abstain from drugs, alcohol, tobacco and casual sex) highlighted how a shared emphasis on "clean living is symbolic of a deeper resistance to mainstream values [and] fosters a broader ideology that shapes straightedgers' gender relationships, sense of self, involvement in social change, and sense of community" (pp. 409-410). At the meso-level, resistance is practiced and celebrated in spectacular rituals such as music concerts, as well as mundane activities such as hanging out together at school or on the weekends. Meso-oriented analyses also call attention to how resistance may represent conflicts and contestations among young people's overlapping social networks and even among competing groups of subculturalists (see Haenfler 2004:429-430), as well over collective identity and the policing of subcultural boundaries (e.g., Williams and Copes 2005; Williams 2006). The meso-level of culture, in short, functions to solidify a frame of reference that will take subculture participants through their everyday lives, assisting them

in moments of micro-oriented resistance, and in some cases helping them frame macro-oriented resistance as well

Macro-oriented resistance, which emphasizes issues of power and inequality at the institutional level of society, was first theorized by Merton (1938), who argued that "rebellion occurs when emancipation from the reigning standards, due to… marginalist perspectives, leads to the attempt to introduce a 'new social order'" (p. 678). Haenfler's (2004) research goes on to search for a balance among the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of resistance. Among the straightedge youths he studied, abstaining from mass cultural products such as alcohol or sex was not only an individual(istic) choice, but also part of an outward-facing political orientation toward societal-level change. Some participants in punk and its derivatives also self-identify as members of environmental, social justice, and animal-rights movements and are actively engaged in public protests and other types of "formal" collective action that are macro-oriented (see e.g., Cherry 2006). Yet in general subculture studies has tended to *not* frame youth subcultures as movers of macro-social change, leaving that task to new social movement scholars. One reason for this may be that social movement scholars have done such a good job theorizing macro-oriented resistance over the past forty years that subculture scholars have not felt the need to theorize it themselves (see Martin 2002). My own sense of why macro-oriented resistance is rarely considered is the move toward a post-subcultural sensibility that highlights play and hedonism over more political concerns such as the economy, discrimination, and public welfare.

Overt – Covert

Among the many types of resistance that Hollander and Einwohner's (2004) conceive are overt and covert, which they describe in the following way.

> …*overt resistance* is behavior that is visible and readily recognized by both targets and observers as resistance and, further, is intended to be recognized as such. This category includes collective acts such as social movements…as well as individual acts of refusal…. We use the term covert resistance to refer to acts that are intentional yet go unnoticed (and, therefore, unpunished) by their targets, although they are recognized as resistance by other, culturally aware observers. [Hollander and Einwohner 2004:545, emphasis in original]

Hollander and Einwohner's claim that overt resistance may be either macro-oriented ("acts such as social movements") or micro-oriented ("individual acts of refusal") appears to recognize what I have been arguing so far, that resistance may simultaneously exist across multiple dimensions. They also rightly note the significance of intent in both overt and covert acts of resistance, which has a lot to do with how active resistance is. Even if resistance is intentional at the level of individual thought, the desire for recognition might not be. In other words, we can identify resistance as relatively overt when all parties involved agree on the meaning of things, while the idea of covert resistance may be more appropriate for framing situations where subculturalists feel that they are acting in a resistant way but do not want certain outsiders to recognize it as such.

By definition overt resistance is hard to miss, but it may still take many forms. The "J18" Carnival Against Capitalism and "N30" Anti-WTO protests in Cologne, Germany and Seattle, Washington in 1999 are examples of overt, active, macro-oriented resistance, where activities were coordinated to draw attention to global processes of inequality. Such events can live on forever in subcultural and mainstream mythology alike (consider the continued circulation of discourse surrounding the original Woodstock festival in 1969) but are rare compared to more mundane, micro-oriented forms of overt resistance. Consider how dreadlocks and reggae music, once religious icons among followers of Ras Tafari, took on new significance among participants of the rude boy subculture in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s (Osgerby 1998). Since then, other styles of hair and music have similarly functioned as "in your face" forms of overt resistance. Increasingly common today among youth, tattooing has traditionally "marks a lifestyle declaration on the body…and publicly announces one's identity as resistant to the cultural mainstream" (Atkinson 2003: 210-211).

Toward the covert pole are those actions engaged in within the relative privacy of subcultural space. Music gigs in the hardcore subculture, for example, occur in relatively private spaces such as clubs or the basements of homes. There, the performances of bands and dancers alike redress communal discontent and dissatisfaction with aspects of the larger society while simultaneously allowing participants to momentarily set aside mainstream social norms of etiquette. Hardcore dancing is enjoyable to participants, yet on those rare occasions when members of the mainstream witness it, it is labeled as violent, dangerous, its performers in need of social control (see Simon 1997; Tsitsos 1999). Dancing and sing-alongs may thus be seen as covert even though they are intentionally resistant.

Looking back at the quote from Hollander and Einwohner, we see that they name each form of resistance a "category," thereby suggesting that any particular act of resistance is *either* covert or overt, but not both. In his study of a confederation of subcultural youths in a local alternative music scene, Tsitsos (1999) found that participants alternately oriented their beliefs and values toward both micro- and macro- forms of resistance. Similarly, Schilt's (2003) study riot grrrl zines suggests something similar in terms of overt and covert resistance. Riot grrrl culture is predicated on the social problems that are intimately experienced by teenage girls: loss of voice, loss of self-efficacy, or unwanted sexual attention, for example—topics that are not easily dealt with openly/publicly during adolescence. Even if we frame youth subcultures as collective efforts to solve the problems associated with adolescence, girls who subscribe to them often find the same gendered structures enacted therein (Leblanc 2001). Schilt focused on the zines— home-made magazines featuring pictures, poetry, rants and raves, diaries, song lyrics, and other items defined as personally meaningful to the author —that riot grrrl participants created and shared with others in the subculture. Like dancing, zine writing may at first glance appear to be a covert strategy of resistance, since zines are typically produced and consumed in the privacy of girls' bedrooms and distributed anonymously to small mailing lists. Yet, "zine writing has the ability to be simultaneously public and private. […] For girls, the experience of having a space to talk about their lives can be very important, as there are few chances for girls to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of ridicule or censure" (Schilt 2003:79). Zines are not only traded through the mail with other girls who request them. Some may be placed in bookstores or coffeehouses anonymously by girls who want to reach a larger audience but wish to avoid the negative repercussions associated with "complaining" about their problems in a more direct way. Nowadays, the ideas of zines is migrating online in the form of blogs, online forums and YouTube videos, through which girls may share as much or as little of their "real life" identities as they choose. Zines, blogs, forums and videos articulate "a sort of c/overt resistance", allowing girls "to overtly express their anger, confusion, and frustration publicly to like-minded peers but still remain covert and anonymous to authority figures" (p. 81).

This type of resistance may appear relatively impotent, offering an empowering identity or community of friends without affecting the culture of everyday life, yet creating and consuming these cultural objects can affect subsequent micro-oriented (for example, standing up for yourself after

reading a story of another girl who did so successfully or watching a home-made video celebrating "girl power") and thus diffuse across multiple cultural groups over time, potentially leading to increased social awareness that can be meso- or macro-oriented. Here the concept of anonymity becomes very useful, for it highlights that resistance can be overt and covert at the same moment.

Conclusion

Through a necessarily short, focused review of the subcultures literature, I have identified three dimensions across which resistance functions. Resistance is *multidimensional* in the sense that any particular action or event identified as resistant may be simultaneously analyzed across one or more dimensions. Neither subcultures nor their participants are fixed at certain points on these dimensions, nor should other resistant phenomena be. A young person who defines herself as punk may engage in relatively passive acts of resistance such as buying punk music, yet reading the CD-insert or song lyrics may lead her to engage in more active forms of resistance. She might hide her CD collection and subcultural affiliation from her parents (covert), but proudly express them in front of peers or other adults (overt). The resistant actions in which she engages may involve criticizing her peers in a diary or one-on-one after school (micro), or participating in a social justice demonstration with thousands of other people (macro). In other words, one member of a single subculture may engage in many different types of resistance in their everyday lives, each with its own (set of) consequences.

Qualitative researchers in the social sciences have for some time now critiqued traditional models of research that require putting theory and hypotheses ahead of empirical research. Viewing resistance in terms of continua instead of typologies allows for a more valid approach to studying lived human experience (where validity refers to the "credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account [Maxwell 2005:106]). When researchers rely on typologies, they are straitjacketed, directed to force their data into a pre-existing theoretical category (or to create yet another category or theory). The continua I have suggested in this article are not intended to be used in that way. Rather they are intended to serve as "sensitizing concepts, [which] give the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer 1969:147, 148). And to be sure, these are not the only dimensions on which resistance operates, though they appeared as the most

salient to me in my review of the youth subcultures literature. I invite other resistance scholars to use, modify or reject these three dimensions, and to identify others, as we collectively build a pragmatic theory of resistance's usefulness and consequences for social life.

Acknowledgement

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