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Are the kids alright? Relating to representations of youth

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Initiatives aimed at promoting young people's well-being potentially conflict with more traditional modes of adult/youth relationship privileging adult authority. For example, teaching practice has shifted from teacher to student-centred, a move that can be attributed at least in part to the acknowledged importance of empathetic teacher–student relationship to the well-being of students. This discussion considers an area of sociocultural practice with the potential to inform understandings of youth and their relationships with adults: How youth have been discursively represented in a sample of popular music spanning the five decades from the 1960s to the 2000s. The analysis, in the first instance, demonstrates how popular culture supports and maintains discernible social relationships, sustaining what is identified here as a normative control–contest binary. A direct challenge to commonplace notions of authority and well-being follows, offering opportunities to theorise a different kind of psychosocial action.

Keywords: relationship; discourse; popular music; social constructionism

Introduction

Relationships between students and teachers are understood as fundamental to the development and maintenance of well-being in education (Pianta, 1999). This acknowledgement applies to students as much as it does to teachers (Split, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Research suggests student well-being is associated with and promoted by teachers engaging in a variety of affective (e.g. displays of empathy) and pedagogic (e.g. verbal and non-verbal immediacy) strategies. Teaching practice has explicitly shifted from teacher to student-centred, further advancing the importance of teacher–student relationships to a range of factors including positive motivation and social connection (Cornelius-White, 2007). However, there are those who see a certain naturalness to more dominative forms of relationship. It could be said this kind of positioning of young people is customary for human psychological development and the relationships in which growth takes place (cf. Freud's [1962] theory of sexuality, Piaget's [1959] model of cognitive development, or Kohlberg's [1981] theory of moral development). Internationally it is claimed that our education systems are being pushed to crisis point because of contemporary policy mandates and practices and their subsequent adverse affect on adult authority. One Antipodean education commentator rued: 'If standards are to improve, especially for disadvantaged students, Australian classrooms must embrace a more disciplined environment where teachers are authority figures who engender respect' (Donnelly, 2013, para. 20). And in the UK, sociologist Frank Furedi (2009) put it this way: 'The therapeutic turn represents not only the school's estrangement from its academic mission, but its estrangement from the exercise of educational authority' (p. 186).

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In 2008, the UK Government Office for Science commissioned the Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project to report on the challenges facing government and communities in making strategic choices concerning the promotion of personal and social well-being. Therein, well-being was defined as:

...a dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society. (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008, p. 9)

Similar concerns are shared by governments worldwide seeking to safeguard and invest in the future capacity of their citizenry and communities. Rather than retracing quarrels for and against what might be termed a contemporary sociopolitical well-being agenda, here a necessary upstream argument, facilitated by the use of a different kind of psychological theory briefed by social constructionism, is used to explore an alternate account of relational action.

Herein I consider one area of sociocultural practice with the potential to form and inform understandings of youth and their relationships with authority: How youth have been discursively represented in a sample of popular music spanning the five decades from the 1960s to the 2000s. There are many ways in which the topic could be methodologically engaged and below I will explain my reasons for choosing Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2008). I acknowledge that the analysis presented here is not the only form of discourse or reading available for discussion. The enquiry nevertheless has value for it shows how certain discursive practices serve to support and maintain discernible and potentially undesirable forms of relationship. The presenting situation speaks directly to a policy and practice disturbance confronting all communities for, as Wyn (2009) asserts, 'there is now ample evidence that school cultures and curricula can have a negative as well as positive effect on young people's wellbeing and that both health and wellbeing are integral to the creation of an effective learning environment' (p. xi). As adults empowered with social authority, we can persist with accounts of young people that retain historically situated and common sense understandings perpetuating what is identified here as a normative control-contest binary. In doing so, our children are open to inherit a kind of relational knowledge they themselves may one day put into practice. This is one means by which discourse is sustained and accordingly validates examination of the means by which young people are portrayed and the ways relational authority are engaged.

Sign of the times

Areas of human communication can be scrutinised for how discourse is employed. In the social sciences (in particular, my home field of psychology rates a justifiable mention here), we extensively use deficit-based and individualistic accounts to explain our interactions with young people and to represent them. Previous work illustrates how young people and their relationships with adults have been constituted in education legislation and policy in moral/behavioural, scientific/legalistic and developmental/ageist terms (Corcoran, 2003; Watson, 2005). In light of these kinds of formal (and informal) practices, Ungar (2004, pp. 139–140) offers an erudite reconceptualisation of how young people achieve and maintain resilience and a sense of well-being. He states:

We seek in our children, both boys and girls, a fanatical desire for them to be conventional without attention to their (and our own) discourses of resistance. Efficacy in social relations

that give voice to this resistance is closely linked to experiences of competence, whether that competence is expressed prosocially or problematically.

Ungar's thesis proposes that young people, engaging in what adults perceive as high risk or problematic behaviours (e.g. actions leading to school exclusion), may in fact be adapting or coping as best they can given their existing social environments and/or immediate cultural norms (e.g. how authority is enacted). Rather than pathologising the individual and potentially labelling them as somehow 'disordered', he suggests it is more enabling of relational action to attempt to understand the broader social context of young people's lives, the strategies they employ and gather from these insights collaborative ways to improving the young person's access to sociopolitical and cultural resources (e.g. education and health). 'Resilience' Ungar (2004) says, 'is the outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy' (pp. 79–81). This compelling perspective bears significant implications for how social policy and programming operationalises relational action and conceptualises notions of well-being (Corcoran, 2012).

The kind of approach used by Ungar is made possible by social constructionist theory (Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 1993). Social constructionism provides a theoretical platform from which aspects of discursive diachronicity and synchronicity can be addressed.¹ This is achieved by critically engaging meaning-making within social practices and acknowledging their specificity to time and place. Let us consider an example. Imagine individuals communicating one to another. Immediately we might think of two people in conversation. We could even use the example of a person listening to their favourite music via a digital platform. Music consumption, as a means of communication between a song and audience, is generally considered as a one-way process i.e. the artist writes and records the song, a company produces and distributes the format (e.g. CD or on-line store) and the song is consumed (purchased then listened to) by the audience.² Were we to consider a person's response to the song, the psychology employed would probably engage social cognition wherein the song is considered an input into the sensory/sense making system of the individual. Having been inputted, the available information related to the song (e.g. sound or text) is internally processed (e.g. via perceptions or attributions) and we are left with an output known as the person's subjective experience. This kind of account remains unilateral for the song and the person's experience are not considered in dialogic relationship with one another because the relational association remains from song to recipient.

In contrast, constructionism looks to the co-constituted nature of experience. Here interest moves to understanding how people relationally create the means for what comes next (i.e. being able to achieve a task like communicating) within their situated sociopolitical practices. They are able to do so, Shotter (2000, p. 13) suggests, because of the dialogic nature of our social worlds. As he states, '(i)t is always from within such complexly intertwined space – in "answer" to the "calls" it exerts upon us – that we responsively perform our actions'. In these demonstrative social engagements, meanings supporting future action are said to develop via our knowledge of or dexterity with discourse. Shotter (1993, p. 3) explains:

It is this kind of knowledge – of the provisions and resources we make available to ourselves for the realisation of our different possible next forms of social behaviour – that is the special kind of knowledge embodied in the world of a civil society. And it is this that we must try to understand: both the nature of these socio-historical resources, and the nature of the social activities in which they are produced.

The discussion herein elaborates a sociohistorical account of representations of youth in a sample of popular music spanning 1966–2007 to consider how these might reflect on

relationships between young people and adults or authority. It also discusses examples of the sociopolitical contexts in which discursive constructions of youth have developed. In the following examples, popular music provides a generous context for discursive analysis.

About the method

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) 'is concerned with the discursive resources that are available to people, and the ways in which discourse constructs subjectivity, selfhood and power relations' (Willig, 2008, p. 95). Whilst other kinds of textual analysis could have been employed for this discussion, the objective here is not to solely focus on song lyrics as per forms of content analysis (Cole, 1971), nor is it intended to account for the subjective experience of music for this could be addressed by critical ethnography (Bennett, 2002) or via musicological-based research (Cook & Dibben, 2001). FDA facilitates dynamic movement between micro textual analysis and macro social analysis providing critical sensitivity to the dialogic, synchronic (i.e. language use at a given time) and diachronic (i.e. language development over time) nature of psychosocial action.

I will briefly explicate the reasons for choosing the songs considered. This discussion looks to form an understanding of the ways in which discourse concerning youth and their relationships with adults has been presented in popular music. Here, youth is taken to be a discursive category situated in time and by place referencing a period within a person's lifespan involving adolescence (ages 10–18) and emerging adulthood (ages 18–25). Analytic interest was to locate language signifying the operationalised category and subsequently, adulthood was inferred as being beyond this range. The term popular music also sponsors debate within academic circles and so I will borrow an uncomplicated account describing it as 'a modern and late modern socio-cultural context, or space, of music production and consumption' (International Advisory Editors, 2005, p. 134).

Purposive criterion sampling was employed to guide the selection of songs. This kind of sampling procedure is used in qualitative research when set criterion is employed to direct data gathering. The approach does not adhere to positivist assumptions regarding representativeness or generalisation (Patton, 2002). Rather, in this instance, the pragmatic utility of the analysis appears in, and is dependent upon, the relationship established between the text (the author/analyst) and context (the reader/interpretant). As Denzin (2001, p. 31) suggests, 'we do not ask if the representation is true. We ask instead, is it probable, workable, fruitful, does it allow us to see things differently, and to think differently.'

It has been suggested that "the auto/biographical I" signals the active inquiring presence of sociologists in constructing, rather than discovering, knowledge' (Stanley, 1993, p. 41). This kind of understanding provides direct acknowledgement for approaching aspects of empirical validity in terms of pragmatic utility. Such utility, as Stanley and Denzin imply, is actively understood by both author and reader in the construction of knowledge. In the sample presented here, with the exception of the My Chemical Romance track, one criteria for inclusion was that I could connect my own youth to the song being discussed. For example, *The Kids Are Alright* was released in the year I was born. *Department of Youth* was released in 1975, the year I purchased my first album.³ When I was 15 years old, *Kids in America* was a popular high school hit. And at age 25, *Smells Like Teen Spirit* signalled the twilight years of emerging adulthood. Other criteria included songs titles referencing words such as youth, kids, teens, teenagers, children and so on. Titles were preferred to general lyric content to constrict the sample size. To further

refine the sample I then grouped the songs into decades in which they were released. Decade was used as a distinct time period in preference to epoch as 10-year segments provided the sample with clearly focused temporal boundaries. So then, how might popular music inform us about the nature of youth and their relationships with adults in contemporary societies?

Let the music play

The Kids Are Alright

Released as a 7-inch vinyl single on 12 August 1966, *The Kids Are Alright* (Townshend, 1966) reached number 41 in the UK charts. At the time of its release, the song's writer and The Who's guitarist Pete Townshend was 21 years old. As a personal narrative, the song immediately presents as a simplistic tale involving a guy who takes an easy-going attitude to life. The first words speak to a general feeling of ambivalence: 'I don't mind other guys dancing with my girl.' The narrator goes on to tell the listener: 'That's fine, I know them all pretty well.' The ambivalence is thus seemingly founded on a trust existing between the narrator and his mates and provides the song's refrain: 'The kids are alright.'

But the story may not be as straightforward as the opening stanza suggests. In the second verse the narrator speaks to a developing feeling of constraint: 'Sometimes, I feel I gotta get away. Bells chime, I know I gotta get away.' The temporal aspect of this account is noteworthy. At first, this feeling is reported as occurring 'sometimes'. The narrator then reports the feeling to have advanced from more than a mere inclination to now presenting as something that is known. The temporal aspect of the lyric supports this movement via the reference to the chiming of bells, as is usual for clocks marking each passing hour. The following lines offer some indication as to what may happen if the pressure experienced is not addressed: 'And I know if I don't I'll go out of my mind. Better leave her behind with the kids, they're alright.'

The issue of parental or authoritative control is pointed to in the song's mid-section. The narrator acknowledges: 'I know if I go things would be a lot better for her. I had things planned but her folks wouldn't let her.' Although the listener is not informed of the exact nature of the narrator's plans it is understood that they were something 'her folks' would not allow. With this the narrator discloses the dilemma immediately before him: to stay with his girl or leave her behind. Changing his agenda is seemingly not an option. He can either continue his (and his girl's) suffering under such relational control, or rebel and 'get out in the light'. In this search for meaning, presented here in a commonly used rationalist discourse as a movement from feelings to knowledge, rebellion will literally bring enlightenment.

Popular music, as defined circa 1966, presented one means through which a generation could name who they were – or at least, who they thought themselves to be. This, of course, was a work in progress for the quintessential popular music happenings of the 1960s were yet to be realised in the form of 1967's Summer of Love, the Isle of Wight Festival starting in 1968⁴ and 1969's Woodstock Festival. Nevertheless, the themes apparent in *The Kids Are Alright* were evident at the time of the song's release. For example, on the same date at the Astor Towers Hotel in Chicago, a press conference was called. The calling of a press conference at the beginning of a tour for a popular music act was unsurprising. What was significant was the topic of the day – the Beatle's John Lennon defending an earlier newspaper interview where he was quoted as saying he had felt the band was more popular than Jesus. Concerned with the effect such a claim might have on the youth of America, popular music radio stations called for their listeners to

boycott the forthcoming tour and public burnings were arranged where Beatles records and memorabilia were incinerated. In the US, the sociopolitical nature of popular music and its potential corrosive influence on the values and convictions of youth was understood and reacted to as a serious threat.

One of the more remarkable representations of youth in media at this time involved Time magazine's award of their Man of the Year to a generation – young people under the age of 25. In testimony to their recipient, the magazine stated:

The young have already staked out their own minisociety, a congruent culture that has both alarmed their elders and, stylistically at least, left an irresistible impression on them. No Western metropolis today lacks a discotheque or espresso joint, a Mod boutique or a Carnaby shop. No transistor is immune from rock 'n' roll, no highway spared the stutter of Hondas... What started out as distinctively youthful sartorial revolt – drainpipe-trousered men, pants-suited or net-stockinged women, long hair on male and female alike – has been accepted by adults the world over. (Anon, 1967)

Contributions from popular music were, and they continue to be, integral to understanding youth. It is questionable however whether by the end of the 1960s the vagaries of youth culture had reached acceptance in an adult world. With greater relational certainty came the realisation that young people were ardently claiming their right to 'kick out the jams'.⁵

Department of Youth

Some could say it was optimistic of Alice Cooper, aged 27 in 1975, to be singing about the *Department of Youth* (Cooper, Wagner, & Ezrin, 1975). Throughout the lyric he continually uses the collective personal pronoun 'we', tying himself categorically to the group referenced in the song's title. Nonetheless, *Department of Youth* is, in several ways, a discursive account supporting the resilience of young people as they relate to their worlds.

In the first verse, the narrator paradoxically disparages youth by calling them 'a blind delegation'. This is interesting on two counts. Firstly, the terms 'department' and 'delegation' have immediate political connotations and this understanding is supported in the song's closing. The narrator asks: 'We're the Department of Youth. Who's got the power?' Emphatically, a chorus of youthful voices cry in unison: 'We do!' This question and answer sequence marches to the song's end. Although the kind of power youth is suggested to possess is not explicated in the lyric, several commentators recognise its existence in modern societies. As Bennett (2005, p. 123) highlights, 'the collective investment made in the power of music as a means for social change was perhaps more prominent in the late 1960s than in any other era of post-war popular music before or since'. But power seldom remains static as Weinstein (1999, p. 109) observed: 'After the 1960s, a focus for resistance was lost due to a complex of factors centring on the hegemony of consumer culture and the consequent detachment of "youthfulness" from chronological youth'. As will be discussed below, youth and popular music together create a political and economic force that commands our on going attention.

Returning to the lyric, a second observation suggests that youth act blindly in their relationships with the world: 'We walk around and bump into walls – a blind delegation.' In the second verse, this assertion is compounded when the narrator states: 'We never make any sense but hell that never mattered.' It could be said that 'the walls' being bumped into are put in place by those in authority i.e. adults. Also, it should be asked, to whom do the actions of youth make no sense? The narrator follows both suggestions with proclamations that youth 'ain't afraid' or that they will 'make it through' regardless.

Conceptualisations of resilience are very much related to an interpretation of the narrative told. As Ungar and Teram (2000, p. 229) suggest:

(R)egardless of the way they behave (e.g. delinquent or scholarly), youth acquire and maintain a sense of wellbeing by ‘drifting’ toward social discourses in which they exercise some degree of power over the self-defining labels attached to them. This patterned drift between discourses is the process by which adolescents, their peers, family members and communities co-author a youth’s personal narrative. These narratives are more than stories youth tell about themselves; they are the way the self constitutes its identity through intersubjective experiences in socio-historical contexts.

Acknowledgement of the capacity for discourse to represent youth as simultaneously resistant and resilient is vital to forming an understanding of the nature of such discourse and the constitutive work language performs. Within both time and context knowledge is produced. That is, at any time and in any context, multiple and often incongruent discourses exist and are available for constructing personhood and social relationships. In the terms used above, youth (and those studying youth) may ‘drift’ between these discourses. Validity of use will depend on how a particular discourse resonates within synchronic and diachronic fields of practice. Thus, *Department of Youth* provides an example for the indispensability and importance of incongruent representations in discourse analytic research. In sum, to be able to talk of youth as both resistant and resilient supports relational descriptions that refrain from essentialising the nature of the subject under consideration.

Kids in America

Kids in America (Wilde & Wilde, 1981) was the debut single for British singer Kim Wilde. It was released on 26 January 1981 when she was 20 years old. The song was written by Wilde’s father and brother who each in their own right had links to the popular music industry.⁶ *Kids in America* ushered Kim Wilde onto the world stage reaching the top 10 in several countries including the UK, Australia and South Africa. The song presents as compelling on a couple of sociocultural counts. First, it actively works to devolve representations of youth and second, for its attendance at the birth of a popular music icon. Intriguingly, these points are connected.

The lyric of the song develops via a female narrator speaking at first to herself and later in the song to a romantic companion. A story is told of youth living in a city where the goal is to find a ‘beat’ as summarised in the song’s chorus: ‘Everybody lives for the music go round.’ On initial impression, there is a non-gendered aspect to this narrative. Attracted to the fast pace of city life, there is no place better for this youth to be as it is ‘Friday night and everyone’s moving.’ Being there produces a ‘heat’ but not of an uncomfortable kind, the narrator reporting ‘it’s soothing’ to be in the midst of bright lights and fast music.

Two discernible issues can be highlighted as atypical in terms of this narrative and the way it services representations of youth in popular music. The first is that the song’s female voice takes an assertive, almost aggressive role in her pursuit of a companion. This is not a love song, this is a song of conquest. Here we see the category of female youth simultaneously challenging two positions: first, the dominance of the masculine perspective in popular music (Shuker, 1994) and second, the homogeneity of youth as an über-concept. Fortright, the female narrator lets her mark know: ‘I’m not leaving now honey not a chance. Hot shot give me no problems.’ But the account goes further still. It would seem not only has the narrator asserted a form of gendered relational power, she is at risk of assuming a pessimistic attitude associated more with adults than of youth.

Seemingly, beyond her life's experience there is resignation to the fact that 'life is cruel, life is never kind' but this is rationalised in the knowledge that 'Kind hearts don't make a new story. Kind hearts don't grab any glory.' The risk however abates as the narrative reaffirms the resilience of youth. Whilst life might be isolating and confusing ('I sit here alone and I wonder why'), we can be assured that it is not all doom and gloom for 'outside a new day is dawning' where 'there's a new wave coming'. Perhaps the Wildes anticipated what was about to come stating: 'Got to get a brand new experience feeling right.' Certainly, the brand about to storm the music industry was an innovative one. The new experience for popular music was television and few could have predicted its enduring impact on youth.

On 1 August 1981, an important event in the history of popular music took place. On this date MTV debuted to American viewers – or at least those who could afford the subscription to the cable network. The idea concerning music television was not a new one by any means. Variety television shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the US had been operating since 1948 and Sullivan's show in particular is remembered for several (in)famous performances such as Elvis Presley's in 1956, the Beatles in 1964 and the Doors in 1967. The concept of the promotional clip or music video also was not novel as each of the songs discussed so far had their own footage to compliment the release of the vinyl single, album or cassette tape. In fact, Alice Cooper's made for TV special, *The Nightmare*, based on the album from which *Department of Youth* is taken, aired on the ABC network in the US in April 1975, six and a half years before the birth of MTV. What then makes MTV so unique in the history of popular music and how has this impacted on representations of youth since?

It is estimated that MTV broadcasts to more than 2 billion people in 200 countries worldwide (Bodey, 2012). Over time, MTV has been seen as a marketing opportunity used by multinationals (e.g. Coca-Cola) via strategic product placement in music videos as well as a means for servicing its own multiple delivery platforms (e.g. MTV.com). And yet, MTV's presence in the lives of youth worldwide is not limited to economics. As one past-president of the Corporation suggested, the reach of the enterprise goes to constructing the sociopolitical ideals of youth: 'That's something our audience expects from us... When there's an issue or cause that impacts them, MTV should be the place where they hear about what they can do and what it means for them, and how to connect them with other people that share their passion' (Christina Norman cited in Bruno, 2006, para. 28). It would be ludicrous to suggest that MTV is purely a community service but given the ingratiating position the company claims to occupy in the lives of youth, it is not difficult to understand how the term 'the MTV generation', referring to those born between 1975 and 1985, entered contemporary vernacular (Rideout, 2003).

Whilst critics have employed Mulvey's (1975) work on the dominance of phallogocentric images in cinema to condemn MTV programming, Lewis (1993, p. 146) provides an interesting riposte highlighting MTV as providing an empowering means for female musicians and composers to access and engage wider audiences. Lewis concludes:

When critics look only at textual examples of social reproduction, they fail to consider the conditional and historical character of textual meaning and the role of human agency in signification practices. In the case of MTV, they overlook how issues of sexism and gender inequality are contested within individual videos, across the channel's schedule of videos, and at the points where the videos converge with the social practices of producers and audiences.

The contribution Kim Wilde and *Kids in America* has made to gender relations is surely arguable. Nonetheless, what is indisputable is the impact MTV has had on representations of youth (Frith, Goodwin, & Grossberg, 1993). This influence surpasses limitation to one

field of social practice (e.g. politics or economics) and remains a prevailing space for discursive contestations between generations.

Smells Like Teen Spirit

If Kurt Cobain's lyrics for the leadoff single from the multi-platinum selling album *Nevermind* are anything to go by, representations of youth in 1991 appear to be intensely conflicted. Age 24 when the song was released, Cobain and Nirvana have since become popular music icons. Central to the stories told about him (and the band) is the disturbing fact that Cobain was found dead, reportedly by suicide, three and a half years after *Smells Like Teen Spirit* (Cobain, Grohl, & Novoselic, 1991) had made Nirvana a worldwide popular music phenomenon.

The lyrical content of *Teen Spirit* has been a source of debate since the song's release (e.g. Azerrad, 1992; Crisafulli, 1996). At times verging on the nonsensical ('A mullato, an albino, a mosquito, my libido'), the lyric was recognised by Cobain 'to describe what I felt about my surroundings and my generation and people my age' (cited in Azerrad, 1994, pp. 211–212). For example, the song accentuates self-focussed apprehensions regarding one's abilities ('I feel stupid and contagious') and positioning ('With the lights out it's less dangerous'). Whilst Cobain and the song have been heralded by some in the media as representing the zeitgeist of a distinct grouping of 1990s youth, this was seemingly never his intention. A *Rolling Stone* interview published six months after the release of *Teen Spirit* put it this way:

Nevermind embodies a cultural movement; *Smells Like Teen Spirit* is an anthem for (or is it against?) the 'Why Ask Why?' generation. Just don't call Cobain a spokesman for a generation. 'I'm a spokesman for myself,' he says. 'It just so happens that there's a bunch of people that are concerned with what I have to say. I find that frightening at times because I'm just as confused as most people. I don't have the answers for anything. I don't want to be a fucking spokesperson.' (Azerrad, 1992, para. 25)

In popular music terms, Nirvana was special in that they contributed to defining a particular musical style. In the same year that *Nevermind* was released, arguably the industry's highest accolade, the Grammy, instituted a new category in its awards.⁷ The category is titled Best Alternative Music Album.⁸ Now firmly entrenched as a subcategory of popular music, the term alternative music was initially used to describe music played on American college radio stations not easily positioned within the available genres of the 1980s (e.g. country, pop, rock, folk). The category alternative music has itself spawned several subcategories including Brit pop (e.g. Oasis or Blur), gothic rock (The Cure or The Birthday Party) and jangle pop (REM or the Go-Betweens). Nirvana (and another band from the American city of Seattle, Pearl Jam) came to represent the subcategory known as grunge.

Nevermind has been described as an album that 'fibrillated the psyche of a generation' (Handy, 1994, para. 4). If this description is accurate, in light of Cobain's avowal, how was it achieved? Alternative music and its grunge variation were sold to youth en masse via marketisation of the music in their ears and the clothing on their backs. The rationale was simple:

There hasn't been this kind of exploitation of a subculture since the media discovered hippies in the 60s. The real targets are not so much grunge lovers per se as the whole generation that grunge reflects. X-ers have grown up in the baby boomers' shadow, but now marketers have belatedly focussed on their taste-setting potential and their annual spending power, estimated by the Roper Organisation to be \$125 billion. (Kobel, 2003, para. 2–3)

Even had they wanted to, youth adopting a grunge-infused resistance to popular culture could not escape the commercialisation of the fringes in which they lived and the appropriation of the icons that defined them. The ultimate addendum was posted by their very presence – ‘Here we are now, entertain us’ – whether young people saw or accepted themselves to be consumers or not. Grunge, with its post-punk ethic and indolent fashion sense, became yet another money-spinner in the pecuniary exploitation of youth.

Ironically, what had started out as a way of being, in part defined by its distaste of an adult-controlled corporate world, became accessible to any person with a credit card. Or, in discursive terms, money talked. Perhaps in some way this was what encouraged Cobain’s sense of mordancy. Distaste, turning to dismay, which in turn leads to a woebegone form of ontological investment: ‘It’s fun to lose and to pretend’ or ‘I’m worse at what I do best. And for this gift I feel blessed.’ In relationships between youth and those seen to be more powerful the suggestion here is to embrace underachievement. In sum, one might as well revel in pretence for there is little to no point in being authentically invested when you know you are going to ‘lose’. Such was the song’s contribution to the heterogeneous and conflicted nature of discourse available to 1990s representations of youth.

Teenagers

A similar comment to the one made about Alice Cooper vis-à-vis age (see above) could be made with Gerard Way, lead vocalist and co-author of the My Chemical Romance song *Teenagers* (My Chemical Romance, 2007). Way was 30 years old when the song was released in July 2007. This seemingly had no influence on the song’s success peaking at number 9 on the UK singles charts and number 6 in New Zealand. The lyric follows a monologue given by an unidentified narrator. The intended audience is recognised in the song’s title as well as lyric: ‘You’re never gonna fit in much, kid.’

An implied association is developed through the lyric as the narrator distances himself from two groups who are suggested to actively limit the aspirations of the audience. One of these groups could be inferred to be adults or more generally authority figures. As the following lyric states, there is a generational difference noted as well as an alleged context of surveillance: ‘Because they sleep with a gun and keep an eye on you son so they can watch all the things that you do.’ The other group mentioned is signified by age via developmental descriptors: ‘The boys and girls in the clique. The awful names that they stick. You’re never gonna fit in much, kid. But if you’re troubled and hurt, what you’ve got under your shirt, will make them pay for the things that they did.’ At this point, more needs to be said about what may or may not account as the means for this open call to retribution.

The narrator suggests that young people are simply ‘another cog in the murder machine’. This is possibly a metaphoric account related to the previous line that blames the Other for crushing the aspirations of youth (‘They’re gonna rip up your heads, your aspirations to shreds’). But somewhat alarmingly, the chorus, acknowledged as the focal point in most popular music, rallies teens to assume a particular style of engagement with the Other:

They said all teenagers scare the living shit out of me,
They could care less as long as someone’ll bleed.
So darken your clothes and strike a violent pose,
Maybe they’ll leave you alone but not me.

Taken by account, this may simply be an invitation to a form of inconsequential posturing but the previously quoted line ‘What you got under your shirt, will make them pay for the things that they did’ intimates otherwise. Accepted, an optimistic reading of this could suggest that what is under the clothing of youth everywhere is a heart beating with hope and a will to achieve. But given that this song’s themes involve violence, guns, bleeding and murder, the outlook might not be so encouraging.

In the year that *Teenagers* was released, another in what seems an incessant series of distressing and senseless attacks on the value of life took place. On 7 November 2007 at Jokela High School, a public secondary school in Finland, an 18-year-old student took the lives of eight people before ending the massacre by turning the gun on himself. Let me be clear here. I am not about to draw a causal link between this or any pop song and the tragedy of gun violence in educational settings.⁹ Whilst perhaps not a flagrant call to arms for disenfranchised youth everywhere, at the least the song provides a distressed social commentary on the potential tensions existing in relationships between youth and adults in contemporary societies.¹⁰

Conclusion

In my own youth, music played a central part. I recall, as if it was moments ago, buying that first LP. Seemingly, we each have a relationship with music and it is remarkably in the age we call our youth that this relationship is more often than not exceptional. Long ago I had neither the interest nor desire to seek academic accounts of this relationship. Nonetheless, in my more reflexive years I have become aware of a well-established and thematically diverse literature considering the relationship between youth (and its described subcultures) and music (Bennett, 2005; Frith, 1981; Miranda, 2013). The songs selected for discussion here speak to both the synchronic tensions that exist when power manifests in relationships and diachronically, as these relational dynamics support what I have called a control-contest binary. Put another way, to say young people might respond to power-infused relationships via resistance (in various shapes and forms) is nothing new, perhaps even ‘normal’ within Western cultures. But given relationships like these remain a perennial concern, particularly for schools and educators (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009; Cothran & Ennis, 1997), maybe such circumstance requires determined reconsideration.

Having contemplated the discourses evidenced in this analysis and mindful of the position maintained by the likes of Donnelly, Furedi and others, I am uncertain whether the control-contest binary will ever abate. This being so, social policy and practice must continue to scrutinise its own normativities, particularly in light of concerted attempts by governments to promote well-being in contemporary societies. To do so requires not only examining the ways in which young people are portrayed but also the manner in which relationships are enacted. Social constructionism offers alternate ways of thinking about relational action. The approach facilitates critical questioning of what society accepts as natural about human being and how this should be explicitly addressed in sociopolitical practice (Corcoran, 2009). Following Drewery’s (2005, p. 306) lead: ‘Once we understand how different forms of subjective experience are produced, it seems to me that we have a responsibility to move forward to thinking about what forms of subjectivity would be preferred, and how different ways of speaking produce more or less preferred subjectivities.’ But are adults willing to accept such responsibility? To do so means problematising not only the ways we engage representations of youth – be they of our own or another’s making – but also how these inform the conduct of our relationships and

contribute to sustaining or sabotaging notions of resilience and well-being. Macleod, MacAllister, and Pirrie (2012) suggest that an explicit theorisation of authority remains largely absent from educational research and thus narrows possibilities for social action. Such omission, they contend, continues an over-reliance on forms of authority operating from positions of force and control, both subsequently present in areas of everyday life like school discipline policy and behaviour management practice.

Some say the thing about the future is that it is yet to be written. As Hosking intimates: 'Relational processes have a local cultural-historical quality such that discourses of the past and future are constructed and reconstructed in an ongoing present' (2006, p. 272). The prospect of an ongoing present offers hope and recourse to any who feel the fight is yet to be won. The fight of course is for preferred futures where synchronic and diachronic representations of resistant youth need not be premised on relationally divisive, exploitive or confrontational discourse. Perhaps individuals vested in cynical portrayals of youth, and adults troubled with relinquishing uncompromising authority in their interactions with young people, should take note from the Boss. A more fitting account of relational reciprocity would be difficult to find and as such, the words strike a powerful chord on which to conclude. In reflecting on the special kind of bond that exists between artist and audience in music, Springsteen observes:

It's an ongoing dialogue about what living means. It's not like a one-on-one dialogue. It's more what you feel back from them. You create a space together. You are involved in an act of the imagination together, imagining the life you want to live, the kind of country you want to live in, the kind of place you want to leave your children. What are the things that bring you ecstasy and bliss, what are the things that bring on the darkness, and what can we do together to combat those things? (cited in Levy, 2007, para. 8)

Notes

1. See the next section for further discussion on this.
2. Acknowledgement should be made for how the digital age is increasingly changing the ways in which popular music is produced, disseminated and consumed (see for e.g. Huang, 2005; Molteni & Ordanini, 2003).
3. For the record (no pun intended), it was 13 December 1975 and the album was Elton John's *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*.
4. The Who co-headlined the Isle of Wight Festival in 1969 with Bob Dylan.
5. *Kick Out The Jams* was the title of Detroit punk-rock band MC5's first album released in 1969. The term has been loosely used as a call to fight back against sociopolitical control imposed on people in the living of their daily lives.
6. Marty Wilde had had a successful career as a singer/songwriter having several top 10 hits in the UK during the 1960s. Ricki Wilde, Kim's brother, began his music career in the UK at age 11.
7. In 1992, Nirvana received a nomination in this category for *Nevermind*. The award was received by another American band with impeccable alternative music credentials, REM.
8. From 1991 to 1999 the category was known as Best Alternative Music Performance.
9. Although some researchers are willing to stake this claim. See, for example, Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks' (2003) study regarding the effects of songs with violent lyrics.
10. In an interview appearing on YouTube, Way recalls the song was written in response to his own feelings as an adult witnessing the behaviour of young people in public spaces (take40australia, 2008).

Notes on contributor

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