The Use of “Subculture” and “Subworld” in Ethnographic Works on Sport: A Discussion of Definitional Distinctions

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Within sport ethnography, the term “subculture” has been employed so broadly that the term has lost much of its explanatory power. In this paper, we attempt to reclaim the explanatory powers of the concept subculture by differentiating it from the concept “subworld.” The paper reviews the theoretical foundations of the concept of subculture and subworld, proposes definitional distinctions, and finally makes recommendations for the use of these concepts in future ethnographic research in sport.

Over the last decade, ethnographers increasingly have explored sport as a cultural product and cultural producer. It is common to hear these sociologists refer to sport as a subculture. Early portrayals of sport have employed the notion of subculture as a means of illuminating the “back regions” (Goffman, 1959) of sport such as the backstretch in horse racing (Scott, 1968) or to describe athletes in “off beat” sports like surfing (Pearson, 1977) and pool hustling (Polsky, 1969). More recently ethnographers have used the term subculture more broadly. Subculture has been employed as a point of departure for discussions of: deviant behavior in rugby (Young, 1988); identity formation in bodybuilding (Klein, 1986), and mountain climbers and rugby players (Donnelly & Young, 1988); the process of group affiliation in windsurfing (Young & Gallup, 1989), running (Nash, 1977), and Little League Baseball (Fine, 1979, 1987); to illustrate cultural resistance and
reproduction in high school football (Foley, 1990), rugby (Young, 1983), and skateboarding (Beal, 1995); and to outline the occupational norms in coaching (Massengale, 1974). The term subculture has been employed so widely and with such variety within studies of sport that the very concept risks losing its explanatory power. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the meaning of “subculture” from “group” or “occupation.”

The term “subworld” suffers from the opposite affliction within sport ethnography—under use. Subworld is rarely employed by sport sociologists. When it is used to describe a sport group, it tends to be by ethnographers who do not specialize in sport but have happened upon the area in their broader exploration of social formations. These works are usually found in less-specialized academic journals and have had little impact on our field. “Subworld” risks losing its explanatory power simply because the term is not a part of sport ethnographer’s repertoire.

The goal of this essay is to propose definitional distinctions between subculture and subworld which might prove useful to ethnographers of sport. Initially, we explore the roots of the term subculture in order to reclaim some of its definitional clarity. Then we examine how this term has been employed by sport ethnographers. Particular attention is paid to ethnographers’ work influenced by the cultural studies school. Finally, we (re)introduce the concept of “subworld” in attempt to relieve “subculture” of some of burden sport ethnographers have placed on this term.

**Intermediary Level of Analysis**

The prefix “sub” in subculture and subworld signifies the level of analysis which is below the macro level and focuses on an intermediate level of society. An intermediate analysis can make explicit the everyday meanings of society by investigating how people interpret and respond to interactions within groups as well as investigate how dominant relations are reproduced, challenged, and negotiated on a daily level. For the most part, sport sociologists use these two terms to suggest the intermediate level of the group that they are investigating. In some cases, subculture and subworld are used interchangeably (see, for example, Adler & Adler, 1991), diluting the potential power of these distinct concepts.

**Subculture**

One of the clearest attempts to define subculture can be found in Milton Yinger’s (1960) essay, *Contraculture and Subculture*. Here, he employs the term subculture to illuminate the normative system by which groups demonstrate the ways they “differ in such things as language, values, religion, diet, and style of life from the larger social world of which they are a part” (p. 626). Yinger distinguishes subculture from role and contraculture (counterculture). Subcultures differ from social roles in that roles are tied into the norms and expectations of the larger culture. Subcultural norms are “looked down upon, or thought of, as separating forces by other members of a society” (p. 628). Clearly, Yinger intended subculture to describe a particular groups relationship to the broader society.

Yinger further contrasts subculture with contraculture (or counterculture) in an effort to sharpen the definition of subculture. A counterculture describes those
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groups in which the normative system contains as its primary element conflict with or rejection of a dominant culture. Yinger may have had the “beats” in mind when he coined the term contraculture. Punks (Fox, 1987) are a contemporary example of a counterculture.

What distinguishes a subculture from a counterculture is the degree of opposition. Subcultures are, as Brake (1985) put it, similar to slang in that they are based in the dominant system yet, nonetheless, unique. Although the shared values and norms of a subculture depart from those of the broader culture, they are not completely oppositional (revolutionary), or detached from larger society. Subcultures exist and interact within a broader cultural context that affect it and which it, in turn, affects. A subculture is rarely a simple oppositional alternative to the broader culture. In fact, as noted by Brake (1985), purely oppositional or counterculture groups that are in direct conflict with dominant society do not exist for long. Most groups, even highly oppositional groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or Punks, work to some degree within dominant systems in order to remain viable as a group.

Yinger’s sense of subculture is used throughout Klein’s (1993) study of bodybuilding. Klein describes the bodybuilding community as marginalized and insulated as a result of their exaggerated notion of masculinity. “Mainstream culture,” Klein writes, “still sees bodybuilding as excessive and somewhat incomprehensible.” Although the bodybuilding community is marginalized, Klein retains a sense of interaction with mainstream society and holds out the possibility that the bodybuilding subculture may someday be accepted and folded into the broader culture. Until such a transformation takes place, those steeped in mainstream culture will view bodybuilding as alien and repellent.

Mainstream attitudes toward bodybuilding are captured by Klein in interactions. For example, he sees them in the face of a young mother who comes to the back fence of the gym for a look. “Her tentative manner, controlled smile, and slightly uptight eyes told me all I needed to know,” Klein writes. After standing for some time, a body builder approached her, but “the mother was too threatened, and the body builder too self-conscious” to actually engage in a conversation. “Mainstream and marginal had just missed” (pp. 44-45).

Cultural Studies, Sport, and Subculture

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing culture. The variety and mix of disciplines and techniques claim the label cultural studies, which has created some ambiguity as to what cultural studies is exactly. Nonetheless, there are some basic concerns and concepts that do identify a cultural studies approach. Although there is an American strain of cultural studies (e.g., Mills, Becker), most associate the current wave of cultural studies to the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, AL.

From a cultural studies perspective, the challenge is to understand why and how subordinate groups accept and oppose the dominant ideologies that do not apparently benefit them. Power is central to this problem, and power is analyzed as a process of legitimizing the dominant groups’ position as opposed to viewing power as a direct manipulation of the subordinate groups (Lears, 1985). In this vein, cultural studies investigates the processes by which ideologies are created, accepted, and challenged, and how they affect the structure of people’s everyday
lives. Agger (1992) described the premise of cultural studies as “an activity of
critical theory that directly decodes the hegemonizing messages of the cultural
industry permeating every nook and cranny of lived experience, from education to
entertainment” (p. 5).

The analysis of youth subcultures has been a focus of scholars influenced by
the Birmingham School. A notable cultural studies analysis of youth subcultures
is Dick Hebdige’s (1977) Subculture: The Meaning of Style. He describes a sub-
culture as “the expressive forms and rituals of subordinate groups.” Subculture is
an area in which groups of people challenge dominant meanings assigned to cul-
tural products. The style and images used by groups of working-class youth pro-
mote an opposing definition of reality, one which challenges the assumed natural-
ness and, therefore, the legitimacy of the dominant groups’ definition of acceptable
behavior. At the same time, style, however shocking, is “easily copied, dismissed,
translated in to the context of the omnivorous mainstream” (Cagle, p. 309). Ulti-
mately, youth subcultures’ impact on social, political, or economic structures is
limited.

The popularity of cultural studies has impacted the study of sport (for a brief
history of cultural studies and sport, see Andrews & Loy, 1993). Much of this
research has described the apparent contradictions of sport participants’ behaviors
which both challenged and reproduced the dominant ideology associated with sport.
Young’s study of a rugby subculture and Beal’s analysis of a skateboarding sub-
culture focus on these groups’ challenge to mainstream values such as competition
yet reproduce sexist male culture. Cultural studies approach has influenced sport
ethnographers investigating as divergent groups as a feminist softball (Birrell &

Peter Donnelly’s work is at the forefront of ethnographic subcultural analy-
sis of sport in North America (1985, 1993). The foundation for this work is found
in Sport Subcultures (1985). While his intention is to operationalize the concept of
subculture, he also is clearly engaged in a debate with other sport ethnographers
about how to theorize sport. In this article, Donnelly is encouraging fellow sport
ethnographers to place their findings within a broader social and historical con-
text. Sport, he argues, needs to be placed in relation to the dominant and parent
culture and not reported as a solely unique phenomena. It is this prodding to ar-
ticulate the relationship between sport and dominant cultures that leads Donnelly
to adopt the term subculture.

His argument is with symbolic interactionists. The danger of the interactionist
approaches to sport ethnography typical at the time is their lack of attention to the
social-historical context. For example, Fine’s analysis of Little League baseball
speaks extensively about preadolescent boys use of homosexual images but fails
to make any connection to homophobia in the broader society. Donnelly argues
that the interactionists’ use of subculture to describe sport isolates it from the larger
class, gender, national, and international culture. Therefore, interactionist studies
of sport tended to be ahistorical, atheoretical, and lack a critical perspective.

Donnelly distinguishes three levels of cultural production of which one is
subculture. The others are the dominant culture and the parent culture. Dominant
culture refers to the broadest shared cultural productions, values, and norms. For
example, a discussion of the dominant American culture might include the shared
value of individual freedom and the moral obligation to work. Parent culture refers
to the culture of groups based on ascribed characteristics. These cultural distinctions can be located, for example, according to class, ethnic origin, or age. For Donnelly, parent cultures also include social spheres dedicated to the creation of broad social products (i.e., social worlds). The concept of subculture, he contends, should be limited to the ideological and cultural production and reproduction of groups defined by achieved characteristics like occupations, avocation, and deviant groups such as art collectors, surfers, and street gangs (Donnelly, 1985).

More recently, Donnelly’s use of subculture has been significantly influenced by the cultural studies school. In his overview of boxing, climbing, and rugby subcultures (1993), he argues that Western culture suffers from hegemonizing tendencies. But hegemony is never complete. Pockets of resistance rupture the dominant culture as groups and individuals challenge the dominant values, ideologies, and meanings.

This dialectical relationship between dominant culture and resistance is a fluid process. The oppositional characteristics of a subculture change over time, depending on the dominant culture’s willingness to “incorporate” subcultures. Sporting subcultures are one means of exploring the incorporation or suppression of alternative ways of being into the dominant culture (Donnelly, 1993).

**Critique of Cultural Studies Use of Subculture**

While a cultural studies approach overcomes the ahistorical and narrow view of some interactionist subcultural analyses, it creates other problems. Fine (1979) and Cagle (1989) warn of the tendency to define or describe the subculture in terms of the conflicts within the broader culture. Cultural studies theorists who rely too heavily on conflicts within the dominant culture (e.g., race, class, and gender) to explain a sporting subculture risk are overlooking unique qualities of sport practices (Albert, 1991). Too often in the cultural studies approach, the “lived perspectives of subcultural participants” (Cagle, p. 312) gets lost in politics. The cultural studies contention, for example, that English youth subcultures are born out of a resistance to working-class culture is something of a leap (Cagle, 1989). One might make a similar claim of the conclusions Tomlinson draws from his “historical ethnography” of Knur-and-Spell (1992).

Cultural studies suffers from a tendency to assume a connection between subcultures and dominant values without producing evidence of causal connections between the activities of a subculture and its parent culture or the dominant culture. For Fine and Kleinman (1979), culture is broad and complex to define and, thus, theoretically impossible to contrast it with a subgroup. Donnelly admits as much when he writes “a complete description of the dominant culture in a complex society such as North American is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper” (1993). Indeed, it is beyond the scope of most sport ethnographies.

Most notable for its absence in much of the current work on sport subcultures, however, is Yinger’s sense that subculture is a marginal group as defined by the dominant culture. Within sport ethnographies written from a cultural studies perspective, any group engaged in the production of cultural products qualifies as a subculture. For Donnelly, “subcultures may range from resilient and conservative maintainers of tradition to the most active sites of cultural production” (p. 121).
This is not to say that subculture researchers have stopped looking for resistance and opposition to the dominant culture—quite the opposite. Resistance and opposition to a dominant culture is assumed within the theoretical foundation of cultural studies. Hegemony and resistance, locked in a dialectical embrace, is the engine behind the (re)production of culture. The term subculture, then retains the connotation of marginalization, but it is not necessary to prove resistance or marginalization because it is assumed. Researchers are left with the “armchair” task of interpreting which acts constitute resistance and which dominant structures, values, or ideologies are being contested. As such, the cultural studies perspective may overstate the oppositional qualities of a sport. Gruneau (1988) has noted some researchers “seem to have discovered resistance virtually everywhere in capitalist consumer cultures.” This criticism merits a special discussion as it relates to sport.

Sport as Oppositional; Is It Even Possible?

It is tempting to view all sport as oppositional or resilient subcultures. Sport is an institution that stands somewhat outside our everyday life, a distraction from the daily grind. The formal structure of sport never fully cooperates with the dominant ideologies nor can it be counted on to support the interests of those in power. Where most forms of entertainment are forms of display, sport must retain an element of play (Stone, 1955). In sport, if it is truly sport, the outcome is always in doubt. The core of sport cannot be completely usurped or controlled by outside social forces or interests if it is to remain sport.

Despite the media’s slick ability to paint the victor as promoting one cultural norm over another, and the industry’s refined craft of creating athletic spokespersons that are free of controversy, sport never fully cooperates. The “right” person is not always the victor. As such, the possibility of sport to be in conflict with dominant culture is always present. For many sport theorists (Morgan, 1985; Gruneau, 1983), it is this aspect of sport’s substantive rationality that sets it somewhat outside of mainstream society. As such, Morgan (1985) writes, sport represents “an alternative order of reality and reason [which] . . . strains the credulity of established society’s definition and control or reality and rational action” (p. 68).

Morgan probably overestimates the oppositional potential of sport. The everyday reality of sport which does not ensure that its outcome will support these dominant cultural expectations is itself a comfort in the highly regulated society which promotes autonomy and individualism. However, Morgan is correct in suggesting a focus on the formal rules of sport. Where a subcultural perspective is appropriate, the formal rules of a sport are likely to undergird its culture.

Young and Gallup (1989), for example, discover structurally encouraged values in their investigation of windsurfers. They contextualize these values within the broader culture.

Since wind is a highly variable and often unpredictable force, and since boardsailing is dependent on its presence, the sport does not afford, nor do its participants recognize, delayed gratification. When it is windy, one sails for the immediate pleasure; there are few long-term benefits. Ironically enough, the values that a strong commitment to a sport requires acting and
thinking in a way that is oppositional to the bourgeois culture that is the background of many of these windsurfers. (p.13)

But even here, the notion of opposition must be employed with caution. It is not strong dedication to sport that might be found oppositional as Young and Gallup suggest. Western culture has long promoted purposeful purposelessness (e.g., a highly productive yet alienated labor force). What is truly oppositional about the boardsailing community and surfers is the abandonment of practices regulated by time. The privileging of nature over time is at the core of “dropping out.” However, even this aspect of sailboarding is threatened by mainstream pressures. Today, some sailboarding enthusiasts have beepers which signal them when winds are sufficient for sailing, eliminating the need to “drop out” and hang out at the beach waiting for the wind.

Further, recreational communities, particularly “thrill seekers,” represent an “alternative to sport” (Donnelly 1993). For that reason alone they appear oppositional. However, Western culture is steeped in a tradition of physical adventure, be it westward migration, Roosevelt-like safaris, or solo trans-Atlantic crossings. From the 1830s on, part of the proof of manhood was engaging in seemingly dangerous activities usually with other men (Gorn & Goldstein, 1993). Today, corporations, for example, often pay for their executives to go on white water rafting trips, and young adults sign up for survival trips to prove something to themselves. When the current outdoor activities like mountain biking, bungee jumping, and mountain climbing are placed within this historical context of Western culture, none seems particularly marginal despite their lack of overt competition. Indeed, it is more plausible to argue that climbing and other thrill-seeking activities are an expected product of a highly regulated, predictable culture, with minimal opportunity for creativity and personal achievement, which nonetheless, promotes individualism and achievement.

Competitive sport are cultural practices to which almost every person in the Western world is exposed and/or participates. The lack of cultural insulation from the forces outside of competitive sport impinge on the participants and dilute the possibility of oppositional culture. It is tempting to view elite professional sport, however, as an insulated subculture. But it, too, is intertwined with and mutually dependent on the powerful sport goods industry and the sports media industry. Working in association with these institutions professional sports organizations reproduce a structure that awards extraordinary honor to athletes. In doing so, the athletes also engage in acts that reflect cultural expectations about who gets ahead in our society, the benefits of hard work, the characteristics of a winner, and appropriate gender behavior. Further, the unique language, values, and life-style of elite sport communities arise out of a shared and collective desire of the members to be highly proficient at a sport, as well as the constant travel and media attention these athletes must endure. While this life-style may seem unusual to members of mainstream society, it is rarely “looked down upon.” As such, there is little that is oppositional about elite and professional sports.

**Sporting Subcultures**

If we are to retain the explanatory power of the concept of subculture, it will be necessary to use it cautiously. The solution to the criticisms above is not the
abandonment of a cultural studies approach (as Fine & Kleinman, 1979, seem to suggest) but rather in doing the rigorous research, or in Joel Best’s (1995) terms, the heavy lifting necessary to document the interactions between members of subgroups and the broader culture (see also MacAlloon, 1992).

Subculture as a description of a sport seems most applicable with sports marginalized within the dominant culture. The more overtly oppositional sports with political revolutionary roots like the American New Games Movement of the ‘60s, Gaelic Games of Ireland at the turn of century, and blood sports as presented in the Police Gazette in the late 1880s seem to meet Yinger’s definitional requirements of subculture.

Further, subculture seems to be applicable to particular segments of “off beat” sports (like skateboarding, rugby, and surfing). In most cases, members of these sport and recreational communities relish the distinction from larger society. As Klein points out in bodybuilding, and Young and Gallup (1989) note of windsurfing, and Beal (1995) with skateboarders, members of these communities draw strength from their marginalization by mainstream culture. Surfers (Pearson, 1977) and sailboarders (Young & Gallup, 1989), for example, are highly regarded within their respective subcultures, if they “drop out” of the dominant culture to devote more time to the sport.

But even here, the dropping out must be thought poorly of by members of dominant groups to qualify as an oppositional. Recently, dropping out has been incorporated into the dominant culture as globe-trotting Westerners use the beaches and forests of the Third World as their exotic playground while between jobs. Similarly, the activities of skateboarding, surfing, and the like may be practiced without challenging dominant norms or values. So within sporting practices, researchers will need to be careful to delineate within sporting communities which lived experiences of participants represent real resistance.

Further, ethnographers will have to bear in mind that subculture status is not claimed by a subgroup but defined by their treatment by members of dominant groups. Participants in a sport or recreational communities are likely to feel themselves to be unique, distinct, and/or outside the mainstream. They may even present themselves and form an identity around their “uniqueness.” But such representation of self or group does not constitute a subculture unless those from within the dominant culture also define them as oppositional.

The burden of the ethnographer is to document interactions which demonstrate marginalization.

Social Worlds

Because most sport and recreational practices are not distinct from the dominant culture, the concept of “social world” may provide a tool which has a wider range of application in researching sport than subculture. It may prove to be an especially fruitful point of departure for the sport ethnographer.

Social world has its roots in Chicago School ethnographers and their focus on overlapping “social worlds” within modern urban life. More recently, the notion of focusing of social world has been pushed by Anslem Strauss in the ‘60s and ‘70s (Unruh 1983). But like the term subculture, social world took on imprecise and commonsense meanings and was applied carelessly to groups. Shared orienta-
tions and perspectives were often assumed without empirical evidence. Unruh (1983) clarified the term in his study of old-age communities in attempt to restore its explanatory power.

He defines social worlds as large and highly permeable, amorphous and spatially transcendent forms of social organization made up of people sharing common interests and sharing common channels of communication (Unruh, 1983). Social worlds are not defined by their relation to the dominant culture but by the production of a "social object," such as sports, opera, card collections, or gardens. Social worlds arise out to the "coordinated efforts of people to create, distribute, and evaluate social object" (Unruh, 1983). The social objects of art, stamp collecting, and baseball, for example, each have a social world.

The concept of social world has been employed to describe the sports of swimming (Chambliss, 1989) and horse racing (Rosencrance, 1985) and women's professional golf (Crosset, 1995). The members of a social world are linked by shared perspectives, unique activities and language, common channels of communication which arise out of common interest in the production of a social object. Within the social world of golf, for example, golfers acquire common knowledge about their world through golf magazines, instructional videos, and the promotional literature of golf equipment manufacturers. Local teaching professionals also disseminate information about the world of golf and often act as the local critic of the sport. Clubhouses and the golf shops are places dedicated to facilitating face-to-face interactions where members of the golf world can share golfing knowledge with each other. As a result, without ever having met before, golfers can carry on detailed conversations concerning the world of golf.

Social worlds are often segmented into subworlds. For example, the world of rock music is made up of punk rockers, heavy metal bands, folk rockers, and the like. Each group represents a subworld. The social world of a sport also is divided into distinct social worlds. Chambliss (1989) has argued that sport is made up of qualitatively distinct subworlds (e.g., Junior National, Mini Tour, Pro Tour for golf). Despite our tendency to measure distinctions in sport quantitatively (e.g., 5 handicapper vs. scratch golfer) and to view improvement as linear, an individual's ability to advance in a sport is made by making successful leaps from one subworld to another. Professional golf, for example, is a subworld within the social world of golf (Crosset, 1995).

The concept "social world" pushes the researchers' gaze in a slightly different direction than does "subculture." The tendency of subculture analysis is to view sports as "homogenous entities" with commonly held ideologies (Donnelly, 1993). Social world analysis invites researchers to discover subworlds within social worlds. Second, social world analysis encourages ethnographers to focus on the production of a social product, to explore a segment of culture on its own terms and, thus, avoiding "defining sport by reference to formal structures and dominant ideologies" which are perhaps insignificant "to the actual practice of a sport" (Albert, 1991). Finally, subworld analysis focuses on a sphere of communication around a social object. This view frees the researcher from looking for signs of cultural resistance in every sporting practice without theoretically isolating sport from the broader social-historical context. This is a particularly useful stance in the initial stages of data analysis.
Conclusion

Sport ethnographers need to develop definitional clarity to harness the explanatory power of the concepts subworld and subculture. Both terms describe an intermediary social grouping, but they offer different frames of reference for doing so. Generally, a subcultural analysis focuses on a structurally subordinate group and their responses to their marginal position within a broader culture. New modes of social relations and cultural expression are created as a result of the subordinate group negotiating with the dominant value system to gain some cultural “space.” A subworld analysis focuses on a specific cultural process through which groups of people unite to create a “social object.”

Following these definitional distinctions, we can describe the unique logic and culture of youth sport teams and bodybuilding as subworlds. Each revolves around the production of a social artifact. A Little League baseball team, however, is not likely to constitute a subculture. There is very little about youth baseball which could be “thought of as separating forces by the other members of society” (Yinger, 1960). Even adolescent rituals and language intended to exclude adults is understood within broader society as normal development—boys asserting their independence and/or practicing displays of gender.

Subworlds can simultaneously be subcultures if they exaggerate or ignore specific norms, values, and practices of the broader culture to such an extreme that those within mainstream society define the subworld repulsive, oppositional, or marginal. Bodybuilding, for example, is likely to represent a subculture because of its marginalized status with the broader society. Subworlds can become subcultures and some subcultures, over time, wind up as subworlds; “incorporated” into the dominant culture (see Donnelly, 1993).

Like Gruneau and Donnelly, we suspect cultural resistance has been exaggerated in recent sport ethnography. While much of sport may be insular, it often is not oppositional. Rather than assume that sport is a subculture, we suggest ethnographers start their research in sport by looking for “coordinated efforts of people to create, distribute, and evaluate social objects” (Unruh, 1983).

This suggestion for a reintroduction of Chicago School interactionist language does not represent a step backwards—just the opposite. A number of theorists have noted that cultural studies and the Chicago School ethnographers have similar roots (e.g., Becker, 1963). The theoretical distance between the two approaches may have been overstated. Denzin (1992) argues convincingly that symbolic interactionists need to incorporate cultural studies into their works. Conversely, interactionists have something to offer cultural studies (Denzin, 1992; MacAlmon, 1992; Cagle, 1989; Kortarba, 1991). This integration of perspectives can already be found within recent sport ethnographies. Adler and Adler, 1991; Beal, 1995; Klein, 1991, 1993; and Crosset, 1995, to varying degrees, struggle to meld a critical cultural studies perspective with the rigorous documentation of interactions which generate symbolic meanings and identity.

The concept subworld provides a conceptual umbrella from which to view sport. It may prove particularly fruitful during the early stages of data analysis. It does not preclude researchers from focusing on a subworld’s impact on the broader culture. Researchers can continue to search for oppositional elements arising within mainstream culture toward a sporting practice by observing and recording interac-
tions between groups and being mindful of the larger social forces at work. Both
concepts, at ready disposal, enhance the sport ethnographer’s explanatory powers.

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Ethnography is not the only means of documenting oppositional relations between sport groups and a dominant culture. Social historians have meticulously demonstrated the oppositional qualities of sport. See, for example, Joseph’s (1987) discussion of baseball in the Yucatan during the early 20th century or Mullen’s (1995) discussion of Gaelic Athletic Association.