The Local Surfer: Issues of Identity and Community within South East Cornwall

Submitted by Emily Beaumont to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sport and Health Sciences in June 2011.

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Abstract

This study is about surfing subculture in the South West of England, within small communities of surfers that live within the South East Cornwall area. Specifically the focus is on the Local Surfer, a surfing type emerging from a typology of surfers observed in the South West of England during my previous study (Beaumont, 2007) and developed through the use of ideal types, a concept taken from Weber (1949). The Interpretive paradigm was adopted for this study in order to conduct research into the social world of surfing subculture that produced richly descriptive data. Within this approach qualitative ethnographic methods were used including participant observation, field notes and semi-structured interviews to generate data on the two key themes surrounding the Local Surfer in the study; identity and community.

In terms of identity, data reveals a list of the ideal typical characteristics for the Wannabe, the Professional Surfer, the Soul Surfer and the Local Surfer types the last of which highlights significant gender differences within the type itself. Donnelly and Young’s (1999) symbolic interactionist model of identity construction and confirmation was applied to analyse the Local Surfer and did help illuminate some stages in Local Surfer identity construction. However, this analysis also revealed limitations of this theories applicability to pursuits rather than sports (which is how surfing is classified to the Local Surfer). Goffman’s (1969) concept of career was also used to provide an opportunity to present the career of the Local Surfer and in particular provides information on the years after identity construction and the process of ageing within a subculture and a community. The Local Surfer career is seen as various distinctive stages which the Local Surfer typically progressed through in a linear manner: the “nurturing” stage; the traveller stage; the responsible stage; and the legends stage.

Finally in terms of community, many of the issues associated with community are addressed by focusing on the elements which make up a definition of community
established in the early stages of the study. Current issues for the Local Surfer are also discussed including their fratriachial qualities, the exclusion of women and the phenomenon of localism.
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