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Pleasurable surfing is possible: ethnographic insights into the constructive sociation choices behind meaningful nothingness

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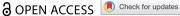Department of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation, Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores the meaningful nothingness between conflict and hedonism experienced by most surfers. It explains how meaningful nothingness is achieved through constructive individual and collective sociation choices. These choices, exemplified through acts of omission and commission, inform mutually beneficial social forms where conflict is mundanely resolved or avoided by diverse social types. For the past 60 years, scholars have employed interpretations of Marx's conflict theory to focus on surfing's extremes by emphasising objective inequities and explaining how marginalised social types are confronted by the deviant in a power struggle for limited resources. The originality of this article is in its use of Simmel's conflict theory and Scott's sociology of nothing as a balanced framework to illuminate the unnoticed and taken-for-granted practices and processes that receive little analytical recognition but are fundamental to pleasurable surfing for all. Drawing on data from a 20-year ethnography of global surfing, findings reveal how constructive sociation choices are learned and employed by surfers to ensure that either triadic closure or sociability is the tribe's final form. The significance of this article is that it presents an insight into how a diverse majority of surfers choose meaningful nothingness over the politics of difference.

Introduction

Irwin's (1962, 1973) interpretations of surfing start with the hedonism of a carefree lifestyle, filled with surf, sand, and escapism, before concluding that surfers became deviants vying for capital and fighting for limited resources. Sixty years later this dystopian vision continues to prevail. Mainstream sociology persists with an epistemological bias of concentrating on deviant behaviour at the extremes, emphasising the objective divisions between them versus us whilst ignoring cooperative interactions (Born, 2010; Rojek, 1995; Yúdice, 2003). For instance, Uekusa (2018) champions the continued use of Bourdieuian conflict theory to explain conceivable tensions in social exchanges between surfers, despite his diverse ethnographic sample of interviewees reflecting on surf sessions that are habitually unmarked or cooperative. Equally, mainstream sociology fails to position the prevalence of deviance in relation to the broader cultural context (Brekhus, 1998; Scott & Stephens, 2018). Thus, depictions of a minority doing something deviant are privileged over the ubiquitous majority who appear to do and experience nothing of consequence (Brekhus, 1998; Rojek, 1995; Scott, 2018; Scott & Stephens, 2018; Yúdice, 2003). The pervasive use of Bourdieuian interpretations of Marx's conflict theory has resulted in unopposed dystopian representations of

conflict and marginalisation in contemporary surfing (Lawler, 2011; Uekusa, 2018). Interactions between surfers are presented as destructive and self-serving, every act is calculatingly political, every exchange in every situation results in conflict, and no one does anything simply for the pleasure of doing it (see, Beaumont & Brown, 2016; Irwin, 1962, 1973; Olive et al., 2013; Stranger, 2011; Uekusa, 2018; Wheaton, 2013).

In contrast, Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing suggests that most social interactions are unmarked non-events, they result in not doing, becoming involved in, or being identified as a notable thing. These non-events result in a meaningful nothingness that goes unnoticed and unreported, due to their common-sense evocations (Brekhus, 1998; Scott, 2018). However, similar to conceptualisations of conflict, unmarked meaningful nothingness is a consequence of socially informed personal choices (Brekhus, 1998). These unmarked choices may be communicated through acts of omission, where people attain a social form by default, or acts of commission, where people actively distance themselves from undesirable social forms through conspicuous repudiation of a role-identity or by disregarding the elements of social interaction that they find unfavourable (Scott, 2018). Thus, meaningful nothingness is the result of complex personal and socially learned and communicated interactions (Brekhus, 1998; Scott, 2018).

A balanced approach is required if all the sociation choices and social forms available within a cultural context are to be understood, appreciated, and evaluated in the context of ordinary life and its cultural and leisure pursuits (Simmel, 1908a, 1908b, 1950, 1990; Stebbins, 2009). As Rojek (1995) argues, leisure participation in itself does not always equate to conflict or hedonism; instead, perceptions of marginalisation or pleasure are socially constructed. Consequently, studies that claim to represent authentic surf culture need to include the mundane interactions that are situated somewhere between the extremes of conflict and hedonism (Lawler, 2011).

Guided by the question of *if contentment is a consequence of the joy of others, how is pleasurable surfing possible*, I scaffold Simmel's (1906, 1990) theoretical framework of dyadic to triadic transition with Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing as an analytical framework. I explore the scope of sociation choices and social forms created and experienced by diverse social types in the surfing tribe, which either result in conflict, tolerance, or unity. I aim to contribute to an understanding of the unmarked by explaining how conspicuous constructive sociation choices reinforce positive actions, which inform the meaningful nothingness of pleasurable surfing. I argue that, when combined with acts of omission and commission, constructive sociation choices help to create allegiances and positive interactions that provide solutions to social conflicts between diverse social types.

I adopt a symbolic interactionist approach within the frame of a 20-year (2000–2020) ethnography situated in surf culture to explore sociation choices. To avoid privileging one social type, I give voice to those alleged to be marginalised, to the supposed deviants, and also to the mundane actors who are habitually ignored because they are nobodies who are perceived not to be involved in conflict or its resolution. Thus, this article uses a diverse polyphony of voices to present empirically defensible triangulated claims of how surfers perceive their lived experiences in local and global surf culture.

The article starts with a discussion of Marx and Simmel's theories of conflict to demonstrate their agreement that dyadic to triadic transitions can create the final form of conflict in open triads. Then Marx's (1848/1932) conflict theory of perpetual struggle until radical social change is achieved is contrasted with Simmel's (1908b) postulation that conflict resolution in social networks is made possible through bargaining and compromise leading to the tolerance of triadic closure or the unity of sociability. Findings add to and contextualise previous understandings of conflict as the lowest form of social interaction, where people act with ulterior motives and nothing is done simply for the pleasure of doing it (King, 2000: Mead, 2016). However, in this article, I reveal the processes and practices learned and employed by most surfers to achieve the positive outcomes associated with

pleasurable surfing. Thus, insight is provided into how and why diverse social types learn to make positive sociation choices, adopt balanced social forms, and create a final form of sociability through acts of omission, commission, and social learning.

Conflict theories and resolutions

Marx (1848/1932) presents a more cohesive theory of conflict than Simmel (1908b, 1990); hence its prevalence. Indeed, a criticism of Simmel's work is that it is contradictory, academically unconventional, and is presented across several essays rather than as a unified theory (Aragona, 2018). He is frequently portrayed as a stimulator of methodological ideas by functionalists, conflict theorists, Marxists, modernists, and postmodernists rather than the author of systematic theoretical works (Staubmann, 1998). Nonetheless, despite the paradoxes, ignoring Simmel's theoretical contribution diminishes the discussion of empathy in social interactions and conflict resolution (Aragona, 2018).

Marx (1848/1932) and Simmel (1908b, 1990) agree that the sociation choices of opposition, conflict, and contradiction are rudimentary characteristics of all social interactions, there would be no society without them. Yet, despite conflict being only one of the many elements in the complex and dynamic mix of social interaction, mainstream Marxian sociologists focus on how the unequal distribution of limited resources in society leads to intensifying conflict between those with sufficient forms of capital to dominate and their powerless subordinates (Simmel, 1908c; Turner, 1975). It would be philistine to suggest that the lowest expressions of conflict are less relevant to social networks or less worthy of study than notions of balance and the highest expression of sociability (Simmel, 1908a, 1918). Hence, this article is indebted to previous studies that have provided an exhaustive analysis of conflict at the extremes of surf culture (see, Beaumont & Brown, 2016; Evers, 2008; Irwin, 1973; Langseth, 2011; Olive, 2008; Olive et al., 2013; Stranger, 2011; Uekusa, 2018; Wheaton, 2013; Young, 2000). However, the current approach is limiting; Marxian analysis simply does not allow for conflict resolution or the positive outcome of cooperative interaction in diverse networks (Simmel, 1908a; Turner, 1975). Solutions to sources of conflict are rejected as momentary illusion (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Likewise, the social forms of hedonism and anti-possessiveness in leisure participation are dismissed as transitory aspirations (Rojek, 1995).

Simmel's (1908b) conflict theory offers balance, with more options than Marx for social actors to achieve positive outcomes. Indeed, Simmel (1908b) suggests that potential conflict can create a unity that addresses social issues. For example, conflicts associated with feminism, gay rights, and other intersectionality issues have created unity with unlikely allies who work collaboratively to positively correct the actions of dominant groups (Chalari, 2017). This unity is not the antithesis of conflict; instead, it represents how a social network deescalates discord through bargaining and compromise, normatively regulating social actors to enable society to move towards functioning as a tolerant or united whole (Simmel, 1908b; Turner, 1975).

Simmel (1918, 1949, 1990) uses the social networks involved in participatory play as an example of how individuals can put mutual enjoyment before self-interest. Here, avoiding and resolving conflict becomes central to the sociation choices adopted in leisure participation; shared interests and mutual pleasure become unifying influences where diverse social types become allies (Simmel, 1918, 1990). Similarly, Stebbins (2009) positive sociology starts from a standpoint where people choose to participate in serious leisure simply for the pleasure of partaking. In doing so they make personal choices to ignore or resolve intersectionality differences by finding solutions to the problematic aspects of life in pursuit of activities '*that make life rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling* at a personal and social level (Stebbins, 2009, p. 2). Focusing on the unmarked and unnoticed consequences of pleasurable leisure participation, Scott and Stephens' (2018) study of embodied learning of diasporic capoeira and swimming provides illustrative empirical examples of these processes in practice. They explain how acts of omission,

such as not looking at each other's bodies to avoid embarrassing others, and acts of commission, such as not swimming in the wrong lane or overlooking bothersome behaviours, have resulted in '*communicating an attitude of harmlessness and fostering an atmosphere of calmness*' (Scott & Stephens, 2018, p. 573).

Critics of the symbolic interactionist approach adopted by Brekhus (1998), Scott (2018), and Scott and Stephens (2018) in studies of the unmarked, dismiss the conclusions as overly subjective and attentive only to macro interactions (Reynolds, 1993). Furthermore, Scott and Stephens' (02018) study is situated in leisure activities performed in formal venues by ordinary people. Whereas previous studies of surfing explain that it is performed in the natural environment by deviants (Booth, 2001; Evers, 2008; Irwin, 1962, 1973; Uekusa, 2018). Therefore, Scott and Stephens' (2018) expectations of civilised behaviour at a subjective level have been replaced with objective discussions of a conflict-driven free-for-all devoid of pleasure by scholars of surfing employing a Marxian perspective (see, Beaumont & Brown, 2016; Stranger, 2011; Uekusa, 2018; Wheaton, 2013). Nonetheless, advocates of positive leisure participation acknowledge the duality and contradictions of social interaction but suggest that individuals are inclined to avoid conflict and will interact in ways that create balanced outcomes for the networks that they choose to inhabit (Scott, 2018; Scott & Stephens, 2018; Simmel, 1908a, 1990; Stebbins, 2009).

Dyad to triadic transition

Simmel's (1906) conceptualisation of dyadic to triadic transition helps to illustrate the duality and contradictions of social interaction. According to Simmel (1990), dyadic relationships are created when two humans interact. Within these dyadic relationships, there is the potential for conflict or cooperation (Simmel, 1908b). According to Simmel (1908d), most people choose the latter, by finding empathic reasons to cooperate. Thus, cooperative social dyads encompass unique characteristics, where their very existence is dependent on power being shared equally by both members through a mutual exchange (Simmel, 1906). For example, when respecting the unwritten surfers' code – one person, one wave – this symbolises the sociation choice of sharing by allowing each other to express himself or herself free from other wave riders. When these dyadic relationships exist, they elicit constructive sociation choices, such as cooperation and mutual trust between the two members, which becomes the social form of that dyad (Simmel, 1908a). Thus, dyadic relationships create a meaningful nothingness.

Network expansion and the conventions of social interaction in complex relationships can, however, threaten the social forms in a dyadic relationship (Simmel, 1908a, 1908b, 1908d, 1908e, 1910, 1950). The arrival of a third member changes the power dynamics in the dyad, introducing the social inequalities reproduced in society that transform egalitarian interactions into a network of competitive triadic relationships (Simmel, 1908a, 1908b, 1908d, 1908e, 1910, 1950). The potential for inequality is increased by the diversity of the social types who enter the network (Simmel, 1908e). For example, descriptive social types, identified through gender, race, ethnicity, class, and age provide a basis for competition and marginalisation (Simmel, 1918). Likewise, functional social types, with social forms such as aggressors, mediators, and strangers can create conflict or offer solutions (Simmel, 1918). Therefore, triadic transformation can create a division of labour, where the balance of power is objective and no longer in the individual or dyadic network's control, leaving the triad open to conflict (Simmel, 1990). Thus, dyadic to triadic transitions create a potential for conflict between the intimate subjective and the detached objective cultural forms of human interaction (Simmel, 1918). This prompts a dialectic sociation choice response that is expressed and reproduced in either constructive or oppressive ways (Simmel, 1908b, 1990).

Simmel (1906) explained that any dyadic relationships with the potential to develop into an open triad of conflict can also revert into the meaningful nothingness of a dyadic like final form through triadic closure if the unalike social types involved choose to interact constructively. During triadic closure the intimacy of the dyad is replaced with indirect relationships, tolerance, and compromise;

however, these interactions remain constructive (Simmel, 1950). The reward for individual sacrifice is the collective gain and reciprocated respect achieved through cooperation and mutual trust in the broader social network (Simmel, 1908b, 1908d, 1908e). When this pattern of constructive sociation choices spread they create the final form of how the social network functions as a whole (Simmel, 1908b, 1990). This transition from conflict in open triads back to the reciprocated respect of triadic closure is not momentary; instead, it can lead to an enduring final form of sociability (Simmel, 1910).

Sociability is realised when a social network consistently chooses to ignore the benefits and disadvantages provided by perceptions of objective qualities, such as capital, wealth, and social position in all their interactions (Simmel, 1910). Instead of the mere tolerant balance of triadic closure, sociability is realised through the desire to be part of a democratic network; here there is no political purpose, compromise, or perceptions of power (Simmel, 1910). Sociability means that personal goals are achieved through a pattern of unity between otherwise unequal individuals because they all choose to find pleasure in the joy of others (Simmel, 1910; Stebbins, 2009). Furthermore, Simmel (1949) suggests that sociability is achieved through processes and patterns of democratisation. This democracy has ever-changing frontiers and actors, the product of the diverse polyphony of voices and identities where individuals do not always act in their own self-interest (Simmel, 1949). Sociability means that power is devolved and opened up to the choices made by a social network's members, to ensure that objective structures never dominate subjective values (Mead, 2016). Unity is realised as a mundane habit where there is little or no conflict to report, meaningful nothingness becomes the norm because people have learned that acts of omission and commission achieve positive outcomes (Scott & Stephens, 2018).

As Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory explains, people model their behaviour on the actions of others. Therefore, in triadic closure, they learn tolerance and mutual respect. Similarly, where sociability is the final form they learn to create unity. The positive actions and interactions that inform the sociation choices and social forms that lead to final forms of open triads, triadic closure, and sociability are all complex processes, which are best understood by examining the patterns and practices of that way of life (Simmel, 1949).

Methodology: insights from the ocean and the field

Simmel (1949, p. 258) describes the contradiction between conceptual theory and social reality as '*a play of shadow pictures*', where the superficiality of sociological concepts disconnects from the authentic patterns and practices in the landscape of interaction between things. To enter the shadow play, I employed a symbolic interactionist perspective in the form of a consumer-orientated ethnography (Arnould, 1998). I aimed to avoid criticisms of the proselytising influence of decorative sociology and to ensure that a diverse range of social types' voices were privileged over confirming a favoured text (Rojek & Turner, 2000).

Utilised widely in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) studies, consumer-orientated ethnography enabled a variety of data collection techniques to be adopted to observe and interact with people preparing to and engaging in cultural practices, such as leisure participation (Arnould, 1998). Consumer-orientated ethnography provided an insight into what (Simmel, 1918) refers to as the contradictions of everyday life. For example, a CCT study may explain why a mild-mannered engineer adopts a rebel persona as she slips into her Harley Davidson leathers. The benefit of consumer-orientated ethnography is that it retained all the robustness of the traditional form, but favoured interpretations that situated the data in a multi-layered representation of how lived experiences are perceived in the context of leisure consumption (Arnould, 1998).

Ethnographic self-reflexivity

My informal participatory observations began in 1993 when I started surfing at the age of 26. Thus, I entered surf culture with many of the attributes previous studies suggest are used to marginalise descriptive social types; such as being a neophyte (Mackert, 2005), older (Wheaton, 2016), working-class in a middle-class sport (Ford & Brown, 2006), not local (Nazer, 2004), and a passé longboarder with limited ability (Booth, 2001). Since 1993 the only change to my participatory social type is that I am no longer a neophyte having achieved a level of surfing competency.

Furthermore, I have studied surfing at undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral levels since 2000, eventually returning to the Surf Science degree as the external examiner. I have made a short film exploring the stereotypical representation of conflict in surfing and presented conference papers on the joy of surfing (2002, 2010, 2013, 2016). Throughout this time I have surfed and collected data in Europe, Asia, and Hawai'i. These experiences provided me with an opportunity to interact with established and emerging scholars of surfing and a diverse range of surfers. Between periods of study, I worked as a project development consultant with marginalised groups and was also the equality and diversity lead on European Union funded projects. I learned and addressed the overt and nonconscious forms of oppression employed to marginalise diverse descriptive social types. Thus, as a research instrument, I have become increasingly sensitive to the language and behaviours of conflict and marginalisation.

Data collection

Data collection began in 2000 as a series of ethically approved studies to fulfil the assessment requirements for a first-class Surf Science and Technology degree, an MA Sport Development at distinction level, and a surf culture PhD examined by a Marxian scholar of surfing. Consistent with the overarching consumer-orientated ethnography, I collected data through participatory ethnographic observations, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and netnography. Throughout the ethnography, I immersed myself in the field by going surfing as frequently as possible. I surfed popular tourist beaches, secret spots, and localised breaks, such as Ala Moana Bowls in O'ahu. During this time I observed thousands of verbal and non-verbal social interactions among surfers and non-surfers. The field for my data collection was vast to ensure that data saturation was achieved from as diverse a range of surfers as possible; it included interactions and observations in and out of the ocean in Britain, France, Spain, Hong Kong, and Hawai'i. I had the opportunity to observe and interview British, European, American, Australian, Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, and Hong Kong surfers and non-surfers. My participants spanned every gender, age group (18–68) sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, social class, and ability level.

Throughout the 20 years, I observed that expert surfers treated diverse social types equitably, both openly and furtively, in similar situations thousands of times. To augment these observations, I conversed face to face with hundreds of surfers and non-surfers of all social types, often in surfing contexts, such as in the ocean or surf shops, but also away from the beach and surf culture. Some of the conversations lasted hours, these transcriptions provided 500,000 words of data. Others lasted minutes and were recorded as field notes. Follow up interviews and the triangulation of data were conducted face to face, via phone, video calls or an exchange of emails with a diverse range of surfers on over 100 occasions. Every conversation encouraged the participants to exercise the innate mode of reflexivity that all people have (Archer, 2012), enabling them to relive their experiences of surf culture. I also employed a netnography (Kozinets, 2002) technique to observe and converse with diverse social types online. I documented and analysed the data in a field-note diary as soon as practicable. The data were recorded and are presented using pseudonyms, but the location and date for each encounter are authentic (for example, Byron, Perranporth, 2019).

Data analysis

Throughout the initial stages of analysing the ethnography data, I became frustrated that my observations and experiences of surf culture did not correspond with the narratives of conflict discussed in academic literature. I assumed that my undergraduate analytical skills were yet to develop, or that conflict only happened elsewhere or to different descriptive social types. Therefore, I adopted a constant analysis approach to make sense of the vast amount of data, continually refining analytical categories as a means of data reduction. Due to the ambiguity between extant literature and the emerging themes, I employed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory framework to analyse the data's intended meaning. Firstly, I used open coding to generate conceptual categories, then axial coding to find the relationships between the categories. Finally, I employed selective coding to integrate the categories to build theoretical statements. At each stage, I contemplated the theoretical possibilities and made comparisons with extant literature. The ethnographic data and reference to extant texts enabled theory building and refinement using the grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In contrast to previous studies of surf culture, a theory of conflict as the exception due to constructive sociation choices emerged. These theoretical statements fitted with the constructive sociation choices in Simmel's (1908b, 1990) conflict theory and dyadic to triadic transition processes. Likewise, Rojek and Turner's (2000) definition and purpose of decorative sociology enabled previous explanations of conflict in surf culture to be contextualised. Paradoxically, Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing helped to explain the paucity of ethnographic narratives describing conflict, but it also limited the significance of the grounded approach. Thus, I present theory refinement rather than a paradigm shift in understanding social interactions. Nonetheless, I present a new insight into how conspicuous constructive sociation acts leading to sociability are more readily socially shared than omission and commission when aiming to achieve meaningful nothingness. To test my interpretation, I adopted a data triangulation process with a diverse range of surfers, which revealed a consensus that my findings represent the most common lived experiences for most surfers.

Findings are presented in thematic form with illustrative examples of potential conflict and resolution. Each theme is supported by illustrative cases from a saturated data collection process to provide insight and evidence. These reveal the relationship among individual experiences rather than suggesting that surfers are a homogenous network. Nonetheless, the similarity in the individual cases supports Simmel's (1908a, 1908e) argument that understanding the final form of a social group is best achieved by observing a consistent series of individual interactions rather than only reporting the outliers.

Sociability in contemporary surfing

One world tribe: the rejection of othering

Surfers cannot escape the negativity inherent in the objective politics of difference. However, at a subjective level, they perceive themselves to be part of an inclusive 'one world tribe' (Kyle, expert African American surfer, Honolulu, 2013). The tribe adopts the final form of triadic closure or sociability to tolerate or unite with others regardless of objective differences. Whereas Marxian sociologists describe othering as a means of attributing negative connotations to anyone different, Simmel (1908d) suggests that the very existence of otherness has advanced positive outcomes by enabling people to find similarities that help to create resolutions to conflict. These similarities create empathic relations between diverse individuals, where they find a mutual basis for cooperation (Simmel, 1908d). In a practical context, as surf culture has expanded more diverse descriptive and functional social types have joined the tribe reducing perceptions of otherness due to the gap between surfing's social network and wider society closing. This expansion and the frictionless integration of the other is made possible through

acts of commission where most surfers have learned not to marginalise diverse social types. Consequently, for most surfers, the involvement of others has gone unnoticed as a non-event. This has positive and negative implications. Integration has been frictionless, but perceptions of marginalisation have the potential to go unnoticed and unresolved unless surfers constantly educate each other.

Through individual acts of omission or commission, surfers reject perceptions of otherness associated with marginalising diverse social types. Gill (interviewed in Perranporth, 2002), a well-travelled surfer, matter-of-factly stated, '*if you surf you are a surfer, end of* [story]'. Likewise, Sarah, a university professor in a male-dominated discipline and self-identified '*middle-aged radical feminist*', adopted an act of commission (Scott, 2018) to emphasise her repudiation of role-identity, arguing that characterising surfers based on their intersectionality '*diminished their accomplishments and demeaned them as mere female surfers or black surfers or Hawaiian versus British surfers*' (Sarah, Honolulu, 2016). She explained that it is just too simplistic to blame conflicts in surfing on '*gender, race, where you are from, how much you earn, or even how well educated you are*'. Sarah contended that '*some of what is written about surfing is a distraction, it creates a hegemony where it does not exist and prevents people from working together to deal with the real issues* [such as workplace inequalities, racism, and the pervasiveness of the patriarchal system]. *But you already knew that didn't you?*' (Sarah, Honolulu, 2016). Sarah suggested that if I, as a man, had chosen to explore and represent female surfers lived experiences in a locale where my ethnicity positioned me as an outsider, then I had embraced unity and rejected otherness.

Sarah's comments regarding why people exclude themselves from debates on the unity of a one-world tribe were well-founded. For example, Simon (Laie, 2016) had arranged several interviews for me in O'ahu with objectively marginalised social types, but when asked to participate in an interview, he stated that he did not '*want to open that can of worms*'. Despite working in unity with diverse social types to address social issues, Simon worried that his voice and his sociation choices would be misinterpreted. Being interviewed would position him as the other, a male voice in contrast to the female surfers. This may affect the relationships he had with his female surfer friends. Thus, Simon's act of omission demonstrated the rejection of otherness, in favour of unity. However, misplaced unity is also problematic. Jenny, a 23-year-old British expatriate, explained that:

> It is difficult to answer some of your [interview] questions. You must think that there are problems, otherwise, you would not be interviewing female surfers. I feel like I am letting the side [women] down if I don't say negative things. But my experiences of surfing, here and back in England, have always been positive (Jenny, Honolulu, 2016).

Hence, Jenny was aware of the objective politics of difference debates surrounding otherness and tried to reconcile them with her own lived experiences through an act of commission – not being a traitor to the feminist cause.

Thus, the issues that are unnoticed by some but are important to others take longer to resolve because balanced interactions and educating each other is frustrated by concerns regarding negative outsider perceptions of how otherness is defined and portrayed. Yet, despite the fear of objective outsider scrutiny, what is significant in these reflections is the meaningful nothingness achieved through the actions of the 'one world tribe' at a subjective level. There is a desire for unity and resistance to othering.

Outsider objective othering was also a concern. Gordon (Fraserburgh, 2008), expressed his hostility towards those seeking to portray surfers as deviants or romanticised hedonistic others, explaining that:

> It is arrogant to think that surfing is more important to surfers than golf is to golfers, or fishing is to fishermen. Yet, their choice of pastime is never portrayed in the [negative] way that ours [surfing] is.

Likewise, Greg (online, 2013) explained that the sociation choices leading to surfing's final form lack a political agenda, stating that '*at the risk of sounding uncommitted, surfing is a hobby. It is something fun to do with your mates*'. What is significant here is the rejection of attempts by outsiders to impose negative objective structures on the surfer's understanding of inclusive subjective values. The surfer's rejection of being portrayed as the other or in othering is consistent with their desire to achieve triadic closure or sociability.

Thus, surfers are protective of the sociation choices and final form that provides a cultural identity of an inclusive one-world tribe. Throughout the ethnography surfers across the world were observed offering food, drink, sharing waves, loans of surfboards, and places to stay to surfers who were strangers or outsiders. These surfers embody the sociability of surfing and insist that the egalitarianism of the democratic communities commonly found in leisure networks are central to the tribe's unity.

Conflict avoidance

Throughout the ethnography, surfers described benefiting from constructive sociation choices that resulted in pleasurable surfing. Alex, a non-local from England, described his visits to Scotland. He occasionally travels north to surf Thurso East, a wave described as one of the best in the world, a mystical, legendary, and epic surf spot (Nelson & Taylor, 2008). Thus, the wave at Thurso East offers the type of limited resource that surfers typically protect through the aggression of localism (Beaumont & Brown, 2016). However, Alex's (Newcastle, 2013) experiences offer an insight into a sociation choice that informs an inclusive social form that rejects othering, localism, and seeks sociability. Alex explained that local surfer:

> Brian is always there, shouting instructions at everyone. It is intimidating at first, but you realise that he is doing it to keep people safe [Thurso East is a powerful and shallow reef break]. He makes sure that everyone gets a turn. I have had some of the best waves of my life because he has told me when to go [paddle for the wave]. He does not need to be like that, he could just sit out there and be Mr Talented Local – "my wave, you guys can f**k off back home" – but he doesn't. I think that he gets a kick out of sharing "his" wave with everyone.

Alex's experience revealed the act of commission as the sociation choice of sacrifice made by Brian and others as the highest expression of the social form of benefactor and beneficiary. This positive experience was the result of a strategy commonly practised by non-local surfers to demonstrate their understanding of shared resources. Caroline, an intermediate surfer, explained that when visiting a new surf spot, surfers should go alone, or in a pair as a maximum, then befriend one of the locals by asking for their advice (Caroline, Newcastle, 2008). By adopting the form of a student willing to learn the taken-for-granted local rules allegiances could be formed and conflict avoided.

In contrast, Nigel (online, 2020), a non-local sociologist provided a unique insight into surfing in Scotland via email. To paraphrase, he explained that Scottish surfers are deviants, their interactions constantly involve conflict and aggression. Furthermore, Scottish surfers are morons, incapable of the basic level of reflexivity that Archer (2012) suggests is an innate ability. Thus, these morons are unaware that they are marginalising others or being marginalised, according to Nigel. Yet, Nelson and Taylor (2008, p. 41) report that even at the 'world-class wave' of Thurso East a '*friendly and relaxed attitude is essential*' because the surfers adopt acts of omission by each taking a turn. Recently the number of surfers visiting Thurso East has increased significantly, creating the conditions where localism and the fight for limited resources could transpire. However, sharing remains the predominant social form. In his article exploring leisure participation in Scotland, McDowell (2017, p. 6) explains that crowds at Thurso have increased, but the local surfers have '*grudgingly accepted the newcomers*'. This acceptance, although grudging, is consistent with the sociation choice of tolerance associated with triadic closure. Follow up

conversations with surfers throughout Scotland, since Nigel's email, suggest that triadic closure or sociability remain the chosen final forms. Rosa suggested that '*maybe it's him* [Nigel] *being a d**k wherever he goes*'.

Despite Nigel's exceptional experiences, the absence of conflict, related to localism, is explained by Simmel's (1908b) elucidation that when resources are limited an understanding of why others value them can develop. This helps to create empathy and respect, where conflict resolution can be achieved through other means to achieve positive outcomes. Thus, through tolerant processes of grudging or willing acts of omission or commission, resources are mostly shared without prejudice and self-interest is exchanged for mutual benefits in most interactions (Scott, 2018; Stebbins, 2009).

Social learning

Leisure participants learn appropriate behaviours in social settings (Scott & Stephens, 2018). Therefore, a post by Pat on northseasurf.com (2004) provides an insight into how surfers, such as Brian, are encouraged to share resources. Pat suggests that surfers learn and practice how to make the sacrifices associated with sociability by acting with respect for each other:

> You should at least share it [the surf spot] with others who feel the same . . . Let's keep it friendly, and not give [non-locals] the belief that they need to come and start to fight for waves because that is what the locals are doing. If we keep the respect going, they may behave.

This post emphasises the Simmelian sociation choice between two arbitrary realities, conflict, or harmony. Pat's post demonstrates that local/expert surfers can either choose to use their capital in the form of power over, or employ their power to be positive, productive, and transformative. Capital and power are only a capacity, people can make conscious choices to exercise that capacity to achieve positive or negative outcomes (Lukes, 2005). By rejecting the sociation choice of conflict in favour of harmony, surfers create social forms that are constructive and progressive. Yet, Marxist scholar, Uekusa (2018) describes these behaviours as wasted capital; almost encouraging the conflict that his ethnography could not find. For surfers, the prevalence of sociability makes sense. Other surfers have the potential to ruin the surfing experience, the energy expended through conflict and localism is always at the expense of the pleasure of surfing (Young, 2000). Therefore, forming allegiances through normative cooperation enhances the pleasure of every individual's experience, which is lost through conflict (Simmel, 1908a, 1908b, 1908c; Stebbins, 2009).

As Scott and Stephens' (2018) explain, leisure participants frequently adopt the social forms of student or teacher. Hence, Pat's post provides an insight into how people learn how to be a member of a social network, which sociation choices are appropriate, what social form they should adopt and how this all contributes to the final form that will define their experiences of conflict or pleasure.

Have empathy – don't be a d**k

None of the surfers mentioned learning sociation choices or adopting social forms; instead, they described these practices using colloquial language. Greg (Glasgow, 2012), a surfer with 10 years of involvement, informed me that '*it doesn't matter about the other stuff* [objective social qualities and the intersectionality of descriptive social types], *you can be yourself, just don't be a d**k*'. In contrast, Anna (Haleiwa, 2016) said that in Hawai'i '*just be humble*' has the same meaning. Due to its imprecise meaning, throughout the ethnography I adopted the social form of a student, to define what 'being a d**k?' is. Themes emerged to suggest that the social form of being a d**k means '*thinking that you are something that you are not*', '*thinking that you are better than anyone else*', '*being selfish*', '*lacking empathy*', '*knowing what you should do, but not*

doing it', and 'getting involved in all of that fake aggro s**t that you read about in [surf] magazines'. Thus, the social form of being a d**k involves acting in a self-serving individualistic way, regardless of or due to the forms of capital that previous studies suggest are central to conflict in surf culture. Surfers actively avoid being a d**k through acts of commission. As Scott (2018) explains, acts of commission enable people to choose not to be something undesirable; therefore, they act in a particular way to avoid negative social forms. What is significant about these acts of commission is that when the majority choose to avoid acting like d**ks, the cultural conflicts of localism, misogyny, greed, entitlement and lack of empathetic consideration are gradually resolved into the meaningful nothingness that is prevalent throughout surf culture.

Redefining marginalism

Although surfers use the word 'd**k' to represent inappropriate sociation choices, this gendered language has potentially misogynistic sociolinguistic connotations. The ethnographic lens provided insights into claims of egalitarian behaviour guided by not being a d**k and suggested that the word was not intended to politicise or marginalise issues of gender. Nevertheless, I drew on previous literature into the marginalisation of women who surf (see, Olive et al., 2013; Wheaton, 2013), by probing further to explore gender politics.

Sally (Kahala, 2016) revealed a comment from a male surfer (*nice ass*) that I perceived as misogynistic, but she believed that it was a poor attempt at flirting. We spent over an hour analysing that one comment, finally Sally convinced me that '*everyone has a line, his was just not very good*'. This conversation and others raised epistemological and ontological questions regarding whose voices, values, and perceptions should be privileged. Women who surf described infrequent encounters with men who had adopted the social form of misogynist d**ks. However, these encounters were rationalised in relation to experiences in the broader cultural context and the supportive social forms adopted by most male surfers. The surfers perceived to be in marginalised groups rejected claims that they adopted an act of commission strategy to disregard the elements of social interaction that they found unfavourable. Instead, many surfers explained that conflict associated with the politics of difference was less prevalent in surf culture than in other leisure pursuits or wider society. Therefore, they were tolerant of the minority d**ks because most surfers were in unity.

Consequently, observations and conversations with the social types most likely to be objectively marginalised and to experience conflict, according to mainstream sociologists, emphasise the disparity between patterns of lived experiences in surf culture and the social forms performed in an open triad. I asked Kyle (expert African American surfer, Honolulu, 2013) if being black ever caused problems when surfing. He replied, '*you are the only European* [code for white] *guy out here* [a surf spot on the North Shore of O'ahu], *do you feel threatened?*' I explained that I '*benefited from many forms of privilege*'. Kyle laughed, '*this is Hawai'i, I think that your ancestors exhausted that privilege a few hundred years ago*'. I elucidated that privilege was more profound than that. Kyle laughed, '*I know*' and reiterated his belief that most surfers were allies in a one-world tribe. The notion that surfers have a connection with each other despite objective structures and descriptive social types was a widely held belief. Surfers like to talk-story with others to find out where they are from, where they surf, and what the conditions are like there. For example, Tam (intermediate surfer, Hong Kong, 2017) suggested that his race and ethnicity were a benefit when travelling. He described his trips to Bali, stating that other surfers, especially travelling Australians, would say '*let's watch that Chinese guy … they don't think that I will be able to surf … then they want to talk about where I learned, and what it's like surfing in Hong Kong*'.

Given the attention Marxian scholars of surfing have devoted to explaining the conflicts experienced by marginalised social types, I had expected to find frequent examples. However, similar to Uekusa (2018), exposing instances of self-perceived marginalisation or experiences of conflict were sporadic. Examples of marginalisation, deviance, and conflict were always provided at a distance through acts of commission. For example, Hawaiian surfers suggested that misogyny and racism were likely to be prevalent on the mainland (USA) but were infrequent on the islands. Likewise, Scottish surfers suggested that localism was probable in Cornwall due to overcrowding; Cornish surfers spoke about perceived Hawaiian aggression. But at a local level, it seems that surfers have learned to make socialisation choices and adopt social forms, through acts of commission leading to tolerance or unity, to achieve a final form where meaningful nothingness prevailed. Conflicts disrupted the pleasure provided by going surfing.

Them versus us

Despite the reticence to perceive unfamiliar surfers as an outsider other using established descriptive social types, there were perceptions of them versus us. Lisa, (ex-professional surfer and surf brand owner), described how most surfers are supportive and how they try to educate the d**ks who are not (Lisa, Turtle Bay, 2016). In contrast to the reticence associated with acts of omission, Lisa suggested that surfers are listening to each other and are starting to believe that they can be allies against the d**ks. She explained that:

> Twenty years ago, you [a man] would not have interviewed me. At that time I was being judged by what I wore and how I looked, I was [ethnically] different to the other girls, so I stood out. Most men did nothing and said nothing to support women, even though most were on our side. Now men are supporting female surfers, but not in a condescending way. You are here to listen to me, rather than assuming that you know what I have experienced [Lisa's husband, a professional in the surf industry intervened] Throughout the years the amount of s**t I have had to listen to when she was competing. I always said something, but now the women are saying it. [Lisa] It is important that girls guide the men and tell them how we want to be supported. Society, men, are co-operating. The circle is getting smaller, the bigots are surrounded, and they know it. Things are not perfect yet, but there are signs that surfers are working together . . . You are a haole guy [non-Hawaiian] on the North Shore [of O'ahu] asking local and transplant [non-indigenous] surfers about surfing, and have included women and locals, that is progress.

In the twenty years of ethnography, the academic work that I read presented conflict as surfing's final form. Members of marginalised groups had witnessed some form of conflict, but they also described allegiance and progress, illustrating how tolerance and unity had replaced indifference or conflict as the dominant social forms. As Simmel (1908d) had described, with increasing diversity there was an increase in the desire for unity. Thus, what is significant in these contemporary narratives is the rejection of marginalisation based on descriptive social types, and a desire to educate people who adopt deviant social forms. Education has thus far resulted in most diverse social types not experiencing frequent conflict, mutual tolerance is now aiding an acceptance of the unity associated with sociability. As part of this unity, white, heterosexual, males, certainly, those who choose not to be deviant through acts of omission or commission, are included as allies, their social type being recognised as distinct to their sociation choices and social form. It is through the unity of sociability that achieving the meaningful nothingness of pleasurable surfing is increasingly becoming the dominant reality for all descriptive social types. The tolerance symbolised by acts of commission, where the marginalised ignore the small number of d**ks who cause conflict, is continuously replaced by constructive sociability. However, continuous progression requires more of the nobodies who employ acts of omission or commission and do and experience nothing, to become somebodies who conspicuously do something to educate the minority of deviant others by actively becoming vocal allies. Acts of omission and commission are not enough. Social demonstrations of constructive sociation choices leading to unity are required to ensure that the d**ks know that they are the minority at surfing's cultural extreme.

Conclusion

In this article, I provide a unique insight into the sociation choices and social forms that make surfing pleasurable. However, reporting the balanced findings created a paradox. If tolerance or unity are the prevalent social forms, and triadic closure or sociability are the dominant final forms in global surf culture, then a meaningful nothingness generally exists. Therefore, observing or giving voice to surfers who perceive themselves as marginalised is problematic. Accusations of a methodological blind spot ensue, and the surfers whose voices and empathetic practices were previously unnoticed continue to be ignored. To avoid confusion, deliberate or otherwise, I do not claim an absence of conflict or that it should go unnoticed or unchallenged. Instead, I aim to balance previous studies explaining the extremes of surfing, by revealing the mundane sociation choices surfers make to ensure that conflict is routinely avoided or resolved.

Consistent with Stebbins (2009) portrayal of positive sociology, my findings reveal that diverse individuals commonly choose Simmelian harmony rather than unresolvable Marxian conflict, because the former offers the pleasure they seek in leisure activities. Thus, surfers contextualise sporadic acts of conflict in relation to their broader subjective experiences. For surfers of all descriptive social types, most of their interactions result in the mutual benefits of tolerance or the unity of sociability. At this subjective level, socially constructed objective qualities such as gender, race, and class, are replaced with perceptions of whether another surfer chooses to act like a d**k or not. Being a d*k is symbolic of deviance, it informs perceptions of them versus us and does not go unnoticed in a network where the unwritten surfer's code and the notion of a one-world tribe inform sociation choices and constructive social forms. Nonetheless, findings reveal a desire to educate the d**ks, rather than to respond to their conflict with further antagonism.

The implications of adopting a balanced approach to understand surf culture are that it provides an insight into how meaningful nothingness is achieved by most surfers through acts of omission and commission. Furthermore, some surfers choose to develop these personal acts into a more socially constructed form than Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing suggests. Because surfers value unity as a 'something' that helps them to achieve meaningful nothingness, they promote constructive sociability choices to enhance social learning. Through social learning, other surfers then make these constructive sociation choices because they want to experience pleasurable surfing too. Thus, they seek unity because that is closer to hedonism.

In this article, I contribute to holistic representations of surf culture through the adoption of a Simmelian approach. I explain that conflict is the least desirable social form or final form available in global surf culture. Consequently, surfers mostly adopt acts of omission, commission, or constructive sociability to become allies with each other. These allegiances create perceptions of a united majority of us versus them, the minority of deviant d**ks. Nonetheless, despite the triangulated support emphasising the authenticity of the findings, this article is not without limitations. The foremost limitation is the reticence of nobodies who experience nothing to participate in studies of surf culture due to fears of misrepresentation. Future studies may wish to investigate why people involved in creating allegiances within surf culture are reticent to discuss constructive social forms. Equally, studies of cultural conflict in surfing may benefit by adopting a Simmelian approach.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Paul Cook is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Management. His research interests include consumer culture, human interactions, and pedagogic practice. He has developed numerous projects to address the real-world problems faced by a diverse range of marginalised groups.

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