Using the concept of generation in youth sociology: Beyond transitions and cultures approaches to researching young lives

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Keywords: generations, transitions, cultures, subcultures, social change, inequality, adulthood, Mannheim.

Abstract

While youth studies is a diverse area of research, two approaches commonly labelled ‘transitions’ and ‘cultures’ have dominated the field over recent years. The ‘transitions’ perspective focuses on young people’s transitions to adult statuses, particularly the transition from education to employment. The cultures perspective investigates young people’s cultural practices, particularly involving music and ‘style’, the potential political content of these practices and their role in identity creation. Researchers working primarily in one approach have tended towards either indifference or antagonism towards research from the other approach. Yet the separation between the two is becoming more difficult to sustain as the changing contexts of young lives highlight the necessary intersection of complex, often messy, transitions to adulthood with young people’s cultural practices. Concurrently, theoretical approaches, new and old are gaining influence within youth studies that challenge the separation of structural patterns and cultural responses. This chapter traces the history of the transitions and cultures strands of youth research, as well as the ongoing efforts to bridge the divide between the two. The chapter finishes by looking at recent attempts to work across the two approaches using the concept of ‘generations’.

Introduction

What defines a ‘sociological’ approach to the study of youth? A key distinction is between youth and adolescence. The latter is associated most strongly with the discipline of psychology, while youth researchers from sociology, anthropology or human geography generally prefer to use the former. While psychological approaches have made their impact in youth studies, the neat alignment of biological age and psychological development is inconsistent with the approach that most youth studies scholars take, looking at the social

construction and institutional shaping of youth and the life course more broadly (Furlong and Woodman 2015: 2).

Instead of defining youth solely by chronological age, sociological youth research often understands youth in terms of a set of institutionalized transitions (for example through education) or a set of ‘youth’ cultural practices (such as pop culture, new music genres, and in recent years online social networking) and associated identities. Around these two sociological ways of approaching youth, ‘twin tracks’ of youth transitions and cultures research have evolved that characterize much youth research (Cohen 2003; Furlong et al., 2011). Both tracks of youth studies in their current form have their genesis in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Both also have a history that goes back further than this, but earlier work looked very different.

The separation of these two ways of conceptualizing youth has perpetuated a tendency to treat young people making employment, housing or relationship transitions as if they had no cultural lives, and young people engaged in cultural practices (for example around a music scene) as if they had no need to work or study. As discussed in this chapter, some of the most important work in youth studies history has crossed the two approaches, and the separation has never been total. Yet it has been significant. The separation of the two approaches to the study of young lives is becoming increasingly difficult to justify, as changes in young lives highlight the intersection of (and often homology across) on the one hand complex youth transitions and on the other young people’s multiple cultural engagement (Woodman and Bennett, 2015). This chapter traces the history of the twin tracks of youth research and their current manifestations before turning to describing the recent re-emergence in youth studies of a focus on the sociology of generations, as one approach to bridge the gap between the study of transitions and cultures.

Transitions and Cultures¹

The ‘transitions’ perspective focuses on young people’s transitions to ‘adult’ statuses, particularly from education to full-time employment, and household transitions from the parental home, to intimate partnerships, and to parenthood. English language youth transition research conducted in the years after the 2nd World War, through to the mid-1970s was focused on adjustment to work and how young people found the appropriate niche for their skills in the labor market (Furlong and Woodman, 2015: 9). The context of this research was very different from today. Some authors highlighted the ‘opportunity structure’ (Roberts

1968: 180) by which inequalities in the school to work transition were shaped by socio-economic status (Coleman 1968). However, in general the process was seen as relatively unproblematic, and attention was addressed to tweaks that could further smooth the process of workplace socialization.

Writing in the mid-1970s, Ashton and Field, two British scholars of transition said the following:

[T]he transition from school to work is one among a number of changes associated with the process of growing up....although it involves inevitable stresses and strains, does not normally create serious problems for them....[D]ifficulties, for example, 'learning the ropes' or getting on with older workers, are normally relatively minor and quickly coped with. (Ashton and Field, 1976: 115)

In the decades following, the notion of largely unproblematic transitions became harder to maintain as unemployment made youth transitions a significant policy issue in many Western countries. One response was to encourage young people to spend longer in education. However, even with education, the guarantee of a successful transition was difficult to maintain, as the high-skilled 'knowledge industry' work envisaged in the latter parts of the twentieth century has not emerged to the extent many national governments had predicted. There is also greater global competition not only for low-end manufacturing but increasingly for these knowledge jobs as well (Brown et al. 2011). Thirty-five years after writing with Field about 'unproblematic' transitions, Ashton and colleagues instead referred to the transition to work as a precarious 'global auction', with potential young employee completing with each other across borders to offer the highest skill for the lowest price (Brown et al., 2011).

Globalization and neo-liberalism have changed youth labour markets around the world – and relatedly patterns of relationship formation, parenthood and housing transitions. The age at which transitions are made differs between countries, even significantly within Europe (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011). Yet in almost every county in the Global North the average age at which people get their first full-time job, form households and have children is later than it was a generation ago (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011: 448-449). This has pushed youth studies scholars to reconceptualizing transitions. Arnett (2004) has characterized people's third decade of life as 'emerging adulthood', giving a relatively positive evaluation of these changes, arguing that young people are being given the opportunity to come to an adult identity at their own pace in an increasingly complex world. Others identify the same delayed

transitions but have a less optimistic take, arguing that transitions have been arrested (Côté 2014) and increasing numbers of young people are ‘prevented adults’ (Hendry and Kloep, 2010).

There is also empirical evidence, although less consistent across countries, for a destandardization of patterns for contemporary youth cohorts relative to their parents. For example the once standard (and norm) of marriage before having children is now less standard (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011). There is also evidence that transitions are now relatively reversible, for example of people increasingly reverting to a ‘youth’ status by moving back in with their parents or returning to education. Approximately 1 in 3 young people in Australia for example return to the family home at some point after they first leave (Warner et al., 2012: 29). One fifth of young Germans in a recent study were ‘returners’, living with their parents again after leaving home at least once (Berngruber, 2015). Using such evidence some have suggested the growth and significance of non-linear transitions and yo-yo transitions (EGRIS, 2001; te Reile, 2004; Walther, 2006; du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm, 2006; Furlong et al., 2006).

In the other ‘track’ of youth research, conceptualizing youth through young people’s cultural forms, the late 1970s and 1980s were also crucial for the emergence of central debates that continue today (Furlong and Woodman, 2015). A politically engaged ‘subcultures approach’ was developed at the University of Birmingham in the UK at this time, just as youth employment transitions were coming to prominence among policy makers and academics scholars.

Previous scholarship into youth culture had been dominated by understandings of the post-war youth cultures in the West as primarily the result of the institutionalization of compulsory schooling, coupled with new consumption opportunities (Coleman 1961; see also Eisenstaedt, 1956; Parsons, 1962). For Coleman (1961) these two factors created a separate, and largely oppositional, ‘adolescent society’. The subcultures approach emerged from scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham as an alternative to and critique of this functionalist perspective. They argued that claims of a general youth culture were politically suspect negations of class inequality because such claims suggested that what young people had in common through youth culture was more important than what divided them (Clarke et al., 2006 [1976]: 8).

The CCCS turned for inspiration to earlier research on youth gangs (Foote-Whyte 1943; Cohen 1956). The researchers behind these gang studies had developed the concept of 'subculture' to show the basis of gang involvement was not the grouping together of young people with individual pathologies, but a process by which areas of social disorder in the USA were replaced by an alternative social order, for particular groups but not all young people (Foot-Whyte, 1942; Cohen, 1955). The CCCS combined this notion of subcultures with neo-Marxist ideas. For them, the fundamental cleavage around which such subcultures formed was social class (Woodman and Bennett, 2015: 4). They argued that young people from working class backgrounds were drawing on culture to symbolically recreate a working class community in the face of economic change, and to protest against the effects of capitalism (Cohen, 1999 [1972]; Hall and Jefferson, 2006).

Groups like the punks, mods and rockers were drawing on historical representations of the working class and combining this with elements appropriated ironically from the styles associated with other classes to create spectacular and confronting styles (Clarke et al., 2006; Hebdidge, 1979). The CCCS saw these youth subcultures as cohesive and relatively long lasting groupings that did symbolically (if not structurally) resolve the problem of belonging and identity for their members (Clarke et al. 2006).

The subcultures approach has faced sustained criticism (Woodman and Bennett, 2015: 4). While the work of the CCCS remains influential (Blackman, 2005; Shildrick and McDonald, 2006), there have been several proposals for new 'after' or 'post' subcultures conceptualizations (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). Critiques have challenged the extent to which class provides the foundation for cultural divisions among young people. The subcultures approach, from the perspective of its critics, was predestined to discover the 'spectacular symptoms' (Hebdige 1979) of a wider and ongoing class conflict in the youth cultures that they studied because of the theory's neo-Marxist underpinning, irrespective of the empirical evidence (Muggleton, 2000). This theoretical foundation also meant the CCCS was prone to blindness towards other profound social divisions and inequalities such as gender and race (McRobbie, 1991; Nayak, 2003; Huq, 2006). The subcultures approach has also been critiqued for giving insufficient weight to social change (see a summary in Woodman and Wyn, 2015: Chapter 6).

Instead of subcultures, many youth researchers today use terms like youth cultural 'scenes', 'lifestyles' or 'neo-tribes' to research the proliferation and seeming fragmentation of youth

cultural forms – including regular hybridizations, revivals and reworkings – and young people’s ability, and propensity to engage in several such forms concurrently (Muggleton, 2000: 47; Bennett, 2011). Such groups are conceptualized as more fluid, and less classed-based than proposed by the proponents of the subcultures approach (Bennett, 2011). Neo-tribes for example are groups that come together around particular events, but that have fluid membership and in which members may concurrently affiliate with other styles and scenes (Bennett, 1999). In particular, this label was used to research the rave, dance and festival scenes of the 1990s and 2000s (see for example Malbon, 1999).

Generations

Furlong (2015: 17) highlights that some of the most enduring youth research has bridged these two approaches to understanding youth (see for example Jenkins 1983; Griffin, 1985; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). Most famously in the UK, Willis (1977) showed how culture and structure interact in the oppositional attitudes to schooling formed by the working-class ‘lads’ that he studied. He traced the ironic outcome of this opposition, preparing them with the dispositions that fitted with their likely futures in manual labor. Willis saw his participants and their cultures as implicated in the processes of class reproduction, without reducing them to ‘dupes’. Highlighting ‘glimmers of critique’ (Weis, 2004: 112) by which cultural forms can bring participants to a partial understanding of the structures that shape their lives – and the ‘limitations’ that occlude these insights – Willis avoided the simplistic labelling of particular youth cultural practices as either collusion, or resistance (Griffin 2011: 252; Furlong, 2015: 20; see also Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979).

The work from the twentieth century that continues to be influential in youth studies today tends to be work similar to this, giving a holistic picture of young lives, and such studies provide a template for more recent arguments for bridging the gap between youth transitions and youth cultures (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007; McDonald, 2011; Geldens et al., 2011; Woodman and Bennett, 2015).

The impact of social change has also sharpened the argument for bridging cultures and transitions approaches (Woodman and Bennett, 2015). In the face of large scale political, social and economic changes brought about by economic globalisation, the internet, and political changes including post-communist transformations in Eastern Europe, youth scholars are asking how the experience of youth is being reshaped and with what consequences (Reiter, 2012). Researchers are progressively questioning the notion of arrival

at a stable ‘adulthood’ after transitions are complete and engagement with youth culture comes to an end (Blatterer, 2007; Lesko, 1996, Cuervo and Wyn, 2014). Longitudinal research which tracks young people through their 20s and beyond is increasingly common, facilitating a re-theorizing of youth and adulthood (Woodman and Wyn, Chapter 5). Investigations of early adult experiences of work, relationships, and culture (Henderson et al., 2007; Silva, 2012; Bennett and Hodkinson, 2012; Woodman and Wyn, 2015) suggests that transitions research and cultures research may systematically underestimate the continuities across these periods of the life course and underestimate differences in the experience of adulthood across generations. The mess, non-linearity and lack of stability that has been used in recent youth research to characterize youth transitions and ‘post-subcultural’ youth leisure, increasingly characterises adult lives as well (Woodman and Wyn, 2015).

Theoretical advances and empirical changes suggest that youth studies scholars need an orientation towards a life course approach, but one that continues to recognize the critical impact of youth experiences to understand ‘youth’ and that is also attuned to the impact of social change and inequality in young lives. The concept of generations – which has a long history in youth studies, but has until recently been marginal relative to the concepts of transitions and youth cultures – has returned to prominence as youth researchers grapple with this challenge.

What about ‘well as long-term patterns of ‘social change and historical transformation’. (Sukerieh and Tannock). While not embracing all the positivism of the Arnett’s emerging adulthood, it is important to not throw out the baby with the bathwater of the new youth studies – young people are agents and not just becoming precarious subjects.

Sekerieh and Tannock right about the way youth is used.

In popular discourse, a crude ‘generationalism’ is common, translating all kinds of social problems such as the supply of housing, the state of national budgets and the impact of popular culture on values into issues of a generational divide and often attributing blame to one generation or another (White 2013). Generations is used in both popular and academic

literature in various ways (Corsten 1999). Contemporary sociological approaches to social generations (Vincent, 2005: 375) tend to take as their starting point the influential early 20th Century conceptualization provided by German sociologist Karl Mannheim (Roberts, 2015). Mannheim's concept of generations (1952 [1923]) is more nuanced than popular uses of the term, and also avoids the tendency towards crude stereotypes.

Alongside other European thinkers like Francois Mentré (1920) and Ortega y Gasset (1961 [1923]), Mannheim began to think seriously in sociological terms about generational change in the wake of World War 1, and its impact on the young generation most caught up in the fighting. He argued that ways of life pursued by the previous generation became at points in the historical process difficult to maintain, for example after a shared traumatic experience like the destruction of World War 1. However, the cultural legacy of previous generations was the only possible raw material available for the new generation to work with. He conceptualised the need to rework the cultural legacy of previous generations as 'fresh contact':

The continuous emergence of new human beings certainly results in some loss of accumulated cultural possessions; but, on the other hand, it alone makes a fresh selection possible when it becomes necessary; it facilitates reevaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won (1952: 294).

Mannheim's theory of generations had three major elements (see Woodman and Wyn, 2015: 58-59). Firstly, what he called the 'generational location' (*Generationslagerung*). This concept aims to capture the temporal-structural location of a generation. For Mannheim an event will differ in its 'decisiveness' for attitudes and outcomes depending on whether it is experienced in youth, or superimposed upon earlier experiences by older people. This is part of the reason 'fresh contact' is so significant; future engagements will build upon early cultural engagements and the dispositions formed.

Secondly, this shared social location will shape, in a non-mechanical way, feelings, attitudes and tendencies, and in some cases a sense of belonging to a generation (Mannheim, 1952). Mannheim highlighted that even if young people developed a sense of belonging to the same generation oriented to the same issues and challenges, there were differences and possibly even violent oppositions between members of a generation. A generation is made up of 'generational units', the third key element of his conceptualization.

Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units. (Mannheim, 1952: 304).

This third element of the sociology of generations asks scholars to attend to intra-generational divisions. Even if his essay on generations quite reasonably takes a one-sided focus for analytic purposes, Mannheim explicitly acknowledges that social locations other than generation (such as class) shape experience and outcomes (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). This framework can facilitate thinking about youth cultures and transitions concurrently in the context of temporally specific institutional structures and subjective elements, hence integrating core concerns of the ‘transitions’ and the cultures approach to youth studies. (Furlong et al. 2011: 361; Woodman and Bennett, 2015).

The sociological concept of generations can help researchers comprehend the seemingly disappearing boundaries between youth and adulthood. Hayward for example (2013) argues that contemporary conditions have created ‘kidadults’, with a dissolution of youth as a meaningful category and the rise of an ‘intergenerational’ mulch. Behavioral norms and transitions do appear to have become less clearly tied to a particular age. However this does not spell the end of youth (or the irrelevance of youth studies). As scholars such as Bennett (2013) and Haenfler (2015) have shown, engagements with ‘youth’ culture takes different forms at different points in the life course, particularly as different commitments such as parenthood, a heavy workload, or even the physical aging process reshape engagement patterns (Bennett and Hodkinson, 2012). Engagement with culture is also generational in that the way that young people make ‘fresh contact’ with cultural elements and possibilities in their teens and early 20s remains a central driver of the emergence of new cultural forms, such as new musical subgenres. Further, the affective investments formed during this significant period tend to shape continuing engagement over time (Woodman and Wyn, 2015: 116).

As many people attempt to maintain their youthful engagements with culture across the life course, and attempt to manage the growth of insecure and under-employment – not only among teenagers and 20-somethings, but increasingly across the prime working years – how adulthood is culturally understood is being reshaped. Earlier models of adulthood are being challenged or becoming structurally impossible for many young people, particular those with

fewer resources and social privileges (Blatterer, 2007). In particular, it seems that the association of adulthood with completed transitions to a stable adult identity (e.g. home ownership, financial independence, marriage) characterises fewer lives in many parts of the world. As such independence, resilience, and ability to cope with change is being used by some people to claim the status of adult, even if their employment is precarious or their engagement with 'youth culture' continues as they age (Silva, 2012).

A 'normative lag' means that new generations are struggling to have their claims to be treated as adults recognized because their lives do not necessarily look like the adult lives older generations have known (Blatterer, 2007). Some find it easier to have their claims to be treated as an adult taken seriously because of the social resources available to them and the other social statuses they occupy. These struggles for recognition, and for access to the symbolic and material resources accorded to people based on the status of 'adult', highlight the need to attend to the intersection of culture and socially shaped life course transitions.

Conclusion

Drawing on the sociology of generations links youth studies to the study of the life course, and the study of social change. Broader changes in society often manifest first, or with most impact, on the lives of the young. As the economic and cultural changes associated with marketization and globalization have unfolded around the world, including in former communist countries, and particularly since the recent financial and economic crises and their aftermath, the concept of social generations in the Mannheimian tradition has returned to a central place in youth studies.

It provides a tripartite focus: on the specific life chances that emerge for new cohorts in the face of changing social structures; on the cultural responses and new subjectivities that emerge as the generation navigates new life course challenges; and on the divisions that emerge as other social locations interact with a generational location. Such a framework facilitates thinking concurrently about youth cultures and transitions. It also attunes researchers to questions about inequality and change, eschewing a tendency in thought to assume that social inequalities are automatically evidence of continuity or to conflate class and gender inequality with stability. Instead it prompts youth scholars to ask how the meaning of youth, and adulthood, is being reshaped and for and by whom, with what outcomes for the lives of different groups of young people.

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¹ This section draws on thinking and arguments developed for a larger book project edited by Dan Woodman and Andy Bennett entitled *Youth Cultures, Transitions and Generations: Bridging the Gap in Youth Research*, particularly material in Chapter 1 (Woodman and Bennett, 2015).