Title: The New Adulthood and the Future of Youth Studies: an Interview with Professor Johanna Wyn

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Dan Woodman: It's a great pleasure to have this opportunity to interview you, Professor Wyn, about your intellectual trajectory and the past, present and future of youth studies. I want to start with what I see as one of your biggest conceptual contributions, the idea that a new adulthood was emerging. Could you tell us how that idea came about?

Johanna Wyn: Thanks, Dan. It's a great pleasure to be interviewed by someone with whom I've worked with so much and who has helped shape some of these ideas. The idea of a new adulthood came up quite early in our work on Life Patterns, our longitudinal study of two generations of young people in Australia.

Early on with the first cohort of the Life Patterns participants (who finished school in 1991) we were seeing that they were not simply having an extended youthful transition period, which would then be ended when settling into some kind of 'normal' adulthood based on the standards set by the previous generation. The idea that they were simply going through the same transitional process into becoming adults started to seem problematic because it was taking for granted the kind of adulthood that was being transitioned into. Of course, this has also precipitated the kind of thinking that you, Dan, have also contributed to about using a concept like generations to really speak to that significant shift in life opportunities and processes.

Dan: Well, let me then jump ahead to in the 2000s when you did turn this to the sociology of generations trying to think through the changing experiences of young lives, but also this new adulthood. Could you tell me what brought you to the sociology of generations?

Johanna: The idea of social generations was very attractive at that time because we were speaking back to a lot of work in the sociology of youth that was still imagining that young people would just continue with a kind of linear – almost biological – development into an adulthood. The concept of generation really does follow from thinking about a new adulthood, offering a more powerful framework for developing an argument for an alternative approach to thinking about youth.

Our 2006 article on generations started to do that work. I don't think you or I anticipated that it would be quite so contentious and erupt in debate, which is still going on in some ways. It was not intended in any way to deny the relevance of disparity between groups, or the relevance of class or gender processes. It was just attempting to get a more authoritative analytical framework for making sense of the magnitude of change that had impacted on young people and was going to impact on them in the future. The concept

of generation provided a framework that took account of both biographical and societal change and their intersections.

With our longitudinal research – our 1991 cohort were fifteen years post school at that point – we were starting to see social changes that affected youth, young adulthood and beyond. The participants in our longitudinal study were not just slipping back into older patterns as they transitioned beyond youth.

Dan: You've already touched on it briefly, but could you say more about the debates you've had with people who frame the period of youth using the concept of transition, the limitations of this framework but also any common ground?

Johanna: The idea of transition gets used in a variety of ways, of course, and often I use it too. If one has a closer look, it's a word that simply marks that change is occurring; it's an empty category. However, it does tend to carry baggage depending on the framework it's used within. Using a social generation approach to make sense of transitions was influenced by our recognition that youth and transitions are profoundly sociological questions; we aren't just talking about individual trajectories but the intersection between individual trajectories and historical circumstances. Historical circumstances impact on our social lives profoundly. If they didn't, we wouldn't have a sociology of anything. So, this critical engagement with the idea of transitions using generations was an attempt to better highlight and hold onto those two threads of individual biography and social conditions as a process.

Dan: You've already mentioned some of the responses to you and colleagues' work on generations. One of the ensuing debates was about transitions, another was about questions of class, gender, racialisation and other differences and inequalities. Reflecting on those debates, how do you think youth scholars should think about the important differences and inequalities that continue to separate young people's experiences?

Johanna: Well difference and inequality is fundamental. There are many registers on which young people experience systematic marginalization, exclusion, and violence. To pose a generational framework as a useful way to understand social change is not to deny inequalities of opportunity and outcome. It is intended to signal that processes of inequality might be changing – and might not look exactly the same as they did for older conceptions of class or gender inequality.

Regardless of gender or class or race, young people are all still facing many of the same broad conditions of change. These broad conditions, which as youth studies scholars it is essential we understand, may well exacerbate

inequalities. I think it's a really important to look at inequalities in the context of generational change and the new adulthood.

For example, what kind of strategies and dynamics occur around the gendered experiences of the new adulthood? We've done some interesting work on that in the Life Patterns study. Changed educational and labour market conditions don't play out in the same way across gender and the same occurs across class lines. I don't think a focus on social change should ever be seen as opposed to analysing inequality, they are simultaneous and intertwined dynamics.

Dan: More recently you've started to think about, and interrogate, the concept of belonging and how it's used in your studies. Could you say something about what this adds to our conceptual tool kit?

Johanna: Belonging, like transitions, is an empty concept in a sense, but it's now used often, and this began to intrigue me as a possibly for conceptual advance. If we put forward a more relational understanding of belonging – asking what kind of space is there for young people to belong in their society or in their community – we start to open up really important questions that are not answered by a straightforward transitions approach.

If we want to see young people progress through their educational careers or build whatever life they desire, we must ask about the nature of relations and connections that enable that. I think this is a productive way to look at it, rather than simply saying, how many people have passed through this marker of transition; how many people are employed; how many people are unemployed; how many have got long-term partnerships?

These kinds of conventional transitions questions create a profile of the situation, but they don't open enough questions about what kind of society exists for young people, to gain employment, mix care with paid employment and build a secure and meaningful life. These are questions about belonging: what is the social and economic space within which young people are engaging, and who is responsible for providing the foundations for a good life? In the Life Patterns project we have seen the marking of individualization, which many youth studies scholars have highlighted. Young people say "oh, it's my fault I didn't get the job." Or "I didn't get enough education, I'll just go back and get another degree." Or "it's really hard to get child care so I'll just drop out of the work force." Structural conditions are converted into private risks.

A belonging framework opens up the broader question what kind of responsibility is there for a society to its young people and young adults, to ensure not only are there productive pathways but they are treated as worthy of rights and a sense of recognition in the present. This contrasts with the

prevailing tendency of “well it's their fault, if they are finding it hard to cope, others have done it so why don't they pull their socks up.”

Dan: This seems to relate to an earlier idea in your work – even before you were talking about the new adulthood – where you highlighted the problem of ‘futurity’ in how young people are conceptualised both within their communities and by youth studies scholars. Could you tell us what you meant by futurity?

Johanna: I used the concept of futurity to capture the way that young people were only being valued for what they could become and that there was also a narrow framing of what this was. They were seen as on a trajectory to, or at risk of not reaching, responsible citizenship, full employment (at least if they were boys or young men) and parenthood. There was a normative aspect to the framing of young people and not enough attention to the fact that youth are an important part of our society, in the present.

Young people have a place, economically, politically and culturally and not just as ‘adults in the making’. It links back to belonging again. Perhaps my new interest in belonging is alluding back to that earlier problem of young people being seen as on the way to somewhere, but not valuable in themselves. I think we've got an amazing example right now with climate-change action, which is being driven by quite young people. They are doing that here and now, taking responsibility for driving an agenda. They're not waiting until they are in their future, arguably more powerful, positions to do that, although clearly questions about the future are central stakes in that political action.

Dan: As we get toward the end of our interview, I want to to ask you to reflect on the state of youth studies. How have you seen the field change over your time as a sociologist of youth?

Johanna: I’ll say two things. One, that youth studies is actually a powerful driver in creating new thinking in sociology. I've seen that happen in Australia and I think it's also happened in the UK. I haven't looked as closely at other national contexts. Clearly the number of youth studies journals that have emerged in recent decades have been a driver of new thinking about social change and inequality. The issues that impact on young people, impact on the whole society. It's all those things about divisions of class and gender, race, sexuality and disability and issues about the changing nature of paid work. The sociology of youth is not just a side issue or small interest group any longer but has shifted towards the centre of sociological thinking.

I also see youth studies as being a field of practice of sociology that has rightly taken mentoring and building opportunities for the next generation of scholars seriously. I see that the youth sociology associations and groups

(including The Australian Sociological Association's Youth Thematic Group) have really focused on creating an environment where people can take risks and push new ideas.

I think we are also slowing beginning to see more recognition of the 'Global South', if that's a useful term. The 'majority world' is a powerful space within which the very things that are of the greatest interest to youth sociologists can be analysed and wrestled with theoretically. That opens new challenges, for example, for thinking about generations and how they play out in different places.

Australia and New Zealand are interesting in this regard. We have been, in this particular period of history of sociology, linked to intellectual traditions in the north, but living in and researching in the geographic South, on the bottom end of one of the world's most dynamic regions. I feel that Australians and New Zealand sociologists have played a particular role in being authoritative about work happening beyond Europe and North America and have played a part in broadening the field.

Dan: That connects nicely to the next question, which is, what do you see as the big questions for youth studies currently?

Johanna: I think the big questions of youth studies are about developing a youth sociology attuned to the political environment young people are living in. We need to recognize young people's claims about the need to have a safe planet, safe from inequality, safe from violence, safe from the damaging effects of climate change as much as possible.

The big questions are very, very big questions, and answering them will need youth studies scholars to further strengthen the connections that are currently expanding between youth scholars across the globe. I think the way that these questions are going to be answered will be through recognising that there are many stories to be told, many ways of analysing, showing how youth experiences look different in different places. It's not helpful to try to drive strong theoretical conceptual frames over everything in the same way. I think that is the kind of nuanced and local/global work that I feel is already coming to the forefront of youth studies. Journals like *Youth and Globalization* are making a direct contribution to pushing this scholarship further.

Dan: Our final question, which I think builds on our discussion so far, is what do you think the future of youth studies might look like?

Johanna: I think the future of sociological youth studies will be a big collaborative space. I think it'll also be a highly contested space as the real challenges of doing strong conceptual work are met and that means that debates have to

be had, the kind of debates that perhaps we've been involved in around the use of concepts like social generation and how they can still account for inequality and difference but in a new light given the platform that exists now for a global youth sociology.

We may even see a more systematized approach to explicitly workshopping controversial ideas through the associations, through the journals, bringing different generations of youth sociologists and from different locations together. The seeds of the future are already planted in the present of course.

Dan: Thank you, Professor Wyn, for these thoughts. This future sounds very promising.

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