

introduction: making sense of young people today?

This book offers an introduction to the key concepts in youth studies in a way we hope is accessible to both tutors and students. Many textbooks in the social sciences are structured around lengthy chapters whereas the short entries in this text will give you the essence of some of the major debates and issues in youth studies. Our entries begin with foundational concepts and debates, which we feel represent some of the most significant areas of discussion in youth research, which are then followed by entries that reflect some of the other major research areas in youth studies. Such short entries cannot possibly hope to cover all of the developments in research but they provide a way into a particular topic and give guidance for further reading and investigation.

This introduction sets out to contextualise the different entries in the book, offering ways to link different areas of youth research that may at first glance seem unconnected. We do also make efforts throughout the text to highlight connections between entries, so where these occur we employ bold text to illustrate how, for example, the issue of **crime** is also linked to entries of **gender** or **class**. Although this book is written so that one can dip in and out of different entries as one might access online material, a more nuanced understanding of entries might be had if you spend a few minutes reading the next few pages. Here we give you an overview of some of the main themes in youth research that will help you 'situate' your own particular focus of interest.

YOUTH RESEARCH: SOME KEY THEMES AND ISSUES

Our approach to studying young people, reflected in this book, is to understand youth in relation to their social identities and cultural practices as well as the life course transitions they make towards adulthood. These are analytical distinctions researchers make to ease their investigations – in other words youth cultures/identities and transitions are models or shorthand forms that are used to represent a more complex empirical world. The notions of transition or identity then do not in themselves



accurately depict young people's lives – young people, for example, do not make simple linear transitions from childhood to adulthood. Such analytical concepts used in youth studies have evolved over many years distilled from countless projects and come to guide the thinking of researchers and students.

In writing this book we asked ourselves a range of questions that helped us focus on the most important issues in youth research. For example, how might we define 'youth'? Are young people those at that developmental stage between childhood and adulthood?¹ We are also concerned with the distinctive everyday experiences that young people have in the different spheres of their lives such as education, training, leisure, work and families. How do the relationships that young people have in these settings influence how they see themselves and how others see them – their social identities? With time as they age how do young people's roles in these settings evolve, as we see with the movement from school to university or from living at home with parents to sharing a flat with friends? We are also interested in the power relationships that enmesh young people – how do other actors (both individuals and more complex processes) condition (constrain and enable) young people who then create and reflect patterns of divisions and inequalities within and between the generations? For example, how do the policies and practices of state organisations influence young people's identities and transition routes? Who are the winners and losers when governments raise the school leaving age or cut welfare benefits? What sort of agency do young people exercise so they can pursue their own interests and contest, challenge or subvert the agendas of other actors such as these governments? Do some young people enjoy more autonomy in their lives than others because of the economic or cultural resources they can access, as their parents can fund their education and housing costs?

As sociologists we are also interested in the 'social construction' of youth – how young people see their own lives in contrast to how adults often view the young (Mannheim, 1952). By this we mean that the very category of youth itself – and how we discuss the idea of young people and their lives – reflects distinctive cultural and political practices that vary from one society to another and through history. In particular we explore how the mass media and new social media shape popular notions of 'youth' and how this may have positive or negative consequences for young people themselves. How, for example, are young people's social identities affected if the popular press is sexist and homophobic? How have technological changes affected young people's work





and leisure experiences and do these changes impact on young people in different ways around the world?

A further set of overarching questions that inform our entries are those concerned with the ways that youth researchers undertake their work (see Heath et al., 2009; Heath and Walker, 2012). Our entries are interested in the theories and methods researchers employ and how these impart a distinctive character to their research. One can develop a critical, evaluative approach to youth research by teasing out the methodological influences on particular studies. Do researchers rely too heavily on secondary sources or qualitative or quantitative approaches? If, for example, feminist or postmodern concepts are employed what biases and interpretations might these encourage and what might therefore have been overlooked in the research?

A further key area of debate in youth studies has been between cultural studies researchers and those more interested in youth policy and transitions (Furlong et al., 2011). Hence some research is driven by an interest in the differential material resources of young people and how life course transitions and social inequalities emerge from such disadvantages (MacDonald, 2011). Whereas other researchers are more interested in questions about the cultural lives of young people and their interest in music, shopping and fashion (Deutsch and Theodorou, 2010). These different research questions create distinctive emphases in the research process that in turn shape the sorts of theory and methods used and the findings generated by these projects. The result being that some research (around youth cultures) can create the impression of young people as creative actors shaping their identities and cultural lives, while other researchers (who focus on policy or transitions) can generate the image of young people more heavily constrained by economic and political forces. A criticism that often applies to both these schools of youth research is their preoccupation with only a minority of young people – those who are marginalised economically (in the case of transitions research) or those leading spectacular cultural lives (in subcultural or post-subcultural research). This interest in the unusual, the pathological or the oppressed can mean the overwhelming majority of ordinary young people are neglected by youth researchers. There is a risk that youth research itself contributes to a distortion or misrepresentation of young people's lives (Cieslik, 2001).

One common theoretical position for youth researchers, following the work of C. Wright Mills (1959) is to situate young people's lives in their wider social and historical contexts. We ask ourselves, therefore, how do





changes to the wider economy or welfare policies ripple out across the lives of the young setting up new patterns of division and disadvantage? The issues of global warming and sustainability, the expansion of the Internet and economic and political crises are all having profound influences on young people around the world (White, 2011). We can promote the importance of youth research by documenting how the changing experiences of youth also have in turn significant implications for other parts of society. For young people are often at the forefront of political protest around the world, they make up most migrants and are often the first to adopt new forms of technology. Youth therefore are very often agents of social change and transformation as we have been witnessing in Europe and the Middle East in recent years.

YOUTH RESEARCH: SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Globalisation

Over the past twenty years youth studies has been concerned with several key developments such as globalisation, the extension of the youth phase and shifting conceptions of identities. These stem from social change such as the increasing mobility of people, commodities and ideas, and also new theoretical formulations such as the 'risk society' thesis (Beck, 1992) and postmodern theories (Bauman, 1991). The spectre of globalisation is the backdrop to many entries in this book. The industrial rise of countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, China and India helps explain the painful de-industrialisation of Western societies since the 1970s and its impact on the life chances of young people in both East and West. The collapse of traditional manufacturing employment in the West heralded a shift away from relatively short transitions from school into employment to more protracted, circuitous routes through training, welfare dependency and waged work (Cieslik and Pollock, 2002; Dillabough and Kennelly, 2010). The shift in production from the West opened up new employment opportunities and consumerist lifestyles for young people in the East and the Global South. Yet during this period we have still witnessed the continuing poverty of young people in developing societies despite countless economic initiatives from domestic policy-makers and organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (ILO, 2006). The global mobility of information also raises questions about the emergence of a 'global youth' as Internet technology allows young people, despite their differing traditions





and languages, to produce and share culture (Furlong, 2012). The ease with which one can record events on a mobile phone and post these online to be accessed by millions of viewers in just a few hours has transformed our lives. Fashion, music, film, as well as political issues around global warming, poverty and citizenship are all ideas that move rapidly around the globe transforming the perspectives, ambitions and behaviours of young people.

Extended Transitions, Inequality and Social Unrest

A major focus in youth studies has been how adult statuses such as marriage, secure employment and childrearing that once would have occurred in the West during the teenage years now occur ten or more years later when young people are in their twenties and thirties. A confluence of social changes – rising costs of housing, scarcity of well-paid work and rising aspirations – have all contributed to this extension of the youth phase. However, some commentators are critical of these arguments contending instead that youth ends in the mid-twenties and the notion of ‘emerging adulthood’ more accurately reflects the phase until the early thirties when adult independence is achieved (Arnett, 2004).

As we discuss in various entries in this book the lengthening of transitions, though offering time for experimentation and exploration, also raises questions about how young people are increasingly dependent on their families, the state and charities for their wellbeing. Being denied opportunities to work, to establish their own homes and participate in leisure activities has become a feature of many young people’s lives in so-called ‘rich societies’. Longitudinal research since the 1980s (Bynner et al., 1997) has illustrated the divisions between affluent and disadvantaged young people, and this in turn has shaped the wider social inequalities and decline in social mobility in Western societies (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). More recently these concerns over extended transitions have focused on the growing inequalities between the generations and how the middle aged (the so-called baby boomers born in the 1950s and 1960s) have benefited at the expense of today’s youth (Howker and Malik, 2010; Willetts, 2010). Recent economic crises have focused attention on the significance of these long-term demographic changes and the associated costs of welfare provision at a time when rich nations are struggling to compete economically with emerging economies of the East and South. The now ageing population of baby-boomers is monopolising welfare yet a shrinking taxpayer base





(because of a falling birth rate) has led governments to cut the education, health and social security benefits that were enjoyed by earlier generations. Young people today are therefore having to pay more tax, work longer and receive much less welfare provision than their parents and at a time of insecure employment and global warming. The ambitions that many young people had of a comfortable consumerist life have been dashed, replaced by a new era of insecurity (Wierenga, 2011). Accordingly many young people feel a sense of injustice and disillusionment in the economic, social and political processes of Western capitalism. The result in many societies around the developed world has been student unrest and social disorder – young people are increasingly challenging the austerity policies of European governments that disproportionately impact on their lives rather than the ones responsible for the crises in global capitalism. Just as we saw in previous decades – the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the fall of communism in the 1980s – young people it seems are at the forefront of political protest and are agents of social change. As we write it is difficult to see how such protest will play out and shape the societies in which we live.

At the same time many young people in other societies around the world are marching on the streets, protesting at the erosion of opportunities and personal freedoms. At the time of writing young people have been at the forefront of protest and social change in many Arab states – the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ – young people in Muslim states taking to the streets to protest against the lack of freedoms in these authoritarian regimes. In Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and many other countries the young have called for a free press, free elections and economic policies that will provide opportunities for them to lead more prosperous and secure lives as they see in other countries around the world.

Young People in Late Modernity: Theories Old and New

Youth researchers have drawn on theories old and new to understand the changing lives of young people. The classical writings of Marx, Weber and Durkheim can still help us make sense of young people’s lives even today. For struggles over economic resources profoundly shape the character of societies and the differential access to waged work is a key driver of young people’s life chances and cultural identities. Bourdieu’s reworking of these thinkers and his concepts of habitus, field and capitals (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986) have been used extensively to unpack how social divisions are reproduced and experienced by young





people (Henderson et al., 2007; Thornton, 1995). Despite the social justice agenda of welfare policies Bourdieu's work can show us how inequities are built into education, health and social security systems marginalising countless millions of young people in the process. Youth studies also draws on feminist and anti-racist ideas to interrogate the structured disadvantages experienced by women and minorities and how gendered/racialised divisions are reproduced through adolescence (Thomson, 2011). What all societies around the world seem to share are gendered and racialised inequalities, with young women and minorities experiencing prejudice and discrimination in all walks of life – through schooling, training, employment, health and social security.

Over the last twenty years youth researchers have also drawn on theories of late modernity such as Beck's (1992) and Giddens' (1991) work on risk and reflexivity or on postmodern theories that have emphasised new ways of researching cultural identities. Risk theories can be used to illustrate how institutional restructuring (such as changing families, labour markets and welfare systems) creates uncertain transition routes and identities. Though economic and cultural divisions remain in risk societies the traditional language of class and gender has given way to more individualised, subjective constructions of everyday life. In late modernity young people in the West are compelled to become more self-conscious and reflexive about their lives – to develop so-called 'choice biographies' where they are personally responsible for their identity work and navigations to adulthood. Drawing on Beck (1992) and Elias (2000), Furlong and Cartmel (1997) apply the notion of 'epistemological fallacy' to describe how structural features in modernity become subjectivised:

Individuals are forced to negotiate a set of risks which impinge on all aspects of their daily lives, yet the intensification of individualism means that crises are perceived as individual shortcomings rather than the outcome of processes which are largely outside the control of individuals... Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure. (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 114)

Though in everyday life we use a language of individual agency and choice, most academic commentators recognise how young people's lives are still heavily conditioned by differential access to opportunities





and resources – so-called ‘structured individualization’ (Roberts, 2003). Youth research into transition routes and cultural lives has therefore been concerned to reveal the relative contributions of structural conditioning and choices/agency rather than emphasising one process at the expense of the other (Cieslik, 2001; Threadgold, 2010).

Recently we have seen the influence of postmodern theories on youth research notably through discussion of ‘post-subcultures’ (Muggleton, 2000). Proponents argue that class processes in particular have become less important to an understanding of young people’s cultures and identities (Bennett, 1999). The increasing significance of social media through the Internet and diverse patterns of consumerism have all encouraged a more fluid, creative and autonomous youth which throws up patterns of cultural identification and sociability that defy easy class-based classification. Some argue that concepts such as lifestyles (Miles, 2000), scenes (Redhead, 1993) and neo-tribes (Bennett, 1999) are better placed to describe young people’s cultural lives than concepts such as subcultures. Though as some have suggested (Cieslik, 2001; Griffin, 2010) we might argue that subcultural studies and recent post-subcultural research have been pursuing different research agendas that may account for some of the disputes between these two camps. The former wish to make explicit the ways the lives of young people are framed by economic, political and cultural forces in society. Whereas the latter tend to emphasise the irreducibility of young people’s experiences through leisure, music and style-based activities.

Young People, Wellbeing and Narcissism

Post-structural theories of the self are also proving influential in youth research, particularly when combined with more traditional ideas around long-term patterns of social change. Unlike the long running disputes between youth cultural and transitions researchers, this emerging focus of study synthesises an interest with complex, stratified ideas of the self with a critical engagement with the impact of consumerism and neo-liberalism on young people. As Jones (2009) has documented we can use Foucault’s ideas of ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1988) to understand how young people develop ways of working on their bodies and emotions to get on in life. Instead then of young people being dominated and exploited by external others (such as through government policies or by employers) they use self-help manuals and body modification to manufacture, monitor and perfect their own identities.





We witness extreme examples of these processes when they break down, such as in obsessive compulsive behaviour, eating disorders and body dysmorphia (Frost, 2001). But the real force of these arguments is how these 'technologies of the self' are employed by all of us in our daily lives and reveal the extent of our often unknowing subjugation to others or our harmful pursuit of an idealised way of life.

This synthesising of theoretical models of the self and theories of society we argue will prove to be an important area of research for youth studies in the future. The use of psycho-analytical theory by Lacan (2006) and Žižek (2002; 2007) to explore the instability of the self is particularly useful in allowing us to picture our daily struggles trying to flourish and grow. These writers document the internal tensions within ourselves between ego, unconscious and super-ego, and societies' fixation with the presentation of a coherent unified self. The impossibility of achieving a coherent self in a dynamic, consumerist, market-driven world means that young people have to manage such dissonance by recourse to fantasy, consumption, celebrity and online virtual worlds. Where such efforts fail, as Hall et al. (2008) argue, we can often see the growth of problematic behaviour and problems such as youth crime. For youth labour markets offer meagre economic resources for most young people to sustain consumerist identity work leaving young people in an endless cycle of dissatisfaction with the self – consumption – fleeting pleasure – dissatisfaction with the self.

Other writers such as Furedi (2004) have also documented the instability of the modern self and the implications this has for our quality of life. This set of debates we argue will also be influential in youth research in coming years. Drawing on the work of Rose (1989) and Lasch (1996), Furedi argues that late modernity has witnessed a turn inwards into the self so that we have all become increasingly narcissistic – preoccupied with personal growth and the development of an authentic self. We pursue our biographical projects through consumerism in an often quick-fix, instrumental way that prevents us from growing and developing in a rich and deep manner. The growth of the happiness industry that produces countless self-help guides and programmes in emotional literacy is just one manifestation of this rise of a 'therapy culture' (Furedi, 2004). Social policies around the world are also coming to reflect this narcissism, with many governments developing ways of measuring and promoting happiness in schools, work and community at a time of growing economic, social and political divisions. The concern, however, with this focus on subjective wellbeing is that it distracts us from





the economic and social divisions that are undermining the life chances of young people. The critics of this narcissism point to how young people are growing up in societies that tend to value the pursuit of a shallow introspective personal fulfilment, at the expense of more outward looking social and political perspectives and activities. The fear is that despite the recent protests led by young people, we may have a generation of youth who not only have a 'one dimensional' way of living but are also ill-equipped to deal with the challenges they face in a world threatened with climate change, conflict and economic uncertainties. Nevertheless we hope that such pessimism will prove to be misplaced and that young people can instead lead the way in challenging the corrosive powers of modernity.

Note

- 1 Though definitions of the youth phase are contested, see entry on defining youth.

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