Editorial: Youth: Identities, Transitions, Cultures

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At the end of the first decade of the 21st Century and in the context of rapid technological change and extensive economic and social uncertainty, the lives and identities of young people continue to be the subject of a broad range of scholarship which is as stimulating as it is important. In July 2010 the British Sociological Association's Youth Study Group hosted a major international conference at the University of Surrey entitled Youth 2010: Identities, Transitions, Cultures that brought together over 100 scholars from across the globe engaging in a wide variety of youth research. The range of topics presented over the three days of the conference demonstrated the timeliness of exploring such issues as well as highlighting the complexities and diversities of young lives in the 21st Century. A number of the contributions to the event also raised questions about youth studies itself and, in particular the historical and, arguably, enduring divide between so-called ‘cultural’ and ‘transitions’ perspectives to youth studies. Both approaches have offered invaluable insights into the life worlds of young people but scholars increasingly are exploring the ways their focal points and approaches to research might be brought together as part of a broader development of youth studies in the twenty-first century.

Held some ten years into the new millennium, the over-arching questions that last year’s conference left us with included: How are scholars contributing to the sociology of youth engaging with themes of identity, transition and culture? Do we have the conceptual and methodological tools to understand adequately the complexities of contemporary young lives? And, what sorts of re-assessments or new conceptualisations might be necessary in order to adequately explore the contemporary life worlds of young people today? The call for papers for this special issue of the Journal of Sociology, borne out of the success of the conference, led to the submission of over 60 abstracts from across the globe. The level of response to the call for submissions for the conference and to this special edition demonstrate extensive interest in questions of youth identity, transition and culture, as well as the continuing significance of studying young people’s lives more generally.

The ‘youth cultures’ approach to the study of young people evolved from the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, UK in the 1970s. Although more varied that it sometimes is given credit for, the Centre’s work on young people was dominated by the analysis of the stylistic practices of groups of young people which it characterised as ‘spectacular subcultures’ (see for example, Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Clarke and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige,1979). With some exceptions, the analyses centred on the assessment of subcultural styles as a group-centred expression of youth resistance to working class structural marginalisation and social change in post-war Britain. The broader youth cultures perspective which was to emerge in the following decades, however, centred as much on criticisms of and limitations identified with Centre’s work as with replicating the approach. In particular, alongside the development of new social contexts interpreted through terms such as post-modernity, ‘risk’ and individualisation (Beck 1992; Miles 2000), many researchers distanced themselves from what was deemed a reductionist CCCS emphasis on subcultural style as class resistance. Alongside a range of ethnographic, insider-oriented studies of spectacular music or taste related groups, there emerged an increasing focus on private as well as public spaces and on the cultural practices and identities of ‘ordinary’ young people rather than those who were the most visible. Though questions of locality, gender, ethnicity and sexuality often have been to the fore in such work, economic, educational and work-related aspects of young people’s lives, including the notion of social class, sometimes have been peripheral amidst a movement towards understandings of youth lifestyles as individually elective, fluid and flexible (Bennett 1999; Miles 2000).
In contrast, the youth transitions tradition has tended to focus squarely on the economic sphere and, specifically, on the movement of adolescents through education and into work, often in the context of structural inequality. Of significance here are psychologically-derived understandings of youth as located on the pathway between childhood and adulthood and, as part of this, the notion of adulthood as ‘destination’ (Wyn and White 1997). Successful transitions, here, are generally associated with the achievement of a sequence of statuses including the completion of education, entry into the labour market, establishment of an independent household and so on (Skeleton 2002). Each of these phases and the intersections between them have attracted attention from youth researchers, who have focused particularly on the impediments facing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. During a time of substantial structural and economic change, however, predictable, normative notions of transition have increasingly been questioned amidst a move towards accounts that recognise the increasingly complex, non-linear trajectories of many young people with respect to their movements into and out of labour markets, economic independence and so on (Côté 2000; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Wyn and White 1997; du Bois Reymond 2009). Further subjects for debate have been whether transitions research has been too exclusively focused on those at the bottom (MacDonald this volume) and whether, in focusing so closely on the spheres of education and work, researchers may sometimes have developed overly narrow understandings of youth transition. Alongside questions relating to the increasingly complex development of social, living and domestic arrangements, a greater focus upon the ways in which the cultural lives and leisure practices of young people connect to their economic transitions has been the focal point for some of those seeking to develop broader understandings (e.g. MacDonald and Shildrick 2007).

With such developments in mind, it is worth emphasising that, in spite of the significance of these two traditions, youth researchers have not been operating exclusively in silos which focus either on the structural or the cultural dimensions of young people’s lives. Alongside various studies and approaches which operate somewhat independently of either tradition, an increasing number of researchers have sought to draw from the strengths of both of them in accounting for the lived experiences, life chances and identities of young people (Nayak 2003; Dawes 1998; MacDonald 1999 to name a few). A number of further examples of such work are cited in some of the papers included herein. Nevertheless one of the legacies of the Youth 2010 conference was a strong sense that there remains space for a more extensive and sustained dialogue between these two main traditions as part of the development of youth studies in the 21st century.

This special edition offers a contribution towards such dialogue as part of a broader exploration of some of the key questions about youth transitions, identities and cultures which face those studying the lives of young people today. It does so at a time of extensive change and uncertainty for young people, high levels of youth unemployment and a range of challenges to our understandings of youth, the life course and generation. Importantly, while some of the articles collected here explicitly address the youth transitions/youth cultures debate other papers present work that addresses questions of youth identities, transitions and/or cultures as they relate to more specific areas of enquiry, highlighting the complexities of contemporary youth life worlds that are increasingly defined by rapid socio-economic and technological change. The authors employ identity, transition and cultural analysis in addressing contemporary concerns for young people, both in Australasia and in Europe. We hope that the discussions presented will offer valuable insights, while stimulating further debate both in relation to the study of young people’s lives and identities, and in relation to broader the sociological questions and orientations which they so often highlight.

The first of the papers, authored by Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, offers a direct reassessment of the traditional ‘youth cultures’ and ‘youth transitions’ divide, in the context of the complex and multifaceted
cultural and structural experiences of young people in late modernity. As well as raising questions about the authenticity of the divide in historical terms, Furlong et al explore how the relationship between the two can be ‘placed on a healthier footing’ (p.#). More specifically the authors identify the potential value of a social-generational approach to youth studies as a perspective which combines a focus on structural context with questions of agency, culture and subjectivity. Drawing on the work of Mannheim, the authors suggest such an approach centres on the proposition that young people’s individual biographies are shaped and influenced by generationally specific sets of conditions and expectations and by the social and cultural responses to these of each cohort of young people. With this in mind, the authors offer an initial discussion of the structural and cultural features of contemporary generations of youth.

The second of our papers, authored by Wierenga, explicitly tackles both theoretical and methodological themes relevant to this special issue in relation to case study. The work draws from data collected with working-class young men over a 20 year period of fieldwork within a small community in Tasmania, Australia. This paper is located at the intersection of several key themes including scholarship exploring the out-migration of young people from rural and regional areas, works which map the future of rural and regional communities and research about the life worlds of working-class young men. Employing a grounded theoretical approach, Wierenga proposes that in order to move beyond the ‘preoccupations which have thinned the discourses about young people’s transitions’ (p.#), a fuller understanding of the biographies of these young men can be achieved through an exploration of their narratives of identity and the ways in which they referred to a range of cultural practices. The paper provides rich insights into the lives of participants and the methodological approaches and resources required in order to obtain these understandings.

Renold and Ringrose, in the third of our papers, draw attention to the inadequacies of the linear transition model as it relates to understandings of development from girlhood to sexual womanhood which, according to the authors, tends towards positioning young women as either ‘object’ or ‘agent’. In contrast the paper makes an argument for the concept of ‘schizoid subjectivities’, which alludes to anti-linear identities which are multiple, reversible and sometimes contradictory. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Deluze and Guatarri (1987) Renold and Ringrose present three case studies taken from research conducted in urban and rural working class communities in England and Wales as a means of highlighting the inherent complexities in the formation of female sexual identities. This argument is made within the context of considerable moral concern about young women’s sexualisation.

In the penultimate paper, Rogers raises questions about recent understandings of youth transitions as non-linear, reflexive and gradual in relation to qualitative research on the experiences and identities of young people moving out of the care system. Far from being gradual, Rogers argues, the transitions of her respondents - who had found themselves suddenly in a position of enforced independence between the ages of 16 and 18 - were immediate and final. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with young care leavers, student support staff and social workers, Rogers explores the strains and anxieties endured by her respondents, whose lack of family, emotional or financial support to fall back on is argued to have effectively placed them in a position of ‘instant adulthood’.

In the final paper, MacDonald begins by posing the question “What is youth studies for?” In answering it, he suggests that observations of the experiences of the young often are of particular value as part of the development of wider understandings of wider sociological change. MacDonald goes on to provide a critical outline of youth transitions research from the 1980s to the present in relation to broader social change, placing particular attention on the notion of ‘churning’ (moving in and out of employment) as a way to conceptualise the under-employment, of disadvantaged working-class young people who move
between unemployment and low-level jobs for much of their lives. MacDonald goes on to suggest that transitions research sometimes has focused too exclusively on the most disadvantaged youth, and draws attention to the significance of underemployment for young graduates in an increasingly crowded employment market. Finally, MacDonald explores the ways in which transitions research might also broaden its scope through greater attention to the ways patterns of education and work connect to other aspects of young people’s lives, including leisure and culture.

In summary, the special issue begins and ends with direct and explicit critical considerations of the future of the sociological study of youth, with particular emphasis on the developing connections between questions of structural transition and those of leisure, culture and subjectivity. In between are three rich contemporary research studies, each of which engaging with questions of transition, identity and culture in intriguing and contrasting ways and in relation to the particularities of different settings, individuals and communities. Needless to say, there is a very great deal that is not covered here, but collectively, the papers offer a theoretical and empirical engagement with some of the key questions and challenges for those studying youth in the 21st century. We look forward to future discussions and developments.

References


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