Conceptualizing Youth: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective

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Abstract

At the onset of the 21st century, "youth studies" has emerged as a rapidly growing field of inquisition and research. Discourses and debates in the field have become more sophisticated, and the spectrum of analysis has likewise broadened. Youth is a concept that could be found in varied type of literature. Though fundamentally it is a concept associated with biology as a stage in human growth and development, it is also the subject of interest in many disciplines such as education, psychology, anthropology, sociology and demography among others. In general, the research on youth is assumed to constitute a separate and significant category of people - non-adults. The problematic nature of being a youth and the even more problematic nature of defining youth is a central and recurring theme in the youth studies. Assumptions inherited from developmental psychology relating to stages of development, identity formation, normative behaviour and the relation between the social and physical maturation are found in the extant literature on youth. Yet very little work has been done to make clear the theoretical basis on the categorization of youth. Researchers on youth studies have stressed this point continuously. The aim of this paper is to offer a perspective on youth which takes these complexities into account and the conceptual issues that are central to understanding the position of young people in society. This paper explores the concept of youth, its historical and its contemporary use and usefulness. 'Youth' is frequently used simply as a categorisation of people based on their age. In this paper we look at the ways in which this approach limits analysis of young people and of the process of growing up. We conclude that young people do experience many things in common because of their age, especially because of the way in which they are treated by institutions. We argue that youth is most productively conceptualised as a social process in which the meaning and experience of becoming adult is socially mediated.

Keywords: Youth, Youth Studies, Modernity, Age categorization, Adolescence, Sociology.

Introduction

Over the past century, youth has, in a number of varied ways, been of major interest to the social sciences. Disciplines such as sociology, criminology, psychology, educational studies and, more recently, cultural and media studies, have all had something to say about the activities of the young. Yet youth research is not a simple reflection of 'how it is'. Historically, youth was conceptualized and 'created' by these disciplines, which were themselves greatly influenced by ideologies and values of the day (France, 2007).

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on youth. Yet very little work has been done to make clear the theoretical basis on the categorization based on age. Researchers on youth studies have stressed this point continuously (Wyn and White, 1997).

From a sociological perspective the concept of youth had yet to develop a framework to explain the different experiences that young people pass through when interacting with different social groups during their transition from youth to adulthood. Further, it would be misleading to emphasize the qualities of youth per se as they are neither a homogenous group nor a static one. Instead, the idea of youth can be conceptualized as an age-related process (Jones. 1998). This implies that the focus in the examination of youth should not be on the inherent characteristics of young people themselves, but on the construction of the idea of youth through social processes such as education, family and the labor market, and the specific ways in which young people engage with these institutions according to their historical circumstances. (Wyn and White, 1997).

Historical Dimension

It has been suggested that prior to the seventeenth century youth or adolescence did not exist (France. 2007). In his classic text 'Centuries of Childhood', Philip Aries describes and analyses the development of a conception of childhood as a state of being separate from, rather than continuous with adulthood. Aries argued that in the Middle Ages in Europe, children were simply seen as small adults. This changed in the modern age when childhood began to be considered as a distinctive period of life with its own characteristics. To think of childhood as distinct from adulthood, begs the question of how children achieve adulthood and here the idea of "youth" as a period of change, of rupture, disruption, discontinuity and transition is born. Whilst the work of Aries is rather too simple in its historical approach, it nevertheless provides a broad brush-stroke view of the manner in which age relations and the representations of youth changed as industrialization took hold in Western Europe (Spence. 2005). But this position has been challenged on methodological grounds. The claims made by Aries evolved from the analysis of paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which showed children were nothing more than 'little adults'. But the pictures were of the wealthy and bourgeoisie of the time and had little to say about the diverse experience of those of different class backgrounds or genders. Youth as a linguistic category did not exist, but boundaries between different age groups in pre-modern society did. These focused more on the distinctions between dependence (childhood), semi-dependence (youth) and independence (adulthood). This form of grading was the precursor to modern youth. Evidence also showed the existence of a distinctive 'youth culture' amongst the semi-dependent groups (France. 2007) and that certain festivals and activities were targeted specifically towards them, showing a recognition of separateness from childhood and adult activities (Gillis, 1981). But the notion of a transitional phase that was age-graded was not universally recognized. Boundaries were more likely to be blurred and locally defined around family, work and community. For example, employment in feudal society tended to revolve around the family home. Men, women and children all had parts to play in the production process of small-scale industries and agriculture.

Distinctive differences in this process existed between genders. Young women were expected to become involved in housewifery and domestic service, while young men entered occupations and apprenticeships that reinforced masculine roles. Marriage was also seen as the main transitional step for young women, while for men it was employment and a trade. A sexual division of labor was also already well established by the mid sixteenth century (Griffiths, 1996).

Early modernity and the youth

In the eighteenth-century modernity became the dominant form of social, economic and political order in Western Europe. It radically changed not only the mode of production but also the political and economic systems and social organization of life. A. Giddens (1991) suggests that modernity brings four critical developments. First, modernity can be associated with the introduction of industrialism and social relationships that emerge from the use of power and machinery in the production process. Second, modernity sees the establishment of capitalism as a system of commodity production that uses markets as the mechanism to distribute labor and commodities. While industrialism and capitalism are closely related, they need to be recognized as separate components. Third, modernity is linked with the creation of the modern nation state and the rise of organization as a critical aspect of ordering social life. Finally, with the emergence of industrialism, capitalism and the nation state, we see the growth of institutions of surveillance. This involves both the visible supervision and organization of certain populations, and the collection of information to monitor and coordinate social life (France, 2007).

The impact of modernity was far-reaching and substantial, leaving no area of life untouched. It not only reshaped time and space but also social relationships and radically changed local, national and global relationships. Its establishment took well over a century, but by the mid-nineteenth century we start to see the fundamental components embedded into the way the Western world was organized. Its influence on the meaning of youth was significant. What we see is the early establishment of the making of the modern phase called **youth**.

The emergence of the concept of youth as a distinctive category – and subsequently of youth as a distinct stage of life within a finite time span – can be historically situated at the passage from pre- industrial to industrial society, and in particular with the advent of modernization. During the 19th century, and in some regions even earlier, the notion of youth as a normal and normative stage in the life cycle became legitimate, particularly in Western societies. This development can be attributed to several factors, including: the effects of industrialization and urbanization and subsequent changes in the labor market, the improvement of living conditions, the transformation of society's modes of production and reproduction, and the emerging realization that time could usefully be calibrated, hence introducing the possibility of sectioning and structuring an individual's life into measurable units (Chisholm, Kovacheva and Merico,2011)

Further a number of factors that influenced the ongoing process of 'constructing' youth were educational reforms that took place in North America and Europe during this period; the beginning of state intervention; the regulation of working conditions, particularly concerning child labor; the reorganization of criminal justice systems; the recognition of leisure as a specific feature of youth experiences; and the erosion of vertical traditional forms of social control and the consequent emergence of new horizontal socializing agencies(Wallace, Kovacheva, 1998). The combined effect of these developments, along with the 'new knowledge' emerging from 'the scientific study of the period of adolescence', was such that it is only in our time that Youth has been fully discovered.

Youth is a broader concept than adolescence, which relates to specific developmental phases, beginning with puberty and ending once physiological and emotional maturity is achieved, and it tends to cover a more protracted time span. The term adolescence was coined by G. Stanley Hall in 1904 in an ambitious two-volume book entitled Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex,

Crime, Religion and Education. For Hall, the physiological changes associated with adolescence meant that the experience was essentially traumatic: characterized by 'storm and stress'– an expression taken from the German 'Sturm und Drang' movement. Adolescence was a period which involved risky behavior, mood swings and conflict with parents. Subsequently, various psychologists recognized that there was an important cultural dimension to adolescence and that physiological explanations were somewhat limited (Furlong, 2013).

Defining Youth

Youth is commonly understood as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. Youth have two dimensions–biological and social. "Puberty is a biological fact, but youth is a social one" (Flacks, 1971). On one hand it refers to a phase in the development of individuals, and on the other, it designates a group in society. These are two interrelated aspects that could be analyzed separately (Rosenmayr. 1972).

August Hollingshead in his study "Elmtown's Youth" defined youth sociologically as

> " the period in the life of the person when the society in which he functions ceases to regard him(male or female) as a child and does not accord to him full adult status, roles and functions. In terms of behavior, it is defined by roles the person is expected to play, is allowed to play, is forced to play, or is prohibited from playing by virtue of his status in society. It is not marked by a specific point in time such as puberty, since its form, content, duration, and period in the life cycle are differently determined by various cultures and societies" (Holligshed. 1949).

According to Friedhelm Neidhardt, "as opposed to children and adults, youth may be defined as those who with puberty have reached biological sexual maturity, without having gained possession, through marriage and employment, of the general rights and privileges which allow or require responsible participation in the significant fundamental processes of society" (Mitterauer, 1992).

Theodore Scharmann places a different emphasis from that of Neidhardt when he includes adult roles in his definition of youth:

> The general meaning and purpose of this period of transition and radical change is the same in all cultures; it is the step from the under-age, dependent child to the mature, responsible person, adjusted to reality, whose income and ability to support others is so far developed that he or she can go on to take the second great life decision, the choice of a partner, and can consider or achieve the founding of a family (Mitterauer, 1992).

S. N. Eisenstadt in his essay "Archetypal Patterns of Youth" seeks more specifically sociological criteria and defines youth as a "period of transition from childhood to full adult status or full membership in society. In this period, the individual is no longer a child (especially from a physical and sexual point of view) but is ready to undertake many attributes of an adult and to fulfill the adult roles. But he is not yet fully acknowledged as an adult, a full member of society. Rather he is being 'prepared' or is preparing himself for such adulthood" (Eisenstadt, 1962).

The specificity of youth as a social position between childhood dependence and adult responsibility can be seen in the institutions of the family, education and work. For example, youth is regarded as undergoing preparation

for the inevitability of leaving home and joining the adult world. Young people are granted some greater responsibilities than children but are still subject to adult control. This view leads to a set of significant assumptions and classifications of youth by agencies of social control – politicians, policymakers and youth professionals. These include the following:

- Youth is a unitary category, with certain psychological characteristics and social needs common to an age group.
- Youth is an especially formative stage of development, where attitudes and values become anchored to ideologies and remain fixed in this mould for life.
- The transition from childhood dependence to adult autonomy normally involves a rebellious phase. This is understood to be part of a cultural tradition transmitted from one generation to the next.
- Young people in modern societies experience difficulty in making successful transitions and require professional help, advice and support to do so. (Cohen, 1997)

In his paper "New Theoretical Approaches to the Sociological Study of Young People", Rosynmayr (1972) puts forward five conceptual approaches that could serve in grasping youth as a concept:

- Youth as a "phase in the individual life cycle," defined in biological terms or with strict reference to age.
- Youth as a "social subset" characterized by empirically frequent forms of behavior in a roughly determined age range.
- Youth as an "incomplete status," evidenced by the existence of individual, social and economic limitations to which grown-ups are not subject.
- Youth as "a socially structured generation-unit," exposed to common conditions and experiences and generating common activities.
- Youth as "an ideal value concept," expressed primarily in mental alertness, a forward-looking outlook, etc, or what subsumed under the expression 'Youthfulness'.

To make things more elaborated, the novel writings of K. Mannheim, L. Rosenmayr, P. Bourdieu, and S. N. Eisenstadt etc. portray youth as: a value concept, connoting a vital force; a source of renewal for the whole society; a category of chronological age; a segment in the lapse of the individuals life; a stage of psycho-biological development; an element of social replacement; a stage in life marked by incomplete access to social positions; a marginal social category; a constellation of ideologically homogeneous cohorts (Kuczynski, et al.,1988). Youth is also a time of growth, of searching for meanings and belonging; a stage of molding characters, interests, and goals; a process of constructing and reconfiguring identities; a creative period with both risks and possibilities.

According to Rosynmayr (1972), the term 'youth' could be viewed from two main aspects: on one hand it refers to a phase in the development of individuals (Age Category), and on the other, it designates a group in society. These are two interrelated aspects that could be analysed separately.

Youth as an Age Category

"Age' is of critical importance to how youth is defined and understood. Age has always been seen as vital in that it is strongly related to how others perceive what young people are capable of, what they should be protected from and what role they should have in choosing their own futures. In fact, what we see is that "... it is the political importance attached to age that in many respects shapes young people's lives" (Mizen, 2004). Talcott Parsons emphasized that "age grading …is interwoven with structural elements like kinship structure, formal education, occupation and community participation" (Parsons, 1942).

According to Eisenstadt, both age and age differences are among the basic aspects of human life. At each age,

> "He attains and uses different biological and intellectual capacities.... [At each age] he performs different tasks and roles in relation to the other members of his society.... [And] every stage in this progression constitutes an irreversible step in the unfolding of his life from its beginning to its end" (Eisenstadt. 1956).

The process of transition from one age stage to another is basically biological in nature and is, therefore, more or less similar in all societies. However, the cultural definition that is ascribed to this biological fact varies from society to society, at least in details. In anthropological literature this is often termed as "age-grade": the recognized division of individuals' life as they pass from infancy to old age. The differential allocation of role and the nature and type of relationships formed by individuals, as well as their social and cultural characteristics, are determined by the age-grades (Radcliffe-Brown. 1950).

The significance of age-grades for both the social structure and individual personality can hardly be exaggerated. From the view-point of the former, it serves as a mechanism for the allocation of roles to various people. From the point of view of the latter, it helps in the development of self-identification and understanding of the role expectations towards others. There is also gender differentiation in the definition of age-grades. However, these definitions are usually related and complementary since "sexual image" and "identity" constitute basic elements of human being's image in every society (Eisenstadt, 1972).

Definitions based on age are often used for legal and statistical purposes, including the age at which young people can earn money, join the armed forces, drives a vehicle, drink alcohol, or consent to sexual relations. It is important to note that these legal classifications are, to a large extent, variable, context-specific, and gendered, and are often at odds with other conceptualizations of childhood and youth (Valentine, 1999).

In legal terms, the age of maturity varies across time and between countries: in the United Kingdom the age of majority was 21 until 1970 when it was lowered to 18. In most countries, the age of majority is now 18, although it is not universal. Even in countries where the legal age of majority is set at 18, some rights are not granted until a later stage: in the United States, young people are not able to purchase alcohol until the age of 21, while in the UK full entitlement to social security assistance is not granted until age 25. In most countries rights and responsibilities are granted in a piecemeal fashion, beginning well before the legal age of majority and ending sometime later. In England, for example, young people may be regarded as responsible for criminal behavior from the age of 10, allowed to work part time in a limited range of occupations at age 13 but not allowed to drive heavy goods vehicles until 21 (Furlong, 2013).

International legal standards define all individuals under the age of 18 as 'children', after which they are legally considered to be adults. However, some international agencies have developed practical guidelines defining 'youth', usually in terms of chronological age. For example, the United Nations (2014) defines **'youth'** as people between the ages of **15 and 24**, based on the definition provided by the General Assembly for International Youth Year in 1985 without prejudice to other definitions by Member States while at the same time it also recognizes the diversity of definitions used by Member States. The UN also recognizes that a useful distinction can be made between **teenagers** (i.e. those between the ages of **13 and 19**), **adolescents** (persons aged **15-17** years) and **young adults** (those between the ages of **20 and 24**) (Furlong, 2013).

Youth as a Social Process

The term 'youth' does not refer to something solid, real or innate—it is a social process. Youth is 'imagined, endowed with meaning and problematized'. It is a social construction with social meanings and it is the task of the sociology of youth to understand how and why these have developed. Psychology and developmental approaches have made important contributions to our understanding of youth. However, such perspectives understand youth in specific ways that are limited to the individual. While the environment is seen as important, it only acts to change the impact of individual dysfunction and problems. Such approaches are unable to give a holistic picture of how youth is formed, constructed and understood as a social category. In addition, such views see young people as driven by internal forces and their bodies. So, sociologists reject such a narrow view and propose that youth has to be understood in its historical, social, political and cultural contexts. For example, understanding youth means that we must also recognize that youth today is itself a product of history. As we saw, G. Stanley Hall made up the notion of adolescence; it did not exist as a field of study until the 20th century. It has been created. In addition, the issues facing young people today are vastly different from those in Hall's time. While psychology continues to have an influence, the meaning of youth today is also strongly shaped by changes in the economy (i.e. in work), in changing notions of the family, in the institutions (the ones that educate our young) and in the norms and values of society. We therefore need to understand that youth is a more fluid category which is shaped by a wide range of external forces. How we will define it in a hundred years will depend on the social, cultural, economic, institutional contexts of that time. It is because of this reason youth sociologists believe that there is no universal (or essential) definition of youth: rather, they recognize that youth is contingent on our time and place and the socio-cultural norms within it (Kehily, 2007).

When sociologists say things like youth is a "social construction", or there is no such thing as "youth", what do they actually mean? What both of these statements imply is that what we currently understand as "youth", especially in wealthy, Western countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA or a wide range of Northern European countries, is in fact mediated by a range of historical, social and cultural factors specific to these countries. While there are similarities among these countries, there is no one set way of defining youth, as what it means to be a young person will depend on the circumstances of the time and place. It is also important to recognize that the "life courses" available to youth in non-Western countries can be very different and there are questions as to whether Western concepts of "youth" bear any relevance in these settings. For example, in Western societies, engagement in education through to the age of twenties is 'the norm', yet in many non-Western

parts of the world, large number of young people are engaged in paid employment in their early teens or straight after any form of schooling. In such circumstances, it is often also common for the girls to marry in their teenage years and become mothers early, while girls in the Western world are unlikely to become mothers until their middle or late twenties. Therefore, what youth means depends strongly on the circumstances of place and location.

Conclusion

The 'youth phase' is therefore one that is constructed by a series of processes, structures and representations that give meaning to the concept of youth. These processes can be economic, political, social and cultural, and they can exist in perceptions, narratives and representations across a wide range of media and discourses. It is important to remember that the social worlds young people inherit and inhabit are not of their making. What it means to be young at a particular historical moment in time in a specific space or place is defined by others. The issue of location (historical and spatial) creates and shapes the possibilities and opportunities that are available; It frames the types of experiences young people will have as they grow up' and move towards adulthood. This is not to deny the role of young people as social actors and contributors to their own lives and trajectories, but it is important to recognize that the social context of young people's lives is one that they largely inherit from previous generations. This operates at multiple levels, across and through a range of ideas, structures and everyday social practices.

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