

## CHAPTER 1

# Young People and Social Change

## CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- Youth as a social process
- Building strategic knowledge about young people
- Theorising social change
- Individualisation
- Social generation
- Subjectivities
- Transitions
- Belonging

## KEY TERMS

belonging

social generation

individualisation

young people

social change

youth transitions

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on one of the central issues in the sociology of youth and youth studies—the changing experience and meaning of youth. The social category ‘youth’ emerged under particular historical circumstances. As Ariès (1962) argues, the idea of children and youth did not exist in the Middle Ages. At that time, children and young people were integrated into adult life at an early age, as many children who are workers or carers are today. Ariès documents how the idea of youth as a separate stage of life began to emerge among the upper classes in the seventeenth century, as it became expected that young people in these classes would be educated. Education became a way of distinguishing between youth and adult lives. Ariès’ foundational work is important for sociologists of youth, because it underlines the historical specificity of the terms ‘child’, ‘youth’ and ‘adult’.

Each chapter in this book elaborates on the ways in which youth is socially constructed, and how youth is experienced. Researchers in youth sociology and youth studies often draw on a range of disciplines to explore different aspects of youth, including the ways in which young people belong or are excluded, the institutional processes that frame their possibilities for being, and the risks they bear. Cultural geography, history, cultural studies, social psychology and political studies, for example, all provide insights into the flows of influence that make youth.

This chapter introduces a number of ongoing debates within the field of youth studies. A range of productive new approaches is emerging, drawing on convergences (for example, between cultural and transition strands of youth sociology); reflexivity (an awareness of how words and concepts shape thinking and influence what we see); and a willingness to challenge orthodoxies (including dominant sociological perspectives). We suggest that building strategic knowledge that is recognised as partial and imperfect offers a productive way to generate understanding of young people's lives in a changing world. We agree with Tuck and Yang (2012), Jones and Hoskings (2015) and Connell (2007) that new approaches must take greater account of people's connectedness with place, with land and landscapes, as well as with people in local and global spaces. Youth researchers are increasingly prepared to take such a reflexive approach, acknowledging the limitations and partial nature of theories.

In order to understand social change, we draw on theories of individualisation and risk and social generation, as well as insights from research on youth cultures to understand young people. The individualisation thesis enables us to understand the changing influence that institutions play in people's lives. Individuals need to respond regularly and frequently to changing circumstances. Decision making is pragmatic and based on imperfect knowledge, with the risks and responsibilities resting on individuals. We return to this framework in several places throughout the book to analyse the changing ways in which young people's lives are structured.

We also draw on the idea of social generation, to recognise the ways in which social conditions create generational dispositions and approaches. For instance, there is a strong body of work that identifies how the generation of young people born after 1970 experienced significantly different circumstances to the preceding generation of young people (known as the 'baby boomers'). These conditions

are specific to Western countries, and relate to the shift from industrially based economies to post-industrial economies, as well as the silent education revolution of the 1990s. A generation of young people have borne the brunt of the global economic crisis in 2007–2008, experiencing high rates of unemployment and facing the emergence of precarious work, and economists talk of the ‘scarring’ effects of unemployment on a generational scale (Chauvel 2010; International Labour Organization 2013).

A generational approach is one way of understanding the possibilities for becoming that are available to each generation as young people engage with their circumstances. We explore this in many of the chapters of this book, especially in Chapter 12, which focuses on the importance of understanding the formation of identities in the context of changing social conditions. A generational approach also provides a framework for understanding the significance of youth cultures. Youth cultures can be seen as an expression of generational preoccupations and dispositions and their engagement with new communications technologies. Similarly, the concept of social generation provides insights into belonging, as distinctive institutionalised transition processes impact on successive generations, and as young people themselves take up new forms of citizenship and civic engagement.

## YOUTH AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

The term ‘youth’ does not refer to something solid, real or innate—it is a social process (Wyn & White 1997). Youth is ‘imagined, endowed with meaning and problematised’ (Talbot & Lesko 2012). 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’ (Jones 2009). According to Jones, Bourdieu stated that ‘youth is just a word’, and argued that age divisions were arbitrary reflections of power relations (Bourdieu 1978, quoted in Jones 2009: 1). Popkewitz takes this idea further, arguing that ‘youth as a category of human kind is made possible and intelligible through a grid of historical practices that is analogous to the making of a cake.’ (2012: 61). Mizen (2004) points out that ‘of course, all young people “grow up”’, although the exact timing of this varies. He argues that although this is not controversial, the use of the physiological transformations of adolescence as the means to explain the socially determined category of youth is highly contested (Mizen 2004: 5). The way in which the category ‘youth’ is used and the meaning

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Youth is just a word.

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of being a young person are both a product of the time and place in which they occur. Researchers continually point out that ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ are variously categorised within variable age groupings that differ widely depending on the time, purpose and place (Valentine 2003; Mizen 2004; Hopkins 2010).

We agree with these authors. The chapters in this book reassert the idea that:

Youth is a relational concept because it exists and has meaning largely in relation to the concept of adulthood. The concept of youth, as idealized and institutionalized (for example in education systems and welfare organisations in industrialized countries) supposes eventual arrival at the status of adulthood. If youth is a state of ‘becoming’, adulthood is the ‘arrival’. (Wyn & White 1997: 11)

But the point of arrival—adulthood—is often a mirage, shimmering on the horizon but never quite in reach. Adulthood is fluid and imprecise. As Blatterer (2007) argues, adulthood itself is a social construction and so its status and meaning changes in time and across places. The alignment of childhood, youth and adulthood with age gives a *common* status to the people in these categories, yet the significance of social divisions (such as class, race, ethnicity, gender and location) that *differentiate* people within these categories are often even more significant. Hence, young men in rural communities, for example, may have more in common with men in their parents’ generation than with all young people in their own generation.

Thus, from the outset, our aim with this book is to explore the ways in which youth is framed and constrained (by institutions), shaped and acted on (by young people) and experienced in enactments of identity, taking account of different contexts and circumstances. We see ‘youth’ as a social category (as in institutional definitions of childhood, youth and adulthood) and we use the term ‘young people’ to talk about specific people and groups. Our analysis draws on contemporary ideas and debates in the sociology of youth and in the field of youth studies, of which the sociology of youth is a part. We argue that the following issues and debates are central to an understanding of young people and social change at the present:

- the recognition that the traditional divide between youth transitions and youth cultures approaches is damaging and has diverted attention away from important sociological questions and policy issues
- the reassertion of sociological frameworks in response to a revival of psycho-developmental models of youth that claim universal ‘truths’ about young people’s capacities and essential characteristics

- the nexus between youth studies and youth policy as a highly contested space in which complexity is often sacrificed for simplistic ideas about problems and solutions
- new approaches that can grasp the relationship between change and continuity in young people's lives, so that change is not overstated and continuities with the past—especially structural divisions like class, gender and ethnicity—are recognised
- conceptual frameworks that are capable of addressing complexity, including change and diversity in young people's trajectories (individual); their different lives across place and time according to social, environmental, economic and political circumstances (structural); and the enactment of these within individual identities (subjectivity).

Building on the questions of social change (Furlong & Cartmel 2007), 'new' youth (Leccardi & Ruspini 2006) and invented and unstable adulthood (Thomson et al. 2004; Blatterer 2007), there has been a concerted effort to seek conceptual approaches and frameworks that address complexity (see Chapter 17). Youth researchers from a range of disciplines are seeking to build on existing approaches to produce more nuanced and sophisticated concepts and frameworks to better understand the complex lives of young people across local and global, national and international spaces. For example, Talburt and Lesko argue that youth studies has 'moved beyond its roots in the subcultural studies of the Birmingham School, psychological developmental research, and sociological studies of socialisation and deviance to encompass a diverse array of disciplines and sub-fields' (2012: 3). The embracing of cross-disciplinary approaches is echoed in research on young people and place, drawing on cultural geography, history, architecture, anthropology and cultural studies (see for example Hall, Coffey & Lashua 2009; Hopkins 2010). Western youth studies traditions are also being challenged by scholarship from non-Western places (Jeffrey 2010; Khalaf & Khalaf 2011a).

These developments refute parallel yet opposing approaches that offer certainty, finality, simplicity and conclusive findings. Although youth is demonstrably a social construction, the idea that youth is essentially a deficient and undeveloped stage towards adulthood is given new life, for example, by the application of new imaging technologies to scan the brains of young people. These practices appear to confirm what developmental psychologists have always asserted: youth is innately limited by biology (Seaton 2012). In other areas too,

finality and simplicity are delivered, through the construction of theory by numbers. For example, the use of statistical surveys that provide evidence of ‘smooth transitions’ between institutional markers (such as school and work), making it easy for policy makers to refer to the ‘distribution’ of educational outcomes as though the pages of numbers before them were active human agents.

In the following sections of this chapter and throughout this book, we argue that such simplicity is only possible through the conceptual sleight of hand that enables researchers to believe that their concepts have no role in the making of the objects of their research. With this in mind, we take a critical perspective on standard concepts and preoccupations within the sociology of youth, such as youth transitions, youth participation and the tendency to focus on urban youth.

## BUILDING STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE

Youth researchers are increasingly interested in exploring the ways in which rationalities of government and governing create and recreate the category of youth, construct youth as a population with emergent problems and create the knowledges to understand and administer them (Talburtt & Lesko 2012: 3; Kelly 2006). Our approaches and the concepts that we use make the objects of our research. In other words, theoretical orthodoxies create ‘truths’ and naturalise particular ways of thinking about young people. Talburtt and Lesko explain how these theoretical orthodoxies come to be ‘affective’—that is, they are internalised by professionals and parents, who invest emotionally in their ways of understanding youth.

Part of the operation of rationalities and technologies is affective, evoking an almost-automatic response to stock representations of gang members, innocent teens, or gangling geeks. Thus educators’, youth workers’ and researchers’ investments in particular rationalities and technologies are often felt ones. (Talburtt & Lesko 2012: 4)

Recent work by a range of youth researchers is taking a ‘reflective turn’ in which orthodoxies are being challenged and the implications of theory for the social worlds that researchers investigate are being explored. Ball (2006) argues that theory is necessary for understanding our social world—but that in using theory we can sometimes do violence to the objects of our research. He argues for theory, but against theory for its own sake. He draws on the insights of Foucault

and Bourdieu to argue that social scientists need to guard against closure and to be aware of the ways in which presuppositions in thinking about the social world are inevitable. He highlights the flaws and discontinuities in the theories of Bourdieu and Foucault, arguing that the partial and at times contradictory nature of their work provides spaces for others to participate in making meaning.

Theory is necessary because we cannot avoid drawing on assumptions to create order (for example, young people are going through processes of transition), but order is elusive, because theoretical work is never finished, findings are never absolute and research is imperfect (older people can also go through similar processes of transition). Theory is a tool to support the practice of a robust social science and the building of 'strategic knowledge' little by little (Foucault 1980: 145, quoted in Ball 2006: 4). It is useful to see recent developments in youth studies in this light. In particular, the desire to develop more sophisticated theories to understand complex lives has been accompanied by a 'reflexive turn' in which youth researchers and theorists take a critical approach to theorising (see for example Lesko & Talburt 2012; Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011; Wright & McLeod 2015).

Complexity is increasingly on the agenda for youth researchers. In a bold statement, Rizvi claims that 'more people are now moving across national boundaries than at any time in the history of mankind' and he notes that cultural borders are becoming increasingly porous (2012: 192). Digital communications play a significant role in breaking down distinctions between local and global cultures and political movements, and create new sites for the expression of Indigenous cultures. Western-based academics are also becoming increasingly aware of the lives of young people in non-Western countries, creating pressure to break with the simplicities that have been written into traditional conceptual frameworks.

For example, gender relations and gender-based violence is one of the most significant issues for young people in non-Western countries (UNICEF 2011, 2012; Carrington 2015). In Western countries, gender is being re-discovered as an issue. Gender-based violence and harassment has been amplified by digital communications and researchers and governments alike have acknowledged that over the last quarter of a century little has changed in the gendered nature of workplaces, with women receiving lower wages and experiencing poorer working conditions than their male peers (ILO 2012). At the same time that new issues (for example, cyber-bullying, obesity, mental health) are being identified as problems

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in developed countries by policy-oriented researchers, older problems associated with poverty, class, gender, disability and location are entrenched (see Chapter 2).

## THEORISING SOCIAL CHANGE

Our analysis of social change draws on a wide range of ideas and references, many of which represent what Connell would term ‘metropolitan theory’, which originates in the northern regions of the planet (Connell 2007). We agree with Connell that the familiar social science theorists (on whom we also draw—including, for example, Bourdieu, Foucault and Beck) have developed theoretical frameworks that ignore the intellectual debates that have occurred among colonised people, and that the social processes referred to by these theorists are characterised as being in an ‘ethnographic time warp’ (Connell 2007: 44). Yet the approach taken in this book resonates with Connell’s idea of ‘dirty theory’ or ‘theorizing that is mixed up with specific situations’ so as to expand rather than reduce the sources of our thinking (Connell 2007: 207). Our focus is unapologetically ‘Southern’, with particular reference to Australia and New Zealand. But we also draw on a wide range of examples from many countries, intersecting the different binaries that are used to describe the parts of our planet (North/South; Western/non-Western; developed/undeveloped), to discuss young people and social change. We draw on the insights of established and emerging scholars on Indigenous youth (for example, from New Zealand, Tuhiwai-Smith 2012; from Australia, Collard & Palmer 2015; Kral 2010; from the US, Tuck & Yang 2014; Patel 2015; from South Africa, Bhana 2015; Graham & Mphaphuli 2015; and from Canada, Sinclair 2009). This work is producing important insights into the lives of young Indigenous people, and the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in these countries.

The shifts in youth studies and the sociology of youth, towards reflexivity in the use of theory and a willingness to draw on diverse disciplines to understand young people’s lives, are consistent with Connell’s orthodox-breaking agenda. These developments in thinking focus on connections between people and place, and between social and physical environments, that enable young people to belong and lives to be sustained.

Two theoretical areas recur in our analysis: the individualisation thesis and the idea of generation. We use these because they allow us to bring together sets of ideas that focus simultaneously on individual lives and trajectories; social contexts



and change; and the construction of dispositions and identities. These frameworks, we suggest, enable us to gain a purchase on temporality (individual and social change) and on the ways that these intersect in identity.

## INDIVIDUALISATION

The concepts of individualisation and risk society provide a broad framework for understanding some of the dynamics of social change in Western societies over the last fifty years. Social changes that have changed the dynamics of society are associated with:

- education—universal post-secondary education (see Chapter 8)
- work—the deregulation of labour markets and the shift from industrial to post-industrial economies (see Chapter 9)
- gender—more women working and fewer men working (see Chapter 3)
- class—new forms of inequality in access to resources within and across countries are emerging and the gap between rich and poor is increasing (see Chapter 4).

These changes have had a significant impact on the conditions under which society functions. Beck and Lau argue that:

All around the world, society is undergoing radical change—radical in the sense that it poses a challenge to Enlightenment-based modernity and opens up a space in which people choose new and unexpected forms of the social and the political. (2005: 525)

Beck and Lau use the term ‘first modernity’ to refer to nation-state societies that exist in a clear territorial sense and exercise control over their dominions. A shift to ‘second modernity’ has involved the fragmentation of collective ways of life based on the nation-state and, through globalising processes, on the undermining of the possibilities for nation-states to control social conditions (to provide for full employment, for example, or to be able to ensure the value of educational credentials). On the other hand, people are freed from older networks and constraints to negotiate new meanings and social relationships.

As Bauman explains in the foreword to *Individualization* (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the fragmentation of traditional structures (including nation-states, families and trade unions) has created a situation where people’s identity has become a task rather than a given: ‘Needing to *become* what one *is* is the

hallmark of modern living' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xv). The sources of collective identity that were characteristic of industrial societies have begun to lose their relevance.

## BOX 1.1

### Some meanings of *globalisation*

- Supranationalisation—transcending national limits
- Internationalisation—exchanges of capital and labour
- Universalisation—spread of information and cultural phenomena worldwide
- Neoliberalisation—removal of regulatory barriers to international exchange or transfer
- Westernisation—homogenisation, driven by advanced industrial economies
- Anglo-Americanisation—homogenisation driven by the United States
- Modernisation—the diffusion of managerial economics

Source: Muncie 2007: 47

Influential in the individualisation tradition, Beck and colleagues' most significant contribution to youth studies is the idea that individuals must respond regularly and frequently to changing circumstances. Decisions are often made without premeditation, and they inevitably have unintended consequences that require further decisions. Although Beck's work has often been (mis)used to explain how individual people respond to change, his work did not focus on individuals (see for example Woodman 2009). The value of Beck's writing is that it offers insights—often partial and imperfect—about changes in institutions. Beck focuses on the shift from collective-based institutions to new institutional logics. It is this logic—one of proliferating institutions and their regimes, which impose contradictory rules, responsibilities and constraints on individuals—that impacts on the individual.

These processes have a number of implications for young people. First, because the world they experience is distinctively related to time and place, the pathways and approaches used by older people, especially those in the previous generation, do not necessarily provide a reliable guide for action. The Youth Research Centre's Life Patterns longitudinal research program, for example, found that young people who left secondary school in the early 1990s saw mobility and flexibility as a more effective way to ensure their (financial) security than

predictability (Andres & Wyn 2010). In other words, whereas their parents had often made a success of their lives by remaining within one occupation or job for the majority of their lives, they learnt that it was best not to become dependent on one job for any length of time. In a precarious labour market, being flexible and mobile are important skills that can provide longer-term security, which means that young people are aware of the need to forge their own pathways. They have learnt that it is necessary to be very proactive.

Secondly, the proliferation of institutional processes and regimes also means that these processes are fragmented and responsibility for managing life is increasingly vested with individuals. Apart from some notable exceptions (for example border control), the state has increasingly divested itself of responsibility for key life events. This is particularly visible in the gradual reduction in the provision of social welfare as governments seek to minimise support for the disadvantaged, and in the resistance to providing public support for childcare by both sides of politics in Australia (see Gornick & Meyers 2003). The decline in social and economic responsibility by nation-states has meant that individuals feel more responsible for managing risks. The capacity to be proactive in uncertain times relies in part on the ability to be reflexive; that is, to see one's own life and biography as something that does not just unfold, but that is also actively constructed through one's own efforts. This active construction of one's biography is called the 'project of the self' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and involves an active process of personal management even in circumstances where, objectively, individuals would have little control (for example, with regard to unemployment). In the Life Patterns study, for example, young people in their mid-twenties (in 2002) said that, after the support of their families, their own personal development was the most significant influence on their lives (Andres & Wyn 2010).

The process of individualisation captures the process through which young people come to feel that they are responsible for bearing the risks that are created through social processes and structures (see Chapter 2). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue, social inequalities in late modernity have become redefined in terms of 'an individualisation of social risks' (2002: 39). They explain that, as a consequence, social problems become perceived through a psychological, and therefore individualising, lens (as personal inadequacies or neuroses, for example). The recent upsurge of concern over obesity among young people could

be seen as an illustration of this. The complexities of the role of the marketing and accessibility of (fast) food consumption in globalised economies tend to be underplayed through the overwhelming focus on the responsibility of parents and children to eat healthy foods. To refer to an older sociological distinction made by Mills (1959), the scale of obesity marks it as a public issue, which is related to the organisation of our society; however, the issue has been treated as a personal problem to be solved by individuals (see Willis 2004: 18).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that the 'do-it-yourself biography' is also a 'risk biography' (2002: 3); that is, in a society in which individuals must make decisions against a backdrop of uncertainty and impermanence, it is easy to make the wrong response. The point is that it is seen as both the right and the responsibility of the individual to make decisions, and as the failure of the individual if the decision is not a good one. Individualisation, then, is a process that makes risky social processes and structures invisible and vests individuals with the responsibility for bearing these risks.

These processes have been supported by shifts in the way in which governments manage youth. In *The Changing State of Youth*, Mizen (2004) discusses a shift in the United Kingdom from Keynesian economic policies (1946–1976) to monetarist policies, which extend from 1977 until the present. He analyses how Keynesian state policies involved support for a welfare state, a commitment to full employment, the expansion of secondary schooling, and the inclusion of youth in civic life. Under monetarist policies, economic goals have become the primary focus. This has meant the progressive reduction of public support for young people, minimising the provision of social welfare, the development of categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' youth, and an emphasis on instrumental, vocationally oriented education (Mizen 2002: 14–16). Monetarist policies have narrowed the fiscal responsibility of the state for young people while at the same time hugely expanding the reach of monitoring, surveillance and control over young people's lives and the institutions in which they spend their time. The framework of individualisation and risk has been subject to extensive debate and criticism within youth studies. For example, an ongoing debate about the use of this approach is recorded in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (Woodman 2009, 2010; Roberts 2010, 2012). This debate centres on the question of whether the individualisation thesis necessarily precludes a consideration of social class, because of its focus on the structuring and fragmenting forces of

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institutions. From time to time, researchers have claimed to have ‘disproven’ the individualisation thesis because young people’s ‘choices’ are still constrained by class and gender divisions even if influenced by ‘an ideology of individualism’ (Andres & Adamuti-Trache 2008), or because they have traditional expectations of life and relationships (Skrbis et al. 2012).

The Life Patterns longitudinal study has been a valuable resource informing debates about individualisation and about social generation. The following case study provides background information about the Life Patterns study.

## **Case Study: The Life Patterns longitudinal study**

The Life Patterns research program is designed to follow patterns in young people’s lives over time in order to gain a longitudinal and holistic understanding of the ways in which two generations of young Australians are responding to our rapidly changing world. The program is based at the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. The generosity and ongoing support of the Life Patterns participants has meant that this study has built up a unique picture of the reality of the lives of two generations. Over the past three decades, changes such as the need for more education, greater insecurity and precariousness in employment, and the decreasing relevance of traditional patterns of living have created conditions in which young people think of their lives as a personal project.

The Life Patterns research program:

- Follows two generations of Australians—one generation that left secondary school in 1991 (corresponding to the popular notion of ‘Gen X’) and another that left secondary school in about 2005 (corresponding to the popular notion of ‘Gen Y’). Multiple comparisons can be made between the two cohorts across different points in their lives.
- Explores the pathways through different areas of life taken by Australian young people, including their experiences in education, the labour market, their family and personal relationships, attitudes to life, concerns, and health and wellbeing.

- Provides a unique picture, very different from the stereotypes of smooth transitions from education to work, or of the lazy, narcissistic or complacent generation often described in the media or by politicians. Researchers have argued for the importance of paying attention to the diversity of experiences that characterise young people's lives.
- Allows for insights to be drawn that feed into policy advice and also into public debate; the research often features in the media disputing simplistic claims about young people.
- Was designed to follow patterns in young people's lives over time in order to gain more than a static glimpse.
- Surveys Cohort 2 yearly, and interviews a small subset of 30–50 participants every second year.
- Surveys Cohort 1 every two years, and interviews a subset of 20 every third year.
- With the support of the participants and the support of the University of Melbourne and the Australian Research Council, it is an ongoing project. For further information, see the Life Patterns website: [www.education.unimelb.edu.au/yrp/projects/life\\_patterns](http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/yrp/projects/life_patterns).

Some of the ideas that are reputed to be central to the idea of individualisation and risk are in fact reinterpretations of Beck's ideas, the actual sources of which are difficult to find. Perhaps the most notorious of these is the idea of 'choice biography', which was popularised by du Bois-Reymond (1998). While Beck and other individualisation writers, such as Giddens (1991) and Bauman (1998), have argued that increased institutional demands put pressures on people to actively shape their lives, this does not mean that they have more choices, or that the choices are not still shaped by structural elements such as gender and class.

[A]lthough young people are faced with the need to make their own decisions about their futures, participation in post-secondary education has become normative. Education credentials are now a necessity, but not sufficient, requirement for job security. In one sense, young people today, while having to make many decisions about their future and receiving guidance from numerous 'experts', are more constrained

in their choices than young people were before the silent education revolution of the early 1990s. (Woodman & Wyn 2011: 9)

Although there is ongoing healthy debate about young people and social change, and the theories used to understand them, there is also an emerging consensus that generational change has indeed occurred, and that ‘adulthood has changed in fundamental ways from previous generations’ (Andres & Adamuti-Trache 2008: 141). In part this is captured in contemporary discussions of generation and change.

## SOCIAL GENERATION

The idea of generation features regularly in the popular media. Stereotypes, such as gens X, Y and Z, generation me, millennials, baby boomers, and baby busters, to name just a few, have appeared in popular writing in order to describe successive generations of young people (Coupland 1991; Foot 1996; Sheahan 2005; Twenge 2006). The popularity of these terms suggests that there are significant, distinctive experiences that link some age cohorts to each other and separate them from others. Although these stereotypical terms are often based on market research, they raise the question of the impact of specific conditions on young people’s lives and the distinctive ways in which young people shape their generation. These popular stereotypes assert that generations can be distinguished from each other and imply that they will continue to be distinctive—and to be identified as a social generation—throughout their lives.

Within sociological writing, the concept of social generation has a long history. It is based on the understanding that age is a sociologically significant variable (Pilcher 1994) and the meaning of age is given through social and economic relations (Allen 1968; Finch 1986; Wyn & White 1997; Mizen 2004). Mannheim (1952) proposed the use of social generation as a conceptual tool for the analysis of social change. He argued that people who belong to a common period of history, or whose lives are forged through common conditions, form a ‘generational consciousness’. He distinguished social generations from age cohorts and developed an argument about social change in which individuals ‘both constitute historical configurations and are constituted historically by them’ (Pilcher 1994: 490).

Social generation has emerged in recent literature on social change to provide a conceptual framework for understanding how patterns of transition are linked to specific historical conditions. Edmunds and Turner, for example, argue that social



generations develop a 'cultural identity' that they form as a result of 'their particular location in the development of a society or culture' (2005 7). There is debate about whether the concept of social generation is too general. Some researchers have cautioned against the use of a very abstract concept of social generation, suggesting that the concept needs to be connected to an understanding of class, and of local variation and difference (Jones 2003; Nayak 2003; France & Roberts 2015).

Nonetheless, we argue that a concept of social generation has value because it overcomes the reliance on age as *the* defining feature of 'youth' (Cohen 1997) and embeds youth within historical and local conditions. Perhaps most importantly, this concept also has value because it focuses on the experience and meaning of change for young people.

One dimension of the relationship between youth and social context is the shaping of youth by state policies (see also Chapter 11). In understanding this dimension, we find Mizen's analysis of youth (2004) useful because it enables us to see the link between the social and material conditions fostered through Keynesian economic policies, including the conditions that so powerfully defined the baby boomer generation (Wyn & Woodman 2006). As argued in Wyn (2007), in Australia these features included the expansion of social welfare, a commitment to full employment, and the implementation of universal, free, public education through mass secondary schooling. These were instrumental in creating the conditions that enabled the distinctive educational, labour market, and domestic patterns that marked the baby boomer generation.

The shift to monetarist policies coincides with the emergence of 'generation X'. Under monetarist policies, state support for young people was reduced as welfare systems were restructured. In Australia, as in other Western countries, reducing state responsibility for young people has been supported at a policy level by using age as a means of control. For example, the 'Learn or Earn' policy of the Australian Government, introduced in January 2015, sought to restrict the payment of unemployment benefits to unemployed young people (up to the age of 30) for six months. Although the withholding of payment for six months was not implemented due to a public outcry, the punitive assumptions underlying youth unemployment policies has remained, enforcing the requirement for young people to be in education or work (see Wyn & Cuervo 2014). These policy approaches have also contributed to the creation of distinctive generational experiences for the post-1970 generation, in which uncertainty and insecurity are heightened and reliance on personal cultural and material resources increased.

As Woodman and Wyn argue in their book *Youth and Generation* (2015), the contemporary use of the concept of generation has followed the sociological tradition of reinventing older concepts and using them in new ways. Hence, Mannheim's concept of generations (1952) informs the concept of social generation used in this book in several ways. Focusing on the question of continuity and change, the concept of social generation highlights the way in which successive generations face distinctive conditions that require a change in the rules for achieving a sense of ontological security. As Woodman and Wyn argue (2015: 8), it is the young—the new generation—who rewrite the rules of the game.

It is important to recognise that a social generation is not simply an age or generational cohort in the strict sense. A social generation covers several age cohorts. For example, the Baby-boomer generation spans those born between 1946 and 1965. Generation X is generally regarded as including those born between 1966 and 1976 and Generation Y between 1977 and 1990. The generation born from 1991 onwards is becoming known as the Millennial Generation. Secondly, a generation is not homogenous, but is constituted by many different, sometimes opposing groups, which Mannheim called 'generational units', that have reacted in different ways to the conditions of their times.

There is considerable evidence across a number of indicators to suggest that in some Western countries a significant shift in life patterns has occurred between the baby boomer generation and the generation born after 1970 (Mizen 2004; Bynner 2005; Wyn & Woodman 2006). While this is likely to remain disputed territory for some time to come (Roberts 2007), social generation nonetheless provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the construction of youth and the diverse experiences of young people within their social contexts. Most importantly, the concept of social generation gives significance to the meanings that young people themselves attribute to their lives. A social generation is constituted through common subjective understandings and orientations as well as material conditions (Wyn & Woodman 2007). Hence it provides a framework that enables the analysis of the dynamic and changing relationship between social institutions and individual biographies.

On another register, the uprisings in the Middle East during 2011, known as the 'Arab Spring', spoke to a theory of generation. At that time, a revolutionary movement was mobilised by young people in in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and many

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It is the young—the new generation—who rewrite the rules of the game.

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other countries who felt disenfranchised by a generation of leaders. These were not ‘marginalised’ youth—they were the educated young people who mobilised against ‘kleptocracy and graftocracy’, poor governance and oppression. In these countries, generational conflict, amplified by the ‘youth demographic bulge’ of many Middle Eastern countries—in which more than half of the population is under the age of thirty-five—has created an environment of uncertainty (Khalaf & Khalaf 2011a).

In many other countries (for example Spain, Greece, the United States, Australia and New Zealand), economic change, exacerbated by the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, has created a crisis of unemployment for young people. The Occupy Movement (referring to the 2011 occupation of Wall Street by protestors) was in part a response by young people to evidence of the unequal burden of economic failures by governments and organisations on the young and the poor, globally. Despite bearing the brunt of economic recession and the emergence of precarious work (Standing 2011; Furlong 2015), young people in these countries have tended to focus on individual solutions and strategies (such as investing in more education). However, researchers point to generational effects of the failing nexus between education and work, identifying a scarring effect into the future (Chauvel 2010; Wyn & Cuervo 2014).

These circumstances highlight the perplexing fact that even though analyses of the situation of young people globally reveal that young people are subject to economic changes that are out of their control, they overwhelmingly see this challenge as an individual responsibility (Woodman & Wyn 2015a). For this reason, many youth researchers have taken an interest in young people’s subjectivities. A focus on subjectivities (including identities and cultures) enables an understanding of how young people make sense of their worlds, which we explore in more detail in the next section. Young people’s subjectivities provide important insights into the effects of social change—and they also influence change. The nature of social change is in turn reflected in the nature of young people’s trajectories over time. The concept of generation enables insights into the interweaving of social processes and individual biographies.

## SUBJECTIVITIES

Throughout this book we return many times to the concept of subjectivities and to the related concept of identity. We describe how young people draw on

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Most importantly, the concept of social generation gives significance to the meanings that young people themselves attribute to their lives.

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a range of influences and experiences in the development of their identities. We provide a more detailed discussion of the emergence of identity as a key concept within youth studies in Part 4, where we discuss youth identities and cultures (Chapter 12), digital youth (Chapter 13), chemical cultures (Chapter 14) and wellbeing (Chapter 15). Here we introduce the idea of subjectivities and identities and how they are integral to social change.

While the terms *identity* and *subjectivity* are sometimes used interchangeably, there is an important distinction between them. The term *subjectivity* refers to the social, economic and political discourses within which identities are formed. Social identities are shaped within specific social contexts in which only limited possible subject positions (subjectivities) are given (Davies 2004). In other words, identities are experienced and actively produced by young people but these productions and experiences are contingent on social and institutional relationships. Hence, when researchers refer to subjectivities they are referring to the discourses and narratives that circulate around and through particular groups of young people. When they refer to *identities*, they are referring to the specific narratives that individuals build to create meaning in their lives. Both of these concepts relate closely to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*: the system of durable and transposable dispositions that are structured by an individual's present and past material conditions of existence and which mediates an individual's actions with the 'external conditions of production' (McNay 1999: 99). Distinctive forms of *habitus* are developed through the taken for granted practices and rules of the game that dominate fields. Fields are structured spaces with their own history, specific rules, logics and practices; where individuals and institutions position and shape what happens in that social space, and the power of one field can influence others (Bourdieu 1990). Formal education, workplaces and family are regarded as fields. The concept of field can also be applied to disciplines. For example, Wyn has analysed the concept of peer groups as an example of the influence of the field of social psychology within the field of the sociology of youth (Wyn 2012).

Evidence about the nature and direction of social change generally takes the form of statistics comparing the life events of one generation with another. However these statistics do not tell us what meaning these patterns have for young people. Young people's aspirations, dispositions and the possibilities they see for themselves provide another very important source of information for understanding just how much has changed and what has not. In what ways, for example, is the pattern for later marriage and childbearing related to new

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Social identities are shaped within specific social contexts in which only limited possible subject positions (subjectivities) are given.

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subjectivities of womanhood? How does the increase in part-time work, even for graduates, influence how young people see themselves as workers? How do these changing possibilities impact on young people's identities?

In order to answer these questions, a lot of youth research has focused on subjectivities, exploring the new possibilities that are emerging for different groups of young people (for example, for some groups of young women, as argued by Harris (2004) and McLeod and Yates (2006)), as well as enduring forms of identity (for example, see MacDonald, Shildrick and Blackman (2010)). The focus on subjectivities also enables researchers to understand how new meanings of career, employment and family are emerging (Wyn & Woodman 2006). Evidence about young people's subjective understandings of learning and work has begun to challenge the traditional view that learning only happens at school (Smith & Green 2001).

The Life Patterns longitudinal research program has explicitly linked social and economic conditions of uncertainty in Australia in the 1990s with the need for young people to become active decision makers who are capable of being flexible in the face of precarious employment and increasing requirements for educational credentials (see Cuervo & Wyn 2012). The processes of individualisation (discussed earlier) have been linked by other researchers to the development of particular subjectivities. Kelly (2006), for example, has argued that contemporary conditions favour, and in one sense 'require', the performance of an 'entrepreneurial Self'. This self, he argues, is one that requires young people to demonstrate considerable autonomy in making decisions, and to take responsibility for the mistakes they make. Similarly, Harris (2004) describes the phenomenon of the 'can-do' girls—young women who believe that they can achieve anything—and McLeod and Yates (2006) describe the emergence of distinctive subjectivities that enable young people to 'self monitor' and adjust their goals and performances. More recent work on young people's subjectivities identifies the emergence of the 'Hikikomori' in Japan, who shut themselves in their bedrooms rather than face the uncertainty and unpredictability of contemporary Japan (Furlong 2008). Other examples are the exploration of young women's aspirations in an intergenerational context (McLeod 2015) and the significance of place to young people's identities (Farrugia 2015).

Research on youth cultures emerged in the late 1970s to explore the way that groups of working-class young people appropriated meaning through the cultural resources available to them and used these to resist education systems within which they inevitably were found wanting, and celebrate their own cultural

expressions (e.g. Willis 1977). This approach has continued to exert a strong influence on youth studies. We note for example that Tuck's analyses of cultural resistance by Indigenous Americans draws specifically on Willis' work (Tuck & Yang 2014). While focusing on young people's subjective experience and shared meaning-making, youth subcultural research theorised youth culture by drawing on a body of theory focused on structural constraint and class inequality.

Indeed, Woodman and Wyn (2015) argue that the idea of a social generation lost favour in the field of youth studies because of the way in which generation was rather mechanistically linked with culture by the scholars attached to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. The notion of a 'sub' culture was used to argue for a close association between young people's cultural expressions (generally through popular culture) and social class. We refer in more detail to the impact of this legacy on contemporary youth sociology (see Part 4). However, it is important to note here that the close coupling of subjectivities and culture with class was challenged by a range of authors in the 1990s and 2000s. Identities and subjectivities began to be viewed through the lens of neo-tribalism, lifestyle and scene (see for example Redhead, 1990; Bennett 2000; Miles 2000; and Muggleton 2000)). These authors emphasised the ephemerality of cultural expressions, opening up an understanding of the relatively fluid nature of young people's identities. The debate continues, as other researchers such as Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) reassert the centrality of social class for young people's identities and their cultural expressions. Others, such as Rattansi and Phoenix (2005) and Nayak (2003) highlight the emergence of hybrid identities, in response to the acceleration of social change and the trend towards fragmented subjectivities.

While the concepts of subjectivity, identity and culture have been central to the understanding of how successive generations of young people experience their worlds and express their understandings of it, this highly creative strand of youth studies has tended to be separate from the strand that identifies young people's patterns of transition. It is to this equally important strand of youth sociology that we now turn.

## TRANSITIONS

The metaphor of transition has held an influential place in contemporary youth studies. As we have alluded earlier, the relationship between youth and social change (and hence of generation) has often been documented through studies



that show the changing nature of youth transitions into young adulthood (see for example Furlong & Cartmel 2007). This is an important area of research and theorising within youth sociology, mapping the interrelated dynamics of both individual and societal change. That is, as young people embark on their individual biographies of transition, society is also going through transition.

The idea of transition is a metaphorical reference to a trajectory that is temporal as well as spatial—from the space/place of youth to that of adulthood. The literature is replete with references to pathways (which are regarded as becoming increasingly complex and messy) and to the idea that individuals navigate these pathways. Transition is almost exclusively seen to be from childhood to adulthood and from school to work. Two implications follow from this. Firstly, transition approaches have an implicit developmental underpinning, drawing on the field of social psychology. From this perspective, moving from childhood to adulthood (via the pathway of youth) is a developmental task, one that can be jeopardised and is risky, but that is nonetheless a universal process with a beginning and end point of arrival. Secondly, transitions approaches are almost exclusively focused on institutional transitions from education to work. This focus on education and work within a transitions approach also has synergies with the original work of the CCCS, particularly that of Willis and the analysis of how working class young men transition through education to get working class jobs (Willis, 1977). However, transitions approaches have been rightly criticised for ignoring other life domains for young people, such as wellbeing, family life and leisure and cultural pursuits. Critics of a transitions approach point out that the dominant focus on education and work, drawing on sets of institutional indicators such as school completion, labour market entry and full-time work do little to enlighten us about the spaces in between these indicators (see Hall, Coffey & Lashua 2009; Cuervo & Wyn 2012), spaces in which the events that impact on educational participation and engagement of work occur.

Even when a fuller account of life spheres is brought into focus, a transitions approach may obscure more than it reveals. For example, it has become common for youth researchers to observe that the life stage of youth has become extended in late modernity. This is obvious when one looks at the standard markers of adulthood such as completing education, buying a home and achieving a full-time job. Each of these achievements, as well as others, such as marrying or becoming a parent, are demonstrably occurring at a later age for today's young people, compared with the 1970s (see Chapter 7 on family). The impact



of these developments would seem to imply that adulthood is simply achieved later today than it was several generations ago. However, when we look beyond these indicators, into the experiences of young adults, this conclusion is not all that satisfactory. Shifting patterns of home ownership, marriage and parenting, education and work have also impacted on the nature of adulthood. It is not just that the markers of childhood, youth and adulthood have become blurred; the nature of these phases of life has also irrevocably changed. The lack of security that once characterised youth now characterises adulthood. Whereas in previous generations the juggling of study and work was seen as a youthful pursuit, it is now common for adults to return to study to improve their situation in the labour market, and to improve their opportunities for mobility. These patterns of a 'new adulthood' have a superficial similarity with previous patterns of youth, but it would be a mistake to assume that today's young people have access to the relatively secure adulthood that was available several generations ago. Instead of witnessing an extended youth, we argue that a 'new adulthood' is being experienced and the patterns that characterise today's young adults foreshadow the future of adulthood itself.

Our discussion highlights the importance of understanding the interweaving of individual transitions with social transitions (or change), and of drawing on conceptual frameworks that go beyond institutional indicators, to explore the relationships—social, cultural and material—that connect young people to their worlds. Hence, in the next section we discuss the ways in which youth researchers are turning to the concept of belonging to fill in the spaces between indicators of transition and gain a fuller perspective of the way in which young people are connected to people, places, institutions and resources.

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The lack of security that once characterised youth now characterises adulthood.

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## BELONGING

Belonging (like transition) is a metaphor, but unlike transition it is a relational metaphor (see for example Cuervo & Wyn 2014). Its use is evident in many of the frameworks that are familiar to youth researchers, such as Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, as well as the work of the researchers who have sought to understand the relationship between social structures and individual biographies (for example McDonald's *Struggles for Subjectivity* (1999) or the experiences of young people in times of significant change, such as for Arab youth). The ways in which young people perform and recognise belonging across different spheres

of life provides a fruitful starting point to understand how, under conditions of uncertainty and precarity, young people hold their lives together. In addition to tracing young people's progress against institutional markers of transition, youth researchers are seeking to understand how young people build relationships and draw on social and material resources.

In youth studies, many researchers have implicitly drawn on a notion of belonging to provide rich explorations of the way in which inequalities emerge. For example, Kraack and Kenway's (2002) study shows how many of the young men in a rural community became marginalised because traditional male occupations (such as forestry) were displaced by new economic developments (such as service work for tourism). Similarly, McLeod and Yates' (2006) study of young people's transitions through secondary school revealed how students actively engaged with the distinctive ethos of their school, shaping their ways of seeing the world and their sense of self. Watson and Farrugia's (2011) research on young people who are homeless, reveals the strategies that young people use to belong, including the use of intimate relationships by young women to create a level of stability and security. Henderson and colleagues (2007) also draw on Bourdieu's concepts to provide a nuanced account of young adults' strategies to belong in different settings in the United Kingdom. Although focusing on young people in very different circumstances, both studies draw on the relational concepts of Bourdieu to highlight the ways in which young people are compelled to 'invent' their own futures as traditional pathways either disappear or are blocked.

These uses of the relational framework, while providing insights into the processes that enable young people to belong, that compel them to strive to belong and that also contribute to processes of exclusion, nonetheless do not focus specifically on belonging.

Conceptual frameworks that focus on belonging enable youth researchers to understand several significant dimensions of contemporary youth that are often obscured by frameworks that focus on transition. These include:

- the social, institutional and economic dynamics that produce and reproduce inequalities (often in new ways)
- the nature and impact of mobilities across national borders
- the significance of social location, identity, and political values.

Research on young people and families provides an example of belonging (see Chapter 7). Family is an important resource for young people, yet its importance

to them has tended to be overlooked, with a focus on the move away from the family home. At the same time, it is increasingly acknowledged that one of the hallmarks of contemporary youth experience is the emergence of complex and multi-directional relationships between parents and their adult children (Gillies 2000). Using the lens of belonging, research on young people shows the centrality of family relationships, support and resources well into young adulthood (Wyn et al. 2012). Young people and their parents are connected through strong ties of interdependence (Pusey 2007), necessitated by changing economic conditions that make young people financially dependent for longer, and facilitated by communications technologies that enable strong connectivity.

An explicit focus on belonging is visible in the post-subcultural debates about young people (Baker et al. 2015). For example, Robards analyses ‘everyday belongings’ to reveal the multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory affiliations of young people in everyday life as ‘systems of belonging’ (Robards 2015: 125). He argues that Facebook plays a significant role in mediating youth cultures, providing a space for the display, recognition, mediation and archiving of cultural practices (such as skateboarding, for example), enabling young people to position themselves within systems of belonging. These analyses contribute to emerging scholarship on belonging.

Belonging is also central to analyses that use a social generations approach. For example, in their analysis of the lives of young people who choose to live in rural areas of Australia, Cuervo and Wyn (2012) draw on a social generational approach to explore how these young people remain part of their generation while going against the grain of migration from rural to urban areas. Similarly, Woodman and Wyn (2015) use the concept of transition regimes to explore the way in which young people’s sense of belonging is influenced by increasingly global patterns of transition through education and into work. Transition regimes are institutionally-sanctioned processes (for example, such as government policies and benefits) that create normative patterns of transition that young people in turn engage with as they seek to belong to their times.

Belonging is a metaphor that youth researchers invoke using a range of frameworks from Bourdieu’s *Habitus to the New Materialism* (see Jones & Hoskins 2015). This relational metaphor provides a way to bridge many of the troubling binaries that challenge youth researchers (such as the distinctions between structure and agency; local and global; virtual and real) and it enables youth researchers to draw on different fields (such as the sociology of identities and

emotions and the sociology of power). Belonging also occurs across different registers, such as belonging as performance (see Bell, 1999); belonging as motility or the capacity to be mobile (see Fallov, Jørgensen & Knudsen 2013) and belonging as multifaceted (see Yuval–Davis 2006). Gaining insights about young people's lives across multiple domains of life provides a useful starting point for youth sociologists to analyse how, in a context of increasingly fluid, unstable and mobile lives, young people hold their lives together.



## SUMMARY

This chapter has discussed some of the main themes to emerge in the sociology of youth and in youth studies more generally about the relationship between youth and social change. It introduces the key conceptual points that youth is a social process and that the experience of youth is an ongoing negotiation between social and personal relationships. We argue that it is important to hold onto the idea of individual trajectories and pathways as well as to understand how social conditions are also changing. The third strand, which we liken to a triple helix (see Chapter 17), is the way that these elements are expressed (and resisted) through identities. The possibilities for becoming and the constraints on young people's development are inextricably tied to the social conditions—the place and time—in which they are living. This awareness within youth sociology has created a sense of dissatisfaction with a transitions framework and has opened up a closer dialogue between the transitions and youth cultures strands of youth studies. This awareness has also created an interest in using the concept of belonging to more effectively understand how 'transitions' are experienced, and to shift the focus to how young people belong in the present.

This approach to social change touches on several key debates that are ongoing:

- The challenge of grasping the 'triple helix' of individual trajectories, social change and identities
- The value of a concept of social generation to grasp the relationship between change and continuity in young people's lives
- Seeking to move beyond the traditional divide between youth transitions and youth cultures approaches to better focus on important sociological questions and policy issues
- The use of conceptual frameworks (such as belonging) that provide insights into how young people are connected to people, places and institutions.

This chapter contributes to these debates, highlighting the following frameworks for analysis: the ideas of individualisation and risk, the idea of social generations, and the concept of belonging. Together, these frameworks and concepts make visible the interconnections between social change and individual trajectories.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How is the question of social change linked to our understandings of youth?
- 2 Discuss whether there are any significant events or transition points in young people's lives today that definitively mark the transition to adulthood.
- 3 Identify some generational stereotypes that are current in the popular media and discuss what they are saying about young people and what they are based on.
- 4 What are the most significant changes that have occurred between the baby boomer generation and generations X and Y?
- 5 What patterns of life are associated with a 'risk biography'?

# EXTENSION TOPICS AND REFERENCES

**THE USES AND ABUSES OF THE INDIVIDUALISATION THESIS IN YOUTH STUDIES** There is an ongoing debate about how the ideas of Back, Bourdieu and other theorists are used in the sociology of youth to deepen our understanding of young people and social change. The exchanges in the *Journal of Youth Studies* enable a deeper engagement with these debates.

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**A SOCIAL GENERATIONS APPROACH** The project of understanding social change has raised important questions about what elements of young people's lives have changed and what elements are enduring. While a social generations approach aims to understand the complex dynamics between change and continuity in young people's lives, some youth sociologists have argued that this approach obscures the persistence of inequalities. Against this backdrop, discuss the ways in which inequality impacts on young people's lives.

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**A CONVERGENCE OF APPROACHES** It is increasingly recognised that the traditional divide between youth transitions and youth cultures approaches is damaging and has diverted attention away from understanding key aspects of youth and social change. Discuss.

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