

Young People and Learning Processes in School and
Everyday Life 1

Thomas Johansson
Marcus Herz

Youth Studies in Transition: Culture, Generation and New Learning Processes

 Springer

Young People and Learning Processes in School and Everyday Life

Volume 1

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Preface

This book is the product of a long collaboration between the authors, who have both done extensive youth research in different fields. Thomas Johansson became involved in youth studies at the beginning of the 1990s. Since then he has published studies on young people's sexuality and identity, bodybuilding and fitness, young migrants, and violence in schools. Over the years, he has met a number of the influential academics cited in this book, such as Anthony Giddens, Paul Gilroy, Paul Willis, Ann Phoenix, Mica Nava, Johan Fornäs, Ove Sernhede, Ien Ang, and Les Back. Some of them have become friends; others have had a direct or indirect influence on his academic writing, not least via their books and articles. Academic work can be a solitary pursuit, but it is also a product of social interaction and influences from intellectual networks. Marcus Herz first became involved in youth studies through his work as a social worker and then later as a researcher. He has researched and published on young people with regard to social exclusion, racism, gender, migration, music, and social work in general.

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About the Authors

Thomas Johansson, PhD, is Professor of Pedagogy at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. He has published extensively in the fields of youth studies, urban studies, the sociology of the family, social theory, and critical studies on men and masculinities. His most recent publication is *The Conundrum of Masculinity: Hegemony, Homosociality, Homophobia and Heteronormativity* (Routledge, 2018) (together with Chris Haywood, Marcus Herz, Nils Hammarén, and Andreas Ottemo) and *Fatherhood in Transition. Masculinity, Identity and Everyday Life* (Palgrave, 2017, with Jesper Andreasson). His most recent publication is *Extreme Sports, Extreme Bodies: Gender Identities and Bodies in Motion* (Palgrave, 2018, with Jesper Andreasson).

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Setting the Scene

Whereas the concept of *adolescence* is used within psychological and especially psychoanalytic theories, *youth* is a sociological category. In this study, we will primarily use the concept of youth. Adolescence as well as the period of youth have been described in many ways. Often young people are described in dramatic and colorful ways. In the psychoanalytical literature, adolescence is described as a period in life when young people have to solve the conflict between *identity* versus *identity confusion* (Erikson 1985). Erik H Erikson regarded adolescence as a crucial phase in life when the search for an identity was the primary focus of the individual. During adolescence, personal identity gradually takes shape and conflictual aspects of the self become integrated into a more coherent identity (Blos 1962). Although we are not primarily interested in the psychological aspects of this development, we are inspired by numerous psychologists' attempts to understand and investigate the challenges inherent in growing up and becoming an adult person. Using the concept of youth, we are directing our focus towards the sociological aspects of being young in modern societies. However, we prefer to keep the focus on the tensions between the young person, the subject, and society.

So, why study young people? We will not try to propose that young people today live in a more uncertain time than, for example, their parents or grandparents, but we will argue that youth is an excellent period in life to study if we wish to acquire knowledge about societal and cultural transformations in our time. Interpreting youth and youth culture is one powerful way of approaching an understanding of historical transformations of ideas, categories, identities, and learning processes. Functioning as a relatively long and today even prolonged transition (Young adolescents) from childhood to adulthood, youth is an exemplary study object for anyone interested in how transitions are configured but are also constantly being reshaped and redefined in contemporary times.

“Youth studies” is in many ways a fractured field of enquiry. On the one hand, we have the divide between psychological studies on adolescence, and on the other hand, sociological studies on youth. To our knowledge, there are relatively few attempts to create bridges between these two camps. In addition, there is a divide between transition studies and cultural studies of youth in the sociological field of youth studies. At the same time, there is huge interest in empirical studies of young people today. In this book, we will argue that there is a need for a more integrated approach to youth studies. There are, of course, various ways of approaching such a delicate task. Our suggestion is that there is a need to create a symbolic and intellectual space for discussions on how to re-engage with the task of *theorizing youth*. The aim of this book and study is to create a platform for engaging in the intellectual challenges of theorizing and making sense of youth. We will elaborate further on this in the following sections.

Youth Studies & Theories of Youth

Youth and youth culture are sometimes seen as *seismographs* of social and cultural changes, alerting us to new subjectivities and societal transformations. There is therefore a close connection between youth, social theory, and modernization, or, as Paul Willis expresses it:

Youth are always among the first to experience, first hand, the problems and possibilities of the successive waves of technical and economic modernization sweeping through capitalist societies (Willis 2003, p. 391).

Consequently, according to this view, being able to read and interpret youth sharpens our eyes to ongoing social and cultural transformations. In Andy Furlong’s textbook *Youth Studies* (2013), we find a somewhat similar view on youth, social theory, and young people’s lives:

The examination of young people’s lives provides a unique window on processes of social and economic change and facilitates the exploration of some of the big theoretical concerns in social science (Furlong 2013, p. 5).

When reading these statements, it seems reasonable to expect that youth studies are a creative research field characterized by constant theoretical renewal and development. Concerns, however, have recently been expressed about the development of theory within this field of research. In particular, there seems to be a deadlock between two influential traditions: *youth in transition* and *youth culture studies* (France and Roberts 2015; MacDonald 1998). To our knowledge, there have been no serious attempts to develop a synthesis between these perspectives, although some researchers do address, identify and discuss the gap between the two perspectives to some extent (Bennett and Woodman 2015; Nayak and Kehily 2013). Paul Hodkinson (2015) has also addressed the need to create bridges between both sub-culture and post-subculture theory, as well as between the “transition” and “cultural” traditions within youth research. It is important to point out that much youth

research, of course, also runs outside the two more prevalent traditions (Geldens et al. 2011). In this book, however, we will focus mainly on the literature on youth studies that is influenced by sociological and cultural theories and perspectives.

In 2011, the relationship between the transitional and cultural perspectives was addressed in several contributions to the *Journal of Sociology*. According to Furlong et al. (2011), today there are clear signs of convergence between these two perspectives. The authors, however, also point out that: “as yet we do not have a conceptual framework that is accepted by those aligned to either tradition” (Ibid, p. 366). Although the ambition of bridging this gap in youth studies has increasingly attracted more attention, there is still an apparent lack of a commonly accepted theoretical foundation for youth studies. By this, of course, we mean common theoretical references, texts, debates, and research questions, rather than any general theory of youth. This lack of common reference points becomes evident when reading a recent volume on youth studies, *Youth cultures, Transitions, and Generations. Bridging the Gap in Youth Research* (Bennett and Woodman 2015). Although this volume is quite eclectic, no real attempts are made either to fuse the different traditions within youth studies or to make them meet and interact.

When reading textbooks on youth studies and browsing through journals such as *Young, Youth and Society* and *Journal of Youth Studies*, it is evident that the field of youth studies currently faces certain challenges, particularly with regard to its theoretical renewal and development. This is also reflected in several articles on the state of youth studies in general in, for example, the US, the Philippines, Turkey, and Colombia (Demir 2012; González and Pinilla 2012; Lanuza 2004; Maira and Soep 2004), or in Burundi and Rwanda (Philipps 2014). This critique, however, is not new; similar issues have, for instance, been raised in the UK (MacDonald 1998) and Australia (Wyn and White 1998). The desire for theoretical renewal and development is also reflected in the criticism that has been aimed at youth studies for years, such as the feminist critique that gender has traditionally been overlooked in youth research. This was evident both in youth transition studies (Wallace 1987) and in youth culture research (Griffin 1985). The focus in studies on youth transitions has been adapted as a result of this criticism, and studies with a gender perspective or where gender not class is the analytical departure point are today more common (Crompton 1999; Egerton and Savage 2000). A similar development has been occurring under the umbrella of youth culture studies, where, for instance, identity, subculture, and resistance among girls are more commonly studied (Sixtensson 2018; Skeggs 1997/2002). Although this shift is evident in the empirical work, however, it does not seem to have led to the same shift in the theoretical debate.

Even though the field of youth studies has often included a range of different experiences and identities, it has still received some critique for being both theoretically and empirically Eurocentric. This is apparent, for instance, in the literature on subcultures and resistance, and how it sometimes tends to overlook ethnic or racialized subcultures and instead highlights subcultures related to music or class (Zine 2000). Attention has similarly been drawn to the need to shift the focus of youth studies towards including new identities and pan-national agendas for young people (Faas 2007). This need is related to “new” identity projects aimed at youth, such as

the construction of a European identity emerging out of the European Union project and the increase in global migration. On the one hand, it is easy to partly dismiss this critique by pointing to existing research, such as much of the British and American research on youth culture, with its strong focus on immigrant youth and black youth culture. On the other hand, this critique encourages us to consider which theoretical concepts are being used and how they reflect different youth groups in different contexts. Examples would include concepts such as resistance, or the meaning of transitions in a global context, or the social and political contexts within which the empirical work is done.

Inspired by these ongoing discussions about the heritage of youth studies theory, the present book is mainly an exploratory and conceptually oriented study. It is designed to point to the routes that could be taken when continuing the work of finding fruitful and adequate ways of exploring and developing theories of youth and youth culture. Consequently, this book has three aims:

1. It explores the current state of some of the main theoretical approaches to youth studies. There are, of course, different ways of describing the development of youth studies theory. From a British perspective, there has been a longstanding distinction and separation between *youth culture studies* and studies of *youth transitions* (Furlong 2009; Furlong et al. 2011). There are both theoretical and methodological differences between these two approaches. Whereas youth cultural studies have primarily drawn on ethnographic and qualitative methodologies, studies of youth transitions have largely (though not solely) been based on large-scale quantitative research. In addition, youth cultural studies have introduced, modified and developed several key concepts, such as subcultures, resistance, style, moral panic, and diaspora. In contrast, the theoretical contribution from studies of youth transitions is less prominent. On the other hand, however, this tradition has contributed to valuable data and discussions about young people's transitions and trajectories. We can also find similar tendencies towards separating perspectives in other countries, such as Sweden, not least because Swedish and Nordic researchers have been heavily influenced by British youth studies. In the past few decades, however, differences in perspectives and conceptual tools have gradually been reduced, and there are strong tendencies towards convergence between both traditions. In Sweden and Denmark, there was also a third position in the 1980s and 1990s, which was expressed mainly through modernity theory and the works of the German pedagogue Thomas Ziehe (1994). As we will see, there was a similar discussion among British researchers in the 1990s, mainly related to discussions within the study of youth transitions and its relation to modernity theory (Bynner 2001). Theories of modernity, such as those by Giddens, Beck, or Ziehe, have been used, celebrated and heavily criticized, but this perspective has survived and has continued to influence youth studies. Today we can also trace a renewed interest in theories of modernity in youth studies (see, for example, Nayak and Kehily 2013).
2. This book explores and investigates possible ways and routes to take to promote a renewal of the theoretical and conceptual development in youth studies. When