

Perspectives on Children and Young People

Johanna Wyn · Helen Cahill ·
Dan Woodman · Hernan Cuervo ·
Carmen Leccardi ·
Jenny Chesters *Editors*

Youth and the New Adulthood

Generations of Change

 Springer

Perspectives on Children and Young People

Volume 8

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Johanna Wyn

Abstract This collaborative writing project, drawing on data from the Life Patterns longitudinal research program, provides new insights into the generations that have shaped a new adulthood. Following the lives of cohort 1 from 1991 and cohort 2 from 2005 to 2006 when they respectively left secondary school, the research spans a time of significant social, political and economic change on a global scale. This book explores in detail what this change looks like for young Australians, how they understand their situation and what the implications of their decisions are over time. Longitudinal research of this nature has a number of strengths, including being able to trace the impact of social change in real time; comparing the experiences of different generations and analysing the longer-term impact of social conditions. The chapters in this book explore both young people's subjectivities as well as documenting the changing economic and political environments they are navigating. The themes of social generation, transformations, relationships, belonging and resilience run through many of the chapters, to create a nuanced and holistic account of young lives and the creation of a new adulthood through the last quarter of a century. The book contributes to ongoing debates in the field of youth studies, including the use of the concept of social generation, the need to reclaim resilience as a social concept, the relevance of relationships to people and place and the re-inscription of inequalities.

Keywords Youth · Young adulthood · Social generation · Social change · Transformation · Relationships · Resilience · Longitudinal research

Introduction

Understanding youth and the new adulthood in changing times is the central focus of this book. It contains a detailed analysis of how the two cohorts of young Australians in the Life Patterns longitudinal research program have navigated their lives from the 1990s through to the year 2018. These years have seen significant social and economic

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changes in the lives of all Australians, including the expansion of precarious work to most parts of the labour market, two economic recessions, the shift from Keynesian to neoliberal-inspired policies, the widespread use of social media and the impact of globalisation forces such as the mobility of capital and labour. Drawing on a sociological approach that analyses the interwoven effects of these societal-level changes with individual lives, the chapters in this book present a complex picture of two generations.

The chapters draw on sociological frameworks that strive to simultaneously account for the situation of young people, in time and place; politically and economically, the sense that young people make of their situations, and the nature of their aspirations and their struggles. Our analysis sees young people's outcomes over time as a product of their engagement with local and global social and political processes. While this is in one sense an Australian story, it is one that has relevance for young people in many other countries, because across this time, the processes of social change have become increasingly global. The insights into young adulthood provided in this book resonate widely.

The nature and pace of social change is itself a challenge for analysis. For example, as social media has become normalised, many aspects of young people's lives have also become more visible. Yet the view is a fractured one—available to some, not all; curated for specific audiences on social media platforms and interpreted in myriad ways. Generational stereotypes, made plausible by piecemeal evidence, proliferate, making a confusing picture: labels such as baby boomers, millennials, generations X, Y and Z, Xennials, iGen and Centennials compete for our attention.

While there is a broad consensus that the situation of young adults has changed dramatically in the last quarter of a century, there is disagreement about what this means for their lives. Contention coalesces around the nature of inequalities (including social class, gender, geographic location) and the ways in which these inequalities are manifested (through health and wellbeing, access to education, housing and secure employment for example). There is little disagreement that, despite dramatically increased participation in post-compulsory education, the employment landscape presents a confusing mix of underemployment, precarious work and insecure working conditions (Campbell and Burgess 2018). Decades of labour market policies, informed by the neoliberal ideals of labour market deregulation and anti-union practices, have led to low wage growth, the normalisation of wage theft by employers and the rorting of education and job training schemes (Rayner 2016). Yet, although there is little dispute about inequalities, there is debate about the dynamics that produce these inequalities, the ways in which young people experience them and how they act on them. For example, are class or gender-based inequalities produced in the same way over time or do class and gender dynamics shift and change? How important is it to understand the sense that young people make of their diverse situations? What work do young people have to do to manage their lives, be well and put in place viable strategies for their futures; and what do these futures look like to them? What messages do their diverse situations have for policy-makers and those who take responsibility for governing? These issues are at the centre of this book, drawing on the Life Patterns research program.

The Life Patterns research program is a panel longitudinal study, which means that it follows the same people over time. The program has been following two panels (which we call cohorts), using a mixed methodology that is described in Chap. 2. Cohort 1 has been tracked since they left secondary school in 1991 and in 2018 were aged 44. Cohort 2 has been tracked since they left secondary school in 2005–2006 and in 2018 were aged 30. These cohorts correspond to the popular notions of Generation X (Cohort 1) and Generation Y (Cohort 2).

As a tool for understanding the nature and effects of social change, panel longitudinal studies have the major advantage of tracking the same people, recording what they hope for, what they value and the nature of the circumstances they face, continuously across their lives. The narratives they build give us insights into how they make sense of their circumstances, how they see the future for themselves, their families and our society and the strategies they use to make their lives. This information enables the researchers to trace the effects of government policies, economic circumstances and social attitudes on young people's lives. Drawing on this evidence base, the research draws on quantitative data that track young people's status in terms of education, employment, residence, wellbeing and family, as well as on a range of qualitative data on young people's subjective understandings of their personal situation and that of their peers. In the process, the chapters in this book contribute new insights to debates in the discipline of youth sociology and the broader field of youth studies, and trouble concepts that are taken for granted.

The relevance of taking account of young adults' subjective understandings, for example, is a central issue of contention in recent debates that have advocated for a political economy of youth that gives analytical priority to the 'objective' circumstances of young people. Far from simply being a 'celebration' of youth, the use of their views and experiences is central to the analysis of social generation and the new adulthood. It highlights the importance of young adult's understandings of their situations (their aspirations, sense of wellbeing, concerns and issues) against the backdrop of 'objective' data that identifies their situation across time (such as educational qualifications, employment, relationship and housing status) (Wyn and Woodman 2006; Woodman and Wyn 2015). Most crucially, the mix of qualitative and quantitative data that spans objective and subjective evidence enables a holistic analysis, exploring the interconnections between spheres of life, such as family relationships and futures; work and place, and shows how young people's individual trajectories are forged in a context of wider generational sensibilities and vulnerabilities and in a milieu of significant others (family and friends).

The embedding of the analysis in young adult's contexts has also created insights into the ways in which inequalities such as gender and class are being made and remade to give new life to old dynamics. Young people's subjectivities—their views, decisions and strategies, remain important to a relational analysis, not because we wish to valorise these things, but because their insights keep the analysis by youth studies researchers in touch with the ways in which the global dynamics and processes of late capitalism, neoliberalism and governmentality shape young adults' worlds.

The analyses presented here reclaim a relational approach to terms that have become individualised, such as transitions and resilience. Framed by a concept of

generational dynamics, the experiences of the Life Patterns participants reveal the way in which a new adulthood is being forged as they navigate their way through changing conditions over which they have no control, and for which the previous generation has no blueprint. In this context, resilience is a function of managing uncertainty and precarity for a future that is always present, yet invisible. Transitions are messy, ongoing processes of transformations that have no clear end-point, involving complex networks of connection across many life spheres.

The chapters were written by a team of authors associated with the Life Patterns research program. Some, such as Johanna Wyn, Dan Woodman and Hernán Cuervo have a legacy of writing about young people drawing on the Life Patterns data. Helen Cahill and Carmen Leccardi, whose bodies of work have defined youth research in their fields, have a more recent engagement with the Life Patterns program, as do Jenny Chesters, Julia Cook, Jun Fu and Katherine Romei. The Life Patterns program has benefitted from strong links with international youth researchers. Lesley Andres who was a partner investigator from 2005 to 2014 has made significant contributions through the comparisons with her *Paths on Life's Way* research program on Canadian youth (see Andres and Wyn 2010); Andy Furlong (a partner investigator from 2016 to 2017) brought connections with UK and Scottish research on young people and Carmen Leccardi (a partner investigator 2017–2020) connects the research program with Italian and other European youth research. Readers familiar with the Life Patterns legacy in youth studies will see in this book some familiar themes such as generations, inequality, temporality and the impact of social and economic conditions, to which we bring fresh insights and greater nuance, as well as new themes and approaches to understanding these generations of change. Because the book is designed to build on synergies between the chapters, and at the same time to ensure that each chapter also ‘stands alone’, readers may find that there is some overlap. In the following section I introduce the themes that flow through the chapters.

Longitudinal Mixed Methods Research Design

To be able to trace lives in real time, over several decades, is the gift of longitudinal research. It is one of the most powerful tools for researching the intersection of individual biographies with social, economic and political processes. As Hernán Cuervo and Julia Cook explain in Chap. 2, the Life Patterns program follows two cohorts of participants whose lives have been traced since they left secondary school; in 1991 for cohort 1 and 2006 for cohort 2. Cuervo and Cook discuss how the Life Patterns research tools were specifically designed to tap into broad patterns over time (through regular surveys that generated quantitative data) as well as to capture what individuals were experiencing, how they felt about this and the strategies they were using to construct their biographies, (through various forms of qualitative data, including individual interviews, dialogic workshops and open-ended questions on the survey). The qualitative and quantitative data have a close association with each other in this study: neither on its own is enough. Both methods inform each other

in an iterative process to produce lines of research inquiries through questions in surveys, interviews and dialogical workshops that are in tune with the changes in the lives of participants in our two cohorts.

The interrelationship between these two types of data takes different forms. At times survey findings have been presented to participants during interviews, to help make sense of the findings. For example, in the early 1990s it became apparent that the idea of having a career was changing, and it was increasingly difficult to interpret the meaning of responses to questionnaire items that assumed a linear career or an upward trajectory in one occupation. When we asked participants in interviews to tell us what career meant to them, it became clear that they no longer saw a career as necessarily related to their long-term employment. This enabled us to redesign survey questions that were more meaningful to their lives. Sometimes the interviews elicited insights that we were able to follow up with through the surveys. For example, participants in both cohorts frequently used the word stress when discussing their lives. We were able to design questions in the survey that provided indicators of levels of stress and the conditions that caused stress, opening up a deeper understanding of the relationship between stressful conditions and mental health (Landstedt et al. 2016).

Several chapters draw exclusively on a range of forms of qualitative data to provide a deeper engagement with particular issues. For example, Helen Cahill and Carmen Leccardi, in Chap. 5 draw on data from a dialogic workshop that tapped into participants' wider concerns about their individual futures, and the future of Australia, shifting the responses from being about individual lives to shared, generational considerations. Julia Cook and Dan Woodman in Chap. 8 draw on interviews conducted with members of cohort 2 when they were aged 20 and again when they were aged 29 to produce a holistic analysis of young people's approaches to the future, one that is embedded in relationships and their wider communities.

The use of this mixed-method approach reflects the Life Patterns program's commitment to understanding the impact of social, economic and political conditions on young people's lives, not by simply documenting the forces that impact on them, but by analysing how young people themselves make sense of this. This has enabled the Life Patterns program to contribute to debates about the relevance of young people's subjectivities, or how they make sense of their lives and their situation and what they do about it. The introduction of dialogic workshops with participants in 2016 in Melbourne and 2018 in Launceston has expanded the capacity of the program to tap into young people's subjectivities, bringing participants in the study together for the first time to reflect on the project's findings and on the challenges, fears and hopes they have for their and their own children's futures.

Longitudinal panel research has the advantage of following people in real time. This means that researchers are not pushed into surmising what might have changed and what might have stayed the same based on data taken at one or two single points in time. This capacity to follow young people's lives is especially significant, because it has enabled the study to document the hopes, aspirations and dreams of young people at significant stages in their lives (such as starting post-secondary study; graduating from post-secondary study and seeking to employ their qualifications in the labour

market), to document what happened to them and how they made sense of challenges and disappointments. For example, the study has documented the high hopes that the first cohort of young women had on entering post-secondary educational institutions in record numbers. They were a vanguard generation that set the scene for universal post-secondary education participation, and they expected to reap the rewards of fulfilling careers and life-sustaining incomes.

With two cohort panels, the Life Patterns research program can compare one generation with another. While the questions on survey questionnaires and in interviews have evolved over time, to respond to new realities and situations, some core questions have remained the same, enabling direct comparisons of the two generations with each other when they were the same (or a similar) age. This is reflected in Chap. 4 by Jenny Chesters, in an analysis of the changing value of education in the labour market. Chesters' analysis comparing the labour market outcomes for both cohorts reveals the disintegrating nexus between education and the labour market for young Australians. Her detailed analysis of the impact of labour force reforms and the changing economic and political climate in Australia reveals how these forces impact on lives. We agree with other researchers who argue that investment in post-secondary education was encouraged with the promise of work security and financial reward (Bessant et al. 2017). However, the reality was very different from the promise, as the Life Patterns research has documented (Andres and Wyn 2010; Wyn et al. 2017).

The approaches presented in this book share a relational mode of analysis that sees youth as a social process, not a category, and that attempts to make visible the social processes through which a new adulthood is being constructed. This is evident in the recurring themes of generations, transformations, relationships, belonging and resilience, discussed below, that run through the chapters.

Generations

In taking a generations approach to analysis, this book contributes to a new wave of scholarship in the discipline of youth sociology and the field of youth studies, seeking to take a more holistic approach, that can account for the big picture and that can encompass historical developments (Furlong et al. 2017) as well as global political and economic processes that shape youth (Bessant et al. 2017), moving beyond the separate 'threads' of youth studies that have dominated thinking in the last few decades (Woodman and Bennett 2015; Furlong et al. 2011; France 2016).

For more than a decade, the idea of youth and generation has fostered debate, in part initiated by the Life Patterns team members Wyn and Woodman (2006). In Chap. 3, Woodman refers briefly to this debate, and outlines the case for using the concept of generation to understand the situation of young adults in a context of social change. This chapter, and Chap. 4 by Jenny Chesters outline the significant global developments that have impacted on young people in many countries. These developments include the expansion of higher education, the expectation of universal