



# Youth and Development in Cuba

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*Edited by*

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ISBN 978-3-030-90865-2      ISBN 978-3-030-90866-9 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90866-9>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Studying Youth and Development in Cuba

*Richard N. Gioioso, Zaily Leticia Velázquez Martínez,  
and Carlos Manuel Osorio García*

## INTRODUCTION

Little has been written about how youth practices intersect with and are influenced by development—economic, human and social—and how youth as social actors negotiate and navigate development trends in Cuba. The collection of chapters we present in this book addresses issues relevant to young people, their experiences and participation in a variety of contexts. As young people constitute the future economic and social development of Cuba, analyzing the diversity of life experiences they face is a constant need for researchers, demanding attention to emerging

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Switzerland AG 2022

R. N. Gioioso et al. (eds.), *Youth and Development in Cuba*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90866-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90866-9_1)

updates and contemporary contextualization. *Youth and Development in Cuba* advances social scientific knowledge and understanding with respect to various current *problématiques* in the lives of young people who live on the island.

This book is a compilation of different theoretical approaches and current scientific research projects as we enter the 2020s. We address problems, situations, conflicts and development experiences over the last ten years related to young people from a part of Cuba far removed from the capital, in the third most populous city in the country, with a high impact cultural, tourist, educational, economic and social value for the entire island: the province of Holguín. Holguín's economic development is especially concentrated on tourism and nickel extraction, along with some industrial production. In recent decades, self-employment has appeared and expanded, opening up new forms of work for the entire population, but largely for young people. In addition, Holguín has a wide cultural movement recognized in national and foreign contexts for its activities in music, dance, theater and the plastic arts throughout the year.

The chapters that follow are the analyses of researchers whose specialize on Holguín with a specific locally situated focus, outside the most hegemonic discourses that emanate from Havana, the capital, where the largest number of publications are developed and as such portray Havana-centric visions that are generalized as truths and realities for the rest of the country. This book serves as useful reference material for scholars on youth, education and development in Cuba as well as for practitioners with youth in other related institutions and organizations. Thanks to strong international collaborations, we are able to present a wealth of social scientific studies from and about Holguín that serve to locate audiences within the Cuban framework of Holguín and to compare and contrast with the dynamics and realities of young people in other developing countries. Therefore, this collection serves to inform a wide audience in all regions of the Americas and outside the hemisphere.

One of the main contributions we make with this edited volume is the updated information about young people from eastern Cuba from different psychosocial perspectives. The information and analyses in this book allow comparisons to be made with the different situations and experiences of young people in other geographical areas of the country and in the Caribbean and Latin American regions. It also serves as a reference bibliography for students from different university majors and

analysis for the development of scientific articles and undergraduate and postgraduate theses that address the nexus of young people and development in Cuba and other countries. In addition, it constitutes a preliminary diagnosis for the identification of possible problems to be solved by parents, relatives, educators and institutions in Holguín and in general, both inside and outside Cuba.

Our point of departure for *Youth and Development in Cuba* is a pluralistic understanding of youth(s)—that is, *juventud(es)* in Spanish—seen as an active generational subject, influenced socio-historically, as a kind of collective identity. By taking youth(s) into account, we demonstrate the diversity of social, economic, biological, personological, historical and psychological factors that intervene in the current *problématiques* of young people in Cuba's eastern province of Holguín. We also open roads to new directions to study and understand realities of and for youth there and elsewhere. We show the existence of regularities in the understanding of Cuban youth, and at the same time the need for contextualized interpretations framed in singular developmental spaces. It is a rupture of pre-established schemes and dogmas that highlights the need for multiple and complex visions of the same phenomenon from different positions and contexts.

The multiple views on contemporary issues presented in this volume are based on different and heterogeneous interpretations of the daily lives and experiences of young people. Our authors apply different approaches—such as gender theory, culture theory, psychology, education studies and sociology—to issues facing young people in Holguín. We have compiled this collection because we ourselves, as university professors, identified the need for updated literature that addresses the current problems of youth from a particular sociodemographic context. It enables debates on the epistemologies and methodologies used in youth studies. It offers the opportunity for scholars and practitioners from other countries a realistic vision of young people in a less-studied region of Cuba—Holguín—without the schematizations or distortions that can result from *a priori* conceptions. As such, it is a notable contribution to the existent bibliography in the field.

## THE CONCEPT AND REALITY OF THE STUDY OF YOUTH(S)

Researchers from multiple disciplines have delved into the characteristics of youth, their definition, typology, criteria for inclusion and other aspects that constitute debate in the study of youth(s). The definition of

the concept has been peppered by multiple views, revealing the trend to prioritize age limits as a conditioning factor, although many analysts insist that there are more and broader criteria for the construction of *youth(s)* as a concept.

Among the most important experts in Cuba who have shaped the debate is the sociologist María Isabel Domínguez (1997, p. 68) whose point of departure is:

a conception of youth defined as a historical-concrete category that designates an internally differentiated sociodemographic group according to its belonging to the social structure of society, in particular to the different classes and layers that compose it, while they constitute its most dynamic and mobile segment. We emphasize that youth is not biologically determined, but socially defined by the nature of the activity that takes place at that stage, which conditions a set of specific social relationships that shape youth status based on the meaning of that period. This constitutes a youth identity, which is both self-identity and identity recognized by members of other generations.

For her part, Cuban psychologist Laura Domínguez (2003) argues that youth has traditionally been defined as a transit age between childhood and adulthood. However, she criticizes the issue of age as a condition of youth and takes up some social issues that are decisive in this analysis, coinciding with the ideas previously discussed. In the following passage, she also highlights the importance of individual characteristics:

[I]nstead of the universal schema, according to which belonging to a certain age determines once and for all the properties of young individuals, we must constantly take into account not only their chronological age, but also: 1) the general properties of the culture and society to which they belong; 2) their socio-economic position; 3) the historical situation in which its development occurs and the particularities of its generation (cohort); 4) their sex; and 5) their individual typological properties (p. 27).

At the international level, we find other perspectives on the subject, for example, Valenzuela (as cited in Alpízar & Bernal, 2003), who conceptualizes youth as “historically defined sociocultural construction” (p. 117) and Souto (2007) on the subject of its location by age range:

Chronologically, it does not have precise age limits since, with the passage of time, there has been a process of expansion of these limits—which do not depend only on psychological considerations, but on social development, on the possibilities of economic and political independence, on legislation, or the perception of society and of young people themselves and youth organizations. (p. 171)

These researchers do not recognize the psychological as a determining factor of youth, an aspect that Domínguez (2003) does not tacitly affirm either, but rather they understand the social, cultural, historical and even the political (the normative, legislated) as elements of greater relevance in their understanding.

Souto's (2007), however, approaches youth as:

... a social phenomenon [that] depends, rather than on age, on the position of the person in different social structures, among which the family, school, work and age groups stand out, and on the action of state institutions that with their legislation alter the position of young people in them. The existence of youth as a defined group is not a universal phenomenon and, like all age groups, its development, form, content and duration are social constructions and, therefore, historical, because they depend on the economic, social, cultural and political order of each society; that is, its historical location and the way in which “youth” is constructed in a society. (pp. 181–182)

Similarly, Taguenca (2009) recognizes the complexity in the theoretical and conceptual development of this construct of youth and the responsibility of society (the social) in its making, and tries to demonstrate that it will be in constant evolution and (re)elaboration. He echoes Levi and Schmitt (as cited in Taguenca, 2009: 161), viewing youth as:

...something that never achieves a concrete and stable definition. Because therein resides both the burden of symbolic meanings, of promises and threats, of potentialities and fragilities that youth entails, as well as the ambiguous attention, constructed at the same time of hopes and suspicions, that in turn societies dedicate to it.

For his part, Brito (as cited in Taguenca, 2009: 166) coinciding with Domínguez's (1997) position regarding the low value of the biological, not the social, expresses that: “Youth is a social product, which we must

differentiate from its biological conditioner.” In both cases, the omission of the psychological aspect in the conception of youth is evident.

Carles Feixa (as quoted in Taguenca, 2009: 174) contributes further:

For youth to exist, there must be, on the one hand, a series of social conditions such as norms, behaviors and institutions that distinguish youth from other age groups, and on the other hand, a series of cultural images: values, attributes and rites specifically associated with youth. Both of them depend on the social structure as a whole, that is, on the forms of subsistence, political institutions and ideological worldviews that predominate in each type of society.

This brief overview of some definitions of youth allows us to synthesize the following four ideas:

1. Age has traditionally been conceived as a criterion for inclusion of in the category of youth.
2. However, not only should biological and chronological criteria be considered, but also social criteria, e.g., the cultural, political, economic, historical, etc. In different contexts, these factors will have a significant impact on what will really define the youth.
3. As such, the understanding of youth demands the inclusion of diverse, pluralistic and heterogeneous approaches.
4. The psychological, i.e., what is subjectified by each individual, should be considered, as it permits fuller and more accurate understandings of young people as human beings.

We find an important need to follow such a path in the work of Alpízar and Bernal (2003), who argue that the theoretical perspectives employed in addressing youth have been carried out from homogenizing and stigmatizing positions, thus invisibilizing young women, devaluing the feminine, denying or not explaining the subjectivity of the researcher and a reliance on adult-centrism. It is therefore a challenge for current research to overcome these biased trends in youth analysis.

Regarding adult-centrism, Taguenca (2009) emphasizes that the adult is always marking what it is to be young, limiting the self-construction of youth, of being self-constructed youth, and conceives: