Researching 'Ordinary' Young People in a Changing World: The Sociology of Generations and the 'Missing Middle' in Youth Research

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Sociological Research Online, 18 (1) 7
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/1/7.html>>
10.5153/sro.2868

Received: 4 Jul 2012 Accepted: 21 Nov 2012 Published: 28 Feb 2013

Abstract

Several researchers have pointed to an overemphasis on 'spectacular' elements of youth culture and on 'at-risk' young people, arguing for greater attention to the 'ordinary' in sociological youth research. This article draws upon the Life Patterns Project, a 20-year longitudinal study of transitions in Australia, to argue that both understanding the 'ordinary' experience of youth and contemporary patterns of inequality between young people can be facilitated by a return to ideas from the undervalued legacy of the sociology of generations. Much youth research draws, often implicitly, on a model of youth where the adulthood that is the end point of transitions tends to be taken for granted. Yet, in the context of a rapidly changing labour market, the Life-Patterns participants have had to reshape the meaning of youth and adulthood as the field of possibilities open to them has changed. Understanding this remaking is the basis from which youth research can understand how some young people come to win or lose in contemporary conditions.

Keywords: *Young People, Youth, Generation, Ordinarity, Missing Middle, Precariousness, Inequality, Class, Gender*

Introduction

1.1 It seems that something is being missed. A number of youth researchers have forcefully argued that a continual focus on the most excluded or most spectacular young people means that comparatively little research focuses on the experience of 'ordinary' young people (Cohen 2003; MacDonald 2011; Roberts 2011). While these calls are not altogether new (see Coles 1986), they have re-emerged with some force in the past year (see MacDonald 2011; Roberts 2011). 'Ordinarity' is defined in different ways by the different researchers arguing it deserves greater attention. In many cases the gap is conceptualised as an empirical problem, a significant group of young people, such as a 'missing middle' between those successfully following government and society approved pathway and the most socially excluded, that is systematically neglected in empirical youth research and hence in accounts of youth (Roberts 2011). In this article I suggest that the challenge of understanding the ordinary experience of youth is as much a conceptual problem as an issue of a lack of empirical attention. The sociology of youth needs concepts that are flexible enough that researchers can trace the way the possibilities available to young people shift over time and, with this, the experience of youth and inequalities in this experience are made and remade (Wyn and White 1997).

1.2 The first section of this article attempts to highlight a parallel between two separate debates within the sociology of youth of which I have been part over recent years, one on the value of the legacy of the sociology of generations in youth research (Wyn and Woodman 2006; Roberts 2007; Wyn and Woodman 2007) and the other on how youth researchers engage with theories of social change (Woodman 2009; Roberts 2010; Woodman 2010). What unites the arguments I have put forward in these two debates is a position that may appear counter intuitive; while an important part of the contribution youth sociology makes, taken on its own the documentation and presentation of the predictability of life outcomes for young people based on the standard sociological variables, such as gender and class, can actually limit understandings of inequality. This is particularly the case if this data is presented as crucial evidence against claims of social change.

1.3 While most sociologically informed youth research, if not all sociological work by definition, aims to understand young lives in context, too often debates in youth research conflate social change with less stratification, or evidence of continued stratification with evidence against social change. The great promise of youth studies is not so much its ability to trace social change, or highlight patterns of continuity, but to show how the two are intertwined; Familiar patterns of inequality can emerge in new ways.

1.4 In the second section I propose that the sociology of generations provides a neglected resource for fulfilling this promise of sociological youth research. Sociological thinking involves a mix of engagement with the past, reinvention, critique and experimentation (Abbott 2001)^[1], and it is through this mix that 'contemporary researchers will develop the frameworks that allows us to think sociologically about the nature of age and "youth" in today's world' (Woodman and Threadgold 2011: 9). As such, I am not suggesting a radical paradigm shift, but for a return to what has so far been an undervalued legacy of the sociology of generations to assist youth researchers pursue existing aims and use existing concepts within an improved framework for thinking about the relationship between continuity and change.

1.5 To finish the article I present two illustrations from the Life Patterns Project, a large-numbers longitudinal study of 'ordinary' young people in Australia. Focusing on the participants' labour market experiences, I show how analysis framed by explicitly tracing the emergence of the generational conditions in which young people live, and the way that young people draw on the differing resources available to them to shape meaningful lives in these conditions, can assist youth research in accounting for the 'ordinary' experience of youth and diversity and inequality within this experience.

The missing middle and the middle ground

2.1 There appears to be several different 'missing middles' that youth sociology wish to fill. My aim in this section is to highlight the multiple middles that are apparently missed and, echoing the call made by others, to argue that working across methodological and conceptual divisions will facilitate understanding 'ordinary' or non-spectacular youth experience today (MacDonald et al 1993, Hollands 2002, Shildrick and MacDonald 2006, Furlong et al 2011). I suggest, however, that recent efforts to claim a 'middle ground' between existing approaches to youth sociology will not achieve this aim. Instead an alternative conceptualisation of the relationship between social change, social structure, social action and inequality that allows us to bring existing approaches into a new relationship will better facilitate efforts to give a fuller account of current youth experience.

2.2 In a context of necessarily limited intellectual and material resources, researchers, policy makers and administrators must decide and justify where these resources are going to be allocated. In doing so, youth researchers often draw on distinctions between young people for whom things are going well and those for whom they are not. It is those on the 'problematic' side of these divisions that are the focus of attention, those not making successful transitions in work, education or to 'adulthood' more broadly. Using the conceptual divisions of contemporary youth research and policy these are the socially excluded, those not in education, employment or training (NEET) or those people in contact with the criminal justice system or otherwise engaged in cultural practices that put themselves or others 'at risk' (France 2007).

2.3 In this context, arguments have been put forward for greater research attention towards 'ordinary' youth experience (Coles 1986; Cohen 2003; MacDonald 2011; Roberts 2011). While overlapping in some ways, these calls are not united on what the ordinary means. Some see primarily an empirical gap in youth studies: youth researchers ignore less spectacular young people. Even within this subgroup of scholars there are somewhat different definitions of which group of young people exactly has been neglected. For some the ordinary is the other side of a distinction between problematic youth and the rest, those not included in the disadvantaged, at risk, socially excluded, or spectacular. This type of call for a return to ordinariness is often part of a critique aimed at research focused on the cultural forms, such as drug use, of highly visible and spectacular youth (see Clarke 1990; MacDonald 2011).

2.4 Others aim to turn these binaries of the problematic and the rest into what appears to be a three-part typology of young people. For these scholars there is a large and important missing-middle group between the socially excluded and those following government preferred paths through youth to successful adulthoods (Griffin 2005; Roberts 2011). This is the group that, for example, neither excels in and embraces education nor rejects it like Paul Willis's (1977) 'lads' but simply complies with the educational demands placed on them (Brown 1987).

2.5 Others instead argue for a greater focus on less spectacular youth practices through advocating that researchers stop developing and using binaries and larger typologies as categories (or boxes) into which particular young people can be placed. It is possible to be 'ordinary', or at least recognised as ordinary by others such as government agency employees^[2], in some aspects of life (such as at work), while being categorised as at risk, and treated as such, in others (such as at school) (Jenkins 1983).

2.6 This approach draws less on the argument that youth studies has neglected to give empirical attention to the more 'ordinary' experiences of youth than on arguing that researchers need to rethink their use of typologies so that they can recognise the 'ordinariness' already there in practices of research participants (Thomson and Taylor 2005, Hodgkinson 2012). To do so, researchers will need frameworks in which typologies do not capture and unambiguously categorise particular young people or particular youth practices, but instead trace the different tensions that pull young people in different directions and which they must negotiate (Thomson and Taylor 2005: 332).

2.7 Arguments for shifting attention towards ordinariness can also be mapped, although not perfectly, in parallel to recent arguments for 'middle-ground' approaches aimed at bringing together the strengths while avoiding the failings of different approaches to youth research and different influential contemporary sociological theories. These approaches advocate developing a middle-ground approach that is capable of properly accounting for the old sociological categories of structure and agency at the same time (see Woodman 2009).

2.8 The history of youth research is commonly told as a story of two distinct paths of development, a 'cultures' and 'transitions' approach (MacDonald et al. 1993; Cohen 2003; Furlong et al. 2011). While much diversity is contained within both of these broad traditions, they are understood to have developed along largely separate lines with separate aims and research designs of choice.

2.9 The cultures track of youth research has largely focuses on visible and often spectacular elements of consumption, cultural expression and identity among particular groups of young people and tends toward ethnographic research. While government research funding tends to be directed towards what Cohen (2003:47) calls the 'three Ds': 'druggies, drop outs and delinquents', academic research into youth culture has also focused on more spectacular and new aspects of young people's cultural practices, particularly that tied to new fashion styles, musical forms and types of nightlife. This focus on the spectacular and the explicitly and visibly creative has meant that relatively 'ordinary' youth cultural forms have arguably been neglected (Hollands 2002) as have less spectacular or specific elements of these spectacular cultural forms (Hodkinson 2012).

2.10 While widely acknowledged as providing powerful insights into the active creativity by which young people engage with and produce cultural forms, and through this a sense of self, critiques argue that a significant proportion of this type of youth research has prematurely abandoned earlier attempts at understanding this creativity in its broader structural context (Shildrick and McDonald 2006; Blackman 2007).

2.11 Studies in the youth transitions tradition on the other hand are more likely to collect empirical data from a large and statistically generalisable spread of young people. Although relatively less numerous than smaller research studies, these projects tend to be influential because of the scope of the data collected, increasingly over an extended period of time. The data collected in large-scale studies can show us patterns in the transitions of young people, the ordinary and the not so ordinary. Indeed, some of the claims that have emerged since the turn of the century in transitions research are claims about ordinary young people, and often about what is wrong with them.

2.12 While resources for youth research are often directed towards Cohen's 'three Ds', at regular intervals the actions, attitudes and outcomes of ordinary young people become matters of significant public, government and academic concern (Bessant and Watts 1998). It is not an excluded minority who are seen by many youth researchers as making increasingly 'delayed' 'extended', 'messy', or 'yo-yo' like transitions (Côté 2000; Biggart and Walther 2006; du Bois-Reymond and te Poel 2006). Instead this is presented as a general trend among young people emerging from research data.

2.13 A number of researchers have challenged some of the assumptions that slip into the conceptual frameworks in research on youth transitions for misrecognising the meaning of the structural patterns identified (Lesko 1996; Cohen 1997; Mizen 2004; Wyn and Woodman 2006 among others). Conceptual limitation can mean that these studies do not properly engage with the possibility that not only patterns of transition but the very meaning and experience of both adulthood and youth can change and do not attend sufficiently to the ways that, along with other social actors, young people themselves play an active part in this cultural change.

2.14 On the one hand transitions studies that neglect to question what is being transitioned to can create a binary where ordinary young people, if they do follow similar or improved pathways to their parents – finishing school, entering post-school study and finding employment – are considered successful and hence less deserving of researchers' attention. On the other hand, these assumptions are often manifested as judgments of contemporary young people, collectively and including 'ordinary' young people, as wanting. The transitions that were not delayed, or alternatively too fast or messy, but just right were those made by the 'ordinary' young people born in the post-WWII baby boom. In both cases, the imagined golden era of youth transitions is providing, often unconsciously, a norm that translates patterns linked to generational change into symptoms of failing transitions to adulthood (Wyn and Woodman 2006)

2.15 In other words, the challenge posed to this type of youth research is that while it is very successful in tracing patterns in young people's work, education, housing and other such transitions, it is lacking the resources to understand what these patterns mean or to see the shifts, complexities and creativity responses of young people embedded in the processes behind these outcomes (Wyn and Woodman 2006).

2.16 The differing interests and methodological preferences of these alternative approaches to youth research inevitably lead to distinct kinds of insights about young people's lives and differing methodological and theoretical 'blind spots' (Furlong et al. 2011). As such, there have been regular calls to bridge these two traditions (Hollands 2002; Geldens et al 2011; MacDonald 2011; Furlong et al 2011). While there have always been some examples of research that does not fit within one camp or the other, increasingly studies are appearing in youth research that appear to successfully bridge the divide, particularly the small but increasing number of qualitative studies of ordinary young people and their work and education engagements (see Henderson et al. 2007; McLeod and Yates 2006; Wierenga 2009; Roberts 2011).

2.17 The model that is increasingly being embraced in this work and in youth sociology broadly is what I have called a 'middle-ground' approach (Woodman 2009). This is unsurprisingly given the concerns discussed here that one track of youth research is better equipped to understand the creative way that young people engage with and shape cultural forms while the other better accounts for large-scale structural patterns. Many of the frameworks developed to inform youth research over the past decade have aimed and claim to highlight agency within systematically differing levels of structural constraint, hence avoiding the various criticisms raised of research in both the traditions of youth sociology. (see Lehmann 2004; McLeod and Yates 2006; Rudd and Evans 1998).

2.18 These models can legitimately be seen as providing the basis for more comprehensive youth research and for bringing together the best elements of differing approaches to youth research. There is a tendency, however, in these middle ground approaches for a particular way of conceptualising the relationship between social change and inequality to emerge that may limit the ability of these models to account for the broad and diverse experience of youth in contemporary times.

2.19 The critical targets of 'middle-ground' frameworks are not solely internal to the sociology of youth, but aimed at filling a larger 'missing middle' in contemporary sociological theory more broadly. So for example, an empty theoretical ground that can and needs to be filled in is identified between recent approaches seen, in part as a response to the failings and blind spots of earlier theories but now with the reverse failings, to over emphasise creativity and agency in the creation of the personal biography and incorrectly discount the impact of structural factors on life chance (for example see Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Lehmann 2004; Evans 2007; also debates on and critiques of 'post-subcultural' approaches^[3]).

2.20 As such, middle ground concepts of 'structured individualisation' (Roberts 1997) and 'bounded agency' (Evans 2007) are applied to data to make claims about change and continuity. For example, unequal transition outcomes are understood as evidence that even if there is profound change in some elements of youth experience, at a more fundamental structural level some young people's agency is bounded more than others. In this work, even as a variety of youth experiences are researched, the focus is on showing that some groups are losing out despite their efforts and highlighting that those facing the most structural constraint to their agency are the same as before, for example the working class.

2.21 While simplification may be unavoidable when engaging with sociological theory, care is required in doing so, particularly when a position is to be critiqued. Otherwise significant critical energy will be directed towards knocking down 'straw people' or in the pursuit of so-called red herrings (Woodman 2009). While arguments can be marshaled to support this critiques at the base of the middle-ground approach, the work of Bauman, Beck and others on shifting social forms is better understood as a challenge not to the continued existence of structured inequality but to how sociological research conceptualises this inequality and a challenge to trace how inequality emerges in contemporary conditions (Woodman 2010).

2.22 Drawing on what I believe is a more generous reading of theories of social change, I have suggested an alternative to these middle ground approaches in which social change has not weakened of social structure, and through this somehow freed actors, but made it more important to attend to the partialities and contradictions in structure (Woodman 2010). It is these contradictions and inconsistencies across spheres of life that engendering active biographical work (although not reflective choice making). Young people, and the not so young, are increasingly asked to hold together contradictory demands. The extent of the contrasting demands faced by different young people and the resources available for dealing with incompatibilities are two dimensions for mapping inequality.

2.23 Numerous scholars rightly highlight the danger of youth researchers over-emphasising change (Roberts 2007; Pollock 2008; MacDonald 2011). Making an assertion of significant, even epochal, shifts can be enticing for researchers as another way to gain attention and influence in a crowded field of research claims, but is often not supported by empirical evidence and can arguably deflect attention from the important promise youth research offers for highlighting, and possibly even alleviating, continued patterns of inequality. This does not mean however that significant shifts do not occur and it is equally dangerous to judge young people on the basis of the past, exemplified in arguments for delayed transitions (Wyn and Woodman 2006).

2.24 This section I have argued that conceptualising the experience of the 'ordinary' young people has been hampered not only by a relative empirical neglect but also by a tendency to debates in youth sociology trending towards conflating arguments about social change with a lack of structural constraint and increased choice on the one hand and continuity, or less significant change, with structural constraint and inequality on the other. Understanding the experience of Robert's (2011) 'missing middle' I argue can be better facilitated by alternatives to the 'middle-ground' models that are currently influential in sociology.

2.25 The objection can be made that I have not been very generous with these middle-ground approaches and I am also guilty of unfairly simplifying the position of the others. Attempts to bridge the strengths of alternative approaches from within youth sociology, or more broadly from sociology and social thought, are valuable conceptually for providing the opportunity to draw on the strengths of different traditions and to account for both the conditions young people face and the creative way young people engage with them.

2.26 I want to recognise that there is much to be admired and retained in currently influential models of the relationship between the actions and beliefs of young people and the conditions in which these take place and are formed. As such, the arguments in this article should not be seen as a polemical call for a radical paradigm shift in youth studies. However, an alternative conceptualisation of the relationship

between social change and inequality, facilitated by a more generous engagement with theories of social change will allow youth researchers to better utilise the concepts and methods already at their disposal.

2.27 In the coming section I argue that with some reworking, ideas from the sociology of generations from the middle of last century can provide an alternative conceptual anchor for accounting for the experiences of 'ordinary' young people in the contemporary world, as this will involve mapping out a structure of possibilities and constraints that can change over time. I see a central task of youth research as tracing the possibilities available to the current generation. This is not only the foundation on which the experience of ordinary young people can be understood. It is only when researchers ask what people are excluded from, or what they are resisting or disavowing, that a satisfactory account of excluded or spectacular young people can be developed.

The missing middle – an alternative drawing on the concept of generations

3.1 The sociology of generations has been explicitly pursuing the aim of tracing change and its impact on biography since early in the 20th Century, when Francois Mentré (1928), Karl Mannheim (1997 [originally 1923]) and Ortega y Gasset (1961 [originally 1923]) among others proposed that cohorts of young people can face historical conditions that make a reliance on older patterns of thought and action difficult, if not impossible.

3.2 Early sociological understandings tended towards universalistic models of generational change through intergenerational conflict. This type of generational thinking still permeates contemporary uses of the term generations among journalists, market researchers and 'pop' academics who claim that new generations, with often diametrically opposed values to the one before, arise every 15 years or so (for an example see Strauss and Howe 1997).

3.3 While this type of generational thinking has been critiqued and to a large extent, I would argue rightly, been abandoned in academic sociology, the kernel of this concept of social generations remains a useful orienting idea for youth studies. It is not of itself only broad-scale structural change, but also and at the same time the work undertaken by young people, their families, policy makers and others to reshape what it means to be an adult or a young person in new times that makes a generation (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Wyn and Woodman 2006; Blatterer 2007; Andres and Wyn 2010).

3.4 While some aspects of early sociological thinking about generations have rightly been challenged, other aspects that have been neglected might be usefully revived and reworked for contemporary conditions. The first is the foundational insight that, despite the way the term is sometimes used in the popular press, not all young people who face a similar set of generational conditions will develop similar sets of attitudes and beliefs (Corsten 1999: 259). Making distinctions between groups within a generation was a central plank of Mannheim's (1997) early work on conceptualising a social generation. His concept of generations has three parts. Firstly, its 'site': a generation is shaped by its temporal-structural location. Secondly, the shared orientations or dispositions that in certain circumstances allow a generation to become a political force or 'actuality'. Finally there are generational 'units' (Mannheim 1997: 304). Generational units are groups of people identified by the particular, and contrasting to other groups, ways of reacting they develop in response to the conditions of that generation. These differences within a generation are ignored in many popular accounts of generations.

3.5 Mannheim was focused on politics, and worked primarily within a framework inherited in large part from Marx, even as he attempted to expand the understanding political action beyond class. He was primarily interested in the possibility that generations and generational units could become political actors, a generation 'for itself' or conscious of itself, and in which rival generational units would emerge with their own explicit shared consciousness to contest political space. More recently, others have tried to rethink what a generation or generational unit shares in terms of embodied dispositions, as theorised in the model of action developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Eyerma and Turner 1998).

3.6 Following his general model, Bourdieu treats generations as socially constructed by the conflict over economic and cultural capitals within fields (Bourdieu 1993). These struggles can be intergenerational, as younger participants struggle to impose a new set of lifestyles and tastes within a field. They can also be intra-generational as particular people utilise social, cultural and economic capital to reproduce a social position across the generations even as the social world changes; some are better equipped to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by change in the rules configuring a field or to colonise emerging fields where the rules of the game are ill-defined (Bourdieu 1984: 357-358).

3.7 Bourdieu gives as an example the rise of new culture industries in France, in which new rules of taste and consumption were constructed mixing pop and high culture in novel ways. For Bourdieu (1984: 357) these 'new occupations are the natural refuge of all those who have not obtained from the education system the qualifications that would have enabled them to claim the established positions that their original social positions promised them; and also those who have not obtained from their qualifications all they felt entitled to expect'. These young people had the dispositions and cultural capital to colonise and define these new occupations. The reproduction of social position does not simply unfold. It is created through activity, not necessarily conscious, against a backdrop of changing conditions.

3.8 The sociology of generations gives a conceptual tool for thinking about social change and social reproduction at the same moment. The notion of generational unit will need to be used in a different way to how it was originally conceptualised. The usefulness of generational units as a group or typology in which different young people can be unambiguously placed seems limited given the fragmented and complex social structures that young people negotiate. Mannheim's early concern with diversity within a generation and the importance of social position does, however, suggest that the sociology of

generations should not be seen as clearly opposed to class analysis or the work of a thinker of class inequality like Bourdieu.

3.9 It is through understanding the ordinary possibilities that are opened and constraints that are imposed upon young people today that researchers have a base from which to understand how some young people win in the current social configuration and what it means to be excluded. It is also a basis for understanding what makes some actions appear spectacular or problematic, or how resistance can be conceptualised.

3.10 The sociology of generations has been an undervalued lineage, not only in the sociology of youth but sociological thinking about the life course more broadly (Pilcher 1994). This means, however, that the concept of generations has not received the same attention as some lines of sociology thought and of concepts like class and gender (not that this means debates about these concepts have been settled!) and questions about how to conceptualise temporal boundaries, cultural or spatial boundaries, and the importance of collective identity are far from settled^[4]. While I have briefly engaged with and taken a position on these questions in this section (for further discussion see Woodman 2011, particularly pages 41-43) my primary aim has not been to settle these issues but to highlight that at the kernel of the concept of generations is an orientation of significant value to the task of thinking differently about the relationship between social change and structural inequality.

Life Patterns in Australia

4.1 As discussed above, I suggest that tracing the working of class, gender and other social divisions today can be pursued through tracing how the conditions shaping young people's lives are made. Changes in generational conditions, instead of simply unfolding at regular and universal intervals, are made by deliberate policy decisions, economic pressures, social movements (often involving young people), unintended consequences and the way that young people build and maintain a sense of self or belonging in this context using the various 'capitals' available in their social position. This section uses two examples from the Life-Patterns longitudinal study in Australia to provide illustrations of how patterns of gender and class inequality have not disappeared, but that understanding the generational conditions in which these inequalities are made provides new insights into the processes through which they emerge.

4.2 The Life- Patterns project, on which I have worked for the past seven years, has followed approximately 2000 people from two cohorts over two decades using a mixed-methods design of survey questionnaires with all participants and semi-structured interviews with a subset.^[5] The project has traced the experience of work and education and how it impacts on others spheres of life during the third and fourth decades of life in contemporary Australia.

4.3 The older of the two cohorts left secondary school in 1991, at the beginning of a recession and a radical reshaping of the labour market in this country. Decentralised bargaining began in Australia in the early 1990s, and since this time employers have made their principal aims in bargaining to weaken controls over standard working hours and controls over job security (ACIRRT 1999). The shift of rights from employees towards employers, particularly embracing employers' demands for more 'flexible' labour markets and 'flexible' workers continued through to 2006 when the second cohort left school. Despite some rebalancing towards employees with a new federal Labor government in 2008, this pushing of workers into increasingly precarious conditions, particularly those newly entering the labour market, continues in Australia and many other parts of the world to this day (ACTU 2012; Standing 2011). I focus on the impacts of this weakening security and standardisation in the illustrations in this section^[6].

Gender, education and generation

5.1 In the face of these labour-market changes towards 'flexibility' for employers, the 1991 Life Patterns cohort had been out of school 14 years, and were well into their mid-30s, before a majority had achieved some employment stability (Andres and Wyn 2000). Even with post-secondary education, which was the pathway for the majority of the participants and is now a majority experience in Australia, many were churning in and out of jobs, and in casual employment or without a long-term contract, for a decade or longer after leaving school.

5.2 This meant that many of the young women in the cohort, who embraced the Australian Government's push through the 1990s and 2000s for an extension of education to a greater extent than the men, were unable to establish themselves in careers that utilised the skills they had been encouraged to 'invest' in before they reached a point where many felt they could no longer delay becoming parents (Andres and Wyn 2010).

5.3 This 'ordinary' educational and employment experience cannot be captured with the notion of delayed transition to adulthood. It is instead the story of a generational shift in some of the mechanisms of gender inequality in Australia. In the context of family policies in Australia that are far behind the OECD benchmark (Pocock 2003), this group of women, now aged forty have not been provided the structural conditions to have the efforts they have put into education properly recognised and rewarded in the labour market.

Class, work time and generation

6.1 A recurring theme in the interview and survey questionnaires conducted with the first cohort over two decades was that relationships and friendships were difficult to maintain, primarily due to challenges with

finding time outside of work commitments. When asked in their late 20s and again in their late 30s the majority of both men and women said that lack of time with significant others was one of the biggest challenges they faced in their day-to-day lives (Andres and Wyn 2010). The early employment experiences of the younger cohort, who finished school in 2006, are following a similar pattern to the older cohort (Woodman 2012). Interviews conducted with the second cohort in 2008, when they were aged between 18-20 years, shed further light on the role of labour-market changes in the concern already raised by the first cohort about finding time for relationships.

6.2 Australia is at the forefront of a widespread shift away from 'standard patterns of employment' and towards 'flexi-time' across much of the world (Castells 2000: 283). Less than half (47 per cent) of Australians now work to 'standard' hours of 9am-5pm Monday to Friday (ABS 2007). This is linked to a rise in casual positions. At almost a quarter of the workforce, Australia has among the highest proportions of casual (temporary) employees in the OECD (Campbell 2004). Young people in particular are in the frontline of this move towards casual and variable work (Furlong and Kelly 2005). Casual employees in Australia have no legislated regular pattern of working hours, no holiday leave entitlements, nor are their employers required to give a meaningful period of notice of the hours and times they will be required to work (ACTU 2012).

6.3 Employment amongst the second cohort participants is currently concentrated in the retail and hospitality sectors, which employ a great number of young people and a great number of casual workers and is steadily moving toward '24-7' hours of operation. In this context, the majority of the interview participants (as with the cohort as a whole) were working weekends and evenings and often faced changes in their hours of engagement with paid work from week to week.

6.4 A primary issue raised by the participants in the interviews was the impact of these work patterns on the rest of their lives (Woodman 2012). There is now a greater variability in when young employees can be working and it tends to be employers who control these patterns. If a number of people in a group of friends work to differing hours then there is no longer a standard timetable or rhythm into which to fit. As a result, scheduling regular periods of time with the same grouping of significant others becomes harder as work schedules are individualised. Often combined with some form of post school study, which has become a majority experience in Australia, an increasingly individualised work schedule is part of a new set of generational conditions shaping the lives of young people (Woodman 2012).

6.5 With online social networking sites like Facebook, young people in Australia today may have more acquaintances than any before. What many of the Life Patterns participants have found difficult in the context of their work patterns, however, is to regularly find time to spend together with the same group of people. Regularly eating a shared meal with family members, or meeting close friends for a drink or to attend a gig, or to undertake another collective endeavor, such as a team sport, have become more difficult and requires more coordination (Woodman 2012: 8).

6.6 It was not the entire second cohort that faced this temporal precariousness. Some participants, generally from higher socio-economic backgrounds, were relatively protected from the restructuring of work toward greater 'flexibility' for employers. While still often working in casual positions, and often combined with university study at more prestigious institutions, financial support from their family gave these participants relative autonomy over their work times, such as a greater ability to say no when a manager asked them to pick up extra work or to adjust hours of work with short notice. They also tended to have social networks comprised of people with a similar level of control over the variability in the work schedules (Woodman 2012: 12).

6.7 The experience of the first cohort suggests that some of these well-resourced participants will be the ones most likely to find more stable employment and favorable work conditions, and to find this sooner (Andres and Wyn 2010). There is also a gender effect interacting with class-related resources to control working hours; in Australia today it is still older males who have the least variability in their hours of work (ACTU 2012: 15).

6.8 While control over time has long been identified as a factor in social inequality, the increasing individualisation and changeability of work patterns in Australia is a primary element of the generational location of contemporary young people. Divisions can be conceptualised on the basis of the extent to which different young people can control or escape these precarious work conditions and their effects.

6.9 Participants in the Life-Patterns study have been at the vanguard of new labour-market patterns. While on the one hand general patterns are clear – they are taking longer to establish themselves in the workplace and, linked to this, to start families – on the other hand diversity has also increased. Some participants left secondary school in their mid-teens and some became parents at a young age (see also AIHW 2012). As noted in this section, in the context of the labour market, it is increased diversity and variability, in terms of long-term and day-to-day patterns of engagement, that defines the generational conditions for this group of young people, and the fault-lines around which intra-generational divisions can be identified.

'Ordinary' young people and social change

7.1 The argument in this article, for a focus on ordinary young people that draws on the legacy of the sociology of generations, has affinity with conceptual critiques of youth research for marginalising the everyday experience of youth (Thomson and Taylor 2005; Jenkins 1983). Young people can be ordinary, or in the 'missing middle', in many aspects of their lives, while 'excluded' or 'spectacular' in others ways that happen to bring them to the attention of researchers, authorities or the popular media.

7.2 From this perspective, the important call to focus on the ordinary experience of youth may have greater purchase if the 'missing middle' is not seen primarily as a particular group of young people who have been neglected, whether defined more narrowly (Roberts 2011) or widely (MacDonald 2011). While Steven Roberts's argument for attending to the missing middle can be read as a contribution to a general critique of a dichotomy between spectacular, dangerous or excluded young people and the rest, at points it also appears that he is defining the 'missing middle' as a 'intermediate' group, defined as in the labour market but not undertaking tertiary level education, that has not been given adequate empirical attention (Roberts 2011: 22). This second conceptualisation is perhaps too constrained. As the example above from the Life-Patterns Project shows, the expansion of more precarious work means that for young Australians in general there is a new struggle to establish themselves in the labour market, many highly educated and 'qualified' Australians find themselves in jobs with few prospects, at least at points in their lives.

7.3 While not invalidating the call for greater empirical attention to young people whose experiences are neglected, I am suggesting that the main danger in focusing on spectacular and excluded young people is not that others are hence ignored in that particular piece of research; this is unavoidable. It is instead that the experience of particular groups needs to be understood in the context of the general, but also unequal, generational conditions that shape the current experience of youth.

7.4 In arguing that the sociology of youth attend to the legacy of the sociology of generations, my interest is not primarily to generate arguments about when a new generation emerges, let alone to advocate neat 15 year categorisations of generations such as X, Y and Z. Instead it is that the sociology of generations gives youth researchers some conceptual tools that help in understanding the relationship between continuity and change, and structure and action, in a different way.

7.5 Highlighting the dangers of exaggerating change is an important contribution to youth studies (Goodwin and O'Connor 2005; MacDonald 2011: 429). Yet there is equally a danger, even in research based explicitly on highlighting both structural conditions and the creative ways that young people exercise their 'bounded agency' within these conditions, that in highlighting the predictability of educational and other outcomes for young people based on age, gender or class, this comes to be seen as clinching evidence against claims of significant social change (see Roberts 2012: 394).

7.6 While it is important to present evidence and argument to counter any researcher arguing that social division and diversity no longer shape youth experience, I believe that such claims are relatively rare. Researchers and theorists who draw on theories of social change are more productively understood as putting forward a challenge to sociological research, in the field of youth studies and elsewhere, to show how these divisions matter and not take processes for granted. In this context, for understanding social division in the contemporary youth experience, the sociology of youth will be strengthened by giving a greater role to conceptual apparatus that allow researchers to be open in their empirical investigations to the possibility that relations between social positions are produced and reproduced in new ways in the face of social change.

Conclusion:

8.1 One of the central aims driving many youth researchers is to understand inequality, and following this to work to alleviate it and highlight the way that marginalised young people resist the status quo. As I have argued previously, the sociology of youth can be reinvigorated by a discussion about whether the primary conceptual frames in the field, shaped by binaries between structure and agency and between transitions and youth cultures, are up to this task in their current form. I believe the disposition embedded in the legacy of the sociology generations provides the foundations for an alternative way of understanding the relationship between structure, action, continuity and change. This approach requires the systematic analysis of the economic, political and social conditions impacting on young people while attending at the same time to the way that culture and subjectivities are implicated in social change.

8.2 While the notion of generations, particularly as it is taken up in popular discourse, risks treating everyone born at the same time as sharing the same set of attributes, this is not the case with the sociology of generations, where identifying divisions within a generation has a history back to Mannheim's discussion of generational units. To undertake youth research in the spirit suggested in this article, informed by the sociology of generations, is to trace both change and continuity but not as binary opposites.

8.3 In this article I have advocated thinking of the challenge of the 'missing middle' in youth research as not only, or even primarily, a matter of shifting our empirical focus. Instead, the challenge is to trace the way the possibilities available to young people in general are remade over time, as it is on this basis that it is possible to trace how patterns of stratification can emerge through processes that shift over time. It is also on this foundation that youth researchers can best understand the experience of those who on some measure may be successful, excluded, or ordinary. A disposition towards youth sociology that recognises that familiar patterns, in particular inequalities, can emerge through changing mechanism over time is the undervalued legacy of the sociology of generations.

Notes

¹See Andrew Abbott's *Chaos of Disciplines* (2001) for a discussion of this relative 'chaos', and apparently lack of progress over time compared to some other intellectual pursuits.

²Of course young people may have their own ideas about whether aspects of their lives are ordinary and may not agree with the conceptualisations discussed here. It is important to note, however, that most participants in the Life Patterns study discussed in this article do not see themselves as particularly out of the ordinary. Claims about a mainstream of young people who believe they are special tend to emerge from conservative commentators who claim to have discovered a new 'narcissistic generation'.

³For a summary of these debates over the apparent failings of newer approaches to youth culture, drawing on contemporary sociological theory, to properly account for structural inequality, see Blackman (2007).

⁴For example, is it possible to have a global generation (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009)? Such a generation would have to be understood as highly pluralistic and fragmentary.

⁵This project is based in the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. I am currently a research team member with Johanna Wyn (lead Chief Investigator), Lesley Andres, Hernan Cuervo, Graeme Smith and Jessica Crofts. The project was originally instigated and coordinated for many years by Peter Dwyer, now retired. Further details, including funding received from the Australian Research Council and others can be found at <http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/ycr/life_patterns/>.

⁶A fuller discussion of the research summarised here, with attendant methodological detail can be found in Andres and Wyn (2000) and Woodman (2012).

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