Youth and generation

In the midst of an adult world

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Introduction

The relationship of young people to the generations that surround them, either younger or older, has been of interest to sociologists, psychologists and policy-makers for some time, with the categories of childhood, youth and adolescence, adulthood and old/third-age all becoming both important conceptual tools and widely used units of analysis. However, despite a wealth of literature from the past fifty or so years, the concept and meaning of youth and generation remain complex – at the same time youth is an age that is both ambiguous and ill defined but is also a time of life that is perceived to be the most difficult for individuals with the problem of making the transition from education to work, the problem of ‘growing up’ and the problem of youth culture with its associated moral panics (see Brake 1985; Clay 2003). It becomes easier then to adopt Mannheim’s view of generation as ‘a common location in the social and historical process’ (Mannheim 1952: 291) and group young people into homogenous generations labelled ‘delinquents’, ‘Baby Boomers’, ‘Generation X’, ‘Generation Y’, and so on. Yet how we understand these groupings, and their relationship to older generations, remains heavily contested and largely dependent upon the perspective adopted in the literature – be it functionalist, structuralist, lifecourse, cohort, transitional or interpretavist (see Pilcher 1995).

As MacDonald et al. (2001) have argued, historically the study of youth developed with research focused on one of two distinct strands. Early studies of youth, dating from the 1960s, were interested in what can be termed as youth culture and the associated moral panics around this life stage. Later studies, which emerged in the 1970s, were more interested in youth transitions from school to work and understanding how young people made the transition into work and on to adulthood. However, as Macdonald et al. (ibid.: 4.9) argue, ‘there is more to becoming an adult than simply making a transition from school to work’. As such, the complexity of youth transitions is now becoming more widely understood as the focus has shifted from looking merely at issues of youth culture and/or the move from school to work to encompass other significant elements such as the transition out of the family home to independent living. Alongside the broadening of the debate around transition it is increasingly argued that not only...
have transitions to work become more complex, but other transitions at this life stage, based on traditional signifiers of adulthood such as independent living, marriage and secure work/career have become more protracted than past transitions.

One of the most important recent contributions to these debates has come from Wyn and Woodman (2006) and their argument that the concept of generation is far a more powerful analytical tool than ‘youth in transition’. Wyn and Woodman (ibid.: 498) argue that ‘youth as transition’ is too psychosocial, too developmental, too deterministic, that it underestimates the importance of young people’s own subjectivities and that it leads to youth being viewed as a ‘linear process or position on the lifecourse’ between childhood and adulthood.

If we understand that the adulthood that was available to the Baby Boomer generation was a historical artefact, a product of a particular combination of economic realities, social policies and industrial settlements that have long since ceased to exist, it becomes possible to see what is missing from the conceptualisation of youth simply as transition.

(ibid.: 498)

They support this assertion with an exploration of the experiences and attitudes of young people born in the early 1970s. From this analysis, they develop the concept of new adulthood which

signals the emergence of significant new priorities and subjectivities that are anchored in the political and material conditions of young people’s lives. It is suggested that these subjectivities are not simply transitional (or age effects), and implies that a generational shift has occurred.

(ibid.: 500)

While Wyn and Woodman’s analysis is clearly important in that it re-states the case for the concept of generation, it is limited by only using youth (or generations of youth) as a metaphor of social change. Their analysis does not fully explore the interconnections or interactions between one generation and another, for example, do young people in Wyn and Woodman’s analysis not interact with their parents and teachers? Who do they interact with when they enter work for the first time, is it exclusively their own peer group and generation or is it, as is more likely, are they interacting with individuals from different generational groups? They also fall foul of what Furlong and Cartmel (1997) refer to as ‘the epistemological fallacy of late modernity’ – that somehow everything is separate from and different to the past. Rather than seeing social life as a snapshot in the way that Wyn and Woodman’s analysis implies, there is a need to see it as a continuum and understand that both the past and present are interrelated. This in turn means that behaviours of today emerge out of, but are not separate from, those of the past. In highlighting the distinctiveness of generations Wyn and Woodman’s analysis often underplays the similarities between generations. For example, they draw a clear distinction between the Baby Boomers in their twenties during the mid-1970s to the post-1970 generation who would be in their twenties in 2001. Yet in our own analysis of historical youth transitions data, we have highlighted the common experiences between youth from 1960s and young workers now (see Goodwin and O’Connor 2005). Our analysis suggests that young people in the 1960s experienced very similar individualized, non-linear
and complex transitions to contemporary generations of youth. This is despite the huge economic and social transformation, between the early 1960s and the present, to which Wyn and Woodman (2006) refer.

In this chapter, we seek to examine intergenerational relationships in Norbert Elias’s ‘Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles’ project from the 1960s. In particular, we aim to answer four broad questions. First, what can we learn from Eliasian sociology about the relationship between young and older people? We want to use Eliasian theory to support our analysis and underscore what Furlong and Cartmel (1997) view as the epistemological fallacy of late modernity that is apparent in some writings on age and generation. Second, to what extent did young people then mix with members of other generations, especially older workers? Third, to what extent were those interactions positive and beneficial for the young workers in helping them develop and make the transition to adulthood? Finally, to what extent is Elias’ work useful for understanding current debates on youth and generation?

Using Eliasian sociology to explore youth and generation

As suggested above, one of the main limitations with much of the writing on youth and generation is the tendency to highlight the apparent ‘distinctiveness’ of young people from older generations around, focusing on what is unique about them and what is different between them and older generations rather than considering the interconnections between the two. However, we feel that the work of Norbert Elias allows us to understand youth and generation slightly differently, he allows us to view generations not as ‘static objects’ or separate groups of relationships, but as figurations or sets of inter-relationships through which young people learn the acceptable adult behaviours from the adults around them (Goodwin 2007). Of particular importance here is Elias’s critique of the homo clausus or ‘closed personality’ perspective that has come to dominate sociology. For Elias,

The conception of the individual as homo clausus, a little world in himself who ultimately exists quite independently of the great world outside … every other human being is seen as a homo clausus; his core, his being, his true self likewise as being divided within him by an invisible wall from everything outside, including every other human being.

(Elias 2000: 472)

Such a conception leads sociologists to continually view the individual as something existing outside of society and society as existing beyond individuals (ibid.: 472). The central thrust of Elias’s work, as Mennell (1993) argues, is underpinned not by homo clausus but by homo aperti – a sociological analysis that emphasizes the interdependence of people and traces ‘changes in personality structure hand in hand with changes in the structure of human relations in societies as parts of an overall process’ (ibid.: 193). Embracing the notion of homo aperti and a sociological analysis that emphasizes the interdependence of people has important implications for how youth and generation are perceived in sociological analysis. Elias articulates this view further, and more fully in his writings (see Elias 2000; 2001) and argues that ‘I’ is an outcome of interactions and relationships with others. In Elias’s analysis:
there can be no ‘I’ without ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘we’, ‘you’ or ‘they’. It is plainly misleading to use such concepts as ‘I’ or ego independently of their position with the web of relationships to which the rest of the pronouns refer. Taken together, the personal pronouns are in fact an elementary form of expression of the fact that every person is fundamentally related to other people, and that every human individual is fundamentally a social being.

(Elias 2001: 124)

In this sense, ‘I’ is not a singular but is instead a plurality with ‘I’ and ‘we’ being inextricably linked. As such, youth cannot solely be about an ‘individual’ or a generation of individuals that are ‘unique’. Instead, generations are historically and spatially located and analysis of generations provides insight into changing group identities, behavioural standards, changing relationships, interactions, configurations, and power balances.

It is the web of social relations in which individuals live during their most impressionable phase, that is childhood and youth, which imprints itself upon their unfolding personality in the form of the relationship between their controlling agencies, super-ego and ego and their libidinal impulses. The resulting balance … determines how an individual person steers him or herself in his or her social relations with others … However, there is no end to the intertwining … it never ceases entirely to be affected by his or her changing relations with others throughout his or her life.

(Elias, 2000: 377)

This process of constant change Elias conceptualized as the inter-relationship between sociogenesis (the processes of development and transformation in social relations) and psychogenesis (the processes of development and transformation in the psychology, personality or habitus that accompany such social changes) (van Krieken 1998). Elias argues that habitus is not inherent or innate but ‘habituated’ and becomes a constituent part of the individual by learning through social experience and develops as part of a continuous process beginning at birth and continuing through childhood and youth (ibid.: 59).

Given the interrelationship between sociogenesis and psychogenesis, Elias argued that the socialization of children cannot take place behind closed doors and the learning of adult behaviours is only possible due to the presence of others.

Elias’s specific writings on youth are located in two places: first, in the archived notes and memorandum that accompanied the archived material associated with the Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles’ project, and, second, his paper ‘The Civilising of Parents’ (Elias 1980). From these writings, it is clear that Elias thinks there are two, parallel, long-term processes occurring. First, that in order for young people to acquire appropriate adult behaviours, interaction with adults both at home and at work is essential. Second, however, compared to more primitive societies, contemporary societies are marked by a growing separation between adults, children and young people. In the context of this later process Elias identified eight particular problems for young people:

- the prolonged separation of young people from adults;
- the indirect knowledge of the adult world;
- the lack of communication between adults and children;
- the social life of children in the midst of an adult world with limited communication between the two;
the role of fantasy elements in the social and personal life of the young vis-à-vis the reality of adult life;

- the social role of young people is ill-defined and ambiguous;
- striving for independence through earning money constitutes a new social dependence (on work rather than parents);
- the prolonging of social childhood beyond biological maturity:

He states:

Human social life in the form of urban-industrial nation-states encloses each individual person in a complex network of longer, more differentiated chains of interdependence. In order to claim to be an adult ... in order to fulfil an adult’s functions ... it is necessary to have a very high degree of foresight, restraint of momentary impulses, for the sake of long-term goals and gratifications ... it requires a high degree of self-regulating restraint of drives and affects.

(Elias 1980: 201–2)

The more complex a society the more complex this process of transition to adulthood or the learning of adult norms becomes. Elias suggested that this is radically different from the children growing up in ‘simpler’ societies of previous periods in which children and young people had more direct contact with adults. To illustrate this, Elias suggests that in Eskimo society there is a direct developmental line between children’s play behaviour (playing with bows and arrows or learning to treat skins) and adult behaviour such as hunting, tent making and survival (ibid.: 202). The young person’s behaviour corresponds to a high degree with adult reality whereas in complex industrial societies it does not. As such, in a simpler society, he argues the individual civilizing transformation is temporally shorter and less deep-rooted (ibid.: 202). Yet despite these problems and the apparent increasing separation of young people from the older generation, the interaction between adults and young people is essential if the young people are to make a successful transition to adulthood – or, in Eliasian terms, to acquire appropriate behavioural standards of the time. The process of separation may make the learning of these adult behaviours more complex but the interaction must still take place.

We would now like to explore some of the above themes using data from Elias’s ‘Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles’, undertaken in Leicester between 1962 and 1964. To explore these themes, data were collected via interviews with a sample of young people drawn from the Youth Employment Office index of all Leicester school leavers from the summer and Christmas of 1960 and the summer and Christmas of 1962 – 882 interviews were completed, of which 851 of the original interview schedules were rediscovered by the authors (see Goodwin and O’Connor 2005; 2006; 2007).

**Youth and generation at work in 1960s Leicester**

One of Elias’s central concerns focused on understanding more about the way that younger people interacted with older people, in particular, to probe the notion that interaction with adults is essential to the acquisition of appropriate adult behaviour. Most respondents, when asked about their relationships with older people, reported that they
had good relationships with older workers and many commented that they interacted better with the older staff than with people of the same age:

All right – Tack (45) who’s just come – he’s nice. I seem to get on better with the older ones because the young ones try to be ‘lairy’ and that – I’d sooner have older ones.

I don’t have much contact with young people of my own age at work, and I prefer it that way, if you get a lot of young lads together, they are going to lark about and not get on with the job. I get on with the boys at the boys’ club. As far as working with them, I resent it. Even girls as old as 19 seem immature about their job, secretaries or trainee secretaries are alright but I don’t bother with the others.

Very well. I find that whenever I go I always get on with older folk best. Probably with working with them a lot. I get on alright with younger people but not as well as older folk. [Why?] As I say, probably because I’ve had to work with older people.

Many were very clear that it was ‘right’ to respect older and more experienced workers. These young workers explained that as long as they respected the older workers, by displaying appropriate adult behaviours themselves, then their workplace relationships were good. This is significant given Elias’s argument that young people only learn appropriate adult behaviour through interaction with older people. Indeed, the quotes that follow provide support for Elias’s contention that the learning of adult behaviours is only possible due to the presence of others:

I get on alright with them [older workers], I don’t go shooting my mouth off, that’s what they don’t like, people shooting their mouths off, there is a lad who has just started who shoots his mouth off and nobody likes him. Everything they’ve got, he’s got something better.

Generally, very well, but they have their own way of doing things, and you have to be very tactful not to upset them.

I’m not cheeky with them, I just respect that they’re older.

Very well. I get on with them all the time. They don’t treat me as the youngster and push any old job on me, they treat me as they treat the other men.

Quite well. You know I used to do as I was told. Sometimes I was a bit cheeky and I used to get a back hander, like – off the chaps especially. I used to get on pretty well with everybody.

Furthermore, some respondents commented that they were not comfortable when adults acted in a way the young person felt was inappropriate: ‘Some of them are alright, but others act stupid, throwing things about and so on.’

For those who commented on positive relationships with other young people, the emphasis was on shared understandings, stressing the similarities within and among their own generation or the ‘collective exposure to the same historical set of cultural … experiences’ (Brannen, 2003: 1.2):

[With] my own age? It’s just like being at school with some of them – you talk about records and things like that.

Alright, better than with the old [Why?] we have more in common – records and so on.
Others, however, demonstrated that they felt little separation from older workers, regardless of their differing generations, by talking about their shared activities. The quotes below suggest that, for some young workers, appropriate behaviour in the adult world was easily learnt:

Very well, the older blokes are very nice. I have a game of darts with them at dinner time.

They’re great. Play football with about 20 of the chaps at dinner on the back of the playing field. We have a fab old time.

In terms of learning work-based skills, the young workers seemed to have clear idea of the separation that existed between themselves and the older, more experienced workers. Here, the concept of learning appropriate adult behaviour, in this case, work-specific skills, was understood by the younger generation in a very explicit way. They had no doubt that the older workers were ‘superior’ not only in age but also in experience:

Well, they’re all right. They were willing to show you a trade, specially the chaps who were ready for retiring. They were more willing than a younger person.

All right … They’re more grown up and obviously talk about more grown-up things.

Very well, in general. For a start, they regard you as incompetent until they get to know your capabilities.

Usually very well, some look down on you a bit, thinking you don’t know the job very well, but usually get all the co-operation you need.

Very well – you know if you get in a bit of a muddle, they’ll always give you a hand. The managers come down on to the warehouse floor to give you a hand with anything as long as they aren’t too busy.

I get on all right – they try to be a bit, telling you this and telling you that. They try to appear too fatherly at times, about work and things in general but that’s all.

It is clear then that among this group of young workers there was evidence of young people learning adult norms through the presence and behaviour of the adults around them, in this case, at work. The majority of young people recognized a clear separation between themselves and the older workers (or adults) on starting work and this was evident in their deference towards older workers and their understanding of their place at work as the most junior employees. However, over time these individuals began to acquire and adopt appropriate forms of social and professional behaviour and this was increasingly recognized and respected by their older colleagues. Recognition for the changes in behaviour at work is important because, as Blatterer explains:

Adult recognition through commitment and responsibility, productivity and performance … implies that being adult is not something we can simply claim for ourselves. Individuals’ adult status ultimately relies on the extent to which the things they do and say, and the attitudes and beliefs they hold and express, match the social norms or criteria and expectations of what constitutes adult behaviour and attitudes in society.

(2007: 9.2)
Conclusion

In this chapter we have suggested that the concept of generation is important but that generations should not be seen as separate groupings but, instead it should be used to denote interrelated groupings. The young workers in the data we have used here were clearly working with colleagues who had been born any time between 1900 and the 1930s – so without doubt were of a different generation to the young workers themselves and therefore an ideal context in which to examine the interrelationships between adults and young people. The data reveal very clearly, that in the context of the workplace, the young workers and older workers interacted and that the young workers themselves thought that this was an essential part of growing up and becoming more adult in their behaviour. The question then remains, for those who critique the transitional approach to generation, how do young people learn appropriate adult behaviours if they only interact within their own generational group? Indeed, using Elias, we can see that young people cannot learn appropriate adult behaviour from within their own generation group alone.

The broadening out of the debates around transition and the recognition of the complexity of this life stage provides support for Elias’s argument that as societies become more complex then so too does the transition from youth to adulthood and the learning of adult norms. However, appropriate adult behaviour still has to be learnt by young people and this can only happen through interaction with older generations. Maintaining a view that generations are independent of each other is fallacious as it de-emphasizes the interaction and underestimates the contact that young people have with older people in society.

References


