

Key Concepts in Youth Studies

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9

Young People, Divisions and Inequality

The study of young people by social scientists invariably involves the investigation of social divisions and inequality. The enduring, structured patterns of experiences in society that frame the identities and life chances of young people are at the heart of many of the debates in youth studies. Very often researchers regard social divisions

and inequality as pathological as they have a deleterious effect on quality of life – they are social problems that need to be reduced. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) point to how growing differences in the income and wealth within societies is associated with poorer health and educational outcomes for young people. Though some suggest that many social divisions are inevitable and reflect the competitive ethos of capitalist societies – some of their more harmful aspects may be reduced but not eradicated. Researchers focus on the economic, cultural and social engines of divisions often understood in relation to social class, gender, ‘race’, sexuality and ethnicity and concepts such as discrimination, prejudice and exclusion (Braham and Janes, 2002: xi). In the key institutional domains of society (such as education, family, leisure and employment) young people will come up against powerful forces that condition their lives, limiting some avenues of action while enabling others. Young people themselves are sometimes conscious of these conditioning processes and work against them to manage and subvert these constraints as they pursue their own projects. There are usually divisions between youths and older citizens but there are also cultural, social and economic differences between young people globally, between young people who live in different parts of the world. The study of social divisions then raises important questions about the different sorts of lives lived by different groups of youths, the causes of these divisions and how young people themselves and government policy are implicated in the enduring patterns of difference. Public policies and the strategies of the young may at times work to mitigate the negative consequences of inequalities and divisions, though at others these same forces are intimately implicated in the processes of domination – where some enjoy privileged lives while others suffer exclusion and disadvantage.¹

Researchers have focused much attention on the ways economic divisions are produced leading to structured patterns of youth inequality within and between different societies. In affluent societies the incidence of youth poverty and social exclusion has been examined illustrating the vulnerability of young people to unemployment and under-employment. In the USA, UK and other Western European countries during the recent recession (2008 onwards) unemployment for those aged between sixteen and twenty-four was twice the rate for adults at over 20 per cent (Eurostat, 2009; Institute for Employment Studies, 2009; United States Department of Labour, 2009). More recent data show youth unemployment rates in Europe reaching between 30 and 40 per

cent (Eurostat, 2010). Research points to how even before the recent recession the flexible labour market policies across Europe were polarising **employment** experiences for young people, with some doing well and many others subject to poor quality, vulnerable jobs (Bradley, 2005: 101). Evidence points to how early experience of educational underachievement and unemployment can have a lasting effect on life chances and identities, leading to further problems such as mental and physical ill health, drug use and **homelessness**. Important longitudinal research in the UK (Thomson, 2011) and Canada (Anisef et al., 2000) illustrates the relatively predictable relationships between childhood experiences of poverty and subsequent transitions into poor quality jobs and social and cultural disadvantage as adults. Youth researchers therefore raise some difficult questions about the responsibility of state agencies to support young people in their **transitions** to adulthood. However, in many affluent societies recently the prevailing neo-liberal policies have created relatively punitive approaches to young people that have tended to blame youth themselves for their disadvantage, offering only limited support for long-term training and employment initiatives (Mizen, 2004; Savelsberg and Martin-Giles, 2008). One consequence of this may be the marked increase in the incidence of mental health problems among young people and the continuing problems with long-term unemployment, homelessness and drug use in many societies (*The Guardian*, 2010). In all of these cases there is the suggestion that the state is doing too little to mitigate the deeply ingrained patterns of disadvantage associated with economic and cultural divisions.

In this context of the social and economic marginalisation of many young people, governments have developed forms of surveillance and control of young people's activities that reflect concerns (moral panics) about youth **crime** and deviance. In the UK, for example, there has been the expansion of the use of closed circuit television (CCTV), stop and search powers and anti-social behaviour orders to monitor and regulate young people's use of public spaces (Muncie, 2009). These policies, which often infringe on the liberties of young people, together with the continuing media portrayal of young people as 'trouble' suggest very real social and ideological divisions in society between young people and older citizens.

Chatterton and Hollands (2001) document how British cities are increasingly experienced as key sites for the playing out of young people's identities and practices as part of the night-time economy. Different sorts of young people (locals, students, gays, marginal

youth) use different parts of the city as their venues and manage the increasingly commercialised nightlife in a multiplicity of ways. Here then we see quite explicit cultural divisions between young people, which have an important spatial dimension. Just as young people from different social backgrounds will live in different communities, so they attend different schools and often pursue different leisure activities and so youth divisions contribute to the wider social segregation often seen in contemporary societies. Such divisions are an obvious source of concern for those keen to promote the creation of tolerant and cohesive societies.

Many of the divisions experienced by young people will occur in their cultural lives, worked through their relationships in various domains and settings such as leisure, school and work. In their daily lives young people's views and experiences are often undervalued or misrecognised and their contribution to wider public debates and issues marginalised by media and government organisations. Recent research by the authors documented the importance of fluency of language use to the ways that young people accomplish the presentation of self in relationships with significant others. Where young people encountered problems with their spoken or written language skills (often originating in poor educational opportunities when young) they often experienced embarrassment, shame and stigma. Over many years such experiences come to shape young people's judgements about their academic abilities and employment prospects, creating subtle psychological barriers to self-advancement and constituting so-called hidden injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb, 1972).

In a similar way Aapola et al. (2005) explored the long-term construction of gendered identities and how young women are bombarded with contradictory messages about 'acceptable' ways of being a young woman – for example, working at appearing attractive to 'fit in' with one's peers yet avoiding being 'too' attractive in case one stand outs and attracts unwanted attention. The **body** is seen as a key site for the representation of gendered identities, and young women are compelled to learn complex practices and scripts that frame acceptable forms of self-identity. There are enduring normative assumptions about heterosexuality and of being able bodied, for example, that frame the language, ideas and practices of young people that can set up at times subtle and at others very conspicuous patterns of division and inequality. Recent research by Croghan et al. (2006) explored some of these issues in relation to style and young people's identities and cultural practices.

Following the work of Steve Miles (2000) they document the increasing significance of **consumerism** to young people's presentation of self and how 'fitting in' with peer group cultures relies on the purchase of key markers of youth identity such as clothes, technology, music and makeup. To be unable to purchase these items because of low income can lead to forms of symbolic and cultural exclusion or 'style failure' and in turn patterns of divisions between youth cultural groupings. In this way economic divisions rooted in socio-economic processes can produce further related cultural divisions. Though being affluent doesn't always ensure popularity – the authors note how young people have to work at 'fitting in', acquiring a sensitivity to group norms so that fluency and skills (humour, for example) or so-called forms of identity capital are also key to understanding youth friendship relations. As with earlier writings in this area, Croghan et al. (2006) document the sustained effort that is required from young people to navigate the complex terrain that are youth identities, peer groups and social practices – much of which involves self-policing and bodily management to ensure compliance with dominant rules of behaviour.

NOTE

- 1 It is important to acknowledge that social divisions are a feature of human societies. Though often seen as problematic and linked to social injustices, at the same time notions of difference can also be associated with rich cosmopolitan communities that celebrate and promote difference as a marker of healthy societies.

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10

Representations of Youth

The ways in which young people are represented – through images and language – can have a powerful effect on the lives of young people as well as wider society. Social scientists are keen to interrogate forms of representation (such as the mass media), as these do not always reflect, in neutral ways, the reality of people's lives. Inevitable processes of interpretation can lead to distortion or bias in modes of representation