Youth sociology must cross cultures

There has been a limited dialogue between the global 'North' and the 'South' in youth studies, which means that dominant interpretive paradigms describe most accurately young people in the nations and cultures where these paradigms are produced. For example, the received wisdom about contemporary youth transitions is that they are extended and fragmented. However, the specifics of local culture, as well as socioeconomic status, need to be taken into account. For a culturally inclusive future, youth sociology needs to deploy conceptual and interpretive frameworks that can apply across the many different settings and circumstances in which young people live, study, work and make decisions.

by Pam Nilan

I n an age of transnational economic production, market integration and social networking, sociologists worldwide are looking beyond traditional national boundaries to build international paradigms of sociological interpretation that will effectively address the manifold challenges posed by global transnationalism without losing a sense of the local in the practices of social actors.

Similarly, the future of youth sociology must also incorporate conceptual and interpretive frameworks that can cross cultures, rather than be locked into assumptions and logics belonging to just one set of culturally linked nations. Western countries, especially English-speaking nations in the northern hemisphere, have long dominated theorising about youth transitions and youth cultures. The proposition here is to anchor core epistemological assumptions about the experiences and choices of a new generation of young people, wherever they are, in verifiable socioeconomic realities pertinent more or less everywhere. Such global realities do exist. They inhere in market forces and class structures that run across the nations of the world, as well as within nations. Such realities are signalled, for example, by the upward credentialling of the labour market, the fall in union membership and guaranteed full-time work, the shrinking of the public sector, the growth of the urban middle class, the trend for small, nuclear families in crowded suburbs, and so on.

However, these global realities do not include the repudiation of tradition, the withering of religious belief, or the waning of trust in marriage and extended family support. Equally, while there are clearly identifiable global trends in youth consumption and popular culture tastes, it is debatable whether these can be identified as the source for any significant change of consciousness sufficient to rip young people from the local foundations of their families and communities, from what Bourdieu (1998, p. 72) would call their "habitus". The same argument can be made, to a greater or a lesser extent, for the new communication and information technologies.

If we acknowledge that certain global socioeconomic pressures of a structural nature affect the choices and lifestyles of youth everywhere in the world, then we must also acknowledge that not all young people experience them in the same way, nor are outcomes similar. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009) identify the existence of "global" youth generations, subsequently arguing that a "cosmopolitan sociology" exercised beyond national boundaries is needed to understand the choices and lifestyles of current and future global generations. However, in keeping with the argument made here, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009, p.26) also admit that a cosmopolitan sociology must equally acknowledge that the inequality of life chances remains "all too conspicuous, and that is precisely what produces a particular tension and explosive force: the sphere of experience of the 'global generations' may be globalized – but it is simultaneously characterized by sharp dividing lines and conflicts", which deeply affect the practices of young people as local social actors.

The global turn

Contemporary youth studies gives the appearance of having gone "global" to some extent. At the conservative end of the continuum there is now an Institute for Global Youth Studies, which promises to equip emerging (Christian) leaders to impact the globe by teaching them how to successfully proselytise to youth in any country of the world. Towards the critical sociology end of the

continuum, Andy Furlong, in his forthcoming book *Youth studies: A global introduction*, will no doubt offer an updated view on the notion of "global youth", previously explored by Nilan and Feixa (2006). However, while it may be tempting to imagine a grand sweep of history in which all youth cultures and youth transitions are becoming more or less the same, apparent trends should not be exaggerated. Instead, youth sociologists now and in the future need to work with appropriate investigative paradigms for conducting studies of young people in culturally sensitive ways that acknowledge their local realities. The rest of this article is devoted to sketching out some parameters for that endeavour.

The challenge of looking beyond national boundaries

Perhaps the best way to predict the future of youth sociology is to create it, or to at least develop some innovative ways to describe what has not happened before. As youth sociologists, we need to evaluate what is subtly arriving in the way of generational trends and, at the same time, muster analytical resources effectively to address what is coming. To do this we need to shore up relevant research network connections and discussions beyond our own national boundaries. The theoretical and interpretive paradigms that have long informed youth sociology need to broaden and yet be available for local analysis at the same time. The insights of youth researchers in other cultures are vital for such a task. However, there seems to be an epistemological gap between youth researchers from different parts of the world.

The global North and South in youth studies

The gap was never more evident than in youth sessions at the International Sociology Association Conference in July 2010 in Gothebörg, Sweden, where youth sociologists from around the world gathered to offer papers on youth phenomena in their own countries. Despite a common interest in youth studies, RC34 – the youth research committee of the International Sociological Association – demonstrated, on a smaller scale, the continuing unequal status division between

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the ways sociological study is carried out in different parts of the world.

The majority of empirically driven papers reporting surveys and mixed-method studies were from non-western countries. In contrast, the majority of practitioner-driven papers on youth social policy, welfare, interventions and practices were from western countries. The most strongly debated and best-attended papers were highly interpretive and theoretical, written by western scholars. While this apparent tripartite division does not necessarily echo a developed world / developing world demarcation, it was the case that very few theoretically oriented or practitioner-driven papers were offered by researchers from beyond the English-speaking world. It seems as though the field of youth sociology, like so many other fields of sociology, is still dominated intellectually by what many call the global "North" (Connell 2007).

It is only natural that youth sociologists tend to write from within the basic cultural assumptions of the places and the cultures in which they conduct their research. For example, since most youth sociologists writing about contemporary youth transitions live and work in the west, western cultural assumptions colour their theorising. This is not to cast aspersions, nor to shut down productive theoretical debate, but simply to urge more theoretical input from subaltern voices in the field of youth studies. While there is so little dialogue between the global North and the South in the field of youth studies, the standard interpretive paradigms we use remain confined in their usefulness to nations most like our own.

Youth transitions: Challenging the canon

Theoretically, the established canon of explanation for the transition of young people to adulthood still needs to be interrogated and enriched to address analytical needs in other cultures. In the view of this author, the life trajectories of contemporary youth in non-western countries confound ever more strikingly the standard youth transitions paradigm. For example, the implicit concept

of adulthood – total independence from family of origin – is problematic in itself for non-western cultures. It is questionable whether culturally different transitions of youth to adulthood can or should be framed using the notion of an individualised "choice biography" (du Bois-Reymond 1998; see Brannen & Nilsen 2007), given strong collective orientations. We need to grasp the role of other family members in young people's decision-making about not only careers, but also life partners. For example, a study in economically struggling Serbia found both "choices" during adolescence and the "individualisation" process were hampered by structural and cultural factors (Tomanović & Ignjatović 2006). All kinds of decisions made by young people were shaped by the central quest for family prosperity. From empirical examples such as these we learn that career choices of youth in other cultures must be understood not only in terms of personal aspirations and unequal geo-political power relations in the international labour market, but also as outcomes of family negotiations and local cultural influences. In cultures where collective values remain salient, we must question whether career and lifestyle choices represent individual aspirations or reflect sets of negotiations between the young person and family/kin members.

Ten years ago, leading Canadian youth researcher James Côté (2000), now President of RC34, laid down a challenge to youth researchers worldwide, arguing that the transition of youth to adulthood is no longer a linear process, but fractured and prolonged. Côté (2000) claimed that contemporary young people are in a state of "arrested adulthood". Certain markers of adulthood status are achieved, but others are not. Some non-western youth researchers eagerly took up Côté's concept to describe the experiences of youth in economically struggling countries. For example, Fokwang (2008) used the term "arrested adulthood" to describe the complex situation of unmarried and unemployed young Africans uncertain of their future in an unstable political context.

However, it may be that Fokwang simply accepted Côté's implicit assumption of what adulthood means in order to reach that

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conclusion. For example, in Fokwang's (2008) study, it is notable that young Africans who do find a job and marry continue to live with the husband's extended family. The concept of "arrested adulthood" in Côté's precise terms presumes not only a culturally fixed notion of what it means to be adult, but also implies a one-way journey towards full autonomy and independence from family of origin. Yet full autonomy and independence from family of origin are not necessarily key markers of adulthood in the developing world, nor in many migrant enclaves of western cities. The term adult needs to be understood contextually in describing youth transitions.

For this author, as a youth sociologist working in the Asia-Pacific region, it is a struggle to map such canonical concepts as "arrested adulthood" (Côté 2000), "fractured transitions" (Bradley & Devadason 2008) or "individualised choice biography" (du Bois-Reymond 1998; Brannen & Nilsen 2007) on the journey of young people moving towards adulthood in Indonesia, Vietnam, Fiji or Tahiti. Not only are each of these places very different from each other, they differ profoundly from western cultural contexts with regard to the embeddedness of young people in their families and communities, indicating strong links that will not dissipate as adulthood is reached, and kin support mechanisms that favour resilience. Here it is still marriage and parenthood that define a person as adult (Nilan 2008), rather than work status and degree of apparent independence from family of origin. Because adulthood is understood differently, the transition of young people seems less fractured than elsewhere, and the notion of individual choice and planning in the life course does not apply in the same way as it does in the West. Research conducted with unemployed young Muslims in Australia (Nilan 2010) found a similar close orientation to concerns of family and kin, with far less emphasis on individual decision-making and a drive for separation.

The lives of young people — avoiding generalisations

We have witnessed a recent compelling theoretical debate about the nature of contemporary youth transitions (Threadgold in press; Woodman 2010; S. Roberts 2010; Woodman 2009; K. Roberts 2007; Wyn & Woodman 2006). Yet despite this sound and fury in the pages of the *Journal of Youth Studies* and *Young,* the canon of youth transition theorising continues to rest on North American, Anglo and European epistemological assumptions about the meaning of adulthood and the nature of choice as a form of agency.

In fact, it is unclear how much actual choice young people in developing nations exercise when taking up forms of work. We should not assume a form of agency that means they individualistically plan out their life trajectories, as the term suggests. For example, in Southeast Asia, household sustainability, supporting the education of younger siblings, home renovations, and the health care of older family members may all depend on the flow of income from younger family members, thus driving them to become temporary migrant workers overseas, which may not reflect a personal or individual choice (Artini, Nilan & Threadgold in press).

There is obviously a certain element of personal choice in taking up work, but the act of choosing is circumscribed by the specific socioeconomic and cultural conditions in which young people are located. It remains an inconvenient truth that youth in richer countries enjoy life choices in work, relationships and leisure vastly different from youth in the poorest nations of the world, although their lives are far from culturally impoverished. Moreover, tight family and community constraints on the behaviour and activities of young women in many non-western countries and migrant cultures make the application of any analysis based on the apparently gender-free concept of an individualised choice biography untenable.

Popular culture, ICTs and the environment

In one important generational transformation, young people all over the world are becoming culturally more similar due to a number of factors associated with the expansion of the middle class in all but

a few countries, and in keeping with the key identified transformations of late modernity. Technological advances have ensured that there is a mediated dissemination of "taste cultures" (Griswold 2008) to youth worldwide in the leisure fields of entertainment, interactive games, fashion and even sport. Expertise in using the new technology, especially online networking, creative 3-D animation, mobile phone interaction and even hacking, have become the preserve of youth. The virtual spaces made available through mobile phone and internet technology enable communication, information sharing, and networking. In both public and virtual spaces, young people everywhere can collectively connect with the cultures and political agendas of a world brought closer by the pressures of globalisation (Nayak 2004). Yet it must be stressed that in both information and communication technologies (ICTs) and popular culture, language and cultural barriers still persist, and priority is almost always given to the local. For example, most ICT communication between young people is not with strangers or in new fields, but serves as an extension of existing interpersonal relationships and interests (Geser 2007).

Furthermore, when it comes to issues of gender, there are tropes of hypermasculinity, and equally of hyperfemininity, circulating in the global mass media that affect young people's framing of personal gendered identity to some extent. At the same time, the moral double standard on sexuality for male and female youth in most cultures of the world remains virtually unchanged. The extent of moral panics about the unrestrained sexual behaviour of youth, particularly young women, in many countries is striking, and strongly reflected in sociological studies of youth carried out in those countries. Moral and religious pressure on young women means that their patterns of sexual behaviour and partnering do not match the model of contemporary intimate relationships offered by Beck-Gernsheim (2002) or earlier by Giddens (1992), since both models were implicitly based on white, middle-class trends in late modernity that emphasised the choosing, relatively isolated, individual.

Two of the most pressing matters for contemporary sociologists – environmental degradation and climate change – are having an effect not only on the material conditions of life for youth in some countries faced with rising sea levels or drought, for example, but also on the very flavour of youth politics and activism worldwide. Here too, though, we may discern a divergence between the political praxis of youth in wealthier nations, who are concerned about climate change and environmental issues, and youth in poorer, troubled nations whose political concerns remain anchored in the struggle for democracy, human rights and equitable distribution of wealth. If we accept the point made by Wyn and White (1997) that we must try and understand any distinct cohort of youth within its own socioeconomic and political milieu, then this divergence in priorities for youth in developed and developing countries must inform any accounts we give of young people's attitudes towards environmental issues. It is almost certain that their concerns will be as much local as global.

However, in making these arguments about current phenomena, the intention is not to close down informed sociological commentary on issues that face youth, perhaps in different ways, all over the world. Theoretical propositions about the changes facing young people today provide channels of dialogue and debate through which youth sociologists across the globe maintain productive dialogue with each other. Moreover, class, race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality remain four of the core concerns of not only sociological praxis, but also of youth sociology, and there is no indication they will diminish in importance in the future.

Perhaps the most critical question to be asked about contemporary youth theorising concerns the assumption of individualisation or, more accurately, the implication that individualisation is constituted as more or less the same process everywhere. This is a globalising assumption in itself. There are many cultures in the world where the process of individualisation is either not as advanced as it is in western countries, or has taken a different form in late modernity. If

we accept that many of the risks, costs and responsibilities for a young person's journey through life have devolved to individuals, we must also recognise that families and the resources they offer have never been so important in youth transition.

Conclusion

In summary, broadly applicable theorising about contemporary youth transitions must take into account not only personal aspirations, but also local cultural factors and family negotiations, as well as unequal geo-political power relations in the international labour market. It is simply unwise to theorise the new "global generations" as a "single, universal generation with common symbols and a unique consciousness" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2009, p.25).

It is unsettling to think that youth sociology, like sociology itself, remains somewhat stuck in the very global status divisions of inequality that the sociological endeavour explicitly seeks to unsettle. For every homogenising theoretical claim about the nature of contemporary youth transitions or youth culture, the actual opportunities and experiences of local young people quickly reveal themselves as varying markedly according to the very inequalities with which sociologists have always concerned themselves: class, race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality, as well as local cultural factors. Yet some of the new theoretical tenets of sociology may be widely applicable. For example, it seems well worth appraising the experiences of young people from non-western cultures in terms of increased risk perceptions (Wall & Olofsson 2008) and reflexivity in late modernity (Threadgold & Nilan 2009). However, it is analytically wise to de-link these potentially useful interpretive concepts from culturally-loaded assumptions about detraditionalisation, individualisation and individualised choice. As indicated just above, the globalising claim that a western-style form of individualisation is operating everywhere in the lives of young people must, in particular, be problematised. It also seems sage to keep an open mind on what constitutes adulthood in other cultures.

I have argued above that the future of youth sociology must incorporate conceptual and interpretive frameworks that have the potential to cross cultures. I am hopeful that this can be achieved in ways that avoid homogenising assumptions that fit awkwardly with local circumstances and traditional modes of conduct and decision-making. The devising of more nuanced interpretive frameworks must involve dialogue with researchers from non-western and developing country contexts. Certain global realities do exist in the market forces and new class structures that run across the nations of the world, as well as within nations. Yet this does not mean cultural traditions are being abandoned wholesale, or that religions are irrelevant. It can be argued that achieving marriage and parenthood holds just as much pragmatic and symbolic value as it ever did. The heuristic of the sociological lens provides the basis for increasing collaboration and synthesis between youth researchers in different parts of the world, and between the different investigative paradigms favoured in the global North and the South. This is something we need to strive for to create a genuinely intercultural youth sociology now and in the future.

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RESILIENCE

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A global sample of 89 young people from 14 communities in 11 countries took part in a study that investigated definitions of resilience across different cultural groups/disadvantaged communities, the existence of 'global and/or culturally specific aspects of resilience', and any unique processes and outcomes 'associated with resilience in specific cultures and contexts'. Data analysis revealed that participants resolved common 'tensions' in 'culturally specific ways'. The findings support the need for a new wave of resilience research, 'one that is sensitive to culturally-embedded definitions of positive development found in both Western and non-Western countries and among indigenous and non-indigenous peoples'.

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