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Introduction

The uses of this book

This book presents the primary issues and debates in youth studies as currently found in the overlapping disciplines of sociology, psychology, and cultural studies, with some considerations from anthropology, criminology, and demography. Youth studies is a rapidly growing field worldwide, representing multiple viewpoints from these disciplines, and as such can present a confusing picture to novices and experts alike. This book has been written with the goal of helping readers get to the heart of the principal issues that characterize this maturing field. It is my hope that by seeing the field in this way, readers will gain a clear picture of the underlying structure of the field as well as how the field can move forward in a more comprehensive manner.

To achieve this goal, what follows is an overview of the long-standing and recent fissures and fractures in the field, rather than summaries of recent research as found in conventional textbooks. This book introduces students to the field, and it is also strong at the intermediate and advanced levels, going to the heart of this field by identifying its underlying *paradigms* and theories, as well as seminal and current debates. If used in introductory-level courses, instructors may want to provide additional and ancillary material, in lectures and/or in supplementary readings, such as those recommended at the end of each chapter (most of which are journal articles that are easily available as PDFs). There are plenty of introductory youth-studies texts now available in many countries that could supplement this book, but what is lacking in the field are more advanced books that are suited for issue-oriented courses. Because of the way it is written, this book can be used in courses that range from introductory-level undergraduate to the graduate level. At the same time, professional youth-studies researchers and academics should find this book helpful in better understanding the key fissures and fractures in their specific specializations, as well as in areas outside of their concentrations.

To set the stage for getting at the heart of the fundamental issues and debates in this field, Chapter 1 identifies the "threshold meta-concepts" (cf. Meyer & Land, 2003) governing social-scientific theory and research, and shows how these apply to youth studies. When these types of concepts are grasped, people can undergo "ah ha experiences," after which an approach in question, and the field as a whole, can make more sense. These insightful experiences should also help people think about social-scientific issues in a less dogmatic

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manner. To augment these pedagogical experiences, pointers are given in sub-sequent chapters throughout the book in terms of exercising critical-thinking skills. Critical thinking is defined in Chapter 1, and common biases and errors that can interfere with these skills are identified. It is a major goal of this book to illustrate how critical thinking can be applied in various ways to youth stud-ies and thus to help readers refine their skills in ways that are transferable to other fields. As argued in Chapter 1, true forms of critical thinking tend to be underutilized, even by those with advanced forms of higher education.

Threshold meta-concepts are those ideas that one must fully comprehend in order to "move beyond" the limitations of individual perspectives and dis-ciplines, and their factional disputes. In this way, they are "gateways" or "portals" into new ways of understanding. Grasping these concepts can trans-form the person's mental operations, such that the world is seen in different ways. Thus, they are more than merely "important" concepts, which just add to a person's terminological repertoire (cf. Meyer & Land, 2003).

Threshold meta-concepts are also different from important disciplinary con-cepts because they are "irreversible" after they transform the person's outlook in some way; they are unlikely to be forgotten and therefore likely to affect the way things are understood by the person in the future. Additionally, threshold meta-concepts are "integrative" in that they open up understandings regarding how other forms of knowledge are interrelated (Meyer & Land, 2003).

These threshold meta-concepts are presented in bold when they are first introduced. Along with the contextual definition given upon introducing each term, a glossary of these terms is provided at the end of the book. Impor-tant disciplinary concepts are italicized when first introduced, and are also included in this glossary. (Non-academic words with more complex mean-ings that can be looked up in dictionaries are not included in the glossary.) The difference between these two types of concepts is that threshold meta-concepts are trans-disciplinary—they do not require accepting disciplinary **boilerplate assumptions** (e.g., terms such as *intersectionality*, *false conscious-ness*, or *second demographic transition* have significance mainly within the disciplines in which they were coined). In contrast, "important concepts" come from specific disciplinary perspectives, and while they can transform think-ing within that perspective, they are not necessarily irreversible because they may not influence the reader when she or he studies or adopts a different perspective.

Finally, threshold meta-concepts can introduce people to "troublesome knowledge" that goes against their previous taken-for-granted understand-ings of the world. People can experience a sense of conflict or ambivalence about potentially new understandings because these new ideas are disso-nant with their previous understandings (cf. Meyer & Land, 2003). This is because threshold meta-concepts highlight disciplinary barriers and give insight into interdisciplinary approaches that may have previously been avoided for paradigmatic reasons (see *paradigm* in the glossary). It is a premise of this book that grasping the threshold meta-concepts governing the perspectives involved

in youth studies is essential to a comprehensive understanding of the field, even if one prefers one perspective over others, for political, ethical, philosophical, or methodological reasons.

When key threshold meta-concepts are grasped, the various fault lines, or fissures and fractures, among the dominant approaches in this field become clearer, in part because they underscore the competing assumptions underlying these approaches. Some fault lines are on the surface: they are discussed and debated in books and articles published in the field. Others are below the surface, out of most people's awareness, and yet others are something that people tacitly agree not to acknowledge. Accordingly, distinctions are made in this book among assumptions, issues, debates, and controversies in the following ways:

- Assumptions entail positions that are usually not explicitly acknowledged in a field, although sides (or factions) have formed or can be identified around them, as in the case of "nominalism" vs. "realism."
- Issues involve open questions that are explicitly acknowledged in a field, but no sides have organized or can be readily identified, as can be the case with the concepts of "structure" vs. "agency."
- Debates refer to positions with two or more sides, with identifiable opponents. The nature–nurture debate is the most readily recognized example of this, but less visible debates are also discussed, as in the case of the status of science in debates between factions ostensibly associated with "postmodernism" vs. "positivism."
- Controversies are open debates that have reached the public realm. There are few of these in the youth studies field, but the Mead–Freeman controversy in anthropology is the most obvious example.

The conceptual plan

The academic field of youth studies is largely a product of the university infrastructures found in Western, developed countries. Over the twentieth century, these infrastructures nurtured the disciplinary studies of the various natural and social sciences, whose intellectual roots lie in the broader pursuit of the liberal arts and humanities, dating back to Greco-Roman antiquity and whose ideals have been embraced by European universities for the past millennium (e.g., Bloom, 1987). Most certainly, universities in developing and "underdeveloped" countries have supported some forms of youth studies, but the field as an international endeavor has been a concerted undertaking mainly in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia, with university researchers communicating primarily through English-language journals and conferences. In addition, there are large pools of researchers and research centers in China and the Russian Federation,[1] as well as smaller pools of researchers within other countries around the world. However, because English is the current lingua franca

of academia, the product of research available in English has tended to define the field internationally (Helve & Holm, 2005).

As a result, this book relies mainly on English-language publications produced in developed Western countries. It therefore characterizes the field as it has emerged in English-speaking countries, as well as those countries that use English as their lingua franca in international academic conferences, such as the Nordic nations. It is to be understood, therefore, that unless otherwise indicated, claims made in this book pertain to youth studies in these countries. Certainly, note will be made when research has revealed something about or from other types of societies, but stating this scope condition of this book upfront has the advantage of not having to keep qualifying the type of society in which each specific theory or research finding applies. Regional and cultural variations and manifestations are certainly important, but a listing of these would distract from the primary purpose of this book in identifying fundamental issues and discussing them in a reasonably concise manner. When this book is used in courses, class discussions and assignments can explore regional and cultural variations that shed light on these issues (see Arnett, 2008 and Nilan, 2011 for discussions of the relevance of differences among countries in terms of economic development).

We see in Part I of the book that the emergence of disciplinary studies in Western academia has been both "a blessing and a curse." The "blessing" has involved the infrastructures that have produced these forms of research, but the "curse" refers to the "academic silos" that have emerged out of the divergent specialized assumptions and terminology underlying the disciplines involved. As argued below, these silos now constitute an impediment to the further development of the youth-studies field as a whole (and more generally the social sciences and humanities), especially as a form of liberal enquiry compatible with the origins of Western academia.

Within this historical, cultural, and linguistic context, Part I takes readers directly to the fundamentals of the **youth question** that has emerged from the various disciplinary theories of the twentieth century. By systematically introducing key threshold meta-concepts, Chapter 1 provides a discussion of the different ways in which youth-studies researchers approach their work in this field. These approaches, and crucial differences among them, can be understood at the most basic levels in terms of three threshold meta-concepts: **ontologies** (i.e., what do researchers consider to be real?), **political agendas** (i.e., what is the object of their investigations—radical social change or maintaining/improving the status quo?), and **value priorities** (i.e., how do they see their responsibilities as researchers to the young people they study?). These threshold meta-concepts provide the theoretical tools to think critically about youth-studies issues in ways that address the youth question and help to identify the various paradigms that have been developed to speak to the youth question. In Chapter 2, the theories constituting each paradigm are fleshed out. Chapter 3 examines the various disputes that have arisen over the history of youth studies regarding how to characterize and study the youth period.

Parts II and III illustrate applications of these fundamentals to the social structures and processes that define aspects of the youth period, with each chapter examining some fundamental assumptions underlying the opposing positions concerning how these structures/processes have emerged and are changing in countries that provide illustrative case studies. The general topics and specific issues and debates examined in these chapters were selected because they have produced discernible debates with far-reaching implications that span the history of the field and cut across the various disciplines that have contributed to youth studies. Some of the more recent topics (such as "place and space") are not covered because no critical mass of published literature involving discernible debates has yet emerged. (Descriptions of some of these topics can be found in current introductory textbooks such as Furlong, 2013 and White, Wyn, & Albanese, 2011.)

The four chapters of Part II examine the socio-economic influences that define and structure the youth period, beginning with the expansion of school systems to encompass more years of education to qualify for entry into the labor force (Chapter 4). Even with higher levels of education, recent cohorts of young people have found themselves increasingly marginalized in the workplace (Chapter 5). Competing explanations for these macro developments are examined. At the same time, the structure of the youth period is changing in terms of the micro influences on young people's daily lives: the different approaches parents take in relating to their offspring (Chapter 6) and the various mediated technologies that increasingly influence how leisure time is spent (Chapter 7). Different understandings representing illustrative fissures and fractures in the field are examined in each chapter.

Part III then moves to an examination of the debates that have emerged with respect to how the changing youth period is experienced: first, in terms of how to conceptualize "youth culture" (Chapter 8); second, in terms of disputes about youth identity formation (Chapter 9); third, in terms of how various youth social identities are experienced subjectively and objectively (Chapter 10); and, finally, with a consideration of competing interpretations of the political behaviors of recent cohorts of young people (Chapter 11).

Part IV draws conclusions about how the field of youth studies is maturing and what it can offer if cooperative research efforts are undertaken in addressing the various problems and prospects of the youth period as currently constituted in Western societies.

Finally, this book has been written such that, with the understandings of the field laid out in Chapter 1, and aided with a glossary for quick reference to threshold and disciplinary concepts, the subsequent chapters can be read in various sequences. This is because the chapters are cross-referenced, so if readers go to a later chapter without reading earlier ones, they will be referred back to earlier ones for those areas that build on these other ideas. In particular, readers may be anxious to get to the "meat" of the field as presented in the substantive chapters in Parts II and III, skipping the more theoretical Chapters 2 and 3 if they do not suit their interests. When using this book in higher-educational

courses, some instructors of introductory courses may feel that their students do not need to understand the fundamental theories and seminal debates to get the gist of the specific issues discussed in the substantive chapters. This leapfrogging is feasible because throughout the subsequent chapters I refer back to the main theories (Chapter 2) and seminal debates (Chapter 3) when relevant issues come up, so students/readers can expand their understandings of the underlying theories and debates to their liking and at their own pace. That said, in my experience, teaching theory and the fundamentals of field is one of the greatest challenges to instructors because students who are new to a field have the most difficulty with abstractions that are novel to them. In point of fact, this is a problem faced by teachers and students at all levels of education (Willingham, 2009). Still, regardless of the course level, I believe Chapters 2 and 3 are helpful to instructors who want to provide the more intellectual challenges in their courses and are worthwhile to students who want to expand their intellectual horizons.

The Youth Question

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The **youth question** at its most basic level involves how to understand the material and subjective conditions associated with the "youth period"—that portion of the life course between what is defined as childhood and adulthood in a given society. This question can be difficult to answer, in part because the societal definitions of the youth period vary widely over time and place. As we see in the chapters to follow, the various cultural definitions of "youth" have a relatively recent history in Western countries and are still changing. To further complicate matters, those from different disciplines use various names for this age period; for instance, psychologists prefer terms such as adolescence, and more recently "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). As a working model in this book, the full age range of the youth period as found in the range of world cultures is recognized as spanning approximately from ages 14 to 30, depending on the society in question. Although the field began a century ago with a focus on those in their teens, with greater proportions of people now experiencing prolonged transitions to full-time work roles and starting families later, increasing attention is being paid to those in their twenties.

One way to grasp the complexity of the youth question is to think in terms of the memory aid "W_5": who, what, where, when, and why. In a given society, *whom* is defined to be in the youth period; *what* forms does the youth period take; *where* do various forms of the youth period emerge; *when* does the youth period begin and end; and *why* does a youth period exist in this society?

Another way to approach this question is identify the key debates over the past century about how to conceptualize the relevance of the youth period. Theoretical formulations have emerged to address the youth question, as have empirical traditions intended to test the validity of those formulations. Four phases in this development can be identified that are associated with the rise of youth-studies theories in response to perceived changes in the nature of the

youth period and debates about the relevance of those changes (cf. Mørch, 2005):

- 1900s–1960s: Modern adolescents in turmoil:

  o Adolescent psychology emerges in the United States to explain the rise in recalcitrant teenagers in a "nature vs. nurture" framework (theories of child/adolescent development are proposed); delinquency studies emerge in the United States in response to localized urban crime; anthropologists dispute the claims of psychologists regarding the universality of "adolescent storm and stress."

- 1950s–1970s: Modern youth in rebellion:

  o American functionalists explain the adolescent period as a product of new role expectations in modern societies; political economists see youth protests as the harbinger of the overthrow of capitalism; psychologists propose developmental stages, including identity formation as well as cognitive, ego, and moral development, linking difficulties with stage progression to social maladjustment.

- 1960s–1990s: Youth as active agents:

  o Sociologists in the United Kingdom see working-class-youth recalcitrance as a form of resistance to their class oppression; cultural theorists in the United Kingdom import American delinquency studies, finding "resistance" in consumption and identity displays in subcultural analyses; adolescent psychology continues to grow in the United States and Europe, becoming increasingly divorced from other youth-studies perspectives, while focusing on "nature-by-nurture" interactions of individual differences in varied contexts (as opposed to global, dichotomous nature vs. nurture effects).

- 1980s–present: Prolonged youth as a positive identity:

  o Multiple, eclectic perspectives emerge in various regions to account for the prolongation of youth into the twenties age range; theoretical perspectives become more covert as research becomes topic-driven and label-based (e.g., emerging adulthood, social generations), and more explicitly value-driven, looking for ways to celebrate the youth prolongation as a minority "identity" or a new "developmental stage." Adolescent psychology counteracts its "deficit approach" with a "positive youth development" approach and complex research models of human "plasticity."

With this evolving nature of youth studies in mind, in this chapter, we review the various answers that have been proposed to the youth question in general, and the specific W_5 components, in Western societies, especially as these answers are influenced by the various philosophical assumptions, political

agendas, and value priorities held by youth researchers. Key threshold meta-concepts are introduced to facilitate critical thinking about how to evaluate youth-studies theories and research. The chapter concludes with the argument that critical thinking itself can constitute a methodology for studying forms of social reality like those suggested by the youth question.

Various answers to the youth question: The ontological debate

Defining youth: Is it "real"?

A starting point in answering the youth question is to ask what people mean at the most fundamental level when they refer to the period of the life course between childhood and adulthood. The most fundamental starting point in this sort of enquiry is ontological in nature.

Ontology is a threshold meta-concept from metaphysical philosophy, referring to the question of reality—the basic nature of an entity's existence and what form it takes. In ontological terms, entities may be defined to exist along a continuum ranging from the abstract to the concrete. On the one hand, some things are so abstract that they exist in name only, such as ideas like "society" or "social forces." One cannot lay hands on these things; one can only speak about them as intangibles. On the other hand, some things have a more concrete, tangible existence; the book or computer tablet you are reading are examples.

In the social sciences and humanities, debates can be found about the ontological nature of abstract entities, with some scholars arguing that even abstractions about intangibles can have an "objective" existence. For example, Durkheim (1897/1951, 1895/1964a) wrote of social forces as "social facts" independent of human motivations whose impact can be reliably measured, as in the case of suicide rates.

The ontological status of abstract concepts, including "youth," can be difficult to grasp because most people have a tendency to reify abstractions—to consider them to have a concrete existence on the same plane of reality as physical objects. For instance, in spite of the abstract nature of the idea of "society," members of societies take the idea for granted because they live in them on a day-to-day basis. In fact, the apparent reality of so much of what we encounter in our daily lives makes it difficult for us to think of something like "society" as merely a concept. Consequently, even the suggestion that the concept of society might be ontologically contestable can be a form of "troublesome knowledge"; even though it is an abstraction, it certainly seems "real." However, it is actually very difficult to demonstrate the existence of abstract entities by putting them to empirical tests that others can observe.

Similarly, how could someone even suggest that the periods of youth, young adulthood, or especially adolescence, are not "real"? We can "see" adolescents

every day, and it can be pretty obvious when someone is a "youth" as opposed to an "adult."

This uncertainty of knowledge is reflected in the historical and cross-cultural variability in how young people are identified by the language of the place and time. Before the modern era in the West, there was not a sharp distinction between being an adult and a non-adult. Under the right circumstances, those in their teens could assume certain adult roles without interference, including certain occupations, marriage, and military duty (e.g., Steinberg, 1990). As a matter of fact, the word "adolescent" came into English usage only in the 1400s, taken from the Latin *adolescere*, meaning "to grow up, mature." Perhaps even more surprising, the word "teenager" was coined less than 100 years ago by American marketers looking for ways to increase the consumption patterns of this age group (Côté & Allahar, 2006). For reasons discussed below, over time, the words "adolescent" and "teenager" have become synonymous terms of disparagement, manipulation, and disempowerment; the concept of "youth" seems to be currently taking the same downward route in terms of social status. Consequently, as these words developed a shared cultural meaning, they became increasingly consequential for the lives of young people.

Even today, some non-Western languages do not have terms to designate adolescence or youth (Brown & Larson, 2002), suggesting that there is nothing intrinsic to human nature about the youth period. Moreover, it appears that the period that came to be called adolescence in the 1400s was not considered a big deal even in Western societies until the early 1900s when an eminent psychologist of the day—G. Stanley Hall—claimed that the period between about ages 13 and 25 years was scientifically significant for human development (Hall, 1904). We return to Hall's work and influence in Chapters 2 and 3.

The point to be taken here is that in one sense youth as an age period appears to be socially constructed—dependent on how it is defined in a particular time and place—but in another sense it appears to have a reality of its own, with serious consequences for the realities experienced by those defined to be part of that age period. Thus, determining the difference between these two ontological positions—youth as a social construction or as a reality of its own—is more than just a philosophical exercise. But, how are both things possible? A closer examination of the threshold meta-concept of ontology clarifies this apparent paradox.

Conventional answers: Nominalism and realism

As a threshold meta-concept, the philosophical idea of ontology further opens "the portal" to the question at hand—the youth question. More generally and historically, the debate whether reality is socially constructed or has its own properties dates back at least to the philosophical disputes of Greek antiquity. An opposition between **nominalism** and **realism**, respectively, has persisted

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