REVIEW ESSAY

Canonical moments and disruptive moves in youth studies research

Julie McLeod*

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Australia


Youth studies is a growing field of interdisciplinary research with a strong institutional and publication presence. Like gender and childhood studies, youth studies appears to cohere around an identity category and a biographical period, yet somewhat paradoxically produces, critiques and deconstructs those same foundational identities and categories. The consensus among most scholars is that youth is a sociological rather than biological category, but how that social subjectivity is theorized varies significantly – as is evident in the books under review. Additionally, much youth research has rejected models of normative development and questioned linear accounts of youth transitions – once cornerstone concepts for the field. While some youth researchers will argue over the age at which youth begins or ends, the crucial issue is not whether we get the exact age right for when one is or is not a ‘youth’, but how that category is mobilized in research, policy and popular imagination. As Gill Jones writes in Youth, youth is not reducible to age (2009, 183), and moreover ‘youth’ is a signifier called upon to denote ‘both a person (in the same way as “child” or “adult”) and a part of the life course (in the same way as “childhood” and “adulthood”)’ (Jones 2009, 2). While there is sometimes slippage between these two usages of ‘youth’, the three books reviewed here raise other questions for me about how the youth studies field is constituted. Read together they point to the value of thinking historically about the formation and agenda of youth studies. What are the dominant stories told about the field?; how is its lineage represented by those working within it?; what have been its concerns, and what are the important questions and issues now?

Although there is considerable variation in the styles of research falling under the youth studies rubric, some recurrent dilemmas and problems can be identified, leading to an occasional sense of a creeping homogeneity. A number of particularly

*Email: jemcleod@unimelb.edu.au
influential, even canonical, themes in recent youth studies are apparent: identity (biography, subjectivity, individualization) (for example, Thomson 2009; Beattie 2003; McLeod and Yates 2006); risk and reflexivity (for example, Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Kelly and Harrison 2009); and globalization and local/global youth cultures (for example, Nilan and Fexia 2006; Nayak 2003; Holm and Helve 2005; McLeod 2009). This does not obviously represent the sum of the field, and there is variation in how these themes are examined. Yet, it would be hard to ignore the influence of these themes and the ways in which articulating and responding to them has become a central feature of the youth studies research agenda over the past decade or so. They feature, for example, in research on youthful femininity and masculinity (Gonick 2003; Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2004; Nayak and Kehily 2008; Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody 2006; Dillabough and Kennelly 2010; Tsolidis 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001); inform more historically oriented accounts of the construction of youth, and shifting norms and cultural practices (Savage 2007; Lesko 2001); and influence studies of youth marginalization and of youth pathways and well-being (Henderson et al. 2007; Wierenga 2009; Wyn 2009).

A further striking commonality is found in claims about ‘new times’ and the imperative to forge new approaches to theorizing youth, or new empirical work to understand how young people themselves are negotiating radically new social conditions. As Mary Jane Kehily in the Introduction to Understanding Youth observes, ‘The lives of young people in the UK, as elsewhere in the world, have changed in dramatic ways in recent years’ (Kehily 2007, 3). Similarly, Nadine Dolby and Fazal Rizvi in the Introduction to Youth Moves reflect that: ‘Youth, then, must move differently in the world today than they did in previous generations, as the sites in which they live are themselves transformed’ (2008, 4). And Gill Jones, explaining the focus of her book on ‘changing approaches to youth as a theoretical concept’ (2009, 1) argues that we need ‘to build a new conceptual framework from the ashes of the old’ (2009, 164).

It is not possible in this essay to give a detailed account of the arguments and topics covered in the three books; I have tried instead to bring to the surface important themes and dilemmas, to locate them in relation to existing debates in youth studies, and to point to some fruitful ways in which they disrupt or enrich the youth studies canon. In different ways these books anchor youth studies in certain traditions, tell stories about its origins and formalize a particular agenda for what youth studies is or should or could be about. Questions about change, movement, history and identity collided in reading these books side by side.

**Concepts and canons**

Gill Jones’ Youth is published in the Polity Press series on Key Concepts and of the three books is the one most explicitly marking a canon – delineating ideas and dilemmas that constitute youth research. Its primary focus is not on empirical research, or on analysing and theorizing from empirical data. Rather, it is principally concerned with mapping how youth has been theorized, and with drawing out the implications of sociological theories, for example, of reflexivity, for conceptualizing youth as an identity and as a social and historical category. She begins by canvassing the various ways in youth or young people have been defined, the terms used to invent and describe this period in the life-course, engaging with frameworks emanating from ‘different countries, mainly in Europe and North America’, but most of the examples from policy and research are UK-based (Jones 2009, 27). The book surveys the claims and influence
of nature versus culture debates, functionalist theories of socialization, developmentalism, age and generations, culture and subculture, conflict and conformity, and gender, class, and youth in late modernity. She reiterates a familiar distinction between postmodern and late modern social theories, aligning her arguments more with the latter, even as some of the limitations and critiques of that cluster of work are acknowledged (Jones 2009, 25). Following Giddens, Jones argues ‘Life transitions demand the exploration and construction of the altered self as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change’ (2009, 26). A central theme of the book is thus ‘linking the individual with the social and trying to understand the source and impact of social change’ (Jones 2009, 26). And throughout, a clear focus is maintained on the materiality of young people’s social circumstances (for example, Jones 2009, 88). Jones borrows from Simmel’s analogy – ‘crossing a bridge is always both an event and a process’ – to argue that ‘both these elements need to be maintained in any explanations of youth’ (2009, 88). This is an important theme throughout the book, underlining the inter-related aspects of youth as an identity and as a period in the life course.

Youth usefully embeds the category of youth within wider debates in the social sciences, indicating how they have either addressed the question of youth, or could be extrapolated to have something to add to theoretical approaches to youth. Accordingly, the book is structured around some of the enduring concepts in youth research, with chapters on: youth as action; youth as identity; youth as transition; youth and inequality; youth and dependence; and youth in society.

In the opening pages, Jones suggests that ‘Intergenerational power relations may […] be the key to understanding youth’ (2009, 3) and this argument surfaces in several of the chapters, most interestingly in the chapter on dependence – symbolically (and practically) one of the transitional markers for young people to navigate. The extended time of youth is perhaps most problematic in relation to dependence and autonomy. This dilemma is played out in families and generational dynamics, as well as in social norms and policy, such as in determinations of the age at which young people are classified as no longer formal dependants. Further, dependence has implications for how identity is theorized. ‘Both Beck and Giddens acknowledge the need to recognize the mutuality and reciprocity in social bonds but admit that theories of reflexivity and individualization are hard to apply to young people because of their dependence’ (Jones 2009, 153). Arguments regarding co-dependence or new forms of democracy in the family are noted but are not seen as convincing. Indeed in this interesting chapter, many different lines of interpretation are introduced but none unequivocally endorsed. The chapter concludes with the reflection that now more than ever we need ‘to understand the ways in which intergenerational social obligations and transitions between dependence and independence are constructed across the entire life course’ (2009, 163).

The discussion of transition – another stubborn fixture in youth research – details the limitations of linear and normative models and considers the pervasive influence of late modern theories of individualization and reflexivity in youth studies, especially in the attention to ‘biography’ typologies – reflexive, choice, normative – and the idea of the self as a project (Jones 2009, 95–105). She argues that there is a disjunction between youth experiences of transition and normative policy constructions (see also Wyn 2009; Henderson et al. 2007). Transition is principally represented in terms of school to work, and from dependence to independence, and Jones argues there is increasing polarization between young people according to the type of transition they experience: between ‘those on slow-track transitions
experiencing extended dependence and those on fast-track transitions attempting to support themselves’ (2009, 111).

This valuable book is strong on mapping what other theoretical approaches have offered, and Jones treads a judicious path, tending in the end to propose a careful synthesis of approaches drawn from sociological theories of late-modernity and social inequality. The book invites and opens up the space for new theorization, but does not immediately begin that task. Questions arise, then, about what those new theorizations might look like? What other questions might enter into the dialogue? The final chapter urges researchers not so much to find new approaches as to build on the narratives and approaches that have come before. This sense of the longer historical view of youth scholarship is one of the virtues of this book, linking youth studies to developments in sociological traditions more broadly. Jones calls for a form of ‘theoretical bricolage’, a synthesis of old and new (2009, 164), in order to build a robust and workable theory of youth. It is useful to build on the narratives of others, rather than start anew, or of vainly thinking that we are starting afresh. Yet, it is also important to leave open the possibility of other voices and politics interrupting and calling to be heard. The recent spate of work on cultural youth studies and globalization is perhaps one example of this, of a body of work that is attempting to contextualize youth in (other) circumstances of the present, and draw on a conceptual lexicon that is different from the vocabulary of the sociology of modernity/late modernity.

Youth reviews conceptual resources for understanding the social connectedness of youth and touches on the significance of biographical and interpersonal relations – in discussion of generations, of self as a project – but overall it is not directly concerned with elaborating the emotional, psychic, sexual or affective dimensions of youth subjectivity. Although informed by some similar theoretical traditions, a more biographical focus is proposed in Understanding Youth (Kehily 2007).

**Pedagogy, text and youth studies**

Developed initially as a text for an undergraduate Open University course (‘Youth: Perspectives and Practices’) the edited book Understanding Youth (Kehily 2007) has all the hallmarks of an exemplary teaching text with crossover appeal to a wider audience. In an accessible and direct style, it conveys ideas and debates that have been central in youth research, drawing out their relevance to the policy and practical aspects of working with young people. Each of the chapters provides resources for understanding the lives of young people and the worlds they – and readers – inhabit. The work of the contributing authors – Rachel Thomson, Martin Robb, Heather Montgomery and Mary Jane Kehily – has been important in mapping out new terrain for youth studies scholarship (Kehily 2002; Nayak and Kehily 2008; Thomson 2009; Henderson et al. 2007). The chapters include authoritative overviews that spell out key challenges and concerns, case studies drawing on classic texts or current dilemmas, generous dialogue with other research to give a flavour of different styles and interests, engaging activities to deepen understanding of topics and summary points strategically placed throughout the chapters. Structured into three sections – ‘Perspectives’, ‘Identities’, and ‘Practices’ – this method of organization and topics reflect, not surprisingly, some of the broad themes and pre-occupations identified above as characterizing contemporary youth studies. So Part One examines three different perspectives or lenses for viewing youth – cultural; comparative; and biographical. Part Two explores identities, focusing on: gender; belonging; and well-being. And Part
Three, ‘Practices’, examines working; playing; moving; and relating. Overall, the book represents a fusion of cultural studies approaches and late modern sociological theories, with the latter perhaps being the dominant flavour.

As curriculum text and pedagogical mode, the ‘textbook’ operates at a complex level of instruction and normalization or formalization. It codifies in an explicit way what is regarded as the required or privileged knowledge of a field or topic, and the mode in which it is presented further underscores this. The pedagogy of this text book deploys intimate moments and memories from the authors, draws on their research, and emphasizes the interpersonal, biographical and cross-generational – in keeping with the biographical turn in cultural studies and the social sciences.

In contrast to Jones’ analysis of key concepts for studying youth, with its unambiguous commitment to a strongly sociological cluster of concepts, this text presents a range of approaches and opens them out for readers to see what they offer. Even so, like Jones, the book endorses a broadly social constructivist position that locates youth as social category, rather than a biological one. While the authors do not advocate developmental models of adolescence, the powerful influence of these ways of thinking about young people is considered, and the salience of the psychological and emotional dimensions of young lives is a central feature of all the chapters. So, for example, Rachel Thomson’s chapter on work begins with a domestic illustration of how young children learn about work in contrast to the experience of playing, followed by a subsection on ‘The subjective meaning of work’ (Kehily 2007, 217–220). The chapter then considers aspects of the historical context of work, the labour market, school to work transitions and how understandings of work are ‘underwritten by a range of social divisions such as gender, social class and ethnicity’ (2007, 221). It returns in the concluding section to a case study of the school-to-work transitions of a young woman, directing readers’ attention to the multiple ways in which her trajectory could be interpreted from the perspective of social policy. Moving from the personal and the particular to the wider sociological and policy argument is in part a pedagogical device, to hook students into the immediate and familiar, but it also reflects a theoretical orientation to privilege the subjective and not to relegate it as an afterthought to the ‘proper’, public-sphere storyline.

Each of the chapters, while having an explicit focus on one topic, weaves in other arguments and themes. For example, there is a separate chapter on gender, but discussion of gender relations, gender identity, and gender differentiation is threaded throughout. The chapter on play builds from themes in the chapter ‘work’ and research approaches from ‘a cultural perspective’. It also extends the analysis of gender with illustrations that foreground gender identity and its significance for understanding youth cultural practice, drawing on examples of girls and rave culture and boys’ play and sporting culture. Indeed play, understood as leisure and pleasure activities, is identified as an important part of identity work and of youth transition. Play can be double-edged: young people’s leisure pursuits are often reduced in public representations as risky or dangerous – such as drug-taking or joy-riding, and even, paradoxically, hanging around and not doing much can be seen as harmful indolence and aimlessness. Yet young people’s play, Kehily argues, can be pleasurable (and risky) and can be ‘seen as imaginative expressions of late childhood/early adulthood which have many points of continuity with children’s play’ (2007, 251). This chapter combines the author’s personal recollections of her ‘youth culture’ identifications, alongside explication of classic theoretical accounts of leisure, play and identity, such as the work of Norbert Elias or Angela McRobbie. It is such juxtaposition of accounts that makes this an
effective textbook and an example of how to do teaching and explication differently. The volume exemplifies and sets an agenda for a particular form of youth studies; on the one hand offering a biographical approach as one lens on to understanding young people, but on the other privileging that approach in its structure and argument – the textual pedagogy as much as the substance of the arguments makes this case.

In Chapter Three, ‘A Biographical Perspective’, Rachel Thomson argues that an ‘approach centred on the individual can provide a holistic understanding of young people’s lives that is historically and sociologically connected’ (Kehily 2007, 73). She surveys theories of late modernity, individualization and reflexivity and explicates the implications of the biographical turn for youth studies, noting that some researchers have explored youth identities through looking at stories and narratives ‘to understand who and what is possible to be’ (2007, 78). Others, she argues, have ‘turned towards biography as a way of understanding wider processes of social change’ (2007, 78); this book straddles both trends, but is more firmly positioned in the latter camp. The final chapter, ‘Relationships’, emphasizes the importance of personal relations and intimacy in young people’s lives – reflecting other prominent themes in the sociology of late modernity. Martin Robb’s discussion of the practical and symbolic importance of dependence and autonomy echoes some of the themes raised by Jones, but Robb also addresses friendship networks, the complicated affective ties within families, romantic and sexual relationships and how the emotional labour of navigating these is tied up in young people’s identity work. His conclusion to the chapter distils the book’s focus – an emphasis on the personal as a way into understanding the social, accompanied by a concern to document instances of change and continuity.

Heather Montgomery’s chapter ‘A Comparative Perspective’ introduces arguments from social anthropology to show how young people’s lives vary across place and time and the value of ethnographic methods for illuminating cultural differences in youth identity and practices. Examining some key practices and popular notions – rites of passage, adolescence as a time of ‘storm and stress’ – the chapter exposes the Eurocentric and western bias inherent in many accounts of adolescence, which, one could argue, also filter into the field of youth studies. Montgomery argues that ‘Ethnography allows a comparative perspective which challenges any notions that adolescence is a universal stage predicated on biological changes, and stresses the point that adolescence must be seen as a cultural construction’ (Kehily 2007, 70). Comparison and cultural difference are taken in some different directions in the Youth Moves collection edited by Nadine Dolby and Fazal Rizvi (2008), where the focus is on globalization and youth cultures.

Global and local mobility

As the edited volume Youth Moves (Dolby and Rizvi 2008) attests, the impact of globalization and local/global binaries is rapidly becoming part of the lexicon for exploring questions about ‘youth identities’ today, and one of the key problematics constituting contemporary youth studies scholarship (Holm and Helve 2005; McLeod 2009; Nilan and Fexia 2006). In their introduction the editors, Nadine Dolby and Fazal Rizvi consider the different forms and intensification of youth mobility – physical, imagined, virtual, desired, enforced – across both local and global spaces. ‘Even those youth’, they argue:
the Internet – their identities are now inextricably linked to the currents of modernity that flow across the world at the speed of a mouse click. (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 5)

Reflecting discussions found in much youth studies, they argue that we live in ‘New Times’ and that this warrants a re-consideration of both youth cultures and the conceptual resources we bring to examine them. The worlds young people inhabit are identified as radically different from those of the immediate past (see also Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004), and central to this contrast is the flow and effects of global culture that infiltrate young people’s lives across myriad local and virtual worlds. Thus past/present comparisons are established, alongside local/global, and transnational categories.

Discourses of mobility, translocality and hybrid identities can create a utopian sense of open possibilities (e.g. Kraidy 2005), generating new kinds of romantic constructions of youth that neglect the materiality of lives and overlook the practicalities encountered by many young people who are stuck, fixed in place by economic, personal, familial and cultural circumstances. As Dolby and Rizvi (2008) caution, we cannot understand the everyday experiences of young people without also looking at how global conditions of mobility are both affected by, and are instrumental in producing and reproducing, class formations (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 3). Influenced by a blend of cultural and postcolonial research, the 12 chapters explore both the celebratory and more sober dimensions of new youth cultures in mobile and globalizing times. The volume is organized into three sections: ‘New Times, New Identities’; ‘Diasporic Youth: Rethinking Borders and Boundaries in the New Modernity’; and ‘Youth and the Global Context: Transforming Us Where we Live’. The diversity of the style and focus of the chapters can give a sense of a loose coherence, but it also reflects some of the rich range of potentially relevant issues and approaches. There is a strong thematic focus on consumption, style and mediatization, with chapters exploring, for example, consumption and new forms of global citizenship (Kenway and Bullen); online gaming and new digital youth cultures (Beavis); Latina/Latino media popular culture (Valdivia); hybridity and representations of Asian identity (Giardina); the spread and consumption of US media culture among African Canadian youth (Kelly); and a more utopian sense of the emancipatory potential of ‘hybrid dialogic spaces’ – talking across and about differences – for young people working towards social justice (Quijada). In her provocative essay, Sarah Nuttall explores post-apartheid Johannesburg and the ways in which media and advertising images that remake the signification of the black body function as a resource – in Foucauldian terms – for new modes of self-stylization among urban middle-class black young people. Importantly, Nuttall argues that we need to understand not only how cultural forms translate – and perhaps lose meaning – but how they move (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 151) and morph into new meaning in new contexts (2008, 152).

Several of the chapters explore new types of identity forged within neo-liberal cultures and global economy markets: enterprise and self-advancing identity practices among suburban US students (Demerath and Lynch); internationally mobile students and higher education markets (Singh and Doherty). Aaron Koh’s chapter on youth and national identity in Singapore shows some of the new possibilities for identity and affiliation. Koh argues that in the:

context of globalization, this cultural experimentation of constructing a national identity and creating a sense of belonging is fraught with ruptures, as a new global youth culture
and new communication technologies potentially offer liminal spaces where other sources and expressions of identity are up for grabs. (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 194)

These spaces allow youth to perform ‘elective belonging’ rather than create a sense of belonging bounded by the national and the local (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 197).

Other chapters explicitly mark out what the lineage of youth cultural studies should address (Lukose; Valdivia; Giardina). And some pose a more ambitious theoretical agenda, such as Cameron McCarthy and Jennifer Logue’s interrogation of cultural materialism and neo-Marxism. They argue that these approaches are:

unable to diagnose the global predicament we are in … Our entire perceptual, conceptual, and linguistic apparatus is in need of overhaul as we come to recognize the rise of networked societies in which traditions, affiliations, and ‘cultures’, subcultural or not, are now disembedded from the moorings of the final property of any group. (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 49)

They further argue that the conflict and consensus metaphors that were characteristic of early forms of cultural Marxist critique are no longer tenable, no longer able to capture the form of contemporary identity and social relations: ‘increasingly social groups are being defined by overwhelming patterns of transnational hybridities and new forms of association and affiliation that seem to flash on the surface of life rather than to plunge deeper into some kind of neo-Marxist substructure’ (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 49). This provocative argument, however, is not really taken up in the other chapters, and in fact contrasts with many of the discussions where the forms of analysis rest very much on conflict and consensus models and reiterate the modes of analysis characteristic of earlier styles of cultural studies. Indeed there is somewhat of a re-affirmation of a resistance/agency dualism. For example, Ritty Lukose, in a discussion of the liberalization of the economy in India, proposes that the ‘central organizing framework for youth cultural studies is the identification and tracking of agency and resistance among young people’ (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 137). The ‘agency versus determination’ form of cultural studies has left a strong imprint and Lukose argues that this framework ‘initially formed in and through Euro-American debates within cultural studies about the boundaries of culture and class resistance, travels to the globalizing worlds of young people in postcolonial contexts’ (Dolby and Rizvi 2008, 147). The collection thus presents some marked differences in the conceptual agenda for global youth cultural studies – as indeed there should be – but juxtaposes rather than deceptively. Nevertheless, this volume unambiguously signals the necessity – and even ascendance – of the local/global dualism and globalization as frames for understanding youth culture and identity.

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A strong sense of an historically ruptured present pervades many of the discussions across these three books, providing a context and rationale for new approaches to researching youth. Such arguments can risk eliding the unevenness of historical change, overstating dislocation, rather than also attending to threads of continuity or re-articulation. Yet the relationship between past and present, and change and continuity, is navigated slightly differently in each of the books. Jones’ argument calls for approaches that build from the old; Kehily and colleagues locate change and continuity as a central feature of youth identity practices; and on the whole the essays in the Dolby
and Rizvi collection continue frameworks from cultural studies, adding insights from globalization and postcolonial studies. In all three books – as in youth studies more generally – young people embody historical and generational change, symbolically and practically represented as bearers of modernity and new times. A key task for youth research is to understand this movement, as not only about ‘young people’ but as also about uneven processes of cultural change. These books provide valuable and contrasting lenses on to this task, and encourage fresh thinking about the making, re-making and disruption of canons and conventions in youth studies research.

References

