

1 *This chapter provides an overview of theories of the transition to young adulthood. It sets out the argument for conceptual renewal and discusses some implications of new patterns of transition for adult education.*

Conceptualizing Transitions to Adulthood

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In the fields of adult education and youth studies, thinking around the concepts of youth, young adults, and the nature of adulthood has been undergoing a transformation, reflecting changes in the ways in which people are living and learning in the 21st century.¹ In this chapter, I set out the arguments for conceptual renewal, drawing on insights about youth and adult development from the fields of youth studies and education, through a consideration of (a) a brief history and analysis of current debates in youth transitions research, (b) the social conditions that have forged a “new adulthood,” and (c) the challenges that these conditions place on the traditional metaphor of youth to adult transitions. Finally, I discuss the implications of these considerations for adult learning.

There is a comprehensive body of work that documents and analyzes the generational shift between the baby boomer generation and subsequent generations (often referred to as Generations X and Y). Although there is debate about the exact nature of these changes and their implications, there is an emerging consensus that the social transformations that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s in Western countries have changed the nature of youth and adulthood, with significant implications for how young adults work, live, and learn. This chapter discusses how a range of theorists have understood these changes to youth transitions. The blurring of the boundaries between youth and adulthood has led to a body of work that interrogates how disciplines such as developmental psychology and sociology have constructed truths and naturalized ways of thinking about young people. I discuss these arguments and some of the developments that are emerging from those arguments.

The Idea of Youth Transitions and the New Adulthood

The idea of youth transitions has played a significant role in youth studies and youth policy, especially since the 1980s, when youth labor markets in developed countries began to fail. As full-time employment and career opportunities

for young people in economies based on manufacturing and primary industries have become increasingly scarce (ILO, 2013), education has become both a refuge from unemployment and a ticket to employment in emerging knowledge, service, and high-skill economies (Furlong, 2013). As a result, youth transitions to adulthood were characterized as *extended* (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) and *arrested* (Côté, 2000) toward an *emerging* but ever-retreating state of adulthood (Bynner, 2005). These analyses sought to understand new patterns of transition from youth to adulthood as the patterns that characterized the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1965) were superseded. Generation X (born between 1965 and 1976) became the pioneers of new patterns of transition that have largely been replicated by Generation Y (born between 1977 and 2001). Although these definitions of generations are not particularly scientific, most analyses of shifts in generational patterns of transition conform broadly to this schema. For example, the socioeconomic changes of the late 1980s through the 2000s and the generational differences that resulted are noted in a range of work on “new adulthoods” and generational effects in France (Chauvel, 2010), Italy (Leccardi, 2012), Australia and Canada (Andres & Wyn, 2010), in the United States (Gerson, 2010), and across many other countries (Esping-Andersen, 2009).

For young adults aged 19–25, global changes in the nature of production and labor markets were reflected in an increase in the time spent in formal education and a decrease in full-time, secure labor market participation. In turn, these developments have resulted in increased financial dependency on parents or welfare, increased levels of financial debt for the young (Schneider, 2000), and later marriage for both men and women compared with the previous generation (Esping-Andersen, 2009).

The phrase “new adulthood” describes the implications of altered circumstances for young people’s options (Wyn, Smith, Stokes, Tyler, & Woodman, 2008). The combination of education and labor market conditions referred to above have, for a majority of young adults, foreclosed some options like achieving financial independence in their early twenties and opened up other opportunities such as taking one or more gap years, living in group households, or undertaking education outside of one’s home country. New communication technologies have widened the scope of opportunities that young adults see for themselves and created global connections around leisure, employment, and education that bring new imagined futures (Rizvi, 2012). These developments have led to the proliferation of diverse experiences of youth and complex trajectories alongside recognized markers of progress.

The patterns of life that characterize the new adulthood have also been accompanied by shifts in disposition. For example, the *Life Patterns* study (Andres & Wyn, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012) showed how the increase in educational participation by young people in the 1990s was accompanied by a widespread belief in the inherent value of investing in educational credentials. Education was seen as a way of securing a foothold in an increasingly complex and precarious labor market. This theme has been taken up by Brown, Lauder,

and Ashton (2011) who analyze how the investment in education by individuals has not been matched by the other part of the “neoliberal bargain”—the promise of jobs and rewards. They argue that the global financial crisis of the mid-2000s has underlined the failure of many national economies, from Greece to the United Kingdom, from New Zealand to the United States, to deliver high-skill, secure, and well-paid jobs for graduates.

In addition, many youth researchers have drawn on the individualization thesis outlined by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2001) that young people have responded to the complexity and uncertainty of the education–job nexus (or transition) by (a) taking individual responsibility for the failures of economic systems to generate stable employment opportunities and (b) engaging in intensive identity work that enables them to respond flexibly to changing conditions. This involves developing a capacity to hold options open, to invest in networks and connections that enable them to gain an understanding of different work identities, and to work on the self as a project, reflexively viewing themselves as others might do (Woodman & Wyn, 2011). These responses have often led to characterizing members of Generation X as having stalled lives or as having entered an extended adolescence, reflecting concern that this generation was not “settling down” as the previous generation had (Côté & Allahar, 1996).

During the 1950s and 1960s, a range of theorists including Piaget (1954) and Erikson (1965) expanded on Hall’s ideas of adolescent development, drawing on social–biological and structural–functionalist concepts (Hall, 1904). As Jones (2009) explains, these theories built on Freud’s notion of the developmental stages of the psyche from infancy to maturity to propose that youth represented a stage of life during which developmental tasks must be mastered to ensure healthy, rational adulthood.

At around the same time, theories about the creation of deviant and resistant youth cultures and subcultures with distinctive styles and social practices emerged (Coleman, 1961; Reich, 1972). The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham took up this focus during the 1970s (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). The early work of the CCCS represented a shift from deviant or spectacular cultural manifestations toward a sociological understanding of how working-class young people unconsciously contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities through peer-based cultures of resistance that reinforce rather than challenge existing power relations (Willis, 1977).

The youth transitions approach that came into vogue in the 1980s, however, tended to take cultural expression for granted, drawing implicitly on developmental approaches to identify a sociological progression through institutional stages such as education, employment, marriage, and independent living. This focus on trajectories through institutional and social markers of progress contributed to a division between transitions and cultural approaches in the field of youth studies that has persisted to the present (Cohen & Ainley, 2000; Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011). An alignment between

developmental and transitions approaches is evident in the way that both rest on the idea of normative transitional stages, drawing on categories of mainstream and at-risk and assuming an (essentialist) adult status as the endpoint of the trajectory. As Talburt and Lesko (2012) pointed out, “youth” invokes a universal category of transitional beings on their way to productive, responsible, and legal adulthood (p. 2).

Over time, a body of work that is critical of elements of a transitions approach has developed. While it is neither possible nor desirable to characterize all of the youth research that draws on a transitions metaphor neatly, it is important to acknowledge the criticism that linear transitions through set markers and stages have become reified through frameworks of measurement (France, 2007; Wyn, Lantz, & Harris, 2012). France (2007) argued that the reliance on normative patterns of transition has the effect of creating nonconforming or “at-risk” categories of youth who become the targets of policy interventions aimed at creating conformity. This approach to closing the “gaps” between conforming and nonconforming, or successful and failing, young people has been criticized for its failure to acknowledge the conditions that create inequalities and marginalization, particularly by educators (Hayes, 2012; Lingard, 2011). Others have drawn attention to the ways in which practices of governance, based on definitions of deserving and undeserving youth, constitute categories of youth (Kelly, 2006; Mizen, 2004). The conflation of youth, and adulthood, with age categories has been criticized by Lesko (1996) and, more recently, Blatterer (2007). These researchers point out that the nature and meanings of youth and of adulthood are determined by social conditions and relationships, not by biology. Both reflect on the way that youth is “book-ended” by an uncritical concept of adulthood as a point of arrival.

Drawing on these critiques, Furlong et al. (2011) have argued that it is timely to consider the synergies between cultural and transitional approaches to youth studies. This argument calls for research focusing on young people’s trajectories to give greater recognition to the situated, cultural, and relational aspects of young people’s lives, while also recognizing institutional processes of progression. Against a backdrop of significant social and economic change over the last quarter of a century, young people have forged new transition patterns through new ways of managing their life contexts, drawing on the search for meaning and security in an unpredictable and unstable world. The convergence between cultural and transitional strands of youth research recognizes young people’s subjectivities as well as their transition patterns. As Ball (2006) argued, it is important for researchers to acknowledge how the frameworks we use constitute the subjects of research. Talburt and Lesko (2012) pointed out that young people are known, and youth is constructed, “through a historical process of shifting assemblages of rationalities, technologies, practices, institutions, and individuals” (p. 5). The point is to interrogate the logics that these processes create and to resist embedding orthodoxies.

Rethinking the Transitions Metaphor

Although the idea of youth transitions remains central to youth studies—especially to policy-related research—there is an emerging consensus that this spatial concept of youth may need to be expanded, or that a different metaphor might be needed, to take full account of the young people's lives in the present and to acknowledge the qualities of relationships that enable young people to be productively connected to their worlds. In order to fully theorize age as a social relation, and to understand how the nature and quality of connections with people, resources, and places contribute to young people's quality of life, a relational approach is needed. To put this more explicitly, the developmental foundations of the metaphor of transitions, as applied to youth studies, position youth as a stage, phase, and space through which ideal trajectories to adulthood may be forged. A metaphor of belonging focuses on the quality of connections and relationship forged by young people and enabled by institutional processes that constitute what is possible for youth.

Relational Frameworks. The field of youth studies contains many examples of research that employs a relational framework. For example, the *Inventing Adulthoods* study explored the changing nature of adulthood in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s (Henderson et al., 2007). This study, based on longitudinal research, analyzes how young people seek out ways to be competent and achieve recognition in different areas of their lives including education, employment, family, and civic life. More importantly, this research highlights the active work that young people do belong. The *Life Patterns* study of Generation X in Australia and Canada has analyzed how a new adulthood was forged by young people as they navigated the new economic realities of the 1990s and found new ways to be connected meaningfully to institutions, people, and places (Andres & Wyn, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). The sense that new patterns of life are being created through these active processes of navigation by young people is evident in the collection of research on a “new youth” by Leccardi and Ruspini (2006). Leccardi's (2012) work explored new temporalities of life among young people in Italy as they grapple with unpredictability and the impossibility of imagining the future that was constructed by the baby boomer generation; this theme was also taken up by Woodman (2012) who explored the issue of temporality in the lives of young Australians during their immediate postschool years. These authors look between the spaces of transition markers, as Hall, Coffey, and Lashua (2009) suggested, to understand how the fragmentation of life that is associated with precarious work, combined with complex educational timetables, has resulted in the acceleration of temporal norms and expectations, which undermines the conditions for maintaining strong personal connections.

Belonging. The idea of belonging is implicit in much of the research that contributes to youth studies. This includes research that focuses on the synergies between youth cultures and transitions research (Furlong et al.,

2011), on the intersections between locality and biography (Kraack & Kenway, 2002), and on struggles for identity (Stokes, 2012). Belonging is a descriptive term that invites the researcher and policy maker to map and understand how young people put together the complex elements of life that enable them to be connected, to be included, to be healthy, to participate, and to be economically stable (Tilleczek, 2010). This approach opens up an understanding of the resources including family, friends, education, and peers that young people draw on to build their lives and the ways in which changing conditions impact life chances. Hall et al. (2009) showed how narratives of transformation redevelopment and regeneration of a rural community interact with young people's biographical transformations. This work identified the importance of understanding the connections between young people and place.

As these studies demonstrate, alongside the metaphor of transitions with its focus on markers and stages of progress, more explicit frameworks are needed that enable researchers to integrate economic change (i.e., school to work) with other dimensions of life, including well-being and relationships with people and place. A metaphor of belonging encompasses these elements.

For the current generation, more needs to be known about how decisions about education and employment are made in relation to belonging—socially, geographically, and economically. Understanding the relationships between education and employment in context is especially important in times of increased economic insecurity, precisely because the links between education and employment are less reliable. The following section argues that it is timely to draw on conceptual frameworks that view education as a strategy and a relationship—not a transition space—in the struggle to construct a life.

The challenge for all educators, and especially for adult educators, is that the reality of people's lives is multidimensional, messy, and almost always nonlinear. A transitions approach that focuses on the school–work nexus obscures other significant areas that influence learning, such as well-being, relationships with people and place, the environment, and leisure.

Young Adults and Learning

Considerations of social change and conceptual renewal have implications for all educators, including those who focus on adult education. Young people are quick to respond to new circumstances, mainly because they have to. Institutions are often the slowest to respond, in part because they bear the imprint of their origins. Young adults in the 21st century require education that takes a flexible approach to age, education that recognizes diverse needs as well as young adults' capacity to make decisions and take responsibility for their learning. Active engagement in decision making, flexible approaches to the relationship between age and learning, and creative learning environments that

meet diverse needs are important elements that help to equip young people to be effective navigators of their own lives and participants in creating an economically sustainable society.

Adult education has a heightened significance in a context of economic uncertainty and global competition for high-skill jobs. The nexus between education and employment is not robust, and there is increasing evidence that the value of education in globalized labor markets is being driven down, and a new category of “overeducated” individuals is being created (Brown et al., 2011; ILO, 2013). Nonetheless, individuals without educational credentials tend to fare the worst in labor markets (ILO, 2013; OECD, 2007). These developments place even greater pressure on young people to be active decision makers who are also flexible and capable of navigating uncertainty. But, perhaps most importantly, they speak to the need for a new metaphor of education that enables educators to acknowledge education as a place of connection, where the quality of relationships is made visible, moving beyond the rather instrumental metaphor of education as a space of transition.

Connected, Locally and Globally. In changing social, economic, and political landscapes, education is shifting from being primarily a tool for economic advancement toward a wider societal role contributing to capacities to navigate complexity and to contribute to a sustainable society. Education is about the production of ways of being and knowing, as well as sets of skills and areas of knowledge. In a context in which young adults feel individual responsibility for the complex navigations and decision making that characterize their lives, responsibility for learning is shifting from the educator to the educated. This approach has been central to the work of adult educators for many years; moving the understanding of the “transition” to adulthood away from age-based or stage-based definitions toward ideas of belonging and connection, as described earlier, may also serve to blur the boundary between the roles of student and teacher. How young people learn in formal education settings can and should more closely approximate the way they learn outside of formal institutions, developing the capacities to understand what is relevant, how to access information, how to learn, and how to develop knowledge (see Olson, Chapter 7 of this volume).

Educational systems in many countries have been slow to respond to changes in young people’s learning needs. Indeed some developments in education, focusing on internal processes such as “quality of teaching” and standardized tests, separate learning from broader social trends, emphasizing an abstract notion of student and a narrow notion of (academic) outcomes. This separation of schools from communities and their global context limits opportunities to make learning relevant, locally as well as globally, and can reinforce a view that “disadvantaged communities” have nothing positive to offer education.

Changing circumstances challenge educationalists to recognize the diversity of young adulthood and to understand and respond to the impact of different economic, political, and social environments on learning. As Bottrell and Goodwin (2011) noted in relation to Australian schools, “it appears that the role of schools in society may be changing, as new understandings of the relationships between the state, institutions, communities, families and individuals emerge” (p. 1).

Needs (Not Age) Based. The reliance on age as a key organizing principle reinforces a normative approach to learning and disconnects that learning from the context and circumstances of individuals and communities. Although significant advances have been made, educational systems still reflect the age-based nature of their origins in the 1950s. Early school leavers (or “dropouts”) in particular find themselves shut out because, having left school, it can be difficult to reconnect with formal education (see Davis, Chapter 6 of this volume). New models of second-chance education are responding to this challenge, recognizing that age is an artificial barrier to learning and creating stronger articulation between different institutional sites of learning (e.g., between schools and “adult” learning institutions or between academic and “vocational” programs; Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011; te Riele, 2007).

Navigating Learning. Being “self-navigators” is increasingly necessary, in part because the links between education and employment are so complex. Research shows that educational qualifications, although important, do not correspond directly to employment outcomes (Andres & Wyn, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). Young people do not necessarily expect to take up employment in their field of training, or they may seek work in that field for a short period of time only, exploring options to retrain in order to enter different fields of work. Being good navigators requires a conscious approach to personal development so that individuals can see how their personal biography has developed in the past and how it is currently being constructed so that they can make decisions about their future options. Being good navigators also requires a deep understanding of the nature of the social, economic, and political world in which they are living and their relationships with others, locally and globally. An example can be found in Wierenga and Guevara’s (2013) analysis of a partnership between an international NGO and educational institutions in Australia and Indonesia that created adult learning opportunities that were also connected with secondary school-aged learning through peer-based citizenship education.

The focus on effective navigation has the capacity to address the needs of those who are currently most disadvantaged within education, who tend to be young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, young indigenous people, and young people from rural areas. Already many educational programs consciously connect learning to place and build relationships across secondary and adult learning sites both locally and globally (Smyth, Angus,

Down, & McInerney, 2008). These programs explore local histories, linking local stories and experiences across different places and recognizing the skills that parents and community members can offer schools (Thomson & Harris, 2004).

Conclusions

An analysis of the idea of youth transitions provides fertile ground for adult educators. This chapter provides a historical perspective on youth development and youth transitions that aims to provoke reflection on the truths that are produced through commonly used theoretical frameworks of this transition. This chapter has explored the ways in which understandings of youth are naturalized and so become taken for granted. The focus of the chapter is on the complex relationship between social, economic, and political conditions and the nature and quality of young people's lives. These considerations are presented as a challenge and an opportunity for educational policy and for educators.

This chapter has argued that the idea of youth transitions is underpinned by a developmental/transitional metaphor linking psychological theories of youth development relatively seamlessly with sociological markers of progress through phases of the life cycle. While these approaches have the capacity to reveal important insights for adult educators about young people's lives today, there are inherent weaknesses in this approach, which it may be timely to address.

The reality of new transnational educational and labor market systems means that the nexus between education and employment, the mainstay of contemporary youth transitions approaches, is weak. Education manifestly no longer guarantees a smooth transition into secure employment, and educational policy based on monitoring transitional processes is less and less capable of delivering policy and programs that can address key issues of inequality of outcomes, much like adult basic, GED, and vocational education programs. Drawing on a body of work that critiques transitional approaches to youth, this chapter argues that a relational metaphor that places an emphasis on the quality and nature of connection and relationship provides a richer framework for understanding young people's lives and the role of education in their lives. Such a framework invites adult educators to be informed about who their students are and what their aspirations are. Adult education is a complex learning space that is traditionally associated with the acquisition of specific vocational skills. In these times, adult education is also a significant resource for young people's identity development that enables them to be connected, to be healthy, to participate and work.

Note

1. I draw on a sociological approach that acknowledges that youth is categorized in different ways across time and place. A survey of the age ranges that are included within

the category of youth reveals that this is a broad inclusive category that commonly begins at age 12 and continues to age 25, but there is considerable variation across policy areas and between countries (see Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). I use the words young people to refer to individuals and groups who are subject to this categorization. Because the range of ages that encompasses youth is extremely broad, I tend to use the term young people when referring to people aged 12–18 and use the term young adults when referring to youth aged from 19 to the late twenties.

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