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Gender and Generations: Using a Generational Framework to Rethink Continuity and Change in the Gender Order

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Abstract

It is now common for youth studies scholars to advocate for research that connects a focus on youth "transitions" and youth "cultures", particularly as they intersect in the context of social change across many spheres, including the gender order. A risk in the rise of a focus on bridging these established traditions of youth research is that a simplistic "middle ground" emerges that diminishes the important insights from previous research within each tradition and fails to engage with sophisticated contemporary framings of social structure and action. This article argues concepts from the sociology of generations can help bridge the gap between the study of youth transitions and youth cultures in a generative, not reductive, way. The sociology of generations provides tools for tracing the dynamic refiguring of key social divisions over time, including gender, through

the intersection of structural change and the reworking of culture. Using examples from the USA and Australia, the paper finishes by tracing the ways that gender is being refigured in new generational conditions.

Keywords: Generation, Gender, Transitions, Youth Culture, Feminism.

1. Introduction

Sociological analysis has shown that youth, like gender, is a social category defined by much more than biology. There are various ways in which a sociological lens can be applied to young lives, and the place of "youth" in a social structure and discourse. One particularly influential approach to thinking about youth and why it matters is the "transitions" strand of youth studies. For scholars working within this approach, youth is a status and stage shaped by institutional patterns, particularly in education and the labor market. These scholars analyze the institutionalized processes of moving into adult roles, at different paces with unequal outcomes. An equally influential way of conceptualizing youth, and its sociological significance, is as a set of cultural practices that young people engage in, or are defined as "youthful". These two ways of thinking about youth mark out one of the major division within the history and present of youth studies (Cohen 2003).

This paper suggests that concepts from the sociology of generations can help bridge the gap between the study of youth transitions and youth cultures. A prominent critique of generational frameworks is that they obscure difference and inequality (France and Roberts 2015). Here, I will briefly trace the history of this long-standing critique, and why it is applicable to functionalist and popular accounts of generations, but not to the approach to the sociology of generations that has developed from the foundational writing of Karl Mannheim (Woodman and Wyn 2015). Instead of obscuring difference and inequality, tools from the sociology of generations helps attune scholars to the dynamic refiguring of key social divisions over time, including gender, through the intersection of structural change and the reworking of culture (Woodman 2013). The paper then

highlights generational analysis in practice and how it can be generatively applied to questions about gender, drawing on the recent work on changes to the gender structure evident among "Millennials" in the USA by Barbara Risman (2018), and my own work with colleagues using the Australian-based Life Patterns longitudinal study of youth. Gender inequalities remain, but are being refigured in new generational conditions.

2. The twin tracks[1]

Youth studies is a constellation of approaches; numerous epistemologies are loosely linked with substantive questions about young people's engagement in crime and "deviance", leisure and culture, family life and sexuality, among others (Griffin 1993). An influential way to summarize sociological youth research across this diversity is to identify two dominant streams of research, transitions and cultures (Furlong *et al*. 2011). Cohen (2003, 30) labelled this the twin track of mainstream post-World War 2 youth studies, the study of increasingly problematic employment transitions on the one hand, and a focus on "juvenile delinquency" morphing into a focus on spectacular, oppositional youth cultures on the other. In both tracks, an unreflexive focus on young men has eventually given way, in the face of critique, to a recognition of the central role of gender in shaping both transitions and cultures.

2.1. Cultures

The cultures "track" of youth studies focuses on young people's cultural practices and representations of youth culture. This strand continues to be shaped by the terms set by the "subcultures approach" linked to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, even if there is now considerable critique. This "Birmingham School" emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, building on earlier accounts of deviance as social, not pathological, including the famous "gang" studies of the Chicago School of Sociology, Whyte's (1943) participant observation of the culture of the "cor-

[1] This section draws on thinking and arguments developed for the introduction and conclusion to a book project edited I edited with Andy Bennett called *Youth Cultures, Transitions and Generations: Bridging the Gap in Youth Research* (Woodman and Bennett 2015).

ner boys" (1943) in Boston, and Albert Cohen's (1956) theory of "deviance" as tied to youth "subcultures" with their own structures and norms, built in opposition to the "mainstream"[2].

The Birmingham School tied this earlier Durkheimian understanding of the social construction of deviance to a Gramscian theory of class stratification and culture. For Gramsci, culture is a site of class antagonism, but it is not simplistically adversarial. Class relations are inherently unstable and fluid; culture is part of building consent for social stratification across factions, but also a site of multiple oppositions. For the CCCS, class divided young people from each other, more so than sharing "youth" united them, and this divide was visible in the spectacular cultural products of working class young people (Clarke *et al.* 2006 [1976] 8).

While the work of the CCCS remains influential (Blackman 2005; Shildrick and McDonald 2006), there is now an established alternative to the CCS approach that gives less of a determining role to class in the study of youth culture. The "after" or "post" subcultures conceptualizations of youth rarely outright deny that class matters to young lives, but see culture as having a degree of autonomy from class overlooked by the Birmingham School (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003), or alternatively highlight the profound effects of race, gender and their intersection with class (Nayak 2003; Huq 2006).

The development of youth cultures research, since the CCCS set the terms of the subcultures debate in the late 1970s, has been driven by scholars drawing on feminist insights. Subcultures theorizing and study, from the Chicago School through to the Birmingham School was prone to blindness towards gender (McRobbie 1991). The spectacular young subculturalists were assumed to be male. The critique of the gender blindness of subcultures research has roots in internal critique from scholars associated with the Birmingham School. There was a Women's Studies Group within the CCCS that released a paper (1978) "on the subordination of women", highlighting the focus on men within sociological research on youth cultures. Most subcultures researchers up until this point had been men, and the participants of focus were young men. Women were not completely absent from studies of youth culture, but they were subordinated and

[2] Blackman's (2014) paper provides a thorough overview of the history of the term subcultures.

seen through “male eyes” (Blackman 2014, 503). Two of the Centre’s famous alumni, Angela McRobbie (1978; and with Garber 1976) and Christine Griffin (1987), built on this critique in their own work, making young women’s involvement in subcultures with men, and young women’s own cultures, the centre-point of their sociology. By the 1990s, the study of young women’s cultures was a major area of study within the youth cultures track (Skelton and Valentine 1998) and by the 2000s, youth studies scholars interested in culture were beginning to seriously interrogate masculinity, not take it for granted (Connell 2000; Frosh *et al.* 2002; Kimmel 2008).

2.2 Transitions

The other major keystone of the sociological study of youth is the study of transitions, ranking in popularity alongside the broader study of youth culture in the academic field and dominating, alongside the narrower study of youth crime (culture), in policy oriented research on youth. The study of transitions is a broad area and is growing more diverse (France and Roberts 2015), but tracking young people’s progression from education to employment remains the core concern.

For much of the second half of the 20th Century, transitions research, at least in “Anglo” contexts, focused on problems of adjustment to the demands and cultures of the workplace (Ashton and Field 1976). Researchers with a critical disposition focused on tracing the sorting of young people into parts of the labor market and the “opportunity structure” revealed by this – see for example the pivotal work of Roberts (1968). After the 1970s, the concept of adjustment and even sorting started to appear increasingly anachronistic, as youth labor markets became more precarious and employment transitions protracted, across the globe (Brown *et al.* 2011). As workplace transitions have been reconceptualized as precarious, more attention has been paid to the intersection of employment and other transitions – including housing and family transitions – that are, in general and despite diversity, happening for most young people later in the life course than for their parents’ generation (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011).

The development of this “track” of youth studies shows a homology with the study of youth culture in its deficient attention to gender. Work on transitions often draws on a set of assumptions about “normal” transitions that are gendered. The transition to full-

time stable work with a career trajectory was a male pathway, and an implicit or explicit norm based on men was smuggled into many early studies in the transitions approach. The enrichment of our concept of transitions and our understanding of diverse transitions has been driven, in significant part, by critique drawing on feminist theories. Christine Griffin (1985) was one of the first to highlight the gendered assumptions underpinning transitions research through a study that tracked the school to work transitions of a group of working-class young women in England, showing how gender norms shaped these transitions and how family, intimate relationships and caring responsibilities impacted on these transitions. Jones and Wallace (1992) used an expanded notion of citizenship, based on a feminist critique, to highlight the role of the state in structuring "private and public" transitions. Contemporary transitions studies give much more attention to gender, and diverse experiences broadly, tracking relationship and parenting, housing, consumption, and citizenship transitions as they are shaped by intersecting inequalities (Jones 1995; Heath and Cleaver 2003; Thomson *et al*. 2009).

3. Bridging the gap

The divide between these two branches of sociological youth studies is easily exaggerated. It is a useful typology, but many studies, including some of the most enduring in the field, have worked across these two ways of thinking about youth. Indeed, it is the insights that emerge from such bridging that is largely responsible for the iconic status of these studies, such as Jenkins' (1983) study of the "lifestyles" of working class youth as they "grow up", Griffin's (1985) study of "typical girls" cultures and transitions, and Chatterton and Hollands' (2003) class-typology of engagement with the night time economy.

Probably the most well-know and cited youth studies text from the second half of the Twentieth Century is Willis' ethnographic account of an ironic "transition" outcomes of a culture of "resistance" in school; an oppositional comradery at school shaped his cohort of working-class young men with the right dispositions for their future place in the labor force. While Willis's work was Marxist in orientation, he gives his young participants agency though "glimmers of critique" from their social position, and an active

role in their own "self damnation" (Weis 2004, 112). The book is powerful because it doesn't romanticise or demonise, allowing an ambivalence to remain despite a clear political commitment to his participants, resonating with Bourdieu's theorising of reproduction (Griffin 2011, 252). Willis's study continues to influence youth researchers today – with part of the legacy visible across transitions and cultural studies, as well as sociologically framed work on young people's attitudes and orientations to the future (Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Merico 2011; Woodman 2011; Helve *et al.* 2017). Yet Willis' study is also the paradigm case of a man, working with implicit gendered assumptions, focusing on the lives of young men and relegating young women to the background in his account (Blackman 2014, 503). Interestingly, building on earlier critiques of this gender blindness, the loose family of contemporary youth research that most consistently works across the cultures and transitions gap, connecting culture, the economy, transitions, gender, sexuality and inequality is "girlhood studies" (Harris 2004; Dobson and Harris 2015; Best 2007).

As noted, there are recurrent calls for such holistic approaches, which concurrently take cultures and transitions into account, to become the norm, not the exception (MacDonald and Shildrick 2007; McDonald 2011; Geldens *et al.* 2011; Harris 2015; Woodman and Bennett 2015). Asking manageable research questions and making strategic analytic distinctions is crucial to sociological research. Yet, young lives come as a package and youth studies needs approaches that highlight this, not obscure it. However, there is a limitation to simply calling for a "middle-ground" approach (Woodman 2009). This middle ground is based on an understanding of cultures research as strong at highlighting agency (or resistance), whether class structure is central to the conceptualising frame (as in subcultures) or not (in post-subcultures), usually using qualitative methods; while transitions, research is strong at tracking broader patterns, understood as evidence of structure, usually using quantitative methods, while largely blind to agency, creativity, culture, and everyday life. This has a grain of truth, but is too simplistic, reducing the nuance and complexity in previous studies in either tradition and creating a middle ground with at least as significant conceptual failings. Such middle-ground approaches are inadequate to properly grasp the impact of social change, as they slip into assumptions that structure is linked to reproduction, and agency to change, or at the

least “resistance” (Woodman 2009; Coffey and Farrugia 2014). Such middle-ground framings are problematic for their impoverished theories of human action, creativity and embodiment, which are major concerns of contemporary feminist youth studies (Coffey 2013; Budgeon 2015; Coffey and Watson 2015; Dobson and Ringrose 2016). They are also particularly problematic in this era of rapid social change, as it leads to inequality being a-priori categorized as evidence of stability.

The processes behind patterns of inequality can change significantly with the abstract constellation of hierarchical social positions largely showing continuity over time. The outcomes youth studies scholars are interested in do not emerge from an inevitable or abstract logic, but through people actively working to maintain distinctions and advantages over others, and through institutional arrangements being adjusted alongside broader social change (Furlong *et al.* 2011, 357). With colleagues (Woodman and Bennett 2015, 5; Woodman and Wyn 2015). I have argued that frameworks that allow scholars to think differently about the relationship of inequality with continuity and change, and the life course, are potentially productive in bridging the gap between the study of transitions and cultures, particularly given the realities of rapid social change. Several youth studies scholars are attempting to develop the concept of generations for this purpose.

4. Generations

The concept of generations is pervasive in contemporary public discourse. This provides an entry into public debate for a sociological point of view – breaking the implicit association between youth and developmental psychological and biological processes (Woodman 2011). If young people act or hold values very different to previous cohorts, social factors must be behind this. Yet the popular use of generational terms often descends into generationalism, a form of bad stereotyping (White 2013). A set of age cohorts is described as if they have a single set of dispositions and attitudes, and a normative element is added – some cohorts are portrayed as having “bad attitudes” relative to others. Simplistic generational claims, like the “Millennials” are more narcissistic than pervious cohorts are not evidence free (Twenge 2013) but are based on small differ-

ences in average attitudes, turning them into group defining oppositions, ignoring diversity (or even statistical deviation) within cohorts (Arnett 2013).

The sociology of generations avoids this simplistic generationalism by enquiring into the diversity and oppositions within generational categories. The Hungarian-German sociologist Karl Mannheim's essay on the "problem of generations" remains the foundation of much of the theorising of generations to this day. Mannheim built on earlier German language philosophy – such as Dilthey's claim that the appearance of new social divisions in emerging cohorts was the concrete mechanisms through which the opposing tendencies in a historical period were worked out (Bessant *et al.* 2017, 49) – and grappled with the question of generations in the context of the legacy of the suffering of World War 1, when the generation of young people most caught up in the war were trying to rebuild their lives.

Mannheim (1952) conceptualised society as a mixture of continuity and change. Implicit knowledge and explicit teaching were passed from generation to generation, at times this allows a steady adjustment as society changes, but at points in history this "education" becomes a problem; a new generation emerges when the previous constellation of beliefs and ways of life become difficult to maintain, either no longer practical or no longer valued. Mannheim saw such conditions in post-war Germany. Yet, although new ideas can be imported from elsewhere, Mannheim argued that the raw material of the nascent generation's world view would have to be in large part the legacy of previous generations.

A new generation emerges from a mix of social change and the creative action of young people making "fresh contact" with culture and working, sometimes struggling, to create a set of values and dispositions that fit the times. The emerging new social formation creates a space of possible responses, but not in a deterministic way, such that the cohort of young people facing this new "generational location", may react in different, often antagonistic ways. He called these different sets of responses, generational units. So, a generation is united by concrete historical problems but «work up the material of their common experience in different specific ways» (Mannheim 1952, 304). These differences can be explained by referencing other social factors but were not, for

Mannheim, reducible to them, generational factors have an autonomous force in social life.

4.1. Critiques

The sociology of generations, as it has recently been used in youth studies, has been critiqued, largely from the direction of class analysis[3]. Particularly, taking a generations approach is argued to create a blindness to the central and ongoing role of class in shaping people's lives (France and Roberts 2015). This is a longstanding critique of any approach understood as treating youth as a category (Clarke *et al.* 2006 [1976]). Like the critique from the direction of class research, some argue that thinking with a generational lens obscures more than it reveals when applied to gender, particularly in the case of the "waves" of feminist thought and activism. Gillis and Munford (2004) argue, for example, that the wave paradigm paralyses feminism, encouraging the pitting of generations against one another. Others critique the generational theory of waves for simplistically transforming ideological differences into generational differences, obscuring, for example, the contemporary legacy of radical feminism, which tends to be the perspective that informs those proposing such critiques (Hogeland 2001; Mackay 2015).

These criticisms hold against the use of the notion of generations in the media and some uses of generations in academia – such as the work of psychologist Jean Twenge (2014) – that largely disregard intracohort differences. Mannheim's version of generations, however, is different. It is explicitly focused on theorizing intra-generational differences. It requires a specification of the changed social conditions, relative to previous generations, and how these have effects in and beyond youth; and it requires identification of the differences within a generation, of the multiple ways that people respond to and shape these conditions, and in turn how this is shaped by their social positioning.

Continuities are obvious in the inequalities that shape lives and it is one of the tasks of youth studies to track and highlight this; yet, by assuming "stable processes" under-

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[3] France and Roberts (2015) provide a detailed overview of unanswered questions for a generational approach. Here I focus on the substance of their critique of using a generational framework, which is that it obscures inequality. My position is that France and Roberts' article is an important starting point for interrogating the concept's ambiguities but the critique concerning inequality has little substance (See Woodman and Wyn 2015b).

pin these continuities, new insights into how these patterns are created, actively, in contemporary conditions, become difficult. Familiar patterns of inequality can emerge in new ways (Woodman 2013, 1.2). Instead of a hindrance, attending to generational processes is important for understanding the contemporary workings of gender and other social divisions. Without a lens attuned to "generational units" the risk is that scholars predefine class and gender relationships as «processes that remain stable» as France and Roberts do (2015, 225), and overlook important shifts in the way class, gender (and race, ability and sexuality) are articulated in changing times.

5. Generational units in the generational gender order

Barbara Risman's (2018) recent book on attitudes to gender among "Millennials" in the USA provides a recent example of using a generational frame to think about shifting gender patterns among young people, focusing on intra-generational divisions. Risman's larger project has been to outline the gender structure of society; gender is salient for identities, but is not primarily an identity. Instead it is primarily a social structure visible at different levels of analysis, from the everyday to the macro (Risman 2004). For this new project focused on generations and gender, Risman and her team conducted interviews with 116 young people from in an around the city of Chicago. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, although most were from working class backgrounds and were attending or had graduated from college. Risman uses these interviews to develop a typology of four different ways that this group of young people are responding to and helping recreate the contemporary gendered social structure: rebels, innovators, straddlers and true believers (Risman 2018, 5-9). In Mannheim's terminology, these can be considered generational units.

Innovators, feel they are not bound by gender and are critical of the gender structure (Ivi, 109). The innovators reported mixing and matching traits and styles that were masculine and feminine and that they did not feel constrained by gendered expectations, at least that this point in their lives. Relatedly, the young women reported that parents, teachers and others rarely treated them differently based on gender or for their mixing of gendered traits. The young men in this group, in contrast, did report social consequenc-

es from breaking gender norms, but these consequences were not ubiquitous, with support available from their social network and even, to an extent, within institutions like school. At least by the time they reached young adulthood, the men and women had little fear of breaking gender norms (Ivi, 122).

Rebels went further than innovators; while innovators play with gender representations, rebels rejected any expression of gender as tied to sex, particularly societal pressures to present their bodies in particular ways (Ivi, 159). Rebels recognize the existence of sex categories in the social structure, but want to dismantle them. Hence at an individual level they rejected these categories completely, often identifying as "genderqueer" (Ivi, 156). The rebels face significant constraints and consequences for their more radical challenge to the gender binary, including a social world still ill-equipped and resistant to recognizing them.

True believers, unlike rebels and innovators, support the continuation of previous gender norms, seeing them as a universal truth (based on religious doctrine) or the outcome of biological differences between men and women (Ivi, 79). Straddlers were an intermediate group, unsure of where they stood and inconsistent in their beliefs and actions. For example, they "might be very proud that they are neither masculine nor feminine, but some of each, but concurrently believe that men should be tough and women nurturing" (Ivi, 6). While the mix of seemingly paradoxical positions varied, common across this group was a recognition that the world was changing, flexibility was needed, and choice was paramount.

A generational framework allows for the identification of different intra-generational styles of thought in response to shared generational problems and possibilities. More than Risman emphasizes in her text, the "true believers" are not just a throwback unit, and hence not part of their generation. Their views, like the other young people in her study, are shaped by their social positioning and those around them, particularly the views of family and peers. Yet they are remaking and defending "tradition" in a context where their beliefs are no longer normative, even if still powerful. This resonates with the analysis of the reshaping of "retro-sexist" lad culture among university students, remade in neoliberal terms as part of a wider, individualized audit culture of sexual desirability (Phipps and Young 2015).

These "conservative" groups of young people, considered as a generational unit, are hence not just evidence of continuity. Risman's "true believers" are embedded in communities that reinforced their conservative views, but cannot not avoid interacting with others who disagree. This complexity is visible in the way this group often understood gender differences to be biological, how men and women just are, while paradoxically believing that these eternal truths needed to be maintained in the face of the threat of social change. And, despite a deep conservatism, they still shared certain assumptions with their peers, such that women should have equal access to the paid-work force and there is a place for individual choice. Traditionalists are evidence of an active, if reactionary, remaking of set of positions in the face of social change.

In the context of the rise of social media, the spread of higher education and the central yet problematic notion of "choice" that shapes young lives, the rise of the "alt right" (on and off campus) and the emerging "fourth wave" feminism (on-and off-line and on-and off-campus) are addressing gender in ways that have a generational aspect. These movements are repositioning the political "left" and "right" along issues such as "free speech", even as at a broader and more abstract level, political leanings continue to correlate across generations, and with their social positioning more broadly (Dunham 1998). In other words, a nuanced generational framework can help with what Gill (2016, 617) calls the challenge to "hold and think together" the seeming reemergence of (new) feminisms concurrently with new types of, and seemingly intensifying, misogyny. Research like Risman's (2018) study highlights the range of different ways of doing gender, including masculinity (and gender politics) that are now circulating and in tension with each other as they take different positions on new generational challenges.

6. Generations, youth and gender in Australia

My own work using the Life Patterns longitudinal study of Australian youth, with Johanna Wyn and others, has argued that conditions for the emergence of a new generation have been created by economic shifts and changing educational patterns. While we have not, yet, created an explicit typology of generational units comparable to Risman's work, we have written about the gender dimensions of broader generational shifts and

embedded this thinking in an account of changing economic and educational structures (Andres and Wyn 2010; Cuervo *et al.* 2012; Woodman and Wyn 2015b; Wyn *et al.* 2010; 2017).

Over the past three decades the Australian Government has attempted to address a building crisis in the youth labor market by encouraging, even mandating young people to stay in education. The participants in the study have responded to this demand by studying for longer, with the significant majority now doing some further education after secondary school. Yet, across education levels, it has continued to become more difficult for young Australians to establish themselves in the labor market, particularly in a career they see as commensurate with their qualifications. Young women have particularly embraced the call to further their education; women overtook men as more likely to hold bachelors level qualifications in 2001, the gap has now increased to ten per cent (ABS 2016). However, a pay gap remains in favor of men, including in the starting salary of Bachelor Degree holders; the median male starting salary in 2015 was $2000 higher (ABS 2016).

By their late 20s, these highly educated and ambitious young women are beginning to drift into part-time work and out of employment altogether, demoralized by the barriers to employment security, career progression and to mixing paid work and family demands. The young women in our study told us, in their early 20s, that they were committed to achieving commensurate career outcomes with young men, and that this was one of their most important aims for the future. Hence, it was not only that these barriers to career success remained as they were for their parents, despite young women's educational achievements, but that some of these challenges became greater or were new as education patterns and aspirations have changed profoundly (Andres and Wyn 2010; Cuervo *et al.* 2012; Woodman and Wyn 2015).

The experience of these young women in Australia cannot be properly represented using the transitions metaphor. The issue with the transitions metaphor in this case is that is built on the assumption of a structured, if occasionally dysfunctional pathway between education and work: that the two spheres have strong homologies and defined pathways (Wyn *et. al.* 2017). There are many factors at play in the creation of gender inequality in the workforce, including the pay gap, but the temporal structure of paid

employment is one of the more significant (Goldin 2014; Wyn *et al.* 2017). The relative flexibility of higher education works well for the young women in the Life Patterns study. Yet, despite some noteworthy policy changes to improve flexibility for employees, it is still not widespread and often comes with a pay penalty. Hence, despite change, the "male breadwinner model" still shapes paid employment.

Our participants in the Life Patterns study are aware of these inequalities, and respond in different ways. Some of the young women feel that they were misled by teachers and parents that they could "have it all", some present a feminist critique, and many understand the personal impact of the structures they face through the notion of choice (both the young women and young men). In other words, there is commonly a recognition of the structural inequalities, but an individualization of the response. One of our participants put it like this:

> I guess the thing is I'm comfortable saying I want to be a mother and I'd prefer to take that shot over my high-flying career but I reserve the right to choose. That's the difference. If it's expected of me and I don't feel like I have the option that's the problem but if I have, and I know I have the choice, I feel comfortable with what I'm doing. I'm happy to cook dinner every night but if you expect me to cook dinner every night I'm going to be annoyed… My generation, I feel, has been brought up to believe that you can have it all to a certain standard… That's not true! You can have a family and a career but something has got to give (excerpt from Life Patterns interview with Marie, aged 23, qualified primary-school teacher, quoted in Wyn *et. al.* 2017, 501).

The relationship between education and work, which forms a foundation of the youth transitions track of youth studies, is problematized in our research, instead of statuses linked by a transition that can be smooth or rough, they are two spheres with different power dynamics, logics and temporalities.

The temporalities of everyday life are linked to the way paid employment articulates with the cultural practices of young adults. This generation of young women in Australia faces the personal responsibility to manage incompatible structural demands, most acutely temporal demands. More so than the young men, they are stuck between two in-

compatible structures. On the one hand a labor market where young women have greater access than before but career success and employment security is deferred for young workers, if not indefinitely at least well into the third and even forth decade of life, even for those with high “human capital”. On the other hand is their hope to become parents, which are coupled with an under resourced maternity leave and childcare sector (Woodman and Leccardi 2015, 65). The young women (and men) in our study are reacting differently to these generational conditions, in the context of a wider discourse of “choice” that they are embracing and challenging in different ways.

7. A generative account of generations

A final note of caution. Like with all frameworks, a generational lens is at its most useful when applied reflexively. Research within a feminist tradition that has found value in and developed a generational lens has been among the most likely strands of scholarship to do this, recognizing the multiple times (and structures) shaping waves of feminist thought and the impact of the generational experience of the author on their work (Brown 2014). Henry (2004) and van der Tuin (2014) use a generational frame to interrogate the relationship between waves, showing a complex picture of new cohorts using (sometimes arguably mischaracterizing, but still productively using) the ideas of their feminist “foremothers”, simultaneously identifying and dis-identifying with them. Similarly, Kehily (2008) traces the experiences of “girlhood”, across three generations to provide a nuanced commentary on continuity and change, where continuing contradictions in the gender order are reconfigured by different generations, like that evident in the examples above.

This work highlights the value of a generational framing, while also calling for reflexivity about how such framings are always performative, helping to create and not simply discover; in scholarship, as in lived experience, generational accounts can be negative or generative (Barnwell 2017). Every framing excludes and includes. For example, even in much feminist work (and I acknowledge in the way this paper is presented) the accounts of the embodied lives of young people tend towards overly clear-cut categorizations that risk erasing important experiences, such as the way “boy” and

“girl”, “women” and “man” tend to remain clearly distinct, erasing the many identities that fit in-between, or that deny such clear-cut distinctions (Driver 2007, 305). As shown in Risman’s (2018) recent study, such experiences help define the generational units visible among contemporary youth.

8. Conclusion

While the separation of youth studies into cultures and transitions tracks has never been total, it has been consequential. From the side of cultures research, this split encourages a tendency to present young people’s cultural activity as separate from their need to earn money, or otherwise meet their material needs, and the compulsion to spend many of their waking hours in school, increasingly into their 20s. From the transitions side, the separation can obscure one of the main reasons for studying the quality of education and employment conditions and transitions: these conditions impact on cultural practices and shape everyday lives and relationships.

The sociology of generations can help researchers conceptualize young lives in a way that bridges the concerns of the transitions and cultures tracks of youth studies, while providing a nuanced lens for thinking about the relationship of social change to inequality. The sociology of generations has been pushed forward by feminist scholars who find it useful but highlight that classification, and to be classified, is not neutral but performative, helping to create what is apparently just defined, providing an ethics as well as a method to guide analysis of generational change and the possibilities of inter-generational dialogue.

Generational accounts can be negative, a type of generationalism that is used as an excuse for bad stereotypes, and can obscure the workings of important social differences and divisions, around class and gender for example. This generationalism is rightly critiqued by sociologists. However, the sociology of generations is not vulnerable to this charge, but provides a generative (part of the etymology of the term generations) framework for understanding the intersection of social divisions, the life course and social change, and how young people are creatively reworking their cultural inheritance. In this paper, I have provided examples drawing on the typology (of in my terms, gen-

erational units) recently put forward by Risman and from the experiences of young women in the Life Patterns study in Australia, hoping to highlight the elements that can make a generative generational framing for youth studies. Such a framework can guide intergenerational engagements based on generational intelligence instead of generational stereotyping.

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