Youth - actor of social change

The second UP2YOUTH thematic workshop took place in Lisbon in November 2007. Researchers from all over Europe working on one of the three topics young parenthood, ethnic minority youth or participation were invited to present and discuss their findings. The aim was to deepen the analysis with regard to complementary approaches and to broaden it with regard to regions and countries not involved in the UP2YOUTH consortium.

Identities and agency: young people, difference and social cohesion

This quotation from a 13 year old young woman interviewed in the framework of a study on consumption relates to the contradiction in young people’s agency under conditions of late modernity. On the one hand, there are longstanding common findings that some young people are concerned to act on their social worlds and to effect changes e.g. in volunteering, campaigning and youth social action groups such as on environmental issues. On the other hand, their agency is influenced and constrained by social structure. Based on an overview of a broad range of research (which unfortunately can not be made due reference to in this summary), the key argument of the speech was: “Young people craft meaningful biographies from the constraints imposed by changing social structures and communities of practice.”

Ann Phoenix started from an understanding of identity as the place or pivot where social structure and its symbolic representations is lived out as forms of both subjectivity and community. Identities are not only constrained by structure but also a resource for subjective projects which are increasingly multiple and de-centred. And: identities are linked with social action also in terms of collective identities as group membership allows for the exploration of individual identities. Depending on young people’s social positioning, however, the emerging explorations are

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UP2YOUTH Project News

Three members of UP2YOUTH have been invited to a hearing of the Federal Youth Curatorship, an advisory board of the German Federal government ‘Towards a coherent youth policy: present tasks and future Challenges’ Thursday, 14th February 2008 in Berlin:
- Bendit, René: ‘Growing up in public responsibility: Youth Policies in Europe and European Youth Policy’
- Stauber, Barbara: ‘Transitions to parenthood under a gender-perspective’
- Strobanek, Jan: ‘Problem youth or potential? Life situations and educational processes of young “disadvantaged” people in their transitions from school to work’

European policy developments

European Qualification Framework
On 26th of November the European Qualification Framework has been launched. It will act as a translation device between the Member States’ qualifications systems. It shifts the focus away from learning inputs (such as the length of a learning experience, or the type of institution), to learning outcomes. The expected effects are:
- a better match between education and the needs of the labour market;
not always in conformity with socially sanctioned values and practices. Thus identity-making is a simultaneous process of belonging and the production and reproduction of us/them-boundaries.

In the individualisation processes associated with late modernity identities have become understood as optional inasmuch as individuals are theorised as having the freedom to construct their identities on what is important for themselves. But they are also affected by dispersed but pervasive insecurity. Disconnected from common shared social identities that provide mutual recognition, identities have become fragile projects which require doing difference.

With regard to the recursive relationship between structures and agency reference can be made to the objectives of UP2YOUTH: What becomes important for individuals depends on the positions in the social hierarchy that are available and accessible to them. This includes people’s knowledge of their own social position and the value attributed to it as central and relevant or marginal. There is a broad range of empirical evidence and examples, especially with regard to gender and race, according to which the situatedness of identities, and the awareness of it, result in specific contributions to differential positioning. These examples show how different these processes of doing difference are.

‘Even if I don’t do anything else in my life, I’ve got this one thing that I’m gonna have for the rest of my life and I brought it into the world. I could stay on the dole for the rest of my life and I brought it into the world. I could even say goodbye to when I was leaving’. (male, age unknown, serial migration study)

The consciousness of a devalued position leading to defensive strategies is visible in research both on young women having to suppress their feelings in order to be seen as a “nice girl”. Young black men to negotiate their identities between being the “darling of popular youth sub-culture” or the “sinner in the classroom” while being conscious of the disadvantages the latter implies for their further life perspectives. Another example of “constrained agency” in identity projects is the higher rate of early pregnancy of young women growing up in public care. For them, a baby is optional inasmuch as individuals are theorised as having the freedom to construct their identities on what is important for themselves. But they are also affected by dispersed but pervasive insecurity. Disconnected from common shared social identities that provide mutual recognition, identities have become fragile projects which require doing difference.

Young people are often conscious of the fact that their agency is disregarded by both particular adults and by societal institutions in general. A convincing example in this context is that of young, unaccompanied refugees to the UK who are confronted with accusations of lying to immigration officers about their past experiences and the ways in which they have endured in order to migrate by themselves are disregarded. As a result, the only agency attributed to them is being duplicitous.

Recognition of agency requires the consideration of inequalities as well as the ways in which young people incorporate them into their identities. This highlights the necessity for policies for recognition and inclusion. Without these, the feeling of not being listened to affects both young people’s well-being and self-esteem and so has deleterious effects on their identity construction. Acknowledgement of young people’s agency thus needs to take into account both intersecting inequalities and the ways in which young people incorporate these into their identities.

In sum, young people’s awareness of their social position has consequences for their current practices, for social cohesion, for the negotiations of their futures and the crafting of meaningful biographies. Individualisation and collective identities operate simultaneously in changing social structures and collective identities can also be sources of insecurity. Young people’s everyday practices simultaneously demonstrate “constrained agency” and social creativity. The problem is, however, that often young people are not recognised as social actors because they do not always exercise agency in ways which are socially approved.

The Commission has adopted a communication stressing a cross-cutting to youth issues to enhance young people’s active participation in education, employment and in society. It proposes to reinforce the partnership between EU institutions and youth representatives and to prepare in future every three years an EU report on youth. Other concrete proposals include the launch of a consultation and an impact assessment on voluntary activities of young people, an initiative for job mobility and access of young people to culture. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0498en01.pdf

A transversal approach to youth policy

The Council of youth ministers on 16 November 2007 adopted conclusions on a transversal approach to youth policy, with a view to enabling young people to participate actively in society. In the Conclusions the Council supports the Commission’s view that investment in youth must start early and must follow a transversal approach. It also underlines that the structured dialogue with young people should be reinforced. The Council underlines the importance of different forms of education – from formal to non formal and entrepreneurship education – as well as the European Youth Pact in addressing young people’s transitions into the labour market and integration in society in general. http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/07/st14/st14426.en07.pdf

New European Commission’s Social Agenda

In 2008, the European Commission will launch its new Social Agenda. There are currently three important and interlinked topics on the table:

- Europe’s social reality
- Economic and Social Cohesion
- The EU budget

A consultation process has been started on the Internet. Until 15th of February contributions can be made here: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/news/news_en.cfm?id=352
Workshop ‘young parenthood’

Our workshop discussion started from a collection of questions and emerging issues the thematic group had developed so far. Among them, there is a strong focus on learning processes in transitions to parenthood – an area which needs to be explored by further research.

• What are tensions between options and constraints in individualised transitions into parenthood?

• Cultures of transitions into parenthood: are there (new?) practices within (old?) cultural frames? Which engendering respectively de-frames? Which learning contexts have to be considered and how is learning related with negotiating meaning, images and normalities in transitions to parenthood?

• Which policies are relevant between self-steered networks and public support systems; and what is the impact of local regimes of transitions into parenthood?

Key issues of the debate were 1st dominant public discourses such as the demographic discourse or its counter-discourse, the moral panics on teenage pregnancy; 2nd, insights into developments in Sweden, Norway, and Estonia; and 3rd, rich material on young people’s decision making and negotiating processes.

Eviva Bernhardt, demographer from the University of Tallinn, presented findings from a longitudinal study of Swedish young adults, conducted over the last years. Two waves of questionings of 22 to 34 year old young women and men have been analysed with regard to the mutual relationship between value orientations and family building. The results underline the complex interaction between different factors of family building. Housing reveals to be a structural barrier, but above all subjective motives and cultural traditions have to be considered.

An-Magritt Jensen from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology of Trondheim, looked at the complexity of choices under different and partly provocative angles: by referring to data from European Surveys and the COST action A19, she highlighted the ambivalence of extramarital births from a child’s perspective. She also brought into mind that the silent revolution of transitions into parenthood, such as responsibility, meaning of life, and social bonds. In a gender perspective, this includes also new concepts of masculinity.

Rachel Thomson from the Open University, Milton Keynes, presented findings from longitudinal studies carried out together with various colleagues. She showed that transitions to parenthood and the concepts of motherhood and fatherhood they rely on are interlinked with (local) youth cultures, (local) normalities, (local) opportunity structures (education, work, housing) for young people. Self-concepts are deeply embedded in these contexts. They depend on the extent to which young women and men are acknowledged as responsible persons and are given the chance to experience themselves as such.

Disa Bergnéhr from Linköping University analysed negotiation processes on parenthood in young couples. Through focus group interviews she found that couples negotiate especially ‘the ideal life course’, the tension between ‘love relationship and family’, the right time for parenthood between the risks of damaging ones career and infertility, and last not least body matters.

For information e-mail Peter Kraftl:

Forthcoming events

Young Justice Conference

Children and Migration: identities, mobilities and belonging(s)

European Outreach Work

EARA - European Association for Research on Adolescence
11th conference


Third Congress on Family Science

‘Youth Matters? Critical geographies of youth policy and practice.’ 27-29th August 2008 in London. For information e-mail Peter Kraftl: pk123@ia.ac.uk.
Workshop ‘youth participation’

The starting point of the workshop on young people’s participation was formulated in terms of emerging issues which had resulted from the interim phase of the UP2YOUTH project:

- What actions of young people can and/or t i pve! le l of qbsjdqbjupo?
- Does school prepare for or inhibit participation?
- To what extent are youth cultures recognised as participation?
- What are positive and negative policy factors with regard to youth participation?

Adrienne Sørbom from the University of Stockholm questioned current understandings of political participation as necessarily being connected to either institutions or social movements. Intergenerational comparison shows how boundaries between life style and political participation, between private and public are being increasingly blurred. In late modernity life politics stand for the role of uncertainty for the question arises who actually listens???? and where participation starts and where it ends considering the relevance of sites like ‘MySpace’ but also right wing sites.

The contextualisation of structure and agency in local communities was also central in the contribution of Alan France and Liz Sutton from Loughborough University. Young people evaluate existing offers according to their access to resources and opportunities for coping with everyday life. A ‘fair’ balance between rights and responsibilities may enhance participation. The experience of unfair treatment in contrast may lead into criminal careers.

Alessandro Martelli and Nicola de Luigi from the University of Bologna referred to participation in the context of intergenerational relationships which structure arenas of agency within institutions but also informal strategies and relationships within the local society. Different meanings of citizenship materialise in different policy or i f of ojub jop! it and t -In pof z! and a social pedagogical model balancing free and control.

Serdar Degirmenciglu from Beykent University in Istanbul reminded of the crucial importance of young people’s subjective motivation. Are participation programmes connected to young people’s subjective interests, do outcomes provide experience? of d f t f p s bjeti f @ b j upo t f v d -tined participation’ means policy and practice which address the links between subjective motivation and power relations.

Barry Percy-Smith from the SOLAR research group, University of the West of England, Bristol, extended this perspective to consequences for participatory practice which starts from children’s and young people’s actions rather than following preset normative assumptions. Consequently, participation means a general shift from services to spaces in which young people express their needs while professionals have the role of interpreters.

The perspectives of participatory policy and practice depend on local, national and European policy structures. Romain Pasquier from the University of Rennes questioned the comparative scope of the project: to what extent are influences on citizenship materialise in different policy orientations London pointed into a similar direction in his presentation of the EU-project CIVICWEB. There is few evidence that the Internet attracts more than offline. As with regard to offline participation and other young people to engage online rather than offline. As with regard to offline participation and other young people to engage online rather than offline.

As a result, the thematic working group concluded to have received valuable comments.

- X ju! f b!epup! i! uf! Ub!jupo! p!d!b!j!u!jupo! it seems crucial - yet almost impossible - to separate normative from descriptive and a;b!j!b!j!t qf du t x i i j oj!nuw t l! f! !e;j!u!v!n! to distinguish political from civic participation: what is (not) political?
- As regards the learning perspective it showed that - apart from instrumental settings - theories on participatory practice need to be related with structural and policy factors.
- With regard to youth cultures individual and collective activities need to be distinguished while de-standardised life courses imply that a restriction to ‘youth’ is debatable. With regard to factors of policy and practice a broader perspective ‘from services to spaces’ and from possibilities for having a say towards having a right to be listened was suggested. More comparative analysis is needed to identify favourable constellations.

New Publications


Migration Integration Policy Index

The Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) measures policies to integrate migrants in 25 EU Member States and 3 non-EU countries. It uses over 100 policy indicators to create a rich, multi-dimensional picture of migrants’ opportunities to participate in European societies. More info and download of full report at: http://www.integrationindex.eu


Workshop ‘transitions of ethnic minority youth’

The discussion in the workshop about young people from ethnic minorities’ transitions to work were guided by a couple of guiding questions. These had emerged during the first year of the project: What role do collective identities play in the development of agency in youth transitions? The subjective perspective of young people on the majority society is a major factor in their social positioning. It would be worth to look into its impact on their agency in school-to-work transitions.

Anna Kende from the Hungarian Academy of Science in Budapest provided the workshop with insights into the situation of young people from Roma minority communities in Hungary. She stressed the interplay between exclusion and inclusion and their transitions to work. One important sideeffect is that by creating special needs schools exclusion in some areas even increased.

Momodou Sallah from the DeMontfort University of Leicester analysed the development of multicultural, anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies in the UK. His main thesis was that since several years assimilation and integration have become major concepts in policies and public debate again.

Karin Schittenhelm from Siegen University in Germany presented findings from a transnational study on the role of cultural capital. In her view, the role of collective identities and the subjective sense of belonging is often under-estimated. Her own research also showed the need for comparative models that include a multi-level analysis.

In conclusion, all participants of the workshop valued the broad overview of perspectives that the choice of experts had brought to the front. While discussion on certain aspects of the contributions were very lively and certainly will go on during the whole project, there are a couple of common questions that the workshop has posed to the upcoming working phase of the UP2YOUTH working group.

- What role do collective identities play in the development of agency in youth transitions?
- The subjective perspective of young people on the majority society is a major factor in their social positioning. It would be worthwhile to look into its impact on their agency in school-to-work transitions.
- Every research dealing with these questions has to be self-reflexive on the way it is conceptualising its topics, its research questions and its methods of analysis.

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