Reflexivity and the Structuring of Young People’s Biographies

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Abstract

This paper addresses the utility of Beck’s individualisation thesis for understanding the structural inequalities shaping the lives of contemporary youth. It presents a theoretically driven review of changes in the literature on class and youth identities, reading this literature in relation to the account of social change presented by Beck’s individualisation thesis. The aim will be to move beyond increasingly stale debates about the ‘right’ way to read Beck, exploring new theoretical territory potentially opened up by these recent discussions of the meaning of individualisation. As a starting point, the paper begins from suggestions for more sophisticated dialogue between the work of Beck and Bourdieu in youth sociology, responding to this call by drawing on subsequent theoretical work focusing on the relationship between reflexivity and the habitus. The paper situates changing empirical and theoretical themes in the literature on inequality and youth identity in the context of these discussions, arguing that this literature indicates that reflexive practices are one way in which the dispositions of the habitus are realised for young people in modernity. It concludes by discussing the role of reflexivity in young people’s lives, emphasising the way that reflexive practices articulate local structural conditions.

Introduction

This paper addresses the utility of Beck’s individualisation thesis for understanding the structural inequalities shaping the lives of contemporary youth. It presents a theoretically driven review of changes in the literature on class and youth identities, reading this literature in relation to the account of social change presented by the individualisation thesis (Beck, 1992). The aim will be to move beyond increasingly stale debates about the ‘right’ way to read Beck, exploring new theoretical territory potentially opened up by these recent discussions of the meaning of individualisation (e.g., Woodman, 2009; Roberts, 2010; Threadgold, 2011). As a starting point, the paper begins from suggestions for more sophisticated dialogue between the work of Beck and Bourdieu in youth sociology (Threadgold, 2011), responding to this call by drawing on theoretical work on the relationship between reflexivity and the habitus from authors such as McNay (1999) and Adkins (2002). The paper situates changing empirical and theoretical themes in the literature on inequality and youth identity in the context of these discussions, arguing that this literature indicates that reflexive practices are one way in which the dispositions of the habitus are realised for young people in modernity. It concludes by discussing the role of reflexivity in young people’s lives, emphasising the way that reflexive practices articulate local structural conditions.

Individualisation, Reflexivity and Youth Sociology
As described in the work of Beck and his collaborators (Beck, 1992; Beck and Lau, 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), the individualisation thesis describes a process of social change in which detraditionalisation and structural fragmentation creates the conditions for individualised, reflexive subjectivities. According to Beck, modern societies are dominated by an ethic of individual personal fulfilment, rather than ‘given’, taken for granted or traditional models for identity. Moreover, Beck argues that contemporary structural conditions are increasingly insecure and heterogeneous. Beck (1997) argues that “first” modern or industrial societies were structured like a series of “Russian dolls” in which a traditional nuclear family, Fordist modes of production, and a class structure with a subcultural basis all fit together to create conditions of relative stability. These structures have broken apart, creating widespread structural insecurity, heterogeneity, and contradiction.

In response to this, Beck argues that modern subjects are increasingly reflexive. With the dissolution of the structural basis for earlier collective identities (particularly for the Fordist working class), modernity compels people to view themselves as individuals, and actively organise the various facets of their lives into a coherent whole in a way which was not necessary before the Russian dolls fell apart. Those who were once situated within secure collectives now must manage structural insecurity and detraditionalised cultural conditions, and this takes place through the active cultivation of a life. Beck refers to these as reflexive subjectivities – subjects who relate to the social world as individuals, and reflexively organise their lives oriented by an ethic of personal fulfilment.

The concept of reflexivity has been controversial in the sociology of youth, since it has been taken to describe an individualistic form of new agency. Whilst Woodman (2009) has argued against interpreting Beck’s work as valorising a new form of emancipatory agency, authors such as Threadgold (2011) have called for a renewed focus on the relationship between Beck’s work and Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus in order to understand the continued impact of modern inequalities on young people. For Bourdieu, the subject is endowed with a habitus, which describes a system of dispositions that are structured by the various contexts that a person practically engages with. The habitus thereby generates practices that are reasonable without being conscious or reflexive. In this perspective, reflexivity only occurs when there is a lack of “fit” between the habitus and the conditions that structured it, such that it can no longer produce reasonable practices. Bourdieu (1990) argues that these moments of “crisis” create the conditions for reflexivity. Drawing on this aspect of Bourdieu’s work, authors such as Sweetman (2003) and McNay (1999) have argued that the social changes Beck describes may have made crises of this kind endemic in modern societies, leading to the creation of reflexive subjectivities. Adkins (2002) cautions against reading these changes as describing any form of emancipation, arguing rather that reflexivity is implicated in new forms of hierarchy and privilege. In the next section of this paper I want to explore this claim in relation to changing themes in youth sociology.

Inequality, Identity, and the Structuring of Youth Biographies – Two Moments

What follows is a discussion of some paradigmatic literature in youth sociology which aims to theorise the relationship between inequality, identity, and the structuring of young people’s
biographies. It is a selective review, but one which is emblematic of overall trends in this literature. Examining these trends, two ‘moments’ can be identified which roughly correspond to the processes of social change identified by Beck. These two moments demonstrate the ways in which the sociology of youth has come to terms with the fragmentation of Beck’s Russian dolls, and synthesising some insights from this literature indicates new ways in which we can come to terms with the structuring of young people’s biographies and identities.

**First Modernity**
The first moment, which reflects Beck’s discussions of the “first modern” social structures, is best captured by Willis’ widely cited classic *Learning to Labour* (1977). Willis carried out his study in a working class community during a period of very low unemployment due to the strength of local manufacturing industries. Willis’ description of this community is reminiscent of Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts’s description (1976) of a working class community discussed by Cohen (1991 [1972]) which was based on three interlocking social structures. Their description of these structures is strikingly similar to Beck’s description of structures connected like Russian dolls. Clarke et al describe an ‘extended kinship network’ providing ‘cultural continuity and stability’, which depends on the ‘ecological setting’ of the working class neighbourhood, a space which shapes and supports social solidarity. This in turn is underpinned by the local economy, which provided good local working class jobs in relative abundance (p 30).

In this social environment, Willis’ lads draw on the working class culture they were embedded in to construct a culture of collective resistance to the middle class individualism of the school. Willis argues that the lads’ cultural practices both drew on, and were homologous to, working class shop floor culture, in particular valorising manual labour over intellectual labour as part of the lads’ working class masculinities. In this sense, the practices that the lads used to resist the authority of the school also prepared them for a smooth transition into the kinds of work that was available to them. In the early stages of their transition in to work, Willis’ lads found satisfaction in those aspects of their jobs which allowed them to perform the identities that that had proved so troublesome to their teachers at school. However, these practices were not subversive at work – rather, they fitted in perfectly with shop floor culture, and made lads preferable employees to the ‘lobes’, because the lads came to work anticipating the hierarchies which structured life on the shop floor. In a similar fashion, Brown (1987) documented the lives of “ordinary kids” working to “get on” within the terms of the ‘respectable’ working class, and McRobbie (1978) documented the way that the culture of working class femininity constituted acts of resistance at school which ended by preparing young women for nuclear families underpinned by traditional divisions of domestic and waged labour.

In this way, young people’s identities reproduced the collective structures around them. However, as both Beck (1992) and Willis (2004) argue, these conditions no longer exist. The replacement of a manufacturing with a service economy, and the collapse of the youth labour market, have eroded the structural basis for these kinds of identities and biographical transitions. Youth identities in the “second moment” identified here reflect these changes.
Second modernity

The kinds of changes Beck describes, with increased structural complexity, heterogeneity, and insecurity, are reflected in changes in the dominant motifs of contemporary youth sociology. Work on youth transitions emphasises complexity, insecurity, non-linearity, heterogeneity and temporal decoupling of transitions (Andres and Wyn, 2010; Chisholm and Hurrelman, 1995) which Wallace and Kovatcheva (1998) go so far as to describe as the ‘deconstruction’ of the youth period. Class inequalities have continued to shape all young people’s lives, but these are no longer experienced in collective terms (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Moreover, whilst class continues to be an important factor influencing young people’s life chances, youth identities no longer map easily onto class locations. Instead, the literature describes a complex terrain of differentiated youth identities. Reflexivity is an important part of this terrain. It is not merely a middle class concern, does not map neatly on to class differences, and has a non-determinate relationship to material advantages. Rather, the evidence seems to be that reflexivity is associated with specific local structural conditions, and is shaped by the dispositions of young people’s habitus.

A number of studies are significant in this regard. One is the widely cited work of Ball et al (2000) who document different individualised identities in the “global city” of London. In this work, class is not a straightforward means by which to predict the existence, or not, of reflexive subjectivities. Class shapes the goals, expectations and values of young people, but these must be realised in reflexive practice. Ball et al document working class young people who navigate the education system strategically, creating strategies to aim for more modest achievements without the educational successes of their middle class peers. Others are thrust into insecure work environments and must manage multiple work and personal commitments in order to build an identity and look towards the future. The authors argue that for today’s “ordinary kids”, life is uncertain, and reflexive practices are about the search for security in an unstable world. Examining the reflexive practices of young people in different structural and geographical locations provides insight into the nature of this process which goes beyond contemporary assumptions about the meaning of reflexivity in youth sociology.

Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moodey (2006) describe working class regional masculinities in Australian communities suffering from the effects of deindustrialisation and the decline of primary industries. The older generation in these communities continues to subscribe to traditional notions of “real” working class masculine work that do not suit local labour market conditions. Young people who cling to these ideals in order to conform to class cultural expectations find themselves unemployed. In contrast, others entered new service and leisure economies, redefining both themselves and the meaning of this work in the process. In these contexts, hospitality work becomes gendered in new ways, with young people defining waitressing as a feminine occupation requiring good personal presentation, and chef work as masculine, requiring physical endurance and technical competence. Kenway et al describe this as the emergence of new reflexive subjectivities oriented towards dealing with rapidly changing economies in a local context. This reflexivity is oriented towards the local labour market, as well as being shaped by the classed and gendered
expectations of young people. However, as Adkins (2002) points out, this reflexivity actually leads to a retraditionalisation of previous gendered hierarchies.

The evidence on middle class biographies is complex. While these young people are often held up as emblematic of contemporary reflexivity, Ball et al describe these young people as having solid identities and stable transitions, arguing that it is the middle class students on the “A level pathway” who have the least need for reflexivity in their various biographical movements. Cultural capital buys these young people structural stability in their movements through school and work, and the success their capital creates and confirms the value of their own identities. Walkerdine et al (2001) present a similar argument, noting the similarity of the pathways taken by their middle class participants, as opposed to the heterogeneity of working class young people thrust into an uncertain services sector with few educational qualifications. In McLeod and Yates (2006), reflexivity is characterised as “generalised disposition” but which takes a heightened form especially for middle class girls. However, significantly, in this study a highly developed reflexive awareness of self and the social world did not translate into material advantage. As in many others, it is those young people who moved through what Walkerdine et al describe as the middle class “conveyor belt” from private schools to elite universities who achieved the most structural advantage.

However, in all of these studies, as well as others, there is a group of young people described as “disconnected”, “socially excluded”, or as members of an “underclass”, who are experiencing very profound forms of disadvantage. The work of McDonald and Marsh (2005) is significant in this respect, describing a community ravaged by deindustrialisation without a service sector to replace the former sources of manufacturing employment on which the community relied. McDonald and Marsh describe these young people as experiencing fragile and chaotic transitions. However, significantly, they argue that rather than responding with reflexivity, their participants continue to operate within strong, locally embedded, class cultures. McDonald and Marsh argue that this is because of the absence of the kinds of opportunities offered in the “global city” of London or the other locales analysed by previous authors. Essentially, in this context, there was nothing to be reflexive about. As a counterpoint to this, both Ball et al and Walkerdine describe socially excluded young people who respond to extreme disadvantage in highly individualised ways, and for whom dealing with insecurity is a day to day struggle requiring constant self management. However, this remains circumscribed by the day to day exigencies of life without capital. All of these young people occupy the structural cracks opened by individualisation, experiencing forms of disadvantage just as intractable as Fordist class divisions.

**Reflexivity, Habitus, and the Creation of New Differences**

Taken as a whole, this literature suggests a reframing of current concerns with reflexivity. There are certainly structural conditions which compel young people to be reflexive. However, differences in the existence of these conditions do not map easily onto traditional class divisions. Contrary to the notion that reflexivity is a privilege of middle class youth, much of the available evidence suggests that reflexivity is neither exclusive to the middle class, nor necessarily a source of privilege or material advantage. Rather, reflexive
subjectivities emerge in response to local structural conditions, and are mobilised in ways that are conditioned by familiar forms of social inequality. Reflexivity does not mean the destructuring of youth biographies, but is a part of the creation of classed and gendered inequalities in specific social contexts. In many ways, reflexivity is part of the means by which modern youth inequalities are actually produced. If youth sociology is to understand the means by which young people’s identities reflect structural conditions, careful attention to different forms of reflexivity is important.

Following McLeod and Yates (2006), I suggest that it is necessary to see reflexivity as a generalised disposition with different consequences for differently positioned young people. In order to understand this, Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital must be seen as forming the basis for the different forms of reflexivity mobilised by young people. Indeed, this is necessary because without this, the concept of reflexivity remains “empty” of any specific meaning – it is the habitus that gives reflexive practices their content. Reflexive practices operate according to assumptions very much like those that structure the habitus: social divisions influence the things that young people are reflexive about, as well as the material resources available to them in achieving their goals. Viewing reflexivity in this way directs attention to the structures which may compel young people to be reflexive about their lives, as well as the values and goals that make up their reflexivity. What is significant about contemporary modern societies is that for the dispositions of the habitus to be successfully realised in practice, young people must be reflexive. With the exception of those described as disconnected and socially excluded, the important distinction between young people is not whether or not they are reflexive, but what they are reflexive about: reflexivity articulates difference, becoming the medium by which inequalities are produced and reproduced on the level of young people’s biographies. Habitus and reflexivity are not paradoxically opposed concepts, but may be mutually implicated in creating the practices which young people mobilise to realise different aspirations.

I conclude with two points. The first is that Beck’s description of a homogeneous modernity in which everyone is reflexive should be approached with caution. It is not supported by evidence, and turns the concept of reflexivity into a blanket description rather than a heuristic tool for understanding the way that structures operate on the level of biographies. Secondly, and related to this, I want to emphasise that the evidence demonstrates the continued importance of local structural conditions in compelling young people to be reflexive, and in providing the content of their reflexive practices. Reflexivity is oriented towards local structures, and constituted by cultural capital – reflexive practices are the way in which modern class inequalities are articulated in young people’s identities and in the way they manage their lives. Understood in this way, the concept of reflexivity provides youth sociology with a means to understand the way that modern social structures are articulated in the lives and biographies of contemporary young people, and provides new insight into the way that class, biography, and identity intersect in late modernity.

**Keywords:** Individualisation, Reflexivity, Class, Beck, Bourdieu.

**References**


