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## Abstract

Childhood and youth are imagined in different ways. The chapters in this handbook make this their central focus, addressing the challenge of recognizing that the concepts we use make the objects of our research. They explore how conceptual frameworks constitute what we research. From a sociocultural perspective, childhood and youth (as well as adulthood) are fluid categories that are given definition and meaning by their social, cultural, political, institutional, locational, governmental, and economic contexts. As many of the chapters of this handbook illustrate, the experience of being a child or young person differs across time and place. From a developmental perspective, childhood and youth are distinctive phases of life that describe age-bounded developmental tasks. These approaches rest on different sets of assumptions, concepts, and frameworks about the nature, meaning, and experience of childhood and youth. Conceptual frameworks create truths and naturalize particular ways of thinking, and so create the discursive frameworks within which

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children and young people are understood, managed, and administered. With a focus on “thinking” about childhood and youth, the chapters in this handbook scrutinize theoretical orthodoxies and conceptual certainties. A focus on the tools we use to think about and define childhood and youth is essential because findings are never absolute and research is imperfect (and the order that institutional processes demand is elusive). This chapter explores key fault lines within the field that take up different positions in relation to the following questions: Is a “new” childhood and youth emerging and if so, does this require “new” concepts? Is the focus on problems and risks (new and old) and if so, what are they? Is the focus on childhood and youth on cultures, subjectivities, mobilities, hopes, and aspirations, and if so, what do these look like? Are childhood and youth a distinctive developmental phase of life? Are children and young people in an emergent state, incomplete and in deficit, until they make the transition into adulthood? Are the boundaries between the categories of childhood, youth, and adulthood blurring? This chapter addresses these key questions through an examination of theoretical orthodoxies and new developments. It takes a critical perspective on the dominant theoretical frameworks (and empirical studies) that have emerged from the global north, and, as in many of the chapters in this book, explores concepts and studies from the global south to account for current debates in this vibrant field.

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## Introduction

Who are, could, and should children and young people be or become? Children and young people are imagined, given meaning, and problematized in a wide range of ways by researchers, policy-makers, media, and professionals, drawing on different conceptual frameworks. The broad field of childhood and youth studies offers a range of often contradictory conceptual frameworks to make sense of children and young people’s worlds and to “know” them. These conceptual lenses make the objects of our research, and they create the discursive frameworks within which children and young people are understood, managed, and administered. Conceptual frameworks provide the tools for analysis, but when they become orthodoxies and are employed uncritically, they create “truths” and naturalize particular ways of thinking about children and young people.

This chapter discusses the framing of childhood and youth through an analysis of contemporary debates and fault lines. It draws on Bourdieu’s notion of field to analyze the work that concepts do within academic domains. Bourdieu (1998) sees a field as a structured space which is relatively autonomous, with its own logics and practices. His notion of field opens up a consideration of the internal structures of fields, their logics, and how they connect with and affect other fields as well as orienting us to the patterns of power relations and hierarchies that exist within and between them. This approach makes visible the ongoing struggle faced by researchers to “know” childhood and youth, drawing on (and creating) legacies that have an enduring impact on how youth and childhood are imagined, problematized, celebrated, and governed.

There is a strong contemporary body of research that recognizes the changing nature of childhood and youth (Kehily 2013; Lesko and Talbut 2012; White and Wyn 2012;

Leccardi and Ruspini 2006). This body of work rests on the understanding that childhood and youth (and adulthood) are fluid relationships that are given definition and meaning by their social, cultural, political, institutional, locational, governmental, and economic contexts. As many of the chapters of this book illustrate, the experience of being a child or young person differs across time and place (see especially the chapters in the section on Time and Space, introduced by Dan Woodman and Carmen Leccardi, and the section on Place, introduced by David Farrugia). Many of the authors who draw on a sociocultural perspective argue that new conceptual lenses are needed to understand how social change impacts on the experience and meaning of childhood and youth. For example, recognizing the significance of increasing mobility (within and across national borders), interest in place, and space has resulted in a burgeoning of research on children's and young people's "geographies" (see, e.g., Farrugia 2014; Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Hopkins and Pain 2007; Massey 1998). Much of this research is informed by new multidisciplinary frameworks, drawing on concepts from social geography, cultural studies, and youth transitions.

New mobilities of people, ideas, and cultures have also challenged the relevance of the nation-state as a concept that can capture the everyday social relations of children and young people (Anderson-Nathe and Gharabaghi 2013). These insights contribute to an emerging "project" that spans both youth and childhood studies, seeking to understand the nature of contemporary change and its impact on children and young people. As Pufall and Unsworth argue "who children are, what they can do, and how they negotiate their relationships with one another, with their parents and with the larger world around them – these are viewed much differently than they were three or four decades ago" (2004, p. xi). The same questions are relevant to young people.

There has also been a proliferation of work that challenges and interrogates the theoretical orthodoxies that have informed childhood (e.g., Kehily 2013; Pufall and Unsworth 2004; James and Prout 1997) and youth studies (e.g., Furlong 2009; White and Wyn 2013; Lesko and Talbut 2012; Kehily 2013). With regard to childhood research, Kehily (2013) argues that ideas about childhood are contested and struggled over at many levels and Pufall and Unsworth (2004) call for a "new paradigm" of childhood studies. Furlong (2013) argues that youth and young adulthood need to be reconceptualized, but notes that there is disagreement among youth researchers about the extent to which change should be emphasized at the expense of understanding continuities and about how to balance theorizing change. In the field of youth research, Leccardi and Ruspini (2006) explore the emergence of a "new youth" and Henderson et al. (2007) argue that young people are inventing "new adulthoods" while also recognizing that there are significant continuities with the past.

There are other significant debates that exercise researchers and practitioners in these fields. For example, there is ongoing debate about the extent to which childhood and youth can be seen as distinct developmental stages and about the significance of biological development. Tanner and Arnott argue that emerging adulthood constitutes a new phase in human development, distinguished from the stage of adolescence (that precedes emerging adulthood) and from young adulthood that follows (Tanner and Arnett 2009). Recently, debate about the biological basis of categories of childhood and youth has been reignited through advances in digital

imaging technologies enabling neuroscientists to argue that the frontal lobe cortex is not fully developed until the late twenties. This information has led some to argue that this is the physiological basis for poor judgment and high-risk behaviors that are thought to characterize adolescence (Seaton 2012). Interest in cognitive approaches to youth developmental approach has also been given impetus recently through the increasing popularity of positive psychology.

Yet there is also compelling evidence that childhood and youth are socially constructed and that the conditions of life (including historical, geographical, social, political, and economic conditions) mediate what childhood and youth mean and how they are experienced. This view has been given strong impetus by research from non-Western sources. For example, David Everatt (in this section) argues that categories of development and concepts of a “life course” that have been developed in relation to the experiences of childhoods and youth lives in the West bear little relation to those in South Africa. There is also a strong body of research from Western sources that provides evidence of the significance of context for childhood and youth, including research that draws on the concept of social generation (see especially Wyn and Woodman 2006) and on culture and mobility (see, e.g., Rizvi 2012; Nilan 2012). As Furlong (2013, p. 1) points out, childhood, youth, and adulthood are socially constructed phases that cannot be linked to specific age ranges, nor can their boundaries be linked to specific activities.

These are among the conceptual challenges that this section addresses. In the following sections, this chapter explores the struggle to theorize, understand, and develop effective practice in relation to youth through a brief analysis of research from the 1950s to the 1970s. Next, the chapter summarizes the dimensions of social change occurring over the last quarter of a century that are seen to have particularly impacted on children and young people. This leads to a more detailed discussion of the underpinnings of the fields of knowledge about youth and childhood, drawing on Bourdieu to understand the links and power relationships between fields of knowledge that draw on categorical and relational theories.

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## **“Knowing” Childhood and Youth in Historical Focus**

Accounts of the sociology of youth traditionally trace the emergence of contemporary research to the field of developmental psychology in the 1950s (in the UK and the USA) and the focus, by the 1970s, on youth cultures of leisure and resistance. The latter is traditionally represented by the studies of young people in the UK, conducted at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (Hebdidge 1979). For recent examples of these accounts, see Woodman and Wyn (2014) and Furlong (2012). Departing from this tradition, this chapter illustrates the historical antecedents of the struggle to “know” young people through the work of sociologists and educators located in Australia in the period from the 1950s to the late 1970s. This work is of interest because although the theoretical concepts are derivative of the “northern theory” of the time, the

researchers were striving to understand what youth (in particular) meant in the context of an “emerging society” where the double-sided transition of both society and individual were being brought into sharp focus.

*Growing Up in an Australian City* by Connell et al. (1957) explored the lives of young people in Sydney in 1952. It was published by the Australian Council for Educational Research, marking out the distinctive location of interest in youth studies within the field of education in Australia. The framing of the questions the study seeks to answer was explicitly designed to support the design of educational curricula and systems that would serve both the society and young people.

The book identifies the hopes and anxieties for the emerging colony (Sydney) and for the young people, and thus provides an insight into research that focuses on both social and individual transitions. The researchers frame the project as addressing the tasks of education in a period of significant social change and insecurity. It is worth quoting in some detail the way this research is framed, because the description of the social conditions that were seen to be impacting on young Australians in the early 1950s (who were later to become known as the baby boomer generation) would not be out of place as a description of conditions that youth researchers see impacting on young people today:

The technological revolution and the educational expansion of the last hundred years have together wrought, throughout the world, and not the least in Sydney, a series of impressive changes. The nature and direction of the changes effected, nevertheless, have not been entirely clear.... Institutions, beliefs and standards have all been subjected to the same processes of radical modification, so that, in all this quick-silver age, it is not possible to point, with security, the direction in which the changes are trending except to say that they are productive of further change. The Sydney adolescent of the present day, therefore, finds himself in a situation whose stability is suspect, and the duration is uncertain. To learn how to cope with the insecurity of the present and with the problematic future involves him in the difficult task of learning not only knowledge, principles of present value, but also, and probably more importantly, the means and techniques whereby knowledge appropriate to new situations is acquired, and principles are modified, jettisoned, or adhered to, in the light of changing circumstances. (Connell et al. 1957, p. 207)

The sense of project that informs this study is unnervingly contemporary (even if the language is quite sexist). The explicit focus on social change and the reference to the 1950s as a “quicksilver age” have tended to be overlooked by the judgment, made with hindsight by subsequent researchers, that the baby boomers lived in a period of remarkable stability. Indeed, one of the assumptions usually made by youth researchers is that one of the distinctive features of the lives of Generation X (which follows the baby boomer generation) is instability, compared with the assumed stability of the lives of the boomers.

The 1952 study was followed by a new study of “city youth” in Sydney (Connell et al. 1975) which explicitly sets out to debunk theoretical orthodoxies. Chapter one boldly asserts:

The view that the teenage years 12 to 20 make up a developmental period of special significance and status within the human life span is a social invention of the 20th Century. (Connell et al. 1975, p. 1)

The project of this book is similar to the earlier *Growing Up in an Australian City* in that it explores the relationships between youth and the institution of education. By 1975, universal secondary education was accepted in Australia as an investment in both personal and economic prosperity. However, the research conveys a strong ambivalence about the nature of this institutional relationship and its impact on young people's lives. Above all, it pushes against the emerging "truth" that youth is a "subdivision" or emergent class in its own right, and seeks to understand "the promise" of secondary school completion at the cost of "economic dependency, social subordination, and sexual sublimation" and the postponement of satisfactions, rights, and status (1975, p. 3). Indeed, the analysis highlights the role of education in using age as "a convenient reference point to use in regulating behaviour," making young people the "objects of close, public scrutiny and concern" and portraying them as "unstable, unappreciative, muddled, exasperating, selfish, inconsiderate people threatening the rest of society with either teenage anarchy, delinquency or secession" (Connell et al. 1975, pp. 4–5).

As the authors of these books, over time, attempted to be reflexive about how (competing) theories of childhood and youth were gaining traction, they illustrate the tendency for particular views to coalesce and to become dominant. For example, they trace the ongoing and expanding influence of theories that conceptualize youth as a distinct phase of life. The researchers strive to understand the meaning and experience of youth in social context, responding to their perceptions of a rapidly changing world and to the impact of social institutions (especially education and the labor market) on youth.

Childhood research also reflects a struggle to balance differing views of childhood. However, instead of the negative stereotype that has tended to inform youth research, childhood studies have struggled with romantic ideals of childhood. This is highlighted by Kehily (2009) in a discussion of childhood studies that refers to Henry Mayhew's description of working-class lives in London during the early 1860s (Mayhew 1861). Kehily draws on Mayhew's description of "the Watercress Girl," an 8-year-old street vendor, whose life "challenges Mayhew's concept of childhood and disturbs his notion of what a child is and how a child behaves" because her childhood did not involve the elements of childhood as a time of innocence, protected from the harsh realities of making a living. As Smith in her chapter in this collection titled "► [Deconstructing Discourses to Rupture Fairytales of the "Ideal" Childhood](#)" (Chap. 2) illustrates, contemporary debates about childhood bear legacies from the past.

In the following sections, I revisit these issues in contemporary research.

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## Social Change

The imperative to open up new ways of thinking about childhood and youth is often given additional impetus from the impact of contemporary social change on children and young people's lives (as the previous section has illustrated). This is as relevant today as it was in the 1950s and 1970s. Today, political and cultural

borders are becoming increasingly porous and young people are at the forefront of unprecedented mobilities of populations across national boundaries. Although scholarship from the global north has dominated childhood and youth research, Asia is home to over 45 % of the young population, and this “youth bulge” is growing (UNESCAP 2013). Knowledge about and from the global south is essential to understanding children and youth today. Young people are also at the forefront of practices, including the use of digital technologies, to break down the barriers between local and global cultures and political movements to create new sites for the expression of youth cultures, and they are among the first to experience the effects of new inequality. Many social scientists argue that we are living in times of significant social transformation. For example, Evans and Helve (2013) explore the changing nature of youth transitions in Western and non-Western contexts. Chauvel (2010) argues that changing labor markets and life chances in France have created a distinctive generation at risk, and Brown et al. (2011) set out the case for a generation that has been failed by the neoliberal promise of high skill, secure work for educational credentials. Buckingham (2006) explores the nature of the digital generation for both children and young people. Changing social conditions are seen by some as heralding a crisis for childhood and youth. For example, the International Labour Organization (ILO 2010) sees a “crisis for youth” in chronic rates of youth unemployment globally, and Palmer (2006) writes about “toxic childhood.”

The literature on the changing social landscape within which childhood and youth are made possible tends to focus on three key areas globally: increasing rates of participation in education; global labor markets and new forms of work; and unprecedented urbanization.

## **Global Transition Regimes of Education and Work**

Education has become implicated in global markets, with all countries aiming to increase educational participation. This means that children and young people in all countries are increasingly subject to the transition regimes of educational participation. The concept of transition regime (see du Bois-Reymond and Stauber 2005, p. 63) refers to the institutional processes, practices and discourses of education and welfare systems, and labor markets that shape the meaning and experience of youth through sanctioned institutional transition points, statuses, and pathways. For example, referring to young people in the UK, Mizen (2004) analyzes the role of welfare and social security systems in defining categories of deserving and undeserving youth and in framing the normative ages whereby transitions from education into the labor market should be accomplished. Transition regimes extend into childhood through the monitoring of normative age-based standards of numeracy and literacy during the primary school years that contribute to international programs such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD 1996).

One of the challenges for the legitimacy of contemporary transition regimes is that they are not always demonstrably based on robust processes. While education

is worthwhile in its own right, it is often depicted (in policies) as ensuring both personal and social prosperity because of the assumed links between educational credentials and the achievement of a favorable labor market position. Yet youth labor markets, globally, are now characterized as precarious (ILO 2013; Standing 2011). Even for the educated, transitions to decent work are slow, as Andres and Wyn (2010) describe in their study of Generation X in Canada and Australia. Against this backdrop, new categories of young people are being created, including NEET (or not in education, employment, or training), the overeducated, and the underemployed.

The global financial crisis of 2008 (GFC) has resulted in high unemployment in all countries, but there are areas of the world where unemployment rates for young people are projected to increase over the next decade: the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, East Asia, South Asia, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Latin America, and the Caribbean (ILO 2013). Chronic patterns of unemployment and normative expectations of increased levels of participation in education have a powerful impact on the possibilities for children and young people. These circumstances create entrenched inequality that contribute to complex transnational relationships impacting on all. Even in countries where aggregate figures on unemployment rates are relatively low (e.g., in Australia), in some local areas youth unemployment is at 50 % and there are massive inequalities in youth employment within and between countries (ILO 2013).

It is also important to acknowledge that the meaning of jobs is changing. Profession and job titles, such as manager, consultant, and engineer, no longer tell us as much as they used to about income, job security, or career opportunities or where these jobs are. Echoing some of the themes in Berlant's "cruel optimism" Berlant (2011), Brown et al. (2011) refer to an "opportunity trap" in which people are forced to invest in educational activities that are increasingly unlikely to help them achieve their employment goals.

## Urbanization

The prevalence of urbanization has contributed to a sense of urban ubiquity in youth and childhood studies. Urban lives are seen as the norm and as the spaces in which new developments and trends occur. Recently researchers have drawn attention to the tendency for young people and children in nonmetropolitan areas to be characterized as a ubiquitous "other" (see, e.g., Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Farrugia 2014; Hopkins and Pain 2007). As Farrugia (2014) argues, the assumption that "new" youth and childhood is forged in the metropolis has obscured the impact of global processes on rural areas (including new patterns of migration that build links between communities in rural and urban areas and the application of new technologies to enterprises in rural areas).

Urbanization has significant implications for children and young people's relationships with place, and for the temporal complexities that they have to manage in locations where life is "speeded up" (Rosa 2013; Woodman 2012).



The process of urbanization has been especially striking in some Asian countries, with 60 % of the world's population living in the Asia-Pacific region (around 4.3 billion in 2013) (UNESCAP 2013, p. 1). More than half of the world's megacities (i.e., 13 out of 22) are found in Asia and the Pacific, and seven of the world's ten most populated cities (i.e., Tokyo, Delhi, Shanghai, Mumbai, Beijing, Dhaka, and Kolkata) are in the Asia-Pacific region. These megacities are drivers of regional and global economic activity (UNESCAP 2013). Research on the implications of these developments in the Asia-Pacific region for children and young people will be at the forefront of knowledge about the impact of changing social conditions and the nature of childhood and youth.

One of the emerging areas of scholarship that is directly relevant to childhood and youth studies is the development and impact of new forms of inequality. A UNICEF report (2011, p. vii) notes that the world's top 20 % of the population enjoys 70 % of total income and the world's richest quintile gets 80 % of global income. This report notes that children and young people are overrepresented in the lowest groupings, with approximately 50 % of the world's children and young people living below the \$2-a-day poverty line. These developments involve new dynamics that interact with and overlay older dynamics and processes. This means that youth researchers need to be especially reflexive about their uses of theories and concepts.

To understand the ways in which these developments impact on who and what it is possible for children and young people to be and become, it is important to hold on to the relationship between biography and society, conceptualized as the triple helix of youth analysis: social change, individual transition, and personal identity (White and Wyn 2012). These elements are integral to understanding the connectedness of individual and society and of the relevance of place, time, and biography.

In the following section, I turn to the question of how the concepts we use both open up and obscure possibilities for analysis, creating youth and childhood as the objects of our research and defining the nature of problems and solutions. In seeking to employ frameworks that enable an understanding of the connectedness of childhood and youth with social conditions, it is important to be reflexive about the work that concepts do.

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## **"Fields" of Knowledge**

Bourdieu's notion of field provides a framework for understanding how concepts are being used and how one field influences another, despite their different senses of project (Bourdieu 1998). As discussed earlier in this chapter, field is a structured and relatively autonomous space with its own logics and practices. The discussion of the early youth research conducted by W. F. Connell and colleagues in Australia in the 1980s and in the 1970s provides an example of the significance of developmental psychology in laying out the logic of childhood and youth as discrete developmental phases of life. These phases have developmental milestones attached to them which, if not completed correctly, can be deleterious for the achievement of maturity in adulthood (Brown 2004). This logic leads to a range

of practices, including the identification of risks and the creation of interventions in young people's lives (see France 2007), a logic that is especially central to much of the research and policy on children's and young people's health and well-being (see Cahill's chapter titled "► [Approaches to Understanding Youth Well-Being](#)" (Chap. 7) in this collection).

An alternative logic through which childhood and youth are "known" is a sociocultural approach, which identifies childhood and youth as a product of social context. The logic of this approach is that different experiences of childhood and youth are made possible by the social, economic, and political conditions under which people are living, but childhood and youth do not exist as *a priori* entities outside of their location in place, space, and time. Cahill, in this collection, refers to this as an ecological approach, because it focuses attention on the contextual factors that either enable or limit children and young people's well-being. Pattman (also in this collection) discusses the ways in which the research process itself produces different ways of knowing children and young people.

A brief consideration of the concepts of identity and peer group, both of which are central to developmental psychology and to sociocultural approaches, reveals influence across these fields and demonstrates the significant legacy of developmental psychology to studies of childhood and youth. This makes visible the ongoing efforts by researchers to "know" childhood and youth. The concept of peer group has a central role within developmental psychology. It contributes to the conceptualization of identity as a process occurring during childhood and youth and that positions young people as adults in the making. It plays a significant role in theories of identity development leading to the formation of an adult identity. From this perspective, adolescence is a risky time, and peers constitute a necessary, but potentially dangerous influence. The idea of the peer group is integral to the logic that becoming adult involves a process of becoming independent from the family. Peer groups have the potential to divert individuals away from (positive) family influences on the development of the mature identity, and can lead young people into "frivolous and delinquent activity with patterns of interaction that undermine autonomy and self esteem" (Brown 2004, p. 363). Interestingly, although the development of a mature adult identity is seen as a universal developmental task of youth, there is a degree of voluntarism in this process, because the literature often characterizes young people as "experimenting" with different possible identities, before settling on their adult self (see, e.g., Northcote 2006 and Gilbert 2007). Identity is regarded as inherently unstable until adulthood has been reached.

The idea of identity as fixed, of youth as a process of becoming adult, and of the peer group as a significant source of influence in this process (alongside family) has made a powerful impact on youth research. For one thing, it has driven a research focus on peer relations almost to the exclusion of family within youth research (Gillies 2000; Wyn et al. 2012), and it has exerted a powerful influence on other fields within youth research, particularly in relation to the conceptualization of identity as fixed and youth and childhood as deficit versions of adulthood.

Sociological research on youth also constitutes a distinctive field, in Bourdieu's terms, with its own sets of assumptions, internal logics, and structures. Although in

much sociological research the idea of peer group is a tool for understanding “becoming adult,” recent work draws on the idea of peer group to refer to collective rather than individual practices of identity, which are seen as relatively fluid, connecting to contexts and social relations as much as to individuals. Drawing on the poststructuralist theorists including Butler (1990, 2000) and Davies (2004, 2006), research on childhood and youth argues that identity as a fixed property of individuals is a fiction, maintained through repetitive performances (Hey 2006) and that identity only exists at the point of action (Nayak and Kehily 2006). From this perspective, peer groups are one medium through which preexisting subject positions are practiced and modified. Identity is performed and practiced, recognized and denied in social settings, and forged within limited, possible subject positions that are historically and locationally specific. This conceptualization of identity locates it within social relations and practices rather than within individuals. Hence the peer group is an important reference point for these performances, but other kinds of social relations are also seen to be significant, including interactions with others in institutional settings such as schools (Youdell 2006) and workplaces (Stokes and Wyn 2007).

Sociological uses of the concept of the peer group ask questions about the resources that are used to enable identity performances. Kehily and Nayak (2008), for example, analyze the ways in which young women appropriate global cultural symbols to enable identity performances about womanhood. Framed through this lens, peer groups are integral to the process of subjectification – the process through which subjecthood is made possible (Davies 2006). The focus is not on how subjects are made but on how peer group practices create the fiction that there is a fixed identity to be made.

This approach makes the unstable nature of identities and the necessity to enact identity performances throughout life visible, and in so doing, enhances analysis of the changing meaning of childhood, youth, and adulthood within local and global contexts. This link to changing social contexts encourages awareness of “new” identities in an era where peers can be global and virtual as well as local (Kehily and Nayak 2008). This analysis of “thinking” about children and young people is a microcosm of larger distinctions with childhood and youth studies and is captured through the idea of categorical and relational approaches.

## **Categories, Relationships, and Metaphors**

One way to understand what the concepts we use invite us to understand and what they obscure from our view is to take a closer look at the metaphors they draw on (for an extended discussion of this, see Cuervo and Wyn 2014). Metaphors enable us to understand our social world through the use of terms previously used for other things, because of a perceived similarity between them (Leary 1995). The new context extends the meaning of the original word, enabling us to see an aspect of social relationships that was not previously apparent, sharpening an existing focus. The metaphoric quality of theories has

nothing to do with “surface” similarities between a concept and what it represents (Brown 1976) – theories can only be more or less useful.

As Helen Cahill demonstrates her chapter in this collection titled “► [Approaches to Understanding Youth Well-Being](#)” (Chap. 7) metaphors provide a tool for exploring the explicit concepts and implicit assumptions within different approaches. Cahill draws attention to the differing “meta-messages” inscribed in approaches to young people’s well-being, which she describes as “the balance,” “the adventure tourist,” “the frog in the pond,” and “the performer.” The metaphor of “the balance,” for example, highlights the binary between risk and protective factors and behaviors in young people’s lives and sees well-being as a struggle for balance in life. The metaphor of “the frog in the pond” describes the assumptions underpinning ecological models of youth well-being and emphasizes the complex interrelationships and flows that influence young people’s well-being.

Over time, “master metaphors” come to dominate across fields. One of these is the master metaphor of transitions, which has widespread use within youth and childhood studies and in the related fields of education and labor market studies. The idea of transition dominates thinking about children and youth in the fields of education and health through a focus on normative progressions (some of which are through institutional processes and some are individual milestones, sanctioned by institutions). As identified above, transitions can be understood as a form of transition regime – normative institutional trajectories that become naturalized in thinking about children and young people. This approach imagines youth and childhood as a category, a space that is bounded by age through which people pass on the way to adulthood. For this reason, this approach is also sometimes referred to as “youth-as-transition,” since it is the immature, risk-laden, and deficit aspects of children and young people’s lives that come to the fore.

Because the institutional pathways are naturalized (or unquestioned) from this perspective, the focus moves (naturally) to identify and categorize those who do not conform (e.g., not in education, employment, or training or NEET) with the goal of bringing them into normative pathways (see OECD 2013). As Hayes (2011) explains in her study of reconnecting marginalized young people to learning, this logic fails to recognize that the institutionalized pathways, experienced as isolated and inflexible, alienate and marginalize young people. A transition approach also dominates research on children and young people’s health and well-being. It is common for health researchers to seek the precursors in a causal chain of health-related behaviors so that risk factors across the relevant populations can be identified and interventions put in place. This is discussed in detail in a number of chapters in the section of this handbook titled “► [Approaches to Understanding Youth Well-Being](#)” (Chap. 7).

The metaphor of transitions, which positions youth and childhood as a space through which children and young people travel, has very strong synergies with developmental approaches. This is evident in the assumption that childhood and youth are deficit, incomplete, and risky and that this is resolved on the completion of the “journey” when adulthood (independence and employment) is reached. Through its integration into policy frameworks, this approach has taken on the

quality of orthodoxy – a taken-for-granted way of framing childhood and youth. Although this approach focuses on categories, this focus is on individual characteristics (such as poor school performance or poor health), not on the wider social dynamics that create these characteristics. An example is the focus on NEET in OECD youth policies (2013). These formative policy documents take little account of the wider realities of precarious work and the destabilizing effect this has on families and communities, to focus with ever-increasing dedication to creating the “pathways” that will return NEETS to the education and training institutional pathways that are assumed to benefit them.

Discussing the parallel tendency within childhood studies, Walkerdine (2009) comments that the maintenance of a dualistic view, with sociological approaches on one side and psychological approaches on the other, has become orthodoxy. As she points out, there are two unhelpful effects of this dualism. One is that sociological accounts leave no room for a discussion of the psychological, and the other is that developmental psychology is replaced by hard “facts” derived from neuroscience. This has contributed to a conceptual cul-de-sac or dead end, where dualisms are maintained and the kind of reworking of psychological and sociological concepts that would engage with the limits and possibilities of master metaphors is hampered (Walkerdine 2009, p. 113). Positive psychology, with its emphasis on cognitive processes, has filled this gap.

A relational metaphor, which focuses on interrelationships, connection, and belonging, positions children and youth within their social context. A relational metaphor draws on a range of theories that see age as a social process and relationship (as argued by Lesko 1996 and Blatterer 2007). Relational metaphors support important theoretical traditions from Bourdieu, whose work has been dedicated to understanding how individuals “belong” to families, communities, and sectors of their society through the complex interrelationships of identity and society. Similarly, actor-network theories and the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are focused on the interrelationships that are taken for granted or obscured by a focus on institutional processes. These approaches focus instead on the dynamic patterns of action and connection that create social realities. The term “assemblage” highlights the role of materials (e.g., places or language) as well as people in the associations that make lives. This is illustrated in the chapter by Nancy Lesko, Mary Ann Chacko, and Shenila Khoja-Moolji. Their discussion of “empowered girls” explicitly shifts away from an analysis of structured positions and the relationships between these (as a series or trajectory through a biographical pattern) to focus instead on the becoming process itself, as an assemblage. They argue that the idea of “empowered girls” exists as an “effect” that positions young women in the West as an ideal and young women in Muslim countries as “other.”

Similarly, Kylie Smith, in this section of the handbook, also draws on the relational metaphor of rhizomes (following Deleuze and Guattari) to deconstruct discourses of the “ideal” childhood in poststructuralist and postcolonial accounts of childhood. Here too, the focus is on what she calls “the middle” rather than the boundaries that provide the basis for categorizations of individuals, or patterns based on institutional trajectories.

A relational metaphor is also apparent in the emerging interest in young people's mobilities (Rizvi 2012), in the ways in which young people are connected to spaces and places (Massey 1998), and in the significance of belonging to a generation (Wyn and Woodman 2006). Research using a relational metaphor throws new light on patterns of inequality that have been well documented in research on youth transitions through school and into work. As the work of Farrugia and Watson (2011) and MacLean (2011) show, young people who are the most disadvantaged and marginalized from education and employment often work the hardest to belong. However, their struggles to perform the subject positions of "their times," drawing on the resources available to them, are not recognized within research and policy frames that focus on youth as a space of transition through normative trajectories.

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## Conclusion and Future Directions

In drawing this chapter to a close, I return to the issue of inequality. As I have discussed briefly above, new patterns of inequality are emerging, within countries and between countries, while older patterns of inequality remain, both of which impact directly on the possibilities for children and young people. Within many developed countries, including Australia, patterns of disadvantage in education, for example, have become entrenched. In Australia, children and young people from poor families, those who live in rural areas, and young Indigenous people remain the most disadvantaged in educational outcomes and in the labor market, and their health is significantly worse (AIHW 2012; FYA 2012). Increasingly sophisticated approaches to the measurement of the achievement of transition markers (such as school readiness, school completion, academic achievement, labor market engagement) have done little to address entrenched patterns of disadvantage. This suggests that in part, the failure to address inequality is linked to dominant policy frameworks and concepts that are incapable of addressing such strong historical patterns of inequality, because these concepts lead us to measure the wrong things, or not enough of the right things. Perhaps this is a call to resist orthodoxy in research and policy – and it may be that we are witnessing a response to this sense that dominant frameworks have not served us well.

One of the claims of relational analyses is the visibility given to "agency" – empowerment and voice, against the categorical approaches that are about children and young people. This has been especially actively pursued in the field of childhood and youth studies. Examples are found in the work of MacNaughton and Smith (2009), and in the chapter by Nicola Taylor and Anne Smith in this section. Both identify how children know their worlds and can be central to decision-making, and a significant body of work within youth studies analyzes how young people can be participants in learning, in well-being, and in the building of strong civic life.

In youth studies, many researchers have focussed on girlhood as a "new" phenomenon. As Nancy Lesko, Mary Ann Chacko, and Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji argue in this section, girl power is a progress narrative that enices, energizes, and focuses attention. It is a relational narrative, in which Western (white and

middle class) ideas of individual agency, individualization, and ambition are wished on “other” girls.

These authors argue that postfeminism mixes feminist and antifeminist discourses, policies, and affects along highly individualized dimensions. Within these postfeminist understandings, girl power suggests that gender issues in education in developed countries have been solved, that girl success is simple and formulaic regardless of setting, and that young women, who do not become ambitious and assertive, are responsible for their failures (Ringrose 2013). These elements represent an “individualistic turn,” drawing on a “positive” interpretation of developmental psychology, drawing on the example of “flow” – the ultimate innately positive psychic experience – it’s all about personal development and growth through cognitive processes.

In conclusion, this analysis returns to the influence of fields, through sets of discourses and concepts that come to dominate thinking and practice. The answer to the questions – who are, could, and should children and young people be or become and what kind of society does this presume – requires a critical understanding of the ways in which biography and history intersect in thinking about children and young people.

The answer also requires an understanding of the connectedness of individual and society, and of the relevance of place, time, and biography that shape the possibilities for being and the meaning and experience of childhood and youth. Perhaps most importantly, in a time of unprecedented inequality, it is important to use concepts that enable us to grasp the impact of new inequalities on the experience and meaning of childhood and youth.

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Approaches to Understanding Youth Well-Being](#)
- ▶ [Bodies: Corporeality and Embodiment in Childhood and Youth Studies](#)
- ▶ [Childhood and Youth Citizenship](#)
- ▶ [Critical Moments? The Importance of Timing in Young People’s Narratives of Transition](#)
- ▶ [Current Debates in Social Justice and Youth Studies](#)
- ▶ [Deconstructing Discourses to Rupture Fairytales of the “Ideal” Childhood](#)
- ▶ [Gender Identity, Intergenerational Dynamics, and Educational Aspirations: Young Women’s Hopes for the Future](#)
- ▶ [Girls’ Embodied Experiences of Media Images](#)
- ▶ [Space and Place in Studies of Childhood and Youth](#)
- ▶ [The Politics of Non-belonging in the Developing World](#)
- ▶ [The Promises of Empowered Girls](#)
- ▶ [Thinking About Children: How Does It Influence Policy and Practice?](#)
- ▶ [Unemployment, Insecurity, and Poor Work: Young Adults in the New Economy](#)
- ▶ [Ways of Thinking About Young People in Participatory Interview Research](#)
- ▶ [Young People, Identity, Class, and the Family](#)

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