Youth: A Provocative Scientific Field

Contributor: Dragos Obreja

Although youth is a highly debated topic in the scientific literature, this does not seem to happen for an extended period of time. While there is no unanimous definition of youth, it should be noted that it is rather an intermediate stage, but also socially constructed, between childhood and adulthood. This is because youth should not be confused with adolescence, which is defined as "… beginning with puberty and ending once physiological and emotional maturity is achieved, and it tends to cover a more protracted time span".

1. Introduction

Although youth is a highly debated topic in the scientific literature, this does not seem to happen for an extended period of time. While there is no unanimous definition of youth, it should be noted that it is rather an intermediate stage, but also socially constructed, between childhood and adulthood [1]. This is because youth should not be confused with adolescence, which is defined as "… beginning with puberty and ending once physiological and emotional maturity is achieved, and it tends to cover a more protracted time span" [1]. On the contrary, youth have an active social component, which is why it is a topic increasingly addressed in the sociological literature, as it will been seen. Leaving the sphere of purely anatomical and psychological analysis of youth, Heinz [2] refers to this category as "path-dependent social structures" because it is characterized by certain dependencies of different intensities: if childhood is considered a period of complete dependence, this state gradually diminishes until adulthood. Additionally, the risks and experiences that characterize youth are quite distinct, which is largely determined by socio-demographic predictors. Therefore, some young people stay longer in the educational environment, while others become employees and start their own families, and this structural variation must be studied even in terms of risk [3]. On the other hand, other young people are part of the NEET category, meaning Not in Education, Employment, or Training. Such a social category is relevant in sociology because it shows how the socioeconomic characteristics of some individuals are reflected in the potential choices and values they acquire. This variety of topics related to youth is largely reflected in the related field of knowledge.

2. Youth: A Provocative Scientific Field

According to Furlong [1], the main concerns of youth researchers have changed very little in the last four decades. The socioeconomic background is a topic of interest for sociologists interested in youth studies, knowing that material advantages and disadvantages are transmitted from one generation to another, along with possible opportunities and risks [4][5][6]. This is a common discussion about the structure–agency dichotomy. This dichotomy has been used for decades to distinguish between structural conditions that limit an individual's perspective (such as socioeconomic status or cultural expectations) and agency conditions, referring to one's ability to access resources that bring power. One of the factors mentioned in youth studies is the opportunities they receive at a point in time, given the fact that these opportunities also influence their socio-professional status. Another structural factor is the welfare regime, which can determine certain national policies regarding youth. Such policies, of course, influence future social and professional opportunities. Thus, it is no coincidence that the main factors influencing the course of youth are topics of interest in sociological studies.

Without considering the main divisions that differentiate young people from each other, it is difficult to develop an effective approach in the field of youth studies. Although these divisions are as diverse as possible, Furlong [1] identifies three such criteria: gender, social class, and ethnicity. While gender is a visible source of youth division, awareness of this problem seems to be gaining ground in academia, especially in the last (two) decades, as will be discussed hereafter. These gender differences are not recent, as boys have been treated differently both in school and at home since childhood [7], with boys being tolerated for aggressive and emotionless behavior over time, while such behaviors are not allowed in the case of girls. On the one hand, gender influences the very choice of the professional sector, owing to the intensive

socialization that girls and boys are subjected to at school and at home, which leads to persistent sources of inequality in organizational environments [8]. On the other hand, although it is a declining phenomenon, some professional sectors still practice gender-based remuneration, with men advancing faster on the hierarchical scale as they are considered more competent [9]. Furthermore, women are more likely to be engaged in professions that require a certain level of empathy and understanding, as well as increased communication skills. Sexuality is also related to gender-based divisions among youth, given that young people in many societies are still forced to hide their sexual identity when it goes outside of heteronormativity. It is not surprising that "… queer youth are often cast as victims of homophobic violence or heterosexist exclusion in ways that inscribe them within tropes of victimization and risk" [10]. "Standard" approaches to relentless sexuality are increasingly being challenged by socially constructed guidelines arguing for culturally dependent sexuality [11][12].

Social class is another frequently mentioned criterion in youth studies, and parents' occupations are a significant predictor in such analyses. According to sociological studies, "… despite changes in patterns of educational participation that affect all social classes, young people's family of origin remains a strong predictor of occupational destinations" [1]. Around the concept of social exclusion, sociologists are interested in observing how certain social categories (including youth) unable to advance socially, remaining stuck in different socio-professional contexts lacking career opportunities. State interventions are more than necessary at such times, given that long-term unemployment among youth should be properly managed in states with active welfare benefits [13].

Ethnicity is also a well-known criterion of youth inequality, which social scientists frequently equate with the term 'race' to argue their view on the rather socially constructed origin of this concept. Most often, possible "race effects" are observed to visibly correlate with what researchers might call "class effects", which is why researchers interested in the ethnic factor in inequality consider transnational phenomena such as migration and colonialism. There are also social infrastructure patterns, such as ethnic minorities frequently living in slums with a high propensity for deviant behavior [14]. Of course, ethnic minorities have experienced a lack of professional opportunities for several generations, as they are disproportionately concentrated in low-status and low-wage occupations. However, some cases of immigration are part of a process of assimilation into the host culture, which is particularly true for younger generations, as Modood [15] illustrates in the case of second-generation immigrants, who are considered to have British identity to an increasing extent, compared to their elder generations of immigrants.

Discussions in the field of youth studies cannot be viewed separately from class analysis, as I have previously argued. Adherence either in the educational environment or in the professional sphere (or maybe even both at the same time) creates a series of structural advantages or disadvantages, being what Bourdieu [16] describes as "field". According to the field theory, social actors are embedded in a variety of hierarchical environments characterized in which they must occupy different positions and perform as expected in that field. Field examples include financial markets, music clubs, etc. Such fields have active components, as they are characterized by conflict or competition, which is why those who are part of such fields systematically seek to obtain benefits and rewards from different social positions [17]. In the discussion regarding the structure–agency dichotomy, the concept of "reflexivity" provides critical conceptual clarification. Thus, debates are frequent about how sociological literature regarding how individuals acquire the different traditions they are engaged in. For example, while structuralist perspectives argue that constraints can easily become routine for individuals so that they unconsciously submit to them, agency-centered perspectives emphasize the idea of reflexivity by causing social actors to decide in favor of some routines and against others [18][19][20]. Therefore, reflexivity underlies both social reproduction and social change because new generations can question previous customs and values.

Studying the obstacles and difficulties experienced by young people throughout their lives also implies increased reflexivity towards the possible structural shortcomings of this social category. According to some studies, it does not seem coincidental that children from the working class still expect to have some working-class jobs [21]. Threadgold and Nilan [19] state that reflective risk negotiation is beginning to take the place of class consciousness. This can be considered viable in late modernity, given that "the self is reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography" [22]. In a period such as the one researchers are currently going through, personal aspirations are beginning to gain importance; however, socioeconomic status continues to play a dominant role in determining future expectations.

Research topics such as youth homelessness are also gaining increased attention, especially in the last decade, representing topics frequently researched through ethnography, as demonstrated by a recent study [23] on the internalization of habitus among homeless young people. In addition, positioning "on the fringes of society" entails the acquisition of multiple deviant behaviors, such as drug use [24], violence [25], along with a number of mental and emotional problems [26][27]. Of course, habitus exists even in the case of homelessness, resulting in the internalization of failures and instability discussed by Barker [23] because habitus involves the analysis and interpretation of the present based on past

experiences [18][28]. Habitus has a coherent existence at the individual level and at the group level, which is why the experiences and visions of individuals belonging to the same group are remarkably similar. Therefore, practices adopted among homogeneous groups also tend to follow a variety of patterns, such that what appear to be unique opportunities and obstacles become structural in nature.

For such social categories, instability is felt in almost every aspect of social life. According to Barker's ethnography [23], homeless young people end up experiencing uncertainty, including elements related to where they will sleep, the food they will eat, etc. In addition, transition periods between different types of accommodation are a recurring problem, given that the families from which homeless young people come are unable to fulfill their essential roles of providing emotional and material support in difficult times [29][30]. Thus, it is certain that the youth's problems are not just about them but rather about interconnected perspectives that bring together several cohorts and socio-demographic categories. The following excerpt justifies the multidimensional importance that youth studies have in defining new social, demographic, and cultural realities: "In these settings, adult anxieties about the public and private behaviours and dispositions of young people means that youth, understood largely as a process of transition and becoming, looms large in popular, policy, and academic discourses. Powerful narratives of risk, fear, and uncertainty structure a variety of processes and practices aimed at regulating the identities of young people" [31].

These essential research directions in youth studies were only briefly presented to demonstrate that youth are not a homogeneous category in the literature, but are determined by a variety of predictors. Thus, multiple studies in the youth area demonstrate that variables such as race, gender, and class influence the very distinction between normal and deviant youth, as well as the emergence of juvenile delinquency [32][33]. Furthermore, as Kelly [31] argues, the discursive complexity surrounding youth studies deserves to be highlighted, as it encompasses a range of scientific fields, such as sociology, criminology, psychology, and cultural studies, along with a variety of social categories in which youth can be included: unemployed, homeless, offenders, etc.

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