

Theorizing liminal adulthood and its consequences for youth

Rebecca Raby

I/ Growing up and the endpoint of adulthood

Modern understandings of growing up have conceptualized childhood through progressive movement towards the endpoint of adulthood, with youth as a liminal, in-between phase before such adult stability. This position is reinforced through socialization theory and more dominant forms of developmental psychology which foreground movement towards social completion, allowing for an understanding of adulthood as a stable subject position. As the lesser half of the binary pair, childhood (adolescence or youth) has been framed as undeveloped, emotional, irrational, savage, peer-focused (and therefore not fully independent) closer to nature and incomplete. These figurations in turn have allowed adulthood to take the dominant half of each of these pairs: developed, rational, civilized, independent, social and complete.¹ Lee contends, for example, that modern sociology has commonly relied on this relationship between young people and adults to frame socialization as the process through which the social is overlaid onto nature in the gradual creation of fully socialized adults.² Yet this understanding of the developing, unstable young person shifting into stable adulthood has come under serious revision.

This paper presents three positions which challenge this modernist, binary positioning of young people and adulthood explores their ramifications in terms of how they are, and can be, deployed in relation to understanding youth. Ultimately I consider

questions that arise in favouring a lifelong, fluid, contextualized and inter-connected selfhood.

II/ Three positions which disrupt the binary: childhood-instability/adult-stability

The Sociology of Childhood

The 'sociology of childhood' provides a valuable argument for considering children as legitimate beings in their present, with voice and agency.³ This position critiques traditional socialization theory for marginalizing young people through framing them as merely vessels for the reproduction of the social. To counter such marginalization, those working in the sociology of childhood sought to legitimize children as subjects of modern sociology through essentializing children's agency and independence.⁴ In this way, the sociology of childhood presents an ontological understanding of children similar to adults: stable, self-knowing, and agentic. This position is quite distinct from those who lament the loss of childhood through the incursion of an adult world of consumption, sexuality and violence.

Individualization, materialism and the destabilization of adulthood

Second, various scholars have reflected on material and psychological changes brought about by the rise of neo-liberalism and the erosion of the welfare state which have affected how we understand adulthood. Individualization theorists have argued that the globalized, reflexive modernity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have loosened class structures and other social 'anchors.' Consequently, individuals are increasingly required to shape their own, flexible and insecure life trajectories thus

individualizing risk and inequality.⁵ Blatterer contends that with neo-liberalism, the loss of stable careers, and the marketing of youthfulness, the liminality traditionally associated with youth has morphed into a liminal adulthood.⁶ The basis for the social recognition of adulthood is changing; current markers shift across social contexts but there is also a new, overarching emphasis on perpetual liminality; adults must now focus on the present in the face of open-ended, temporary, reversible and individualized options for the future. While western adulthood remains commonly and problematically measured through the dominant, middle class narratives of career, house, family, *etc.* these emergent definitions emphasize internal, psychological achievements such as self-confidence and flexibility to define adulthood.

The Post-structuralist subject

Finally, poststructuralist deconstruction of the modern, unitary self has destabilized past and present subject positions such that *both* young people and adults are produced within shifting and intersecting, contextualized discourses, potentially removing the stable end-point of adulthood.⁷ Within such subject formation, people attempt to create unifying narratives of the self as individual biographies are central to modern individuality, but the self remains ever-changing and contextual. Such instability is made visible through looking at how discourses and practices shift with context, are in tension and can even contradict.⁸ Poststructural theorizing into childhood, adolescence, youth and adulthood has also sought to denaturalize and deconstruct these categories, further undermining their categorical distinctions.⁹

II/ The consequent reconceptualizing of youth and its political implications

Each of the abovementioned positions reflects and informs an understanding of the relationship between how we understand childhood/youth and adulthood with effects in terms of the disruption and/or reproduction of young people's marginalization.

Becoming: Marginalization and Protection

The sociology of childhood sought to embrace young people as active, participatory subjects, or *beings*, to counter their social marginalization. While sociologists of childhood, critical psychologists and poststructuralists legitimately problematize socialization and developmental approaches, others are concerned with conceptual and material shifts from what the protective focus of childhood as *becoming* (adults). For example, to critical pedagogue and youth advocate Henri Giroux, the modern social contract invested in young people as future citizens, workers and symbols of progress.¹⁰ As neo-liberalism has made most workers unnecessary or interchangeable, marginalized, American youth are no longer considered an investment in the future but rather 'disposable' and therefore contained within prisons and prison-like schools. The modern liminality of youth afforded young people important protection; if we no longer consider youth as becoming they are no longer worthy of investment. Grossberg argues that this "war against youth" reflects attempts to permanently end modern investments in citizenship through an erosion of any future focus in a triumph of short-term finance capital over commodity production.¹¹ Jen Qvortrup brings a similar dilemma into the foreground when reflecting on how the historical compartmentalization of childhood

brought children protection and investment but in turn denied them widespread participation in the community.¹²

Lifelong Liminality

Concerns have been raised about conceptualizing young people as being like adults, so what of conceptualizing adults as becoming, or as permanently liminal? One might first assume that a focus on liminal adulthood would shift adulthood onto a par with liminal youth. Yet instead, some individualization theorists have re-imposed more traditional, stable markers of adulthood to problematize youth/adults who cannot attain them. They argue that in the face of losing the structural ‘anchors’ of adulthood, young people enter into a listless, ‘prolonged adolescence’ as they become overwhelmed, passive and irresponsible through the range of options and challenges they face.¹³ Blatterer, critical of these representations of youth that disparage their failure to attain increasingly elusive markers of stable adulthood, finds instead that young people are *redefining* adulthood through psychological rather than material measures of attainment.¹⁴ Ironically, this definitional shift stabilizes a flexible, psychological adulthood, which continues to position childhood, adolescence and youth as psychologically incomplete. A focus on psychological markers may in turn increase the distinction between young people and adults because, unlike paid work or parenthood which can and have been concreted accessed by young people, the psychological self is vague and immaterial, with its boundaries patrolled by adults and experts.

The poststructural subject offers another way to conceptualize lifelong liminality, with the self as always changing alongside its social context. Some may consider the

fluid, poststructural subject as the perfect neo-liberal subject, with the theory a logical outcome of this particular economic juncture. Such a relationship is challenged, however, by the critiques of neo-liberalism embedded in poststructural theorizing. Fundamentally, neo-liberalism focuses on the individual detached from context while poststructuralism considers the individual to be made, understood and constantly embedded in the social.¹⁵ Part of what poststructuralism accomplishes is a displacement of the centrality of a unified, rational, self-knowing subject, thus undoing a psychological adulthood and potentially eroding clear lines between childhood, youth and adulthood.

Castaneda has provided a strong critique of common poststructural figurations of the child, however. She contends that Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Leotard all project a pre-discursive freedom onto the concept of child (which is, in turn, disconnected from actual children) in order to find ways to oppose adult subjection.¹⁶ Also, de Lauretis, Butler and Walkerdine all come under her scrutiny for interpreting child subjectivity through an adult lens. Yet Castaneda also suggests a poststructural resolution through the agency of nature which is embedded within children and adults alike; as such I now will turn to a focus on agency.

The question of agency

Agency and autonomy are fundamental to the modern (and the neoliberal) concept of the self in which full subjects are constrained by the social and yet act as if they are responsible for their own actions.¹⁷ The sociology of childhood has attempted to elevate the child self through accepting this framework and embracing children's agency.

Through individualization, an increasing adult liminality is similarly held to this modern conceptualization of self through an emphasis on psychological self-knowledge.

Lee argues that rather than trying to make the child fit sociological theorizing, sociological theorizing needs to be made to fit the child by re-conceptualizing agency.¹⁸ He argues that agency can be reconceptualized through dependency. Lee makes this argument by looking at how children's court statements are mediated through video-recording and interviewing that are staged to show that there is no mediation in order to '...[make] the child's ontological status decidable.'¹⁹ This child's agency is dependent on mediation, but adult agency is also mediated when they must indicate self-possession in court through being sworn in – both are therefore dependent. Lee's position is an interesting one for opening up the question of how agency can be understood through destabilizing the modern, autonomous, individual subject. Yet his examples still maintain an adult arbiter of the agentic voice. The jury or the judge must decide on the fitness of the child (or the adult) to testify, a decision quite likely drawing on traditional concepts of self-possession and rationality.

While some have suggested that poststructuralism is incompatible with agency because it emphasizes the discursive construction of the subject, in her work with Laws, Davies draws on Butler to argue that 'one is simultaneously subjected and at the same time can become an agentic, speaking subject ... [as] the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence.'²⁰ Both young people and adults are active in the process of being subjected, embracing it, making choices, and participating in the process of subjectification in ways that can alter power relations. Castaneda similarly presents a poststructural understanding of becoming selves that redefines agency in order to address

the child and therefore youth. Castaneda draws on Haraway to argue that the agency of nature, or the world 'as an active participant both in its own making, and in our knowledge of the world.'²¹ cannot be fully known or located specifically in the child or adult. Through this understanding, both the child and the adult are constituted through the agency of nature and also through the social from the very beginning. As such, all subjects are constituted within diverse, contextual, discursive frameworks; and all are also subject to the agency of nature.

Distinguishing childhood and youth

These explorations leave us with the question of what childhood and youth are, if anything at all, and what might be lost by failing to distinguish them from adulthood. Ultimately Lee contends that children occupy a unique position as they constantly shift between being and becoming and that by examining childhood we can challenge dominant sociological prejudice against the unfinished.²² Like other positions criticized by Castaneda, however, this argument positions childhood as providing the key to addressing adulthood, rather than considering children for themselves.

Davies, in contrast, argues that agency is made available to people, as constructed subjects, through certain discursive practices that may (or may not) provide an understanding of themselves as agentic.²³ Agency is thus contingent on certain resources: a discourse of individual independence; the desire to be agentic; access to the imagination, knowledge and skills to embrace alternatives; and access to others who will accept discourses of agency (which is hampered by age and other structural inequalities). She cites a specific classroom teacher who provides his students with these resources in a

way that values both their present participation and their skill development. An emphasis on skills which need to be imparted and developed over time can constitute young people as particularly in need of such investment and consequent protection – their becoming is therefore indistinguishable from adult becoming but also 1) in need of exceptional nurture due to young people's relative dependence, newness and need for skills and 2) uniquely creative for these very same reasons.

Conclusion

The sociology of childhood brings childhood and youth into the ontological status of adulthood through considering young people as beings in the present, raising tensions between protection and participation, investment and agency. By looking at economic shifts, others have destabilized adulthood. This position has contributed to negative representations of some young people as faltering in the face of a chasm of possibility and failing to live up to modernist adult landmarks. Young people in turn figure strongly in a redefinition of a flexible yet distinct psychological adulthood.²⁴ Poststructuralism suggests that stable adulthood has always been an illusion – a position that may have become more now be more evident in light of a materially destabilized adulthood. This argument has raised concerns among those embracing the modern subject that by destabilizing the self, possibilities for agency become closed off. This contention is countered as poststructuralists attempt to redefine agency, some within the context of young people. I have drawn on Davies to argue that certain ways of constructing the subject and agency facilitate young people's legitimacy as social participants,²⁵ but I

remain cautious about how to maintain this position alongside young people' protection and skill development.

References

- Beck, U, & Beck-Gernsheim, E, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. Sage Publications, London, 2002.
- Blatterer, H, *Coming of Age In Times of Uncertainty*. Berghahn Books, New York, 2007.
- Butler, J, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York, 1990.
- Castaneda, C, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*. Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- Cote, J, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity*. New York University Press, New York, 2000.
- Davies, B, *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool children and gender*. Allen and Unwin, Sydney, Australia, 1989.
- , 'Agency as a Form of Discursive Practice. A Classroom Scene Observed.' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol.11, no.3, 1990, 341-361.
- , *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities*. Hampton Press, New Jersey, 2002.
- Giroux, H, 'Racial Injustice and Disposable Youth in the Age of Zero Tolerance.' *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 16, no.4, 2003, 553-565.
- Grossberg, L, 'Why Does Neo-liberalism Hate Kids? The War on Youth and the Culture of Politics.' *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, vol.23, no.2, 2001, pp.111-136.
- James, A, & Prout, A, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Falmer Press, Basingstoke, Bristol, 1990.
- Laws, C, and Davies, B, 'Poststructuralist Theory in Practice: Working with "behaviorally disturbed" children.' *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol.13, no.3, 2000, pp.205-221.
- Lee, N, 'Towards an Immature Sociology.' *The Sociological Review*, vol. 46, no.3, 1998, pp. 458-482.
- Lesko, N, 'Denaturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations.' *Youth and Society*, vol.28, no.2, 1996, pp. 453-161.

Qvortrup, J, 'Varieties of Childhood.' J Qvortrup (ed), *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hounsmills, 2005, pp.1-20.

¹ B Davies, *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities*, Hampton Press, New Jersey, 2002.

² N Lee, 'Towards an Immature Sociology' in *The Sociological Review*, vol. 46, no.3, 1998, pp. 458-482.

³ A James & A Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, Falmer Press, Basingstoke, Bristol, 1990.

⁴ Lee, op. cit.

⁵ U Beck and E Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, Sage Publications, London, 2002.

⁶ H Blatterer, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*. Berghahn Books, New York, 2007.

⁷ J Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

⁸ Davies, op. cit.

⁹ N Lesko, 'Denaturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations', *Youth and Society*, vol.28, no.2, 1996, pp. 453-161.

¹⁰ H Giroux, 'Racial Injustice and Disposable Youth in the Age of Zero Tolerance' in *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 16, no.4, 2003, 553-565.

¹¹ L Grossberg, 'Why Does Neo-liberalism Hate Kids? The War on Youth and the Culture of Politics,' *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, vol.23, no.2, 2001, pp.111-136.

¹² J Qvortrup, 'Varieties of Childhood' in J Qvortrup (ed), *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hounsmills, 2005, pp.1-20.

¹³ J Cote, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity*, New York University Press, New York, 2000.

¹⁴ H Blatterer, op. cit.

¹⁵ B Davies, *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool children and gender*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, Australia, 1989.

¹⁶ C Castaneda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*. Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.

¹⁷ B Davies, 'Agency as a Form of Discursive Practice. A Classroom Scene Observed.' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol.11, no.3, 1990, 341-361, p.343.

¹⁸ Lee, op. cit.

¹⁹ Lee, op. cit., p.471.

²⁰ C Laws and B Davies, 'Poststructuralist Theory in Practice: Working with "behaviorally disturbed" children' in *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol.13, no.3, 2000, pp.205-221, pp.206-207.

²¹ C Castaneda, op. cit., p.166.

²² Lee, op. cit.

²³ Davies, 'Agency as a Form.'

²⁴ Blatterer, op. cit.

²⁵ Davies, 'Agency as a Form.'