2

Theorising 'Youth'

Maurice Devlin

Introduction

Theory is something that is often not highly valued by youth workers and others who work with young people. 'I'm not a great one for theory. I prefer to get on with doing the job,' is a not uncommon opinion. Such a view is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of theory and of the relationship between theory and practice. Specifically, it reflects the misguided notion that theory is necessarily both abstract and abstruse, something 'academic' and impractical. But in fact, as Kurt Lewin once wrote, 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1952: 346). Theory is essentially concerned with *explanation* and *understanding* of why things are the way they are; of why things work the way they do. It is therefore utterly indispensable to good practice, whether the practice in question is car mechanics, brain surgery or youth work.

Theory of youth work provides an explanation and understanding of what makes for effective and appropriate youth work practice, in different settings and contexts and with different groups of young people. It critically examines the values and assumptions that underpin practice, and it throws light on how youth work and youth workers relate to the State, social policy and the economy; to other professions and stakeholders; to local communities; and to young people themselves. Other contributions to this volume explore some of the key dimensions of youth work theory.

Also of fundamental importance to practitioners is theory that is concerned with an explanation and understanding of the *youth* in 'youth work'. Theory of youth addresses a wide range of topics and questions. What is distinctive about youth as a stage in the lifecycle

or the life course, and how does it relate to other stages? To what extent does it overlap with the concept of adolescence? What is the lived experience of young people, or of different groups of young people, for example, young people in different classes or cultures, or with different identities or circumstances? In what ways is the experience of 'youth' different for young men and young women? How have young people's lives changed over time, and what has caused such change? What factors are shaping the experiences of young people and the nature of youth in today's society, and how is it likely that relations between the generations will change in the future?

Answers to questions such as these are far from straightforward, and there are often differences of opinion from one theorist to another, or one academic discipline to another, as we will see. However, such answers are also far from abstract. The nature of any youth work practice will depend crucially on the understanding of 'youth' on which such practice rests. Therefore different responses to these 'theoretical' questions will lead to different types of practice. This is why practitioners who say 'I'm not a great one for theory. I prefer to get on with doing the job' (or a variation on this theme) are actually betraying the fact that they simply do not recognise or understand the theoretical assumptions on which their practice rests. This means that they may not be in a position to explain their practice, either to themselves or others. They may not be in a position to reflect consciously or creatively on it (for example, by exploring *alternative* assumptions) and therefore may not be in a position to improve it.

Youth and Adolescence in History

Adults – particularly of course adult intellectuals, whose views tend to be highly influential in shaping the way 'lay' people think – have been 'theorising' about youth for generations, even for millennia. In *Ars Rhetorica (Rhetoric)*, Aristotle (384–322 BC) gave an account of the 'youthful type of character', which he distinguished from adulthood and old age. He had a decidedly gendered understanding of such a character, holding certain views that remain widespread in our own society today (reflected for instance in the fact that in English the singular noun 'a youth' is almost exclusively used to refer to young men). In other ways too his perspective on youth foreshadowed many of today's stereotypical images of young people:

> Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires, it is the sexual by which they are most swayed and in which they show absence of self-control. They are changeable and fickle in their desires, which are violent while they last, but quickly over: their impulses are keen but not deep-rooted.... They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it; this, in fact, is why they overdo everything ...

As regards the boundaries between youth and other stages, a similarly gendered example from the ancient Western world is the fourfold categorisation put forward by the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero (106–43BC) in the treatise *De Senectute (On Old Age)*. He distinguished between 'boyhood' (*pueritia*), 'adolescence' (*adulescentia*), 'settled or middle age' (*aetas constans* or *media*) and 'old age' (*senectus*). However, in practice, age gradations were not carefully applied, and apart from certain specific instances – such as age of enrolment in the army (which sometimes had lower and upper age limits), liability for taxation (which may have had age bands), and perhaps the holding of political office – in general 'a simple binary was applied', as Barclay (2007) points out:

> After childhood and a loosely defined 'youth' (for men until their mid-twenties), the free population (both male and female) was divided into two categories, the 'young(er)' and 'old(er)', with no clearly defined boundary between them, or rather, only such demarcation as fitted the rhetorical or political interests of those who created it. (Barclay, 2007: 230)

This appears to have been the case for much of the intervening period in the Western World (and is true in many 'traditional' societies even today). Insofar as a clear demarcation between the generations *did* exist, it was provided by the onset of puberty and physical signs of 'adult' reproductive capacity (and associated capacities and responsibilities); the idea of a protracted 'transition' into adulthood had not taken hold. This is the thesis of Philippe Aries (1962), who argues that Europeans made no significant distinction between childhood and adolescence before the end of the eighteenth century. People had 'no idea of what we call adolescence' because effectively there was 'no room for adolescence' (Aries, 1962: 23, 27) by which he meant that the institutional arrangements and provisions that set young people apart from young children and from adults, such as an extended period of formal education, were not yet needed and had not yet developed.

Others have taken issue with this view, a notable example being Natalie Zemon Davis (1975) who analyses the sixteenth-century French 'youth abbeys' or 'youth kingdoms': groups of young people in towns and villages who played a key part in carnivals, festivities and other important communal events and who helped to regulate or sanction aspects of community members' behaviour through a variety of (often uproarious) methods. Davis suggests that, not just in France but 'throughout rural Europe', such groups fulfilled some of the functions attributed to contemporary adolescence:

> They gave the youth rituals to help control their sexual instincts and also to allow them some limited sphere of jurisdiction or 'autonomy' in the interval before they were married. They socialized them to the conscience of the community by making them the raucous voice of that conscience. (Davis, 1975: 108–9)

Nonetheless, whatever the precise configuration of age relations in the past, and whatever echoes we can find of today's age-related assumptions in the literature, art and philosophy of other times and places, it is still safe to say that conceptions of 'youth' and 'adolescence' and their relationship to other stages in life are much more complex and multifaceted (some would say much more ambivalent) in contemporary society than they have ever been heretofore. Such conceptions – and the *practices* associated with them, the lived realities of young people's lives – have, in particular, undergone a dramatic shift since the onset of the industrial era. Industrialisation and the attendant processes of urbanisation and modernisation transformed all aspects of social life, including age relations, the lifecycle and the life course (concepts which will be explained further below). As part of the process of transformation, new academic disciplines emerged (including sociology, psychology and education), which provided new ways of understanding, responding to and perhaps even shaping the changes taking place.

These disciplines remain crucial in providing us with sets of (often contrasting) 'lenses' through which to apprehend and understand the experiences of young people in today's society. As will be suggested again later in this chapter, it is very important that we do not accept any of their theoretical accounts unquestioningly or at face value. We should continuously subject them to scrutiny and test them against our own personal experience and against the views and voices of the young people with whom our work brings us into direct contact. Only then can we assess the extent to which any or all of these theories can live up to Kurt Lewin's touchstone of 'practicality'.

The rest of this chapter will present a range of theoretical perspectives on youth under five main headings. The five categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, and in some cases individual theorists and researchers can be seen to straddle different perspectives at the same time, or to have moved from one to another in the course of their careers. The perspectives are briefly summarised below and described in more detail in the sections that follow.

Developmental perspectives are rooted in mainstream psychology and are principally concerned with the processes of change which individual young people go through – physical change, cognitive and intellectual change, and socio-emotional change – during their *adolescence* (which is the central concept employed).

Generational perspectives are highly complementary to developmental accounts and emphasise the ways in which young people, as they undergo shared processes of individual development (and to a large extent because they have this in common), also engage in collective forms of expression and activity through a distinctive *youth culture*, which marks them out in a very public way as a separate generation.

Structural conflict perspectives reject what they regard as a homogenising approach to 'youth culture' (and indeed 'youth work') and focus instead on the ways in which the lives and experiences of different groups of young people (often in different subcultures) systematically reflect broader structures of social inequality (relating particularly to class, gender, culture and ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability).

Transitional perspectives began with a specific focus on the 'transition from school to work' (TSW) in the late 1970s and early 1980s but have broadened to accommodate a more recent postmodernist concern with the complexity and contingency of young people's *transitions* (plural) in both their personal and public lives, and with the increasing need for young people to manage risk and negotiate their own 'biographical projects'.

Constructionist perspectives overlap to some extent with transitional ones and place an emphasis on the ways in which youth, both as a social category and as a stage in the lives of individual young people, is actively constructed and 'constituted' within a variety of *discourses* and related *practices* – discourses and practices which are often incompatible or contradictory (youth as a troublesome social problem; as a

vulnerable or turbulent 'phase'; as an idealistic and energetic social resource, and so on).

Developmental Perspectives

As already noted, developmental perspectives tend to be associated with the discipline of psychology, and for the most part they start by recognising the biological and physiological aspects of adolescence: the most obvious way in which it is a 'developmental' stage is that, physically, girls become young women and boys become young men. As well as a generalised 'growth spurt', the key physical changes include menarche (the onset of menstruation) and breast development for females; and sperm production and 'voice breaking' (the growth of the larynx) for males. Both sexes also experience hair growth, particularly in the pubic area, which is why the stage of early adolescence is also called 'puberty' (which ultimately comes from the Latin for 'growing hairy'). Boys begin to mature physically on average two years later than girls, while both sexes are maturing earlier today than ever before due to the influence of socio-cultural factors such as diet and nutrition. Brain size, structure and function also change significantly during the adolescent years. Accompanying all of these transformations, and directly inducing some of them, is a dramatic increase in hormonal activity in the body: adolescence is the most 'hormonally active' stage in the lifecycle.

However, what is of most interest from a psychological (and certainly from a youth work) point of view is the impact of these physical changes on other aspects of young people's experience and development. The physical changes in the brain are clearly related to young people's *cognitive development*, which refers to 'all those abilities associated with thinking and knowing' (Birch, 1997: 63). The best known and most influential account of developments in cognition from infancy to adolescence is that of Jean Piaget (1926), who identified four intellectual stages, culminating in the *formal operational* stage, beginning at about eleven years of age and therefore closely associated with development during adolescence. This is when more complex and abstract thought becomes possible:

> [Adolescents] are more aware than the younger child that events can be interpreted in many ways and that there is no final version of truth ... This mature system of thought allows the mastery of complex systems of literature, mathematics and science. It also enables the development of abilities necessary for adult socio-emotional

> adjustment, such as the planning of future goals and the integration of past and present into a realistic self-identity. (Bourne and Ekstrand, 1979: 309–310)

Piaget also argued that changes in cognition were necessary (but not sufficient) for *moral development* to take place. Building further on Piaget's work, Lawrence Kohlberg (1963) identified three levels of moral development (each of which was in turn broken down into two stages, which need not concern us here). The first level he called *pre-conventional*, when 'morality is shaped by the standards of adults and the consequences of following or breaking their rules' (McIlveen and Gross, 1997: 87). This applies up to about ten years of age and is followed by *conventional* morality, when the sense of right and wrong is further internalised, shaped by the desire to help and please others and to maintain social order. Kohlberg believed that only a minority of people progress beyond this to *post-conventional* morality, and those who do tend to do so well into their adulthood. At the post-conventional level it is recognised that moral and legal precepts are sometimes in conflict, and people come to be guided by their own ethical principles. Kohlberg was criticised by Gilligan (1982) for not recognising gender differences, specifically the contrasting 'moral orientations' of 'justice' and 'care' into which boys and girls are, respectively, more likely to be socialised. His work can also be criticised on a number of other grounds but the conceptual framework he presented remains useful as a point of departure in the study of moral development.

Cognitive development is closely related not just to moral reasoning but – as the quotation above makes clear – to young people's overall *personal, social and emotional development*, because among the things they are capable of 'thinking and knowing' about in new ways are their own personalities and their relationships with others and with the world at large. Much of the psychological investigation of such matters has focused on the concept of identity, and most studies of identity are influenced in one way or another by Erik Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development, which was further elaborated upon by James Marcia (1980). Within Erikson's framework, adolescence is one of eight universal psychosocial stages in the lifecycle, each of which has a particular 'crisis' associated with it (by 'crisis' is meant a key issue to be resolved). In adolescence the crisis relates to identity formation, to the formulation of a coherent answer to questions such as: 'Who am I?' 'What are my beliefs and attitudes?' 'Who or what do I want to be in the future?'

While Erikson's claim that his psychosocial stages are universally applicable is highly questionable, the notion that during their adolescence young people begin the process of grappling with substantial questions about their identity is certainly very persuasive. What is less convincing (or in tune with the experience of most adults and young people in today's society) is the idea that identity is 'resolved' or fully formed by the end of adolescence. A further criticism of Erikson's approach is that it was unduly influenced by his clinical work with troubled adolescents and therefore serves to reinforce the widespread stereotypical image of youth as inherently 'problematic'. For recent discussions of such stereotyping in the Irish context, see Devlin (2005, 2006*a*).

An alternative and more balanced view of young people's social and psychological development is provided by Coleman and Hendry (1999), who argue that what is needed is a theory of adolescent *normality* rather than abnormality. There are certainly a lot of developmental tasks and challenges confronting young people during the adolescent years, including relations with peers and parents, the discovery and development of sexuality, and issues related to education, (un)employment, leisure and lifestyle; but for most young people concerns about the different issues reach a peak at different ages or stages, so the pressures are not simultaneous or overwhelming. Based on an empirical investigation, Coleman (and later his collaborator Hendry) developed 'focal theory' to explain how and why most young people move through their adolescence without undue difficulty (in other words without experiencing 'storm and stress'), while acknowledging that some do have a need for special support and intervention.

Coleman and Hendry also stress the role of individual young people as 'active agents' who play a significant part in shaping or determining their own development (rather than being helplessly swept along by unseen hormonal, biological or psychological forces). Furthermore, they support the argument of writers like Bronfenbenner (1979) that human development has an 'ecology', meaning that it is shaped by and interacts with its environment: 'for children and young people, the context of development is not just the family, but the geographical, historical, social and political setting in which the family is living' (Coleman and Hendry, 1999: 12). This raises questions more usually dealt with by the discipline of sociology, which is the principal source of the theoretical and empirical work discussed in the following sections.

Generational Perspectives

As already suggested, 'generational' perspectives within the sociology of youth are highly complementary to developmental psychological accounts of adolescence. What we are here calling generational theory accepts that young people, by virtue of their age alone, are inherently different from children on the one hand and adults on the other; that these differences are in themselves of great significance for individuals and for society; and that they manifest themselves in a distinctive *youth culture* with its own roles, values and behaviour patterns. Generational accounts are most typically presented within an overall approach to sociological analysis called 'functionalism', which explains all major social phenomena with reference to the positive functions they fulfil in terms of promoting social order and stability. From this perspective, youth culture – despite its frequent apparent 'unruliness' and 'rebelliousness' – serves a number of 'important positive functions' both for young people and for society as a whole (Parsons, 1972: 146).

Youth culture's positive functions, even when it appears problematic or troublesome from many adults' point of view, includes the fact that it encourages young people to be creative and innovative rather than accepting unquestioningly the values and norms of their elders, and such a willingness to innovate is vital if society is to remain progressive, flexible and capable of responding to the complex demands of a changing environment. Paradoxically, however, it is through the very same 'problematic' or 'troublesome' peer groups that young people learn to *conform* (because of the influence of peer pressure), and conformity also is necessary for social stability. They may be more concerned in the short term with conforming to the expectations of their friends than those of their parents or teachers, but the important thing in the longer term is that they learn what conformity is, and they come to value it. Most rebellious young people, the thinking goes, 'return to the fold' having had the chance to experiment and innovate, and they are better equipped to be active and committed members of society having had such a chance (if they were denied it they might feel frustrated or resentful). In the meantime, their individual psychological need for a delay on assuming adult responsibilities (a 'moratorium', as Erikson called it), so as to facilitate their identity development, has also been fulfilled.

Generational accounts of youth dominated sociology throughout Europe and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s (although

important earlier essays on the theme of generation included those by Ortega y Gasset, 1923, and Mannheim, 1927). The most systematic treatment came from S.N. Eisenstadt in *From Generation to Generation* (1956). Starting from the position that 'age and age relations are among the most basic aspects of life and the determinants of human destiny' (1956: 26), Eisenstadt argued that youth is a stage of particular importance in modern industrial societies. This is because there is a pronounced structural gap between the family of origin within which children spend their early years and the economic and social system in which they must eventually take their place. The family has become concentrated on emotional and sexual (rather than economic) functions, so new institutions are necessary to manage the transition out of the family. These include education, youth services and the media. They also include youth culture itself, whose key function relates to identity and autonomy:

> Youth's tendency to coalesce ... is rooted in the fact that participation in the family became insufficient for developing full identity or full social maturity, and that the roles learned in the family did not constitute an adequate basis for developing such identity and participation. In the youth groups the adolescent seeks some framework for the development and crystallization of his identity, for the attainment of personal autonomy, and for his effective transition into the adult world. (Eisenstadt 1963: 31–2)

Youth culture therefore has to be understood by reference to 'the process in which industrial society detaches children from their families and places them in/prepares them for the wider social system' (Frith, 1984: 20); this preparation being its key social function. While functionalism no longer commands the dominant position it once did within sociology, an emphasis on the central importance of age and generation continues to be found in much 'common sense' thinking about young people, youth culture and youth work, and indeed continues to characterise much social policy on youth in Ireland and elsewhere, the most obvious example being the age-based structure of the formal education system, a point to which we will return below. Media reports or casual discourse that generalise about 'young people today' are common. The 'needs of young people' or 'young people's experiences and opinions' (the suggestion being that young people are inherently different from children and from adults) are usually regarded as a starting point for youth work policy and practice; and of course the very idea of 'youth work' and other forms of youth service

provision are rooted in the assumption that 'youth' itself has its own empirical and conceptual integrity. Much of the relevant recent research does, in fact, continue to sustain such a view; but it also suggests that the generational perspective should be tempered with an appreciation of the significance of factors other than age alone (Devlin, 2006*b*; Lalor *et al.*, 2007).

Structural Conflict Perspectives

We have seen that generational perspectives on youth are associated with functionalist sociology, which in turn is usually regarded as part of a broader approach to the study of modern society called 'consensus theory'. It is so called because it assumes that societies such as ours are built on a broad value consensus (basic agreement among their members on the things that matter), which helps to provide a sense of fundamental order and stability, even though there may be problems or challenges to be confronted from time to time. Closely related to its assumption about value consensus, this theoretical perspective adopts a generally benign view of contemporary western societies, regarding them as the enlightened product of centuries of progress and therefore as examples of the kind of social organisation to which other, less 'developed' societies, should aspire.

This view, which dominated sociology in Europe and North America for much of the twentieth century, came to be increasingly challenged by an alternative approach which can be termed 'structural conflict theory' (sometimes just one of the two words 'structural' or 'conflict' is used on its own). From this point of view the striking thing about contemporary societies is not their value consensus or social order but the fact that the entire social structure reflects (and sustains) pervasive conflict and inequality.

Whereas a generational or functionalist sociologist would begin the analysis of youth and youth culture by asking 'what positive functions does it serve for individuals and society?' a structural conflict approach assesses any social phenomenon by asking: 'in what ways is it related to major conflicts of interest and inequalities of circumstance and position?' Such major conflicts and inequalities, according to these theorists (most of whom have been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the thinking of Karl Marx, 1818–1883) have little to do with age or generation, and therefore these concepts are of limited interest to them. Of far more interest is the way in which people's lives and experiences are systematically structured by such factors as class,

gender, 'race', ethnicity and culture, sexuality and dis/ability. These are all significant forms of social stratification and inequality, whereas 'the generation gap' is not.

> We would argue, in the sense that it is [conventionally] aimed at ... that there can be no 'sociology of youth' – it is a misleading quest for a holy grail that does not exist. Youth as a concept is unthinkable. Even Youth as a social category does not make much empirical sense. Youth as a single, homogeneous group does not exist. (Hall, Jefferson and Clarke 1976: 18)

This is a statement from the authors of what is perhaps the best-known and most influential book dealing with youth from a structural conflict perspective. It emerged from the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s, and was called *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1975). It presents a broadly Marxist analysis of youth in society. Clearly, when the authors say that youth is 'unthinkable' they do not mean it literally, because it is obvious from the earlier part of this chapter that the concept of youth has been 'thought' (and acted upon) for centuries, at least in some parts of the world. What they mean is that youth as a concept is *not worth* thinking, that thinking it has little sociological value; or, worse, that it serves the ideological purpose of distracting attention from more important matters, specifically analysis and action in relation to major social inequalities, particularly those relating to class (Devlin, 2006*b*: 2). From a Marxist perspective (and even from the point of view of many contemporary theorists who recognise material and economic inequalities as fundamental but do not define themselves as Marxists), the most significant groups in society are the social classes, and all other major 'cultural configurations' will relate in one way or another to class.

For this reason Hall and his colleagues were interested not in a homogeneous 'youth culture' (which they did not believe existed) but rather in class-based youth subcultures, which at the time they were writing (or shortly beforehand) included the Teddy Boys, Rockers and Skinheads. It was certainly true that the particular dress, style, musical tastes, *argot* (slang), 'focal concerns and milieux' of such subcultures seemed to set them apart as different from both their parents and from 'ordinary' working-class boys and girls, but from Hall's point of view these differences were relatively trivial:

> Through dress, activities, leisure pursuits and lifestyle, they may project a different cultural response or 'solution' to the problems

> posed for them by their material and social class position and experience. But ...[e]specially in relation to the dominant culture, their sub-culture remains like other elements in their class culture – subordinate and subordinated. (Hall and Jefferson, 1975: 15)

The subordination of these young people is perpetuated, paradoxically, by the very subcultural activity and expression which to them seems so autonomous and 'self-controlled', and this key point is captured in the title of *Resistance Through Rituals*: forms of opposition and resistance that are 'ritualistic' and symbolic, operating at the level of dress, music, language and so on but not going beyond this, cannot provide a solution to 'working-class unemployment, educational disadvantage, compulsory miseducation, dead-end jobs, the routinisation and specialisation of labour, low pay and the loss of skills' (Hall and Jefferson, 1975: 47).

The analysis of Hall and the CCCS team remains enormously influential today, even if the particular forms of subcultural expression among young people have changed. From a class-based structural conflict perspective, even if the numbers of young people participating in second or third-level education have increased in the intervening decades, and the numbers of severely 'disadvantaged' (educationally and materially) have declined, the fundamentally unequal economic relationships on which the class structure rests have not changed at all (in other words the owners of wealth and the political elite are still largely the same individuals and families).

Because of its explicit focus on class and economic inequalities, the CCCS approach could be accused of being insensitive to (almost blind to) other significant inequalities, particularly gender. *Resistance Through Rituals* contained a chapter on 'girls and subcultures' followed by one on the 'marginality of girls', but these amounted to twenty pages in a book almost three hundred pages long. The deficit was remedied somewhat in later years by authors such as Angela McRobbie (herself co-author of the 'Girls and Subcultures' chapter), who provided an analysis in which the concepts of patriarchy and gender inequality are at least as significant as class (see, for example, McRobbie, 2000). As the title suggests, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (Aapola *et al.*, 2005) also provides a recent feminist analysis, although its authors do also address the significance of class, 'race', disability and sexuality. These factors have themselves been prioritised in a range of studies which argue that a 'neat' developmental or generational model of adolescence and youth cannot sufficiently take account of the diversity of young people's

lives and lifestyles (for example, Back, 1997; French and Swain, 1997; Monro, 2006; Robinson, 1997).

In Ireland, research studies of youth subcultures that draw on (at least elements of) the structural conflict approach and that are based substantially on ethnography (sustained participant observation) among young people include that by Jenkins (1983), who studied Protestant working-class young people very much from a class-conflict perspective, leading to criticism from Bell (1990), for whom the 'all embracing sectarian habitus' among young people (and older people) in Northern Ireland was at least as significant. Gaetz (1997) highlights both class differences and geographical divisions among young people in Cork, while Fagan's study (1995) of early school leavers adopts a 'post-structuralist and post-Marxist' framework which aims at contributing to the development of a radical democracy in Ireland. Fagan advocates a 'critical pedagogy' in which 'cultural workers' (which might include youth workers) would engage collaboratively with early school-leavers and together 'examine the specific contexts and constraints of the social and cultural practices that relate to their material location' (1995: 167).

Even when an avowed conflict perspective is not adopted, it is now largely accepted among youth studies scholars and researchers that an overemphasis on factors related to age and generation in shaping the lives and circumstances of young people can be simplistic and unrealistic. A recently published textbook on young people in contemporary Ireland (Lalor *et al.*, 2007) not only includes consideration throughout of the influence of gender and socio-economic background on young people's experiences of (for example) family life, the education system and leisure opportunities, but also devotes specific attention to the position of young LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people, young people with disabilities, young Travellers and other ethnic minorities, young people who are in care or homeless, and young people in rural areas.

Transitional Perspectives

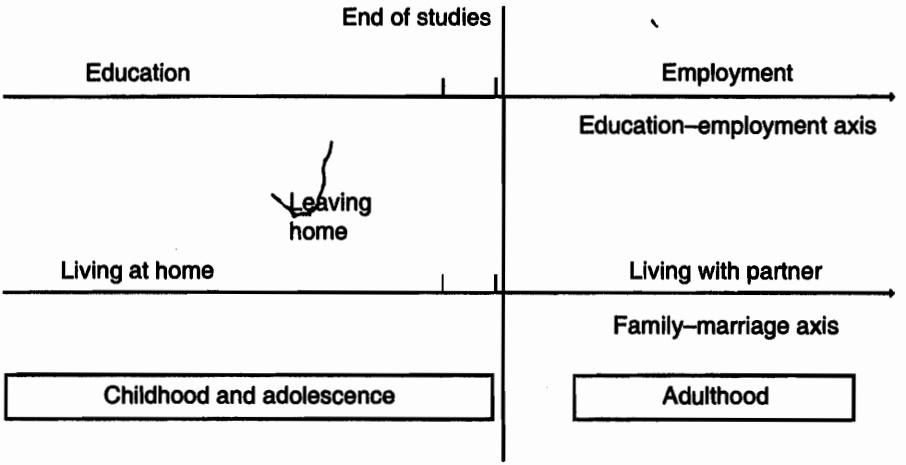
Transitional perspectives can be dated back to the concern throughout the EC (or European Community, as the EU then was) in the 1970s and early 1980s with policy relating to youth unemployment and youth training, resulting in numerous studies focusing specifically on the 'transition from school to work' (TSW). The emphasis in youth policy at that time on matters relating to employment and unemployment (or 'employability and unemployability'), in Ireland as elsewhere, can be

gauged from the fact that, for a period in the early 1980s, the Youth Affairs Section was attached to the Department of Labour rather than the Department of Education, its usual home. Transitional accounts are the most empirically orientated of all accounts of youth, in that they are often based on the detailed results of surveys and other quantitative research, and they are not as obviously aligned with a particular macro-sociological worldview as are generational and conflict perspectives.

More recent research from this perspective has moved beyond a concern with the transition from school to work alone to explore a variety of other aspects of young people's progression into adulthood, and particularly the relationship between the two principal 'axes' of transition, the public and the private (Galland, 1995). In the transitional pattern that came to dominate the industrial era, the public and private transitions of young people – from education into employment and from living at home to living independently with a partner – were relatively predictable and unidirectional, and also relatively irreversible (in the sense that having left the education system for the workplace, people did not normally return to it; and having left the parental home to marry and set up an independent household, they did not go back). There were of course some differences in the experience of transition, both public and private, based on factors such as class and gender (young working-class people moving into the workplace earlier; young women much more likely to move out of the workplace and into home duties after a few years), but overall the framework was relatively stable and predictable, like two parallel lines along which young people made the public and private transitions into adulthood. This 'traditional' model of access to adulthood in the industrial age is represented diagrammatically in Figure 2.1.

It now seems that this 'traditional' model may have been historically specific to industrial society and is being progressively redefined as we move into the 'post-industrial' era. Increasingly today, transitions are much less unidirectional and definitive and much more reversible and provisional. This is because adulthood itself – the supposed 'endpoint' of young people's transitions – is being redefined: 'Life trajectories have lost their predictability, values are irredeemably pluralized ... The very criteria upon which adult recognition rests are not static' (Blatterer, 2007: 787–8). Elsewhere it has been suggested that transitions previously associated with 'youth' are no longer so limited in scope: at all ages, 'backtracking, re-visiting, revising and the reversing of earlier decisions regarding life style and content are a growing feature of life' (Jeffs and Smith, 1998/99: 54). To take an obvious example of how things have changed, many more people in Ireland – both young

Figure 2.1: Traditional Model of Access to Adulthood



Source: Galland, O. (1995), 'What Is Youth?' in A. Cavalli and O. Galland (eds.), *Youth in Europe*, London: Pinter, 3. Reproduced by kind permission of Continuum International Publishing Group.

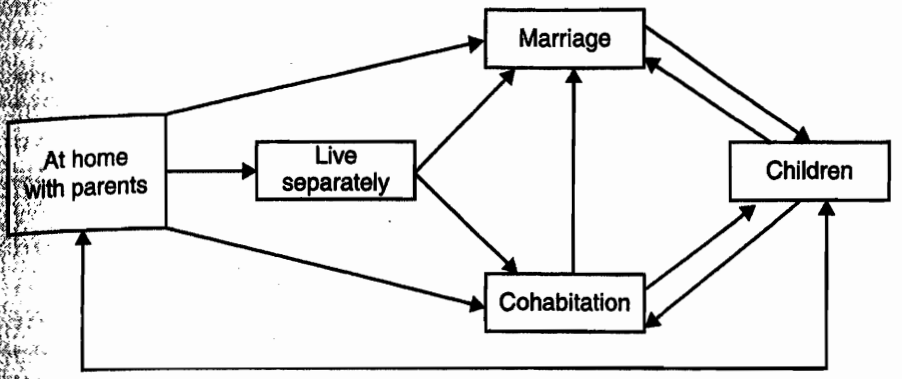
people and adults – are today likely to be both in education (of one kind or another) and employment (of one kind or another) simultaneously, and the idea of being educated (or trained) at an early age for a job that will last a lifetime is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. Such blurring of 'traditional' generational boundaries has resulted in the development of concepts such as 'emergent adulthood' (Arnett, 2007; Bynner, 2005) and 'extended youth' (see Lalor *et al.*, 2007, Chapter 12) and has also led to a move away from the linear notion of a 'life-cycle' with predetermined stages towards the more historical and sociological concept of the 'life course' (Hunt, 2005).

In terms of the private sphere (or 'axis'), even in the 1980s an empirical study in Britain by Claire Wallace (1987) suggested that young people's transitions had become much more complex and contingent than was suggested by the traditional model, and the process of change is likely to have accelerated in the intervening years. Some of the 'flexibility' and 'reversibility' involved in contemporary personal transitions is reflected graphically in Figure 2.2.

In Ireland, the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003*a*) also noted changes in young people's personal transitions:

> ... the picture is more complex than in the past, when it was overwhelmingly the norm for young people to progress (or at least to

Figure 2.2: Transitions in the Lifecycle: the 1980s



Source: Wallace, C. (1987), *For Richer, For Poorer: Growing Up In and Out of Work*, London: Tavistock, 130.

> want to progress) sequentially, and at a relatively early stage, through heterosexual courtship, marriage and parenthood. While this is of course still a prevailing norm, young people are today exercising a greater variety of choices about lifestyle, relationships and sexuality, and in particular about the sequence and timing of significant life events. (Department of Education and Science, 2003*a*: 3)

It is important to remember, however, that, while there may indeed be a 'greater variety of choices' for young people in contemporary society, significant structural *constraints* also remain in place and the choices are by no means evenly divided across different social groups. Moreover, such 'choices' may actually be experienced by many young people as increased pressures or problems (Department of Education and Science, 2003*a*). This paradoxical state of affairs is part of a more general process of cultural change, which has been described by Beck (1992) in terms of such concepts as individualisation and 'risk', with life as a 'biographical project' which each individual has to manage (in much the same way as the manager of any project has to make assessments and decisions about strategies, 'investments', developments and risks).

The international literature on transitions takes little account of the ways in which specific cultural, historical and economic factors – such as the experience of emigration in twentieth-century Ireland – can have a decisive impact on young people's experience of transition in a given national or regional context; while in Ireland itself there has

been little research drawing explicitly on transitional perspectives. Some years ago an important empirical study by Hannan and Ó Riain (1993) of young people's 'pathways to adulthood' set out to examine whether there was still a singular 'normal' pattern in the sequencing and means of attainment of adult statuses in this country (given that such a pattern 'may have broken down' elsewhere in Europe). The authors concluded that there was 'substantial support ... for a "normal" or majority pattern of integration into adult life ... for over 90 per cent of young people at least up to age 22' (1993: 223). Further research is required to ascertain whether and to what extent this pattern has changed, but it is undoubtedly the case that, in a range of other respects (for example, young people's attitudes and behaviour in areas such as relationships, family, sexuality, religion, leisure pursuits and popular culture), the Irish situation has converged with our European neighbours in the intervening years (see Lalor *et al.*, 2007, Chapters 3, 4, 7 and 8).

Constructionist Perspectives

The British sociologist Frank Musgrove (1964: 33) quirkily expressed one key tenet of the constructionist approach to youth studies when he stated that 'the adolescent was invented at the same time as the steam engine'! What he meant was that a new stage in life had effectively been created (constructed) by the process of social and economic change. Peter Berger, one of whose co-authored works helped to give 'social constructionism' its name (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), similarly argued that the 'basic causal factor' of modern youth was 'industrial society and its institutional dynamics':

> [T]he deepening of the division of labour, brought about by the industrial revolution ... separated the family (and thus childhood) from the process of modern production and administration. Modern youth is a further extension of the same process of institutional separation or differentiation ... [T]he industrial revolution has produced an institutional structure which 'allows room' for youth. (Berger and Berger, 1976: 240–1)

The reader may note that this reference to 'allowing room' recalls the views of Philippe Aries, cited earlier. What emerged to fill the room, from a constructionist viewpoint, was not just youth itself but a range of professions concerned with young people's education,

welfare and development (for example, teachers, youth workers, social workers and care workers), drawing on the theories and concepts being developed within the new disciplines of psychology, sociology and education. For example, Hendrick (1990) charts the emergence and institutionalisation of the key elements of adolescent psychology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He questions the widely accepted interpretation provided by Gillis (1974) to the effect that adolescence was 'discovered' (or 'invented') in public schools (that is, elite fee paying schools) between 1870 and 1900 – that, in effect, it was a middle-class creation which was gradually 'democratised' to include the working class. Instead, Hendrick argues that the concept of adolescence was at first 'principally concerned with working-class youth' and related to the emerging social problem of urbanism:

> The concept of adolescence as the social psychologists developed it and as other social scientists and educationalists adopted it, was important for categorising knowledge of youth: it delineated reference points; it established norms; and, moreover, it facilitated a more precise age-structuring of the urban population at a time when commentators were eager to know as much as possible about what they regarded as the pathology of urbanism. (Hendrick, 1990: 88)

Ultimately concerns about working-class young males became concerns about adolescence and youth in general, and a pattern emerged of regular 'moral panics' (Cohen, 2002) about young people's problematic behaviour, fuelled as time went on by a burgeoning mass media for whom the combination of 'youth' with 'sex and drugs and rock'n'roll' (and variations on the theme) was to become – and remain – a staple of news and feature coverage, often with a distinctively gendered character (Devlin, 2003; Griffin, 1997). The continuing prevalence of stereotypical images of young people, and the fact that young people take heed of and care about such images, has been the subject of recent research which places the Irish experience in a comparative international context. Devlin (2006*a*) found that dominant media images of young people in Ireland tend to correspond to those in countries such as Britain, the United States and Australia, whereby young people are represented overwhelmingly – particularly in the news media – either as 'being problems or having problems'. Even the more 'positive' images of young people in other media such as teenage magazines or TV 'soaps' also tend to be stereotypical and distorted, focusing predominantly on certain types of young people, or certain aspects of

being young. The research also found that young people – while they did not tend to use the term themselves – are highly sensitive to the ways in which such images and representations are 'social constructs'.

An important constructionist analysis with a pan-European dimension is provided by Wallace and Kovatcheva (1998), who argue that youth was just one of a number of essentialist categories like 'race' and 'gender' which emerged and – at least for a time – became entrenched during modernity, when there was a 'need to divide people into strongly distinguished groups ... with the elaboration of theories to sustain and justify this division' (Wallace and Kovatcheva, 1998: 6). In particular, youth was the creation of State systems through which age became 'bureaucratically calibrated'. Without a comprehensive State, such precise definitions would not have been possible. The authors go further and suggest that, just as modernisation constructed youth as a social category, so too 'postmodernisation is deconstructing youth' (209); an idea which clearly complements some of the thinking on youth transitions outlined in the previous section (and in fact you may have noticed that Wallace's work features in both sections). Table 2.1 summarises Wallace and Kovatcheva's view of the contrasting implications of modernisation and postmodernisation for youth.

As well as referring to the process whereby social structures and institutions (including institutionalised age relations) can undergo evolution or even transformation, the term 'constructionism' can also be used to refer to the capacity of individuals to construct their own identities through exercising 'agency', making choices about the kind of life they want to live (this point was also touched on in the previous section). In contemporary society, such 'choices' are often essentially about *consumption* patterns, a process that has been termed 'shopping for subjectivities' (Langman, 1992). This concept has a lot of resonance in the Irish context, where the shopping mall has become a key element of urban and suburban culture for both young people and adults. Frost (2003) notes that for both boys and girls 'shopping' need not simply be a case of passive consumerism – 'the context of shopping may allow for a sense of choice, action and agency' (2003: 58) – but also cautions that it carries the risk of being experienced as excluding or disempowering: a case of 'conform or else' (2003: 59). One way or the other, the individual as consumer, and the lifestyle(s) that can be actively constructed through consumption, are at the heart of many analyses of young people's (and indeed adults') experiences

Table 2.1: Contrasts between Modernisation and Postmodernisation for Youth

Modernisation	Postmodernisation
Youth defined by precisely calibrated age	Youth as an age group dissolves
Work-achievement ethic	Leisure-expressive ethic
Distinguishing youth by male and female (separate schooling, youth provision, etc.)	Mixed provision
Ethnic groups defined as 'immigrants', assimilationist model through social policies	Range of ethnic hybridisation and differentiation through youth cultures; multicultural models
Separations by class/education linked to levels of the labour market – more education for some and work or training for others	More and more education and training for everyone
Youth culture associated with specific 'courting period'	Youth culture associated with all periods of life
Youth as a period between family of origin and family of destination	No clear division between family of origin and family of destination – perhaps no family of destination
Working class most disadvantaged youth	Non-working class (those without jobs) most disadvantaged youth
Politicisation of youth movements and youth as the bearer of the bright new future	De-politicisation of youth
Conventional right–left politics	New social movements

Source: Wallace, C. and Kovatcheva, S. (1998), *Youth in Society: The Construction and Deconstruction of Youth in East and West Europe*, London: Macmillan, 216. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

in the postindustrial and postmodern age. Indeed, concepts such as 'taste', 'fashion' and 'lifestyle' have been described as 'the key sources of [contemporary] social differentiation' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 121–2).

While longer established forms of social differentiation may persist (including class and gender), consumerism is certainly a core value in contemporary society. The *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003*a*) has suggested

that, while consumerism in itself is probably irreversible, forms of 'critical consumption' can be encouraged and enhanced through effective educational programmes both in schools and through youth work, which would better prepare young people to make positive use of the increasing consumer choices open to them, including the opportunities for self-expression and socialising provided by information technologies. (Of course, these are not new arguments – see, for example, Henriksson, 1983; see also Chapter 1 in this volume.) Without support, information and guidance, consumption and lifestyle choices 'may be exercised to harmful effect, whether for the individual him/herself or for others, and often with consequences for the wider community or for society as a whole' (Department of Education and Science, 2003*a*: 4).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of five major theoretical perspectives on young people drawn principally from the academic disciplines of psychology and sociology. There are some direct points of conflict or contradiction to be found, and many points of tension and differences of philosophy or ethos across the five. There are certainly considerable differences of emphasis from one to the other, and this is what makes it meaningful to present them separately. To repeat the image presented earlier, each is like a set of lenses through which we can apprehend and understand 'youth' in contemporary society, and, depending on which set we choose, our attention will be drawn to some features rather than others. Indeed, some features will remain virtually hidden unless a particular set of lenses is chosen.

How do these lenses relate to Irish youth work policy and practice? Certainly we can say that, historically, social policy on young people in Ireland has, for the most part, reflected a generational approach, one that places an emphasis on the way in which young people *in general* are different from other sections of the population. Thus, youth policy documents have tended to start with a focus on such matters as 'the needs of young people' and 'the social situation of young people'; in fact these were the exact titles of chapters or sections in two significant documents, the O'Sullivan Report (Department of Education, 1980) and the Costello Report (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984). Devlin (1989) explored the ways in which this generational emphasis could be interpreted as serving the *ideological* purpose of emphasising a 'consensual' vision of Irish society and playing down

possible sites or sources of conflict, including those relating to class, gender and sexuality (although other writers, including Kiely and McMahon in Chapters 1 and 5, highlight the fact that the Costello Report was the first important Irish youth policy document to emphasise young people's potential role in bringing about social change). By contrast, more recent youth policy, including the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003*a*), explicitly addresses at least some of the ways in which young people have different – indeed *unequal* – experiences and circumstances, identities and opportunities, and in doing so appears to reflect a greater awareness of the insights provided by a structuralist analysis.

As will be clear from the previous two sections of this chapter (and as Kiely suggests in Chapter 1), the *Development Plan* also includes some observations about young people in contemporary Ireland which are very much in tune with the transitional and constructionist perspectives, indicating that an unquestioning acceptance of the generational approach may be a thing of the past. However, it is important not to overstate the change. Formal education is a central element of 'youth policy', broadly defined (accounting for a huge proportion of public spending as compared with nonformal or informal education), and it remains firmly generational in orientation, both in policy and practice, reflected most obviously in the continuing use of an age-calibrated approach to entry into, and progression through, the primary and secondary systems.

It is important to remember that all of the theoretical perspectives outlined in this chapter emerged and developed in a predominantly Anglo–North American environment and that, whichever perspective is at issue, the 'theory' needs to be tempered with an awareness of the ways in which a given social and cultural context will have an impact on lived experience. For example, as touched on already, in twentieth-century Ireland (and indeed before) the experience of emigration was an important part of the transition into adulthood for a very large proportion of Irish young people, with obvious implications for their own families, for local community life throughout the country and for social and demographic systems in general. Yet the conventional transitional model takes no account of this.

It is also important to reiterate the fact that – while they have been presented separately for the sake of analysis, and while there are certainly points of tension and contradiction – the five perspectives outlined above are *not* mutually exclusive, and neither are they exhaustive. In practice – including youth work practice – human experience is too complex to capture in a single theoretical lens. The

point therefore is not to *choose* one of these perspectives, but rather to weigh their arguments one against the other (in the light of our own experience and that of the young people we work with) and draw on them as appropriate in different settings and contexts. As was said at the outset, all practice with young people reflects underlying assumptions, whether consciously or not, which are likely to be based on theoretical frameworks such as those presented here. Making sure that these assumptions *do* become conscious puts workers in a much stronger position to place them in context and to explore alternatives, thereby interrogating and hopefully improving their practice.