

Youth, transitions and risk

CHAPTER

2

Sample pages



Get up stand up

As explained in chapter 1, at the present time in history – even in relatively peaceful and comfortable Australia – we come to perceive imminent *risk* (Beck 1992) of many kinds all around us. Look at the young people in the photograph on the previous page. They are participating in a mass rally in Sydney against liberalising global trade agreements proposed by the WTO (World Trade Organization). Their protest claims that many countries, including Australia, will run the risk of negative consequences if all trade barriers and subsidies across the world are removed. You may not agree with their opinion. But the demonstration does signal youth perceptions of global risk. Participation by young people in rallies of this kind signals that the generation as a whole is concerned to varying degrees about what will happen when they are adults. In fact, youth in general do express a heightened sense of anxiety about the future. As they *transit* from the relatively secure world of childhood towards the uncertain world of adult responsibilities, youth come to realise what kind of risks and challenges they will have to manage, both personally and collectively. In the first part of this chapter we will focus upon the process of transition from childhood to adulthood.

Youth transitions: from what to what?

It was implied in chapter 1 that young people are usually imagined as individuals in **transition** from childhood to adulthood, from school to work. Certainly much of the early American research on youth was about this process. However, youth transition has recently become a topic of hot debate among youth researchers (for example, Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Cieslik & Pollock 2002). It is questionable whether we can even talk about youth *transitions* anymore when the demographic category of ‘youth’ – or *emerging adulthood* (Arnett 2004) – can extend up until the age of 35. So let us see what youth transitions meant in the past, and contrast it to the contemporary debate.

Traditional youth transitions

British youth researchers Furlong and Cartmel maintain that historically there are three kinds of youth transitions: ‘school to work transitions, domestic transitions and housing transitions’ (1997, p.9). Previously this was imagined as a straightforward chronological sequence. The scenario went as follows: in a previous age (when few attend university), the young person aged 14–18 completes his or her education, finds a job, starts to live independently, finds a marriage partner, and moves into his or her own home – usually by the age of 21 or so. From there the story

changes depending on gender. For males, symbolically achieving full adult citizen status used to mean a full-time permanent job, stable marriage to a financially dependent wife, then children and home ownership. For females, symbolically achieving full adult status used to mean stable marriage to a solid breadwinner husband, a strong focus on family and household (rather than paid work), motherhood and shared home ownership.

So how does this model of youth transition shape up in the postmodern era? Not well at all (Skelton 2002). 'We are witnessing increasingly prolonged, decoupled transitions between education and work, dating and mating, and childhood and adulthood' (Côté 2003, p.2). Adolescence is now just an early stage of youth. New terms for the later age bracket have proliferated. For example, **post-adolescence** 'takes into account parents' diminished ability to control their children's decisions and the objective lengthening of the period between completion of schooling and creation of a new family' (IARD 2001, p.37). While some Australian youth researchers stress the combination of 'adult age' with 'childlike' dependency – speaking of the new post-adolescents as 'dependulfs' (Bessant & Sercombe 1998, p.172) – others note the very opposite trend in youth transitions. White and Wyn (2004) talk of a new 'adulthood' being imposed on youth in their teens so that some youth reach 'adulthood' quite early. How could both these things be true at the same time? This apparent contradiction in claims can possibly be explained by socioeconomic or class differences, so that both trends actually do coexist, but not in the same youth cohorts or locations.

However, we also know that while some aspects of current youthful lives are adult-like early on, in other aspects dependency is extended. Researcher David Chalke conducted interviews with 1000 young Australians in 2005. He claims that Australian youth are being forced to grow up early, because they have to deal with issues like sex and drug education, careers and global warming at a much earlier age than ever before (Chalke, quoted in Lee 2006, p.3). At the same time, though, young people are entering the full-time labour force much later, are dependent and living at home with parents much longer, and are marrying and having children later (Pitman 2003). Arnett reports that when he asks young people aged 18–25 whether they have reached adulthood, most respond both yes *and* no (2006, p.113).

We acknowledge that class, gender and ethnic differences make a great difference to transition experiences and outcomes for youth. Given these differences, it is almost impossible to generalise about contemporary youth transitions in Australia. Nevertheless, in this chapter we make many generalisations. This is virtually inevitable because we are talking about theoretical interpretations of broad trends. So when we speak of

youth below, please be aware that it is usually a racially inclusive, degendered, non-marginal idea of youth. This allows us to appropriately set the theoretical stage for our discussion in subsequent chapters, where we do discuss class, gender and ethnic/racial differences of Australian youth in the detail they deserve.

Contemporary youth transitions

Nowadays the transition from school to work is no longer direct, as it was in the time of your grandparents. Back then most young people left school between 14 and 18 and permanently entered the workforce. But things are different now. Early school-to-work transfer is relatively rare (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000). Even those who complete Year 10 may not make a direct transition. The youth labour market has changed to favour situations in which young people work while still attending educational institutions. For example, the proportion of Australian young people combining school and work is now almost 45 per cent (Curtain 2003). Employers tend to prefer such candidates over early school-leavers.

Young people today spend much longer in education (and working part-time) than ever before, and may not exit some undergraduate degrees until the age of 25. In 2003, twentysomethings were almost twice as likely to be studying than in 1976 – 23 per cent compared to 12 per cent – and to have gained a non-school qualification – 45 per cent compared to 31 per cent (ABS 2005a). Also, many integrated youth training schemes involve simultaneous participation in both the paid workforce and an educational institution (Mizen 1995). Youth who leave school before Year 10, even for a job, face a definite risk of long-term unemployment. In May 2003, the unemployment rate of 3 per cent for people aged 20–64 years with higher education qualifications was half the rate of 6 per cent for those without such qualifications (ABS 2005a). In May 2003, only 16 per cent of all 15–19 year olds were in full-time employment (ABS 2004). Even university graduates may face periods of unemployment in their chosen field, implicitly postponing the transition to full adult citizenship. Moreover, the kinds of work available to the current generation of school-leavers and tertiary graduates are rarely the lifelong jobs of yesteryear, but casual, temporary or contractual positions – for both sexes. The percentage of casual workers aged under 25 in Australia is around 41 per cent (ABS 2004).

Young people today expect to change jobs a number of times in their working lives, and that periods of unemployment and retraining will be involved. All this means that the stage at which young people achieve a full transition from school to work is now difficult to pinpoint. The process is usually not straightforward but a long zigzag. Furthermore, a

young person may not choose the same education or career options as his or her siblings and peers, unlike previous generations when nearly all youth of a certain age and location tended to enter specific labour market sectors (such as factory work). In Britain, Furlong and Cartmel sum up the current school-to-work transitions as ‘increasingly fragmented’ (1997, p.27) – ‘a complex set of routes into the labour market’ (p.39). Similarly, Arnett describes the transition period as ‘highly unstructured and unsettled’ (2006, p.113).

Turning to ‘domestic transitions’, the process here is once again much longer, less **linear** (Te Riele 2004) and more complex. Firstly, the age of first marriage (or recognised de facto relationship) in Australia is now much later. Age at first marriage has been increasing steadily and has not yet levelled off. In 1981, the peak age for brides and grooms was 20–24 (Pitman 2003, p.30). By 2004, the median age of first marriage was 29 years for men and 28 for women. Cohabitation prior to marriage is also common. Of those marrying in 2004, 76 per cent said that they cohabited prior to the marriage – up from 69 per cent in 1999 and 16 per cent in 1975 (ABS 2005b). Given the contemporary pattern of serial monogamy – a series of monogamous but not long-lasting relationships – for those aged under 30, we can see that ‘domestic’ transitions may continue for 20 years or so. As for the gendered fork in the transitions road, the trend now is to ‘partnership’ marriages in which traditional notions of male breadwinner and female homemaker have to some extent been set aside (or at least until the first child arrives). Men are not readily finding permanent jobs for life that enable a completely dependent wife. There is much evidence that young women no longer regard paid work as just a short stage before marriage and motherhood (Pocock 2001; Heath & Kenyon 2001). Furthermore, the total fertility rate fell in Australia to 1.76 in 2003 (ABS 2005b). Median age of bearing a first child has risen steadily, and now stands at around 30.5 for women (ABS 2005b). The chances of twentysomethings having their own family with children in 2003 was half what it used to be – 20 per cent compared to 41 per cent in 1976 (ABS 2005b). In short, young couples are having fewer children and having them later in life, further extending the period before the symbolic status of full adult citizenship is reached.

Turning finally to ‘housing transitions’, we find that getting a first job does not now automatically signal a move to independent living. Twentysomethings in 2001 were more likely to be living with their parents than in 1976 – 30 per cent compared to 21 per cent respectively (ABS 2005a), while only 12.4 per cent were group household members (ABS 2003). In Australian capital cities, median house prices are well beyond the budgets of most young people, and actual purchase (through mortgage) of a first home usually does not typically occur until after a couple reaches

their mid-thirties. In short, we agree with Australian youth researcher Ani Wierenga – due to changes in both the economy and labour market, young Australians now find it hard to achieve the key landmarks of adulthood – finding a job, getting married, having children and purchasing a house (2002, p.11).

The prolonged transition of Fred and Trinity

Let's spell this contemporary youth phenomenon out in a narrative way by creating an imaginary young man – 'Fred' – and an imaginary young woman – 'Trinity'. Fred is an ordinary 14-year-old boy living in an average house in an average suburb in Melbourne right now with his mum and dad and older sister. He would like to be an architect. Trinity is an ordinary 14-year-old girl from a similarly average background right now in Sydney who dreams of becoming a town planner. In the last years of secondary school, to support his sporting interests, Fred undertakes casual work in the sports centre canteen. To support her social and fashion needs, Trinity works at McDonald's. Neither Fred nor Trinity is eligible for university Austudy allowance because parental income is too high. After her final exams, Trinity does not go to university right away, preferring to take a 'gap' year working in retail. She moves out into a flat with two friends and parties – hard. Fred is thrilled to gain a place in architecture but has to continue casual work while studying to meet sport and socialising costs. Fred remains living at home with his parents. The following year, Trinity starts her town planning degree, but finds she must move back in with her parents to cut living costs, even while still working part-time. By now Fred has found that he can't keep up with architecture study while working, so he arranges a bank loan to cover living costs until he finishes his degree. In Sydney, Trinity continues to live at home and earn income from casual work while she completes her degree. In the last year she also arranges a bank loan through her parents to cover costs so she can study for final exams and complete her professional placement.

Degrees complete, Fred and Trinity both apply for jobs and are appointed to the same building consultancy firm in Melbourne. Although their graduate starting salaries are high, they both have loans to repay and HECS debt, so they do not have much disposable income. Both move into share households close to work to save transport costs. Not long after, they meet for the first time and fall in love at a staff party. In the second year of their jobs in the building consultancy firm, they move into a rented house together. Three years later they announce their engagement, just after they finally pay off all their study-related debts. Trinity and Fred would dearly like to have two children and raise them in the same kind of pleasant, middle-class suburb they both grew up in. So they get married, arrange a

local honeymoon, and move in with Fred's parents to save for a house deposit. That takes two years of stringent economising, and they find they must settle for a much smaller house than they wanted, in a less popular suburb.

At the age of 30, Fred and Trinity as an adult couple finally move into their own home, but find they are barely managing the mortgage repayments and furnishing costs. With little warning the building consultancy firm announces it is downsizing and their work contracts will not be renewed. Trinity enrolls part-time in an MBA to maximise her job prospects, while working again in retail. Fred starts to do freelance architecture work at night and contract drafting during the day to produce an income, while he looks for work. It will take eight months for the two of them to find jobs that suit their qualifications and experience, but neither of these jobs will be permanent. It will be at least three more years before they build up a solid savings safety margin and start trying for their first child. Trinity and Fred will not become parents until after the age of 35. According to the traditional transitions model, it is only then they will attain unquestionable adult citizen status.

Questioning and reshaping the idea of youth transitions

You can see now why the notion of youth transitions has become a hot debate among researchers and policy-makers. It is clear that the very concept of transition itself must be reframed and redefined. First we have to acknowledge that all three kinds of transition are greatly extended in late modernity. Second, the biographies of young people today reflect a blending of transition experiences, such as working while studying, or working full-time but still living at home. In the story of Trinity and Fred we see how each must make their path through life individually, even after becoming a couple. The second trend in youth transitions is shaped by **individualisation** – each young person is under pressure to consciously tailor-make his or her own life trajectory towards successful adult citizenship (see Giddens 1991).

Although an attractive theory, we should not push the notion of individualisation in youth transitions too far, and imagine that it is all now a matter of free choice in lifestyle variations. There are still recognisable structural factors that compel particular cohorts of young people towards transitions which are early or late, smooth or troubled. In countries like Australia these have to do with socioeconomic stratification and sociocultural exclusion (Bynner 2005, p.370). In other words, class, race, ethnicity and gender still play a shaping role in what happens *when, why* and *how* in the stage of life some call 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2004; 2006).

Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel make this point very strongly, arguing that while youth transitions are increasingly fragmented, **non-linear** and characterised by apparent choice and fluidity, structural ‘interdependencies’ of class, race, ethnicity and gender still matter a great deal in the life trajectories of contemporary youth (Furlong & Cartmel 1997, p.113–4). As dedicated youth researchers, Furlong and Cartmel are very critical of Giddens’ sociological ‘individualisation’ thesis, so it is to that set of arguments that we turn now.

Giddens: individualisation, de-traditionalisation and uncertainty

Writing in the early 1990s, Giddens proposes that in ‘high modernity’ (the last decades of the twentieth century and the start of the current century), people are subject to a range of uncertainties as the choices in their lives increase in number, and become more complex and confusing (Giddens 1991). Commenting on contemporary Australian youth, Huntley claims that ‘living in today’s world means you have to live with uncertainty’ (2006, p.3). One reason often cited for the epidemic of late modern uncertainty is the mass commodification of goods and services, which results in people feeling ‘overwhelmed and bewildered by the seemingly endless array of choices available to them’ (Huntley 2006, p.170). According to Giddens, another reason is **de-traditionalisation** – the withering away of old forms of social collectivity and associated norms of behaviour (Giddens 1994). Where the young person no longer gains a strong primary identity from place, kinship, religion or membership of a social class, ‘each phase of transition tends to become an identity crisis’ (Giddens 1991, p.148). In such conditions, the ‘self’ becomes what Giddens calls a ‘reflexive project’, something to be consciously worked on. ‘We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves [. . .] what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which she or he engages’ (Giddens 1991, p.75).

These ‘reconstructive endeavours’ demand positioning oneself simultaneously as the individual focus of the project for building a coherent sense of self, and the agent doing the building. In youth transitions, this means creating a legitimate, socially recognised identity for oneself by choosing between options or pathways. At the macro level, the young person can apparently choose a life pathway through higher education (or not), through late marriage (or not), or even through membership of spectacular youth cultures (or not). At the micro level, identities legitimate within youth culture can be established by judicious consumption of consumer goods and fashion trends. Psychologically, this process expresses the need for the young person to find ‘ontological security’

(Giddens 1991, p.44) – a symbolic position of safety and certainty. Fred and Trinity, for example, identify full student loan repayment, achieving home ownership and creating a savings safety margin as sequences in a journey towards the symbolic space of certainty in which they can conceive a child. Giddens' individualisation thesis also illuminates to some extent Eckersley's findings on youth suicide rates which showed that 'suicidal behaviour increases when unhappy people have fewer outside sources on which to blame their misery; that the greater happiness of most increases the misery of the few; or that social changes such as *increasing individualism* are good for the majority but bad for a minority' (Eckersley 2001, p.2, our emphasis).

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) warn against attaching too much significance to the kinds of changes Giddens highlights, however. For example, while it is perfectly admissible that a young person no longer derives a strong primary identity from place, kinship, religion or social class membership, this does not necessarily mean these facts of existence do not still shape their lives. Just because no young person actually says he or she is 'working-class' anymore, it does not mean that the working class has disappeared. Even though each phase of youth transition may have become an 'identity crisis' in late modernity, as Giddens claims, these 'crises' will most likely be highly gendered, and based on race and class. We argue that the **reflexive** project of the self is implicitly limited in its scale of reinvention – first, by abundance or shortage of *resources* (especially money), and second, by abundance or lack of *opportunities* (for example, not everyone gets the choice of completing higher education). Relative abundance or lack of resources and opportunities tends to strongly follow the pattern of prevailing social inequalities. This means an uneven distribution of choices and opportunities for youth. Remember Trinity and Fred? They obviously had the middle-class resources to start reinventing themselves when they lost their jobs, but think about those youth *without* tertiary qualifications and family support. What would they do?

Furlong and Cartmel find German sociologist Ulrich Beck's thesis of the 'risk' society far more worthy of recognition in its contribution to late-1990s theorising about youth, and so it is to Beck's arguments that we now turn.

Risk? Or perceptions of risk?

We mentioned Beck quite extensively in chapter 1. Here we take up his ideas more deeply. Let's look first at the straightforward meaning of 'risk' for youth through an example. The following list of risks comes from a New Zealand study into youth 'inactivity' – where inactivity means 'not in education, work or training' (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development 2003, p.2):

Normative notions of youth risk

To give our discussion a context, we start with a list that encodes normative notions of youth-at-risk:

Pathways into inactivity

- ▶ family disadvantage (including low income, parental education levels, maternal age at birth of child, family conflict and cohesion)
- ▶ attention difficulties
- ▶ conduct disorder
- ▶ lack of preschool education
- ▶ low cognitive development
- ▶ disciplinary problems and peer rejection at school
- ▶ truancy, suspension, expulsion, or early school leaving
- ▶ academic failure
- ▶ teenage fertility
- ▶ physical and mental ill health
- ▶ substance abuse
- ▶ early and prolonged experience of unemployment (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development 2003, p.3).

This list above is useful because it reveals the way social welfare agencies routinely analyse risk in regard to young people. This is certainly not the list that those same young people might generate themselves if asked about risks. For example, they would be very unlikely to name 'lack of preschool education' as a risk factor in their lives. When we do ask young people about risk relevant to participation in education and work we get some answers quite different to the list above, which are dominated by family and personal problems. For example, in a 2002 study conducted in Newcastle, New South Wales, young people from a disadvantaged secondary school identified the major obstacles to achieving their ambitions in education and work as:

- ▶ money problems in the family
- ▶ other people negatively affecting their chances
- ▶ lack of jobs or opportunities available in their field of interest
- ▶ educational failure
- ▶ not achieving entry to competitive, quota-limited places in post-secondary training institutions (Threadgold & Nilan 2004).

These are *structural* risks – lack of money in the family for educational support, lack of jobs in the local region, lack of post-secondary training, and a shortage of funded university places in the fields they wanted.

The second thing the New Zealand list reveals about the way social welfare agencies typically analyse risks for young people is exemplified in a comment on the same page: 'Risk factors tend to operate cumulatively along developmental pathways, with one risk factor leading to

another, progressively compounding the likelihood that a young person will be inactive' (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development 2003, p.3).

The metaphor here is of youth-at-risk proceeding inexorably step by step down a pathway into an adolescent hell of inactivity, then presumably to early incarceration. In fact, one of the most risky things that can happen to a young person in trouble is to be formally labelled 'at risk' (Wyn & White 1997, p.141). Such well-meaning labels, once affixed, are very hard to remove from records and lives. They tend to follow some young people about as a stigma. Even though these youth may never commit a crime, they may be seen as a poor credit risk, an unsuitable tenant, an undesirable employee. In practice the term 'at risk' is not really a great improvement on the now unfashionable term 'juvenile delinquent'. Australian health researcher Richard Eckersley refutes the view that 'a small group of troubled youth is clearly segregated from the mainstream, or majority, of young people who are happy, healthy and thriving'. He maintains that 'there are gradients of disturbance, distress and discomfort that include a large minority of young people today, perhaps even a majority at some time in their lives' (Eckersley 2001, p.4).

So while some young people may be in actual danger, most youth 'risk' factors identified by welfare agencies, or the older generation, or the media, have an element of *perception* about them (Kelly 2003; 2006). That is, they reflect prevailing ideas about youth and risk. Identifications of youth-at-risk also tend to commit one of the great sins of social science – they take any *correlation* as *causality*. To do this is to take a *correlation* – for example, the fact that all those suffering from miscarriages are women – and make the assumption that being female *causes* miscarriages. In the New Zealand list above, the most striking example of this interpretive error is the idea that 'substance abuse' somehow *causes* labour market inactivity to come about for youth-at-risk. We need to be very careful of such an assumption. In the first place, 'substance abuse' is ambiguous – rather like 'teenage fertility'. It may refer to heavy use of illegal drugs, but this is not clear. Weekend bingeing on alcohol is usually included in the umbrella term 'substance abuse', but that particular practice is not only favoured by the majority of youth in Australia, but the majority of their parents. So identifying *that* practice as a 'risk' contributing in a causal way to labour market inactivity of certain young people seems far-fetched. In fact we could make the reverse claim – that spending money on alcohol and recreational drugs by youth is more likely to indicate labour market *involvement* than inactivity.

To take this reverse logic further we could argue that *not* participating in some 'substance abuse' practices, like binge-drinking and smoking marijuana with peers, presents a substantial *social* risk for many youth. As Australian youth researcher Rebecca Huntley (2006, p.155) claims,

‘the cost of being different, of not belonging or keeping up with the consumer habits of your peers, is high. You risk social [. . .] alienation and personal unhappiness’ (see also Pocock & Clarke 2004).

Socioeconomic distribution of risk

Beck maintained that risk, and our perceptions of risk in this frantic world, drive our actions as we construct a sense of who we are and what we need to achieve in life. Yet ‘risks’ in Beck’s perspective are not distributed evenly in the population. He recognised that ‘risk adheres to class patterns, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom’, so that those at the bottom attract ‘an unfortunate abundance of risks’ (Beck 1992, p.35). Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the Newcastle research (Threadgold 2002; Threadgold & Nilan 2004) were highly aware of structural risks associated with the socioeconomic position of their families in the working class or in the ranks of the long-term unemployed. In contrast, young people from more privileged backgrounds in the Newcastle study identified obstacles to their life goals primarily in terms of personal failings, lack of focus, not knowing what to choose as a career, laziness, failing to maximise their potential and so on. They rarely mentioned structural risks. This data contrast signals to us that young people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds have an associated view of the world and the future which matches their location in the social structure. Pierre Bourdieu calls this *habitus*. We explore Bourdieu’s ideas in chapter 3.

Giddens and Castells – individualisation, the ‘space of flows’ and identity

While the majority of children are still shielded to some extent from endemic instability, youth face the full force of uncertainty and rapid change as they struggle to achieve coherent identities during transitions. The story of Fred and Trinity outlined earlier in this chapter, while fictional, is not a fantasy but an amalgamation of a million real-life stories. Not only do they battle structural problems (like unemployment), they face the deeper identity question – ‘Who are we?’ – or, separately, ‘Who am I?’ For example, when they finally get married, but move back in with Fred’s mum and dad, they are an ‘adult’ married couple, not so young anymore, but they are still not yet independent home-owners, and not yet parents, although they want to be. When they finally move into their home, they find their identity as ‘workers’ has vanished. Trinity even takes up the identity of student again.

Giddens uses the concepts of individualisation and reflexivity to

explain contemporary social identity struggles. In late modernity, 'the self is reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography' (Giddens 1991, p.53). As we saw above, reflexivity is a kind of feedback loop of self-evaluation through which we reinvent ourselves to deal with social and economic challenges. Young people now live their lives more self-consciously, actively planning or projecting themselves imaginatively as individuals into a future adult existence.

If we translate this into our discussion of contemporary youth transitions in Australia, we might claim, then, that young people now come to define themselves – gain a sense of who they are – primarily through individual choices in the lifestyle rather than by reproducing family and community identity frameworks. In the case of Trinity and Fred – who actually want to reproduce some conditions of their families of origin – the world has changed, even for middle-class young people. Risk and the responsibility for managing risk have become the preserve of individuals and very small groups (couples and nuclear family), rather than larger collectivities such as kin and locale groups, or the state (Kelly 2006). In short, young people everywhere now grow up in 'risk' society (Beck 1992; Furlong & Cartmel 1997), a global state of perceived uncertainty and threat within which the individual struggles to find security and a stable identity (Giddens 1991).

Manuel Castells takes this claim further again, arguing that 'our world, and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity'. By 'globalization' he means worldwide IT (information technology); the restructuring of world trade, labour and money markets; and a 'pervasive, interconnected, and diversified media system'. This is a global *network* – 'a space of flows and of timeless time' (Castells 1997, p.1). The people of the world are positioned in various locations within this material and virtual network, according to their life situations. For those at the symbolic top, who occupy privileged positions in the global space of flows, fitting their personal identities into the 'legitimizing identities' offered by 'dominant institutions of society' is easy (Castells 1997, p.8). For those at the very bottom, however, who are positioned outside the space of flows – such as the homeless, refugees or unemployed – the 'legitimizing identities' offered by dominant institutions of society, or even relatively humble identity labels such as 'worker' or 'citizen', may have little meaning.

If we return for one final time to Trinity and Fred, and imagine them recast as Jason and Tiffany who grew up in housing commission flats, left school before the age of 15, met at a rock concert, married before the age of 20, now have two children aged under three, and are both unemployed and living together in yet another housing commission flat, you get a sense of how some young people may indeed be positioned outside the

'space of flows', experience more risks, and have many fewer choices. In one way, Jason and Tiffany would fulfil all youth transition criteria for achieving full adulthood early in life, except for perhaps the most significant one – they are unemployed and have no income except welfare payments. Moreover, their situation is unlikely to change since they do not possess the reflexive resources (including education) to readily reinvent themselves even though they are quite stable, resilient people in their own right.

Conclusion

Having reviewed some of the relevant theories, we can suggest a number of propositions that might be productively applied to understanding contemporary youth transitions in Australia.

- 1 Youth transitions are now greatly prolonged and do not proceed in a linear fashion.
- 2 As young people move towards the uncertain and rapidly changing adult world, they become aware of the many risks and challenges they will have to manage, both personally and collectively.
- 3 Fixed sources of collectively reinforced meaning such as religion, gender, class, marriage, lifetime employment and the extended family have diminished in the post-traditional era.
- 4 We are seeing the individualisation of transitions. Each young person now must create a life trajectory – but does so within structural limits of class, race and gender.
- 5 Ontological insecurity encourages individual and group self-invention in lifestyle and consumption practices.
- 6 Some privileged youth have developed reflexive and flexible generative dispositions of habitus to support them in the risk management and identity reinvention demanded by neo-liberal governmentality.
- 7 Youth outside the space of flows, occupying marginal positions, find these new reflexive and flexible generative dispositions of habitus much harder to acquire, and this may contribute to the production of resistant identities.

This chapter sets the stage theoretically. Whether we are talking in future chapters about the practices of young people in religion or sport or crime or popular culture, those practices should be understood as taking place within the extended, non-linear youth transitions of late modernity we discuss above.

Key terms

De-traditionalisation – the process in which traditions, traditional practices and ideas become progressively less and less important in people’s lives.

Individualisation – in late modernity, the idea of the individual is paramount and has become much more significant than the idea of the family, group or collectivity.

Linear and **non-linear** – linear means ‘in a straight line’; non-linear is the opposite.

Post-adolescence – the period following adolescence when young people are still fully or partially dependent on their families or have yet to gain full adult citizenship.

Reflexive – self-consciously aware and engaged in self-surveillance, reflection on the self and the presentation of the self.

Transition – a passage or movement from one state to another; young people move from a childlike dependent status to full adult, independent living status.

Discussion questions

- 1 Using Furlong and Cartmel’s identification of the three different kinds of youth transitions – school-to-work, domestic and housing – discuss how these have eventuated in your own life, or in the lives of people you know (work in small groups if possible).
- 2 What are some of the problems with using Giddens’ notion of *individualisation* in analysing contemporary youth transitions?
- 3 What kind of specific resources and opportunities either limit or enhance the *reflexive project* of the self for contemporary youth?
- 4 What are some of the specific short-term and long-term problems that arise from defining some youth using the label ‘youth-at-risk’? How does this notion of risk differ from Beck’s definition of risk?
- 5 Recast the fictional Trinity and Fred as Jason and Tiffany. Map out their life trajectories using your imagination and the ideas about contemporary youth transitions offered in this chapter (work in small groups if possible).

Suggested essay topics

- 1 Describe the major differences between traditional youth transitions and the contemporary transitions process.
- 2 Why do contemporary theorists argue so strongly in favour of 'risk' society? Explain your answer in reference to youth transitions.

Further reading

Australian government websites

Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce,
 <www.connecttoyourfuture.dest.gov.au/youthpathways>
 The Source – Youth Gateway, <www.youth.gov.au>
 Australian Institute of Family Studies, <www.aifs.gov.au>

Journals

Journal of Youth Studies, <www.acys.info/journal/overview>

Reports and forums

OECD & CPRN 2005, *From Education to Work: A Difficult Transition for Young Adults with Low Levels of Education*, OECD, Paris, <www.cprn.com/documents/37063_en.pdf>, accessed 7 November 2006
 Dusseldorp Skills Forum, <www.dsf.org.au>

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