RE-CONCEPTUALISING YOUTH: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Marina Galstyan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9396-0550

Founder-director, Center for Educational Research and Consulting

Email: galstyanmarina@gmail.com

Abstract. *There are a bulk of definitions and even controversial claims about the "youth" concept. The origins of the concept date back to early Medieval Times, when youth was associated with self-sufficiency and the ability to take responsibility for others (Jones, G., 2009). Since the 17th century, the ideas of childhood and youth have been associated with dependency. Later on, youth has been perceived as a transitional phase of the human life. Though each of the approaches characterizes a specific aspect of young people's life, taken separately, it does not allow to gain a holistic sense of the concept. To get a comprehensive understanding of the concept, it is necessary to formulate an integrated approach to the youth by analysing existing definitions through the sociological and youth studies perspectives. Thus, the article covers the twofold objectives: 1) a comparative theoretical analysis of contemporary approaches to the "youth" notion; 2) the development of an analytical tool to overcome paradoxes among different approaches defining and conceptualizing the "youth".*

Keywords: *youth, youth studies, sociology of youth, youth independence, youth in transition, youth adaptation.*

ՎԵՐԱՍԱՀՄԱՆԵԼՈՎ ԵՐԻՏԱՍԱՐԴՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ. ՏԵՍԱԿԱՆ ԱԿՆԱՐԿ
Մարինա Գալստյան

Կրթական հետազոտությունների և խորհրդատվությունների կենտրոնի հիմնադիր-տնօրեն

Ամփոփում. *«Երիտասարդություն» հասկացության սահմանումը անցել է պատմական մի շարք փուլեր՝ ձեռք բերելով տարբեր և նույնիսկ հակասական իմաստներ: Երիտասարդության հայեցակարգի նմուշներ և հատկանիշներ եղել են դարեր առաջ, այդ թվում՝ Հին Հունաստանում, երբ Պլատոնը և Արիստոտելը դեռահասությունը դիտարկում էին կյանքի երրորդ փուլ, որը հաջորդում է մանկիկության և մանկության փուլերին: Մինչև միջնադար երիտասարդությունը՝ որպես կյանքի փուլ, կապվում էր ինքնաբավության և այլոց հանդեպ պատասխանատվության կարողության հետ: Արդի հասարակա-գիտական դիսկուրսում երիտասարդությունը սահմանվում է որպես անցումային փուլ: Այս հոդվածում վերանայվում են երիտասարդության սոցիոլոգիայի ժամանակակից մոտեցումներ, ու առաջ է քաշվում տեսակետ, ըստ որի՝ երիտասարդության սահմանումը ներառում է անկախանալու փուլն ու ինքնուրույն որոշումներ ընդունելու, դրանց համար պատասխանատվություն ստանձնելու կարողությունը: Հոդվածում քննարկվում են երիտասարդների անկախության բաղադրիչները՝ տնտեսական, ֆինանսա-կան, մտավոր, նաև ներկայացվում են երիտասարդների՝ անկախություն ձեռք բերելուն նպաստող գոր-ծոնները՝ կրթության, զբաղվածության, կարիերայի, ծնողներից առանձին ապրելու, ճանապարհորդելու հնարավորությունները:*

Բանալի բառեր. *երիտասարդություն, երիտասարդության սոցիոլոգիա, երիտասարդության ուսումնասիրություններ, երիտասարդների անկախություն, կյանքի փուլ, երիտասարդների հարմարում*

РЕКОНЦЕПТУАЛИЗИРУЯ «МОЛОДЕЖЬ»: ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР
Марина Галстян

Основатель-руководитель Центра по образовательным исследованиям и консалтингу

Аннотация: *Определение понятия «молодежь» проходило различные исторические этапы, приобретая разные и даже противоречивые значения. Размышления о молодости как категории известны с древних времен; так, Платон и Аристотель рассматривали подростковый возраст как третий этап жизни, следующий за этапами младенчества и детства. До средневековья юность как жизненный этап ассоциировалась с самодостаточностью и способностью нести ответственность по отношению к другим. В современном дискурсе молодежь определяется как переходный этап между детством и взрослой жизнью. В статье рассматриваются современные подходы в исследованиях молодежи, обосновывается подход к определению молодежи в связи с ее независимостью, рассматриваются составляющие независимости молодежи: экономическая, финансовая, интеллектуальная. Представлены факторы, способствующие достижению независимости молодежи: возможность получения образования, трудоустройства, карьерного роста, проживание отдельно от родителей, самостоятельные путешествия.*

Ключевые слова: *молодежь, молодежные исследования, независимость молодежи, жизненный этап.*

Introduction

According to the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, "youth is just a word", and "a notion evolving over the centuries into a social construct (sources)". Youth is "a stage of life between childhood and adulthood" or the period when a person gains independency from dependency (Kehily, 2007). Another approach suggests to defining youth as a cultural marker meaning "a distinct social status with specific roles, rituals, and relationships" (USAID, 2005). According to the Armenian State Youth Policy Concept, young people represent the 16-30 age group of the population. It is worth stressing that definitions of youth by age groups vary across various international and local institutions. For example, the UN defines youth as those persons between 15 to 24 years old. Thus, we can assume that there are at least three main directions for conceptualizing youth notion:

1.   theoretical and scientific approaches,
2.   socio-political context,
3.   purposes of particular research.

The ultimate goal of this article is to formulate the basics for developing a theoretical framework merging these three approaches in light of one of the most important characteristics of youth concept-independence.

The sociological literature review suggests that there are some theoretical approaches that provide the following definition of youth.

- Youth as a **life stage** between childhood and adulthood (Haveren, 1976).
- Conceptualization of youth in terms of **youth culture**, specific roles, social status, etc. In the early twentieth century, K. Mannheim (Mannheim, 1952) and T. Parsons noted how many young people came to recognize their common way of life (ideas, culture, life chances) and what they shared with other youth in contrast to adults, thus setting up the possibility of generational conflict and tensions (Cieslik, Simpson, 2013). The authors paid more attention to a fact that different generations had experienced very different forms of socialization. Earlier studies of youth, dating from the 1950s, were interested in what can be termed as youth culture and the associated moral panics around this life stage. At the same time one should be mindful of the fact the youngest people during the twentieth century found their lives heavily conditioned by class, race and gender processes that determined much of their early lives and set limits to what they might possibly become through adulthood (Cieslik, Simpson, 2013).
- In the 1970s, scholars were more focused to investigate **youth transition** processes from school to work and adulthood. R. Macdonald extended this definition by emphasizing the importance of analyzing another important aspect of youth as well. Particularly he argued that "complexity of youth transitions is now becoming more widely understood as the focus has shifted from looking merely at issues of youth culture and/or the move from school to work to encompass other significant elements such as the transition out of the family home to independent living''. It is increasingly argued that not only have transitions to work become more complex, but other transitions at this life stage, based on traditional signifiers of adulthood such as independent living, marriage and secure work/career have become more protracted than past transitions (Furlong, 2009).
- Another alternative is the term **'adolescence'** which is often used in frames of psychology. This term is used to describe the common psychological, emotional, biological phases of young people (Furlong, 2009).
- Social anthropologists usually interpret the concept of youth from a cultural perspective rather than seeing it from a biological view. They study **the cultural beliefs, behavior, and family lives of young people, as well as social, and political groups** in which young people are involved with their relationships (Kehily, 2007). Most cultural studies are "based upon non-western and traditional societies" (Nelson, 2004). However, in this cultural context, the process of youth transition could be interpreted in different ways, for instance, leaving school, going on to university, and getting married can be seen as an initiation process than a transition into adulthood. One of the weaknesses of the anthropological approach is that it usually focuses on specific geographic areas, which cannot be generalized to the rest of the world.
- According to Wyn and Woodman, "youth" as transition' is too psychosocial, too developmental, too deterministic, which underestimates the importance of young people's

subjectivities and leads to view of youth as a 'linear process or position on the life course' between childhood and adulthood (Furlong, 2009). While Wyn and Woodman's analysis is very important as it highlights the concept of generation, it is limited by only using youth as a metaphor of social change. Their analysis does not fully explore interactions between generations. The important peculiarity of this approach is that, with help of highlighting the distinctiveness of generations, Wyn and Woodman's analysis often underplays the similarities between generations.

The mentioned theoretical approaches are closely interconnected and could be discussed in the same 'space' of dependency or independency of youth on different aspects of life, groups, or persons. Thus when we discuss youth as a life stage between childhood and adulthood, we could notice that **young people are dependent on the stereotypes attributable to this stage of life**: 'your peers are admitted to a university or are working, but you still do nothing' (any parent), or 'you are not a child anymore, why you are playing football, instead of doing more important things' (any neighbour), 'what do you think about marriage?' (any parent or close relative).

V. Lisovsky came up with a new definition of youth encompassing such social characteristics as the stage of socialization, assimilating professional, cultural, and social functions, prepared by society for the assimilation and fulfilment of certain social roles and whose age limits, depending on specific historical conditions, can vary from 13 - 16 to 29 - 30 years (Lisovksi,1962)

V. Lisovsky noted that the determining factor in the essence of youth is its social characteristics as a generation of people passing through the stage of socialization, assimilating professional, cultural and other social functions, prepared by society for the assimilation and fulfilment of certain social roles and whose age limits, depending on specific historical conditions, can vary from 13 - 16 to 29 - 30 years (Lisovksi,1962).

When we consider young people as holders of certain social roles and statuses, we must pay attention to the fact that they are somewhat dependent on the social groups and institutions in which they play their roles. As we already mentioned above, during the twentieth- century young people's lives were heavily conditioned by class, race and gender processes which set limits to what they might possibly become through adulthood. In the current era of information technology development and widespread use of the internet we may notice the process of **youth transitioning from 'childhood dependency to independency'**. This means that access to information about opportunities created for young people allows them to make independent decisions about their own lives, education, and work, without being dependent on the views of social groups in which they are involved. However, we should also take into account that the process of youth transitioning from school to work or on to adulthood is still somehow conditioned by messages and opinions which they receive from their relatives, school, social group or society.

Another important stage of life for young people is the **transition from the family home to independent living.** In Armenian society, this does not necessarily mean that young people should leave their family home to be independent. Here it is important to pay attention to the intellectual, moral and financial independence of young people that allow them to make more independent decisions about their lives.

In his 'Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles' project from the 1960s, German sociologist Norbert Elias seeks to examine intergenerational relationships. Particularly he tried to answer a question of to what extent those interactions between generations are positive and beneficial for young workers in helping them develop and make the transition to adulthood (Goodwin, O'Connor, 2015). During our comparative theoretical research, we identified that there is a tendency to highlight the apparent 'distinctiveness' of young people from older generations around, with a focus on what is unique about them and what is different between them and older generations. The work of Norbert Elias allows to understand youth and generation differently, he proposes to view generations not as 'static objects' or separate groups of relationships, but as sets of interrelationships through which young people learn the acceptable adult behaviours from the adults around them (Goodwin, O'Connor, 2015).

The most important aspect of Norbert Elias's approach to the problem of generations and independence of young people is the necessity to find a balance between the conception of the individual as 'homo clausus' (closed person- a little world in himself who ultimately exists quite independently of the great world outside) and interdependent human image 'homo aperti' (open person). Currently, social scientists and sociologists continually view the individual as something existing outside of society and society as existing beyond individuals. However, in our current research on independent youth, we should be careful in our definition of the meaning of independence. Independence within the context of our research is first of all about young people's ability to think independently and be financially independent to make their own decision about their lives.

Independence within the context of our research is first of young people's ability to think independently, be financially independent in order to make their own decision about their lives. This does not necessarily mean that they should separate themselves from society to be independent. The interdependence of people has important implications for how youth and generation are perceived in sociological analysis. Elias articulates this view and argues that 'I' is an outcome of interactions and relationships with others.

The process of continual change examined by N. Elias could be considered as another crucial idea for the research. Elias conceptualized this process as the inter-relationship between sociogenesis (the processes of development and transformation in social relations) and psychogenesis (the processes of development and transformation in the psychology, personality or habitus that accompany such social changes) (van Krieken, 1998). According to N. Elias, habitus develops as part of a continuous process that starts at birth and continues through childhood and adolescence. It becomes a constituent element of the individual via learning through social experience. As for the interrelationship between sociogenesis and psychogenesis, Elias mentioned that the socialization of children cannot take place behind closed doors (Furlong, 2009). Interactions with adults at home and at work are crucial for young people to acquire adult behaviours. Modern societies are characterized by a growing separation between adults, children, and young people in contrast to more primitive societies.

Elias distinguished eight specific problems for young people:

- the indirect knowledge of the adult world;
- the prolonged separation of young people from adults;
- the lack of communication between adults and children;
- the social life of children in the midst of an adult world with limited communication between the two;
- the role of fantasy elements in the social and personal life of the young vis-à-vis the reality of adult life;
- the social role of young people is ill-defined and ambiguous;
- striving for independence through earning money constitutes a new social dependence (on work rather than parents);
- the prolonging of social childhood beyond biological maturity.

The more complex a society, the more complicated the process of transitioning to adulthood or learning adult norms. Thus, within the framework of our research, we can define youth as a continuous process of transition from dependency to independency, in which young people apply values, skills and knowledge received from society to think, act and make life decision more or less independently.

Youth independence

One of the characteristics of youth as a distinct social group is that it is a transitional cohort group between childhood/adolescence and adulthood. Youth combines characteristics of socio-economic dependency which **are unique to children and adolescence with characteristics of independency that are unique to adults**. The transition from youth to adulthood may be marked by the number of interconnected activities, that result in a shift from economic dependence to economic independence (Marini, 1984; Arnett, 1997). Additionally, this process might be marked by the departure from the family of origin to create one's own family. Five major transitions have been identified:

- The exit from school,

- The entry into the labour force,

- The departure from the family of origin,

- The marriage and the entry into parenthood (Modell, Furstenberg, Hershberg, 1976; Arnett, 1997).

Leaving home is considered as one of the major events that define the notion of adulthood in many countries. However, this process may vary from one country to another. Nonetheless, it is important to notice that leaving home does not necessarily lead to a neglect of family ties and a lack of parental care. The specific national context should be considered as well. Taking into account specific Armenian traditional context, young people can indeed be economically and financially independent but would prefer

to stay with their family of origin. Even when a young man or woman enters to the labor force or marries, he or she does not necessarily become economically independent: family members, or close relatives could continue to provide financial support for young people. In a number of European countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, etc.) people move out of their family of origin not because they have become economically independent, but because they have reached a certain age when founding one's own household has become the norm.

Becoming independent from parents is an objective indicator or so -called "transition marker". It also often frequently implies that young people gain greater autonomy. However, the objective indicator of leaving the parental home should only be viewed as a proxy for these underlying subjective dimensions and similar aspects that are frequently not measured in available data sets. There is, in particular, no perfect overlap with the event of becoming independent of one's parents. This is because, even if they share a flat, young people can be quite independent of their parents. Or, young people may have their own households but parents are still strongly supporting their children (Manzoni, 2016). This means that, in addition to the types of youth transitions listed above, the theoretical model for understanding the notion of 'youth independence' should include additional components (exit from school, entry into the labor force, separation from one's biological family).

According to J. Levy and J. Schmidt, youth ends when a person is integrated into society, which is closely related to the socio-economic independence of a young man (Volkov, 2001). Maturity is expressed in some societies through certain ceremonies that recognize that status (for example, some societies still hold maturity). However, in modern societies, maturity has more ambiguous borders and is primarily expressed through the ability to exercise socio-economic independence. Accordingly, the problem of independence in modern societies is focusing in particular on the preparation of the youth's transition to adulthood and the vulnerability of youth in the labour market. It is also worth stressing that the proportion of young people in the economically inactive population is increasing in general, and relative poverty is recorded in some countries when compared to adults. In this regard, Armenia faces a shortage of data on these issues. This fact is yet another argument to investigate the phenomenon. It should also be noted that in some countries, including the United States, a great deal of attention is paid to the so- called positive development of youth (Positive Youth Development). According to the US Family and Youth Services Bureau and the US Department of Health and Human Services approach, young people need assistance and guidance to increase their independence.

Young people's independence should be perceived not only as economic independence but also as mental /intellectual independence, which is a particular issue. For instance, in the former Socialist-Spatial Societies (in particular, in the CIS), values promoting reliance on the state have been imported over time in accordance with the existing ideology.

Domestic self-sufficiency, or how self-sufficient young person is ensuring his or her daily life, is another component that defines youth independence. Daily life independence implies that the young people can choose, buy and prepare food, clothes and items of hygiene for themselves.

Youth independence and young people's transition from economic, financial, mental and daily life dependency to independency should serve as a cornerstone for defining and analysing youth issues in contemporary society. In this regard, it should be underlined that **youth independence is a transition process from childhood to adulthood,** not in the later life stages. This approach could serve as a theoretical background to develop a methodological tool for social scientists in measuring different aspects of young people's life (youth transition to labour force, unemployment, transition from public school to high school, etc.).

Conclusions

1. There are different theoretical approaches to defining youth: youth as a life stage; young people as group members with their specific roles, social status; youth with its cultural beliefs, behaviour, family lives, social, political groups, etc. Independence is an important characteristic of youth that could connect all of these approaches.

2. The concept of youth independence could serve as a holistic approach to conceptualising the youth nation with a synergy of different theoretical approaches for defining youth.

3. Youth could be considered as a continuous process of transition from childhood dependency to adulthood independency, during which young people used values, skills and knowledge received from society to think, act and make decision about their lives more or less independently.

4. The following components could be used as a theoretical foundation for measuring youth independence: financial independence, economic independence, mental independence, daily life independence, political and civic independence.

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