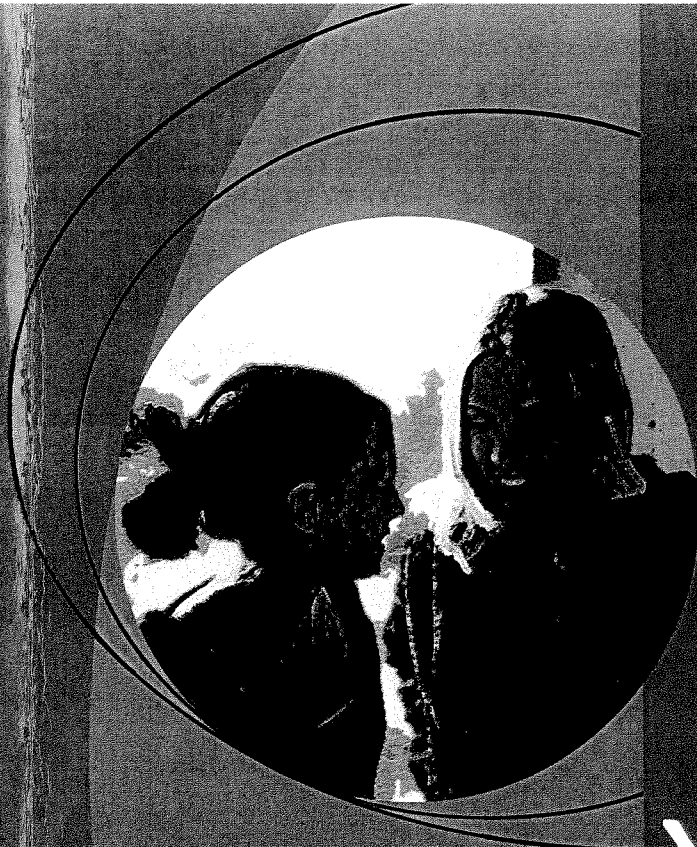




YOUTH
LIFESTYLES
IN a
changing
world

Open University Press
Celtic Court
22 Ballmoor
Buckingham
MK18 1XW

email: enquiries@openup.co.uk
world wide web: <http://www.openup.co.uk>

and
325 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

To Phoebe

First Published 2000

Copyright © Steven Miles 2000

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency Limited. Details of such licences (for reprographic reproduction) may be obtained from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd of 90 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1P 9HE.

ISBN 0 335 20098 2 (pb) 0 335 20099 0 (hb)

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Miles, Steven.

Youth lifestyles in a changing world/Steven Miles.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-335-20098-2 (pbk.) – ISBN 0-335-20099-0 (hb)

1. Youth – Social conditions. 2. Young consumers. 3. Lifestyles. 4. Social change. I. Title.
HQ796.M4783 2000
305.235–dc21

99-056818

Copy-edited and typeset by The Running Head Limited,
www.therunninghead.com

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Marston Book Services Limited, Oxford

in creating such a supportive environment in which to work. I would also like to thank LK for her efforts in a phone box in Dover. A final word of thanks to Justin Vaughan, Viv Cracknell and everybody at Open University Press and The Running Head who helped bring this book to life.

Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World is intended to encourage students, researchers and academics alike to reflect on how the world around them is changing and how such changes might affect what it currently means to be a 'young' person. Writing this book may not have made me any younger, but it has hopefully provided a springboard from which both the reader and I can take stock of both our own role and sociology's role in an ever-changing world.

1 CONCEPTUALIZING 'YOUTH'

For too long social scientists have portrayed young people as excluded risk-taking trouble-makers motivated by nothing more than their own rebellious self-interest. The everyday realities of young people's lifestyles as an expression or reproduction of the dominant values of society have, in turn, too often been neglected. Young people are not always rebellious and are not simply on a mission to undermine society or that society as it appears to be represented to them by their parents. Nor is it possible or even desirable to generalize about what it is that constitutes 'youth', because youth is far more complicated than a single word inevitably implies. In fact, young people's experiences are eminently diverse and will be differentiated, among other things, according to variations in class, gender and education. The contention here, however, is that it is still possible to identify some key characteristics of young people's experiences which have a powerful and widespread influence on both the construction of their everyday lives and their identities. Angela McRobbie (1993) points out that youth represents a major symbolic investment for society as a whole and for this reason the richness of young people's experience needs to be addressed in a far more sophisticated manner than is currently the case. *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* will therefore seek to redress some of the over-romanticized, media-generated, and quite often misguided conceptions of youth that have dominated sociological thought in the past thirty or forty years, and by doing so will monitor the diversities,

commonalities and experiences which characterize young people's lifestyles today.

The sociological study of youth is fascinating not only because it has the potential to tell us so much about what it means to be a young person in contemporary society, but because it can also tell us so much about the changing nature of social life in general. In this context, McRobbie (1993) suggests that young people are constantly making 'statements' of one form or another and that these statements take different shapes under different historical conditions and yet continue to be made. The key question is therefore: what statements are young people currently making and why? Young people represent a rich source of sociological debate and discussion, but the trick lies in pursuing such discussions down avenues that accurately reflect young people's experiences of social change:

Perhaps by examining these changes, by investigating the processes that affect both young people and adults, we can identify a common ground of experience which can be discussed despite the differences in our languages, points of view, ages, and roles. Young people are the primary subjects of dramatic transformations that affect contemporary society and experience them most directly. Parents, teachers, and adults can learn about themselves by listening to youngsters.

(Melucci 1992: 52)

The intention of this book is therefore to construct a grounded and critically aware discussion of youth lifestyles in a changing world. Above all, the priority here is to actively address the suggestion made by authors such as Hollands (1995) and Williamson (1997a) that young people need to be provided with a voice which actually addresses what it means to be part of the sorts of social changes that they experience daily. How, in effect, do young people interact with and negotiate the social worlds in which they construct their everyday lives? In this chapter I will introduce some of the problems sociologists have encountered in their attempt to come to terms with the nature of the relationship between young people and social change. In particular, I will highlight the tensions caused by the division that exists in the sociology of youth between structural and cultural approaches to young people's changing lives.

Young people and social change

Many authors have pointed out that young people are a barometer of social change. In addition, Jones and Wallace (1992) note that young people might equally be conceptualized as an index of social *ills*. This

latter proposition may well be the case, but there is also a strong argument for suggesting that by accentuating an image of young people simply as a social group likely to feel the full force of society's more negative aspects such as unemployment, drug misuse and teenage pregnancy, the actual intricacies of young people's experiences have been misunderstood. Not all young people are submerged in the melodrama of subcultural life or the terrors of drug addiction and alcohol consumption. In many ways young people are an index of social *norms*. But for too long sociology has neglected what I will describe as 'mainstream youth' in favour of a sociology of the melodramatic and perhaps more worryingly of the 'problematic', which as a result has underestimated the degree of complexity that characterizes young people's lives.

As Osgerby (1998a) notes, far from being an immutably fixed and timeless stage in human physical and psychological development, the nature of youth varies enormously across time and cultures. The contention underlying this book as a whole is that social change is such that traditional forms of transition into adulthood have been increasingly undermined, in the sense that adult roles are less easily assumed or assimilated (see Hollands 1995). Indeed, what is perhaps most interesting about youth at the start of a new millennium is that the youth experience is as varied now as it ever has been in history and yet, paradoxically, young people continue to be bonded by common experiences and concerns. Sociologists have traditionally tended to focus on extreme cultural expressions of youth at one end of the spectrum and conceptions of 'disadvantaged' youth at the other. On this basis there has been a tendency to extract meaning from either melodramatic expressions of lifestyle or from structural conceptions of youth disadvantage as a basis for further generalizations about the nature of youth as a whole.

Cultural conceptions of youth

As Thornton (1997) points out, one of the main problems with cultural approaches to the sociology of youth is that they have tended to focus on the subordination of youth. Research has often focused on youth subcultures which have been perceived to be deviant or debased, but also low down the social ladder due to exclusionary experiences based on class, race, ethnicity and age (Thornton 1997: 4). Although sociologists and subcultural researchers have, in effect, used youth as a vehicle for the systematic study of the cultural (which in itself is a more than worthwhile exercise), by doing so they have labelled and therefore framed, shaped and delineated social formations. This has resulted in

the relationship between the subordinate and the dominant culture (and those that might actively abide by that culture) becoming increasingly blurred. In this context, authors such as Wryn and White (1997) have noted how the tendency to categorize young people, as if age represents the central feature characterizing their lives, has tended to portray masculine, white (and rebellious) middle-class experience as the norm. In this context

A categorical approach also ignores the significant role of institutions and of changing economic and political circumstances and their impact on youth. The result is the tendency to present the attitudes, behaviours and styles of particular groups as normative and to underestimate diversity amongst young people.

(Wryn and White 1997: 13)

Perhaps the classic example of work of this type, which in hindsight can be criticized for the above limitations, is that undertaken by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1970s (see Epstein 1998 for a detailed discussion). Basing its conception of young people very much upon what it is to be deviant, the Birmingham School argue that young people establish who it is they are through a process of labelling. By combining the insights of symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism and semiology, the Birmingham School tried to move away from mass media portrayals of spectacular youth cultures in order to establish a more grounded, realistic and objective portrayal of young people's lives which were seen to be resistant to hegemonic cultural forms. In other words, the Birmingham School was concerned with the ways in which the young expressed themselves in opposition to a culture in which their voice was rarely heard.

Subcultural styles incorporate the recontextualization of objects to communicate fresh meanings via bricolage or pastiche (Epstein 1998: 13). In this context, perhaps of most relevance to this book is Dick Hebdige's (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Lying at the core of Hebdige's argument is the suggestion that young people express their resistance to authority through visual styles. He argues that youth subcultures represent a form of genuinely expressive subterranean style and, 'a symbolic violation of the social order' (p. 19). Interestingly, Hebdige sees the increase in spending power among working-class youth during the 1970s and the creation of a market to absorb the resulting surplus as having a key role in the changing nature of youth lifestyles. However, Hebdige and the Birmingham School in general are often criticized for the way in which they deploy a Marxist delinquency-based theoretical framework 'whilst downplaying dominant or radical affectivities' (see below).

ing that bourgeois society utilises the new mass institutions to its own ends. Subcultures then simply become rituals acted out within a class structure' (Stratton 1985: 204).

In turn, there may well be a strong argument to suggest that despite providing the sociology of youth with a considerable legacy (for reasons which I will consider throughout this book), this sort of deviancy model is in fact becoming less relevant to what it is to be a young person at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There may well be a case for arguing, as does Cohen (1980), that the latent function of subcultures is to somehow magically solve – even if in little more than an imaginary way – the unresolved contradictions of the parent culture. But what should be of more importance here is not the good intentions behind subcultural forms. Of potentially more interest is the suggestion that despite all their gesturing and all their achievements in constructing a sense of group identity, young people's efforts are arguably redundant in the sense that they can ultimately do little more than prop up dominant power structures.

It would be misleading to suggest that the sociology of youth culture is still dependent upon Birmingham-style subcultural analyses, but its influence is clearly still in evidence. It is also fair to say that disaffection with the term 'subculture' has become increasingly prevalent in Britain. Sadly, however, this is as a reflection of what Redhead (1997: 3) describes as 'the virtual disappearance of a "field" of "appreciative" contemporary sociological and cultural studies of youth culture'. In effect, the sociology of cultural aspects of young people's lives has appeared to have lost its impetus since the 1980s, arguably because there are simply fewer 'committed' youths upon which sociologists can focus their subcultural attention in a world where 'ordinary' youths are the norm. Those studies that do exist tend to pursue a theoretical vacuum in which the cultural contexts in which young people operate are rarely related to the sorts of social pressures they are experiencing. In this context, the over-emphasis on rave cultures as being representative of more general youth experience has been especially damaging, as I will point out in Chapter 6.

The development of youth subcultures as a focus for sociological research has been interesting in a broader sense in so far as the emergence of this area of study has reflected an associated struggle to come to terms with appropriate conceptual tools. Hence, the sociology of youth is riddled with highly contested notions such as 'transition', 'youth culture' and 'subculture'. The notion of youth 'subculture' is worthy of particular attention as it has played such an instrumental role in the development of the sociology of youth throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

A more detailed critique of the continued sociological significance of youth subcultures should provide a context within which we can begin to consider the nature of youth lifestyles which, I will argue, represent a potentially more enlightening means of coming to terms with young people's relationship with social change. One of the most insightful recent discussions of the development of subcultures as a focus for sociological research can be found in the work of Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) who argue that the notion of subculture has been prioritized by sociologists precisely because it represents the most *visible* aspect of the youth experience. In effect, the way in which youth subcultures have been too readily identified as an indicator of social change (and in particular of social ills) has meant that they 'have been given significance and prominence within much broader sociological debates, and beyond the lives of the minority of adolescents who are involved' (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995: 7). More specifically, Widdicombe and Wooffitt argue that sociologists have been too theoretical in their treatment of youth subcultures and have failed to accommodate actors' own accounts or experiences. This might well be because the methods that sociologists traditionally used to understand youth subcultures were bound up with notions of class and resistance. The process of commodification appears to have undermined this analysis in the sense that the oppositional force constituted by young people has arguably been incorporated into the dominant order. Subculture, in effect, has arguably been commodified and 'made palatable for popular consumption' (McRobbie 1993: 411).

But, just because sociologists have tended to misuse the notion of 'youth subcultures', this does not mean that we should dismiss it entirely as a conceptual tool. Indeed, as Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) themselves point out, used appropriately it still has much to offer analytically. Youth subcultures can be said to offer young people a sense of identity different from that which is ascribed for them by school, work and class. Style, lifestyle, image, values and ideology therefore provide the symbolic resources through which identities can be constructed: 'This in turn enables individuals to escape effectively their ascribed identities, and therefore (psychologically at least) to escape the problems which the ascribed categories entail' (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995: 24). In effect then, youth subcultures give young people the opportunity to experience a sense of social reality independent of the adult world which they inhabit; they provide the space within which young people can be young people. It is easy to forget, however, that young people's cultural lives actively reflect their relationship to dominant power structures. This book will suggest that the nature of such structures and their

cultural expression have changed to such an extent that nowadays the notion of youth *lifestyles* is now potentially far more useful than that of youth subcultures.

The danger with a subcultural approach to youth is that subcultural analyses of young people's experience, as I imply above, simplify what being a young person is all about and, by doing so, focus on specific spaces in which young people can be themselves at the expense of many other such spaces. More often than not, this has tended to involve the media portraying young people as harbingers of moral panic to the extent that the creative possibilities and the real problems experienced by young people are neglected (see Hollands 1995). Many authors have taken up this subcultural theme in an effort to come to terms with the sociological significance of youth, but with mixed results. In this context, there may even be a case for arguing that, despite their economic position, young people's subcultures are less resistant to class at the beginning of the twenty-first century than ever before, and that subcultures rarely play a significant role in young people's lives.

In considering the declining influence of youth subcultures, John Epstein's (1998) contribution is of particular interest in so far as it highlights another division in the sociology of youth – that between British and American approaches to the debates in question. The historical reliance on contributions made by the Birmingham School by British sociologists has aided and abetted a strong tendency to consider British approaches to youth entirely independently from those in the United States, which in some respects have coped with the changing nature of youth more effectively. In his introduction, Epstein talks particularly about the work of Donna Gaines (1991) and Henry Giroux (1994). Gaines (1991), described by Epstein (1998) as a chronicler of a generation, investigated the everyday lives of young people in a suburban New Jersey community where four teenagers committed suicide. Gaines portrays a fatalistic generation with no future and no hope:

In recent years many American kids have had their dreams taken from them. Their vision has been blocked, unable to move beyond next week, because the world outside is simply too much. Suicide is known as the disease of hope. Helplessness and hopelessness. Hopeless because you see no choices. Helpless because you feel that nothing you can do will ever make a difference. You feel powerless and trapped. This makes you feel worthless; you can't defend yourself.

(Gaines 1991: 253–4)

Giroux is slightly more optimistic to the extent that he describes this sort of fatalism as resistance (Epstein 1998: 16), the streets providing an

arena for cultural struggle, a place where young people can reject the goals of adult society. The irony here, however, as Epstein (1998) points out, is that the resistance in which young people do partake is expressed through consumerism and the mass media and as such arguably represents little more than a confirmation of the status quo. The picture drawn here is a long way from the sort of resistance associated with the melodramatic subcultures that sociologists studied in the 1960s and 1970s.

Forever young

Another controversial, and in some ways very appealing suggestion is that 'youth cultures' have lost their significance because the sorts of characteristics associated with them are now characteristic of virtually all social groups under the age of sixty. To this end Brian Appleyard (1995) suggests in the *Independent* newspaper that youth culture is now culture in its entirety. What both Appleyard (1995) and Calcutt (1998) mean by this is that popular culture, previously the preserve of young people, has now been appropriated by all age groups in order that they can 'find the iconography which describes their own lives back to them' (Calcutt 1998: 5). In this context, Calcutt goes on to argue that in a world which had its beginnings in a counter-culture which refused to accept the norms associated with adulthood, people have led their entire lives poised on the cusp of the adolescent dilemma. As such, Calcutt discusses the work of the American critic John W. Aldridge (1969) who identifies the emergence of a 'fetishization' of youth during the 1960s which developed into a lifelong excuse for immaturity and childishness, arguably personified in Britain 30 years later in the guise of Paul Gascoigne.

The childishness which is apparently amplified in Gascoigne's persona is, from this point of view, symptomatic of a broader malaise where the 'cult of youth' has apparently emerged as the avant-garde of a society which has quite simply lost the ability to move forward. Calcutt (1998) goes on to argue that people have cultivated a sense of estrangement in so far as they are alienated by the belief that they cannot actually change anything. Popular culture lives very much, therefore, for the present. Calcutt quotes Savage (1997) who argues that 'the total intensity of the moment' is 'the hallmark of youth and its culture', a suggestion which may well reinforce the suggestion that young people are essentially hedonistic (see Chapter 6). For Calcutt the abiding cultural personalities in contemporary society are the child and the woman for whom he

reflect the powerless situation in which human beings find themselves in our society. This, in turn, reflects a sea change in the nature and role of youth subcultures which, I argue, should culminate in a discussion of youth *lifestyles*. The point here is that youth lifestyles, however conservative they appear to be, do not operate independently of political and social change. The benefit of this sort of approach, as I will illustrate in Chapter 2, is that it is potentially less prescriptive and less politically loaded than has previously been the case when commentators have adopted a subcultural perspective.

The implication of my criticisms of cultural approaches to the sociology of youth is that they are built on a presupposition that regards young people as essentially problematic and rebellious when that often clearly is not the case. The fact that young people are apparently equally likely to accept the status quo (and arguably always have) is just as good a reason to prioritize them as a barometer of social change (and continuity) as their predilection to oppose dominant orders. Perhaps more importantly, a grounded analysis of the apparently sober nature of youth, if we can usefully identify youth at all, represents a valuable means of coming to terms with the changing nature of the relationship between structure and agency and the way in which structures and cultures affect young people's lives in tandem. In other words, young people's experience of social life is founded on the intersection of the structural and the cultural. It is upon this intersection that *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* will focus.

Youth 'transitions'

Because youth lifestyles are so bound up with cultural concerns, I have so far focused on the problems inherent in over-extending conceptions of cultural aspects of young people's lives. But it is equally important to recognize that sociologists have paradoxically tended to exaggerate the impact of structural influences on young people's everyday lives and that the attraction of an in-depth understanding of youth lifestyles emanates from the way in which such a notion transcends both the cultural and the social. I will discuss the detailed restraints that commentators have identified in their discussions of youth transitions in Chapter 3, but at this stage I simply want to acknowledge that the structural arena is just as problematic as the cultural one and that the future of an effective sociology of youth very much depends on a constructive dialogue between the two.

A key term in developing any adequate understanding of young

people's lifestyles is that of 'transition', the process by which young people somehow manage to reach 'adulthood'. This reflects the broad concern that in recent years traditional routes into adulthood have apparently become increasingly problematic. The concept of transition therefore focuses on the way structures affect how young people grow up. However, the position underlying this book as a whole is that the over-emphasis by sociologists on what I will call the 'transition debate' has tended to blinker them from equally important concerns about youth lifestyles and, in particular, how such lifestyles actively engage with the structural constraints that young people must contend with from day to day. In some respects the tendency in recent years to adopt a structural perspective on transitions has been counter-productive, primarily because of its failure to prioritize the actual views, experiences, interests and perspectives of young people as they see them, in favour of bland discussions, most commonly of trends in employment and education patterns. The most damaging problem with the 'transition debate' is that it has tended to take young people out of the youth equation. What I mean by this is that the sociology of youth has tended to treat young people as troubled victims of economic and social restructuring without enough recourse to the active ways in which young people negotiate such circumstances in the course of their everyday lives. In this context, youth becomes little more than a term describing an undifferentiated mass of people of similar age experiencing similar things, when what it should be describing is a highly differentiated group of people of similar age subject to a whole variety of experiences depending upon a diverse range of personal circumstances.

Equally important here is an inherent problem with, or at least a contradiction of, the notion of transition, as Wyn and White (1997) point out. While operating within a discourse that sees the transition as a fluid, changing process, this discourse has in fact been harnessed to a static, categorical notion of youth:

hence, although we appear to be dealing with a concept which has process and change at its centre, it offers instead a perspective on youth as a steady progression through identifiable and predictable stages, to a set end point: adulthood.

(Wyn and White 1997: 93)

This approach can therefore be said to over-simplify the nature of youth experiences which are, in fact, very diverse in nature and highly dependent upon specific personal experiences of social division and inequality, rather than a logical stage-by-stage progression through to the endpoint, namely 'adulthood'. Youth is not a static

in a linear life-cycle through which each and every one of us passes in the same predictable ways. Conceptions of youth transitions need to be more flexible in taking account of the multiple, spiralling nature of youth transitions which do not represent a fixed point at all, but rather a plethora of *transitional transitions*. Youth is related to age, but is not determined by it. Sociologists of youth therefore need to focus not on the characteristics of young people of a particular age group, but rather on the construction of youth as a way of life or a lifestyle constructed through social processes such as family relationships, the labour market, schooling and training, but often expressed through cultural means. I am advocating a socio-cultural interpretation of youth that sees the process of youth as being dependent on the active endowment of meaning within it by young people. Power structures and relationships do exist, but what is exciting about those relationships for the sociologist is the way in which young people negotiate with and interpret those structures and relationships.

The suggestion here is not that traditional notions of the transition are entirely redundant, but that those notions need to be deployed far more imaginatively and pro-actively. The static conception of transitions currently adopted by most youth studies' commentators is only useful in so far as it provides a way of conceptualizing the 'big picture' (Wyn and Whyte 1997). But the concept falls down when applied too closely to the actualities and complexities of young people's everyday lives, which it simply cannot cater for adequately. Indeed, it is almost as if sociologists of youth are actively afraid of the challenging prospect of coming to terms with the depth and richness of youth experience. Perhaps they fear that the limitations of the conceptual tools on which they have depended for decades might be exposed, and the very authenticity of the sociology of youth may itself be threatened. The problem then, as Furlong and Cartmel (1997) note, is that young people's biographies are simply too diverse for the debate over youth transitions to continue as it has done over the past twenty or so years. Perhaps more significant, however, is Williamson's (1997a: 16) observation that 'rather too much youth research has served the theoretical positions of its writers than the articulated needs of the young people who have been the subject of that research'.

Navigating a way forward

The division between cultural and structural conceptions of youth is maintained by a tendency to over-theorize the former approach and

over-research the latter. Of particular concern here is the fact that these two types of approach have remained almost entirely independent when young people's actual experience of cultural and social spheres is almost entirely *interdependent*. The consequence of all this is that the sociology of youth has a very partial handle on what it is to be a young person at the end of the twentieth century. In other words, the everyday experience of young people in contemporary society centres on the point of contact between these two spheres, and yet sociologists, often for instrumental reasons, continue to insist on studying them as separate entities.

Amid such confusion, some commentators have argued that the very notion of youth is redundant in the sense that young people are seen to be reacting to a variety of social forces which are not necessarily peculiar to people in their particular age group; they argue that sociologists should make those social forces rather than young people themselves their starting point (see Jeffs and Smith 1998). I would suggest that this sort of approach underestimates the commonalities which young people experience in their everyday lives and that a first stage in dealing with this problem should be to identify appropriate conceptual tools that can transcend the divide identified above. The intention of *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* is therefore to highlight the potential for advancing the sociology of youth by focusing on youth lifestyles as an active arena within which the everyday struggles associated with the dialectical relationship between structure and agency can be worked out.

Structure of the book

To the above end, in Chapter 2 I outline sociological conceptions of 'lifestyle' before reflecting on how that particular notion might help to enliven our understanding of young people's relationship with social change in the context of debates surrounding the relationship between structure and agency. I therefore suggest that an understanding of consumer lifestyles is particularly salient to what young people's lives are all about as we move into the twenty-first century.

In Chapter 3 I reiterate my argument that young people's lifestyles cannot be adequately understood without reference to the structural contexts in which they operate. Here, I focus in particular on education and employment as the two most important arenas in which young people struggle to establish themselves as citizens in a world in which they continue to be marginalized. However, I go on to argue that structural influences on young people's lives are not the only ones that shape their experiences. In Chapter 4 I explore the ways in which young people's lives are shaped by the cultural contexts in which they are contextualized and actively addressed. My suggestion in Chapter 4 is therefore that the apparent marginalization of young people cannot be understood without a thorough understanding of social change and the cultural contexts in which young people interpret such change. In this context I prioritize discussions of post-modern fragmentation, risk society and globalization. All three of these areas affect young people's experience of social change through processes of individualization which have, in turn, served to undermine the traditional nature of the youth experience, while threatening the orthodoxy of the ways in which sociologists have tended to address these questions in the past.

The next two chapters are, in effect, case studies in which I examine particular aspects of young people's lives that many commentators have identified as being fundamental to their relationship with a changing world. In Chapter 5 I consider the nature of young people's relationship with and consumption of the mass media. Are they controlled by it, or do they actively mould it to their own ends? I go on to identify young people's use of the electronic media as being an especially important aspect of their lifestyles, particularly in relation to representations of consumer culture. Chapter 6 discusses in detail what is arguably one of the most important expressions of the changing nature of youth culture, namely rave. In particular, this chapter considers how far rave simply represents the acceptance on the part of young people of dominant ideological codes, and most especially that of consumerism as a way of life. Is rave anything more than a celebration of hedonism, a temporary window of escape from a culture that young people are actively propping up?

Taking this discussion of hedonism one step further, Chapter 7 focuses on the emergence of young people as consumers, arguing that consumption is the primary arena within which young people relate to and reproduce social change. Can youth consumption be 'authentic' and what role does consumption have in constructing young people's identities? This is a question I address empirically in Chapter 8 which looks at the construction of young people's lifestyles in context through a series of group interviews with young people. This provides a useful means of actively coming to terms with what constitutes youth lifestyles in a changing world.

Chapter 9 draws the above threads together in arguing that young people's lifestyles do indeed represent an invaluable means of coming to terms with their own changing relationship with social, cultural and structural change. In this context the construction of young people's

identities is highlighted as a particularly important issue and one that sociologists of youth may need to prioritize if they are to bring their area of study kicking, screaming and raving into the twenty-first century.

This book aims to present a new perspective on young people's relationship to social change. It represents an attempt to avoid a tendency elsewhere in the literature to get bogged down in rather dry and often unrevealing discussions of youth inequality and disadvantage, while being equally concerned to give a more grounded basis to some of the more obtuse and often remote approaches to cultural aspects of young people's lives. Young people are indeed barometers of social change, but they do not simply reflect such change; they actively and consciously partake in it. If *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* can provide more than merely a flavour of what it means to be a young person at the beginning of the new millennium, while questioning the role that sociology should play in monitoring such meanings, then it will have gone some way towards achieving its aim.

Recommended reading

Epstein, Jonathon, S. (ed.) (1998) *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*. Oxford: Blackwell.

A collection of American articles about young people's experience of a post-modern world. Provides a useful insight into the changing nature of 'youth culture'.

Thornton, Sarah (1997) *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge: Polity.

An insightful and theoretically sound analysis of young people's consumption of club cultures, and an example of a more cultural approach to the youth question.

Widdicombe, S. and Woollitt, R. (1995) *The Language of Youth Subcultures*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Provides a useful critique of traditional approaches to subcultures that have tended to neglect mainstream youth in favour of a sociology of the melodramatic.

Wyn, Johanna and White, Rob (1997) *Rethinking Youth*. London: Sage.

This Australian text provides one of the most insightful discussions of what it currently means to be a young person and how sociologists need to adapt in this context.

2 LIVING LIFESTYLES

It is tempting to assume that the nature of youth or young people's lifestyles has radically altered in recent years. This comes, at least partly, from sentimental memories of a lost youth most commonly expressed as 'it wasn't like this in my day'. If you add this general (and often unsubstantiated) feeling to a concomitant one that the world in general is changing at a breathtaking pace, you have a ready-made recipe for a predetermined conception of what it is to be a young person at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This book will propose that the world has indeed changed radically in recent decades and that lifestyles and, in particular, consumer lifestyles have played an increasingly important role in cementing such change, but also that however sentimental one might get about one's own youth, young people's lifestyles are essentially more paradoxical in terms of the juxtaposition of the predictable and the unpredictable than they ever have been in the past. In this chapter I will concentrate on outlining the value of a discussion of 'lifestyles', notably in the context of the structure and agency debate where the work of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu is especially instructive. I will then discuss the value of addressing lifestyles as lived, identity-forming and most often consumer-based entities, before concluding with a more detailed discussion of what constitutes young people's lifestyles.

In the above context, it could be argued that the declining value of the notion of subculture as discussed in Chapter 1, and as outlined by

themselves? Calcutt therefore describes the alienated sensibility as the 'new universal'. Ultimately, young people cannot conceive of the world around them improving because

Unlike fifty years ago, there are no ideologies for today's alienated to define themselves against. Our 'cool' predecessors knew who they were by virtue of the fact that they disbelieved in those singular entities known as Marxism-Leninism and the American/British Way of Life. But nowadays there are no absolute belief systems left to disbelieve in. From priests to politicians, everyone is as pragmatic and pluralist as only rebels without causes used to be.

(Calcutt 1998: 42)

In recent years, sociologists have failed to confront such contradictions largely because of their apparent reluctance to come to terms with the actual life experiences of the people they are studying and with the changing nature of the world which young people inhabit (see Wyn and White 1997). Recent sociological studies of youth seem to have revealed more about the sociologists undertaking the research than about the objects of their study. The task of this book is to illustrate how a focus on youth lifestyles can, potentially at least, begin to reverse this trend. In the next chapter I begin laying the groundwork for this proposition through a discussion of the changing structural conditions which are fundamentally altering the nature of youth lifestyles.

Recommended reading

Chaney, David (1996) *Lifestyles*. London: Routledge.

A comprehensive discussion of the notion of 'lifestyle' and how it relates to the sociological agenda.

Johansson, T. and Miegel, E. (1992) *Do the Right Thing: Lifestyle and Identity in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Malmo: Graphic Systems.

Up to now, the most authoritative and enlightening empirical discussion of what actually constitutes young people's lifestyles.

Reimer, Bo (1995) Youth and modern lifestyles, in Johan Förrnas and Göran Bolin (eds) *Youth Culture in Late Modernity*. London: Sage, pp. 120-44.

A useful discussion of lifestyles in a Swedish context with particular reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Sobel, Michael (1981) *Lifestyle and Social Structure: Concepts, Definitions, Analyses*. New York: Academic Press.

An impressive examination of lifestyles by perhaps the most significant author in the field.

3 STRUCTURES OF YOUTH

Before discussing in detail the changing nature of youth lifestyles and the subsequent implications for the changing nature of the sociology of youth, it is useful to expand on the sorts of practical experiences that characterize young people's lives in a changing world. Although young people's lifestyles represent a key sociological concern, those lifestyles do not emerge entirely independently of social structures. In part, youth lifestyles are a manifestation of the ways in which young people negotiate with structural components of their everyday lives. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the sociology of youth in recent years has tended to become divided between those commentators who are primarily concerned with structural constraints on young people's lives and those who present a culture-centred approach to young people's lives. One of the concerns that underlies this book is the contention that this divide has served to undermine the development of an effective sociology of youth which will only emerge when cultural aspects of young people's lives are considered in the situated context of structural constraints and vice versa. A tendency for sociologists of youth to specialize in one or other of these areas (and most often, and potentially damagingly, in the former) can only result in a distorted conception of what it is to be a young person. In this chapter, I will therefore outline some of the key structural factors that appear to impinge on young people's lives. This will form the means of constructing a well-contextualized assessment of young people's lifestyles through the book as a whole. The key point to

remember is that young people are not entirely free to control the structural influences on their everyday lives as a means of constructing lifestyles in their own image, but neither do these structures completely control who it is young people are. In effect then, young people's lives are an outward expression or negotiation of the relationship between structure and agency.

So what experiences and structural constraints really do affect the construction of young people's everyday lives? What is it like to be a young person at the beginning of the twenty-first century? One of the most useful and accessible treatments of the structural factors that constitute young people's lives can be found in an edition of *Soundings*, a journal of politics and culture. In the introduction to a series of articles on the subject, Jonathon Rutherford (1997) argues that 1990s Britain, in particular, has seen the emergence of an increasingly disadvantaged youth, a small minority of homeless youth symbolizing the way in which the decline in welfare and changes in the job market have appeared to hit young people harder than any other group. Transformations in the nature of capitalism have undermined traditional work-based solidarities which once defined personal identity; as Rutherford (1997) notes, such identities are arguably constructed nowadays by consumption, lifestyles and leisure activities. Although young people live in an increasingly individualized culture, such individualization has been undermined by what Rutherford describes as a massive growth in economic inequality.

These are the sorts of trends described in the mid-1980s by E. Ellis Cashmore in his book *No Future* (1984). Here he identified a situation where working-class young people in particular are simply resigned to an unfulfilling future. In this view, they are perceived as living in a void within which they have few ambitions, limited horizons and minimal prospects. Cashmore paints a depressing picture, despite recognizing that young people are resilient in nature and are capable of at least adapting to this sort of an unfulfilling environment. He does, however, actually conclude on a partially positive note by arguing that the horrendous situation in which some young people found themselves in the 1980s helped breed a new type of resourceful, creative individual capable of surviving on the merest crumbs provided by society. Young people in the 1980s became drifters, masters of boredom and endurance. The question remains: how far did this state of affairs continue into the 1990s and are young people actually more vulnerable now as we enter a new century than they were in the 1980s? Could they be said to be experiencing comparatively worse structural inequalities and dependencies than they have ever done before or have the limitations of the

sociology of youth resulted in a situation where the majority of mainstream youth, whose 'transitions' are in fact relatively straightforward, have been neglected by sociologists keen to chart more melodramatic patterns of inequality?

My criticism of the sociology of youth for the way in which it attempts to present an overview of youth inequalities, often based on statistical and questionnaire-based evidence of educational and employment trends, does not mean that this data does not have something to offer. My point is that such an approach has come to characterize what the sociology of youth is all about and, by doing so has presented a potentially misleading picture of what young people are all about. At the heart of young people's experience appears to be the extent to which they can achieve independence, but the achievement of independence is not solely dependent upon the structures determining their destiny, but rather upon how young people negotiate with these structures, often in terms of the everyday construction of their lifestyles. It is in this context that we need to consider what are probably the two main structural influences on young people's lives: education and employment, arenas within which young people are expected to make a whole series of future-forming decisions. The following discussion, though reflecting the structure-oriented nature of the sociology of youth, should provide a basis upon which the significance of youth lifestyles can be more easily contextualized in a way that is more explicitly concerned with the cultural actualities of young people's everyday lives. Recognizing that an overview of young people's experiences will vary considerably from one country to another and that such variation is too complex to chart accurately on a global scale, I will use mainly British illustrations, while referring to the broader picture where it is appropriate to do so.

Education

Education plays a crucial role in young people's lives. Those young people able to take advantage of the best educational opportunities are likely to have an advantage when it comes to taking advantage, in turn, of the often limited opportunities available on the job market. The apparent extension of youth transitions throughout Europe has been accompanied by an increasing pressure on young people to gain qualifications and, in the absence of jobs, a pressure to find something else to do instead (see Adamski and Grootings 1989). What is more, many commentators argue that Britain, in particular, is hampered economically by a less-educated, less-trained and less-skilled workforce than

many of its European competitors. While the British government attempts to implement policies aimed at reversing this state of affairs, a situation has been created where young people are simply having to accept the indignity of taking on intermediate statuses (Jones 1995). Instead of accessing the independence generally associated with obtaining their first job, they may have to settle instead for being a trainee or a student. In turn, a global process of 'education inflation' (Côté and Allahar 1996: 124) has resulted in a massive increase in the numbers of young people studying for particular qualifications, thereby undermining the value of those qualifications lower down the scale. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) point out that full-time education among 17- and 18-year-olds in Britain more than doubled between the 1970s and 1990s. On the surface this appears to be a commendable development, but it also represents a reaction to a situation in which employment opportunities are few and far between. This in turn puts considerable pressure on available opportunities. Thus, what has emerged is what Furlong and Cartmel describe as a dual process of standardization and diversification. In other words, young people are spending more years in education and training, building up an improved range of qualifications to equip them for their working lives, while the education experience is itself diversifying in an attempt to meet the needs of this expanding market. As Williamson (1997a) notes, British educational policy during the 1980s and early 1990s was very much ideologically driven and there may well be a case for arguing that that ideology is at least partly a consumer ideology – an ideology that promises the best for every individual but cannot possibly provide it. The classic illustration of the dangers inherent in such an ideologically driven education system is the introduction of 'league tables' on educational performance based purely on examination results. These tables, as Williamson (1997a) points out, do not place relative achievements in the context of socio-economic background. Judgements on the quality of education therefore simply reinforce the inequalities that already exist. Those young people whose socio-economic background puts them at a disadvantage in the first place are made increasingly vulnerable.

Perhaps one of the most significant changes affecting the nature of young people's transitions into adulthood in Britain is the increased governmental emphasis on training. During the 1970s, the vast majority of young people left school at 16 and entered full-time employment. In contrast, Morrow and Richards (1996) point out that in 1996 about a quarter of 16- to 17-year-olds entered training schemes when they left school. The irony here, of course, is that however well trained an individual is, there still may not be a job at the end of such a course. Indeed

as Morrrows and Richards indicate, the rate of unemployment among training scheme leavers has gradually increased. Many young people drop out of unsatisfactory training schemes or are not offered jobs at the end of them. As Morrow and Richards (1996: 28) point out: 'The overall conclusion from much of the research on training schemes is that such schemes are too dependent upon employer goodwill, and that the training provided is patchy in quality.' In addition, young people on training schemes are undoubtedly poorly paid, so making the schemes vulnerable to the criticism that they constitute little more than slave labour. For that reason, such schemes (and perhaps most notoriously Youth Training Schemes) became stigmatized in the minds of young people as little more than a last resort should all else fail (see Coles 1995). Above all, as Coles notes, those young people who do take part in youth training schemes are overwhelmingly from working-class backgrounds. The extent to which such training programmes, and those being introduced by the new Labour government in Britain as part of the 'New Deal' initiative, actively address the question of youth unemployment is debatable, and the criticism that such programmes are merely intended to massage the unemployment figures is never far from the surface.

It is important that these changes in the nature of employment are considered in the context of broader social and cultural processes, and that we do not simply dwell on young people as the losers in a zero-sum game they cannot win. This would be far too much of an oversimplification, but it is an over-simplification that tends to pervade the literature. As such, it is briefly worth mentioning the work of Phil Cohen (1997) who relates changes in the education system and in young people's experience of education to the broader political changes associated with Thatcherism and the New Right which had an equally significant impact on the development of educational provision in the United States (see Griffin 1993). In this context, Cohen suggests that children have a special role to play in maintaining a fairy tale propagated by the Conservative government in Britain during the 1980s. This fairy tale convinced us that we could be freed from the shackles of socialism through the joys of an enterprise culture which would in turn reacquaint us with the greatness that by right was Britain's historical inheritance. Cohen argues that education provides the terrain within which this promised land could come about, a vocationalist terrain that would set the British economy on the road to recovery. The essence of this new educational philosophy, according to Cohen, lies in its emphasis on skill-attainment rather than knowledge-attainment, the net result of which was the empowerment of young people as agents of capital rather than labour. Cohen (1997: 287) therefore describes a hidden

agenda whereby skills become disassociated from particular practices of manual labour and from any historical association with particular trades or occupational structures:

Instead work practices are reclassified into 'occupational training families' defined according to a set of purely functional properties of coordination between atomized operations of mind-body-machine interfacing with the same 'information environment'. In this discourse skills have become abstract universal properties of the labour process.

In this respect the training that young people receive in schools, colleges and on training schemes involves an ideological process whereby labour itself is commodified as an interchangeable unit of production. This creates what is supposed to be an increasingly 'flexible' workforce. In fact, that workforce and, in particular, the young people who are propping it up are made increasingly vulnerable to the ups and downs of the economy because their skills are simply not well enough targeted. In an environment within which class arguably continues to impart a major determining role in the construction of work-based destinies, the emphasis on the individual as the author of his or her own career biography plays a proactive role in reshaping people's social aspirations according to the ideological principles of individualism. From this point of view, Thatcherism is all about the creation of an enterprise culture in which individuals become increasingly individualistic so that market values affect every area of social life and individual success arguably appears to become the be all and end all of social life (see Miles 1998).

A skill-based Thatcherite education actively promotes a way of thinking about the world that emphasizes the benefits for self-improvement, while simultaneously shifting young people's perspectives on the world towards a characteristically insular point of view, one in which lifestyle choices come to play a particularly important role. More importantly, as far as education itself is concerned, this process is reflected through the promotion of choice for parents and in particular by the introduction in 1991 of a Parents' Charter which reflected an on-going emphasis on an education system characterized by performance indicators and league tables. The problem here, as Furlong and Cartmel (1997) note, is that consumer choice as represented in the sphere of education tends to mask the inequalities underlying that system. Consumer choice can only ultimately be enacted by those who can afford it. The ideology of individualism and consumer sovereignty can from this point of view be said to amount to little more than a veneer of open access. Changes in education saw more about change in how people perceived the world and

the role they themselves play in that world, than they do about how the nature of that education itself.

Education clearly plays a fundamental role in influencing young people's career paths and futures throughout the world (see for instance, Adamski and Grootings (1989) for an in-depth discussion of the wider European picture). That such an education is potentially ideological as well as practical clearly alters the very nature of education which appears to be just as much about the shaping of the person in particular ways as it is about the shaping of the worker. But regardless of how young people's opinions about the world may have been altered by global changes in the education system, their actual experience of the workplace, if they are fortunate enough to gain access to it, is of equal importance in shaping their lives, and it is to this issue that I now turn.

Employment

Despite some signs that youth unemployment is improving in many European countries, the 1980s saw youth unemployment rates rise as high as 45 per cent in many EU countries (Pople and Kirby 1997). In Canada, the official unemployment rate for individuals aged 15 to 24 is almost twice the average rate for all groups, while males between the ages of 15 and 19 are likely to have an unemployment rate seven times greater than all individuals aged 25 years or more (Côté and Allahar 1996). Youth unemployment is undoubtedly a global problem (see Touraine 1991).

One of the most useful discussions of youth employment and unemployment in contemporary Britain can be found in the work of Ken Roberts (1995) who identifies a radical decline in youth employment in recent years at what is a much faster rate than the rise of general unemployment between the 1980s and early 1990s. According to Roberts, young people are exceptionally susceptible to the ups and downs of economic restructuring, most notably in the aftermath of the recession of the early 1980s which itself reflected global changes in the demand for labour to which young people were particularly vulnerable. In this context, Brinkley (1997) describes young people as 'under-worked and under-paid', the problem being that deregulation and the freedom of the market-place have not necessarily benefited young people as much as might have been hoped. Indeed, Brinkley points out that the relative position of the under 25s in Britain has worsened during the 1990s, with the gap between the unemployment rate for all ages and that of the under 25s being greater in the 1990s than it was in the 1980s. Young people are relatively worse off in terms of employment than the workforce as a

whole. In fact, young people make up 35 per cent of the long-term unemployed. Meanwhile, young people appear to be especially susceptible to the mismatch that exists between the sorts of jobs on offer and the sorts of jobs they are actually seeking. The move towards part-time and temporary employment has hit young people particularly badly as they are arguably the most vulnerable sector of the labour force and as such are increasingly having to take up jobs, or 'McJobs', which demand fewer or lower qualifications than they have actually attained. The problem seems to be that youth unemployment is highly sensitive to overall economic conditions. Not only can young people be described as an index of social ills and a barometer of social change, but also as beacons of economic stresses and strains. In this context, Brinkley argues that deregulation simply does not work and that the main source of hope for the future of youth employment lies in the implementation of the minimum wage in 1999. What is clear is that the youth labour market has been radically transformed in recent years; indeed, some commentators go as far as to argue that there is no longer any such thing as a youth labour market (Skilbeck *et al.* 1994; Maguire and Maguire 1997).

Perhaps one of the most concerning aspects of the above developments is that young people are increasingly economically dependent on their parents and that family relationships appear to have changed markedly as a result of this. Indeed, as Rutherford (1997) points out, 64 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds in Britain live with their parents. Meanwhile, young people have suffered severe cuts to the benefits they are entitled to receive, as the system seeks to shift the responsibility for unemployment onto the moral and personal conduct of the individual. This creates a situation where the pressures on both the family unit and on young people going through a key transitional phase in their lives are compounded.

The effect is to drive thousands of young people off benefit and out of the mainstream economy altogether, either into an indefinite dependency on their families or into illicit forms of money making. Enforced economic dependency takes away young people's cultural, social and personal autonomy and denies them any semblance of citizenship.

(Rutherford 1997: 120)

Herein lies a key issue. Young people are unable to attain full citizenship in a society that barely knows how to provide them with the opportunities such citizenship entails. Indeed, it might be reasonable to suggest that in many respects young people occupy a state of purgatory between having no rights as children and having full rights as adults. Young people in effect are intermediate status individuals.

which can more or less be ignored. In this context, Gill Jones (1995) talks about how young people appear to be caught in what amounts to a state of limbo between dependence and independence. Young people are finding it increasingly difficult to enter the job market, and, having none of the rights of taxpayers, are therefore often unable to take advantage of the benefits available from the welfare state. Jones does, however, acknowledge the introduction of a series of measures that have effectively extended young people's dependency upon their families up until the age of 25, the most notable perhaps being the withdrawal of unemployment benefit for under-18s (Jones 1995). Young people are left to deal with a situation in which securing a viable income is becoming increasingly less likely and in which the safety net beneath them is ridden with bigger and bigger holes. In effect, then, the period of dependency in youth has been extended by an extension of training and education, the shrinkage of the youth labour market and a reduction in state support (Jones 1995: 30). In this context, Touraine (1991) describes a global economic crisis which has created a situation in which the job market actively discriminates against young people and in which young people are forced to conform and adapt.

Status Zero youth?

Commentators have used a variety of explanatory notions as a means of coming to terms with the above issues. At this stage I want to focus on just one: discussions of 'Status Zero' youth. The emergence of 'Status Zero' youth in Britain – young people in their mid-teens who do not appear to participate in education, training and employment and who are therefore consigned to marginalized economic futures – was identified by Williamson (1997) who based his research on the experiences of young people in south and mid-Glamorgan, the latter being one of the poorest regions in Britain. Although perhaps most insightful when dealing with those young people who are most clearly socially excluded, this notion can also provide an informative angle on some of the problems that young people generally are facing today.

I have already described a situation in which de-industrialization and subsequent structural unemployment have apparently hit young people disproportionately hard, 'obscuring paths to adult statuses, identities and activities' (MacDonald 1997: 186). In other words, young people have been 'lost' in the transition between school and work, with as many as 30,000 young people actively refusing to participate in YTS for example (Williamson 1997a). Williamson identifies a situation where a

considerable number of people aged 16 and 17 are not in education, training or employment, despite their being ineligible for income support (Williamson 1997a). Interestingly, Williamson argues that the increase in the numbers of young people electing to continue in education beyond school age is more a reflection of the contracting labour market than it is of any deep-rooted motivation to gain additional skills and qualifications. Such developments illustrate the extent to which young people have been generally disaffected from both youth training and the 'transition infrastructure' (the education system and the careers service, for instance) (Williamson 1997a). Young people are therefore partaking in more informal and often illegal arenas precisely because they feel that more formal structures cannot offer them anything. Williamson estimates that 'Status Zero' youth constitute anywhere between 16 per cent and 23 per cent of the age group and as such are much more than a small problem – quite possibly they make up the largest single group of each age cohort. These young people's backgrounds are typically 'fractured' in so far as they often experience violence in some form or another, their school attendance is intermittent and homelessness relatively common. But not all 'Status Zero' young people are the products of an anti-school culture. Many have high educational aspirations, and this, as Williamson (1997) points out, illustrates the potential vulnerability of young people in general. An important issue to recognize, however, is that these young people are united by the belief that the benefits and training system was not serving their needs and that somehow they had to top up their earnings even if that meant (as it did quite often) engaging in criminal activity:

many [of these young people] were having great difficulty in making sense of their current predicament: they were the victims as much as the shapers of their circumstances. Few gave much thought to the future, since their whole culture and life-styles are about living for the present. It is perhaps wise, psychologically, for them not to contemplate their likely future of unemployment and marginality. Not all, however, had given up hope; many in fact remained surprisingly optimistic that, eventually, things would get better.

(Williamson 1997: 116)

What is interesting in this context is that young people, and in particular those pursuing criminal careers, are dismissive of the support provided by the training system because it simply does not provide them with the resources they need to maintain the sort of lifestyle they want and to which they have become accustomed through the opportunities provided by criminal activities and the associated lifestyle.

cultures. Crime, in particular, provides a modest income, a way of killing time and a means of avoiding having to contemplate the future (Williamson 1997). More prosaically, Williamson (1997) found that many young people in his research area clearly live their lives from day-to-day and that few, if any, aspects of their lives have any stability. Money and the need to secure a roof over their heads is a constant preoccupation. Young people's lives are therefore characterized by short-term expediency, largely because they simply do not have the opportunities or freedoms to approach life in any other way. Interestingly, Williamson's respondents did not tend to blame themselves for their predicament, but expressed their dissatisfaction that they had been let down by others including parents, politicians and professionals. This much is understandable, although ultimately it might well be argued that the system rather than any individuals within that system has let these young people down. More broadly, as Williamson (1997) argues, the problem with youth policy appears to be that it has tended to impose a vision of what and who young people are without taking into account their cultural and political orientations or those of the communities in which they live.

To secure a real handle on the experiences and orientations of more alienated young people, one has to engage with them on their own ground . . . If one is truly going to 'engage the user', one has to seize opportunities, 'duck and dive' and jump around in order to obtain data which will provide an authentic illumination of the condition of marginal young people.

(Williamson 1997: 13)

Young people as 'citizens'?

In the above context, Jones and Wallace (1992) echo some of Jones' (1995) sentiments in arguing that the question of citizenship provides a more useful framework in understanding the 'end product' of youth than that of adulthood in the sense that it provides us with more of an insight into the question of inequality and, in particular, the rights of young people. It tends to be assumed that young people will reach adulthood at some stage, regardless of these inequalities. But if young people do not have the necessary resources at their disposal they will not necessarily achieve full citizenship. In this respect, it can be argued that the key factor underlying young people's inequality is economic dependence. In turn, the problem for young people is that citizenship appears, in many ways, to be based on the very thing that young people cannot achieve, namely consumer citizenship. Certainly, young people can

consume in all sorts of fashion-orientated ways, but ultimately they are not economically dependent and therefore cannot be fully-fledged citizens of the consumer society that surrounds them. Youth lifestyles provide a particularly effective focus for sociologists of youth in so far as they represent an arena within which ideological aspects of life in a consumer society are actively expressed. Young people may negotiate their place in the job market, they may make strategic personal decisions about their working futures, but they do not necessarily feel entirely in control of those choices. Consumer lifestyles do give them that feeling of control even if it is merely illusory.

It is worth remembering that there is undoubtedly a significant class dimension to the sorts of broad trends I am describing here, but that the significance of that dimension remains hotly debated. Young people from working-class backgrounds are far more likely to suffer from unemployment than their middle-class counterparts, just as they are less likely to get the opportunity to go to better resourced schools. The latter point is a timely reminder that the problems young people experience are not simply youth problems but problems that owe much to the broader spectrum of social inequality which characterizes contemporary British society. This issue is highlighted by Furlong and Cartmel (1997) who describe what they call the 'epistemological fallacy' of late modernity. What they mean by this is that although the experiences of young people have radically altered in recent years, this has not brought with it a loosening of the influence of the key structural factors that underpin young people's experiences of social life. Collectivist traditions such as the support mechanism of the family have been undermined in many ways, but the risks young people are experiencing, according to Furlong and Cartmel, are in fact reinforcing social divisions characteristic of the traditional order such as class and gender. Although Furlong and Cartmel's assumption that a post-Fordist economy does exist is highly debatable, their discussion of the new types of vulnerability that young people are experiencing is an important one. The traditional forms of inequality continue to play an influential role in structuring people's lives. Above all, and despite Williamson's (1997a) contrary argument above, the problems young people experience in gaining employment, for example, become personal in the sense that any failures to do so are perceived by them as being their own fault. As I will point out in Chapter 4, individuals are therefore forced to negotiate a highly risky path through their daily lives and

which are largely outside the control of individuals. In this context, we have seen that some of the problems faced by young people in modern Britain stem from an attempt to negotiate difficulties on an individual level. Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure.

(Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 114)

The challenge for the sociology of youth is to directly address the arenas within which young people address the risks associated with transitions into adulthood. It is one thing to acknowledge that young people blame themselves for structural constraints impinging on their lives, but the next stage is to prioritize the personal negotiation of those structures as a focus for a more flexible and focused sociology of youth. It is simply not enough to describe blandly the patterns of youth employment and unemployment, for the everyday impact on the way in which young people perceive such experiences is just as important a consideration – perhaps more so. In his specific discussion of the underclass thesis, MacDonald (1998) calls for research that focuses on the cultural responses young people deploy when excluded from capitalist production. He suggests that longitudinal ethnographic work looking at 'new cultures of accommodation, resistance and survival amongst the youthful population' (p. 173) might provide the key for the construction of a new agenda for youth research in the United Kingdom and beyond.

Discussion

It is certainly true that a new agenda for youth research is required. The suggestion I am making is that youth lifestyles provide one approach by which this new agenda might be explored. This should help lift the 'transition debate' out of 'the sociological specialism to which... [it has] been assigned, and placing... [it] more centrally to questions about social change' (Irwin 1995: 312–13). We must at least accept the proposition that employment structures in general have changed, with a decline in manufacturing and a move towards service-based employment. Given this, we must also accept that if there has been any sort of a move towards a post-industrial service economy then young people appear not to have benefited from such change (Hollands 1995). The question remains: why is this the case and how do young people cope with such problems in day-to-day contexts?

yet the intensification of individualism means that crises are perceived as individual characteristics and not as a result of

who are 'marginal' because in a sense all young people are marginal. The weight of social structure on young people's shoulders does appear to be overwhelming. It may be an unrealistic goal for sociologists of youth to attempt to 'step into the shoes' of young people, but the very least they can do is attempt to address the actual circumstances and contexts within which young people have decided to wear those shoes. It is equally important that sociologists of youth realize there are massive variations in the degree to which young people are disadvantaged and that to portray young people as helpless consumers of structural disadvantage is entirely inappropriate. Middle-class young people, in particular, have all too often been neglected by sociologists of youth. This is one of the reasons why sociologists need to reconsider how best to analyse the sorts of structural constraints I have outlined above. The notion of 'lifestyle' may well provide the most appropriate means of doing this as it taps into the active cultural contexts in which young people establish social relationships. Social structures are intimately related to the cultural contexts in which they are played out, as young people well know. The role of social change is of equal significance. Sociologists of youth 'transitions' forget this at their peril. In the next chapter I discuss those aspects of social change which are of particular relevance to the changing nature of youth lifestyles.

Recommended reading

- Adamski, W. and Grootings, P. (eds) (1989) *Youth, Education and Work in Europe*. London: Routledge.
- A somewhat dated, but none the less useful discussion of a Europe-wide research project on young people's relationship with work and education. Jones, Gill and Wallace, Claire (1992) *Youth, Family and Citizenship*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Particularly useful in dealing with the issue of young people as 'citizens'. Roberts, Ken (1995) *Youth Employment in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- An informative and intelligent discussion of young people's employment patterns with particular reference to questions of individualization. Williamson, Howard (1997a) *Youth and Policy: Contexts and Consequences*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- An effective analysis of some of the structural limitations that exist in people's lives with particular reference to the problems experienced by Status Zero youth.

4 A CHANGING WORLD

If we accept that some key social and cultural aspects of young people's transitions to adulthood are radically different from what they were in the past, then this has two major implications which demand further contemplation. First, as I discussed in Chapter 1, sociology needs to reconsider the rather outmoded ways of researching young people in favour of a more flexible people-centred approach. Second, if we acknowledge that young people do not exist in a vacuum, but have changed in relation to their everyday social and cultural contexts, then we must consider the social and cultural conditions that have facilitated such change. What is it about an apparently changing world that has provided the preconditions in which young people's lifestyles have apparently been so radically altered? In order to answer this question, I will consider three theoretical themes, each of which has significant implications for the everyday experience of youth: post-modern fragmentation, risk and globalization. I will then proceed to focus on the question of individualization as a means of highlighting how social change has affected the ways in which young people relate both to their peers and to themselves.

Post-modern fragmentation

Sociologists have always been fascinated by the nature of social change, but this fascination has apparently intensified with the emergence in

recent years of debates over post-modernity (see Lyon (1994) and Rosenau (1992) for useful overviews). The appeal of post-modernism can partly be explained by the fact that there is no definitive understanding of what constitutes post-modernity which is itself a highly contested term. Broadly speaking, however, approaches to post-modernity can be divided into two main groups: those of commentators who perceive contemporary developed societies to be undergoing some form of an epochal shift from modernity to a new phase of post-modernity, and those which see the changes as a continuation of trends that are part of the on-going development of modernity. The first of these two approaches suggests that the world is no longer characterized by the thirst for human progress, but by the acknowledgement that such progress is no longer possible in a world where there is no such thing as reality, but merely representations of reality (see Lash 1990).

From the above point of view, the world is seen as becoming increasingly heterogeneous. We apparently live in an eclectic society where post-modern style is emphasized at the expense of substance or content. The sort of social changes involved here are closely associated with the rise of a consumer culture and indeed, globalization, which I will discuss in more detail below. Life becomes little more than a menu from which the individual simply picks and chooses the direction in which he or she wishes to go. Although, it would of course be misleading to imply that there is any such thing as a definitive post-modern position, many post-modern authors argue that society has become a mere mass, that it is no longer composed of individuals or social classes capable of meaningful social action. In many respects people are more individual than ever before, but express such individuality through the consumption of mass-produced imagery in a world dominated by surface meaning (see Baudrillard 1988).

In this context, post-modernists such as Baudrillard go as far as to describe the end of the social: the notion that there is no such thing as society, people are rather thrown together in a hotch-potch of styles, opinions and ideas. In this environment people's identities are seen to be increasingly fragmented. In a post-modern world it could be argued that there is no such thing as a sense of self. In fact, many post-modern theorists talk about the 'death of the subject', whereby traditional sources of identity such as the nuclear family, community, and class are seen to be in decline due to the rapidity of social and economic change, while no alternatives emerge to take their place. All that appears to be on offer are the insatiable demands of consumerism or the superficialities of the TV screen, neither of which give an individual any real sense of personal stability. Tolan is an excellent example

social change in general rather than a school of social theory *per se*, post-modernism reflects the move from a highly rational and rigid society to a highly irrational and flexible pseudo-society which emerged from about the 1960s onwards.

Before I consider the nature of young people's experience of post-modernity, if it indeed exists, it is worth recognizing that many commentators actively debate the extent to which society has undergone an epochal shift. Many, as I suggested above, argue that we are undergoing little more than a continuation of modernity. Frederic Jameson (1984), for instance, sees post-modernity simply as another stage in the development of a capitalist society as is represented by multinational capitalism. Capitalism has emerged as a global totality which has, in turn, transformed our relationship with place and space so that difference has been rejected in favour of sameness. Thus, while on the surface post-modern culture is all about fragmentation and eclecticism, beneath that surface people are consuming the same things in more or less the same ways. A key issue as far as Jameson is concerned is that the production of culture has been integrated into commodity production in general so that post-modernity is essentially hollow and superficial. Jameson therefore identifies a depthless culture which has run out of its own ideas and which is increasingly dependent on mimicking the past in what amounts to a culture of quotations. In other words, social change has taken a profoundly negative turn having somehow lost its innate sense of history.

Interestingly, Wilson (1992) argues that post-modernity represents, in turn, a chaotic culture of contradictions, a culture where capitalism appears to have triumphed, where everybody appears to be better off, alongside a parallel and empty feeling that somehow everything is actually getting worse. This sentiment appears to chime very closely with some of the experiences of young people at the end of the twentieth century. In an increasingly fragmented and material world, which appears to offer more and more opportunities to move and more people, many of those opportunities are blocked by the limitations of underemployment and by the possibility, and perhaps even the probability, of an apparently bleak future. These changes have the potential to impact profoundly on the construction of young people's identities, particularly in respect of their relationship with consumerism. Young people represent the hope for an economically viable future in a post-modern world and as such their relationship with consumerism is highly prized, not only by themselves but by consumer capitalism as a whole. In effect then, consumerism provides a flexible enough arena for the construction of what are inevitably flexible post-modern identities. This promise

of flexibility plays on young people's desires for exploration, and above all, for freedom:

As the consumer market is flexible and more dynamic than the older ways of regulating identities, much more fluidity is apparent: people can change their identities more frequently, experiment with them, select more options from a cultural supermarket with far less commitment than before.

(Harris 1997: 207)

Young people's lifestyles provide the arena within which consumer identities are apparently forged. Whether or not such identities are *forged*, in the sense that they could be perceived as being in some way inauthentic, is another question entirely. When relating debates about post-modernity to the changing experiences of young people there do appear to be some significant points of resonance. Life is entirely about the present and how best to exploit it, regardless of the historical foundations that have made that present possible. In this context, Muggleton (1997) focuses on the changing nature of young people's subcultural experience and goes as far as to describe 'post-subculturalists' who

no longer have any sense of subcultural 'authenticity', where inception is rooted in particular socio-temporal contexts and tied to underlying social relations... This is something that all post-subculturalists are aware of, that there are no rules, that there is no authenticity, no reason for ideological commitment, merely a stylistic game to be played... perhaps the very concept of subculture is becoming less applicable in post-modernity, for it maintains its specificity with something to define it against...

(pp. 198–9)

Ironically then, young people's experience of the changing world is characterized above all by that world's resistance to acknowledge such change because the change lacks any clear temporal form. Similarly, David Harvey (1989) argues that although in some ways modernity has changed, it is essentially the same in that it reflects the same underlying capitalist dynamic. It is that dynamic that provides a context within which the world appears to be young, people's consumerist oyster. However, the reality of social exclusion and extended transitions tends to temper this vision of young people as liberated symbols of post-modern eclecticism, while muddying the definitional waters.

Pointing out that there is no agreed upon conception of what constitutes 'post-modern' youth, Côté and Allahar (1994) consider the key

factors that characterize a post-modern world and affect what it is to be a young person. In discussing the work of Tinning and Fitzclarence (1992), Côté and Allahar (1994) argue that the rapid advances made in the development of information technology have had a profound impact on young people whose social lives are increasingly individualized as part of a move towards a globalization of culture. Far from being disadvantaged by these developments young people are empowered in the sense that it gives them a semblance of control over their personal biographies.

But the above is a rather optimistic account of what constitutes young people's lives in a post-modern world. Many commentators prefer to emphasize the fact that post-modernity simply serves to standardize youth experience, or at the other extreme, to rob young people of what unifies them in the first place. Indeed, Best and Kellner (1998) argue that many young people are simply not equipped to cope with the extreme demands of a new high-tech economy because post-modern culture has created a world in which young people are being dumbed down by the mass media (see Chapter 5). From this point of view, young people have been lost in a world of hyper-reality. Using the popular MTV series *Beavis and Butt-Head* as an exemplar of the current state of the teenage life experience, Best and Kellner identify the existence of 'a large teenage underclass that is undereducated; that comes from broken homes; that is angry, resentful, and potentially violent and that has nothing to do but to engage in social mayhem' (p. 88). Focusing in particular on the American example, the authors suggest that a large proportion of young people have been denied a future and as such are almost obliged to choose an alternatively illegal future instead:

it should be clear that the reality of today's youth is not only the hyperreality of watching TV or surfing the Net, but also difficult lives filled with violence, poverty, homelessness, systematic neglect, drug and alcohol abuse, high pregnancy rates and poor education. They are not merely absorbing images, playing video games, and hanging out at the malls; great numbers of them are suffering, living in fear of various health and safety threats, and under the psychological duress of 'lockdown' from concerned parents aware of the dangers of the streets.

(Best and Kellner 1998: 93)

As Best and Kellner suggest there is a down-side to the ephemerality of post-modernity which clearly has links to the discussion of risk society below. The value of a post-modern approach to social life and to young

people more specifically will continue to be hotly debated. The issues raised by the post-modern debate are highly complex and by its very nature such a debate raises more questions than it can ever answer. The post-modern argument that it is simply not possible to conceive of answers to why the world is the way it is, and that we can construct little more than opinions or representations of reality, means that these arguments can never be tested, least of all disproved, because they are not trying to prove anything in the first place. But regardless of such problems, post-modernism has undoubtedly had a profound effect upon the social sciences and at the very least has persuaded sociologists to combine micro and macro interpretations of their subject matter. In other words, post-modernism has recognized the value to be had from studying expressions of culture in their own right, but it does so within a broad debate about the nature of long-term social change and so has the potential to provide insights into the changing nature of youth lifestyles.

To summarize then, the changing nature of the world is actively changing what it is to be a young person at the beginning of a new millennium. The more practical everyday ways in which the nature of youth has apparently been undermined in this context were discussed in Chapter 3. An important part of this debate centres on whether or not this means that youth at the start of the new millennium is in some way a less authentic experience than it has been in the past. This is an issue I will return to throughout this book. All I need to say at this stage is that if young people's experiences of social change have been fragmented and are in that respect different from how they may have been in the past then the actual concepts sociologists use need to be as flexible as the phenomena they are seeking to explain.

Risk society

One of the most important contemporary sociological debates centres upon the question of risk. In some respects, debates about the risk society can be closely related to the sorts of questions posed by post-modernists, the theorists of risk being concerned with the extent to which we can identify the emergence of a new industrial risk society. Indeed, Ulrich Beck prefaces his book, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992), by pointing out that the prefix 'post' is the key word of our times. Many authors have identified risk as a key issue underlying life in the late twentieth century (e.g. Green 1997) with risk assessment permeating all areas of human interest. Furedi (1997) talks about a 'culture of fear' where the struggle to save the world has become

been surpassed by the need to ensure personal safety. He argues that although people live longer and are healthier and wealthier than they were in the past, these improvements have come at a cost. The social, economic and scientific advances which made these developments possible have actually created new and bigger problems. A distinctly inhuman environment is being created in which people are having to learn to constrain themselves and their actions:

The virtues held up to be followed are passivity rather than activism, safety rather than boldness. The rather diminished individual that emerges is indulged on the grounds that, in a world awash with conditions and impending catastrophes, he or she is doing a job by just surviving.

(Furedi 1997: 12)

Three authors have had a particular influence on the debate over a 'risk society': Mary Douglas, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Mary Douglas (1992) argues that risk and danger are culturally conditioned ideas shaped by the pressures of everyday life. Risk has apparently become central to our social lives precisely because of the move towards a global society. We are liberated from the constraints of local community but at one and the same time are bereft of traditional forms of protection and support mechanisms. Markets play a key role in this process in that they 'suck us (willingly) out of our cosy, dull, local niches and turn us into unencumbered actors, mobile in a world system, but setting us free they leave us exposed. We feel vulnerable' (Douglas 1992: 15). Douglas goes on to suggest that risk fulfils the forensic needs of a new global culture, the shift to a world community having constructed a new set of political priorities. Risk fits the bill in that it provides a neutral vocabulary for the conception of social change. Risk is forward-looking and provides a means of assessing the dangers ahead, while simultaneously serving the needs of what is an increasingly individualistic culture. That is, it provides a discourse within which the individual can look forward to being protected. Thus, discussions about risk, especially as propagated by the media, are not about community but about the protection of the individual. Risk therefore helps to prop up a culture in which the liberty of the individual remains a political priority, not to say a political vote winner. Risk has therefore been politicized precisely because it provides a discourse which promotes the liberty of the individual. This is not a process that has been thrust upon the populace, but one that they gratefully collude in.

Ulrich Beck (1992) perhaps goes further than Douglas in that he sees risk as the defining characteristic of the developed world. For Beck the

contemporary world is fundamentally divided not by differentials in access to the production of wealth, but by the distribution of risks (see Green 1997, for a discussion of risk and its role within the social sciences). We no longer live in a safe predictable world, but one that is characterized by uncertainty and risks which, broadly speaking, operate at two levels: the global environmental level and the everyday personal level. Thus, Beck (1992) argues that it is possible to identify a new mode of socialization, a 'metamorphosis' or 'categorical shift' in the make-up of the relationship between the individual and society. He suggests that while society cannot be said to be 'post-modern' as such, it has reached an important stage in its 'evolution' in which it is having to reflect back on itself (see Kumar 1995). This need for reflexivity is characterized above all by the preponderance of risk in contemporary society. Beck conceptualizes the question of risk within a further discussion of reflexive modernization, arguing that modernization is dissolving industrial society and giving rise to another form of modernity. Risk society therefore develops as a means of modernizing the principles of modernity, as Kumar (1995) notes, so that the onus is less on the potential for self-destruction which characterized industrial society and more on modernization. For Beck, in advanced society, the social reproduction of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks:

Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself. Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization and to its globalization of doubt. They are politically reflexive.

(Beck 1992: 21 [emphasis in the original])

In short, a risk society is a far more pessimistic society than its predecessor. It is more about preventing or limiting the impact of the negative aspects of modernization than it is about everybody wanting to get the most out of it as was more characteristic of a class-based industrial society. The pursuit of success through the production of wealth, once the key characteristic of modern society, has been overtaken by the production of risk and the subsequent quest for safety. Modern technology can be seen as playing a major role in creating large-scale risks, most notably the potential for nuclear war and environmental disaster. Of more interest here, however, are those risks associated with what Beck calls 'individualization'. In this context he identifies three main patterns:

1 The increasing focus on the individual as a reproduction unit for the social in his or her life-world. This development has significant implications for the nature of the 'social' and the concomitant decline of traditional forms of social support. Indeed the family collapses as the 'penultimate' synthesis of life situations between the generations and the sexes, and individuals inside and outside the family become the agents of their livelihood mediated by the market, as well as of their biographical planning and organization.

(Beck 1992: 130)

2 A high degree of standardization which accompanies the above. This process is underpinned by the extension of the market into every aspect of social life. Traditional sources of social support are undermined and the individual becomes just as standardized as he or she is individualized (see Simmel (1978) and his analysis of money).

3 A concomitant change in the nature of individual situations so that the individual becomes increasingly, and ironically perhaps, dependent upon institutions. Although liberated on one level, the individual actually becomes increasingly dependent on his or her relationship with the labour market, which is especially ironic for young people who often find it so difficult to gain access to it. The individual is equally dependent on education, consumption, the welfare state, 'and on possibilities and fashions in medical, psychological and pedagogical counselling and care... Individualization becomes the *most advanced* form of societalization dependent on the market, law, education and so on' (Beck 1992: 130-1).

In this situation, class and family contexts become less important as the individual becomes more responsible for his or her own direction in life. Two people may have very similar backgrounds but are at liberty to choose different lifestyles, subcultures, social ties and identities. And herein lies Beck's fundamental point:

The individual is indeed removed from traditional commitments and support relationships, but exchanges them for the constraints of existence in the labor market and as a consumer, with the standardizations and controls they contain. The place of *traditional* ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by *secondary* agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social

policy, economic cycles and markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in consciousness.

(Beck 1992: 131)

The individual's relationship with risk is apparently changing in that the individual has less and less control over those risks that surround him or her, a classic illustration of this being a young person's experience of the employment market. But a key point made by Beck in this context, and one that is often overlooked, is that the process of individualization brings with it market dependency which invades all aspects of living. The mass market and mass consumption come to play a key role in structuring everyday existence notably through the construction of lifestyles 'launched and adopted through the mass media' (Beck 1992: 132). The market therefore plays a key role as an external form of control and standardization. In this context, the individual is institutionally dependent, that dependency being most readily reflected in the peer group's relationship to the labour market. And yet the irony of all this is that individuals perceive their social lives, not as being determined by the social or by social institutions, but as revolving around their own egos. In other words, the individual's biography lies in his or her own hands, this being a necessity in a world with arguably fewer genuine forms of social support than ever before.

Anthony Giddens (1991) is equally concerned with the nature of social change but sees it as part of the long-term evolution of modernity. To this end, Giddens talks about the onset of 'high modernity', one of the key characteristics of which is the uncertainty it manages to engender in the individual. As Green (1997) argues, in a world where scientific explanations are fracturing and where the understanding of what constitutes 'truth' and who is responsible for maintaining such truth becomes increasingly hazy, the individual is forced to respond to what is a rapidly changing and uncertain environment. These are themes that Giddens (1991) develops when he argues that living in high modernity 'has the feeling of riding a juggernaut' (p. 28). High modernity then is simultaneously a time of risk, danger and yet infinite possibility: 'Living in the "risk society" means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence' (Giddens 1991: 28).

For Giddens, the risk society is a society in which the individual is confronted with an infinite range of potential courses of action which themselves breed an atmosphere of self-doubt and anxiety. The point here is not that there have to be more choices, but that the range of choices is so vast that it becomes overwhelming and anxiety-inducing.

than there would have been in the past, but that anxieties are generated by the increase in risk calculations which feeds the 'culture of fear'. Giddens recognizes the possibility that individuals can make particular lifestyle choices as a means of minimizing anxiety. But such a strategy, he argues, is limited due to the sheer overwhelming magnitude of life possibilities perceived by the individual on a day-to-day basis. These possibilities are extended by the process of globalization (which I discuss in more detail below) in the sense that global transformations are increasingly tied up with everyday activity and hence the constitution of the self. In high modernity self-identities are intimately bound up with crisis situations thereby making the narrative of self-identity permanently fragile. The world in which we live is markedly different from that of the past. Our local lives are directly affected by and directly express global experiences and this creates a radically different type of social experience.

Two authors who have considered most comprehensively the question of risk and how risk relates specifically to young people's lives are Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel (1997). They argue that young people have become especially vulnerable to the heightened sense of risk and the individualization of experience which has characterized the move towards 'high modernity'. 'Young people today are growing up in a different world to that experienced by previous generations – changes which are significant enough to merit a reconceptualization of youth transitions and processes of social reproduction' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 6).

Furlong and Cartmel go on to suggest that young people are facing a greater diversity of risks and opportunities in the modern world, and with the traditional links between family, work and school breaking down, their journeys into adulthood are becoming increasingly precarious. Moreover,

because there are a much greater range of pathways to choose from, young people may develop the impression that their own route is unique and that the risks they face are to be overcome as individuals rather than as members of a collectivity.

(Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 7)

Furlong and Cartmel describe a society where the old social cleavages associated with class and gender remain intact, to the extent that objective forms of risk have changed little, while subjective feelings of risk have grown out of all proportion due to a perceived lack of collective tradition and security. In this context, young people's identities are inevitably and increasingly fragile. To back up this proposition, Furlong

and Cartmel describe a situation in which patterns of education and employment have changed radically in recent years (see Chapter 3). Transitions into adulthood have therefore been extended, partly reflecting the increased difficulties young people experience in entering the labour market, which in itself makes education an increasingly attractive prospect. This in turn, results in young people being dependent upon their family for longer periods than was previously the case.

What is perhaps most interesting as far as the changing nature of young people's lifestyles is concerned is that family ties have weakened, while other influences on young people's lives – particularly the media and peer groups – have apparently strengthened. Consumption and lifestyles are arguably now central to the process of identity construction. Furlong and Cartmel actually go as far as to suggest that although consumption and style have not succeeded class as the main determinant of young people's lives, consumer lifestyles are actually very stressful in nature and the sense of risk experienced by young people is very much a product of the consumer society. Indeed, in this context it is worth considering the suggestion that young people react to the sorts of inequalities and risks I have outlined above by partaking in increasingly risky types of behaviour themselves. As Plant and Plant (1992) argue, risk-taking behaviour such as drug and alcohol consumption is simply a way in which young people react to the structural conditions which operate around them. In this context, Plant and Plant go on to discuss the work of Jessor *et al.* (1990) who in turn argue that risk-taking by young people is, by definition, entwined with lifestyle. In many respects risk is a product of socially organized poverty, inequality and discrimination.

Globalization

Globalization appears to pervade questions of post-modernity and risk. It has emerged as a key focus for sociological debate in recent years with the recognition that much of what happens in our daily lives is increasingly influenced by events beyond our 'local world' (see Allen and Massey 1995). Anthony Giddens has defined globalization as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Giddens 1991: 64).

If we are to understand the local nature of our lives, including the local expression of youth lifestyles, we have also to consider the global context within which the local operates. In other words, the local is always already global.

dimension to the sorts of cultural issues under discussion in this book, with a careful balance to be made between global interdependence and local character. We can only understand the changes taking place in our locality if we are prepared to understand changes taking place outside our locality that may directly or indirectly affect the nature of that locality (Allen and Massey 1995: 1).

But globalization is a multidimensional phenomenon. There are, as Allen and Massey suggest, many 'globalizations' including the globalization of telecommunications, of finance and of culture. On the economic level the actions of transnational companies are seen to be central to the globalization of production. Companies no longer make location or investment decisions on a national basis, but consider their options on a global scale. Meanwhile, the world's financial markets are connected through rapid developments in information technology which mean that capital and resources can be switched around the world at the touch of a button. Though the above aspects of globalization are virtually invisible to the individual, the implications of such a process are very real. As more and more companies work on a global basis, crucial decisions can be made about the viability of an individual's job perhaps thousands of miles away. The decision-makers, being remote from the impacts of their policies, are likely to be more hard-headed and less sentimental than if they were making a locally-based decision.

A key development is thus the receding influence of the nation-state – a phenomenon that some authors have described as 'time-space compression' or 'time-space distanciation'. David Harvey (1989), who relates his discussion of time-space compression closely to that of post-modernity, considers the ways in which global capitalism has sped up in recent decades, resulting in massive disruptions and implications for political-economic practices, the balance of class power, and social and cultural life in general. The acceleration in production and the associated accelerations in exchange and consumption have apparently resulted in an increasingly volatile and ephemeral market which in turn has undermined the stability of youth lifestyles, precisely because young people represent the social group perhaps most likely to partake in ephemeral forms of consumption. Our culture then is increasingly unstable and disposable, for we live in a world where we throw away 'values, lifestyles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being' (Harvey 1989: 286). The problem with all this, according to Harvey, is that we may not be able to cope as easily with such rapid social change as well as we might think. Globalization as expressed through time-space compression has created an ever more stressful world.

The sense that the world is simply out of the individual's control is an immensely frightening but common one in the global society. This is an issue taken up by Giddens (1991) in his book *Modernity and Self-Identity* in which he discusses the concept of 'time-space distanciation'. In discussing globalization as a dialectical phenomenon impacting upon divergent events at both a global and a local level, Giddens point out that nobody can 'opt out' of the transformations brought about by modernity. Everybody, for instance, is threatened by nuclear war or ecological catastrophe. But at the individual, day-to-day level, Giddens argues that globalization has an impact on intensional as well as extensional change. The sense of powerlessness which globalization brings with it can have a profound impact upon the self.

Globalization is not then simply an abstract theoretical notion. It actively impinges on people's daily lives. Indeed, as Spybey (1996) suggests, the single most important point about globalization is that it enters directly into the day-to-day reproduction of social institutions. People are socialized in the light of 'global knowledge, global awareness and global images' (p. 151). In illustrating this point, Spybey discusses Giddens' work in some detail and in particular his contention that traditional institutions are 'disembedded' in favour of globalized communication, authorization, allocation and sanction. Thus, Giddens describes the 'duality of structure', the idea that flows of the global are only reproduced in time and time space through human contact in passing moments. But perhaps most important of all here is the debate as to whether or not globalization promotes mass participation on an increasingly global scale while breaking down gaps between the haves and the have-nots. This is clearly not entirely true because, as Spybey suggests, an increasing division in a global culture is between those who are familiar with technological developments and those who are not. Fortunately young people tend to fall into the former category.

In the context of this book, the globalization of culture, and more specifically the globalization of the mass media, is a central concern, as is the suggestion that this process has broken down barriers between different cultures. In other words, there has arguably been a move towards a common global culture sparked off by new technologies of communication (Allen and Massey 1995). On the one hand, this process is seen to transmit a whole range of cross-cultural influences worldwide. On the other, it is seen as potentially damaging to local cultures which are increasingly threatened by external influences and, not least, by American influences. These in turn may result in the standardization and massification of culture on a global scale. Albrow (1997) argues that it may

massification of global culture through the particularity of mega-stars and global media events and images has created a situation where culture is no longer simply about the historic experience of a people. In other words, the whole concept of culture has been disembedded from its territorial base 'and re-embedded in a mass communications media frame' (Albrow 1997: 29). The problem with this situation, as I will discuss further in Chapter 5, is that American culture and culture portrayed by the media (particularly satellite television) presents a very particular image of the world:

The message on the radio or television which speaks across linguistic and cultural communities is that they too can also gain access to the consumer trappings of the advanced economies; if they have not already started to do so in the shape of a pair of Nike trainers or a Ford motor car or pick-up.

(Allen and Massey 1995: 114)

In this context, Street's (1997) discussion of global popular culture is of particular interest. Street points out that the rhetoric of global culture has been detached from the material and institutional conditions that underlie the appearance of globalization. In particular, globalization is not constituted by a plurality of cultures intermingling or by a harmonious synthesis of a single global culture but by a struggle for power. Power operates at two levels in this context. American culture may be a global heavyweight compared with that, say, of Honduras, but American culture may actually be received in a very different way in Honduras than it is in the United States. Honduras may not have the global cultural influence of the United States but at least it can interpret popular culture wherever it may emanate from, in the way it sees fit. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that popular culture is truly global: access to global American culture in remote parts of Honduras will clearly be much more restricted than in down-town San Francisco, for example. In this respect, globalization is clearly political as well as cultural, and part of the political impact of globalization relates in turn to the question of homogenization.

Waters (1995) develops these arguments with a discussion of the homogenizing impact of a global consumer culture which may have particular implications for young people's lives. But such 'homogenisations' are not entirely straightforward. Certainly, what is available in any single locality can be available in all localities, but in any particular locality cultural opportunities can also be widened. The concern here is that this process actually conflates the individual's identity to culture. However as Rillington *et al.* (1998) point out, it should not necessarily

be assumed that patterns of consumption simply follow some kind of global script. Consumers can appropriate mass consumer goods and use them to their own ends, as Billington *et al.* (1998) and Friedman (1990) have shown in their discussion of consumption in the People's Republic of Congo. Friedman identifies specific ways in which young men in the Congo, who belong to a low-status social group known as the *sape*, create high status identities through the consumption of global goods. They wear designer goods with ostentatious designer names, while displaying cans of global soft drinks in their cars. Such actions are not simply symptomatic of a third world country desperate to ape its first world 'masters'. What matters to these people is that these products provide an immediate means by which they can establish their own forms of social power. According to Friedman, the purchase of designer clothes in the West is a way of infiltrating a higher social order; the third world is all about assaulting and undermining dominant social orders. In other words, from our skewed Western viewpoints it is also too easy to make crass generalizations about the nature of globalization when in actual fact local identity is 'constituted through face-to-face relationships that occur in social contexts where there is little territorial movement' (Billington *et al.* 1998: 298). Nevertheless, in discussing the work of Hannerz (1992), Billington *et al.* point out that cultures can just as easily be located in collective structures of meaning that transcend space as they can be territorial:

Western fashion clothes, trends in travel and tourism, and 'foreign' food are now available throughout the world. Yet, when individuals use them or consume them they do not seem to become 'global villagers'. Instead, such items take on meanings that are specific to the individual's local context. They become part of the social repertoire through which individuals and groups assert *particular* ethnic, gender or class-based identities. However, what cannot be overlooked are the external pressures that influence negotiations over power and status which take place at a local level. Thus a global setting of extreme, political, social and economic inequality must be recognised as the wider context.

(Billington *et al.* 1998: 214–15)

The external pressures towards the construction of a common global culture are in this sense enormous, as is, at least potentially, the impact upon the individual's identity. But perhaps the key point here with regard to young people, and in particular the onus society places on them as fledgling consumers, is that globalization and the companies

In order to elbow their way through the dense and the dark, straggly, 'deregulated' thicket of global competitiveness and into the limelight of public attention – goods, services and signals must arouse desire and in order to do so they must seduce their prospective consumers and out-seduce their competitors. But once they have done it they must make room, and quickly, for other objects of desire, lest the global chase of profit and ever greater profit shall grind to a halt.

(Bauman 1998: 78)

It could be argued that regardless of either the positive or negative implications of consumerism, capitalism appears to direct people, and young people in particular, down a route in which consumer goods and services become the primary resource for the construction of their identities. Young people represent a prime target for the consumption of ephemerality, for the consumption of lifestyles. The point is that globalization has played its part in perpetuating consumption as a prime focus for the construction of lifestyles. Globalization promotes consumerism because both are temporal and consumers' desires are never quite fulfilled. Thus, the global consumer is constantly looking for promised unprecedented sensations: 'Consumers are first and foremost gatherers of sensations; they are collectors of things only in a secondary and derivative sense' (Bauman 1998: 83). If we take Bauman's argument one step further, young people are clearly the ultimate travelling consumer, intent on consuming sensation, not only for the sensation itself but for the sensation the sensation creates, as a means of firming up that individual's identity through desirous day-dreaming (Campbell 1987: ch. 7). More than any other social group, young consumers actually *want* to be seduced. Thus, as Côté and Allahar suggest, in the contemporary world youth cultures do not simply emerge as a result of the actions of marginalized youth but as a result of the impact of modern information technologies spread by consumer capitalism which has profound implications for the everyday experience of consumerism – with the mass media playing a fundamental role in this process (see Chapter 5). Some authors argue that the possibilities provided for young people via consumer capitalism actually liberate them by allowing them to be the authors of their own biographies. 'As consumers of images and commodities, they can accept or reject these things depending on whether or not they suit "their life projects" of "self-making"' (Côté and Allahar 1996: 22–3). But ultimately, such self-making, at least on the surface, appears to be based on the principles of self-gratification.

The suggestion here is not that young people are dupes of global con-

sumer capitalism but that the major impact of globalization on their lives is both economic and cultural. First, young people, perhaps more than any other social group, are subject to the imperatives of global economic change. Second, young people are far more subject to the imperatives of a global culture than any previous generation and as such appear to be virtually obliged to construct global and largely consumption-based lifestyles. Such lifestyles serve to offset the pitfalls associated with the sort of risky post-modern world of uncertainty which they inhabit. In particular as consumers of global culture young people are, by definition, consumers of *cultures*. Their lifestyles provide an arena within which those cultures can be actively negotiated in a process of mutual self-affirmation.

Discussion

The key change touched upon in all three of the above debates, and one that relates closely to the individual's relationship to social change, is individualization. As individuals become increasingly independent and arguably free, the way in which their identity is constructed and the individualized nature of their lifestyles become increasingly interesting to the sociologist. However, as Johansson and Miegel (1992) point out, discussions over individualization should not tempt the sociologist into over-exaggerating the amount of freedom people, and in this case young people, actually have.

It is probably true that in modern society the individual has gained greater freedom to choose and create her or his specific lifestyle. This is not to say, however, that structure and position no longer play a significant role in the making of lifestyle... in modern society neither structure, position, nor the individual, is the sole determinant of lifestyles. Modern lifestyles are the result of a complex interplay between phenomena at all three of these levels.

(Johansson and Miegel 1992: 37–8)

In order to bring the above discussion to a satisfactory close one might ask how the impact of risk, globalization and the move to 'post-modernity' can be related to the construction of youth lifestyles. It is all well and good to point out that the world is changing and that young people are changing with it, but what form does the link between the young people and social change actually take? Two authors who have directly addressed this question are Fornäs and Bolin (1992) in their edited collection, *Moves in Modernity*. Here they point out that modern-

nity appears to be dissolving the traditional distribution of roles so that it is no longer possible to assume that young people are transgressors and reactionaries. In other words, young people are more complex than many conventional and traditional approaches actually allow. Indeed, young people may have a role to play in setting limits and reining in changes as well as perpetuating them. The problem with the sociology of youth in general, as I hinted in Chapter 1, and as Fornäs and Bolin also argue, is that at times it gets so carried away with relating youth to broader socio-cultural trends that the actual object of study, namely young people, gets lost. As a result, the sociology of youth loses any impact in its own right. Of more immediate concern, however, and an issue touched upon by all three discourses discussed above, is that of individualization. As Fornäs and Bolin point out, this concept should not be confused with that of individualism, which implies that everyone is egoistic, or canonizes their own individuality. Instead, Fornäs and Bolin identify a process whereby individuals have increasingly been freed from collective constraints: 'In recent youth culture, there are lots of examples of new constructions of collectivities through mass media, leisure activities or social movements, but these are to a higher degree individually chosen rather than organically grown' (p. 9).

The move towards individualization is also picked up by Michael Mitterauer (1992) who argues that young people's rooms constitute an increasingly significant arena for individuated space (see Streele and Brown 1995). It is in this respect that the territorial youth groups with which sociology has traditionally been fascinated are actually less significant than they were in the past (assuming they were indeed ever 'significant'). In this sense, and as a reflection of broader social change, young people's collectivities tend to be increasingly informal in nature and in turn, their loyalty to a particular territorial focal point is being undermined (although Mitterauer (1992) sees this as more the case for young men than for young women). As far as long-term historical change is concerned, this reflects the emergence of the car and the subsequent 'loss of the street' in favour of a withdrawal into the domestic sphere. The global media appear to have played a particularly influential role in de-territorializing youth and in actively constructing global expressions of musical and fashion-based style. Young people are less dependent on the immediate expression of style in local contexts, because such styles were constantly reaffirmed anyway through the power of the global media.

Interestingly, Mitterauer suggests that the youth experience today is less ritualized than it was in the past. Youth groups are less dependent upon rituals (such as ritual admission via oaths or communal eating)

than they used to be. As I argue in Chapter 8, young people's peer relationships undercut their experience of broader social change. However, I would also agree with Mitterauer that the nature of peer relationships, though perhaps equally as significant, have taken on a new guise in which personal relationships are more important than communal ones. A concomitant trend, according to Mitterauer is the de-differentiation of gender roles, with same age and mixed gender groups becoming more and more prevalent. Mitterauer provides a useful example of this development when he discusses the changing nature of young people's relationship with dance. As part of the 'Rock 'n' Roll' ritual for instance, men asked women to dance and led their partner through that dance. New dance styles do not distinguish between an active and a passive partner and therefore individualize the whole experience. There are, of course, exceptions to this process (for example, attendance at football matches) but even these examples are arguably less gender-specific than they have been in the past. The key point is that young people's experiences have been fragmented to the extent that youth groups are gradually losing their function. Young people have common interests which help to frame their communication, 'but they also provide a chance for individual participation without intensive communication' (Mitterauer 1992: 45). Closely bound up with processes of urbanization, young people's lifestyles are not dependent upon a single uniting group to the extent that 'a freedom of choices seems to increasingly be the rule' (Mitterauer 1992: 4). From this perspective young people have more control over their own lifestyles than they had in the past. They are no longer obliged to do what a particular group is doing but can legitimately choose to do their own thing, hence the increasing significance of young people's own space. As Mitterauer (1992: 48) explains, 'the process of individualization, witnessed generally within society, determined the described development from the informal to the territorial group as well as the basic opportunity to do without forming a group at all'.

In summary, the picture of young people that we gain from these discussions is one of increased independence, self-determination and self-realization. But as discussions of risk illustrate, the conditions within which these apparently positive developments are occurring are actually taking place in a world which in some respects is quite possibly less secure than it has ever been. Young people do not have the sort of support from the more formal youth groups (and indeed subcultures) that they may once have had, which in itself leaves them increasingly isolated, and such isolation opens them up to the psychological pitfalls of individualization and self-blame. The changing world in which young people live

leaving young people on the edge, unsure of whether or not they will ever be in a position to take advantage of the riches associated with a consumer culture. For this reason the mass media plays a particularly significant role in young people's lives as a resource from which they can structure their lifestyles or at least from which they can construct opinions about what lifestyles might be *deemed* to be appropriate.

Recommended reading

- Allen, John and Massey, Doreen (1995) *Geographical Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Perhaps the most informative discussion of globalization, particularly its cultural impact.
- Beck, Ulrich (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- The most important single book to be published on the question of risk and its relationship to social change.
- Côté, James, E. and Allahaar, Anton, L. (1996) *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: New York University Press.
- Particularly useful in coming to terms with the nature of 'post-modern' youth.
- Furlong, Andy and Cartmel, Fred (1997) *Young People and Social Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- A well-structured and well-argued attempt to relate those structures influencing young people's 'transitions' to how young people experience a 'risk' society.
- Lyon, David (1994) *Postmodernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- A useful and understandable summary of a highly complex field. The chapter on consumerism is especially informative.