1   The concept of youth

Young people in the developed world have been the subjects of an enormous amount of research over the last 40 years. In general, this research assumes that young people constitute a separate and significant category of people: as non-adults. A central and recurring theme in the studies is the problematic nature of being a young person and the even more problematic nature of becoming adult. Much of the literature about youth has inherited assumptions from developmental psychology about universal stages of development, identity formation, normative behaviour and the relationship between social and physical maturation. Yet very little work has been done to clarify the theoretical basis of this categorisation based on age.

From time to time this point has been made by youth researchers. In 1968, Allen argued that the concept of youth needed to be reassessed. She pointed out that, 'it is not the relations between ages that creates change or stability in society, but change in society which explains relations between different ages' (1968, p. 321). Twenty years later, Jones took up the challenge, pointing out that the sociology of youth was yet to develop a conceptual framework for understanding both the transitions young people pass through as they become adult and the different experiences of young people from different social groups. She argued that it is 'misleading to emphasise the qualities or otherwise of "Youth" per se, since the young are neither a homogeneous group nor a static one' (1988, p. 707). Her conclusion was that youth is most usefully conceptualised as an *age-related process*. This means that the focus on youth is not

on the inherent characteristics of young people themselves, but on the construction of youth through social processes (such as schooling, families or the labour market). Young people engage with these institutions in specific ways, in relation to historical circumstances.

There is a growing awareness amongst contemporary youth researchers that focusing on youth as a process throws into question the very use of the universal term 'youth'. For example, recently Liebau and Chisholm (1993) have suggested that 'European youth' do not exist. Their point is that as nationally framed cultures and economies follow their own courses, young people in the different countries and regions that make up Europe negotiate very different circumstances from each other. They are shaped by both the material, 'objective' aspects of the cultures and societies in which they grow up; and by the ways in which they subjectively interpret their circumstances (Liebau & Chisholm 1993, p. 5). Also focusing on young people in European countries, Wallace and Kovacheva (1995) point out that the experience of youth is being 'de-structured', because the significant transitions in life are less and less age related. They argue that transitions are no longer associated with any age or with each other. Education, for example, has become gradually dissociated from work, and leaving home is not necessarily a transition stage linked with marriage.

This chapter discusses the use and usefulness of the concept of 'youth'. The first section discusses the ways in which young people have been conceptualised, examining common assumptions about what growing up means. The second section offers a perspective on the concept of youth as a social process. It concludes that it is important to study young people because they are embarking on a process involving transitions in many dimensions of life, towards becoming adult and establishing a livelihood. Yet, increasingly, the meaning of adulthood and how it is achieved, marked, acknowledged and maintained is ambiguous. The period of youth is significant because it is the threshold to adulthood, and it is problematic largely because adult status itself is problematic. The third section explores popular conceptions of youth, focusing on the representations of youth in the media as discourses about youth.

GROWING UP: THE RELEVANCE OF AGE AND THE CONCEPT OF YOUTH

One of the most significant issues which confronts the area of youth research is the apparent symmetry between biological and social processes. Age is a concept which is assumed to refer to a biological reality. However, the meaning and the experience of age, and of the

process of ageing, is subject to historical and cultural processes. Although each person's life span can be measured 'objectively' by the passing of time, cultural understandings about life stages give the process of growing up, and of ageing, its social meaning. Specific social and political processes provide the frame within which cultural meanings are developed. Both youth and childhood have had and continue to have different meanings depending on young people's social, cultural and political circumstances.

Research on young people's lives in non-Western countries exposes the ideal of the happy, safe childhood and period of youth as myths, 'built around the social preoccupations and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States' (Boyden 1990, p. 184). As a stark contrast to the Western ideal, she poses the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children in Thailand and the Philippines, the crimes perpetrated on young people in Argentina under the military regime and the repression and detention of young people in South Africa under apartheid. More importantly, Boyden also refers to ethnographic research which reveals that children and young people are expected to work for an income in some societies (for example, in Bangalore, India), not just for economic reasons, but also because it is believed that they should engage with adult life as early as possible.

When a global perspective is taken, the socially constructed nature of 'youth' becomes more apparent. For a large proportion of the world's young people, the idea of 'youth' as a universal stage of development was and remains an inappropriate concept. In 1986, the International Year of Youth, it was estimated by the International Labour Organisation that globally:

> there are some 50 million children under the age of 15 who are at work. Nearly 98 per cent of all these child labourers are found in developing countries. The striking increase in the urban youth popul-ations of less developed regions has created the phenomenon of the 'street children' who live and work on the streets, doing anything that will earn them and their families that little extra which enables them to survive . . . If 'youth' is understood as constituting the period between the end of childhood, on the one hand, and entry into the world of work on the other, then it is manifest that youth does not exist in the situations outlined above (United Nations 1986, p. 8).

Although the experience of youth varies widely, and may not exist at all for some, the *concept* of youth is important in enabling us to understand some of the complexities of social change and the intersections between institutions and personal biography. We argue that it is most usefully seen as a *relational* concept, which refers

to the social processes whereby age is socially constructed, institutionalised and controlled in historically and culturally specific ways.

It may be useful here to refer to earlier conceptual debates over the concept of gender, because there are similarities. In the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of sex roles was especially powerful in drawing attention to inequalities between men and women. The concept of sex roles provided a framework in which both men and women were seen to become limited by socially constructed categories, or roles. Although this concept offered a useful descriptive model, and was a significant basis for educational strategies to address gender inequality (Connell 1987), it had serious drawbacks. The static and categorical concept of sex roles, in which masculinity and femininity were seen as simply discrete, if socially constructed, categories failed to give any grasp of the *relationship* between masculinities and femininities. Ultimately, the sex roles framework was replaced by a more sophisticated understanding of gender as a relational concept, which placed *power* at the centre. Gender as a relational concept draws attention to the ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed in relation to each other. They are not simply 'different' categories and they cannot be understood independently of each other. Davies, for example, describes how the boys in her study worked hard to maintain a dualism between 'boys' and 'girls' by denigrating, devaluing and constantly drawing attention to 'feminine' behaviour. These boys provide an example of the way in which 'being masculine' involves maintaining a *hierarchy* in which being male has the greater value (Davies 1993, p. 107). There are several useful discussions of this conceptual issue; for example, Franzway and Lowe (1978), Connell (1987) and Edwards (1983) have provided extensive analyses of the limitations of a categorical approach to gender relations.

Youth is a relational concept because it exists and has meaning largely in relation to the concept of adulthood. The concept of youth, as idealised and institutionalised (for example in education systems and welfare organisations in industrialised countries) supposes eventual arrival at the status of adulthood. If youth is a state of 'becoming', adulthood is the 'arrival' (see table 2.1) At the same time, youth is also 'not adult', a deficit of the adult state. This dimension of the concept of youth is evident in the positioning of young people as requiring guidance and expert attention (from professionals) to ensure that the process of becoming adult is conducted correctly.

Understanding youth as a relational concept brings *power relations* to the forefront. For the purposes of our analysis, this is an important dimension in understanding the experiences that different

Table 1.1 Notions of youth and adult

Youth	Adult
Not adult/adolescent	Adult/grown up
Becoming	Arrived
Presocial self that will emerge under the right conditions	Identity is fixed
Powerless & vulnerable	Powerful & strong
Less responsible	Responsible
Dependent	Independent
Ignorant	Knowledgeable
Risky behaviours	Considered behaviour
Rebellious	Conformist
Reliant	Autonomous

groups of young people have of growing up. The popular image of young people presenting a 'threat' to law and order represents young people as more powerful than they really are. Although young people have 'rights' as young citizens, these are relatively easily denied, and they have very little say in the institutions in which they have the most at stake, such as education.

Another similarity between the conceptualisation of gender as relations of power (through the constructions of masculinities and femininities) and age (through the constructions of youth and adulthood) is that both involve interpretations of physical or biological 'realities'. The challenge, in rethinking youth, is to maintain a balance between recognising the importance of physical and psychological changes which occur in young people's lives and recognising the extent to which these are constructed by social institutions and negotiated by individuals. Importantly, it is also necessary to understand the extent to which categorical conceptions of youth have been central to denying young people their rights by creating frameworks within which adults can judge some young people as 'normal' and others as in need of intervention.

We would characterise approaches to youth which are based primarily on age groupings as *categorical*. The concept of *adolescence* epitomises this approach, because it assumes the existence of essential characteristics in young people because of their age, focusing on the assumed link between physical growth and social identity. For example, adolescence is assumed to involve a number of developmental tasks which must be completed appropriately or the young person will not develop into a fully mature adult. In chapter three we discuss the concept of adolescence in more detail.

One of the limitations of taking a categorical approach to the study of youth is the ahistorical and static nature of this approach. The assumption that age is the central feature characterising young people gives insufficient weight to difference, process and change. A categorical approach tends to rest on the assumption that the similarities amongst the age category are more significant than the differences, taking masculine, white, middle class experience as the norm. It offers little grasp of the ways in which the experience of growing up is a process, negotiated by young people as well as being imposed on them.

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. Furthermore, this approach takes little or no account of the relations between young people and adults (for example, in communities where there is high unemployment, in rural communities during recession, within elite families or in urban Aboriginal communities). It also tends to ignore the relations between groups of young people. Schooling, for example, structures competition between groups of young people in classrooms, as young people learn their 'place' in the hierarchy of performance. Relations between groups of young people are also structured through schooling systems. The privatisation of education also carries the message that some schools (and by implication, their students) are 'better' than others. In some states of Australia, where a large private education sector is well established, young people in private schools learn quite explicitly that they are an elite (see for example, Davies 1993; Kenway 1990).

In addition, a static approach to the study of youth as a category overlooks the continuities linking past, present and future. This shortcoming has the potential to be addressed in contemporary research that takes a 'life course' approach to studying issues such as transition from school to work. Kruger (1993) for example, demonstrates that a focus on youth alone may obscure significant continuities between generations of women, by looking at life stages in isolation from one another. A further dimension of the links between past, present and future is the positioning of youth (and childhood) as a reference point for future 'real' life. Youth is seen as a separate 'stage' of life because the time of youth is about preparation for future (real) life—adulthood. Although this dimension would seem to contradict the static nature of approaches to the study of youth, when used uncritically it reinforces the idea that young people are marginal members of society, awaiting their full participation when they reach adulthood.

The tendency to emphasise the qualities of 'youth' per se has been especially strong within the tradition of developmental psychology, which has influenced conceptions of youth which are used more broadly. Because we take up this issue in detail in chapter three on youth development, we shall confine our discussion here to issues covered in recent and current approaches to the study of youth.

SOCIAL PROCESS

There are many ways in which growing up in the 1990s in the industrialised world is fundamentally different from in the 1950s. It is important to ask what are the circumstances under which particular groups of young people make the transitions to adulthood? Although the concept of youth as a subject of research was associated with social conditions prevailing in developed countries following the Second World War (Frith 1986), it is argued that youth as a period of transition into adulthood has a much longer history. Indeed, a focus on youth has a history extending back much further, depending on how youth is defined. For example, during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, working class youth were regularly portrayed as a public problem, and besides regular media coverage, were the subject of sustained academic and government study (Finch 1993).

Mitterauer (1993) further argues that it is too simplistic to assume, because of linguistic evidence alone, that the period of youth did not exist in Europe prior to the seventeenth century. His study explores the possible bases for categorising youth, clearly demarcating between childhood and adulthood. He explores the historical validity of five 'transitions in status': leaving school, finding employment, leaving home, setting up home and marriage. Mitterauer concludes that youth, as a period of transition to adulthood is not usefully categorised in this way, because the timing of these aspects of transition, their meaning and their order of occurrence differ for young men and young women, and from one region to another, reflecting urban–rural differences as well as regional economic differences.

> Our analysis of traditional thresholds of youth has shown that many of them were applicable only to young men. This was particularly true of thresholds which had their historical roots in the granting of arms. Like these traditional thresholds, the concepts of youth which are based on them are primarily male in orientation. Male and female youth were so different that until the end of the nineteenth century the concepts relating to the age-group were entirely gender-

specific. Only then did a sexually inclusive collective concept of youth emerge. But even so, the turning points of the biography of youth continued to be very different for the two sexes (Mitterauer 1993 p. 87).

Youth, as a period of transition to adulthood, has meaning only in relation to the specific circumstances of social, political and economic conditions. Once this is understood, it is possible to bring social conditions to the foreground and examine the significant differences between groups of young people as they engage with the processes which will take them closer to adult life. Inevitably, viewing youth as a social process raises questions about the meaning of 'adult' status. For the concept of youth to have meaning its end point—adulthood—also has to have a clear meaning.

Historically, there have been periods when, for some groups of young people, the social processes were far more clear cut than they are today. For example, becoming adult for middle class male Australians in the 1960s was largely a process of getting a job, a car, establishing a career, getting married and buying a home. For this group, as for white middle class men in most developed countries at this time, youth and adulthood were relatively clearly demarcated by accepted patterns of consumption and production. The concept of youth as a distinct category, within a finite time span, fits the experiences of this historical group most closely.

Even during this time, however, the patterns of growing up on which the concept is based were not universally experienced. The transitions to adulthood for women were very different from their male counterparts'. Women's patterns of employment did not match men's. They were much more likely to remain dependent on a partner, or on the government if they were the recipients of income security. Women in the paid workforce were largely ignored by trade unions and by government policy (Probert 1989). It was only in the latter half of the 1960s that Australian women, upon marriage, were not required to resign their permanent positions as teachers. Their participation in the workforce, although increasing, revealed that women were limited to employment in a few sectors of the labour market compared with men, and they were not represented in the higher paid, senior positions of their occupations.

These examples illustrate that the concept of youth involves a tension between the social significance of age, which gives young people a *common* social status which is different from adulthood, and the social significance of other social divisions, which *differentiate* young people from each other. Table 2.2 draws attention to this point, in terms of the contradiction between homogeneity and heterogeneity in the concept of youth.

Table 1.2 Universal and particular elements in the conception of youth

Universal	Particular
Age status	Social status, e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, 'race', geographical location
Global youth culture	Cultural formation, e.g., youth subcultures
Compulsory schooling	Unequal provision, opportunities and outcomes
Legal prescriptions based on age, e.g., status offences	State regulation according to social status, e.g., indigenous young people and police
Adolescent development	Diverse life experiences and cultural norms for growing up
Youth as deficient	Youth as having multiple dimensions

While young people do have a common status and to some extent common experiences (for example, schooling) because of their age, there are many 'forces' which work against this. For example, researchers are now beginning to provide evidence that the experiences of older people in the labour market and in the home have a strong impact on the visions young people have of their own futures. This means that gender divisions and inequalities continue to have a powerful impact on the way in which young men and women approach the decisions which will affect their futures. Despite nearly 20 years of equal opportunity reform in Australian schooling, for example, young women continue to make decisions about their future lives in terms of very different priorities from young men. Young women accept that it is possible for women to challenge the occupational boundaries of the gender-segmented labour market, but many are reluctant to do so, because they envisage their futures as adults in terms of balancing paid and unpaid labour and public and private responsibilities (Ashenden & Associates 1992).

Researchers in Canada, the Netherlands and Germany have found the same trends occurring with regard to young women's approaches to adult life (Looker 1993; du Bois-Reymond et al. 1994; Kruger 1993). Young women, even though they might be aware of the potential opportunities that education offers them to achieve 'equality' with their male peers, continue to make decisions about their futures based on what they perceive to be the reality, that is, inequality. These aspects of the transitions to adulthood are taken up in more detail in chapter five.

In Australia, young Aboriginal people of both sexes in the 1960s also anticipated a very different transition to adulthood from their white counterparts'. Even in the 1980s, the relevance of the term 'adolescence' for young Aboriginal people was contested. McConnochie (1982) argues that the category of youth, as employed by many non-indigenous researchers, is inappropriate to characterise the social experience of growing up for young Aboriginal people. McConnochie's reservation about the use of the term 'adolescence' stemmed from his perception that it implied that there were 'internal psychological traits' which could be used to explain behaviour. By contrast he pointed to the nature of the social conditions affecting many young Aboriginal people. Traditional Aboriginal cultures carefully prescribed the process of becoming an adult, leaving relatively little room for speculation. However, fundamental social change to the traditional life of Aboriginal peoples meant that both achieving adult status and the meaning of adulthood have become increasingly ambiguous and uncertain.

The idea that youth only has meaning in relation to specific circumstances is also supported by a consideration of class relations. One of the key conditions that young people have had to face during the 1980s and 1990s is *the failure of the economies* of most Western societies to provide employment that sustains the establishment of a legitimate livelihood for significant proportions of young people. The struggle to establish a livelihood, historically the special burden of working class communities, continues to be central (Wilson & Wyn 1987). In the 1990s, it is clear from the experience of New Zealand that economic growth can continue to produce jobs and improve the standard of living of a proportion of the population, while at the same time the conditions and life chances of a large proportion of the society can actually deteriorate (Kelsey 1995). Young people who fail to find employment that is stable enough and well paid enough to establish a legitimate livelihood have major difficulties now and in later life. These young people become marginal to our society not because of their youth, but because of the operation of economic and political processes. There is increasing evidence that activities across multiple economies (see table 2.2) is the only way young people can gain access to a livelihood that is sustaining, if not legitimate.

On a global scale, social and economic changes which affect remote, small-scale and large urban communities alike have a significant impact on the meaning and experience of 'growing up'. Although the impact of these changes is far reaching, it does not mean that the outcomes for young people are all the same. As this discussion has begun to point out, the social processes which affect the experience of growing up serve to differentiate groups of young

people from each other, sharpening and reinforcing deeper social divisions rather than breaking them down. This discussion of social process has attempted to outline some of the issues that processes of social change raise for a conceptualisation of youth. Subsequent chapters take up issues raised here in more substance.

POPULAR CONCEPTIONS

Our discussion of the concept of youth would be incomplete without a consideration of the contribution of popular conceptions. The idea that youth constitutes a significant and distinct category is inevitably reinforced by popular media. Indeed, the analysis of media representations of young people occupies a distinct place within youth research. It is widely argued that in the 1950s, as patterns of consumption and production changed to give groups of working class young men greater leisure time and more buying power, the popular media (mainly newspapers) were involved in the presentation of particular constructions of young people (mostly young working class men). The term 'youth' became widely used in the 1950s in industrialised countries, as the experience of growing up responded to changing economic and political processes.

Frith (1986) argues that the term 'youth' was initially most frequently used in research on young men from working class backgrounds, mainly in the United States and in Britain. Relatively high rates of employment gave this group unprecedented disposable income, enabling them to use their leisure time in new ways, and giving them both a visibility and a form of power (Stratton 1993). Youth became a 'new category' of person, distinctive, usually male, and a potential threat to the stability of society. Although the sense of threat implied physical threat, there was also a sense in which young people were seen to symbolise change to moral and cultural values as well. This sense of threat was described by Cohen (1972) as precipitating 'moral panics' about the violent or disruptive behaviour of youth.

Historical analyses of the popular representations of young people in Australia before the 1950s, however, suggest that it is important to recognise the continuity of popular discourses about youth. In contrast to the historical evidence of considerable diversity in young people's lives, several themes in popular conceptions of youth have dominated. Bessant (1993) has summed up these themes in a recent discussion of the 'cultures' of young Australians in the years between 1900 and 1950. She discusses the dual popular representations of young people: as threat and inherently bad; and at the same time as the focus of hope and optimism and intrinsically good but vulnerable.

This discourse rested, Bessant argues, on the assumption that young people were naturally rather animalistic and uncontrollable, but that if tamed by social conventions they could be respectable. The assumption of this dual representation (of which the more negative image was dominant), provided an ongoing legitimation for state intervention, control and protection. As many researchers have pointed out, the youth who were represented in this way were almost exclusively male. These discourses also both drew on and fed the newly developing psychological theories which assumed that young people needed to pass through a series of developmental stages in which they defied the conventions of society and experienced a time of storm and stress, emerging from this process having 'found themselves'.

Subsequent analyses of later post-1950s popular conceptions of youth in the media reveal a continuity with these early discourses. Newspaper articles on youth are inevitably about young working class men (and often, especially indigenous and ethnic minority youth) who are seen as a threat to the assumed values of a 'majority', because of their style of dress, their violent behaviour, their drug-taking behaviour, or because of their attitudes towards employment, schooling or political processes. Stratton's (1993) analysis of the media treatment of young people in the 1950s, for example, argues that the derogatory portrayal of young people as 'bodgies and widgies' was a dominant theme. As the analyses of these media representations point out, it is seldom revealed that the young people who are represented in this way constitute a small proportion of the young population.

In addition to being portrayed as a threat, youth are represented in the media as both symbols and victims of modern society. In her analysis of girlhood in the 1950s, Johnson explores this theme, arguing that the concept of youth provided the imagery for it as a a time of uncertainty, which although threatening because of its potential to disrupt, would be prescribed by the biological processes of growing up, leading naturally to a stage of greater stability and certainty in adulthood (Johnson 1993, p. 36). The insights of developmental psychology offered a perspective on youth as a time of turmoil and change, in which adulthood was reached after completing specific normative tasks such as identity formation.

Johnson (1993) has also argued that the masculine bias in the concept of youth derives in part from the significance that youth had in the 1950s and 1960s as a symbol of the emerging post-war, virile and self-determined economies and societies of the developed world. The fit between this imagery and the experience of white middle class young people at that time was close enough to maintain the myth, with the promise that the transition from youth into a secure

and certain adulthood would also be the process for working class
males. Johnson's analysis offers a useful perspective on the use of
the concept of youth in Australia in the 1950s. However, what is
the symbolism of youth in the 1990s? Now, the transition into
adulthood is into a world of widespread uncertainty and scarcity.

Young people in the 1990s are seen to face significantly different
circumstances from those of previous generations. Giroux, writing
specifically about young people in the United States, suggests that
'plurality and contingency' either mediated through 'media culture'
or the economic system 'have resulted in a world with few secure
psychological, economic, or intellectual markers' (1994, p. 287). For
Giroux, young people are:

> condemned to wander within and between multiple borders and
> spaces marked by excess, otherness and difference. This is a world in
> which old certainties are ruptured and meaning becomes more contin-
> gent, less indebted to the dictates of reverence and established truth.
> While the circumstances of youth vary across and within terrains
> marked by racial and class differences, the modernist world of cer-
> tainty and order that has traditionally policed, contained, and
> insulated such difference has given way to a shared postmodern cul-
> ture in which representational borders collapse into new hybridised
> forms of cultural performance, identity and political agency (1994,
> pp. 287–8).

Giroux's analysis suggests that popular conceptions of youth in
the media not only represent youth, but actively construct the
experience and meaning of youth, offering a frame of reference that
may replace traditional frameworks.

In the 1990s, we argue, popular conceptions of youth continue
to portray the dualism of young people as both the symbol of
society's future and its victims, 'at risk' of succumbing to lives of
violence, drug dependence and moral degeneracy. In the 1990s, the
symbolic representation of youth lies in the areas described by Giroux
above as 'cultural performance, identity and political agency'. Instead
of symbolising the certainty of reaching the defined status of adult-
hood, youth in the 1990s, as portrayed in popular conceptions,
symbolises the use of new forms of consumption. For those who can
afford them, the technologies are now available to modify, shape or
transform the body, so that young people can become 'perfect' and
old people can look young. 'Youth' now has symbolic value as the
'outcome' of the process of becoming more and more in control over
one's body.

The changing symbolic representation of youth has meaning and
value in an increasingly global way, in a world in which traditional
boundaries are eroded. The traditional markers of the end of youth

are less and less meaningful. The implication of this is that youth as a social experience can be continuously available, regardless of age—the 'becoming' can go on and on. Youth, then, has symbolic meaning as an item of consumption. Of course, this symbolic representation of youth does not mean that everyone, or even a majority of people experience this. It is enough for highly visible media personalities to keep coming back, 'younger' than they were the first time around.

'Youth' as a symbol of consumption does, in a paradoxical way challenge the concept of youth as an age category. This emerging meaning of 'youth' means 'appearance', rather than age as such. The symbolic value of the concept of youth in the 1990s, then, is of youth as the future of society, not in the sense of the 1950s when coming to maturity was the imagery, but in the sense of having access to the trappings of youth throughout life, through consumption, and through performance. The symbolic meaning of youth, then, is not 'coming of age', but 'being anything you want to be'.

In addressing the question of what is the symbolism of youth in the 1990s, it is apparent that, as in previous eras, there are a number of dimensions which are simultaneous. At the same time that the concept of youth is an emerging symbol of consumption in society, young people continue to be presented as victims and therefore as a problem. This side of the multiple representation of youth is discussed in the following section.

YOUTH AS A PROBLEM

The idea that youth are a problem to society, and to themselves, is a central theme to which the media and youth researchers alike return. We have pointed out that one dimension of popular conceptions of youth in the media involves the positioning of young people as a threat to accepted social values, and as likely to engage in risky behaviours. In this section, we discuss this dimension briefly, foreshadowing the more detailed treatment of some of these issues in subsequent chapters.

Historical analyses of the 'youth as a problem' approach, although acknowledging that it goes back to the turn of the century or earlier, usually focus on the 1950s, seeing this as a time when both media and social researchers treated the phenomenon as if it were new. The new interest in young people as 'troublesome' is often linked to the changing economic and social conditions and circumstances, and their impact on working class youth. In his succinct treatment of the sociology of youth, Frith (1986) argues that the increased affluence of working class youth created new modes of

consumption, of leisure, and of distinctive styles of clothing and music, which were identified with 'youth' culture.

At the same time, the concept of 'juvenile delinquents' came into use. Johnson's discussion of 'troublesome youth' provides a useful summary of juvenile delinquency as a 'set of concerns about the activities of young people and their supervision by institutions or individuals representing the social order' (1993, p. 96). What Johnson's analysis makes clear is the integral link between development of a discourse of youth as a problem, and the establishment of many levels of institutions and processes for the monitoring, processing and surveillance of young people (see also Cunneen & White 1995). While these institutions (schools, social welfare organisations and the juvenile justice system, for example) were increasingly charged with a responsibility for young people, this role was seen to be complementary to and possibly in support of family life. However, signs of failure to develop appropriately were to be dealt with by interventions of experts in the lives of children or their parents. The monitoring of young people has inevitably led to the idea that some young people can be identified as 'at risk' (of a variety of things, including not developing through the assumed stages of adolescence properly or failing school).

This concept plays a key role in positioning young people as a problem. There are many variants of the discourse of 'at risk', but most involve the following elements. It is assumed that not all young people are a problem, only a group who are not growing up in the way that they should. This problem group is identified as different in identifiable ways from an assumed mainstream of young people, either in terms of psychological characteristics (such as learning difficulties) or social characteristics (for example, young people from single-parent families).

The concept of 'at risk' depends on the idea that a majority of young people are 'on target', making the transitions towards adulthood in the appropriate way. The concept of 'at risk' and its corollary, the idea of a 'mainstream', are central to a categorical approach to conceptualising youth. The assumption that an identifiable group of young people are at risk gives credibility to the notion, integral to most education systems, that all other young people are by and large the same.

The idea that some young people are at risk is also central to one of the dimensions of 'youth as a problem'—the idea that youth are victims of society, as well as a threat to it. In the last decade, the newly found affluence of working class youth has been replaced by the poverty of communities who are bearing the brunt of economic restructuring. With the virtual disappearance of traditional youth labour markets, young people who would rather get a job are

refugees in education systems which were never intended to address these people's approaches to life or to education and which cannot deliver their promise of access to a better life.

Recently, this approach has re-emerged with the idea that the young are a 'lost generation' (Daniel & Cornwall 1993). Daniel and Cornwall's study of young people focuses on disadvantaged young people, presenting their perspectives on work, school and youth services. The picture which emerges from this study is of a group of young people who have few points of engagement with society, and feel that they do not belong. This group of young people were portrayed as a 'lost generation', not because of their own behaviours or characteristics, but because they were the victims of changes to and developments in the economic and social organisation of Australian society, which marginalised them.

The concept of a youth 'underclass' is also gaining currency as a concept which describes the victim status of young people who are marginalised from society. Some writers focus on this group from the point of view of behaviour, arguing that young people themselves, through antisocial attitudes and activities, are a threat to society. Others argue that the notion of an underclass is useful because it highlights the marginalisation of young people by society (see Robinson & Gregson 1992).

Both concepts of lost generation and youth underclass, although useful in drawing attention to the plight of some groups of young people, do so at the risk of sensationalising their situation. Both concepts are descriptive, collecting together groups of young people who have been marginalised from the major benefits and institutions of society, emphasising the hopelessness of the situation of this group, and at the same time rendering invisible the differences amongst them.

Critics of the concept of a youth underclass argue that it is too broad a concept to generate an understanding of the marginalising processes themselves, focusing instead on the results of marginalisation (Williamson 1995). This means that although the concept is useful in pointing out the severity of some young people's circumstances, it does not provide the basis for an analysis that would enable their situation to be addressed. For example, although they are both marginalised, it is not useful to place in the same category black teenage mothers with young white men in rural communities in the United States, because their marginalisation can only be seen as the same in the broadest possible terms. Although the effects may be seen as marginalisation, the processes creating these outcomes are very different, and their routes towards gaining an adequate livelihood are likely to be very different.

The construction of youth as victims and as vulnerable was challenged by the emerging cultural studies research traditions which suggested that young people were not necessarily passive 'victims' of society. During the 1970s cultural analysis of young people emerged as a strong influence on thinking about youth. This tradition explored the dynamic relationship between particular groups of young people and forms of popular culture, including dress (style), music, film and video (see, for example, Hall & Jefferson 1976). The work of people associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was especially influential. Their work has been summarised in a number of places (for example, Jones 1988; Frith 1986), so it is not necessary to go into detail here. Although the work which is characterised as fitting into the CCCS tradition is by no means in agreement about the significance of popular culture and of youth itself, it can be said that in retrospect, this work has left an important legacy.

The detailed ethnographic studies of groups of young working class men which were generated at this time were informed by a perspective that highlighted the active participation of these young people in negotiating their lives, albeit within the boundaries of their communities. At the time, the concept of resistance offered a view of these young working class men as agents rather than as recipients of a dominant culture. In some of this work, the emphasis was on their engagement in class relations, rather than on age as such (Hall & Jefferson 1976). Others argued that it was necessary to examine the relations between class and age, and particularly the way in which age is a mediator of class relations (Murdoch & McCron 1976, p. 10). However, despite this, the studies emerging from this tradition have tended to give visibility to the practices, styles and perspectives of young men, and later, young women, reinforcing their 'difference' from 'adult society' (Taylor 1993).

This tradition of ethnographic research on young people has also provided a perspective on the way in which groups of young people take up popular media, not as mindless consumers, but as an expression of their resistance to the dominant culture. Many studies have presented the practices of young people in terms of subcultural styles of expression, which, in their everyday lives, subvert aspects of the dominant culture (for example, see Hall & Jefferson 1976).

However, critics have pointed out that the focus on the relationship of young people to popular culture has tended to underplay the historically specific nature of this relationship. The meaning of 'the dominant culture', the extent to which it is contested and the form this takes are related to social divisions such as gender, ethnicity and race. The expression of youthful self that is evident in the adoption of popular music by young Aboriginal people in remote Australian

communities (Brady 1992) has very different meanings and implica-
tions from its use by middle class white young women in Brisbane
(Gilbert & Taylor 1991).

Johnson (1993) argues that in taking insufficient account of the
different expressions and meanings of the relationship of young
people to popular culture, the cultural studies approach has taken
for granted the idea that young people have a 'pre-social' self which
they strive to develop and express through their engagement with
mass media. By 'pre-social' self she means an 'essential' self, which
exists independently of social relationships, and which will strive to
gain expression. Hence, although the cultural studies tradition offered
an approach in which young people's behaviour was seen as con-
structive rather than problematic, in some of its manifestations it
failed to challenge the categorical concept of youth.

CONCLUSION

The central issue addressed in this chapter is the contradiction that
young people do share in common their age, but the social, economic
and cultural significance of this physical reality is far from common.
The chapter outlines the argument, which forms the framework for
the following chapters, that a *relational* concept of youth offers an
approach to understanding the social meaning of growing up that
can take account of the diverse ways in which young people are
constructed through social institutions, and the ways in which they
negotiate their transitions. This approach problematises the meaning
of adulthood, a status which is generally taken for granted in
discussions of youth and youth transitions and development.

There are many studies of young people which offer insights into
the multiple and diverse experiences of growing up. Perhaps over-
whelmed by the dominance of the developmental psychological
approach to youth ('youth development'), few have explored the
implications of challenging the categorical approach to youth re-
search, youth studies and to youth policy. The remaining chapters
of this book offer such a challenge, drawing on our own and others'
research to 'rethink youth', and to develop a framework for re-
searching young people's experiences of growing up.