

Are young people's
identities more
individualised?



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Is it correct to suggest that young people's identities today are more 'Individualised' than in earlier generations?

How people define themselves in relationship to society is an ongoing concern of sociology. This essay examines the question of whether young people's identities are more individualised today than they were in earlier generations. The question itself is an interesting one because it implies that identity is discrete and unique. That notion is in itself modern, so it becomes axiomatic to say that identities are more "individualised" because by the framing of the question it is already presumed that identity is individual. However, as all individuals operate within the framework of society it is reasonable to examine how and to what extent the relationship has changed between earlier generations and now. To this end this essay will examine the facets of people's lives including work, leisure, education, and entertainment, that are associated with creating identity and discuss the ways they lead to greater individualisation, and also the ways in which people create community.

Sociologists and historians are aware of the strong trends that have changed culture since the industrial revolution, and especially since World War II, as traditional divisions of class and solidarity have broken down (Chisholm, 1990, p. 134). This took place in the industrial revolution because it caused a mass movement towards urbanisation, which resulted in the breakdown of older community structures. After World War II improved communications and transport lead to globalisation and individualisation as youth were removed further from national or class-based identification (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001, p. 329). Along with this it is clear to see the lack of religious

identification in modern culture, as well as increasing mobility, both of which disrupt older social organisations. Johnson, et al argues that youth culture expanded in the post-war world, to the point of excluding the aged (2005). The main concern of his argument is for the marginalising of the aged, but there is a reverse effect too: the alienation of youth from the support of traditional structures. The freedom to be individuals, and defining youth in opposition to older generations, means that young people cannot rely as much on the support and wisdom of older adults.

The term generation gap is used to discuss this break between older and younger. Generations form a type of social organisation, and Johnson notes they are the organising force behind relationships involving: “ children, economic resources, political power, and cultural hegemony... generations are a basic unit of social reproduction and social change” (2005, p. 518). However the influence of generational divides is changing in modern culture as “ the individual has become important and influential both in politics and working life” (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006, p. 63). Whereas before relationships fit into more traditional patterns – parents, children, grandparents – now with the loss of community and the extended family, and with the greater emphasis on personal development rather than fitting in within a group, the result is enhanced individualisation. Young people no longer necessarily see themselves first as children, or members of a clan, but as individuals. This perception can have both positive and negative effects. Warner Weil et al note the importance of “ social capital” (2005, p. 206) that is to say, a sense of belonging to a group, that helps individuals cope with the insecurities of daily life. As culture becomes more individualised young people might feel

cut off from the support they need. However, other sociologists note that anti-social behaviour can be transmitted from one generation to the next, through association and environment (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009, p. 700). Therefore individualism can be beneficial if it helps youth break out of negative group behaviour patterns, and overcome problems within their family or community.

Part of the change is that individualism is breaking down old class differences, and leading to a more consumer/market orientated economy. While the positive effect is noted in reducing class prejudice, the danger of extreme individualism is that social inequality is re-envisioned not as the result of pre-existing social divisions but as “ a consequence of individual failure in coping with societal conditions” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 25). Individualism raises the notion that young people who fail to thrive are to blame for not adapting to society, which can lead to feelings of failure and low self-esteem. This is not productive, and does not encourage personal growth. The other challenge of integrating individualism and society is that in order to maintain cohesion society may openly or subtly influence individuals (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006, p. 65). This can be harmless, but it can also be coercive, for example using advertising to promote certain lifestyles as social norms, which can leave some young people feeling left out. For example, our culture is very heterosexual, and the majority of media and advertising focuses on romantic love as between a man and a woman. This excludes gays and lesbians, and anyone who does not identify as totally heterosexual. Because of individualism these people are able to live as they choose, and create alternative communities, however there is still a powerful

message that they are not “ normal”. This is one way that through advertising consumption is used to create a social order (Warner Weil, 2005, p. 151).

Modern education plays a key role in individualisation, as from the end of the 18th century it began to construct the notion of youth and “ individualisation followed education, and education both followed class lines and attacked them” (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006, p. 63). Therefore as more people were educated to a roughly equal level there was greater opportunity for social mobility. Education has continued to grow in importance as society has become more technologically sophisticated, with annual debates about the values of A-levels, the importance of university funding, promoting education for low-income children and so forth. Today, education is perceived as the “ the most important means for individual success or failure” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 25) and governments spend a large quantity of time and energy trying to improve and tailor the education system. There is a paradox in the importance of education, however, because the expansion of schooling, education “ intended as a means of escape has resulted in the extension of dependence and restrictions on autonomy in youth... it acts as a restraint” (Jones, 2009, p. 165). While young people would have gone out to work much younger, in previous generations, and therefore had the individualising experience of personal responsibility and self-reliance, modern education keeps them closer to their parents, which creates a push-pull where education is teaching them to think for themselves, but they are still dependent on others.

Currently in society work is the greatest single factor in individualisation. Since the industrial revolution the labour market has been the principle cause of individualisation, through competition and occupational and geographic mobility (Chisholm, 1990, p. 135). People often spend more time at work than at home, and Jones notes the two are now separated (2009). Work even becomes the dominant way of forming peer groups, with work colleagues becoming friends and romantic partners. Individualisation through work has some liberating effects, with people being defined by their skills and abilities, rather than by origin or class status, as they would have been in previous generations. However, the danger is that the dominance of work rather than the personal, and the emphasis on individual achievement can lead to alienation when youth do not have an opportunity to exercise their skills. Because work is important as a basis for identity, because it forms a primary part of a person's role in society, it is noted that: " when young people do not have a job that suits their education and skills, or an adequate salary, there are always social and psychological disorders" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 126). The many possibilities of working life pose a major challenge too – it is no longer enough to be good at doing a job, people have to be able to navigate a wide range of possibilities and social situations, and constantly adjust to a changing labour market, and this can " paralyse the search for work as a source of meaning" (Warner Weil, et al, 2005, p. 106)

Since work is not a complete, or always satisfactory, source of identity, most young people focus on leisure activities such as music as a way to demonstrate power and form a discrete social identity (Jones, 2009, p. 46).

Jones notes there is a dual role to the dynamic of individualisation through leisure, though. Young people's increased leisure opportunities can actually keep them in their parents' house because they spend their money on entertainment, rather than setting up an independent home (2009, p. 107). This is a situation that has only been possible since the end of World War II, with changes in technology and increased opportunities for leisure. The creation of pop culture - music, movies, fashion, television - was possible because of mass communication, and it gives young people a way to create individual identities and have a social life based on leisure and consumption that relates to their sub-cultural identities (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006, p. 57). This is easy to see in any school, or group of young people, where they identify themselves by their clothing and accessories, as being into hip hop, or indie rock, or skateboarding, or sport.

It is a dry run for adulthood, only instead of work, leisure is the focus. Adults identify based on their jobs, but for many young people who they are is what they do for fun. Therefore entertainment is very important in allowing individualisation. Chisholm notes that thanks to technology and housing arrangements more youth can choose their own entertainment, e. g. TVs, games consoles, DVD players, and enjoy them separately from the rest of the family (1990). Johnson argues that youth culture started "to acquire a history with the inauguration of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" (Johnson, et al, 2005, p. 158). Entertainment allows individualisation outside of the traditional class, family or generational groupings. It also encourages social identification between individuals to form new kinds of groups. Livingstone and Bovill note that young people pursue their interests across multiple

media, creating global subcultures (2001, p. 329), which has the effect of enhancing individualisation within their immediate community but opens the possibility of wider networks. Social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, and the hundreds of thousands of sites devoted to every imaginable interest from sport, to music, to fashion, to hobbies, show that there is a definite impulse to form communities, even if the basis is individualism. Because of this entertainment plays a “ key role in young people’s identity formation” (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001, p. 8).

This association between entertainment, leisure and individualism is promoted by capitalism, and used to encourage individualism through consumption. Individual image becomes important, as seen by the huge celebrity culture in the UK, and bodies and looks become part of young people’s identity and how they present themselves (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 23). The importance of not just being an individual but looking like an individual has made people more aware of, and dependent on how they look (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 25). This causes a paradox situation though, because it is individualism based on able-bodiedness. As noted previously society uses powerful images to help maintain coherence in spite of individualism, and the emphasis on certain bodies and behaviours as normal raises the danger of alienating and excluding young people. In the past, within traditional communities, disabled young people would have likely been cared for by family and integrated into the community, but it is much harder to integrate into an individualised society. Despite this risk of exclusion, and the loss of group support, people want more control over their lives - not less - and education and work are increasingly focused on

competition and individual success (Chisholm, 1990, p. 135). There is no doubt, examining these facets of modern society, that young people have far more “ individual” identities than they did in the past.

Politically, this is identified as freedom, and Western culture defines freedom as “ individual choice and responsibility” (Johnson et al, 2005, p. 159). The drive towards greater individualism is seen over the past few decades, especially with Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, where welfare institutions were broken down and the message was that everyone should be self-sufficient. Today, it is generally accepted that children are “ born as individuals with individual rights” and they are entitled to be treated as such from birth (Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006, p. 65). This lays the groundwork for individualisation from a very early age. Balancing this, however, is the fact that individuals are not free from the influence of their families or social groups. This can be relatively benign, as with young people identifying through music or taste in movies, or it can be negative, as noted by Lerner & Steinberg who say the risk of developing depression or other pathologies is related to parenting, and environment (2009, p. 562).

The conclusion is that it is clear young people’s lives are more individualised than in previous generations, thanks in large part to mass communication and developments in technology. The primary force for change has been education, leading to work as a focus for creating identity. However, young people also identify heavily based on entertainment and leisure activities. Despite all the opportunities for individualism there is still a fundamental need for social cohesion and inclusion. Unfortunately some of the ways society tries to promote cohesion, such as through messages in advertising

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and defining normal behaviour, actually serve to exclude individuals who do not fit the stereotype. Against this trend, however, the self-selection into groups by young people with common interests, or needs, is possible through the internet, which creates a new form of social grouping based on – rather than opposed to – individualisation. It seems certain that as humanity and technology evolve there will continue to be enhancements in individualism, as well as new types of social organisation to compensate for the loss of traditional social structures based on class identity, geographical location or extended family.

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