



The making of a generation: The children of the 1970s in adulthood

Lesley Andres and Johanna Wyn 2010,
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‘Generation’ is a term usually deployed in two problematic ways. It is a key trope for use in marketing. In connection, but more troubling, it is a form of symbolic violence in mainstream media and political discourses where an array of generalisations, stereotypes and labels are mobilised to pathologise structural problems as individual deficiencies – lazy students bludging off their parents; disloyal careerists; technologically dependent, mindless consumers; socially irresponsible, politically apathetic individuals – and so on. By using a socio-historical definition of generation, where it denotes how people born at a similar time face similar economic, social and cultural norms that do not necessarily parlay into common values and experiences, Andres and Wyn skilfully show how two traditional contours of inequality – class and gender – still play key roles in shaping the very different transitions of young people and do much to destroy these governmentalised caricatures.

Andres and Wyn present comparative data from rare and valuable longitudinal research, which has followed the trajectory of young

people in Canada and Australia. The research is underpinned by using reflexive modernity theorists such as Beck, Bauman and Giddens to help understand the rapid social change since the 1970s, while using the Bourdieuan toolbox to analyse the persistence of class and gender to shape experiences, life chances and choice. The book contains comparative analyses in the form of case studies on policy; 'hopes and dreams'; education; work; relationships and families; and health and wellbeing. Importantly, there is an emphasis on how all of these fields bear considerable influence on each other and are made more complex by class and gender. The study concludes with an outline of the implications of inequality and generation for the notion of adulthood, and for youth policy and social theory.

Across these case studies common themes emerge. This generation 'has had to manage, and negotiate new territory' (p.225) unrecognisable to previous generations. Intergenerational transfer of cultural and social capital still deeply marks educational inequalities despite increasing levels of tertiary participation. Educational credentials are the key to successful labour market transitions and the quest for wellbeing. Nevertheless, 'gaining a foothold in the world of work' is a long struggle, even for the relatively privileged, where a work/life balance is a constant challenge. Partnering and parenting happen later. By the time they have reached their early thirties, for the most part this generation has reached a level of satisfaction in achieving relatively modest goals. For the Australian cohort, 'the personal costs of the mismatch of social and economic goals' (p.225) is expressed in higher levels of physical and mental health concerns.

As a child born in the 1970s, now in so-called 'adulthood', the findings in this book resonate both with my own experiences and observations of my friends and peers. As a youth sociologist

concerned about ever-increasing and entrenched inequality in a time of global uncertainty, I think this book should become a canonical text for both academics and practitioners.

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