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## Are Contemporary British Youth A Lost Generation?

Within British society today youth is generally defined biologically, by both puberty and age however the natural stages from childhood through to adulthood are open to questioning; leading the definition of youth to be progressively less clear. It has been said that 'conceptions of the youth phase are historically and culturally specific' (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013:3). The difficulty of insinuating a concise definition of both 'youth' and 'generation' could however, directly mirror why the current modern-day generation is considered 'lost'. Highlighted within this essay are various concepts regarding the subject matter, such as: generations and what they are, the intersection and transition from youth to adulthood, youth unemployment rates, the impact of social change, and youth and deviance as a social construction. It will conclude that young people are now facing more problems than ever regarding their boundaries and subsequent transition from childhood to adulthood - due to a broad range of social, political and psychological issues that exist within contemporary British society. Posing the question: Are the youth of today 'running up a down escalator'? (Ainley and Allen, 2010).

Historically youth has been an increasingly difficult concept to define Gillis, 1974 (cited in: Cieslik and Simpson, 2013:3) states 'historical studies show that the category of youth as we understand it today is a relatively recent phenomenon dating from the 18th century'. This suggests that the construction of youth may have been triggered by the apparent upward rise of modernity within Western societies. Gillis 1974 (cited in: Cieslik and Simpson, 2013) goes onto assert that before the 18th century, childhood as a conceptual notion was seen to intertwine into an earlier form of adulthood. Children were seen to participate in waged occupations from a much earlier age, whilst also taking on more significant domestic duties within the family. This suggests that prior to the apparent shift towards modernity, the lines were somewhat blurred regarding youth's conceptual definition. Following on from this, many sociologists see youth as a social construction and argue that 'Youth is, perhaps, better described as a phase in the life course between childhood and adulthood' (Alcock et al, 2016:426). Here, Alcock et al, (2016) suggests that youth is a vulnerable life stage where an intersection between dependent childhood and independent adulthood takes place and that this inevitable shift towards independency, may in fact, also trigger a transitional period of potential disorder. This uncertainty of status demarcated by the term 'inbetweeners', directly links to contemporary British youth and hence highlights the ambiguity that exists between the dependence of childhood and autonomy of adulthood (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013).

Furthermore, it could be argued that recent social change has also had a significant impact upon young people's transitions. The 'youth phase' now being extended from the 'teenage years of fourteen and fifteen' into the 'early twenties' (Brynnner 2005). This extended period of youth has occurred due to large amounts of young people spending more time in various forms of education, therefore delaying commencing employment and starting a family (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). A number of sociologists assert that these delays are a driver of the current high rates of youth unemployment within British society. Unemployment is seen to be one of the major factors that contributes towards the perception of there being a 'lost generation'. The Office for National Statistics (2018) has shown this in one of its most recent reports, which states that only 11.3% of 16-24-year olds are currently employed. Although this percentage of the youth population are in fact employed, the Office for National Statistics (2018) suggests the

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work is generally low skilled, low paid and on a zero-hour contract basis; thus, highlighting the difficulty that occurs regarding the transition from education to work for young people. This research supports the notion that British contemporary youth are a 'lost generation', as it demonstrates that they are responsible, yet reliant in a financial sense upon their families or in fact the welfare state itself. Henceforth, illustrating that the youth of today are struggling to find a sense identity within contemporary British society, which has consequently led to further social exclusion and marginalisation.

Following on from this, recent generational analysis stresses the idea of a "boomerang generation" which involves young people returning to live with their parents (Stone et al 2014; West et al 2017). It is suggested by Koslow and Booth, (2012) that young people who are faced with unemployment, are then forced to return home due to the substantial inflation of modern housing prices. This theory again, reinforces the idea that contemporary British 'youth' are hugely reliant upon internal family structures and the state, therefore suggesting they are 'lost' somewhere in between the transition from the dependency of childhood to the independency of adulthood. This issue could be seen to be further compounded as it appears that these social and political factors affecting unemployment and housing prices, are somewhat out of young people's control.

Furthermore, the term 'generation' is commonly defined by scholars such as Mannheim, as 'a way of understanding differences between age groups and a means of locating individuals and groups within historical time' (Mannheim, 1928, cited in: Pilcher, 1993:481). However, other sociologists such as (Glenn, 1977, cited in: Pilcher 1993) dispute this definition of generation, and argue that it raises significant terminological issues. Glenn (1977, cited in: Pilcher 1993:483) argues that the 'synonymous use of 'generation' for 'cohort' should be avoided', suggesting that alternative terminology, such as 'cohort' may in fact provide higher rates of accuracy when attempting to define such an intrinsic sociological concept. Within previous societies, demographic generations have frequently had labels assigned to them. For example, the generation that followed WW2, were labelled as the 'baby boomers' due to the sharp increase in birth rates following the war. 'Generation X', which directly involved those born after the 'baby boomers', and the 'digital generation' whose birth took place during a time of widespread technological advancement (Pritchard and Whiting (2014). Mannheim (1928) makes sense of these labels using the concept of 'generational location'. This concept proposes that individual's experiences and the social context in which they are situated, seem to have a 'tendency pointing towards certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling and thought' (Mannheim, 1928:291). This suggests that those who are born during the same demographic cohort can in fact share very similar developmental viewpoints, which in turn intertwine into a more 'natural' view of the world. This adopted viewpoint usually remains with the individual for the remainder of their lives, and somewhat dictates the way which their later experiences are construed. On the other hand, older cohorts are much less likely to alter their intrinsic values and beliefs that have informed their existence (Scott, 2000). This is due to their shared formative experiences or social context, e.g. a period of conflict and subsequent experience of social solidarity. However, within contemporary British society no such formative experiences are so greatly shared by the masses, due to a lack of revolutionary social change. Therefore, this infers that young people may in fact be somewhat of a 'lost generation' due to the apparent absence of a collective consciousness, combined with the sharp rise in complexity and uncertainty within contemporary society.

Another significant aspect when considering contemporary British youth as a 'lost generation',

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is that of deviance, and youth as a problem. Social interactionists would argue that issues such as youth and deviance, only become problems through a process of social construction. However, social policy can play a significant role in defining social problems and in helping demarcate whether young people have problems or whether young people are in fact the problem itself. According to Muncie, (1999) official crime statistics at this time reported that crime and disorder involving young people was “out of control” and that youth were seen to be a cause of the generational conflict that exists within society. The notion that British youth are a ‘problem’ is repeatedly suggested in media and literature (Wyn and White, 1997, cited in: Muncie, 1999). Moreover, MORI (2004), analysed a range of tabloid, broadsheet and local papers that carried out a combined sum of “603 ‘youth’ related articles”. They found that “three in four articles (71%) concerning young people have a negative tone” and “a third of articles discuss young people in the context of violent crime or antisocial behaviour (32%)”. This was again demonstrated on review of the media coverage of the riots in UK in 2011 with the continued use of the terms such as ‘feral youth’ and ‘menaced youth’ (Nijjar 2015). This suggests that the dominant representations of British youth within contemporary society are often negatively depicted by the media, and that this may heavily contribute towards youth being labelled as ‘deviant’

In previous societies, deviance has been identified as a potential consequence of labelling- which in part has been well illustrated by Merton (1948) in his concept of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’. Furthermore, this links to Cohen’s theory of “moral panics” (1972) found in ‘Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers’. Cohen argues that “media reportage” played a largely substantial role in the construction of panic in the 1960’s, by somewhat magnifying the apparent deviance (or deviant behaviours) of British youths. Additionally, “their deviance was amplified through social reaction which in turn produced a deviancy amplification spiral”, therefore, highlighting the application of Merton’s previously mentioned concept of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ as ‘the Mods and Rockers’ then ‘took on aspects of their new publicly defined personas’ (Cohen, 1973, cited in: Muncie, 1999). Moreover, Cohen (1972) identifies that certain social groups, usually consisting of youths, were identified as ‘scapegoats’ or ‘folk devils’ in order to appease public anxiety and anomie within society. These groups “became the visual symbols of what was wrong with society” (Cohen, 1973, cited in: Muncie, 1999), thus suggesting and reinforcing the idea that youth are seen as a problem, rather than having problems themselves.

Likewise, in contemporary society, there are parallels to be drawn between the young people of today and those involved in Cohen’s theory during the 1960’s. In modern day Britain, young people are generally seen as irresponsible, disrespectful and frequently engaging in street violence and unsafe sex. Media reportage amplifies this moral panic within society with headlines such as ‘One in four adolescents is a criminal’ (Daily Mail Online, 2018) and ‘British youths are ‘the most unpleasant and violent in the world’...’ (Daily Mail Online, 2011). Consequently, this then triggers a ‘deviancy amplification spiral’ and the subsequent process of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ is initiated. In addition to this, contemporary demographic cohorts such as the ‘millennials’, for example, are identified as ‘scapegoats’ and are blamed by both the media and society, for endless public anxieties and societal issues. This therefore, emphasises the usefulness and application of Cohen’s theory in contemporary British society and suggests that the youth of today, much like in the 1960’s, have been marginalised from mainstream British culture. However, unlike the ‘Mods and Rockers’, young people today have no immediate subculture to identify with, henceforth leading to further social exclusion and the indication that they may in fact be a ‘lost generation’.

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To conclude, many sociologists such as Grenier argue that the 'life course' "a concept that has become fundamental to the study of continuity, change and transition" (Grenier, 2012:185) recognises the existence of the social, psychological and biological stages that exist in between childhood and adulthood. This suggests that young people are not homogenous and that there is no universal experience of youth. Therefore, inferring that youth by its very definition may in fact be somewhat ethnocentric. However, it is also argued that young people are now potentially becoming members of a new social or 'lost' generation. Standing (2011), argues that young people are now members of a dangerous new class called the 'precariat' defined by financial instability, therefore suggesting that neo-liberalist ideology has in fact polarised the youth of today into their own class of insecurity. Whilst the definitions of both 'youth' and 'generation' are difficult to insinuate, young people from Britain are now seen to be facing more problems than ever- and are consequently may respond to these problems with 'binge drinking', drug misuse and risky sexual behaviour (MacArthur et al 2012). But, unlike previous demographic cohorts, today's youth have no immediate subculture to identify with, in order to overcome the "moral panic" (Cohen, 1972) that surrounds them. In addition to this, young people are also faced with high unemployment rates and inflated housing prices, making their increasingly difficult transition towards adulthood, an even more precarious one. The toxic combination of these negative social, psychological and political issues has led to the conclusion that British contemporary youth are a 'lost generation' at this moment in time. However, contemporary British youth may not be completely 'lost', perhaps it is merely undergoing an extended period of change and transition, due to the effects of globalisation.