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Becoming an Adult

Living Conditions and Attitudes among Swedish Youth

by

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Abstract

This thesis studies youth from different perspectives. These are the life phase and the generational perspectives, which have been studied via questions of establishment and individualisation. The main question is whether young people are different because they have not made socially important transitions into adulthood or if they are different because they have grown up under different circumstances than earlier generations. The consequences of the outcome are important because they can indicate what kind of society young people will reproduce.

The following conclusions are drawn: First, there are clear effects of social structurations (class of origin and gender) in the lives of young people. They affect the distribution of attitudes towards welfare state expenditures as well as the economic effects in a long-term perspective. Second, there is rather weak importance of role transitions in relation to what young people believe is important for adulthood, role transitions' importance for the distribution of attitudes towards the welfare state as well as role transitions' importance in a long-term perspective. Third, increasing age and subtle socialisation processes may be an explanation to the rather weak meaning of role transitions, because adjustments to surrounding contexts and people's expectations.

It is concluded that the life phase perspective is a more accurate way of viewing young people, mainly because of the impact of social structurations, which are believed to contribute to continuous reproduction rather than complete change of society.

Key words: youth, transitions, individualisation, life phase, life-course, welfare state, attitudes, social structuration.

Preface

When I was a kid I thought that all grown ups had a crystal clear thought of their yes and no's, that they knew exactly why they answered in a certain way. That there was a logical line that only grown ups understood. Now I am standing here, 40 years old, and on the outside I count as a grown up. But inside my head there is a complete snowstorm.
Martina Haag (Aftonbladet 16/11 2004).

"I am not an adult!" That has been the first response when I have asked people if they consider themselves as adults. Even though they had passed all the socially prescribed transitions into adulthood, somehow these do not count if people evaluate their own status. In an objective sense they might recognize adulthood in such terms, but when it comes to the personal and subjective evaluation, adulthood is hardly strived for and seldom achieved.
Researching youth has in many senses been a research of me. It was not long ago since I made socially important transitions and have these changed any of my own outlooks on life? Both age- and transition wise, I was still much of a youth when I started working on the project, and as the results of the thesis show, transitions themselves are probably less responsible for my feeling of adulthood than the collecting of experiences that increasing age generate. Most of all, during this hard, mind-wrecking, sometimes devastating – but most of the time interesting and developing process – I have found out just how complex the issue of youth is.

I have received economic support from Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS) and for that I am grateful. Also, there are a number of people who in different ways have helped me in the making of this thesis. First of all, I wish to thank my two supervisors Björn Halleröd and Mattias Strandh who both have contributed with their time, knowledge and patience. I honestly believe that Björn will never have such a stubborn graduate student again nor do I believe that he will experience the same agony with the time which is running too fast for her. I made it! My second supervisor Mattias Strandh arrived in just the right time to give me additional inspiration and support. There are not enough words to describe how fortunate I have been to receive your expertise and knowledge! In order for me to keep my own sanity during these six years, the whole Department of Sociology deserves acknowledgements. It has proven to be the best environment, both socially and professionally, and I will miss you all! There are many who have contributed with thoughts and comments on drafts during the process. Peter Waara has carefully read initial drafts and the final manuscript and given me new perspectives to think about – thank you! Karina

Nilsson has read and commented on several parts on the thesis; it has been of great value to receive your knowledge on youth! The working group: Jonas Edlund, Dietmar Rauch, Lena Karlsson and Ingrid Grosse – thank you for your time and thoughts. Thanks also to the technical and administrative staff at the department who made complicated things easier and to Maritha Lundgren who edited the manuscript.

My family has been extremely important. Thank you mom and dad for always believing that I could do anything I wanted. Learning through experiencing! My grandfather is unfortunately not here to see my thesis. He was proud that I was the first with a university degree in the family of farmers and I wish he was here to share this with me. My friends have been invaluable just by being there and supporting me. You know who you are! Trina Sterner has been the research police copying Ingemar Stenmark: "It's just to write". She also coined the famous phrase "I am not an adult because adults are old – and I am not old!" Cassandra, the sister that I never had and my soul mate: let's return to Brazil!

Finally, I want to thank Magnus for his never ending love, support and challenging discussions. Even though he has not had the patience enough to read all of my work, he has been a main source of inspiration and has helped me keep my mind off work at times.

To Magnus and Lova, this one is for you!

Annika Westberg
Umeå, March 2004.

Contents

INTRODUCTION **1**

AIM AND QUESTIONS **2**

DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS **3**

WHAT IS YOUTH? **4**

THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE **5**

Analytical frame *6*
Is it a question of generation? 6
Youth as a life phase 8

TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER – THE FOUR STUDIES **9**

Article I. Forever Young? Young People's Conception of Adulthood – the Swedish Case *9*
Article II: How Problematic are Youth Problems in the Long Run? *10*
Article III: Life phase or generation? Young people's attitudes towards welfare state expenditures *12*
Article IV: Do youths grow up or does the adult world become youthful? Young people's attitudes towards welfare state expenditures. *13*

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION **14**

REFERENCES **19**

The Attached Articles:

Article I – Westberg, Annika (2004) 'Forever Young? Young People's Conception of Adulthood – the Swedish Case' in *Journal of Youth Studies* vol 7, 35-53.

Article II – Halleröd, Björn & Westberg, Annika (2004) 'How Problematic are Youth Problems in the Long Run?' in *Perspektiv på välfärden 2004* Levnadsförhållanden Rapport 106. Stockholm: SCB. (also forthcoming in *Acta Sociologica*)

Article III – Westberg, Annika (2004) 'Life phase or generation? Young people's attitudes towards welfare state expenditures' in *Sociologisk Forskning* vol. 41, 55-73.

Article IV – Westberg, Annika (2004) 'Do youths grow up or does the adult world become youthful? Young people's attitudes towards welfare state expenditures' (Manuscript re-submitted)

Introduction

Although more than two thousand years have passed since the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato wrote about the problems of youth, the topic is still highly relevant. In general, youth is seen as a difficult phase in the life course, and sometimes as a threat to accepted social values. The amount of research in the area, as well as official reports, signal that youth in general is perceived as problematic (Wyn & White 1997; Heinz 1999; Ungdomsstyrelsen 1996; SOU 1994, SCB 1997). However, in reality youth should not be viewed as a homogenous group except for the age commonality. There are nevertheless urgent questions that have to be posed in relation to youths' general life conditions. Young people live and grow up under remarkably different circumstances, yet they share several common characteristics. These commonalities are largely based on the notion that we live in a risk society in which young people have to negotiate their transition to adulthood in a far more complex way than was the case for previous generations. The period which is labelled youth has been extended, much as a result of the breakdown of the youth labour market leading to higher youth unemployment and prolonged education. Insecurity and more options in transitions are thought to have an impact on how young people manage these transitions (Chisholm & Hurrelmann 1995).

Youth research often focuses on subcultures, unemployed or marginalised youth or other "extreme" groups. In this thesis, the aim is to move beyond these and to study youth in general. The issues of interest in this thesis revolve to a great extent around why and in what way contemporary young people are different from the older population. From this follows also the question of what the outcome of the difference might be. The difference between youth and adults can be described either in terms of youth as a life phase – young people will grow up and become similar to the adult population – or in terms of youths forming a distinct new generation with outlooks clearly separated from the previous one. The consequences of the differences are widely separated. From the first perspective, the life phase perspective, society will not change dramatically because the nature of the difference is transitory. From the other perspective, the generational perspective, the differences between generations will be stable over time, something that should contribute to social change in a more drastic way.

Aim and questions

Young people have always been set in a different position in relation to the adult population; they have been seen as troublesome or in a disadvantaged situation because of their youth and problems of social integration. The overall aim of this thesis is to study why young people are different from adults. Is it the life phase perspective or the generation perspective that best explains the difference? Another main aim is to look at characteristics of youth – transitions – and ask what transitions mean in various contexts. Do young people in different stages of life also have different opinions, i.e. are the stages themselves responsible for different outlooks? Establishment in family and work are characteristics of youth, but do establishments also affect future income development and economic problems? Are problems in youth connected to youth or do they also associate with future income development and economic hardship? Are the young and poor also losers in the long run? These questions are important because it is often argued that their position in the life course is what makes the young different from the older generations. But increasingly, competing theories, such as individualisation theory, claim that young people today are different because the macro changes have caused young people to take a whole new and individualised responsibility in the creating of their biographies. Individualisation theory also suggest that socially ascribed characteristics such as social class of origin and gender have lost some of their stringency, creating extended options for young people without reference to traditional markers. Do they have any explanatory power for the differences between youth and adults in the short as well as the long run? So therefore, are life phase and age-related establishments appropriate for understanding young people and their differences – or have competitive theories gained explanatory power?

The four studies each have clearly demarcated questions connected to the overall aim of the thesis:

Article I discusses young people's conception of adulthood and raises the question of whether there is a difference in this conception between those who have completed and not completed role transitions. It also asks whether those who have completed and not completed these transitions have differentiated views on 'existential adulthood' i.e. questions connected to issues of responsibility, identity and knowing what one wants.

Article II uses a longitudinal approach to answer the question of whether there are long–term effects of youth. The degree to which circumstances during youth affect future income development and the occurrence of economic problems in adult life is the main question.

Article III examines if young people have different attitudes towards certain welfare state expenditures compared to the adult population, and the reason for these differences.

Article IV investigates the degree in the process of establishment to further explore attitudes towards welfare state expenditures. Do young people with different grades of establishments have different attitudes towards specific welfare state expenditures and are class of origin and gender still viable in understanding the age differences?

Data and methodological considerations

The conceptual framework in this thesis is necessarily broader than the empirical investigation. Data do not in all cases provide comprehensive answers to all claims. It would take more than one book to empirically cover all the theoretical arguments and discussions, but I believe that in the end, they are all necessary in order to frame the complex topic of youth.

Structuring and managing lives with restraints and possibilities within the contexts of such traditional sociological concepts like class of origin and gender will set a broad perspective on young people's lives. At the same time, since the approach of the study is quantitative, it will not be able to fully capture the ways in which young people act and give meaning to their actions. In order to understand how individuals think, evaluate and live their lives and how they individually perceive what their possibilities are would also demand a study in which concepts were to give the individual a position as an actor. But by using a process perspective I hope that I will negotiate the pitfalls of studying "actions without actors" (Wyn & White 1997, Buchmann 1989).

The data in this thesis consists of quantitative material due to the nature of the questions which were set up in the initial part of the project. In

three articles (articles II, III and IV), data is supplied by Statistics Sweden. One of these (article II) has a longitudinal approach, using a panel covering 16 years. In one article (article I) the data is supplied by the Swedish Board of Youth Affairs. The use of the data and the techniques are further discussed in each article.

What is youth?

The study of youth as a specific subject in the social sciences was introduced by Stanley Hall in 1904. In his study *Adolescence, Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, he saw adolescence as a separate phase between childhood and adulthood. During this phase, young people emerged on a new path of autonomy, sexual awakening and disruption from parent's will. Moreover, adolescence was seen as a phase of searching social and emotional identity. Increasingly, adolescence was seen as a consequence of industrialism and, subsequently, a new social phenomenon for scientists to study (Kett 1993).

What then is youth today? Youth is still predominantly understood as a developmental stage where new roles and competencies are to be mastered in order to manage the status passage into adulthood (Coleman & Hendry 1990). Wyn and White (1997) argue that youth is a concept which has to be seen in relation to that of adulthood because it exists and has meaning only as a relational concept. It has been argued that youth is commonly regarded as "non-adult" – a deficit of adulthood – because much about youth is surrounded by preparation for adulthood (Skelton 2002).

Youth research is inevitably confronted with the apparent symmetry of biological and social processes. The concept of age is referred to as a biological reality, but ageing is also subjected to social and cultural developments. The life span can be measured by increasing age, but its contents and understanding gives the process of growing up its social meaning. The significance that the stages of life are given is shaped depending on the social, economic or political order of a society. It is therefore also necessary that the concept of youth is seen in a historical perspective (Wallace & Kovatcheva 1998; Mitterauer 1992). Without this it

is impossible to understand the age-relations and how they are continually being shaped and reshaped. If one should compare today's youth with those who were young 20, 50 or 100 years ago, important aspects, which affect possibilities and restrictions of the life course, have changed. Although individuals mature in different ways, modernity has had an impact in constructing a uniform way of categorising chronological age. In the course of modernisation, childhood, youth, adulthood (and most recently "young adulthood" and even "over-aged young adults", see du Bois-Reymond, 1998) have emerged as separate life stages (Klein 1990). Therefore, it is commonly argued that youth is a social construction rather than a biologically determined condition (Wallace & Kovatcheva 1998; Hutson & Jenkins 1989).

Theoretical point of departure

Throughout my work, continuous interest has been shown in what difference a change in the status of youth makes. This is tied together with life course. The field of life course has become a major field in research and relates to actual changes in life course patterns, experiences and future plans. A contemporary definition of life course by Heinz and Krüger (2001:33) is that it "…examines the interaction between structural constraints, institutional rules and regulations and subjective meanings as well as decisions over time." Characteristic of life course theory is its interpretation of transitions to adult status and its longitudinal perspectives on income and career (Irwin 1995). Certain aspects, such as norms defining a proper life course, legal restrictions, conventions and labour market possibilities, govern the life course but there is no single timetable for the life course. It forces emphasis on lifetime earnings and career prospects as well as focussing on how aggregate social changes, such as postponed parenthood or staying in education, may affect the future. Decisions and choices made in youth can change the outlook of life at that moment and even have an effect on the future life (Nilsson 2001). Long–term effects of establishment in multiple domains in youth are studied in article II to see whether income development and economic hardship can be attributed to earlier circumstances in life.

Analytical frame

The analytical frame of reference has been the two concepts of individualisation and life-phase establishments (for example residential, work and family), in which their potential for social change are of core interest. Both are also much referred to in current research which makes them a relevant frame for the study. They are also important, because they take into account why young people are different from adults, and as mentioned earlier – how society will be reproduced.

When studying change, two different perspectives are commonly used: life phase and a generational effect connected to the 'spirit of the time', i.e. what the characteristics of the aggregate social circumstances are at a given time, such as economic recession.

The perspective that sees youth as a life phase and focuses on establishment, assumes that the difference between the young and the old principally lies in how far in establishing an independent "adult" life the individual has come. The potential for change is quite limited because the lacking integration in society is argued to be a consequence of age difference along with a continuous strengthening of social structuration such as class of origin and gender. On the other hand, value-change theories, for instance individualisation, assume that young people's different outlook on life is a result of the changed macro-context and youths will therefore not become similar to the older generation as they grow up themselves. This can be described in terms of, and be a characteristic of, a generation.

Is it a question of generation?

The conception that different epochs form people in certain ways is popular and in some way a basic assumption in postmodern theory, which is based on the notion that growing up in different epochs grounds different values. In the popular discourse it is common to talk about the differences between people of different ages by referring to generations (Carle 2000). The variations between the generations are thought to appear because of new experiences which generations before do not have. Those born during the post-war period are called the *baby-boom generation* because they are many in number and grew up in times of great social changes and hence gained experiences which those before did not have. Likewise, those born during the 1920's and 1930's are labelled the *golden genera-*

tion because they are seen as profiteers of the general development of society (Vogel 1987). Contemporary youth has been described as the *yo-yo generation* to illustrate the increasing reversibility of transitions - young people often make transitions connected to adulthood and reverse them again (Pais 1995). If one looks at how different generations have benefited or been disadvantaged by general social recessions or economic booms, the 'spirit of the time' can be seen as a part of the generational perspective as well.

Mannheim (1928/1952) linked the formations of generation with social change and argued that people in the same birth cohorts share experiences of similar historical events that therefore can influence behaviour and attitudes distinctly separated from other generations. When there are great changes in society, then specific values and attitudes are established. And according to Mannheim, it is the social change which creates attitudes connected to a specific generation and not the opposite. The formative years in an individual's life is said to take place during youth in the process of integration in society because fresh contacts with norm systems are made and experiences are still limited.

However, there are problems with applying Mannheim's generations. What historical events are important enough to form a generation and what should the age limitations be? There are clearly more problems associated with applying the concept in social science than in speaking of generations in the popular discourse. Hence, one can speak of generations in several different ways. Attias–Donfut and Arber (2000) point out at least four meanings: 1) Generation as a principle of kinship studies, 2) Generation as life phase, 3) Generation as a historical or social formation and 4) Generation as birth cohort. In this context, the birth cohort is applied.

During the 1990's there have been frequent discussions around the concepts individualisation, risk and reflexivity. These concepts function in this setting as to describe some of the competing theories to social structurations of class of origin and gender. Thus, they also function as the tools to analyse the generation thesis. Individualisation is used to interpret the relation between the individual and society, and the intersection between life plans, attitudes and competencies. Together with socially perceived opportunities makes individualisation relevant and intriguing for youth research. The theory has the potential of analysing many different issues within the subject such as how the individual can or is required to negotiate transitions or the importance of social structurations on opportunities and outcome. Metaphorically, youth transitions in modern society

were seen as a railway journey while today's youth are considered as driving private cars (Roberts 1995). The metaphor wants to illustrate how the change has influenced and increased options available and the role of the individual versus the previously set way of making transitions. It is argued that individuals have to be reflexive and shape their own biographies (Giddens 1994) and according to Beck (1992), individuals are liberated from social networks, which earlier were hampering the life course. Throughout daily life, each individual has to negotiate all the choices available. Connected to the responsibility of individual negotiation and increased options, there is an increased exposure of risk. Earlier, the social networks, in the shape of class relations, could make up for some of it, but since they are losing their explanatory power, according to individualisation theory, the individual is made more and more accountable for actions taken. The question is whether young people are different because of individualisation and a larger degree of individual achievement orientation.

However, individualisation as a concept is not new in sociological research (Lukes 1973; Elias 1978). The historical processes that made youth a distinct phase of the life course have been subjected to the concept of individualisation. One such example is the socio-economic developments in the old European societies which increased youth's mobility and contributed to a sense of individuality (Mitterauer 1992). The question posed in this thesis, is whether there are less structurations of class of origin and gender among youth concerning attitudes towards the welfare state's expenditures.

Youth as a life phase

The life course consists of more or less normative phases which are to be passed through from birth to death. A life phase can therefore be seen as a "subdivision" of the life course. Youth is a life phase which all individuals go through, but do so with varying pace and timing. The labour market has gone through profound changes and the youth labour market is no exception. Since labour market establishment is seen as one of the crucial events in the life phase of youths who are passing on to adulthood, there have accordingly been profound changes of the youth phase. Extended period in education and postponed family formation (primarily parenthood) are common effects of the aggregate changes. But establishment will nevertheless (or at least most likely) occur at some point in time and, seen from the point of view of social integration, hence also a gradual acquisition of adult status. The most important feature of the life phase in this context is that it is assumed to be a more or less continual form of reproduction of society. Although social change is an ongoing process,

the pace of the change is quite slow in this perspective since young people are thought to be different because they lack integration in society. Once they have passed the socially recognised passages of adult life, they also become more like the adults. All the articles focus on the importance of establishment in different contexts, and what meaning different levels of establishment have for young people. Can establishment – hence life phase – be accountable for the difference between youths and adults?

To the heart of the matter – the four studies

In this chapter, a review of the most important results of the four studies will be given. They will attempt to give answers to the aims set up for the thesis and implications for youth research. The articles are connected to the questions of whether youth should be understood as part of generation or life phase and the overall results of these will be discussed in the end.

Article I. Forever Young? Young People's Conception of Adulthood – the Swedish Case.

This article wants to investigate what a change in status means for young people's conception of adulthood. Is there a difference in how young people regard adulthood if one has completed or not completed transitions? The second question asks if completed and not completed role transitions are related to differentiated views of adulthood. This question brings up the important aspect of multidimensionality by locating the existential dimension (issues of responsibility, identity and knowing what one wants) within the concept of transitions and adulthood. The survey was conducted by the Swedish Board of Youth Affairs in spring 1997 and consisted of 5000 respondents in the ages of 16 to 29. The response rate was 64 percent, which left 3200 respondents in the working sample (Ungdomsstyrelsen 1998).

Do those who have completed and not completed transitions have different conceptions of what constitutes adulthood? The answer is yes, but with a somewhat surprising result. Only parenthood is seen as more important for those who are parents. It is safe to say that, in young people's opinion, role transitions do not build on one another and culminate in

adulthood, as is often argued if one looks at society's view of adulthood. On the contrary, they are seen as less important for 'completers'. What could be the reason for this? It may be the case that young people are aware of the reversibility and insecurity of a transition. It is not certain that once they have started working they will not go back to school again or move back in with their parents after living independently for a while (Wyn & White 1997; Ungdomsstyrelsen 1998). Role transitions can be reconsidered, reversed and made again when circumstances allow. Why then, is parenthood seen as more important for parents than for non-parents? This transition is sometimes described as the most important transition because it requires a large degree of responsibility and it is also arguably difficult to reverse this specific transition.

Despite the vast field of youth research, it has remained unclear what the relation between completed/ not completed role transitions and issues in the existential dimension are. Are issues of existential adulthood stronger among those who have made role transitions? This dimension may develop after experiencing a transition's various demands. The results show foremost that taking responsibility for one's actions gains importance for those who have completed transitions. But when other factors; age, gender and class of origin were controlled for; it becomes clear that it is not only role transitions which are important. The older the individual is, the more important responsibility is for the conception of adulthood. The different conception of adulthood can be a sign of subtle socialisation processes of everyday life, where also the surrounding social context might increase their expectations on the individual with increasing age. Young people's conception of adulthood is thus not reducible to transitions. It should rather be seen in a longer perspective of participation in various social processes.

Article II: How Problematic are Youth Problems in the Long Run?

One of the main achievements of life course research is its focus on individuals over a long period of time and also trace effects over time. This is what is done in article II *"How Problematic are Youth Problems in the Long Run?"*: it uses a longitudinal approach to trace effects of youth in adulthood. The data consists of the annual Swedish Survey of Living Conditions (ULF), which is based on a representative sample of the Swedish population aged 16 to 84. A panel was created in 1979 and it is possible to analyse a three-wave panel covering 16 years. The age span in

the first wave consists of those being 19 to 25 years old and consequently between 35 and 41 in the final wave. The total working sample is made up of 1,435 respondents and represents those who participated in all three waves.

The question in article II is the degree to which the circumstances during youth affect future income development and the occurrence of economic problems in adult life. Young people have always been subjected to concern related to their youth, and during the past couple of decades, the concern has largely been as to how they have problems establishing themselves. As a result of there being relatively little research on the long-term impact of these it is difficult to determine whether we worry about the right things. The problems of poor incomes and economic difficulties often arise among the young because of the specific mobility of this period in the life course. Therefore, the research necessary, which is conducted in this study, is firstly to explore what factors determine the economic situation among the young, and secondly, what factors in youth have long-term impact on people's economic situation.

The conclusions which are drawn from article II, are that young people's incomes do not say much about either current standard of living or future earning ability. On the contrary, income poverty in youth is rather a sign of substantial future incomes. Likewise, economic deprivation in youth is also unrelated to the deprivation over time. The household and labour market situations in youth had only modest impact on future income development and the long-term incidence of economic problems. However, those who were long-term unemployed in youth seemed to have difficulties compensating for the situation over time. Most crucially in the study, were the findings of ongoing reproduction of class and gender relations. Low income during youth was a problem predominantly connected to those of white-collar origins but at the same time, there were no signs of economic deprivation among these. Their income development over time was also greater and faster than youths of other origins. The gender differences are equally important in understanding the long-term developments. Women had lower incomes in youth and were more economically deprived. However, their situation was not counterbalanced over time – it was accentuated compared to men. No other factors in youth (such as educational level, parenthood, nest-leaving or social assistance) than gender itself could explain these patterns.

Article III: Life phase or generation? Young people's attitudes towards welfare state expenditures

Two articles deal with the issue of attitudes towards welfare expenditures (articles III and IV). In article III, the questions of whether there are differences between youths and adults in the distribution of attitudes are raised, and what the reasons for, as well as what the consequences of, this may be.

The data consists of Statistics Sweden's annual Survey of Living Condition (ULF) from 1998. The working sample consists of 5732 respondents in the ages of 19 to 65 who answered the question as to whether they wanted to increase, keep unchanged or decrease the expenditures to a range of purposes within the welfare system.

Age is an important factor in understanding why there might be a difference between young and old. Therefore, the first hypothesis tested was simply to determine the existence of an age effect. It was furthermore concluded that there indeed exist such an effect. The explanations can be either of the two analytical themes discussed earlier: life phase or generation – in this case individualisation. The theory of life phase organises the differences around the notion that the young people's establishments are affected by their relative insecurity and exposure to risk in the process of making transitions. The second theme, individualisation, refers in this context to achievement-orientation and that individual projects replace collective values. Rather than supporting a collective, the individual achievement is crucial for what life chances and standard of living one should receive. In hypothesis two, the age effect was outlined and assumed to show that the areas young people favoured were those related to youth. Accordingly, the results showed that young people were more positive towards increased spending in areas connected to youth.

The main results of article III are that young people, more so than the old, reveal a self-interest in their support of expenditures (social assistance, housing benefits, policies towards labour market actions and benefits to parents). This specific age-related self-interest is only valid when there is no control for transfers within the system – it is unrelated to the factual transfers which are received. The quantity of monetary transfers, which stands in relation to disposable income, is not specific for young people. Rather, if one has a large share of transfers, then one is also more positive towards greater welfare spending on support. This speaks against self-interest being unique to young people, but is on the other hand a stronger

evidence for the risk situation in which young people are argued to be. The conclusion made in article III is that it seems reasonable that young people perceive the welfare state's support as a risk-reducing insurance solution. Real or potential threats of economic exposure may be decreased when recognising the support that might be available. Therefore, age in combination with degree of establishment is suggested to be crucial in understanding the distribution of young people's attitudes and their difference from the older population. A consequence of this reasoning is also that the life phase would be more accurate than achievement orientation in a generation's individualisation in explaining the age differences.

Article IV: Do youths grow up or does the adult world become youthful? Young people's attitudes towards welfare state expenditures.

Since much concerning young people revolves around the importance of establishment, the main aim of article IV is to study what establishment (residential, family and work) mean for the distribution of attitudes towards the welfare state's support. An assumption in the study is that individuals have different attitudes depending on what transitions they have made. This is also a basic assumption in the youth research which argues in favour of youth as a life phase. Another important aim is also to take a closer look at whether class of origin and gender are still important in understanding the distribution of attitudes.

The data consists of Statistics Sweden's annual Survey of Living Condition (ULF) from 1998. The working sample consists of 5732 respondents in the age range 19 to 65 who answered the question as to whether they wanted to increase, keep unchanged or decrease the expenditures to different purposes within the welfare system.

The main results from article IV are that there is some evidence of differences regarding importance of establishment for the distribution of attitudes. But it is not the only factor of relevance. The second question was whether there were any signs of fragmentation with respect to class of origin and gender. It was revealed that these social structurations show a stable pattern of distribution both at young ages and older and these are stronger the older the individual is.

If the two results are analysed together – that there are signs of influence of establishment as well as class and origin and gender, and that these are

stronger the older the person is – then the conclusion drawn is that the age-factor must be highly important. Increasing age means not only gaining biological years, but rather that there is a collecting of experiences, an accumulation of factors (Greene 1990) which influences an individual's attitudes towards the welfare state's expenditures. Growing up in a society characterised by high risks of exposure, does not subsequently lead to actions without references to the social environment in which one has lived. Rather, it is more likely that the exposure of risk creates a more tight connection to the social security systems. If these results are seen in relation to the existence of youth's self-interest revealed in article III, then this interpretation seems quite likely. The subjective notion is that the great risks connected with the process of transition are high but the objective reality, in the shape of principles of structuration, still has an effect on how attitudes will be distributed. In conclusion, it seems premature to speak of revolutionary social changes.

Concluding discussion

The main objective of this thesis has been to analyse why young people are different from adults by looking at youth's establishments in various contexts and effects of social structurations, as well as tracing long-term effects of youth.

To sum up the results, there are some general findings, which can contribute to the field of, and understanding of youth. The first main finding of this study – and maybe the most important as well – is that of the effect of social structurations. Contrary to recent reports on the declining magnitude of social structurations in young people's lives, the studies in this thesis found that both class of origin and gender was of utmost importance in the distribution of young people's attitudes towards the welfare state's expenditures (cf. articles III and IV) as well as economic effects in the long–term perspective (cf. article II). In article II, it is shown that there is considerable impact of gender in the long-term perspective of income development and economic hardship. While young men compensate a poor economic situation in the long run, young women do not. For women, the marginalised economic situation is accentuated over time in relation to men because they improve their economic situation to a lesser extent than men do. The effect of gender is also visible when looking at

distribution of attitudes, and there seems to be a process of increasing importance of gender with increasing age. There is no difference between men and women in youth (19-25 years old), however, among those who are a little bit older (26-30 years old) there are clear and significant signs of a gender effect on the distribution of attitudes, and these results are maintained among the oldest. When it comes to class of origin, it is shown that although youth with working-class origins have higher incomes than their white-collar peers, they have higher incidence of economic hardship and the income development over time is less favourable. Hence, a poor economic situation has less to do with being young than class of origin. Also, the distribution of attitudes towards certain welfare state expenditures shows strong class-based patterns.

The second main result is that of the rather weak importance of role transitions in relation to what young people believe that adulthood is, role transition's significance in relation to attitudes towards the welfare state as well as what role transitions signify in a long–term economic perspective. Role transitions are thought of as one the main explanations as to why young people are different from adults. It is common to think of and use youth in the sense of becoming something different, and this is usually connected to establishments and role transitions. An argument that is linked to the life phase of youth is that degree of establishment has influence over why youth are different as well as over what the outcome in different areas will be. The issue of role transitions has thus been in focus to analyse whether it is reasonable to assume that young people are heterogeneous and different from adults because they have or have not made socially important role transitions. Their difference should here be a result of these specific transitions. This would also describe young people's increasing integration in adult life and would lead to reproduction of society. Articles I and IV had as a main focus role transition's importance for the conception of adulthood and attitudes towards welfare state expenditures. They both show that there are not as big differences between young people based on establishments as is often claimed. Establishment itself can only be accredited with a small part of the differences that do exist. In the case of conception of adulthood, it was shown that the only transition which seemed to contribute to adulthood was parenthood – the other transitions were less important for those who had completed them. Instead of seeing young people as adults after they have completed role transitions, it was in article I suggested that one should pay more attention to what was called existential adulthood. This is a multidimensional aspect which has been defined as evidencing appropriate behaviour, such as responsibility and independence. Parenthood is seen as a role transition which can hardly be reversed and it also requires a large degree of re-

sponsibility from the individual, to a greater extent than other transitions. The effects of social structurations and establishments in relation to youth's difference are thus that class of origin and gender hold greater power of explanation than if one moves from the parental home and has children early or late, or if there is unemployment in youth. Of course, as article II showed, some may encounter greater and more enduring problems with establishment, mainly connected to long-term unemployment, than is the case for young people in general.

What then, are the reasons for the rather weak meaning of establishment in youth? There are a few plausible explanations. Firstly, there is potential reversibility in transitions – they might not be seen as an "end point" by those who make them (Wallace & Kovatcheva 1998, Wyn & White 1997). The question of when there is an end point is impossible to answer, because who will know that they will never go back to education for a while or become single after cohabiting or being married? The other explanation for the rather weak importance of role transitions connects to the third main result of this study. This explanation's point is that the change of outlook might be governed by more than the first integration into a new social context. Rather, it can be seen as a long-term factor of social integration, where the individual adjusts herself to the surrounding context and other people's expectations. Hence, the weak meaning of role transitions can be a result of subtle socialisation processes. Increasing age appears to contribute to gradual integration in social domains and hence, rather a continual reproduction than change of society.

The analytical frame of life phase and generation has guided the analyses, and with the studies taken together, it is possible to discuss which perspective gets more support as regards the strength of these two concepts. Are young people different because of a dramatic change between the generations or are they different because of lower establishment in society? It is difficult to support achievement orientation and fragmentation of social characteristics in these matters. There is a problem with the theory of individualisation, which originates from the perception of the social context. A key point in individualisation theory is the downsizing of structure and emphasising of agency – two principal concerns of sociology. As young people construct their biographies and make an abundance of choices there is, in the individualisation theories, too little concern for the possibility to do so. It tends to underestimate the duality of agency and structure and fails to give appropriate regard to the context in which decisions and choices are made. It has been argued that these may take the form of subjective experience of risk, but the results found do not support that this also has an effect on the topics which are in focus here.

Of course, there may still be effects of individualisation in young people's lives. For this, however, a qualitative study as well as a longitudinal perspective which take into account young people's individual thoughts and actions would be required.

To view youth as life phase would seem to better capture the results of this thesis. Although much of the life phase of youth revolves around role transitions and establishment, the most noticeable results are not those which are effects of establishment – but those of social structuration. Young people are undeniably often in a precarious situation involving unemployment, short term employment etc., but in general this is not an enduring problem which has implications for the future. Even though the establishments are not the most essential factor in explaining why young people are different from adults, the life phase perspective has, in the studies, gained explanatory strength in relation to the generational perspective. How can this conclusion be and why are young people different from adults? The third main finding offers an answer to this question. I would argue that we should put stronger emphasis on the effect of ageing and, in relation to this, what continuous social and cultural integration mean for young people's difference or similarity. This is a life phase perspective, which uses age, in the sense of continual socialisation by increasing age and increasing contact with society's institutions, and not only transitions as the main factor of explanation. It has been shown that one should not see the transitions as milestones where the transitions are the crucial element of difference. Continually, engagement in various settings has the power to change people's point of view, and the experiences made from establishments should be seen in a long–term perspective. Social contexts help shape and reshape the individual and her attitudes and outlook in different aspects, most likely throughout the whole life. Overall, the conclusion is that youth should be seen as a process which is part of the life course, and young people will most likely reproduce society without the revolutionary changes that are connected with individualisation.

After completing this thesis, there are a few issues which I believe would be of interest for future research. A qualitative approach focusing in particular on concepts revolving around risk and how the risk situation is perceived and handled by the individual would complement the results of this study. Furthermore, a continuation of the longitudinal study covering those who were young in the beginning of the 1990's would extend the comprehension of the consequences of class of origin and gender as well as factors of establishment. Did the deep recession in the 1990's affect youth's income development and economic hardship in a long-term per-

spective? This study has proven that social structurations are still at work and the interesting question for future youth research should be to go deeper into the experiences, choices and thoughts of young people entering new social environments.

It seems we have to continue to keep key sociological concepts in focus when studying youth, but without missing the changes which are, without doubt, taking place. The subjective conception of change, risk and individualisation of the personal biography should not be underestimated, though; neither should young people's objective situations.

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