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Where in the world are youth geographies going? Reflections on the journey and directions for the future.

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Abstract

This viewpoints paper reflects upon the journey youth geographies have travelled over the last 20 years and highlights some thoughts on where directions for new research might be best placed in the coming decades. In particular, the paper draws attention to the growing numbers of youth in the Global South and especially in the African continent where youth populations are set to continue to rise. The paper identifies some of the potential challenges faced by the majority of youth in coming years in particular the need to decolonise thinking around youth geographies while also considering the importance of economic, social and political contexts in shaping debates. The paper charts some potential new directions while also suggesting that youth's own perspectives need to receive greater prominence in theory and outcomes.

Keywords: Youth geographies; youth research; new directions; global youth; challenges

The direction of travel within youth geographies: charting the journey

In the 1990s (and arguably before) geographers interested in understanding children's socio-spatial lives were invigorating and re-theorising the geographical dimensions of the then termed 'New Social Studies of Childhood'. As a PhD student, I was inspired to engage with the work emerging in the UK around children's socio-spatial experiences alongside the anthropological and development studies work with young people growing up in diverse, often difficult, situations in the global south. The geographies and mobilities of young people's lives in precarious contexts, their experience of poverty, inequality and limitations on the realisation of rights was particularly pertinent to understanding the survival strategies of children living and working in street situations, the focus of my research. These debates informed discussion around uneven access to education, opportunities to develop sustainable livelihoods, and the impacts of economic crises, AIDS and other shocks for the lived experiences of children and youth. Further, the attention to detail emerging through children's geographies research examining the daily minutiae of children's lives was important; not only conceptually and methodologically, but for achieving significant impact in recognising children's position in society (Valentine and Skelton, 2007), their right to be properly researched (Bessell, 2015), unique life worlds (Holloway and Valentine, 2000), and contributions to broader geographical theories (Horton and Kraftl, 2006).

Although the sub-discipline of Children's Geographies continued to gain momentum over the next two decades and arguably received more attention, youth geographies were by no means neglected and perhaps even more so at the cutting edge of bringing youth into mainstream debates. *Cool Places* (Skelton and Valentine, 1998) consolidated work that was starting to emerge, acknowledging the liminal period of youth, the distinctness of this life phase, and the impact of the ever-changing global landscape in terms of economics, politics, communication and travel from a geographical perspective. It highlighted the contributions geographers could make to conceptualising the experience of this life phase in terms of space, place and scale.

Unlike for studies within children's geographies, which were receiving criticism as remaining too focused on the micro scale, youth geographies were already engaging in wider debates. Therefore, Ansell's (2009) call for the descaling of children's geographies, including the need to recognise the limits of children's spaces of perception and action, did not so much apply to youth geographies which were already demonstrating how young people create their own global geographies, sometimes in very local places and through sites of resistance (Jeffrey, 2012; Katz, 2004).

Youth Geographies not only represented a critical, but growing, mass of research, which moved beyond the work of the early 'delinquency theorists' of the 1960s in criminology and sociology. It also provided a geographical lens through which to explore the everyday lives of young people in a variety of contexts and on shaping the experiences and exploring the geographies of younger people and taking social sciences in new directions. Youth geographies highlighted the way space, place, scale and mobility were important for really understanding diverse youth cultures as both local and global sites of resistance, setting an agenda for geographers interested in youth and conceptualising youth as creating varied spatial identities in and through the places that held meaning for them. Youth geographies were therefore able to significantly contribute to wider debates around identity, relationality, temporality and mobility (see for example: Ansell et al. 2011; Hopkins, 2013; Gough, 2008; Worth, 2014) as well as help to explore the impacts of economic crisis, social and political change simply because of their in-between position. Further, the specific time-space of growing up elucidated issues of difference and tension

including around gender, race and disability and how they were expressed through resistance at various scales from the local (including the body) to the global.

However, it is notable that many of chapters in *Cool Places*, indicative of the direction of work at that time, were mainly focused on the experiences of groups of youth in the global north: particularly Europe and North America, albeit celebrating uniqueness and highlighting diversity. Where work exploring youth cultures in non-western settings emerged, this tended to be more limited focusing on particular niche groups or on what was considered marginal experiences including youth in gangs or on the streets (see Herrera et al., 2009; Winton, 2006). Yet these insights pointed towards the importance of the impact of globalisation on youth cultures and their local manifestations with, for example, Indonesian street girls using their bodies as sites of resistance against dominant discourse and ideology (Beazley, 2002).

Building on this momentum, over the last decades, a major contribution of geographers has been to explore the perspectives of youth in the global south, and significant gains have been made in relation to exploring the spatialities of young people's lives and transitional journeys to adulthood. Research has particularly developed new insights around livelihoods and access to education and employment (Gough and Langevang, 2016; Ansell et al., 2012). This has contributed a youth perspective to generational relations: interdependence rather than independence as part of the transition to work (Punch, 2015); transnational mobility including international student mobility (Brooks and Watters, 2013) and the wider temporalities of youth perspectives (Jeffery, 2010). There have also been contributions that connect youth experiences across continents comparing caring responsibilities in the home between youth in the UK and East Africa (Evans and Becker, 2009) or the impacts of economic restructuring on youth in diverse places (Katz, 2004).

Main challenges for youth geographers in the next decade?

Despite these insights from the global south, there is still a long way to go in understanding young people's lives globally, but there is hope and anticipation in new directions of travel for youth geographies to emerge beyond the transference of theories developed in the global north to youth in the global south. A shift in emphasis towards not simply understanding youth in the contexts of our conceptualisations of mobilities, spatialities and temporalities but a need to learn *from* youth globally for shaping these theories and concepts. A key challenge for youth geographies in the next decades will be to consider the changing landscape of youth populations and decolonise thinking around how we conceptualise who youth are, without minimising the importance of economic, social and political contexts in shaping debates.

United Nations predictions suggest that already in most world regions youth populations have stabilised; with only Asia and Africa expected to witness a rise in the next decade (UN 2015). By 2030 even Asian youth populations are expected to plateau and move towards declining numbers. Across the African continent, however, the population of 15-24-year-olds is set to rise steadily for several decades. BY 2030 African youth are expected to constitute 42% of all youth and over 50% by 2050. Youth geographers will need to position African perspectives as dominant and perhaps experiences of extreme poverty and inequality, uncertainty and insecurity as mainstream rather than marginal. This will require greater understanding of local and cultural contexts, the economic and political contexts as well as development

discourse which has been very much focused on pathways to livelihoods and employment (Locke and Lintelo, 2012). For youth, increasing access and awareness of globalisation and the transference of global (north) youth cultures to the south occur in contexts where youth are facing increasing difficulties of fulfilling aspirations, accessing employment, and encountering restricted mobility, particularly in areas where forced migration is high.

New directions for youth geographies must be mindful in responding to stark inequalities and intractable problems that the majority of youth in 2030 will face. Geographers should be challenged to think about the implications of hazards and climate change; economic crises; protracted displacement, conflict and war among others and mainstream the outcomes of such issues for research with youth. There will be a need to learn from these perspectives and consider how new conceptualisations of the liminal period of youth emerging from the global south may differently apply to lives experienced in the global north and indeed through greater international migration and cross-continent mobility.

The non-physical spaces of youth geographies may require greater attention with the undulating emotional geographies of growing up reconciling aspirations and realities as well as those experiencing trauma through crises such as war; natural disaster; and disease. Other non-physical realms where youth geographers may engage can build on, and go beyond, the work on geographies of religion to explore the spiritual realm for understanding African spiritualities and the connections here to transitional journeys (including faith, radicalisation, healing; witchcraft). Additionally, virtual spaces of technology and communication are increasingly important in the Global South. Rapid technological change across Africa, particularly in remote rural locations, has been bolstered by a surge in the spread of mobile technology due to the increasing affordability of phones. The implications of this for those whose physical mobility may be restricted in crossing borders but who are able to access an online social world and connections deserves attention. The virtual spaces of youth in such contexts will be key areas for investigation particularly in relation to the connections between technological change; employment and livelihoods (see Porter et al. 2018).

The future direction of youth geographies is exciting, just like this liminal life phase for young people there are endless possibilities, opportunities and pitfalls that can impact on the outcomes for young people. Research rooted in a social justice perspective that seeks to research with youth, including their diversity as a group, but focused on working with the *majority* youth for fully including their viewpoints and understanding the complexities of research areas requiring investigation may offer new potential theories and perspectives.

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