LEARNING TO ACT YOUR AGE:

SCHOOLING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

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CHAPTER I

Age in Society: Framing Social Structure

ABSTRACT:
This chapter interrogates the recent origins of Western ideas about age. In Part I, I begin to explore these questions by untangling a few of the intellectual threads that combine to give structure to contemporary Western notions of 'age' as an aspect of human social life, starting with the proposition that age acts as an organising concept of sum importance to the project of modernity. I briefly examine how different scientific, political, sociological, psychological, and philosophical traditions coalesced during the 20th century to cement a particularly linear notion of how age figures as an aspect of the human condition. This narrative is linked to changing social constructions of the concept of childhood in Western society; to patterns of mass consumption; and, crucially, to the encroachment of the modern nation-state and its disciplinary institutions (Foucault 1977) into the lives of children and young people. In Part II, I continue by reviewing sociological and anthropological thinking about age, with particular reference to childhood, youth, and education. This discussion leads to the following chapter, where I frame the concept of age imaginaries.

Introduction: Blurred Lines

What does the pop star Miley Cyrus have in common with William Shakespeare? This is only sort of a joke. Picture, if you will, a young, peroxide-blonde pop starlet, onstage in front of millions of children and young people, dressed in skimpy hot pants and surrounded by giant teddy bears, tongue hanging out, twerking[1] up against a man almost two decades her senior, singing a song with explicit, misogynist sexual content, entitled *Blurred Lines*. This is the iconic scene from American singer Miley Cyrus's 2013 Video Music Awards performance alongside singer Robin Thicke, the content of which sent the global media into paroxysms of salacious anxiety about the declining moral values of modern children and youth and the sexualisation of young women. Cyrus' performance was particularly scandalous because she had formerly portrayed the quintessentially innocent children's TV character Hannah Montana, and was seen as a role model for pre-teen girls worldwide. Her 2013 performance and subsequent sexualized reincarnations as adult pop icon have wrecked this image of innocence, arousing much popular outcry and hand-wringing, not least among the parents of her current and former fans. Now picture Jacques, wistfully lamenting in *As You Like It* that 'all the world's a stage…' upon which we transition from 'infant' to 'schoolboy', 'lover', 'soldier', 'justice', 'pantaloon', and finally to 'second childishness… and oblivion' in our journeys through life. Each of these rather incongruous texts have served as weathervanes for popular anxiety about age. The latter has invited centuries of readers to ponder the cruel inevitability of the linear ageing process. While the former is now already gathering dust in the public consciousness, the case of Miley Cyrus more recently provoked millions, in contrast, because of what it suggests about the precariousness and changing significance of age categories. Specifically, Cyrus and Thicke laid bare the 'troubled' sanctity of childhood and the implications that this has for the increasingly blurred lines of contemporary adulthood. The yawning centuries between these texts are littered with examples from popular discourse of our preoccupation either with the inevitable nature of the life course, or the prospect that age categories - and particularly childhood and youth - are inevitably not what they 'used to be'. This is evidenced as much in the popular impact of the writings of Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Durkheim, Piaget, Erisken, Hall, and Freud as it is public and political outcry about delinquent child criminals on the streets of Victorian London, 'penny dreadful' magazines, mods and rockers of 1960s Britain (Cohen 1972), 1990s gangsta rap (Springhall 1998), 'hoodies', paedophilia, the negative impact of new digital technologies on contemporary children's brains (Greenfield 2014), or the more recent moral panic about knife crime. The

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[1] a particular kind of suggestive dance popular among young people in 2013 and originally associated with ʹbounceʹ hip hop from the Southern United States.

tension between inevitable structure and the inevitable decay of structure is of profound importance to recent social constructions of age as an aspect of the human condition.

Shakespeare's *Seven Ages of Man* is an all-too common starting point for historical reflections on the seemingly eternal nature of age and the life course, experienced through discrete stages (see, for example, James, 2004). Whatever the veracity of the ages that Shakespeare presents, we are broadly familiar with contemplating our social, intellectual, moral, spiritual and psychic development alongside the growth and decay of our bodies in this kind of way. It seems reasonable to presume that a temporal reckoning of the person, alongside the institution of some system of organization that makes this temporal reckoning socially meaningful, is a relatively common (if not necessarily universal) human practice. Age, in its many manifestations, can be related to shifting social status and shifts in standing and power within a society, often enacted through ritual activity and performance, and crystalized in relation to age grades, age sets, and generations (Van Gennep 1960; Mannheim 1952 [1923]). Reproducing these transitions through age-related statuses provides a framework for other forms of social and cultural reproduction. Indeed, conceptions of age underpin in a profound way how we make sense of how culture 'works' over time – how it is transmitted, produced, and reproduced from one generation to the next. As Ingold has suggested (2017), a 'genealogical' model pervades how we think about learning as the process through which culture is inscribed; and culture is in this sense inherently 'aged' because age categories often shape how one's education into culture is enacted. Nowhere is this more evident than in schools. In a genealogical framing, knowledge is in its essence a matter of transferring skills, values, beliefs, morality, rights, and obligations from one older group to a younger one. However, it is not the case that all people everywhere imagine and make sense of age (or culture, or time, or how knowledge 'transfers', for that matter) in the same genealogical terms - even if many Western scientists and social scientists have done so for more than a century. On the contrary, cross-cultural comparisons highlight a rich diversity of ways to configure age (and, therefore, culture), each the product of making human existence meaningful within a given social and cultural context. The fact that culture, as a process, remains dynamic and prone to change also means that the categories used to define age are also likely to shift *within* cultural contexts (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). And yet, as in the case with Miley Cyrus' and Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines* performance, the troubling of age categories can in turn lead to widespread social outcry because, somewhat ironically, this inevitable process of shift also implies the decay of seemingly foundational and unshakeable social structures.[2]

It is the aim of this book to better understand the above tension as it relates to schooling in contemporary British society. With this in mind, it is important to begin this chapter by interrogating the recent origins of Western ideas about age, beginning with a few big questions: Why is it that we think about and make sense of age and the ageing process in the way that we do? What are the recent historical, philosophical and sociological premises for the way that we think about age in Western societies? How might we start to think about age differently? In Part I, I begin to explore these questions by untangling a few of the intellectual threads that combine to give structure to contemporary Western notions of 'age' as an aspect of human social life, starting with the proposition that age acts as an organising concept of sum importance to the project of modernity. I briefly examine how different scientific, political, sociological, psychological, and philosophical traditions coalesced during the 20th century to cement a particularly linear notion of how age figures as an aspect of the human condition. This narrative is linked to changing social constructions of the concept of childhood in Western society; to patterns of mass consumption; and, crucially, to the encroachment of the modern nation-state and its disciplinary institutions (Foucault 1977) into the lives of children and young people. An important part of this encroachment -mass education- is given its own due in the following chapter. In Part II, I continue by reviewing sociological and anthropological thinking about age, with particular reference to childhood, youth, and education. This review sets the scene for the concept of age imaginaries that I elaborate in Chapter II.

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[2] Cyrus was formerly an icon of ideal childhood in her guise as innocent US TV character *Hanna Montana*, and in part, this highly sexualized performance caused consternation because viewers felt that she had 'desecrated' their memories of childhood and blurred the line between her childhood and adult public personas.

PART I: The Modern Age

Defining 'age' as a term of analysis

It is important to start by noting that 'age' is a sphere of social inquiry claimed by diverse and sometimes disparate traditions across the social sciences, not to mention its various interpretations across medicine, the biological sciences, experimental psychology – and the list goes on. As a result, age has been understood from a range of epistemological and theoretical perspectives. What each has in common, however, it the notion that our present linear, chronological framing of age is an *inevitable* feature of human life, as much in our biology as in our forms of social organisation. The current dominant notion of linear age is, I argue, the grandest of all narratives: it serves as the trellis against which to train the many vines of human life that flourish under the guise of modernity. Taking age as an *a priori* starting point for inquiry across diverse disciplines has helped to cement the normality of the age categories against which modern society is organized – from physical and cognitive development, to moral and intellectual growth, to civic responsibility and legal culpability. Age is at the heart of modern personhood, literally from the moment of conception.

It is the very centrality of age to the project of modernity that makes its interrogation as an organizing concept for social life seem unnecessary, or even facile. Within the social sciences, age is employed in multiple ways, often by proxy, as a backdrop for making sense of other aspects of social life. The quiet ubiquity of age as a backdrop in social science research in this sense means that it is particularly difficult to pin down as a discrete field of study. Indeed, it is perhaps better to see 'age' currently existing at the crossroads of multiple fields of inquiry, rather than as a field in its own right. This is made even more apparent by the fact that studies dealing with 'age' frequently focus on one particular stage or time of life, in terms of childhood, youth, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and so on, rather than dealing with 'age' more broadly defined. More often than not, purported studies of age are in fact studies of ageing. This also means that there exist fewer theoretical accounts that present a coherent and critical picture of age as a broader continuum, particularly in terms of its significance as a marker of identity or self-making (Hockey and James, 2003, Pilcher, 1995; Thorne, 2004). As Pilcher suggests, '…theorizing on age…is underdeveloped and limited, in that there is no one overarching theory. Rather, there is a somewhat heterogeneous bundle of theories, each with a variety of concerns, strengths and weaknesses' (1995:16). More recently, renewed interest in age as a broad field of inquiry has signaled a shift towards more holistic considerations of how age 'works' in society (Cote 2000; Furlong 2009; Thorne 2004). However, there remains scant research that takes as its focus age broadly defined. This is telling of the taxonomic power that age-based categories impose on the study of age itself, and of the potentially homogenising effect that age-related categories can have on the carving out of different imaginings of age within specific disciplines. Or to put it another way, the existence of discrete fields of inquiry into stages of life itself reinforces the logic of linear age as a means of understanding human experience. The division of age-related fields of study into different temporal, theoretical and disciplinary niches also means that studies of age, more broadly defined, are made unusual by their inability to adhere to particular, specific age/stage-based areas of inquiry. One is obliged to transgress the disciplinary boundaries of studies into childhood, youth, and adulthood in order to look critically at age. Age itself, then, is a concept that does not immediately lend itself to dexterous analytic use, because it encompasses so many different aspects of human experience. It is therefore crucial that I make clear from the outset what exactly I am referring to when I talk about age in the analysis that follows. In order to do this it will be useful to present an overview, if not an exhaustive account, of how age has been framed in different ways as a field of inquiry in the social sciences in recent years. So that we can make sense of this conceptual landscape, I will start by painting in the broad strokes. It will then be possible to focus in on the particular ideas of 'age' to be used in more detail in the context of this research.

Defining 'Age': A Question of Biology? Nerve Endings, And Nerves Ending

Let us begin by stating the biological conditions of age – the cognitive, neurological, and physiological conditions that we make socially meaningful through the idiom of 'age'. There is much to be gained in our understanding of the social processes of imagining age from embracing the overlap between the factors, both social and biological, that make up the 'aged' person (Thorne 2004; James et al. 1997). Indeed, age is a multidimensional process in which the physical is inextricably tied to the social. This demands a healthy approach to what we might term bio-sociology. Age is of course related to the development and decline of the human body, and to the concomitant developments in cognition that this involves. On a very fundamental level we can say that age is about the development, death, rejuvenation and ultimate decline of cells. At the level of neurology, we can even argue that brain plasticity or the way our brain changes as we age is ultimately what makes us human. It is what sets *homo sapiens* apart from our evolutionary predecessors. So age, on a foundational level, is about nerve endings, and nerves ending. There are certain patterns of growth and development of cells that we associate with different stages of physiological and cognitive development, and these are linked to the social categories that we use to articulate ideas of age. Of course, there is an extent to which as social beings we are profoundly anchored to these physiological and cognitive processes. Infancy, in this sense, may be defined by the acquisition of basic motor skills and linguistic competencies, while childhood may see the development of these competencies alongside psychological, social and physical development. Adolescence can be defined by the onset of puberty and the development of hormonal changes and reproductive capacities, and by neurological change through which the number of nerve-endings in the prefrontal cortex of the brain is drastically reduced (a process known as 'synaptic pruning') (Casey, Jones & Hare 2008). Some would argue that this neurological process is what leads to reasoned 'adult' thinking, rather than the 'storm and stress' (Hall, 1904) of the adolescent brain. Below I present a counter-argument. For decades it has been the orthodoxy to presume that the slow process of biological decline begins at some point towards the end of this adolescent transformation, initiating the slow journey, eventually, towards senescence and ultimately death - what Shakespeare might refer to as "*second childhood, and oblivion*". That is the story of age in a nutshell. While more recent research refutes this long-held claim (Boldrini et al 2018), instead suggesting that our neurons remain remarkably vivacious throught the human lifespan, in the popular imagination biological age is experienced very much like a mountain, with human life the arduous process of ascent, apex, and precarious descent to the Other Side.

Biological processes of age are facts of life that in most cases cannot be avoided, and which limit the flexibility of how we imagine age socially. An adult cannot physically *be* a baby, and an infant lacks the cognitive, social, and physical skills of the adult. A child cannot physically *be* an adult (although even this seemingly clear distinction involves a blurred line); and it is difficult for the fully-grown adult to convincingly take the place of a still-developing child (although such distinctions are more frequently made based on folk interpretations of the body than on any measure of biological change). Accepting the relative inevitability of certain biological processes, however, is not the same as suggesting that age is rigidly tethered to these processes. Of course, each of the transformations described above takes place in an idiosyncratic way within each individual human body, meaning that there are few certainties or straightforward cut-off points within the realm of physical or chronological age. What is more, a biological understanding of age presents the roadmap of human physiological and cognitive development, but it does not provide an inviolate idiom for *giving meaning* to these processes. Foucault (1981 [1976]) has famously argued that through modernity our bodies have been socialized into seemingly natural indexes of sex, sexuality, and gender. So too does 'age', in its many guises, work as a taxonomic mapping of the body which in its totality can be nothing if not 'natural' to the human condition. And yet one does not need to look far for rich evidence that challenges the fixity of our own age categories. What in the Western biomedical model is seen as the total innocence and ignorance of childhood, for example, in other cultures is seen as an abundance of knowing. Among the Beng in The Ivory Coast, West Africa, a child's inability to speak one language, for example, is taken to mean that she can speak *all* languages and can converse with beings beyond the mortal realm, coming miraculously as she has from that place (Gottlieb 2004; Montgomery 2009a). Adolescence, similarly, only *becomes* adolescence as we know it (with all its multiple meanings and caveats) when we identify it as such (Mead 1928). Just as many have critiqued the capacity of

recent advances in neuroscience to inform our understanding of social behavior (Johnson, Blumm & Giedd, 2009), learning or psychological dispositions, so too is it possible to suggest that the biological model of understanding age is just one version of the story. This is the case not least when we consider non-Western constructions of the self that are not so closely tied to the individual human body as it is imagined in the scientific biological tradition (and as I discuss in more detail below) (Carsten 2004; Vivieros de Castro 2004). The unavoidable physical, cellular realities of age can be interpreted through a wide range of social, cultural and historical lenses, from Shakespeare to Cyrus, and in so doing it is also possible to challenge some of the enduring connections that are often made between the physiology of age and the social constitution of age as an aspect of a person's life. Nowhere is this embodied notion of age more evident than in the assumptions about learning, cognition, and socialisation made in schools; and in the concurrent disciplining of bodies through schooling.

Defining and Disciplining Age: Citizens of Tomorrow

At the turn of the 20th century – what Cunningham (2005) rightly identifies as the 'century of the child' - conceptions of childhood in Britain were characterized by the notion of children as innocent and naïve, but also as the emotional focus of the family, and of society in general. Moreover, children and young people were increasingly the focus of state control as future citizens in need of training in moral, civic, and economic terms. In this respect, the 20th century saw the reification of age as the backdrop for modernity. As an increasing focus for emotional investment (rather than as economically productive labour), children were seen to be in need of protection, instruction *and* discipline, both at the hand of the family and as wards of the state. The emergence of pediatric medicine and the institution of mass education in the latter years of the 19th century in England meant that progress and development was increasingly measured against a universalist model of what a child *should* be like at a certain age. While by no means unique to the 19th and 20th centuries, 'self-help' guides for parents increasingly relied on age-bound scientific data for their arguments (Tisdall 2017). Under the powerful influence of Piaget (1936), Freud (1949 [1923]), Eriksen (1950) and others (Hall, 1904, for example), at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries age came to be defined in this way according to various but similarly rigid, linear models of development. For Freud, age was a canvas for plotting discrete stages of psychosexual progression; for Piaget, it was instead the metre by which cognitive development could be ascertained and measured. As the backdrop to ideas about social, psychological and cognitive growth, age was in this way perceived as being divided into culturally universal stages of forward progression through the lifecycle.

As Lesko suggests (2001), thinking about age within these fields was reflective of the broader discourses of progress and (social) evolution dominating popular, political, scientific and academic debate. Childhood and youth in particular were emerging as new areas of scientific inquiry, the overarching objective of which was to understand and regulate the social, moral, biological, psychological, and pedagogical conditions by which children and young people could be socialised into 'complete' adult citizens (Cunningham, 2005:176, James and Prout, 1997a:12). Thinking about age principally in terms of progress and/or decline – whether in psychological, social, developmental or pedagogical terms – therefore had, and continues to have, particular significance for conceptualisations of childhood, youth and adolescence as times of *becoming* on the way to adulthood (Qvortrup, 1994), even though this is by no means a culturally universal way of making age socially meaningful. Just as the inhabitants of Britain were being presented with a more coherent, universalist imagining of national identity (Anderson 1993), so too were they starting to think about progress through the life course as something that happened in the same way for everyone, everywhere. As I explore in more detail in Chapter II, the incursion of the state into the lives of young people through mass education allowed universalist ideas of age to become normal, with new imaginings of generation cross-cutting the broader imagined community of the modern nation-state.

Disciplining Age in the Social Sciences

The study of age within the social sciences can be seen in many ways as part of the project of modernity – of establishing and reifying a coherent taxonomy by which human life is organized, and which fits neatly with the economic and political order of the time (Foucault 1977). The social science of age draws heavily on scientific explanations of physiological processes. Indeed, the sociological study of age in part owes its temporal and theoretical fragmentation to the early emergence of age as a focus for investigation within other fields, including medicine (particularly pediatrics), psychology, psychoanalysis, child development and education. Scientific (and scientistic) discourses of age in each of these fields have had an important part to play in constituting the traditional linear model of the life-course. Psychological discourses of age as a framework for growth and development also had a profound influence on the way in which age was figured within sociology during much of the twentieth century, and, in many cases, into the present day). As James & Prout suggest in relation to sociological concepts of childhood,

> The scientific construction of the 'irrationality', 'naturalness' and 'universality' of childhood through psychological discourses was translated directly into sociological accounts of childhood in the form of theories of socialization during the 1950s. Within structural-functionalist accounts of society the 'individual' was slotted into a finite number of social roles. Socialization, therefore was the mechanism whereby these social roles came to be replicated in successive generations. The theory purported to explain the ways in which children gradually acquire knowledge of these roles. However, it frequently failed to do so… (1997a:12).

Of profound importance to the history of sociological research about age, then, are functionalist conceptualisations of age as a structuring force for consensus, stability and continuity within societies (Pilcher, 1995). Implicit in Durkheim's theorizing of the moral importance of education is the argument that a mass system of schooling should serve as a means of regulating social norms, beliefs, practices and statuses according to age and generation (Alexander 2013). As we shall see in the next chapter, it is difficult to overstate the impact that mass education has had, in this way, on the construction of normative generational social identities (Alanen 2001). In relation to the family, in the middle of the twentieth century Parsons (1954) and Eisenstadt (1964) helped to cement the notion that age (in terms of the relationships between younger and older generations) was the framework through which socialisation takes place and through which social norms and cultural traditions are regularly processed, transmitted and maintained within societies. By recognising the social significance of age, represented here as a social phenomenon governed by undifferentiated, universal social rules, Parsons and Eisenstadt helped to establish age as a major focus of sociological inquiry. But the functionalist preoccupation with age as an aspect of social structure also served to further limit sociological understandings of age within universalistic, reified categories that did not fully recognise the power relations and inequalities between generations, or shed light on the role of individual and social agency in giving *dynamic* meaning to the social processes of age. A preoccupation with the structural elements of age and ageing can also be seen in the tradition of structural-functionalist research within social anthropology during the first half of the 20th century, particularly within the British context (Kertzer and Keith, 1984). Early considerations of age from British social anthropology concentrated on how age-based social structures were reproduced, principally through kinship, in order to maintain the broader structural coherence of societies (Lancy 2015; Montgomery 2009a). As Kertzer and Keith suggest, anthropological studies of age during this period focused primarily on age systems themselves – on formal age-grades, age-groups and age-sets – rather than on the individuals in them (1984:21). These limitations did not prevent (and indeed may have encouraged) such functionalist interpretations of age and the family from permeating mainstream political and economic discourse throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the present day.

Having said this, however, a major contribution the social sciences to the study of age has also been to further highlight the social, cultural and historical construction of 'age' as a social category. In the tradition of the Culture and Personality school of cultural anthropology in North America, the social and cultural contingency of childhood (and youth or adolescence) has been a theoretical premise of anthropological studies of childhood

since the early 20th century (for example, Mead, 1928; Benedict, 1938). While early studies such as that of Margaret Mead (1928) were still premised on the idea of children as passive participants in processes of socialisation directed by adults (or older 'adult' children), their cross-cultural approach presented a direct challenge to the universalistic claims dominant in psychology and child development at the time (James and Prout, 1997a:19). While not without its own significant controversies (Jarvie 2012) Mead, for example, made the point that age could be imagined in ways other than those popular in American and European societies at the time. In emphasizing the sexual liberation and lack of stress among her female adolescent informants in Western Samoa, Mead provided a direct rebuke to Hall's 1904 theory of 'Sturm und Drang'/'storm and stress' in adolescence. Karl Mannheim's *The Problem of Generations'* also represents an important early alternative to the structural-functionalist view of age and intergenerational social relationships, because Mannheim went some way towards recognising the significance of social and historical context (and variability) in the development of generational notions of identity, belonging and difference (particularly during youth) (Manheim, 1952 [1923]; Pilcher, 1994). In doing so, Mannheim instigated a trajectory of social science research that while on one hand has reinforced notions of the structural inevitability of age-based social relations, on the other has yielded an interrogation of the 'cultural' traits that give meaning to generational identity (Furlong 2009).

Ingold provides a clear and compelling argument as to why age remains so central, and yet so evasive of critique, as an organizing concept in the social sciences and in wider society in the age of modernity. Drawing heavily on Dewey, and focusing on the transmission of culture through education rather than on 'age' as such, Ingold makes the case that a 'genealogical' idiom has pervaded dominant understandings of how culture and society 'work' since the end of the 19th century. In crude summary the 'genealogical model' describes the idea made popular in the biological sciences of the transmission of discrete information from one generation to the next, with actors across generations remaining equally discrete in the roles that they take on in this process. Just as coded genetic information is broadly assumed to pass directly from parent to child, with the child a passive recipient of this code, so too is a genealogical idiom applied to the 'transmission' of culture from one generation to the next, with the young as imitators of already-existing cultural knowledge cultivated and coded by elders to be handed down. Ingold succinctly argues that culture is seen within the context of modernity as a series of competencies to be mastered and reproduced through reason and rationality. The alternative is to experience culture and to be bound by its traditions without the self-determination and mastery that reason provides – or, as Ingold puts it, the difference between 'having culture' and being 'had by culture' (Ingold 2017:14). While this crude distinction has long been discredited as a means of distinguishing 'civilised' from 'primitive' societies, the genealogical model is a persistent logic that underpins the presumed superiority of scientific reasoning as the foundation of the project of modernity. The very same framing of culture is clearly reflected in assumptions about the relative ignorance of children and young people relative to the wisdom and intelligence of adults, not least in the context of schooling. As Ingold suggests,

> 'We are convinced that children should be educated in order that they can cross from one condition to the other. To this end, the world they know from experience has to be returned to them in rationalized form, as a system of rules and principles, or what once were called *rudiments*. Drained of environmental variation, these rudiments are conveyed to students as if they mapped an already known continent, serving as a territorial foundation for their own ascent to reason' (Ingold 2017:14).

The well-mapped route for the ascent to which Ingold refers (although he does not explicitly mention age as such) is progress measured against chronological age. The logic of inherited cultural knowledge can only work when organized around an age-based system that presumes a discrete divide, along genealogical lines, between neophytes and elders. It is therefore central to the project of mass education as a means of conveying abstract knowledge from those who know more, to those who know less. Of course, life in schools is never quite this simple, as I aim to show below; but such a view is characteristic of a modernist perspective on age as a monolithic and rigid, inviolate system of categorization that underpins all aspects of social life. Underpinning a range of other taxonomies that serve to carve up and make sense of the modern world, age endures as a category rarely challenged in its obviousness because it is very difficult to think about culture itself without thinking in genealogical terms. Following Mannheim (1952 [1923]), there is perhaps no grander narrative, no more

enduring coherent logic to the modern world than the ages and stages that we are all now accustomed to travelling through.

PART II

Critiquing Age in Studies of Childhood and Youth: Culture and subcultures

Thus far, it is possible to see that in the first half of the 20th century theories from the biological sciences, from psychology and from sociology, have served to reify a particularly modernist way of understanding age as part of the human experience, based on particular interpretations of scientific reasoning. Just as new public disciplinary institutions like schools and hospitals helped to establish normative ideas about how age should be trained and experienced, the disciplining of ideas about age occurred through the dividing out and reification of disciplinary knowledge on the subject. A prescriptive view of age is also reflected in popular and political discourse during this period, and in the government policies and consumer trends that have served to reassure of us of the universal fixity implied by our particular linear model how structure and cultural transmission is organized around age.

The second half of the 20th century, however, saw the emergence of increasingly complex conceptualisations of age within society and within the social sciences, not least in terms of the development of a critical (if sometimes equally universalistic) Marxist sociology that questioned the dominant functionalist paradigm and highlighted the significance of the processes of power and inequality shaping young people's lives. Published in 1960, Ariés' *Centuries of Childhood* presented a convincing (if at times flawed and inaccurate) account of the historical construction of childhood and youth as social categories, and provided a new starting point for critical studies of contemporary children and young people (Ariés, 1973 [1960], Cunningham, 2005). The emergence of notions of the life course (Elder, 1974), also served to problematise the more rigid model of the life cycle and allowed for a more nuanced conceptualisation of how individuals experience trajectories through life dependent on social, cultural and historical context. While a dominant stream of social science research remained focused on functionalist and clinical interpretations of issues such as youth and deviance – what Griffin (1993) has described as part of an essentialising 'mainstream discourse' on youth – interpretivist approaches to the study of childhood and youth also began during this period to expand the theoretical scope of research related to age by focusing on the meanings that individuals attach to notions of age (or particular categories of age, such as youth), and on the processes by which these meanings are nurtured and articulated (Pilcher, 1995:29, Griffin, 1993; Woodman and Wyn 2015). These changes in sociological thinking were in large part in response to the emergence of the teenager first as a consumer demographic in the 1950s, and as both a rebellious, countercultural phenomenon and a focus of subcultural production and consumption in the proceeding decades of the twentieth century. If in the latter stages of the twentieth century Western societies were undergoing profound change in the transition towards late modernity (Giddens 1991), children and youth remained centre-stage both as instigators of this change and as ideological wards of the future for adults to protect, and to protect against.

An interpretivist approach exploring asymmetries of power in the politics of aged social identity (of childhood and youth) was well suited to documenting the apparent decay of what formerly had seemed unshakeable structures based on age hierarchy. With these emerging theoretical perspectives in mind, during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s youth also became a focus of the emerging field of cultural studies (Jefferson & Hall and Jefferson, 1993), with age, once again, serving as the backdrop for more nuanced theories of young people's 'subcultural' activity as symbolic resistance to systems of power and inequality. Building on the work emerging from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, research exploring the so-called 'subcultures' of youth also lead sociologists to place increasing emphasis on diversity

rather than universality in their descriptions of 'youth' and of the transitions from childhood into adulthood (see, for example, Brake, 1985). This diversity was manifested above all in the consumption habits of young people (Hebdige 1974; Cohen, 1972, Frith, 1978; McRobbie 1991). Indeed, consumption has been a pervasive, almost ubiquitous feature of sociological explorations of youth culture since its emergence as a field of study in the middle twentieth century (for an early example, see Abrams 1959). This is of course tied to the invention in the 1950s of the 'teenager' as a demographic, when consumers in the teen years started to represent a powerful economic force to be harnessed by advertisers and marketeers. Later focuses on gender (McRobbie, 1991), and race and ethnicity (Mac an Ghaill 1988, Mirza 1992; Carey 2019) have also served to further expand the vantages of 'youth' being put forward in the social sciences, adding to a much richer portrait of the multiple experiences that this particular imagining of age could entail. Importantly, these studies reflect a general move within sociological studies of youth towards a more complex conceptualisation of both the nature of 'youth' and of the 'subcultures' that they represent. Miles' (2000) development of the idea of 'youth lifestyles' to replace references to subculture, for example, is indicative of the need for a theoretical frame that takes into account the contemporary contexts in which 'youth' is negotiated, in terms of recognising that 'subcultures' now more frequently make up part of the 'mainstream' of popular culture, and recognising that 'youth' is now imagined and negotiated on a global scale. Indeed, Griffin also invokes the metaphor of the imaginary ('*imagining* new naratives of youth') to argue that notions of contemporary 'youth' need to take into consideration perspectives from theories of globalisation if they are to accurately reflect the lived experiences of young people in the present (Griffin, 2001). Thinking about 'youth' in these terms also highlights the fact that 'youth' is as much characterised by 'normal' young people as it is by the extreme, rebellious, or deviant examples more frequently encountered in youth studies of the 1980s (Miles, 2000, Hollands, 1995). Drawing on practice theory (Bourdieu 1991), contemporary perspectives on 'youth' also more readily recognise the interplay between structure and agency, rather than focusing on the predominance of one or the other (Miles, 2000:9).

The 'New' Sociology of Childhood

Another significant move away from the universalistic and essentialising notions of age put forward in the first half of the 20th century can be found in the emergence of the 'new' sociology of childhood from the late 1980s onwards – a field that echoes the broader concerns emerging in Western society with the rights and active voices of children (see, for example the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Sociological (and anthropological) studies of childhood have in recent years served to further problematise the social categories by which age is defined (Lancy 2015; Montgomery 2009b), and studies of childhood in school settings have more explicitly grappled with the complexities of age as an aspect of children's lives. What is more, the emergence of the 'new' sociology of childhood also coincides with a shift towards a more multi-disciplinary perspective on social life in school settings. Indeed, both the multi-disciplinary scope and the theoretical ideas at the heart of the 'new' sociology and anthropology of childhood have considerable utility for exploring 'age' more generally as an aspect of life in school. Built around the idea that childhood is a fundamentally social and historical construct, the 'new' sociology of childhood has sought to critique existing conceptualisations – whether in academic research or popular culture – of childhood as an innate and universal experience cloaked by innocence and/or dependence on the guardianship of supposedly socially complete adults (James and Prout, 1997a, Prout, 2005, Jenks, 1996, James et al., 1998). Crucial to this argument is the recognition of children as active, agentic participants in the social worlds that they inhabit: like adults, children play an active role in shaping their social interactions with others, in spite of their frequent marginalisation and subordination in wider society. James & Prout describe some of the main tenets of this view of childhood as follows:

> Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life…Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity…Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon. Children's relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right…children must be seen as

active in the construction and determination of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live (1997a:8).

As with Ariés' and subsequently Hendrick's (1997) and Cunningham's (2005) treatments of the historical construction of childhood, 'new' sociological studies of childhood have served to explore the social and cultural contingency of 'childhood' and provide empirical accounts of childhood as it is lived in various ways by children in a multiplicity of social and cultural contexts – often beyond the walled limits of 'childhood' more narrowly defined. Similarly, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, research in the field of psychology has also adopted a more child-centred approach. While it is only in relatively recent years, and in part in response to the flourishing of new approaches to the psychology, history and sociology of childhood, that the (child-centred) study of children's lives has once again become a field of primary concern for anthropologists (Froerer, 2009), the 'new' sociology of childhood nevertheless owes some of its theoretical and methodological approach to a historical link with social anthropology. As suggested above, a major contribution of anthropology to the study of age as a social phenomenon is the early recognition that categories such as 'childhood' and 'adolescence' are socially and culturally constructed. In the multi-disciplinary spirit of contemporary studies of childhood, these disciplinary traditions are in this sense now very closely aligned in many respects, and both present highly valuable, overlapping theoretical perspectives for understanding age in the context of school.

One example of this kind of theoretical perspective is the four-part typology of 'imagining' childhood put forward by James *et al* (1998). They argue that theorizing about childhood can be ordered according to visions of the 'tribal child', the 'minority group child', the 'socially constructed child' and the 'social structural' child. This typology has resonance in the context of this study because it highlights the interplay between the 'commonality and diversity' of children's experiences – between the structural forces that serve to regiment and order lived experiences of childhood, and the role that children themselves play as social actors actively engaged in constructing childhood for themselves. While visions of the 'tribal child' emphasise difference among children according to other factors such as gender (Thorne, 1993) and age, the idea of the 'minority child' embodies the common political struggles that children, like other minority groups, face as a result of their marginal position in society. The idea of the 'social-structural child' also captures elements of the dynamics of power underpinning childhood as a category of age by focusing on the structural positioning of childhood (and children) in relation to other social categories and social groups. The vision of the 'socially constructed child', on the other hand, focuses on the lives of children as they are experienced in specific social contexts and in the discourses of childhood that are brought to bear on these experiences. As James and James suggest (2001:31), the value of this four-part typology is in the prospect of uniting all four perspectives in order to account simultaneously for structure *and* agency – for commonality *and* diversity. In 'tacking between' evidence of one and the other, it is possible to develop a theoretical perspective through which the complexities of childhood can be grasped.

A New 'New Wave' in Childhood Studies?

This kind of multivalent approach has increasingly characterized anthropological and sociological studies of childhood and youth in the last two decades. Christensen et al (2018) go so far as to suggest an emerging 'new wave' of childhood studies that lends further complexity to understanding childhood at once by critiquing the nature of 'agency' in childhood and, drawing on Latour (2005), by incorporating a theoretical approach that recognizes the importance of space, materiality, and non-human actors in the lives of children. More recent explorations of childhood (James and Prout 2015; Wasshede 2017) provide a critique of agency as a notion hinging on a neoliberal logic of the self within which the individual human person is the locus for all action, and therefore is also the focus us all responsibility for one's position in society. In contrast, a renewed focus on social or relational agency places instead a focus on how efficacy emerges in the reconciliation of novelty and difference between members of a community (or what Ingold might call, following the argument above, the 'commoning' of an educative experience). Further still, more recent research (Ryan 2012; Ursin 2011) points to a model of 'agency' that also takes into consideration the active role of non-human actors in the cultural worlds

of children, young people, and adults alike. Such relationships are situated spatially and temporally, with children actively shaping the temporal and spatial domains that they inhabit, in correspondence with non-human actors. Playgrounds, pets, toys, bedroom posters, social media, subcultural patterns of the consumption of things – all serve as means for reckoning age that children and young people consort with as they imagine age in their day-to-day lives. Posthuman reckonings of age in childhood allow for the exploration of broader non-human relations in the lives of children and which help to constitute imaginings and experiences of age.

Age in the Sociology of Education

In terms of studies into the social worlds of schools, the second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of a British sociology of education focused, on one hand, on the unveiling of structural inequalities in the English education system, and, on the other, on exploring the day-to-day of social life at school through ethnographic methods and the theoretical perspectives provided by symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1956). Under the guidance of Max Gluckman, David Hargreaves (1967) and Colin Lacey (1970) provided early accounts of everyday social life in English secondary schools that were groundbreaking in their ethnographic approach. In this respect they helped to pave the way for a generation of ethnographically-inclined sociologists of education interested, above all, in exploring issues of social class through the analysis of schooling as it happened day-to-day. Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977) serves as an iconic and well-worn example of this renewed interest in the social world of school; but numerous other examples of sociological studies of school life also emerged during the 1970s and 1980s (Corrigan, 1979, Ball, 1980, Hammersley and Woods, 1984, Woods, 1983, Walford, 1986, Delamont, 1976). The 'new' sociology of education in this sense provided a magnifying glass through which schooling could be analysed in its daily minutiae, rather than solely at the structural level.

As with sociological and cultural studies of 'youth', age looms large in the background of the ethnographic accounts of school life during this period, but age is seldom tackled explicitly as a focus of sociological analysis. Indeed, most, if not all school ethnographies deal implicitly with issues of age, not only because schools are organised according to age, and because they serve as a staging ground for negotiating age as an aspect of identity, but also because ethnographers must frequently grapple with the questions of how adult researchers can develop relationships with children and young people in a way that allows them to effectively and appropriately explore the research questions that they wish to address (Pollard, 1987; Walford, 1987). And yet at the same time few school ethnographies treat age as their primary concern, particularly in the context of English secondary education. This is somewhat surprising given the importance of age as an aspect of social life in school settings as suggested in the potted history above. In the case of the school ethnographies mentioned here, it is also understandable, though, given that sociologists of education were at the time more interested in pointing out other aspects of the social dynamics of schooling, not least among which were the class-based inequalities perpetuated by the so-called 'comprehensivisation' of the English education system.

Sociologists of education and cultural theorists interested in youth culture have had a significant role to play in establishing and perpetuating particular imaginings of age in relation to schooling. From the late 1970s onwards, studies of youth culture and social life at school served to greatly expand knowledge and awareness of the everyday lives of young people, and in so doing have also recognised the active role that young people play in shaping the social contexts that they inhabit. It could reasonably be imagined that while the 'new' sociology of education was flourishing alongside studies of youth culture, the social worlds of schools would have also attracted attention in the sphere of British social anthropology. However, in Britain the task of unravelling the social fabric of formal education remained (and, for the most part, has remained) firmly in the hands of sociologists (Delamont and Atkinson 1980). While a few exceptions exist (e.g. Opie and Opie 1959; Driver 1979), the social world of English schools has not until more recently developed as a recognised and legitimate research context for British social anthropologists (James 1993; Evans 2007; Montgomery 2009; Winkler-Reid 2017; Alexander 2014). In the context of this study this historical lack of attention means that aspects of anthropological theory relevant to the study of age – exploring rites of passage, ritual and symbolism, for example – have not been brought to bear sufficiently in the context of British education until much more

recently (e.g. Wulf, 2010). It also suggests that disciplinary boundaries have served to further limit the extent to which age, as an aspect of schooling, has been able to develop as a field of study unto itself.

With this in mind, Delamont & Atkinson point out that the tradition of ethnographies of education is, in contrast, much stronger in North America, but that historically there has been little cross-fertilization between the British and American traditions (1980). While the pioneers of the 'new' sociology of education were busy unravelling the nature of schooling with a particular interest in social class, North American anthropologists of education were continuing in the legacy of cultural anthropology (and the Chicago School of sociology) by focusing on the school as a site for acculturation and/or the contestation of indigenous and minority 'cultures' (see, for example, Jackson, 1968) – what Delamont & Atkinson wryly refer to as 'an obsession with cultural pluralism' (1980:146). Just as it has been argued that ethnicity and notions of cultural difference were significant in their absence as ingredients of earlier British school ethnographies, here too then it is possible to make the case that, historically, American anthropologists of education have privileged processes of cultural contestation and 'acculturation' above a critical analysis of the process of schooling itself (1980:148). This is not to say, however, that there are no examples of North American school ethnography focusing on school processes and social reproduction. On the contrary, there are a number of important examples from among the wide array of American school-based ethnographic studies emerging during this period (and, as we shall see, in subsequent decades as well) that explore the potentially marginalizing propensities of formal education (see, for example, Rist, 1973, Ogbu, 1974). Indeed, Yon points out that like the 'new' sociologists of education in Brtiain, American anthropologists of education in the late 1960s and 1970s were increasingly focused on analysis informed by Marxist and structuralist interpretations of the place of school in society (2003: 417). In turn, just as the emergence of cultural studies of education and youth in Britain heralded a more nuanced approach to the complexity of young people's lives, so too was American anthropology of education influenced by theoretical perspectives, such as those of Bourdieu and Habermas, that emphasised the multiplicities and contradictions of life in school (Yon, 2003: 421). And yet despite these points of convergence, the (real and imagined) differences in focus between American and European ethnographers of education, and the general lack of interest in schools among British social anthropologists, has led to the shoring up of disciplinary divides. Even with a more recent revival of interest in schooling as a site for anthropological analysis (Varenne and McDermott 1999), there is little if any research that explicitly focuses on age as an aspect of schooling.

In relation to conceptualising age in ethnographies of education, these disciplinary rifts have served to further fragment the ways in which age is imagined by social scientists in relation to schooling. Within the American tradition of anthropology of education, as in the sociology of education, age has remained a 'backdrop' to ethnographies concerned with other aspects of social and cultural life in school. In this sense the special attention paid in American school ethnographies to the 'acquisition' of culture has also led anthropologists to overlook the problematisation of age as a negotiated aspect of life at school (see, for example, Singleton, 1974). Of course, age often emerges as an *aspect* of cultural difference, in so much as young people at school can be described as experiencing age in different ways according to social and cultural context or background. Similarly, age also provides the framework for ethnographic accounts of the processes by which the 'acquisition' of culture takes place. In the legacy of Margaret Mead (and Van Gennep, 1960), historically these processes have often been couched within the terms of well-worn, linear patterns of 'coming of age'. The nature of 'coming of age' itself, however, has until recently avoided critical analysis, not least with respect to the linear and irreversible quality of rites of passage and the agency of individuals as participants in these processes. Annette Hemmings, for example, recognises this as a long-standing issue in the anthropology of education; but she also points out that during the last two decades theoretical developments in anthropology (and other areas of the social sciences) have served to expand the picture of 'coming of age' practices taking place in schools. The development of ideas of cultural (re)production in school, for instance, has helped to highlight the active role that students play in negotiating ideas of identity and age-based transitions (Hemmings 2004: 131). While these processes of cultural production are often framed in terms of resistance to the dominant middle-class values of capitalist society (for example, Foley, 1990), other contemporary ethnographic accounts represent a more complicated and contradictory picture of how students negotiate ideas of identity in school, eschewing a simple Us/Them dichotomy as a means of describing school relations (for example, Yon, 2000).

Where age does emerge in these accounts of schooling, criticisms have also been levelled at the notions of 'youth' to be found in school ethnographies (Delamont, 2000). Delamont argues that, traditionally, discussions of 'youth' identities in the sociology of education have also placed undue attention on young, rebellious working-class white males, seen either in the guise of romantic heroes or as threats to civil society. A number of ethnographic studies from the CCCS are presented as examples of the former approach (e.g. Willis, 1977, Corrigan, 1979). The analogue to this rose-tinted view of the 'lads' is what Delamont describes as the other 'grand narrative' in British sociology of education: that of moral panic over under-achieving working-class males who represent an unbridled and therefore potentially destructive and misanthropic youth. In each case, it is possible to see that the study and/or representation of a particular and particularly peculiar group of young people serves to re-create an imagining of age that plays on well-established tropes about 'youth' as something either to protect, or to protect against (Springhall, 1998, Cohen, 1972). This would seem to fit with Delamont's further argument that sociology in general is uninterested in the potential spheres of social research that schools represent because they do not necessarily deal with anti-intellectual, popular aspects of culture – aspects of culture, it should be added, that are traditionally associated with stereotypical portrayals of 'youth'. In turn sociologists of education have focused on the anti-intellectual aspects of school, because this is what is valued in the broader context of the sociology of culture (Delamont, 2000:106). To an extent it would seem valid to question the preoccupation of sociologists of education with the 'rebels' of the school world; at the same time, however, the 'grand' narratives of male working-class resistance that Delamont describes are certainly not the only focus for sociologists and anthropologists of education interested in the identities of young people (as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter). In any case, Delamont makes the important point that 'normal' aspects of school life – the lives of 'normal' young people – are less well-documented than the apparently more interesting lives of young rebels. This includes their experiences and negotiations of age as an aspect of mundane daily life in school; and it certainly relates to the seemingly obvious organization of schools, both at the structural and discursive levels, into linear, developmental hierarchies of age.

Bearing in mind the gaps in existing anthropological and sociological research on age in the context of schooling, the sociology of youth subcultures has also been criticised for focusing too intently on a narrow vision of youth subculture (McRobbie 1991). Cohen (1997) argues, for example, that form the late 1970s until the '90s, 'youth' became synonymous with a very specific (white, male) vision of young people either as a 'problem' and/or as a symbol of rebellion (Cohen, 1997). In this sense studies of youth culture helped to solidify a particular construction of youth, both as an aspect of the popular imagination and as an object of academic study (Griffin, 1993). It is also arguable that 'youth' itself was a somewhat neglected element in youth studies intent on illuminating other elements of social life for young people, such as cultural (re)production, class, ethnicity, race and gender. Serving as the 'backdrop' for other theoretical concerns in this way means that age – here categorised as 'youth' – has not always been given due critical attention as a contingent aspect of social life unto itself (Alexander, 2014; Miles, 2000). Cohen suggests that the detachment of 'youth' from studies of youth culture can be perceived in two ways. In studies of youth lifestyles or subcultures, it is possible to argue that analysis and interpretation became focused on the semiotic meanings of youth culture, but not on young people themselves (Cohen, 1997:195, see also Hebdige, 1979). In contrast, youth studies that focus on social and cultural reproduction have been criticised for focusing, as Cohen puts it, on the 'synchronic' characteristics of youth and youth transitions, rather than on the 'diachronic' elements of young people's lives. Or, put another way, a focus on reproduction at times obscures the multiplicities of the active *processes* of reproduction (and production) as they occur in the lived experiences of individual young people. By breaking down the limits of a functionalist framing of youth, cultural theorists and sociologists of the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s helped to formulate a far broader theoretical understanding of age; but they also helped to imagine a similarly powerful set of categories by which age, as a focus of sociological inquiry, could be defined and controlled as 'youth' (Griffin, 1993; Furlong 2009).

Consuming 'youth' at school

In the sphere of studies of 'youth' in English school settings, a number of other more recent studies have highlighted the social importance of patterns of consumption (and gender) on identity in school settings, again, with age emerging as a background theme (Nairn and Griffin, 2007, Livingstone, 2009, Phoenix and Frosh, 2001; Sandin and McClaren 2010). The convergence of these theoretical perspectives and an interest in consumption as an aspect of young people's lives can be seen in a number of ethnographic studies of schools. This is further evidence for the importance of including material (and virtual) markers of age in an understanding of how children and young people make sense of age in everyday life. Phoenix & Frosh, for example, have explored the role that 'fashionable looks' play in constructions of masculinity – that is, the process of boys becoming men – in secondary schools in London (2001). In relation to consumption of media culture in particular, Ben Rampton's study of the exchanges between secondary school students and (sometimes) teachers considers the significance that media consumption plays in the normal routines of school life (Rampton, 2006, see also Buckingham, 2000). Caroline Dover has also conducted research in schools that highlights the significance of pop culture in the daily lives of students in English secondary schools (Dover, 2007). Dover's study is a valuable example of an ethnographic approach to media consumption and identity that emphasises the embedded nature of media consumption as an aspect of everyday interactions. Here age is another silent definer of identity, in that the study explicitly looks at popular culture in the lives of 'young people', but does not explore where these practices overlap with the adults who also inhabit the school. It is important also to bear in mind that sociological studies of 'youth' in school have been criticized in this sense for continuing to emphasise the 'youthful' attributes of a particular group identity – from Snapchat (Handyside and Ringrose 2017) to street gangs – while underplaying the interconnectedness of these 'younger' groups with the social world of adults in a myriad of related contexts (Amit, 2003:241). Uncoupling experiences of 'youth' from chronological age represents a significant gap in our understanding of the ways in which age is figured in schools, and suggests the need for a more integrative conceptual frame that accounts for negotiations of age *between* children, young people and adults in interlocking and overlapping social contexts, rather in than separate 'cultural worlds' (Kehily and Swann, 2003). Along with Laughey (2006) and others, the above studies represent examples of an important move towards a more nuanced understanding of the social significance of consumption within the context of secondary school education in Britain. However, there still remains a gap in existing research in terms of a more critical treatment of the relationship between consumption and age in school.

School ethnography in the present: multi-disciplinary perspectives

There is much to be gained in our understanding of age as an aspect of life in school from exploring recent examples of school ethnography. Numerous school ethnographies have emerged from the ongoing legacy of the 'new' sociological study of childhood and in the anthropology of childhood (Levinson 2000), not least because schools present a key site in which childhood is imagined and enacted and because the establishment of compulsory formal education (and the increasing involvement of the state in children's lives in general) has had a key role to play in the construction of contemporary popular ideas about childhood. To ethnographies focusing on childhood in school we can also add an increasingly broad range of multi-disciplinary studies that explore 'youth', consumption and other aspects of school life, including ethnographies emerging from the American tradition of anthropology of education, from the burgeoning anthropology of education in the UK context, and from the increasingly broad range of other disciplines, such as geography (for example, Valentine and Skelton, 1998) which now hold an interest in ethnographies of schooling as well (Anderson-Levitt 2012).

Alison James' *Childhood Identities* (1993) provides one example of school ethnography that is particularly useful for thinking about age (and, importantly, gender) in school, in terms of her description of the significance of the body as a locus for social expression, as a marker of belonging and difference and as a means for performing age. Christensen & James' (2001) account of how students and teachers experience time in school, and how the

temporal framework of school helps to structure both notions of childhood and the relationships between adults and children in school, is similarly insightful in its treatment of age as an aspect of school life. This ethnography is particularly useful in that it focuses specifically on the relationships *between* teachers and students (although the authors do not go into detail about the differences in these relationships between students and teachers of *different* ages). While age is not explicitly highlighted as a focus of study, Christensen & James' exploration of adult control over time, and of time pressures related to the structure of the curriculum, reveal important aspects of how teachers and students become divested from one another in the process of formal education. Crucially, they also recognise, following Shilling, that the 'macro-micro' division within school ethnography is 'in need of remedy': that is, they argue that accounts of life at school should incorporate both a focus on the active participation of students and teachers in shaping the intricacies of daily school life, and on the structural forces and processes of social reproduction at play in schools (2001:71). This confluence of 'macro' and 'micro' perspectives is also key to the conceptual frame that I wish to apply throughout this study.

While some portraits of social life at school emphasise a sense of linear age-based social hierarchy, in which younger students are invariably subordinated to their elders in traditional relationships where age and physical size are commensurate with social status and power (see, for example, Simpson, 2003), others instead give us an idea of the multiple ways in which students are able to actively negotiate less fixed notions of age as an aspect of how they are located in school. In her description of an English secondary school playground, Gill Valentine (2000), for example, borrows from James (1993) in order to explicitly consider the physical embodiment of age as an aspect of students' social lives, particularly as a dimension of gender. In her account, age can be understood as an aspect of informal social space in school both in terms of the physical location of student's bodies (notions of belonging reflected in physical space), and in terms of the significance that certain bodily forms have as markers of social identity. Valentine argues that an informal age-based social hierarchy of social identities is reinforced in school according to the meanings that are imbued in height, shape, appearance, gender and performance (the latter understood, for example, in terms of gracefulness of movement or in sporting ability) (Valentine 2000:261). Age is embodied in this sense through traditional markers of masculinity and 'manhood', including performance in the form of appearance or sporting prowess. For girls, gender and age can also emerge as physical embodiments of identity (see also Jackson, 2006b, Karsten, 2003). Boundaries of belonging and difference are plotted in terms of embodied markers of physical development towards 'womanhood' – as well as associated consumption habits in fashion, cosmetics, and so on. Thorne's account of 'boys and girls' at elementary school is valuable in connection with these studies in its focus on the profound importance of gender as an aspect of how age is experienced and imagined (1993). In particular, Thorne's study is useful in the context of this research because he uses the metaphor of 'play' – of dramatic performance – to make sense of how children negotiate different ideas of gender. This has a strong resonance with my own framing of performance as an aspect of age imaginaries (of which gender is an important part). Gender also emerges as a key theme in Thomson & Holland's longitudinal study of transitions to adulthood in an English secondary school, in which they use the metaphor of the imaginary to explore the ways in which female students negotiate not only changing body types but also normative and alternative visions of what it means to 'become' an adult and a woman at the end of secondary school (Thomson and Holland, 2002).

In Gillian Evans' description of 'Tenter Ground' Primary school in South London (Evans, 2007) there is an absence of explicit reference to the systematic, ritualised age-based social relations between students. However, age is again present in the ethnography as a dimension of her description of educational failure, gender and class in the context of the school. Evans provides a portrait of informal social space in which peer groups are carved out according to the ability of pupils to engage in particular forms of social exchange and participation. Gender is in the foreground of this description, with the tougher 'disruptive boys' in Years 5/6 taking centre stage in the football area of the playground. This vision of social relations between children at Tenter Ground points to the significance of age as an aspect of social identity in a number of ways. Generally speaking an age hierarchy is reinforced through the social significance of physical size and performance and the ability of older students to bully and dominate their younger counterparts. Interestingly, however, (and unlike Valentine's almost adult-free account mentioned above) age is also of significance here in terms of how students are able, through their 'disruptive' behaviour, to undermine the authority of the adults in the school and impose, albeit

intermittently, their control over social space. In trying to come to terms with this reversal of traditional age-based social roles, the adults in the school resort to wider discourses about the 'wild', untamed, animalistic nature of these children (Evans, 2007:111). These are placed in contrast to their idea of what children (or 'childhood') *should* be like at school – that is, children who are engaged learners who are unquestioningly submissive to adult authority. Another recent study of note that deals with age as an aspect of school in the UK context is Donna Lanclos' ethnography of folklore and identity in a Belfast primary school (Lanclos, 2003). While the majority of the ethnography does not deal explicitly with age, Lanclos describes how the children in a number of different Belfast primary school playgrounds use 'rude' games and folklore as a means of stretching the boundaries of 'childhood' as it is traditionally defined in terms of innocence, naivety and an ignorance of the profane world of adults. Lanclos makes the highly valuable observation that children in this way lead a 'dual life' while at school – that is, they are actively engaged in performances of childhood innocence in front of adults, and in performances of 'profane' adulthood in front of other children. Balancing between these two performances of age is described as a process of ongoing negotiation (see also Jackson, 2006a). This notion of age as something that can be imagined and re-imagined in school, depending on context and audience, also has a profound resonance with the perspective of age that I wish to put forward here.

Other more recent ethnographies of schooling continue in the rich tradition of scholarship that reveals the complex minutiae of social life in formal education. Age remains an important backdrop, cut across by class, race, and gender (see, for example, Reay et al 2011; Reay et al 2010). Stahl (2016), for example, provides a rich account of schooling, exploring the intersection between neoliberal logics of aspiration and working-class white masculinity. The temporal framing of 'success' in this context hinges on the negotiation of particular imaginings of age, even if age is not the explicit focus of Stahl's study. Similarly, Dumas and Nelson (2016) present a compelling, ethnographically-informed account of schooling that unravels the relationship between education, race, and boyhood. Understanding boyhood demands an understanding of how age is imagined in childhood both by children and the important adults in their lives. Closer to the context of this book, Winkler-Reid (2017) provides a detailed account of how gender, sexuality and attractiveness coalesce in processes of self-making in a London secondary school. Again, age looms large in the background as the metre against which embodied sexuality and attractiveness is measured. Each of these ethnographic accounts presents a slightly different version of how age emerges as a thread in the social lives of students, but in each case it is an unmistakably important means for making sense of informal social life at school. In some cases, like that of Evans, age is woven into the background of her description, while class and gender are kept in tight focus, alongside consumption habits. The same is true for Stahl. For Valentine, particular aspects of age are explicitly considered, while others (the presence of adults, for example) are left to one side. Imaginings of age are in this sense established not only on the tarmac of the playground, but also in the written re-imaginings of these relationships conjured up in ethnographic accounts.

Age and Uncertainty: Is Age What it Used to Be?

A final point of consideration in framing age as a locus for social analysis is the proposition that contemporary society is characterized above all by conditions of risk and uncertainty (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). If a rigid, linear reckoning of age is key to thinking about society in the modern nation-state, the political and economic conditions of neo-liberalism have also provided the context in which these categories appear increasingly anchorless. While Willis' 'lads' successfully failed in school in the certain anticipation of working-class jobs, those jobs are now long-gone, replaced with zero-hour contract work in a precarious so-called 'gig' economy. Similarly, those young people who excel at school and make the now familiar transition to Higher Education are not guaranteed the prospects for employment or future satisfaction that have long been presented as the inevitable fruits of 'working hard' at school. Furlong (1997) was among the early scholars of youth studies to illuminate the importance of uncertainty to the experiences of contemporary young people along these lines. It is not controversial to argue that in recent years the conditions of uncertainty identified by Furlong have become ever more entrenched. Drawing on military terminology, Facer (2013) and others describe contemporary society as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous

(VUCA) – that is, defined by conditions which make 'the future' just as uncertain a prospect as is the present. To the same end, Pels (2015) suggests that the future itself is a modernist idea rather than a temporal certainty, meaning that 'the future' itself is a concept made unstable. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and more recently in relation to the geopolitical uncertainties of Brexit, so-called 'fake news', and the rise of 'post-truth' populist political movements world-wide, the future that awaits young people is now defined by profound uncertainty. This uncertainty extends to the very ideological foundations of contemporary schooling. I have written elsewhere (Alexander 2017; 2018) about the conflict that exists in schools between a stable, modernist vision of the future and of future 'success', produced through hard work and adherence to the hierarchies of school life, and pupils' lived experiences of an emerging future bears little resemblance to this stable vision. In navigating their way through school 'successfully', pupils must somehow reconcile an adherence to a normative understanding of how 'success' is produced in the future (nominally, through progression to work or Higher Education) while also recognizing that adhering to the rules of the game will not always produce this success. More profound still are ecological questions of uncertainty and risk that lie at the heart of the contemporary youth movement to counter climate crisis. Existentially, these conditions make the future ever-less certain for children and young people who are expected to inhabit it. And yet, ironically, these young people are subject to regimes of mass education that are increasingly premised on a rational-choice model of how schooling relates to future outcomes. Certainly, such conditions make starker still the incongruence between the complex reckonings of age imagined in the day-to-day lives of young people, and the more rigid reflection of age presented to them through mass education. For some, this tension can result in ambivalence: in a world so rife with uncertainty, what recourse to structure is possible (Alexander 2020)? For others, the seeming encroachment of disorder has precipitated a call to arms – and, interestingly, this too presents a challenge to the old order of generations. Recent ecological activism on the part of school-age children, personified by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, presents a compelling counter-narrative to the idea that teenage rebellion is most likely a precursor to the wisdom of adulthood. Rather – and in contrast to the archetype of 'Millennial' youth as vapid, delicate, always online, and celebrity-obsessed - Thunberg represents young people example who have reclaimed the foresight and maturity normally the preserve of their elders. The same youthful resistance drives the 2019 protests against extradition laws and the encroachment of Chinese state violence in Hong Kong. They are rebellious in a way very different to Miley Cyrus, with whom this chapter began, but are similar in representing a challenge to a taxonomy of age seemingly out of step with the conditions of later modernity in which this taxonomy persists. This as a topic that we return to in the conclusion of the book.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter has been to present a review of the complex history of ideas and the diverse landscape of existing research into age. Central to this history is the importance of age as a framework for organizing a broad range of ideas at the core of the project of modernity. This chapter also points to the emergence of complimentary theoretical perspectives and approaches to research about age that in some cases still remain to be put together as parts of the same puzzle. Age is at once an area of great significance as a field within the social sciences and a social phenomenon that remains under-explored in and of itself. This is particularly the case because of the lack of dialogue between cognate disciplines and fields of study that, while disparate, share a common interest in aspects of 'age'. I will continue to develop these links in the chapters that follow by considering how the sociology and anthropology of education (and particularly schooling) deals with the question of age and social identity. When combined and interwoven, the theoretical perspectives and empirical data presented in these fields serve as a starting point from which to forge new ground in the study of age. It is thus possible to identify a number of conceptual threads that need to be brought together if age as an aspect of daily school life is to be better understood, as follows: 1) an account of age needs to incorporate an analysis not only of structural forces and the processes of social reproduction that these facilitate, but also the interplay between these forces and individual agency, or the active participation of children, young people, and adults in negotiations of age on a day-to-day basis; 2) It is important that age is considered across a range of different age-based categories (i.e. childhood, youth, and adulthood) so that the fixity of these categories can be

problematised and the relational nature of imagining age *between* children, young people and adults can be recognised and better understood; 3) age can be made more visible as an aspect of social life through its interconnectedness with other categories of belonging, such as gender, class, and consumption, rather than in isolation from them. I suggest, therefore, that there is a need for a conceptual framework that captures perhaps even *more* complexity than has been recognised thus far in the study of age. In Chapter II I put forward the idea of age imaginaries as a means of capturing some of this complexity.

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