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‘Making Sense of Intersecting Crises: Promises, Challenges & Possibilities of Intersectional Perspectives in Youth Research’

Karenza Moore, Benjamin Hanckel, Caitlin Nunn, Sophie Atherton

Introduction: Intersecting Crises

The COVID-19 global pandemic is having a profound effect on young people worldwide. This Special Issue locates this single, significant crisis within broader, socio-historically situated intersecting crises (Ang 2021) that are shaping contemporary lives. These intersecting crises, including precarity, criminalisation, Black Lives Matter, austerity, and the climate crisis, are disproportionately affecting young people. The intersection of such crises is profoundly transforming contemporary young peoples' lived experiences and imagined trajectories in diverse, contextual ways. Critically, they are exacerbating and extending persistent structural inequalities associated with class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and age at a time when “transitions to adulthood have become longer, fuzzier and more complex” (Macdonald et al, 2019:1). Yet, in grappling with these intersecting crises and troubled transitions, young people are giving rise to new spaces, practices and conversations that challenge the status quo and create possibilities for more hopeful futures (Hanckel and Chandra 2021; Woodrow and Moore, 2021; Nunn et al., 2021; Bowman and Pickard, 2021). Centering these intersecting crises and their effects is critical for the field of youth studies as we seek to make sense of contemporary young people's lives and experiences.

This special issue builds on conversations that began in a 2019 workshop on ‘Youth Intersections’ organised by the *British Sociological Association’s (BSA) Youth Study Group*. This dialogue continued across study group (virtual) meet-ups throughout the pandemic (2020-2021), as well as a Plenary held at the BSA annual conference 2021. Notable across these conversations among youth researchers was the role of COVID-19 in (re)producing existing intersecting inequalities and representing a new crisis for young people already grappling with myriad contemporary crises. The articles in this special issue draw on interdisciplinary perspectives to examine how these intersecting crises are playing out in the lives of young people right now. Our contributors draw on research undertaken before and during the pandemic, surfacing how young people can (and are!) navigating intersecting crises in creative ways, and who and what is supporting them to do so. This special issue aims to expand the field of youth studies through centering lived experiences by thinking *with* young people about how we respond to the challenges to youth transitions and cultures these crises are creating. In doing so, this special issue concentrates on the ‘unprecedented’ current pandemic moment, whilst recognising continuities with past

moments, and attending to the cumulative impact of crises on the (im)possible futures of young people.

Intersectional Perspectives in Youth Studies

As youth studies scholars we are constantly navigating the tension between theorising youth and young people's lives generally, and attending to the specific experiences of particular individuals and groups. Intersectionality, with its focus on the complex and compounding relations between different forms of oppression and inequality, offers an important conceptual resource for meaningfully engaging with differentiated experiences of 'youth'. Intersectionality as a concept is focused on the multiple interacting influences of social location, 'identity' and historical and ongoing oppression (Hancock 2016). An intersectional approach enables consideration of how categories of 'identity' and social position overlap, and how we might better understand identity and oppression by exploring categories such as 'race' and 'gender' in unison. Whilst intersectionality focuses on the categories we use to make sense of the world, it troubles and avoids essentialist understandings of identity. Intersectional approaches in this way acknowledge the heterogeneity of young people's experiences without obscuring the similarities in, and specificities of, the disadvantages they face.

However, foregrounding intersectionality is not an easy or guaranteed route to inclusivity and transformation in youth research or practice, or anywhere else for that matter. Longstanding criticisms of its unreflective use as a 'buzzword' continue (Davis 2008), as do questions about both "the focus on multiple axes of difference" and about "the need to focus on specific axes over others" (Hopkins 2018: 585). In this context, we apply intersectionality as a *provisional* concept (Crenshaw 1991; Carastathis 2014), using it as a lens through which to "think about how we think about" (Carastathis 2016:4) representations, transitions and lived experiences of young people in COVID-19 times and beyond. While there is increasing attention being paid to various intersectional youth perspectives (see, for example, Idriss (2021) on race and Fredrick (2021) on disability), we argue there is more work to be done. This is critical in the context of contemporary crises, which can be understood, through their intersection, to similarly exceed the sum of their parts. We might consider, for example, how the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, austerity and precarity combine to shape the experiences of working class young people in the UK (see Nunn et al, this issue) and Australia (Cook et al, 2021), or how the racialisation intersects with financial crises to mediate employment outcomes for young people of colour (Eseonu, this issue).

Intersectionality is never divorced from practice, emerging as it did from a sociolegal concern with Black feminist thinking *and* practice (Carastathis 2014; Alexander-Floyd 2012). These practice-based origins are crucial in shaping intersectionality's efficacy as a tool with which to think about and challenge oppression, and a means to identify agency or lack of it, within moments, spaces, and times, alongside acts of resistance

and activism. Intersectionality for example is a useful tool to critically analyse and disparage policies which emphasise 'individual responsibility' as a so-called solution to navigating crises, be it COVID-19 or others. As a provisional concept then, intersectionality holds transformative potential as it relates to applied youth-focused research, policy and practice.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Intersectional analysis can also benefit from an *interdisciplinary* approach (see Degnen and Tyler 2017 regarding Anthropology and Sociology). Recent contributions to intersectional analyses of youth have emerged from cognate disciplines including Childhood Studies and Geography (see Konstantoni et al 2017; Gutierrez and Hopkins 2015). The diversity of disciplines contributing to intersectional work exemplifies the strengths of an interdisciplinary approach to analysing youth experience and considering youth practices. While interdisciplinary approaches can create (sub)disciplinary tensions, these can be productive, and this special issue shows how such tensions can be a key strength for analysing young people's experiences. This special issue therefore continues to champion interdisciplinary approaches by offering contributions from youth studies scholars located within and across various cognate disciplines, including alcohol and drug studies, criminology, digital sociology, education studies, and gender/sexuality studies. In so doing the papers attend to the varied socio-historical intersecting crises facing young people, and illuminate how mechanisms of support as well as control are actioned in youth lives lived at particular intersections, and the resulting effects. Here intersectionality and interdisciplinarity function as critical resources for understanding intersecting crises in young lives.

This special issue includes five papers, uniting a range of international scholars examining the changing circumstances of young people, and the tensions and opportunities of intersectional work from interdisciplinary perspectives. This work is composed by academics, at various career stages, representing the diversity of the Youth Studies community, as well as some young student co-authors. Each paper surfaces young people's experiences as they deal with crises, and create spaces for themselves, even when structures (continue) to marginalise them.

Our first article, by Nunn and colleagues, is a collaboration between academics and undergraduate students. Reflecting on student experiences during COVID-19, the authors highlight the pandemic's intersection with existing crises and inequalities that structure young people's lives. At the same time, they introduce the concept of 'precarious hope' to make sense of the fragile but generative possibilities emerging from this moment of precarity. Directly addressing student authors' experiences of feeling ignored and undervalued as young people throughout the pandemic, the article's co-productive approach is posited as an example of cross-generational solidarity. The theme of precarious hope situates the ways that (im)possible futures

emerge throughout each paper in this special issue, and the ways that intersecting crises affect youth lives and trajectories.

In the second article, Eseonu draws on case study data to examine youth transitions to employment as experienced by racially minoritised youth in the UK. Situated against the backdrop of the economic crises of 2008 and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic, Eseonu argues that the entanglement of race, class and opportunity structures work to constrain racially minoritised youth as they transition to employment. The paper illustrates how individuals working in the employment support service may provide proactive support for racially minoritised youth to challenge racialised transitions at this pivotal transition point, hence potentiating a future better aligned with precarious hope for these young people.

Zúñiga and Colin, co-authors of the third article, draw on Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour to offer a comparative perspective of contexts in crisis for young people - early career high school teachers in Mexico City in private and public school systems. These young workers (aged 21-31) were at the beginning of their employment trajectories as COVID-19 forced them to pivot to digital work with their students. Their analysis illuminates teaching practices across private and public schools, showing how disparities in existing digital infrastructure and existing inequalities between private and public schools and their student cohorts forced differing emotional work on these young teachers. The authors refer to this as 'asymmetrical emotional labours', making visible the varied labour that intersecting crises of COVID-19 and existing social inequalities produced. Yet despite their struggles, Zúñiga and Colin found hope in the young teachers' capacity to express empathy towards their students, suggesting the need for empathetic training/spaces to be built into teacher training.

In the fourth article, Woodrow and Moore explore how intersectional disadvantages relating to access to safe and affordable leisure spaces are being compounded, exacerbated and extended in familiar and novel ways by the COVID-19 crisis. They bring together innovative data sets taken before *and* during the pandemic to show how the liminal leisure status of disadvantaged young people pre-COVID-19 became, albeit briefly, the experience of young people in the UK more generally, in light of the policing of lockdowns and the closure of night-time economies. They note, however, that despite some confluence of experience, youth leisure exclusion remains highly differentiated, particularly given "intersectionally disadvantaged young people 'at leisure' are subject to a confluence of criminalisation, exclusion, and stigmatisation in Covid times".

Our final article in this special issue is by Bowman and Pickard. They draw on 60 interviews with youth environmental activists before and during school climate strikes. Utilising the 'youth-led' concept of 'climate peace', which emerged in their work, they "shift the conceptual focus onto the work [that] young people are doing, as

opposed to the way young people fit into the concepts, structures and institutions of adult-centred politics". The article explores how young people advocated an understanding of peace whilst situated in and negotiating complex competing contexts relating to precarity, activism and policing which persistently marginalised them. Bowman and Pickard's critical argument for thinking with young people and youth-led concepts emerging out of youth experiences reinforces the focus on researching and learning with young people that threads throughout all contributions in this special issue. Collectively, these five papers open up possibilities for moving youth studies forward as a discipline not just about but *with* young people. Far from being the conclusion, we offer this collection to stimulate scholarly thinking in youth studies and youth practice, and as a critical and hopeful contribution to making sense of young people's lives in the context of continued intersecting crises.

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