

Editorial

Confidence and uncertainty for young people in contemporary Europe

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When we embarked upon *Perspectives on youth Volume 3* our working framework was “Healthy Europe”. We were interested not only in the “narrow track” of the health and well-being of young people, but also in the broader canvas of what it is like to be young in a Europe faced with conflict and austerity and what it feels like to be young as transitions become ever more challenging. Reference points are shifting: How do young people feel when embarking on yet another precarious and underpaid internship, despite their impressive educational attainment? Are they just accepting of their lot, or do they wish they had taken another (possibly, ultimately, equally precarious) path? How do they relate to and deal with the fact that there was a time when qualifications meant much more in terms of labour market destinations? How do they feel about having to plan a life when the resources to support any planning are so unpredictable? Do they still plan for the future or just live for the present? In what ways can these questions be understood or conceptualised in terms of health?

Our assumption was that health remains a controversial area within youth policy, where the points of departure of policy makers on the one hand, and young people themselves on the other often are dramatically different; in fact, young people tend to interpret the dominating discourse on health as limiting, patronising – maybe even offensive. A healthy lifestyle tends to be conceptualised in normative and prescriptive ways, often asserting norms that may be impossible to live up to in a so-called knowledge-based economy.

The question of health, of course, brings the old tensions between protection and participation as well as agency and structure to the forefront. Some would argue that it is unfair to apply a framework of healthy versus unhealthy to young people as the dichotomy is far from neutral and implies that there is a choice, and that they can choose better. Others would say that a focus on health is synonymous with a focus on the individual, and consequently any health-related failures are interpreted as individual failures rather than consequences of a broader societal ill-being.

Alternatively, could the scope of health within youth policy be broadened to go beyond traditional indicators such as body mass index, and alcohol and exercise habits? What constitutes healthy participation, citizenship, or consumption patterns? What are healthy coping mechanisms for a generation that has seen the role of the state change and shrink? Can a health framework help us to explore issues from a new perspective?

As our thinking about framing this book unfolded we started to contemplate the ideas of love and hate, in an attempt to capture the often deeply embedded and emotional positions that may be held by young people. It was something of an unsuccessful attempt, as we sought to attract contributions of a contrarian, controversial, comparative and transnational character from those linked to the youth field in policy, research and practice. Perhaps we had moved so far away from more concrete conceptualisations of health that prospective contributors had no idea what we were seeking!

In a parallel vein, we really have no idea what is going through young people's minds (and bodies) as they traverse their multiple transitions in the context of their own aspirations and the expectations of others. What we know projects a rather mixed and muddled picture. Survey data relay one perspective, but qualitative material often paints another picture. The view from research can be very different from that from practice. And policy makers may persist with attempts to "put old wine in new bottles" or make connections with new realities, not least the fragilities surrounding social inclusion and increasing psychosocial disorders in a significant proportion of young people. These factors affect perhaps all young people except for those from the most privileged backgrounds. Mental health issues in young people derive less from social disadvantage and more from social dislocation, according to global analyses of scientific literature. Where do young people fit in contemporary Europe? What do young people expect of and from Europe? What does Europe expect of them?

Not all of these questions are addressed in any detail in the contents of this edition of *Perspectives on youth*, but many are touched upon. We have gone, intentionally, for an eclectic mix of contributions – to provide a diversity of argumentation and to promote reflection and debate. As has been the intention of *Perspectives on youth* throughout, we have sought to solicit and elicit the views of academics, policy makers and practitioners, presenting theoretical, empirical and hypothetical assertions and analysis.

There are some fairly incontrovertible arguments about factors that promote good health and a sense of well-being or contribute to poor health. A key determinant is invariably social class – patterns of inequality and poverty. As Richard Wilkinson (1996) has argued impeccably, the healthiest societies are those that are more equal. His later work with Kate Pickett *The spirit level: why more equal societies almost always do better* (2009) has achieved international recognition (see also Atkinson 2015). Their book was published just six months after the start of the current crisis in Europe, following the banking meltdown in 2008. It makes for salutary reading as we experience growing inequalities across Europe, within its member states, and between the generations. And we should perhaps think of the idea of spirit not just

in terms of levelling opportunities and conditions, but also in relation to zeitgeist – conceptualised as the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time. How should we consider the mood of early 21st century Europe in the context of opportunity and experience for young people? It is certainly very different from the often quite relaxed optimism and positive expectation that prevailed only a few years ago following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism, the expansion and extension of human rights, democracy and the rule of law throughout an enlarging European Union (EU) and increasing membership of the Council of Europe.

Of course, policy can make a difference. The elusive concept of youth policy – all of those policies which, in some way or another, shape and affect the position and prospects of young people – can help or hinder young people's capacity to move forward in their lives, to move geographically and physically to other spaces and places, and to move psychologically in terms of their aspirations and identity. Today, such movement is facilitated or obstructed in both virtual and actual realities. But the objectives and implementation of active youth policy or, by contrast, inaction when youth policy is absent can either nurture or paralyse a sense of well-being among the young. European frameworks can set the tone, though usually it is the more specific actions of national, regional and local governments that really make a difference.

We start with an interview with Harald Hartung, the relatively new head of the Youth Policy and Programme Unit within the European Commission, to get his take on young people and health in contemporary Europe. This is followed by a strongly critical perspective from Fred Powell and Margaret Scanlon concerning the precarious state of many young people in modern Europe and the need for a more radical policy agenda. There is little doubt that policy is important, not just in the field of health per se but across many other policy domains that affect young people. Constructive, opportunity-focused education, employment, housing and training policies contribute to improved health for young people now and in the future. But the rhetoric of transversal or cross-sectoral youth policy is confusing, poorly understood and weakly implemented, as Magda Nico's analysis of the documentation from key institutions clearly demonstrates.

Prospects for the health of young people, however conceived and defined, rest significantly outside of their own control. There is broad consensus that there is a need for urgent, immediate action on environmental and ecological questions, yet the questions themselves continue to be debated and debatable, according to Beata Sochacka. Yet while the short view is critical within the environmental debate, it is the long view that is required when it comes to demography. Dragana Avmarov explores and presents what she calls the "demographic dynamic" in relation to young people in Europe, considering the risks they face and how these risks may be more equitably distributed.

The book then turns to some more specific analysis of young people's health, albeit in relation to international youth work and later in the context of what might be called, in turn, "youth for youth" and "youth from youth". Haridhan Goswami and Gary Pollock look at health and well-being in the changing context of and for young people in Europe. They confirm many things that those in the youth field would consider quite

predictable in relation to the psychological well-being of young people. But there are some surprises. A range of policy implications are advanced.

But one could place a reasonable bet that one particular group of young people are not featured in the European Quality of Life Survey. They are the young people who are desperately trying to secure what, in their terms, they perceive to be a “better life” in Europe. The increasing population of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers seeking entry to Europe as they escape from the poverty, uncertainty, conflict and oppression of the Middle East and Africa is composed of significant numbers of children and young people. Maria Pisani considers the issues that surround their plight, taking an unapologetically political perspective anchored by a commitment to social justice. She also engages in a discussion of the theoretical deficiencies in (western European-dominated) youth studies, which, from her perspective, can appear out of touch with global realities.

Our attention then turns away from the specific social and physical condition of young people in Europe (and their theoretical implications) to broader issues around international youth work and how these may contribute to their health and well-being. Ansgar Drücker forges links between the statutory annual report prepared by the German federal government on the health of children and young people in Germany, and the potential of voluntary and international youth work to engage in practices of “implicit health promotion”, particularly as concerns the self-effectiveness (or “self-efficacy”) of young people that can be dreadfully undermined by experiences of discrimination and hate speech. Drücker notes that the subject of sexual orientation (and trans- and intersexuality) is a “blind spot” in the 13th report on children and young people. This issue is taken up by Michael Barron, who points out that despite the fact that human rights violations of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people have been in the public eye for close to two decades, bringing about a plethora of international and European resolutions, conventions and initiatives to protect and promote their rights, especially with regard to establishing safe educational environments, there is now a resurgence of homophobic laws and sentiment, particularly in eastern Europe and Africa. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon may argue that human rights must “carry the day” over cultural attitudes but, as we have also learned from Pisani’s discussion of migration, principled statements from on high may often resonate weakly and ineffectually in the everyday lives of young people. Homophobic bullying and violence – as one form of identity-based bullying – severely jeopardises the positive and prospective health of those young people who experience it.

The evolution of the international youth work that might support Drücker’s contention that it can support implicit health promotion and wider contributions to the well-being of young people’s lives is then reflected on through an autobiographical note by Gordon Blakely, who has spent a lifetime in that sphere. There are some important caveats in his celebration of the life-enhancing outcomes of international youth work, but he argues forcefully in favour of a healthy infrastructure for a healthy Europe.

It is not, however, just structured policy and practice that may make a difference to the health and well-being of children and young people. There has been a growing interest in peer education and learning. This manifests itself in many different forms with different objectives – notably prevention, education, promotion – and is subjected

to a measured critical discussion by Yaëlle Amsellem-Mainguy. Young people are increasingly likely to take their lead on what it means to be healthy and, arguably more importantly for them, to look fit (in terms of bodily shape and image) from the Internet and through social media. This is relatively new territory – a new form of public space for self-presentation – and carries, inevitably, both positive potential for health as well as risks. This subject is explored by way of a more experiential and polemical approach by Manfred Zentner.

Inevitably, these contributions encapsulate a range of overlapping, as well as sometimes contradictory, positions. As we drew together and absorbed the various contributions outlined above, we concluded that the overarching issue was not “health and well-being”, or “love and hate”, but a dialogue about “confidence and uncertainty”, from which – of course – health and well-being or its opposite, flow. It may be something of a truism but the perspective must always be holistic – young people who are living in better conditions are likely to have better opportunities and experiences, providing them with greater confidence and a greater sense of possibility, which in turn are likely to produce a better approach to healthy lifestyles and, indeed, a more healthy physiology. Conversely, those in more adverse predicaments, denied pathways for progress, may succumb (through some spurious choice or economic necessity) to less healthy lifestyles and the resultant physical and mental ill health. These are certainly not linear relationships. They work in multiple directions.

The authors touch on confidence and uncertainty in many different ways. There are questions about responsibility, the balance between individual and collective action, the global, the personal, and – the all-pervasive challenge – reaching and rallying the engagement of the most vulnerable and those in most difficulty, both those who are “dying inside” (through anxiety, depression, fatalism, social dislocation, a sense of isolation and a loss of hope in the future) and those who are really dying (following illnesses, suicide and on the shores of Europe). It is not all bad or sad news. In some respects, young people are looking after themselves better than ever before and we are looking after them. Their confidence in different sexualities is palpably stronger, even if it remains a blind spot in the German health report. The digital age may herald new possibilities for raising self-awareness, understanding and confidence in young people. But urgent attention needs to be given to inter-generational justice, the challenges for social cohesion on account of mobility and migration, commitments to human rights and, ultimately, equalities. We may never produce, nor even aspire to produce, equal outcomes, but we need to ensure equal opportunities. Health and healthy opportunities underpin the making of a confident generation of young people, rather than one imbued with uncertainty.

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