



Growing Up and Being Young in an Indonesian Provincial Town
W.M. Minza

Growing Up and Being Young in an Indonesian Provincial Town

Wenty Marina Minza

Summary

This study explores the experiences of youth in the provincial town of Pontianak, West Kalimantan. The research was done in Pontianak, the provincial capital of West Kalimantan during the years 2008-2009. This region has been relatively marginalised from the overall process of national development. Within the region's history of ethnic segregation and conflict that structures the opportunities, social relations, and individual life aspirations of its population; it has recently gone through major changes. These changes include the implementation of decentralisation, the booming of tertiary education facilities, the growth of the service sector, and the proliferation of ideas of modernity and consumer culture.

These changes have encouraged the formation of a large university student population, as ideas of modernity and the ability to consume, are generally linked to attaining well-paid formal jobs in the urban economy, which in turn, is believed accessible through participating in tertiary education. Formal jobs are expected to generate enough income for achieving financial independence and forming a new family through marriage. From a generational perspective, successful transition in these life domains becomes a base for social reproduction and upward mobility. This explains what is generally expected from young people in the process of growing up, which is to go through the proper life transitions (education, work, marriage) according to the normative time table in society. This does not, however, help understand why young people in Pontianak are sometimes behaving in a manner that seemingly contradicts the process of growing up. They seem to be caught in a state of 'being young', as they engage in various youth cultures and build a youthful social identity. For instance, young men and women do not always seem to take education seriously, many educated youth are working in dead-end jobs and those who are involved in romantic relationships do not necessarily see it ending in marriage.

Within this context, this study focuses on educated youth in university and those who have graduated from university, but have not yet attained their ideal job. As Pontianak's university student population is steadily growing, it is not balanced by enough promising job opportunities for these educated youth. This study therefore, tries to understand the various patterns of relations between growing up and being young, how social relations of interdependence are embedded within this process, and how it is experienced by different segments of the youth population in the Pontianak context. By trying to understand how young people navigate between being young and growing up as two co-existing dimensions of their lives, this study offers an alternative approach to deal with the limitations of both the perspectives of 'growing up' and the perspectives of 'being young' which are often discussed, and deployed in research, separately. Mainly using a qualitative approach that focuses on the subjective experiences of an educated youth population coming from the lower middle class, it explores how the tensions and continuities between growing up and being young are experienced in three life domains influential in young people's lives: education, work, and romantic relationships. It also shows the interweaving of life domains that young people have to negotiate in their lives, which are also often dealt with separately in studies on youth.

The continuities and tensions between growing up and being young are captured through identifying two main patterns of relations: 'being young while growing up' and 'growing up while being young', with the difference between them being a matter of different emphasis along what is basically a continuum. The first pattern, 'being young while growing up', focuses on the continuities that exist between being young and growing up through youth cultures. Instead of merely seeing youth culture and adult culture as in tension, it also recognises how certain aspects of youth culture are adopted from the adult world. In the domain of education, it provides an alternative way of better understanding school counter cultures. For instance, university education provides space for the emergence of particular urban youth cultures: of hanging out on campus but also at malls, consuming alcohol for young men (especially beer, as opposed to traditional forms of alcoholic drinks), or various kinds of consumptive behaviour, that are more acceptable to the adult world, as they are associated with the life style of an educated person. Adults often consider hanging out by university students as a way of relaxing after hard work at school rather than assuming it is a general way of life young people employ (associated with irresponsible behaviour, laziness or an attitude resisting growing up).

The domain of romantic relationships also illustrates continuities between adult and youth culture, especially in how adult-constructed views of ethnic group status often frame young people's

modes of exploration in romantic relationships. Various 'styles of appropriation' (Jeffrey et al., 2008: 62-77), such as physicality or language related to another person's ethnic background become a basis for choosing or avoiding the formation of a romantic relationship (relative to one's own ethnic group membership). Making public appearances that show connections to perceived higher status (ethnic) groups brings a positive image to one's social identity. For example, Malay young men are often attracted to 'white' skinned Chinese young women, also assumed to come from a higher social economic background. Fixation on images of beauty based on physicality (the body), public appearance, and material transactions show how expressions of love in romantic relationships are commoditised through processes of global capitalism (Padilla et al., 2007).

Aside from confirming that cultures of youth sexuality show continuities to the adult culture, this study also illustrates another dimension to this pattern. It finds that youth cultures also function as a productive domain – as way to *facilitate* growing up. Many young men and women believe that youth cultures in university facilitate the making of a modern identity, breaking away from structural constraints of ethnicity, class and geographical marginality. Ideas of tolerance, nationalism, optimism, and competitiveness are part of the young modern identity that they want to build. Though a youthful modern identity emphasising individual capacity is believed to support the process of growing up, young people in Pontianak are very much aware of the role social networks play in making their transition. This is why hanging out becomes a central resource that young people use to construct their youth identity, but at the same time, to grow up. Youth cultures of hanging out while still studying enable inclusion within the peer group in a new university environment. This includes engaging in both leisurely and 'serious' campus activities which enable them to acquire and expand their network for the future.

The second pattern emphasises how growing up is a *structured* process, and how young people give meaning to it. In this case, youngsters tend to accept the values of the older generation that ensures the process of reproduction, but face various constraints to actually do so. The findings of this study are in line with the general view of other studies on youth transitions (Grant and Furstenberg Jr, 2007: 426; Atal, 2005: 15; Dalsgaard et al., 2008: 63-70), which show the importance of family, state institutions, and global processes in shaping young people's lives. This study shows that families, in particular, play a crucial role in the process of social reproduction and cultural transmission by the older to the younger generation (Mannheim, 1952). As argued in most growing up perspectives, my findings show that financial independence is one of the significant indicators that define entrance into adulthood. This study also confirms studies suggesting that global

processes have intensified the changes young people go through, resulting in differences between young people and their previous generation and the variations existing between different groups of young people in understanding the meaning and experience of growing up. Here, being young is often a consequence of not being able to successfully grow up – of not being able to make a smooth transition to adulthood. Most young people endure quite long periods of unemployment while waiting for the opportunity to enter a job they find meaningful. Many end up settling for underemployment, basically entering casual informal, low paying, and/or insecure type of jobs for which they are overqualified. Yet, young people try their best at trying to make the transition to *somewhere*, no matter how limited their mobility to *somewhere* is. In most cases, young men try to make the transition to somewhere by entering informal sectors, such as politics, through the forming of patron-client relationships.

Rather than merely portraying a bleak picture of young people's situation, as many previous studies have done, this study supports a rather optimistic view about young people in transition. It shows how young people strategise and rationalise their situation, without trying to romanticise the uncertain futures they face. By looking at the experience of being young and growing up together, it also sheds light on how young people experiencing a ruptured transition resort to the peer group for support. Instead of taking political action such as staging collective protest like the educated unemployed men in India described by Jeffrey (2008: 745-746), this study shows a rather individualised and subtle strategy in coping with insecurity. In the work domain, young people strategise by constructing images of 'play' or of being 'free'. This is an effort to claim making progress towards becoming an adult, of making the transition to somewhere rather than nowhere (Herrera, 2010). Even so, intragenerational relations have much more significance than as merely a resort from a ruptured experience of growing up. Hanging out is not always intended to compensate for being stuck and to overcome boredom, as elaborated in Schielke's (2009) work. As explained above, hanging out in adult made institutions and public spaces, such as schools, has been illustrated as part of youthful activity in itself and a way to facilitate growing up, which is both central in young people's lives.

In the domain of romantic relationships, young people form ambiguous meanings to their relationship. Young men and young women are reconstructing gender relations within the gendered opportunities in the labour market, with the expanding low end service sector providing more opportunities for young women to become future breadwinners. Thus, many young people in Pontianak construct long-term relationships, where they imagine that their relationship will end in

marriage, yet they are also often unsure whether they can fulfil the family obligation a marriage entails.

The findings suggest that 'growing up' and 'being young' are experienced differently based on gender and ethnic background. For instance, while young men are often at a more disadvantaged position than young women to enter secure work in the midst of the feminisation of the work force (McDowell, 2004; Kenway and Kraack, 2004), young women who do find employment in the expanding service sector often face difficulties in keeping their jobs, due to increasing age, marriage, or pregnancy. Ethnicity has always played an influential role in processes of social reproduction through work in Pontianak. However, the ethnic work domain is currently challenged. Young people acknowledge that decentralisation has opened opportunities for all ethnic groups to participate in seizing opportunities, especially in entering the civil service. This has changed not only the work aspirations of young people from marginalised ethnic groups, but also the ways in which they try to fulfil these aspirations.

By using a lens that looks into the interweaving of the three domains in young people's lives (education, work, and romantic relationship), this study has made it possible to see that young people often compensate for a lack of success in one domain by claiming success in another. Those that are stuck in the domain of work, for instance, compensate by claiming success in the domain of romantic relationship. Education becomes a domain that not only compensates for not being able to work or to get married, but is a domain where young people can use to justify of being successful without being pressured to 'move on'.

Finally, this study highlights three main arguments. First, by looking at growing up and being young together across life domains, we are able to see that peers are becoming more significant in young people's lives in all life domains. Second, this study supports the argument that continuities exist between adult culture and youth culture. By doing so, it supports a view that the significance of peers does not render the family unimportant. This is not unique to Pontianak, Indonesia, or countries of the Global South, but is also the case in Global North. Third, along the same line as this study that proposes young people move in and out of growing up and being young, Tanner's (2006: 30-31) work in the US illustrates how young people move away from their family in certain times of their lives, and re-establish bonds with family of origin when they are entering adulthood. The goal of achieving independence, Tanner emphasises, is only temporary. Building on Tanner's insightful work, more studies are needed on the dynamics and shifts between growing up and being young, and the ways in which interdependent relations (rather than relations of dependence or

independence) are practiced, in different regions and social groups of Indonesia and other parts of our globalised world.