Growing up and being young in an Indonesian provincial town
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Introduction

Idham is a 24-year-old Malay man who has been studying at the Faculty of Law at a state university in Pontianak for six years. His father is a retired civil servant, and his mother is currently serving as one in a nearby district. Idham also works as a singer at cafés, wedding ceremonies, and office gatherings. For him, education is ‘important for the future and for adding to the development of the mind and soul’. However, he admits that he dedicates more time to performing at cafés, where he is paid 70,000 rupiahs for two hours’ work. He keeps the money he earns as pocket money. He plans to open a restaurant business in the distant future, which he feels will go well with his passion for music. At the moment, he does not have enough capital and experience to open this business. He is uncertain when he will finish his education, and even seems reluctant to. His parents expect him to finish university soon and enter the civil service, but he is still considering which career choice he will make. For Idham, job success means that he is ‘not deprived, meaning having a source of money…a job that produces (enough) money and a job that one likes.’

Idham is involved with a young woman from the same university, and they have both been introduced to each other’s parents. This shows that the relationship is quite serious, but Idham is still uncertain whether he will marry her. He admits that ‘…at certain occasions, for example,
(when) my friends bring their girlfriends to gatherings, and I don’t bring (mine), there is an ‘awkward feeling (insecure)’. Yet he still holds on to the idea that marriage is important, stating ‘...it is my intention to take this current relationship further (which is to marry), but for now, I will just go with the flow...though (I still think) marriage is important’. (Interview with Idham, 26 December 2008).

Idham’s case illustrates that young people are active in three life domains: education, work, and romantic relationships⁴. Like Idham, most young people are often ambivalent about dealing with issues they face in these domains. Succeeding in these three life domains is important for them, because it conforms to societal norms of success. Yet, they do not necessarily behave in ways that seem to further the achievement of the normative success story. Idham seems to see education as important for his future, but does not dedicate much of his time to his studies. He prefers using his time doing the work he enjoys, yet also expects to settle into a stable job. He wants to get married someday, but he is also quite practical and present-oriented about his relationship with his girlfriend. Idham’s case shows that he is actually living the present as a young person: he engages with the youth culture of hanging out (on campus, in malls, and cafés), while also making money through his music. His work is income generating, yet still within a leisurely context. He also has a girlfriend who secures his status at peer gatherings, which he feels partially confirms the image of being a

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⁴ The term romantic relationship here refers to a relationship between a young man and a young woman that involves sexual attraction, but not necessarily involving sexual intercourse. In Indonesian, it is commonly called pacaran. In Chapter 5 there will be a more complete description of pacaran, which will show that not all patterns of pacaran are actually romantic.
successful youth. However, at the same time he is concerned about his future. He has ideas of graduating, starting a business, and marrying one day. He does not believe that he is jeopardizing his future just because he is trying to enjoy being young. How do we explain the gap between society’s ideal notions of transition to adulthood that young people tend to follow and their actual practices that seem to be in contradiction to this ideal?

This study is about how young people deal with opportunities and constraints in the process of growing up and being young in a provincial town, located in one of the so-called outer islands of Indonesia. The research was done in Pontianak, the provincial capital of West Kalimantan during the years 2008-2009. Pontianak has a relatively large university student population, but does not offer enough promising jobs for these educated youth. This research focuses on educated youth in university and those who have graduated from university, but have not yet attained their ideal job. Three life domains that young people often engage in are explored: education, work, and romantic relationships. The objective is to understand the continuities and tensions between young people’s future expectations and present experience within these life domains.

**Growing up and Being Young: Two Contrasting Perspectives in Youth Studies**

In this thesis, I use two main perspectives in youth studies which will help understand young people’s experiences and behaviour. These perspectives will be explored in greater detail later in Chapter 1, but it is
useful to summarise them here. The first is the ‘growing up’ perspective which positions young people as in the process of becoming an adult (Wyn and White, 1997: 8-14; Lesko, 2001: 31-33). Transitions in three core life domains (education, work, and marriage) are often used to indicate a successful transition to adulthood (Furstenberg, 2000: 898). Education is assumed to open opportunities for formal jobs in the urban economy. Formal jobs in turn, are expected to generate enough income to achieve financial independence and form a new family through marriage. From a generational perspective, successful transition in these life domains becomes a basis for social reproduction and upward mobility. This normative line of thinking shows only one dimension of youth’s life story: it helps explain what is expected from youth in the process of growing up, but it does not help understand why they sometimes behave in the way they do. 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 a romantic relationship do not necessarily see it ending in marriage. From this perspective, Idham would be said to have a problem growing up, as he is lacking the commitment to perform in school, obtain a secure job, and seriously consider his girlfriend as his future wife. He would be considered problematic either because he does not want to progress towards adulthood or because he is incapable of doing so.

The second main perspective in youth studies focuses on young people’s experience of youth itself or of ‘being young’. In this perspective, youth are seen as individuals and a social group in their own right. This means that we need to understand how young people think about themselves, how they relate to other youth (not just to adults), and how their social identities as youth structure their ideas and
behaviour. Young people’s subjective experiences are often emphasised in this approach, thus providing a lens with which to look at the reality of young people’s lives (Wyn and White, 1997: 118-119). From this perspective, we can expect that education might have many other objectives than merely obtaining a job, work is not necessarily for the sake of making money per se, and involving oneself in a romantic relationship may be for purposes other than marriage. In this respect, Idham is seen as enjoying his youth and simply living the present. This perspective seems to suggest that present identity formation is young people’s primary focus in life – as if to say that they do not put much thought into their future as adults. It emphasises young people’s present identities and subjective experiences, but tends to ignore the fact that they are also aware that they will sooner or later become adults. Therefore, it is a partial reflection of reality.

As such, the growing up and being young perspectives are each partially useful in understanding youth; together, they reflect two key dimensions of the experience and construction of youth, that co-exist in tension in the lives of young people. Understanding young people’s lives and identities therefore requires an approach that considers both perspectives. This study will take an approach that combines both perspectives in order to better understand young people’s life experiences. The combination of the two approaches will enable us to see youth as in the process of transition (growing up) and being young (living in the present) together, and through it we will be able to acknowledge the tensions and continuities between these co-existing dimensions of young people’s lives. This perspective has been used elsewhere, as in Naafs (2012b), which illustrates how young people navigate the structural constraints of growing up by engaging in
consumer culture, based on a gender and class division in a provincial town in Java. This study adds another dimension by taking into account the role of ethnicity in the process of growing up and being young. The two main patterns of relations between being young and growing young are identified: ‘being young while growing up’ and ‘growing up while being young’. The former emphasises young people’s state of being young, while the latter shows young people’s focus on the future and growing up.

Research Question and Organisation of Thesis

The above theoretical approach brings me to my main research question: how do young men and women experience growing up and being young in a provincial town such as Pontianak, West Kalimantan? The sub questions that I intend to answer are: Which patterns of relations between growing up and being young are predominant, and at what points in young people’s lives is one pattern more predominant than the other? How do social relations work within the identified patterns of being young and growing up? Is the same pattern observed in all life domains, and do social relations work in the same way across the life domains? How do they differ based on young people’s social position?

In Chapter one, I will discuss literature related to the process of growing up and being young in greater detail, and how I position my study within these two main theoretical strands. At the end of this chapter, I elaborate the methodology used in this research and how the choice of methods facilitated the acquisition of the data.
Chapter two will provide an overview of the research setting, focusing mainly on Pontianak and West Kalimantan’s structure in relation to their history and the economic, social and political changes that have occurred. At the end of this chapter, I will provide a short review of how young people perceive concepts of youth and adulthood within this specific context. How young people in Pontianak understand what it means to be young and what it means to become an adult will provide a frame explaining the empirical findings in Chapters 3 to 5.

In the third chapter, I focus on how young people give meaning to education. The question that I try to answer in this chapter is: do young men and women believe – and if so in what ways do they believe – that education is a means for ‘proper’ future transition? On the one hand, they often state that education is important, but why does the leisure youth culture seemingly outweigh the importance of learning? To explain this ambiguity, I argue in this chapter that being in education is a strategy that youth employ to prolong being young while preparing for their future in the best way they know how (which is not only through learning). Youth leisure cultures, especially on campus, provide a means for the young to find the resources that are perceived to better prepare them for the future.

In chapter four, my main focus is on young people who are about to graduate from university and those who have recently graduated. In this chapter, I question: how do these young people relate to the labour market? Why do they often see the state in a negative light, yet dream of getting a job as a civil servant? I argue that jobs that ensure stability of income, accumulation of wealth, future social security for parents, and status are considered important indicators of a successful transition. However, most find it difficult to attain such dream
jobs, and they often engage in a ‘youth culture of waiting’. I will show in this chapter how waiting denotes active agency, rather than passivity on the part of youth.

Chapter five elaborates how young people view romantic relationships. What meaning is attached to being involved in these relationships? Why do young people seem to embrace the importance of marriage, yet often find themselves uncertain about the direction their relationship is going? I find that various meanings are given to romantic relationships. Long-term relationships, for instance, are conceptualised against a backdrop of structural constraints in continuing the relationship towards marriage. Parents play a more influential role in determining rules and standards in these relationships. For ‘youth in waiting’, involvement in romantic relationships compensates for the feeling of being stuck in the world of work. It provides a sense that, at least in a certain domain of life, they are moving on.

In the concluding chapter six, I argue that tensions and continuity exist between growing up and being young. This results in ambiguity in young people’s thoughts and behaviour. For instance, some want to grow up, but are ‘stuck’ in their youth, some just want to enjoy their youth as long as possible and stall growing up, while others try to grow up by engaging in youthful activities. Ambiguity becomes a strategy in which young people deal with insecure futures. This includes seeing themselves as making progress in their transition to adulthood, despite not necessarily following the normative timelines of growing up. The manifestations of these ambiguities are contextual. In a place where there is a scarcity of promising jobs to enter and no state to fall back on, future uncertainties are multiplied. As a result, the ambiguity also
becomes more intense and prolonged. This has made the role of social relationships more apparent in dealing with this situation.