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Everyday life, everyday connections? Theological reflections on the relevance of international youth studies research

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Young people everywhere seem to experience religion in their everyday living environments. They do theology. The question is how faith communities and theologians can nurture a creative and sensitive dialogue with these young people? More so, can we as researchers learn from each other across disciplines and geographic distances and how could the result of comparative dialogical research be relevant for youth ministry work and teaching? This contribution focuses on the value and prospects of comparative youth research on the everyday life (including their lived religion) of these young people for academic theologians. While it takes the approach of Meredith McGuire as a starting point as she challenges dominant Western approaches to the study of religion, yet this contribution also aims to maintain theological perspective, as I seek to find connections.

Introduction

In Practical Theology, the discipline that Professor Yolanda Dreyer teaches with much acclaim, the challenge of research amongst young people was initially mostly focused on intra-congregational concerns. Professor Dreyer is however amongst a cohort of researchers who are able to keep a delicate balance between this concern and also what one could call a public concern. She remains with me, one of the theologians who writes regular columns in the daily Afrikaans newspaper, *Beeld,* where theological concerns or even broader religious questions are related to everyday life of the readers of *Beeld.* To make these connections is critical, if theology at large is to remain relevant, thus making a social impact. The efforts to make these connections also happen in other contexts.

In 2016, when a Commonwealth-wide conference was hosted on youth work at the University of South Africa (Unisa), one was amazed, as a theologian, at the number of instances where faith, religion and theological considerations came into play in discussions of what might perhaps be considered, 'secular', 'governmental' or even 'political' and 'activist' youth work. This interplay also happens in social media and on the streets where it seems that young people themselves, often challenge and subvert authoritative regimes (see earlier work of Nel 2014; 2015). Young people and those working with them or do research about them seem to try to make sense of, including experiencing and interpreting religion, invariably in terms of their everyday living environments. They do theology in context. In this, they are the subjects in their own religious reflections – wherever they are.

This has specific implications for the direction and scope of our work as theologians – not only practical theologians. On the one hand, how to be a theologian within the broader social scientific context, doing research on younger people, is not straight forward. Suspicions about conversionist motives, or a naïve worldview and spirituality persist. There might be valid reasons for these suspicions. However, there remains evidently a need, on the other hand, for a broader scope and audience for our theological work. More importantly, on a deeper level, what is critically important is a theoretical framework for these everyday life (theological) reflections – also for social scientists. In this contribution I focus on Youth Studies Research. The question for this article is therefore self-critical: how would theologians reflect on the broad field of Youth Studies Research related to the everyday experiences of young people, in order to make connections?

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This question is addressed by starting from the premise that, at least in southern Africa, youth ministry research or in general, research on young people in religious contexts (in religious studies or religious education), needs to take account of the developments and contestations of the broader stream of youth studies research (Swartz 2004:75–91; Weber 2015). I share the view of amongst others, Sharlene Swartz and Shantelle Weber, that youth ministry research cannot be confined only to intra-congregational or parachurch practices, aiming at 'improving' ourselves and ministry practices– as church people. As a missiologist, I also need to be up front in declaring that this kind of research with young people and students cannot simply be to get them, also often referred to as 'the world', into the church. One needs to be open for mutual transformative encounters. The kind of (youth ministry) research or 'encounterology' that is argued for in this contribution is to be repositioned as one stream of the broader river of youth studies. The aim would be to be learning from, making key contributions, but also, allowing itself to be challenged by other streams of the big river. Why is this significant?

This repositioning within youth studies is significant globally, as Woodman and Wynn (2015) argue:

> Youth studies can be central to developing an understanding of the dynamics of global economic, social, cultural and political changes that will play out over the next quarter of a century and their impact on young people. The economic opportunities and unprecedented levels of inequality within and across countries that are emerging as key aspects of these transformations will impact directly on youth … (p. 17)

Even if their vision is perhaps an exaggeration, this repositioning for youth ministry research, within a broader interdisciplinary context, is critical as an acknowledgement that young people in general are influenced by and interpret their living realities as a whole, economically, socially, culturally and politically. They don't live in the one-size-for-all programmes of congregations or youth ministry events. Youth do their theology in public. At least in southern Africa, we experience that they also challenge and often drive in a variety of ways and with varying success the changes Woodman and Wyn refer to. As researchers, therefore, we can and need to learn from each other across disciplines, and also geographic, ideological, cultural, racial or religious divides. The challenge is methodological. In youth studies itself, Lisa Russel correctly points out, 'researching young people poses specific methodological challenges' (2013:47). A question for us as theologians would be, how the result of a specific type of dialogical, comparative research, be relevant for youth ministry research and teaching, as well as, in turn, how can youth ministry research contribute to the broader river of youth studies?

This article, limited at this stage to literature sources, will therefore explore the value and prospects of international youth studies research on the everyday life (including their lived religion) of young people. I do this by presenting an overview of what I consider the key current developments within international youth studies, as well as the key contestations and fault-lines. The article then narrows the engagement down by focusing on developments within the specific southern African context. However, these developments cannot simplistically be accepted without some theological critique. In a separate section using the frameworks of scholars, Meredith McGuire and Hubertus Roebben from the disciplines of sociology of religion and religious education respectively, the article then draws together some of the key challenges for theologians. While the approach of McGuire is a starting point, as she challenges dominant Western approaches to the study of religion and everyday religious experience, this contribution also aims to maintain theological perspective as I seek also to find interdisciplinary connections. In this last respect, this article aims at taking seriously the recent proposal by Roebben for what he calls an inclusive religious pedagogy (2015). The article concludes with some key considerations for us as theologians.

Current developments within international youth studies

In an insightful article on the state of youth research in South Africa, Swartz (2004) presents an overview of key developments of projects and concludes that:

> Youth ministry in South Africa is in desperate need of accurate and current youth research …

> But there are also many ways in which social science research and 'religious' research needs to inform each other, and they seldom do. (p. 90)

In order to make these connections and be challenged by and possibly contribute to the field of youth research as youth ministry theologians, one needs to start by having a broad overview of current developments and contestations. In this regard, the contribution of Swartz is an important starting point. As her work shows, it is however not possible to touch on all developments or, to go into any depth of the various debates, at this stage (see also Nel 2014:1–3). In an overview of this field, internationally, Steve Roberts (2012:390) boldly refers to a 'mission' of youth studies in relation to his own engagement specifically with the work of social theorist, Ulrich Beck. His focused contribution however does bring out the various developments and conceptual contestations to the fore. Conceptual debates, he argues, either clarify or problematise the way we dialogue with and therefore aims to understand young people and the contemporary social world. Roberts then brings into discussion what he considers the two most influential streams of international contemporary youth research for the last quarter of a century. He refers to, what is often called on the one hand, the 'transitions' approach and on the other hand, a 'cultures' approach (Roberts 2012:391; see also Farrugia 2014:294; Woodman & Wyn 2015).

Youth transitions

Woodman and Wyn (2015), in their discussion of these streams, explain the transitions approach, to be related to the conceptualisation of the notion of 'youth', as a phase of

transition, a transit point in a lifecycle. They also refer to the key notion of 'transition regimes', that is, those institutional processes like educational systems, labour markets and welfare systems which shape the meaning and experience of young people (p. 75). This kind of thinking (about 'youth') and its developmental foundations have been challenged (Seekings 1996:103–125; Cannella & Viruru 2004:3–5). Woodman and Wyn, in particular, point out that youth is not to be conceptualised as a stage, nor a phase or a transitionary space through which they must go in order to achieve idealist constructed trajectories of adulthood. Youth is not a pathway towards a fixed destination. For them, from a social generational perspective, transition regimes do not just shape transitions to adulthood; they forge distinctive social generations in which the meanings of 'youth' and also of 'adulthood' itself are transformed (p. 76). This is an argument against the danger of what they call:

> … research that implicitly judges younger people and their actions on (older) researcher's experiences of, or nostalgic reconstructions of, their own youth and how they remember their transitions to adulthood. (p. 76)

They show that the developmental theories that underpinned this focus on youth *development* have strengthened again in recent years, with neuroscientists arguing that some areas of the brain are not fully developed until the mid-to-late twenties (p. 78). These studies, important as they are, however do not adequately deal with the danger of essentialised notions of adulthood and biological reductionism. As I will show later, one would question essentialised notions of 'youth' and 'adulthood', forged in a specific Western-European cultural milieu. This issue of culture and class needs to be accounted for. Therefore, taking the cue from Roberts, I will therefore turn to what is known as the youth cultures research approach.

Youth cultures

The youth cultures research approach has also been influential in international contemporary youth studies (Gudmundsson 2010:135; Roberts 2012). The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) or simply called, the 'Birmingham School', has been influential in promoting this approach, foregrounding the notion of subcultures, as 'a close coupling of cultural practices and social stratification, by class' (p. 95). For these proponents of this school, subcultures are not subsets of general youth culture, but of class cultures. While this approach remained dominant in popular literature on young people, this approach has however also been critiqued with the introduction of the post-subcultural notions of 'neo-tribalism' (see the work of Bennett 1999; Mafesoli 1996), 'lifestyle' (Miles 2000) or 'scene'. These were introduced to challenge the dominance of social or economic class within the Birmingham School. Woodman and Wyn argue that these contestations fundamentally remained centred around the relationship between youth cultural forms and the reality of inequality (p. 96), with questions like what is the relationship between culture, social change and social structure?

This critique against the oversimplification of the Birmingham School was valid. But there also needs to be a caution against an overemphasis on, what Woodman and Wyn call, the 'fluidity and playfulness of identity associations that are possible' (p. 102), as well as, against the exclusive focus on everyday life and consumption, which may side-line explicit political and I would add, structural questions. They point to scholars who would respond positively to the post-subcultural theory turn, but who would still show that social inequality, in particular cultural practice, still shapes their engagements in youth studies. For them, class and race, as well as gender, continue to shape youth cultural forms (p. 103). The freedom to choose (or consume) is still linked to the ability or constraints to pay. In this regard, Woodman and Wyn explain in a more nuanced way the contestations:

> It is not that the early subcultural theorists refused to recognise change, or that they failed to recognise fluidity or multiple forms of belongings, or even that their work did not recognise that youth subcultures were in a symbolic dialogue with the parental generation as well the class conditions they faced. To a degree at least, subcultures research has recognised all this. However, in addition to the lack of attention to gender and race that has now been well highlighted, they subordinated generational questions to questions of class cultural continuity over time. By giving scant attention to the everyday lives of young people in their changing times, ultimately the subcultural analysis by scholars attached to the CCCS did not, despite intentions, really investigate the processes by which class inequality was reproduced over time but took this for granted. (p. 103)

In response to both these important developments and contestations within the field of youth studies, Woodman and Wyn call for a reconceptualisation because for them:

> It is only through rethinking our frameworks for contemporary conditions that youth research can remain relevant and reaffirm its core concepts such as class, gender, race and identity. (p. 7)

This reconceptualisation and reframing, they argue, would support research on how social division, across multiple dimensions including class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and geographic location, is being made today in the contexts that differ from those that impacted on the lives of young people in previous generations (p. 108). They therefore appropriate the notion of social generations from Karl Mannheim. For them, the sociology of generations is part of a broader tradition that asks not only how youth transitions and cultures have or have not changed, but also how the very meaning of youth as a relational concept is shaped by contemporary conditions. However, in building their case for rethinking change and inequality in the lives of young people, they aim to draw on theories and data from around the world, but almost unavoidably, given the current political economy of academic knowledge, with a focus on the Global North (p. 9). They also show an appreciation for the critique against the classic sociology of generations, which project an image of essentialised generational cohorts and concede:

> Both post-subcultural and post-colonial scholarship have shown that young people can have many belongings and identities and that empirically they clearly belong to multiple cultural and

political configurations concurrently, across class, gender and ethnic divisions. (p. 109)

They affirm the everyday life focus and that their participation in social and cultural groups is only one aspect of their lives. One should be wary of only highlighting the 'most spectacular, or trouble making, or excluded young people' (p. 109), and therefore much of the significance of youth cultural practices to young people may involve more mundane practices of belonging that are common across youth cultures, and these practices can only be fully understood in the context of the full breadth and depth of young people's lives. It is then in this context that the notion of biography or biographical research comes into play, which transcends a focus on consumption. They explain:

A focus on biography is also closely linked to arguments in feminist-inspired youth sociology for better attending to everyday life to understand the cultural lives of young women. (p. 112)

Woodman and Wyn conclude:

The challenge will be to understand identity, shared cultural practices and resistance in the context of the different tensions that unequally pull contemporary young people in different directions and which they must negotiate. As an alternative for theorising the impact of inequality on the opportunities for, and hindrances to, engaging in group-based cultural forms, including the impact of class, gender and other divisions, we would advocate a biography approach. (p. 119)

I will stop here on the way in which Woodman and Wyn engage the key developments and current contestations within the youth studies and their own proposal for dealing with the everyday negotiations, fragmentation and connections of younger people. However, reference needs to be made to the so-called 'Nordic model of youth research' as it remains influential in relation to the youth cultures approach in particular.

Youth studies specifically in the Nordic context or the Nordic model of youth research, suggested by Helena Helve, a prominent Finnish scholar in youth studies and others (Gough 2008; Hammer 2000; 2003; Holm & Helve 2005), have been highly influential in international youth studies. Gestur Gudmundsson opens his treatise of this corpus of material, with the bold sentence, 'For almost two decades, the Nordic countries have fostered a frontline in youth research' (2010:127). This is not an over-statement. While the origins are rooted back in the classic studies of Eriksson on identity, as indicated, there is recognition of the role of the youth cultures approach, in particular, the CCCS, or Birmingham School (p. 129). However, the Nordic model is also a critical engagement with the Neo-Marxist roots of this school. Gudmundsson states:

In the Nordic countries a new generation of scholars was eager to break away from objectivist Marxism without going back to habitual science. At this time inter-disciplinarity was already well established in the Nordic countries, sometimes organized in new university centers or university colleges and according to

fields or themes rather than disciplines, sometimes as a revolt within traditional disciplines … Through interdisciplinary networking, youth researchers from a large number of disciplines in dozens of Nordic universities were able to avoid isolation at their own institutes and at the same time bring knowledge from many fields into this new arena. On the Nordic level, the Nordic Youth Research Symposium (NYRIS) network has played the most important role in this process. (pp. 129–131)

Gudmundsson then points to three central topics or orientations, namely studies on cultural practice, through methodological tools from fields like literature, musicology and anthropology; women and youth studies; studies of youth in local communities; and lastly the place of youth in the welfare state. However, more important is the key characteristics of this model, namely the strong tradition of networking across disciplines, institutions and national borders, for participation and consultation of organisations, voluntary as well as governmental. It would be important to do more research on how youth ministry research from the Nordic countries reflects, transcends or challenges this model. However, what was important for my contribution here is merely to broadly outline the key developments and contestations, as a basis for a focus on Africa, in order to develop a theoretical framework for these everyday life (theological) reflections, especially for how theologians would reflect on these youth studies research, related to the everyday experiences of young people. Closer to my own experiences, I will then turn to African Youth Studies Research.

African youth studies

In the introduction to their book, *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, De Boeck and Honwana (2005) ask:

how can we understand children and youth in various African contexts as both makers and breakers of society, while they are simultaneously being made and broken by that society? How can we situate their lives in the present, grasp the meanings revealed in their shaping of a future, and ground both in an understanding of the past? (pp. 2–3)

Youth studies in Africa have become amongst the popular topics specifically in anthropological research (Klouwenberg & Butter 2011; Philipps 2014). This is done in dialogue with the influences, developments and debates as discussed in previous sections. This is understandable, given the social and political challenges facing children and young people, also in this context. There is however a danger of 'ideologies of youth' or an emphasis on the spectacular, because of academic funding models as well as the political-economic agendas of the interests concerned. Various scholars point to not only the ambiguous, ambivalent and perhaps paradoxical conceptualisation of young people in Africa, but also various methodological problems (Philipps 2014; Van Dijk et al 2011). Philipps explains, 'the underlying methodological problem of African youth research: as it deals with an oversized analytical category, namely, "youth", it has largely failed to disaggregate youth's diversity' (2014:2). He proposes comparison. For him, 'a comparative perspective is useful to investigate how different

contexts, be they economic, political or professional, impact young people'. The question is, how do we explain variation?

As a background towards answering this question, he refers to the upsurge in research on African youth in the 1990s. The aforementioned paradoxical conceptualisation was prominent not only in the context of decolonisation, but also the influence of global youth popular cultures and youth-related movements. He explains:

> debates about this larger picture have been framed mainly by economists, demographers and youth bulge theorists (see, e.g. Cincotta 2009; Fuller 2003; Mesquida and Weiner 1999; Urdal 2006, 2007; Urdal and Hoelscher 2009), who can at least claim to work with statistical data from multiple countries. Their hypotheses, however, tend to be de-contextualised to such a degree that there is an evident need for a more context-sensitive, yet methodologically sound and systematic theory formation.

> … the post-structuralist prosaic tone, its rejection of definitional clarity and basic academic formalities certainly come with the price of analytical disorientation and methodological deficiencies, which impair the scientific potential of African youth research. (p. 4)

Comparative studies of African youth consist of a wide spectrum of case-based comparative analyses, varying in terms of what is compared and how it is compared (Philipps 2014:5). Three approaches can be identified, namely the individualising, encompassing and variation-finding approaches. I share briefly the meaning of these approaches.

Individualising

The individualising approach works with a detailed case study that seeks to explain the distinctive outcomes in one or more cases through implicit or explicit (usually qualitative) comparison with other cases that might confirm hypotheses concerning causal processes and outcomes generated in the specific case study. Its potential lies in its sensitivity to the particular historical constitution of a given social phenomenon. Whether it is actually comparative, however, depends on its relation to other cases or theoretical debates.

Encompassing

The encompassing approach sees different cases as parts 'of overarching, systemic processes, such as capitalism or globalization'. Philips notes that Honwana's (2012) *Time of Youth* falls under this category. While acknowledging that each of the studied settings (Mozambique, Senegal, Tunisia, and South Africa) 'has specific characteristics that shape [*youth's*] predicaments and responses', Honwana's (2012:165) main point concerns the global predicament of youth; in each case, young people are stuck in a period of 'waithood', largely 'resulting from failed neoliberal economic politics, bad governance and political crises'.

Variation finding

Lastly, the variation-finding approach seeks to explain variations of certain variables, usually across few cases and

on the basis of qualitative analyses. As a key method for theory building (see Collier, Brady & Seawright 2010:10), it develops and tests hypotheses about certain phenomena by inquiring into how they relate to different contexts.

This is in so far as one can present a brief overview of current developments and contestations within the field of international youth studies. The question is how we are to reflect on it theologically, in order to present a way forward for reflections on everyday religious reflections, and connections.

Theological reflections

Meredith McGuire, who works with an understanding that religious expression is part of culture, shows that this expression is fluid and connected to everyday life experiences. While on face level, this might seems to be only relevant for the cultures approach as discussed earlier, it also relates in my view to the notions of a generational approach to research on youth. However, relating the everyday experiences to religious experiences, the notion of cultural and religious syncretism becomes relevant. She asserts that there is an agreement with Rosalind Shaw and Charles Steward that the notion of syncretism is basically 'the process by which cultures constitute themselves at any given time' (Loc. 2522). They argue that all cultural groups are fundamentally syncretistic, but not all have the same attitudes or social movements against the syncretism of others. Social scientists should therefore ask the key question, who opposes syncretistic religious beliefs and practices and why, meaning what are the political interests and social locations? Why would the labelling of cultural or religious hybridity as 'inauthentic' be an issue only for certain types of societies in certain historical periods, given the fact that it is basic to all processes of cultural formation (Loc. 2526)? She surmises that the reason for this resistance and stereotypical depiction is because it (syncretism) challenges privileged status of a particular (meaning their own) religious practice. McGuire (Loc 2526) states:

> Many scholars of religion fail to acknowledge that the boundaries separating recognised religions from those religions considered suspect – as syncretic – are themselves political, serving to privilege certain religions – including the scholars' own religion or those of their society's dominant classes and ethnic groups. (Loc. 2526)

For the moment and for the purpose of this contribution, I would argue that what one needs to affirm is that indeed today:

> [*M*]any people nowadays engage in religious or spiritual practices that have been eclectically combined from diverse, often culturally foreign sources. How then, can we understand various social processes that result in hybridity? And how can we frame the resulted blended religious expressions so that we do not forget that they too, are continuing to change, adapt, and intermix … (Loc. 2526)

These perspectives of McGuire is a key framework as she challenges dominant approaches of working within separating silos in cultural and religious formation. It sheds light on how younger people make sense of their everyday

experiences, and how they make connections, by changing, adapting and intermixing.

Theologically, therefore, Roebben (2015) makes a valuable distinction, primarily from the Western-European context, between theology for, by and with children ('*theologie van, voor en met kinderen*'), and chooses for a theology with children which makes explicit the implicit theological presuppositions of children and brings it in dialogue with more systematic insights for children (pp. 102–103). This is also relevant for a theology with younger people. While for most of professional theologians or religious professionals, theological reflection (still) happens mostly within a university, seminary, church or school settings. Yet, as we have seen, these reflections could also happen in the context of wrestling with government policies, economic realities, cultural influences and environmental realities in urban or rural contexts. It could happen on the street, or on social media. It might not always have a conscious religious language. Roebben therefore proposes correctly in my view that we should rather think of these reflections, under the broad umbrella of '*lewensbeskouwing*' ['life orientation'], and therefore '*lewensbeschoulijke vorming*' ['life orientation formation'?], instead of narrowly '*religieuze vorming*' ['religious formation'] (p. 13). His aim, in arguing for this shift, is to find a place in the education and training of religious education teachers or then, youth workers as teachers, within the context of faith – as well as non-faith. Why? Because we all, so he argues, whether in an explicit faith context, or not, struggle with the same questions. He states:

> Zowel christenen als moslims, humanisten als ietsisten, atheisten als agnosten worstelen vandaag immers met dezelfde hermenutische processen. We kunnen van elkaar leren. (p. 14)

He therefore argues for a kenotic theological perspective on *levensbeschoulijke vorming*. This means for him that if the didactic play of theologising with children and young people, and I would add, through the aforementioned intermixing with youth studies research, is played 'seriously', then theology (in church and academy) will not be able to continue to direct orders from a storm-free zone, but they themselves will be changed in appearance. Thus theology will, in a new and creative manner, work interdisciplinary and be open to the impulses from elsewhere – the world of the arts, literature, sports, science, etc. (p. 107). Not learned faith, but lived faith '*niet het geleerde geloof staat voorop (fides quae), maar het geleefde geloof (fides qua), dat zich in alle kwetsbaarheid moet waarmaken in het level van elke dag* (p. 109) [Not learned faith is the priority, but lived faith – which they must make a reality in vulnerability in everyday living].

This shift challenges theologians and religious practitioners to cross the borders across disciplines as we aim at understanding the everyday worlds of all the young people. I agree with the challenge by Woodman and Wyn that youth studies research should not only be focused on a narrow transition from essentialised notions of childhood to adulthood, or reduced to political-economic categories. That is the danger, especially where revised and improved government policy is the only desired output. Youth research should prioritise the everyday life experiences, the biographies of young people, as they negotiate, make connections, change, adapt and intermix, as they attempt to find meaning in the context of social change and structures. Theologically, this is the process of discerning their vocation, their mission in life. What are the implications of this serious play?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would point to at least three possibilities for youth ministry research in general.

Firstly, youth ministry research (again) will start with the affirmation that children and young people's stories (biographies) are a process of fluid sense-making. This might be seen as syncretism or hybridity, yet it stems theologically from the deep kenotic theological perspective. Theoretical categories emerge from this serious play, but it comes afterwards and the connections between subcultural symbolism and everyday life will continue to constantly challenge these categories.

Secondly, (theological) meaning-making in everyday situations is rooted not only in connecting, but also in personal agency and taking responsibility. The agency-structure debate, within youth studies, remains critical; however, it needs to be rooted in the personal agency.

Lastly, as theologians, we need to hold onto our categories with soft hands. As Dawid Bosch reminds us, our theological efforts remain human efforts; they can never be done with and therefore 'every branch of theology … remains piecework, fragile, and preliminary' (1991:498). It requires soft hands.

In working with young people, whether in government youth work, in the context of activism, group work, religious or life formation, policy framework development or research, we are indeed changing, adapting, intermixing or, as young people would have it, remixing new sounds, images, etc. – it is done in hope. Indeed, it is already making connections, everywhere.

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Competing interests

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