

Disconnected Youth?

Young people, transitions & social exclusion

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Aims

- **Not** a paper about the majority of UK youth who make 'successful' (if extended/ complicated) transitions from school
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General aim is to research youth:

- Holistically
 - Longitudinally
 - Qualitatively
 - To question common representations, theories, policies, practices
 - From the basis of 'close-up' research with young people 'at the sharp end' of socio-economic change
 - Connecting 'personal troubles' of individual biography with 'public issues of social structure' (CW Mills, 1959)
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Teesside, North East England: 'one of the most de-industrialised locales in the UK' (Byrne, 1999)

Middlesbrough - most concentrated poverty in England

Research in wards - all top 5% most deprived nationally

2 wards in worst 5 - from 8,414 - in England in 2000

Multiple deprivation

Youth, 'the underclass' & social exclusion

- **Middlesbrough**, in Teesside, identified as prime 'new rabble underclass' locale (Murray, 1994)
 - Are these young adults '**socially excluded**'? If so, *how, why & what* does this mean?
 - Are they **disconnected** from the social, economic & moral mainstream?
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- Qualitative studies of youth transitions & ‘social exclusion’ (fieldwork 1998-2003) in some of poorest neighbourhoods in England
- The place, people, methods most likely to reveal ‘the underclass’/ ‘social exclusion’...
- Biographical interviews; 186 white, working-class, young people & young adults, 15-25/ 30 years
- ‘Participant observation’ & ‘stake-holder’ interviews

Understanding youth transitions

- The outcome of individual agency, local sub/culture & social structural constraint
 - Focus on the interplay of:
 - **'school-to-work'** (e.g. training, jobs, unempl.)
 - **family** (e.g. becoming a parent, partnerships)
 - **housing** (e.g. leaving home, independent living)
 - **leisure** (e.g. peer associations, identities)
 - **criminal** (e.g. offending, desistance)
 - **drug-using careers** (e.g. rec. to dependent use)
 - Cross-case and within-case longitudinal, 'life-grid' analysis
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Findings: After school...

- Disaffected/ disappointed school experience
(cf: Willis 1977 *Learning to Labour*)
 - Leaving school at 16 with low qualifications for...
 - ❑ low status, low quality, training & educational courses (often unfinished)
 - ❑ low/ no skill, poorly paid manual or service sector jobs, or
 - ❑ 'Not in Education Employment Training' (NEET)
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Post-16 labour market careers

- Unemployment a common & recurrent experience for all
 - ...but so was employment
 - Post-school transitions: *unstable, insecure, non-progressive, cyclical*
 - School-youth training-unemployment-job-unemployment-job-FE course-unemployment-New Deal-unemployment-job-unemployment-New Deal, etc.
 - Not labour market *exclusion* but churning, economic *marginality*
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On not being a 'dole wallah'

- Virtually no positive comments about being unemployed/ on welfare
- Strong working-class views about self-reliance, hard work & family respectability
- Moral/ cultural commitment to work drove post-school choices & transitions (& abandonment of other post-school 'options')
- Murad also finds this same class-based '**work ethic & enthusiasm for work**' amongst excluded groups in continental Europe: '**its persistence in current times [is] remarkable**' (2002: 98).

...despite the 'poor work' they got

- Low paid & low/ no skilled & insecure
factory workers, bar/ fast food staff, care assistants, security guards, labourers, shop assistants
 - Easily *hired* into, & *fired* from, the abundant 'poor work' at the bottom of the labour market
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Longer-term poor transitions

‘Low pay is fair enough if these jobs can be labelled ‘entry level’, just a first step on the ladder...but very few move far, few make it to the next step. They inhabit a cycle of no pay/ low pay insecurity. This indeed is the end of social progress’

Polly Toynbee *Hard Work*, 2003

- For our interviewees, same ‘poor work’ at 17 & 27 years, entrapping young adults in lasting economic marginality & poverty [& at 37? 47? – new study]
 - Downward social mobility, compared with their fathers & grandfathers (from skilled, ‘labour aristocracy’)
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Marginality & 'poor work': the role of social capital

- Objective, multiple deprivation but 'living here is brilliant' (Martin, 20)?
 - Localised 'bonding social capital' (with family & friends) made life liveable in hard times/ places
 - e.g. informal child care, loans of money, protection from criminal victimisation, reparation after crime, job search, leisure life, emotional support, etc.
 - A classed, 'traditional' way of life (in 'de-traditionalised' circumstances)
 - Strong, subjective sense of social *inclusion* & of 'normality' of unusual hardship
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Staying in place (socially/ geographically)

- Informal, word-of-mouth, job-search relied on for employment ...but restricted young people to the same 'poor work' done by those they knew
 - 'the value of informal networks militates against mobility. Networks, whether based on the family or friends, depend on people's roots in a locality: they take time to establish' (Kelvin and Jarrett, 1985: 30).
 - 'You're, like, friendly with everybody round the area and when you go away it'll take time, won't it?' (Broderick, 18).
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The power of social networks

- Social networks locally embedded, culturally uniform & narrow
 - Increasingly so, as years passed
 - Young mothers socialised with other young mothers
 - The unemployed/ 'poor workers' only knew others like them
 - 'Heavy end' drug users/ offenders moved with the same
 - Loyalties, allegiances, associations & friendships reinforced transition pathways, narrative possibilities & social identities
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The marginal transitions equation

old, class-based, normative values & practices in
respect of 'real work'

+

massive, locally concentrated de-industrialisation

+

continued abundance of 'poor work'

+

poor quality 'welfare to work' programmes

=

'poor transitions' of poverty/ economic marginality &
intergenerational, downward social mobility

Conclusions: 'personal troubles of individual biography'...

- Interplay of multiple hardships, 'critical moments' & individual agency generated complicated, unpredictable & *differentiated* biographies (under common socio-economic conditions)
 - **But great uniformity in labour market 'careers': shared, lasting poverty & marginality**
 - Not explicable at individual, biographical level
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Conclusions: ...and 'public issues of social structure'

- *What has happened here?*
 - Teesside, these neighbourhoods in particular, built *for* industry & industrial workers & families
 - Global capital used Teesside as 'a (temporary) space for profitable production' ...
 - But people 'become profoundly attached to particular places, which come to have socially endowed & shared meanings which touch on all aspects of their lives, helping shape *who* they are by virtue of *where* they are' (Beynon et al, 1994:5).
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Conclusions: biography & social structure

- Interviewees born on the cusp/ in the depths of accelerated global-local economic change (between 1974 & mid-80s)
- De-industrialising their neighbourhoods, & shifting social structural crises onto individual life histories
- Old working-class practices & subjective *inclusion* make life liveable under new conditions of exclusion & insecurity
- Paradoxically, they also limit possibilities for escaping these conditions, entrapping young adults in persistent poor work & economic marginality

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