

# Biographies of Exclusion: Poor Work & Poor Transitions

**Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald**

**Youth Research Group  
School of Social Sciences and Law  
University of Teesside  
Middlesbrough  
UK TS1 3BA  
Email: [T.A.Shildrick@tees.ac.uk](mailto:T.A.Shildrick@tees.ac.uk)**

## **Biographical information**

Dr. Tracy Shildrick is Convenor of the Youth Research Group and Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Youth Studies at Teesside. Her doctorate explored the interrelationships between youth culture, youth transitions and illicit drug use. She has a long-standing interest in debates about young people and social class and has published several articles on these themes as well as co-authoring *Poor Transitions* (Policy Press, 2004). She is co-editor of *Drugs in Britain: Supply, Consumption and Control* (Palgrave, 2006).

Robert MacDonald is Professor of Sociology at the University of Teesside. His research interests lie in the sociology of youth and of economic life. His publications include *Youth, the 'Underclass' and Social Exclusion* (as editor), *Snakes and Ladders: Young People, Transitions and Social Exclusion* and *Poor Transitions* (both as co-author). With Jane Marsh, he wrote *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (Palgrave, 2005).

## *Biographies of Exclusion: Poor Work & Poor Transitions*

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### **Abstract**

The usefulness of the concept of transition has been hotly contested in Anglophone youth studies over the past decade. A variety of criticisms have been ranged against it, including that it; presumes the continuing predominance of linear, obvious, mainstream pathways to adulthood; excludes wider youth questions in focusing narrowly on educational and employment encounters; prioritises normative and policy-focused assumptions and de-prioritises the actual lived experiences of young people; is no longer a tenable concept, given the extension of youth phase and the blurring of it and 'adulthood' as distinct life-phases.

Drawing upon qualitative, longitudinal studies with 'socially excluded' young adults, this paper contends with these arguments. The research participants were 186 'hard to reach' young women and men who were growing up in some of England's poorest neighbourhoods, some of whom were followed into their mid to late twenties. The studies *confirmed* many of the specific criticisms lodged against the idea of transition. Interviewees' lives post-school were marked by unpredictability, flux and insecurity. Engagement with post-16 education and training courses was common, despite widespread disaffection from school pre-16. Typically, these later learning encounters were short-lived, negatively assessed and un-related to labour market fortunes. Economic marginality and recurrent unemployment were uniform experiences. 'Hyper-conventional', class cultural orientations to employment drove post-school transitions, even when these motivations resulted only in low paid, low skill, insecure 'poor work'.

In conclusion, we re-affirm the value of a broad and long view of youth transitions, situated in a panorama of socio-economic change. We argue that this sort of conceptualisation of transition is crucial to understanding the twists and turns of individual biographies and the coming together of these in socially structured patterns of inclusion, exclusion and inequality.

## **Biographies of Exclusion: Poor Work & Poor Transitions**

### **INTRODUCTION: THE END OF ‘TRANSITION’?**

In simple terms youth transitions can be understood as the pathways that young people make as they leave school and encounter different labour market, housing and family situations as they progress towards adulthood. As elsewhere in social science, the relative influence of individual agency and social structural constraint have been much debated, as has the most apposite term to describe this process (Roberts, 1997). ‘Transitions’, ‘trajectories’, ‘pathways’, ‘routes’, ‘journeys’ and ‘navigations’ find favour with different authors, with versions that suggest greater degrees of individual agency becoming more prominent since the latter 1990s (see Evans and Furlong, 1997; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1999; Cieslik and Pollock, 2002).

Few disagree, however, with the general argument that the nature of youth transitions in the UK has altered radically over the past thirty years. Of primary interest to youth sociologists, particularly during the 1980s and early 1990s, has been the economic aspect of transition: the ‘school-to-work’ career. Numerous studies have plotted out how young people - differentiated by social class, gender, ethnicity, locality and education - follow different paths during the late teenage years as they leave school and enter the labour market (see Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). All stress how school-to-work careers have been transformed over thirty years by a series of inter-related social and economic developments (Roberts, 1995; Mizen, 2003). These include: the virtual collapse of the youth labour market and the sharp decline in the supply of jobs and skill apprenticeships; persistent, regionally-concentrated, structural unemployment; the introduction of widespread youth training provision and employment preparation programmes; welfare ‘reforms’ that have reduced young people’s entitlement to benefits; and the expansion of opportunities in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) for young people who might previously have been unlikely to continue in post-compulsory education.

To describe the consequences of these changes, sociologists have appended a variety of adjectives to the concept. Transitions are ‘long’, ‘broken’, ‘extended’, ‘protracted’, ‘uneasy’ and ‘fractured’. Young people now experience longer periods of dependency upon parents and have delayed access to the identities and activities which were

previously regarded as signifying adult status (e.g. earning a wage, leaving the parental home, the establishment of long-term partnerships, parenthood). Additionally, such status passages may be 'de-coupled' in that the achievement of one (such as parenting) is no longer dependent upon the other (e.g. the getting of steady employment) (Jones, 2002). Youth transitions in the UK are beginning to emulate more closely transitions in parts of continental Europe and the US with, increasingly, British youth also 'enjoying' a 'post-adolescent' life-phase, free from the traditional demands of adulthood (Jones and Wallace, 1992). The American developmental psychologist, Jeffrey Arnett (2006), claims to have invented a new theory and term to capture this development: 'emerging adulthood' (see Bynner, 2005, for a critical discussion).

Partly (but only partly) as a result of these empirical changes, the very *concept* of transition has come under attack. Criticisms have been multiple and strong. Jeffs and Smith (1998: 53) give one of the liveliest condemnations:

the concept of transition to adulthood has been fast fading in Northern countries...In order to keep it alive the notion has undergone constant revision. We have been asked to use the concept of transition in an array of re-constituted forms...[which] have been paraded before an increasingly confused, dare we say irritated audience. What they each share is a desperation to hold fast to notions of an imagined mainstream in which the majority of young people neatly go forward in a unidirectional way towards some magic moment when adulthood is conferred. As such they are aligned to a predominantly economic view which, particularly for young men, sees full-time employment as pivotal signifier of adulthood.

For them, 'it is increasingly difficult to approach "youth" as a meaningful way of categorizing a set of experiences or qualities' (p. 50). Because 'youth', like 'adulthood', has become less distinct – and the passage between them less obvious – the concept of transition to adulthood now holds little value, they argue. A common complaint, also noted by Jeffs and Smith, is the over-emphasis on economic (i.e. 'school to work') transitions. Cohen and Ainley (2000: 80) lambaste what they perceive as the 'narrowly restricted' economicism of a 'series of repetitive and redundant...transitions studies'. Miles (2000:10) bemoans the 'bland discussions' that result. More specifically, several

writers have echoed the argument that such research wrongly assumes the continued existence of a neat, unidirectional, mainstream transition (Coles, 2000; Fergusson et al, 2000). According to Cohen and Ainley (2000: 83), ‘young people simply do not view work and study in the linear sequential way implied...images about “pathways” and linear transitions from school via further study and then into the world of work and an independent adult way of life do not reflect the actual experience of growing up’.

Not only is the focus of research too narrow, but it is also said that transitions studies marginalise young people’s own accounts of growing up and their active, cultural role in that process. Miles suggests that ‘dry’, quantitative, empiricist and policy-driven mappings of school-to-work transitions have taken precedence over more ‘lively’, ethnographic and theoretically-driven studies of youth cultural identities. He says (2000:10):

The tendency...to adopt a structural perspective on transitions has been counter-productive, primarily because of its failure to prioritize the actual views, experiences, interests and perspectives of young people as they see them...//...[T]he most damaging problem with the ‘transitions debate’ is that it has tended to take young people out of the youth equation...treat[ing] young people as troubled victims of economic and social restructuring without enough recourse to the active ways in which young people negotiate such circumstances in the course of their every day lives.

In a similar vein and more recently, Barry asserts that the ‘model of transition rarely incorporates the lived reality for disadvantaged young people’ (2005: 108). We will give our verdict on these criticisms in conclusion, having first reported our own research; research that *did* seek to provide what Barry says is missing.

## RESEARCHING YOUTH TRANSITIONS AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION: THE TEESSIDE STUDIES

Since the 1990s – with colleagues<sup>1</sup> – we have undertaken extensive research into the life transitions of young adults from some of Britain’s poorest neighbourhoods; in Teesside, North East England. This is a conurbation that has undergone remarkably speedy economic change. Famous for its industrial prowess and economic success in steel, chemical and heavy engineering industries in the post-war, Fordist period of full-employment, by the end of the century it had become ‘one of the most in de-industrialised locales in the UK’ (Byrne, 1999: 93).

Our first two studies - *Snakes and Ladders* (Johnston et al, 2000) and *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain’s Poor Neighbourhoods* (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) – conducted fieldwork between 1998 and 2001. They investigated youth transitions in a context of severe socio-economic deprivation. We undertook research in Teesside wards that were in the top five per cent most deprived nationally, with some ranked amongst the five most deprived wards (from 8,414) in the country (DETR, 2000). Both studies involved periods of participant observation with young people and interviews with professionals who worked with young people or the problems of poor neighbourhoods (e.g. Youth Workers, Benefits Agency staff, New Deal Personal Advisors). At their core, though, they relied on lengthy, detailed, tape-recorded, biographical interviews (Chamberlayne et al, 2002) with 186 young people (82 females and 104 males) aged 15 to 25 years from the predominantly white, (ex)manual working-class population resident here. Our third project, *Poor Transitions* (Webster et al, 2004), sought to follow the fortunes of a proportion of the earlier sample (34 people from 186, 18 females and 16 males) as they reached their mid-to-late twenties, in 2003. In each study, sample recruitment was purposive and theoretically oriented toward capturing as diverse a set of experiences of transition as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Mason, Jane Marsh, Donald Simpson, Les Johnston, Mark Simpson, Colin Webster, Andrea Abbas, Mark Cieslik and Louise Ridley participated, at different points, in this research. We are indebted to them, to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) for their support and to all the participants in their study. Georgious Antonopolous kindly commented on a draft of the paper. All real names of informants and their immediate neighbourhoods have been changed.

We draw here upon the researched completed for all three projects. In doing so, we present research that we feel is relatively unusual in contemporary social science in Britain. Not only are the nearly two hundred young adults who took part often described as ‘hard to reach’ (Merton, 1998), the longitudinal, qualitative perspective enabled by the three studies provides for a rare, close-up insight into the ways those people at the sharp end live through conditions of social exclusion.

### **POOR TRANSITIONS: IN SCHOOL AND AFTER**

There is a temptation in social research – perhaps especially in youth studies – to emphasise social *change*, with observed patterns of youth transition or lifestyle often proclaimed as evidence of wider societal developments; the coming of the new (Griffin, 1993). Social *continuity* rarely makes as compelling headlines. Yet, we found much in respect of working-class young adults’ encounters with education, training and employment that was depressingly reminiscent of previous decades.

### **Schooling for ‘the lower classes’: plus ça change...**

In brief and broad terms, interviews underlined how long-standing processes of working-class educational ‘underachievement’ maintain (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). This is despite enormous changes in the organisation of schooling - and in the post-school labour market – that might have been expected to alter these processes, or at least how we explain them. So, for instance, Willis’s classic *Learning to Labour* (1977) might rightly be criticised for presenting an overly simplistic theorisation of the range of educational orientations possible amongst working-class youth (see Brown, 1987). Nevertheless, his ethnographic description of school disaffection still captured nicely the experience of many of our participants. This is particularly interesting given the restructuring of the youth labour market that has occurred in the decades between his and our studies.

Willis stressed the cultural correspondence between working-class experience of school and of post-school factory life. Traditional, class and gender-segregated employment ‘lured’ working-class lads into working-class jobs, capturing their acculturated predilection for ‘real work’ for ‘real men’. The decline in these forms of employment in the 1980s and ‘90s led commentators to predict the disappearance of the ‘cocksure

attitude to job prospects of the lads of Willis's study' (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000: 45). Yet we found extraordinarily similar depictions of school experience in a place where easy progress to working-class jobs, of the sort traditional to Teesside, has all but disappeared. Thus, interviewees described: 'not being bothered with' by schools more focused on those closer to A-C grades at GCSE; poor quality provision for 'us in the lower classes'; their own rejection of the relevance and rationale of education (particularly the meritocratic claim that better qualifications meant better job prospects); and how powerful peer groups disrupted educational practices.

Later we describe how this familiar form of working-class school disengagement can persist in changed economic circumstances. For now, we note the very low level of educational qualifications achieved by interviewees as they reached 16 and minimum school-leaving age. In 2000, nearly 50 per cent of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs graded A-C nation-wide (this is a common but contested measure of educational success for 16-year-olds; Ball, 2003). In that year, the 'best' school in one of our research sites recorded a figure of 20 per cent with the 'worst' showing only four per cent reaching these grades (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005).

### **Leaving school**

Young people in these Teesside neighbourhoods were no different from those in other parts of the UK in that their *immediate* post-school transitions were comprised predominantly of training and educational courses. In 1974, when Willis's 'lads' were getting working-class jobs (Willis, 1977), their counterparts in Teesside were doing the same with, overall, 54 per cent of sixteen year olds moving straight into employment. By the end of the 1990s, this figure had shrunk to 6 per cent. For working-class school leavers, however, vocationally-oriented training and educational courses are particularly important. For virtually all our interviewees, A-levels - the more academic post-16 route historically typical of middle-class youth transitions - fell outside their radar screen of possibilities. Not only were they not educationally qualified for such next steps, they did not wish to take them.



Interviewees' answers about what they (had) hoped to do after school were reflective of well-known patterns of class and gender differentiation. Preferred options were stubbornly bound to their perceptions of appropriate choices for working-class young women and men: jobs or training in hairdressing, catering, cleaning, childcare and secretarial work for women; construction, mechanics, scaffolding or soldiering for young men (Howieson, 2003). The interviewees gave the same sort of answers as their predecessors in youth studies from the 1980s and before (e.g. Griffin, 1985; Cockburn, 1987)<sup>2</sup>. Social networks of peers and kin were powerful in shaping the way young people perceived and acted upon the choices open to them (MacDonald et al, 2005). Informal, collective knowledge about the right way of becoming and being a working-class young adult did much to govern the shape of school-to-work careers. These young people were embedded in a relatively stable, mono-cultural, working-class community and their reaction to the 'options' presented to them were, at least in part, steered by the values and traditions of the place. The channelling of young people towards work sharply defined as 'masculine' or 'feminine' reflects one aspect of this cultural inheritance.

### **Post-16 education: reluctant recruits?**

This research uncovered many instances of the lasting, negative impact of schooling upon attitudes to education. As Ball et al describe (2000: 8): 'many of those outside of education and training post-16, the "others" to the "learning society", carry with them learner identities often severely damaged by their experiences in compulsory education. More learning is the last thing they are interested in'. Or as Clare, a recent school leaver put it, 'I don't fancy it, I just think I've had enough of school'.

Nevertheless, not all dispensed with formal education for good at the age of 16. Our biographical, retrospective interviews revealed how some of those with the grimmest memories of school *re-engaged* with formal learning later. A significant minority went on to access *some* form of post-16 education<sup>3</sup>. Thus, learner identities were not set in stone. Virtual abandonment of formal schooling at the ages of 12 did *not* predict unequivocally

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<sup>2</sup> These occupational choices appear to be more narrowly confined than the employment horizons envisaged in other recent studies (e.g. Ball et al, 2000). This can be explained in part by the differences in the 'structures of opportunity' facing school-leavers in London (in Ball et al's study) and Teesside; with the former possessing a greater range and mix of post-16, employment-related opportunities than this smaller, working-class town.

educational disengagement at 15. Equally, early instrumental orientations to school could be superseded by later, full-blown alienation.

Episodic engagement with post-16 education was indicative of interviewees' stuttering post-16 transitions. Far more courses were started than were completed. Enrolment on a programme did not necessarily reflect strong commitment to that programme. The relationship between post-16 formal learning (i.e. whether it was accessed at all and the type of courses undertaken and qualifications gained) and later 'outcomes' was weak at best<sup>4</sup>. This partly reflects the disturbing fact that lower level vocational qualifications – that is, the sort to which under-qualified, working-class school-leavers are usually encouraged – generally have insignificant and sometimes *negative* effects on labour market fortunes (Adams, 2006). Nevertheless, exactly this sort of practically-oriented education was that most appreciated by informants: 'I'm doing all practical work here, so I'm actually doing summat, not just doing write-ups about things' (Susan, 22). Sometimes even applied, vocational courses seemed too abstract and distant from the 'real' world of work, leading students to abandon courses in favour of jobs or training schemes.

Although cultural factors shaped post-16 educational decisions, the impact of personal and household poverty should not be understated. Financial reasons were given by several people for not staying on in education or for dropping out later<sup>5</sup>:

I thought at the time, getting a wage [in fact, a youth training allowance], which was only £30 a week, was better than going to college and getting nothing...If I could go back now, I think I would've went to college (Martin, 20, office worker).

No, I don't wanna go to college. Me Mam wants me to do a drama course, but I love where I am. I know it's a rubbish wage but I enjoy what I'm doing. I enjoy getting my weekly wage and being able to go out drinking and buying clothes on a Friday after I've been paid. If I lost that, I'd be lost (Alison, 18, factory worker).

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<sup>3</sup> Including the re-taking of GCSE qualifications, vocationally-oriented college courses, short, skills-oriented courses delivered in community settings (e.g. in first aid, basic computing) and, for a handful, undergraduate university courses.

<sup>4</sup> With the important exception being the handful whose post-16 studies led later to university enrolment.

Financial reasons were also a small part of the explanation for why some did not consider university. Frankly, going to university was regarded as such a remote prospect (by most) that financial calculations rarely came to the fore. A more prominent barrier was the deeply felt, widely held view that university was not for people like them. Some participants who did proceed into further or higher education felt culturally out of place (see Forsyth and Furlong, 2000, 2003). Tara (22) explains why she dropped out of college in favour of a hairdressing training scheme:

I had all these big plans so I went to Ackthorpe College to do my A levels and hated every minute of it! What I found [laughing] was that St. Claire's [her previous secondary school] wasn't that great a school compared to the schools these other people had gone to. They'd all read Shakespeare and I'd never read a Shakespeare book in my life! I managed through a year, just! I sat, like, a mock exam half way, and my results were that lousy I said 'Oh, I've got no chance'. So that was the end of that, really.

### **Youth training**

More common a first (and later) destination than post-16 education was youth training. Compared with the high unemployment years of the 1980s and 90s, at national level far fewer school-leavers now access government-sponsored training schemes (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). In Teesside in the late '90s, however, this still provided a quantitatively significant first step for under-qualified young people. More than half of our informants had participated in such schemes.

Again typical of studies from the 1980s and '90s (e.g. Finn, 1987; Hollands, 1990), interviewees described how work placements operated with a 'revolving door' whereby employers had a steady stream of low skilled but cheap, malleable labour (and trainees had a steady stream of fruitless placements). 'Working-class trainees with few qualifications' often get 'trained in contexts where the chance of employment are virtually nil' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 32).

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<sup>5</sup> This problem explains the introduction of the means-tested Educational Maintenance Allowance for those who continue in post-16 education (Maguire et al, 2001). It aims to make further education possible for those who would otherwise be attracted to the income granted by employment or youth training.

Youth training was commonly described as ‘boring’ and ‘a waste of time’. Mandy (18, unemployed) said she ‘hated it. It took so long. It could have been done in six months. Training was crap. Placements were crap. Making cups of tea and stuff. Not proper admin work’. Because training was perceived as poor quality, many interviewees switched between schemes or abandoned them altogether<sup>6</sup>. More significant still, in explaining trainees’ apparently weak attachment to these schemes was the general view that they were unlikely to help in getting a job. Only a handful later found jobs that related to their training, work placements or newly acquired qualifications. For instance, after training as a sales assistant, Malcolm took a job with a roofing company: ‘at the end of the day I wanted a job, I wasn’t bothered what job it was, as long as I could do it’.

Youth training was a ‘second best’ option for those unable or unwilling to continue in education, often uncertain about exactly what sort of employment they desired but sure that a job of some sort was the primary goal in the short and longer term. Youth training - designed to inculcate ‘employability’ through quality skills training – became in practice a holding pen periodically entered and left by young people as they weighed up the possibilities of their immediate post-school years. Because informants knew it provided little labour market dividend (Furlong, 1992), schemes were swapped for what appeared, at that moment, better options: college courses, jobs or other schemes.

### **The New Deal for Young People**

None of the interviewees entered *stable* employment after transiting through immediate post-16 training and/ or educational courses. Episodic employment and unemployment became the norm with the next ‘official’ stop-off point in their labour market transitions sometimes being the New Deal for Young People programme (NDYP; for a fuller description of this government programme see Kemp, 2005).

Overall, NDYP fared better in informants’ descriptions than did youth training schemes for school-leavers. Some spoke very positively about the programme. That recruits received guidance and support tailored to their specific needs was a point of compliment.

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<sup>6</sup> A few individuals acknowledged that their own lack of perseverance or career uncertainty accounted for them ‘dropping out’. Pregnancy, illness, and sexual harassment from a placement employer were examples of reasons also given.

The dedication and support of the programme's personal advisors was another (Millar, 2000). Fox, 19, gave one of the most up-beat assessments:

Fox: I decided I had to do it. I wanted to do it.

RM: So you weren't too bothered?

Fox: I'd spent too much time on the dole and I realised, 'I've got a chance to do something here'.

RM: In your case, the New Deal was a positive intervention?

Fox: It was. It was very positive. I'm enjoying it...//...It's nice to be here. It's nice to have the option. Makes me feel that I'm going somewhere.

Others were less sanguine about NDYP, with several people resenting the compulsive character of the programme: Some actively avoided 'invitations' to participate, worrying that it might lead to short-term, 'skivvy' work placements rather than secure employment (Kalra, et al 2001; Gunter, 2004). Curtis (21), for instance, had been claiming benefits and doing casual, illicit 'fiddly work' at Kelby docks when he 'got put on New Deal'. The reason he was 'gutted' was because, he insisted, engagement in this sort of cash-in-hand work and the social networks that distributed it was far more likely than NDYP to lead to a 'proper job' (a viewpoint that has some legitimacy, see MacDonald, 1994).

Where interviewees were sceptical about the value of the programme this was not conjured out of thin air but rooted in their practical experience of restricted school-to-work careers, particularly of youth training. Many NDYP participants faced the same 'choices' previously encountered under youth training – care, business administration, painting and decorating and so on – sometimes offered, a few years down the line, at the very same training agencies. For example, Peter completed a joinery youth training scheme then spent three years largely unemployed before entering NDYP. By the age of 23, Peter had added two New Deal placements in building maintenance and kitchen fitting to his CV but returned again to the dole queue.

Experiences like these conjure up a 'nightmare vision of the learning society: Excluded groups confined to segregated settings undergoing continuous training as a form of warehousing' (Riddell et al, 1999, cited in Coffield, 2000: 30). When it was first introduced, the Employment Service in Teesside declared that the 'New Deal must not

become a revolving door to unemployment' (Employment Service, 1997: 46). It would seem, however, that the young and disadvantaged now face a *series* of revolving doors; unstable, non-progressive youth transitions in which chronologically arranged, government labour market programmes are central components.

In a similar vein, Byrne (1999) argues that welfare to work programmes have not solved but *added* to the problems of social exclusion for young adults. Although our method disallows accurate evaluation, this did *seem* to be true for our interviewees<sup>7</sup>. Regardless of debates about the contribution of NDYP to reducing overall unemployment (e.g. National Audit Office, 2002; Mizen, 2003; Kemp, 2005), national statistics can mask continuing problems at local level. Moving people 'from welfare to work' is easier in buoyant local economies than in those with persistent unemployment. It will be most successful where it is least needed. Wicks reports that 'six months after leaving the New Deal for a job, as few as ten per cent of people are still employed in the least advantaged areas' (2004: 51). This statistic points up the dangers of equating the 'success' of NDYP with a simple, static measure of post-programme employment (a few months later). This not only disregards questions about the quality of the employment entered (e.g. in terms of pay and skill level) but also nature of the labour market careers of the most disadvantaged who displayed rapid movement into *and* out of jobs.

### **Finding and doing 'poor work'**

Overwhelmingly – and reflecting historical class practice (Marsden and Duff, 1975) - interviewees found informal job-search strategies to be most effective (Morris, 1995). Social networks for information, advice and recommendation were crucial in getting work. Friends, neighbours and family members were the key players that helped secure jobs: 'there's this part-time job at the turkey factory. They're looking for people. I've asked this lad – cos his uncle works there – to see if they want any more' (Lindsay, 17, youth trainee).

In comparison, the official methods encouraged by employment services and programmes were seen as wholly ineffective. These include the sending of speculative application letters to local employers, regardless of whether they were currently

advertising vacancies. No-one reported receiving a job offer as a result, despite them having fired off, collectively, several thousand letters. Even rejection letters were rare. Adam (21) was just one of those frustrated by the lack of opportunity to prove his worth: 'it's just what's on that piece of paper [the application form] and they look at it and they say "do we want him or don't we want him?" That piece of paper holds me back'. For some, this pattern of 'sending stuff all the time and not hearing' (Leo, 22) became a demotivating series of personal knock-backs.

The sort of jobs our informants *did* access - in the lower reaches of the service industries and factory production - were not confined to school leavers. These were also the sort of jobs their parents now did, when they worked. Many reported that, even if their fathers (or, in a few cases, mothers) had previously had standard employment in traditional industries, they were now similarly economically marginal: working on short-term contracts, in under-skilled jobs, unemployed, 'retired', 'on the sick' or otherwise economically inactive<sup>8</sup>. There was no indication that young adults worked their way through low level employment to higher positions. This was a key finding of our *Poor Transitions* follow up study. Informants did the same sort of jobs at 17 and 27 years. In this context, getting a job that paid £4.50, rather than £3.50 an hour, was counted as a good outcome and potential jobs in call centres or as bus drivers were regarded as a step up. They did insecure 'poor work' (Brown and Scase, 1991), often for seemingly punitive employers who, according to these accounts, were as quick to fire as they were to hire willing workers<sup>9</sup>. Furlong and Cartmel's (2004: 27) study of the longer-term economic fortunes of disadvantaged young men in Scotland found exactly the same thing:

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<sup>7</sup> Whilst a few interviewees undoubtedly did benefit (in terms of accessing later employment), several participants were on their second round of New Deal.

<sup>8</sup> Historically, employment in Teesside has been highly gendered (Beynon et al, 1994) reflecting its industrial heritage. Women's employment has been less extensive, lower paid, lower skilled. Increasing service sector work has meant greater rates of female employment but much of this – and the remaining factory-based production - is insecure and low paid (*ibid*). In our studies, there was little gender difference in overall experience of jobs (bar their gender segregation). Elsewhere we examine how gender differentiated other aspects of transition (such as parenthood) and experiences of social exclusion (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Many informants referred vaguely and inaccurately to 'redundancy' as the reason why they were no longer in a particular job. We also heard many instances of what seemed like unfair dismissal (e.g. for missing one day's work because of sicknesses, for becoming pregnant, so that the relative of an employer could take the job). Interviewees recounted these tales with the weary tone of the 'taken for granted'. 'Unfair dismissal' and 'exploitation' were our terms, not theirs.

Their main problem was not finding work, but keeping it. This employment insecurity tended not to reflect negative attitudes on the part of the young men or necessarily a lack of skills; it was almost entirely a consequence of the ‘flexible’ nature of low-skilled employment in modern Britain.

We are not, then, describing the details of a separate *youth* labour market (Ashton and Maguire, 1986) but a secondary labour market (Beynon, 1997), marked by pervasive unemployment and underemployment, to which many working-class people are now confined, regardless of age:

Low pay is also a fair enough if these jobs can be labelled ‘entry-level’, just a first step on a ladder. But it is now clear that very few of those in low-paid jobs can ever move far...//...few make it to the next step. They inhabit a cycle of no-pay/ low-pay job insecurity. This indeed is the end of social progress (Toynbee, 2003: 5-6).

Byrne argues persuasively that ‘what is absolutely missing’ from many accounts of the socially excluded is ‘the significance of the combination of low wages, insecure employment and dependence on means tested benefits supplements to low incomes...//...poor work is the big story’ (1999: 69). Our studies help include what Byrne says is missing and resonate with his theoretical explanation (that is, one that prioritises changes in the nature of post-industrial capitalism in understanding exclusion). That the majority of young adults stuck with this sort of working life is evidence of their negative assessment of other possibilities (youth training, NDYP, further education), the dearth of more rewarding jobs for the under-qualified and a *hyper-conventional* assessment of work, even ‘poor work’, that was the driving force behind most youth transitions. Murad found this same class-based ‘work ethic and enthusiasm for work’ amongst excluded groups in continental Europe, describing its ‘persistence in current times’ as ‘remarkable’ (2002: 98).



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, virtually all informants displayed longer-term work histories that consisted of various combinations of: often low-quality, government training and employability schemes; usually unfinished, lower level educational courses; low skill, low paid, insecure employment; and recurrent periods of unemployment. Transitions carried little sense of forward motion toward more secure, rewarding employment. Rather, flux, inconstancy and ‘multiple relocations’ (Fergusson et al, 2000) around the post-16 market place of courses, schemes and jobs were the norm. It is understandable that Meagre (2001) has clutched at chaos theory in characterising the post-school transitions of disadvantaged young people. Quite against the grain of some contemporary academic and policy analyses, and in order to comprehend this pattern of transition, we argue that a strong, ‘old-fashioned’ preference for employment motivated most transitions. This remained the case even when what young adults encountered was not the sort of skilled, ‘decent’ work traditional to their place and class but abundant, insecure, poor work.

To conclude, what can we say about the usefulness of the concept of transition from this depiction?

It is easy to concur with many of the criticisms outlined earlier. Transitions are less simple than in previous decades. Our studies testify to their complexity and instability (see EGRIS, 2001). *None* of our research participants followed ‘mainstream’, orderly transitions, upwards and onwards to the neat accomplishment of adult situations (although we suspect that, actually, some more comfortably situated young people may still achieve this).

Similarly we agree – partly as a consequence of this – that it is impossible to define ‘youth’ strictly by age or by the clear-cut achievement of adult statuses. Youth has become ‘fuzzier’ for all and extended for most. Nevertheless, more socially disadvantaged young people continue to face the challenges of parenting, running their own households and employment earlier than celebratory theories of a uniform, pan-Western phase of ‘emerging adulthood’ suggest (Arnett, 2006). Indeed, the most serious flaw in Arnett’s proposition is just this failure to acknowledge research that shows that the experience of youth is *increasingly* divided and polarised between those who make

‘fast-track’ and ‘slow-track’ transitions to adulthood, in Britain at least (see Jones, 2002; Bynner et al, 2002; Bynner, 2005).

We also admit that - *in the past* - transitions studies have been too pre-occupied with labour market experience at the expense of a more rounded view of youth; whilst still agreeing with Ken Roberts (2000) that ‘the economic sub-structure’ of young lives is fundamental to much else (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). A more holistic understanding of transition is to be welcomed. It is evident in recent youth research that adds new foci to the triumvirate of school to work, family (e.g. Quinton et al, 2002) and housing transitions (e.g. Rugg, 1999) now commonly researched (Coles, 1995). Valentine et al (2002) and Skelton (2002), for instance, identify sexuality and dis/ability as sources of identity and disadvantage in youth marginalisation. Of late, criminological attempts to understand pathways into and out of crime have benefited from sociological research on youth transitions (e.g. Stephen and Squires, 2003; France and Homel, 2006; Barry, 2006).

Although space has disallowed discussion here, our studies have demonstrated how a *range of interdependent* careers (Becker, 1963; Berger and Berger, 1972) shape transitions and how experience of education, training and employment cannot be properly comprehended in isolation. For instance, MacDonald and Marsh (2002) and MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) examine how, for some young adults, their biographies and their particular form of social exclusion were best understood with reference to their leisure, drug-using and criminal careers. We could not have hoped to make sense of their ‘school to work’ careers without looking beyond them. We have also considered the significance of health and bereavement in shaping transitions (Webster et al, 2004). Coles (2000: 10) says that the ‘transition model’ has little to say about many social problems associated with the most vulnerable, including ‘the impact of truancy or school exclusion’, ‘drug or alcohol misuse’, ‘mental illness’ or ‘involvement in crime or the criminal justice system’. He was largely correct, at the time of writing. Yet these recent studies, our own included, argue that a model of transition *can* usefully include such interests.

That transitions studies are inevitably dominated by neo-positivistic methodological approaches that banish subjects’ active role in making and interpreting their lives (Miles, 2000), is a criticism with which we cannot agree. To us, this reflects a lack of attention to the library shelves on the part of these critics. There is a long history of qualitative social

research that forefronts young people's own accounts of their post-school transitions (e.g. Willis, 1977; Griffin, 1985; Brown, 1987; Coffield, Borrill and Marshall, 1987; Wallace, 1987; Bates and Riseborough, 1992; Hollands, 1990; Craine, 1997). And contrary to what Barry (2005) says, a better criticism is that transition studies less commonly include the voices of less vulnerable, more *advantaged* young people.

Reading across the sorts of criticisms sketched in introduction, one discerns uneasiness with what is sometimes explicitly described as overly socially deterministic theories of transition. This is the force of Miles's complaint (2000) and what lies behind some commentators' rejection of the terminology of transition. Cieslik and Simpson (2006) provide a useful case in point, not least because they target these Teesside studies to make their argument (at the same time as providing a useful addition to basic skills research)<sup>10</sup>. They argue that in criticising neo-conservative theories of an alleged youth underclass (e.g. Murray, 1994), studies like ours over-emphasise the social structural determination of transitions and minimise the active, reflexive role of young people in their creation<sup>11</sup>. Ironically, our biographically oriented method was directed at grasping exactly this. It showed and tried to make sense of how - even when young people come from the same class, ethnicity and streets - they forged quite different transitions in relation to family, housing, leisure, drug and criminal careers. Karen Evans and colleagues' concept of 'bounded agency' is a useful metaphor here:

the notion of bounded agency can be...further elaborated through the metaphor of social actors moving in a social landscape...[this sees] agency as being both temporally embedded and bounded, *influenced in the chances of the present moment by past experiences and the sense of future possibilities* (2001: 25, our emphasis).

'Bounded agency' reminds us that individual choices and decision-making are themselves the outcome of 'subjectively perceived frames for action and decision' that are, to different degrees, structurally-rooted rooted in history, class and place (2001: 24). For

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<sup>10</sup> There is an odd academic history here, which we cannot attempt to explain further here. Mark Cieslik and Donald Simpson were co-authors of one of the studies (Webster et al, 2004) they criticise in their piece.

<sup>11</sup> We readily acknowledge that perhaps even suitably untangling for *display*, never mind solving, the knotty, age-old agency-structure problematic is beyond the capability of the authors. We would recommend, however, Jay MacLeod's (2004) attempted answer in his superb ethnography of 'aspirations and attainment in a low income neighbourhood'.

example, our interviewees' post-16 choice to elevate employment over other options is embedded in and reflects their historic, class cultural practice. They made this choice, however, in a different economic world to that known by their predecessors.

Thus, Cieslik and Simpson are correct in that, if pushed into identifying the *most fundamental* explanations for the *collective* and *new* experience of downward social mobility, economic marginality and social exclusion described by informants, we prefer to stress historical, spatial processes of social and economic change over the individual choices and actions of young people. In other words, these are 'public issues of social structure' not just 'personal troubles' in the lives of individuals (Mills, 1959: 14); even if interviewees themselves tended to offer individualistic, self-blaming 'theories' of their circumstances. In attempting to see 'the relations between the two' (*ibid.*), between biography and social structure, Webster et al (2006) describe the situation of our interviewees like this:

...our cohorts were born on the cusp or in the depths of accelerated social transformation (i.e. between 1974 and the mid-80s), which de-industrialised and destabilised their neighbourhoods, polarising their experiences and class positions. These crises were shifted onto the life histories of individuals.

For sure, some informants apparently possessed greater stocks of personal resilience, self-efficacy, family resource, or social or human capital (such as basic skills or educational qualifications). These individual differences did seem to play a *significant* role in explaining why personal encounters with 'critical moments' were so unpredictable in their psycho-social outcomes (Webster et al, 2004). Our longer-term surveying of where youth transitions led people in early adulthood showed, however, that such individual-level differences played a *minimal* role in accounting for longer-term socio-economic outcomes. Poverty and economic marginality remained a *shared*, virtually uniform experience in youth and destination in early adulthood, regardless of the twists and turns of individual's post-16 choices and pathways. Stressing socio-economic over individual-level causation seems, therefore, a more honest way to represent our research findings.

To finish, the concept of transition – or something very like it – is a necessary heuristic with which to understand the making of young lives. In our case, we find it difficult to imagine how meaningful research with young adults on biographical *processes* of social exclusion and inclusion could operate without some such concept. As Roberts puts it: ‘youth is a life stage, neither the first nor the last, and as such is *inherently* transitional’ (2000: 3, our emphasis). Youth, despite the changes that have recast transitions, is still a critically important period in which life chances are established and through which society is reproduced in familiar or different forms. The appeal of a broad, holistic, long view of youth transitions is that it offers a privileged vantage point from which to glimpse processes of social structural formation and transformation.

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