Street Corner Society

Leisure careers, youth (sub)culture and social exclusion

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Abstract

The paper draws upon qualitative research with 'socially excluded' young people in the North East of England. It proposes that the concept and study of 'leisure careers' is useful in understanding the transitions, (sub)cultural experiences and identities of social groups like this. The empirical focus is upon the significance of leisure careers in the neighbourhood-based, social networks of some criminally involved, socially excluded young adults.

Theoretically, we argue that a focus on leisure careers, as part of a broad, holistic approach to youth transitions, can help overcome some of the problems that currently affect youth studies. In particular, fuller examination of shifting, leisure-based activities and identities within studies of _youth transition_ may help bridge the analytical divide between that tradition of youth research and that which focuses primarily on _youth culture_ and identity.

Key words: leisure career, youth, sub-culture, crime, youth studies, social exclusion

The Corner Boys are groups of men who centre their social activities upon particular street corners…//…they constitute the bottom level of society within their age group, and at the same time they make up the great majority of young men in Cornerville…//…most of them were unemployed or had only irregular employment. Few had completed high school…

WF Whyte <u>Street Corner Society</u> (1943: xvii).

The most important things to them are not their relationships with schools or teachers, but their relationships at night-time. *Friendships and street corners are the main thing*. Total apathy. They never do their homework. Drugs and sex – that's what their life is.

(Karen, who works with school-leavers deemed not 'work ready': our emphasis).

INTRODUCTION

The main theoretical aim of this paper is to show that a focus on 'leisure careers' might be one way of bridging what has been described as the 'two traditions of youth research' in Britain. Several authors have described the bifurcation of youth studies (Coles, 1986; Griffin, 1993; MacDonald et al, 2001) into *youth cultural studies* and *youth transitions studies*. A brief history of the former would usually start with the seminal work of the writers associated the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham in the 1970s and their development of a sophisticated, neo-Marxist, class-based theory of working-class sub-cultural resistance (e.g. Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Following sustained theoretical, methodological and empirical critique during the 1980s (and still) – and partly consequent upon the changing socio-economic situations of young people in Britain in that decade – youth cultural studies became less prominent and less

influential (at least in the UK). This tradition of research was overtaken by youth transitions studies that turned the academic gaze away from 'the stylistic appearances of particular tribes' and the 'stylistic art of a few' (Clarke 1982: 1) toward the transitions to adulthood carved out by young people in worsened economic conditions.

Youth transitions studies still dominate the field, even though there has emerged since the 1990s 'a second wave' of youth cultural studies (Roberts, 2005). This has been rejuvenated by the emergence of Acid House, rave and club culture and by a new, post-modern, *post*-subcultural theoretical perspective (e.g. Redhead et al, 1997; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004). Post-subcultural studies is not, however, a 'unified body of work' (Muggleton, 2005: 214). There are disagreements between those associated with these studies about, for instance, the extent to which broader, post-modernising trends impact on youth identities and about how best to conceptualise (and name) contemporary youth cultural forms (see Bennett and Khan-Harris, 2004). These debates are 'live' ones as well, with argument continuing between those who, despite some differences, generally favour post-subcultural theory and those who generally do not (see Blackman, 2005; Bennett, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). For those new to these on-going arguments, we can summarise post-subcultural studies as ones that *tend* to downplay the importance of social structural influences on youth culture and to celebrate young people's opportunities freely to pick and choose between the many 'lifestyles' (Miles, 2000), 'scenes' (Stahl, 2004), 'neo-tribes' (Bennett, 2000) and 'post-subcultural' identities (Muggleton, 1997, 2000) on offer in the contemporary 'supermarket of style' (Polhemus, 1997).

The current state of play in youth research in Britain can be characterised therefore as one that remains divided between a 'mainstream' transitions approach (that *largely* ignores issues of leisure, youth culture and identity) and a more 'marginal' (at least in research funding terms) youth cultural studies tradition (that, since its 'post-modern turn', now *largely* overlooks issues of social division and inequality in youth experience)[1]. This is

despite of repeated calls for more *holistic* analysis of young people's experiences (Coles, 2000).

This paper provides some empirical evidence for the argument (MacDonald et al, 2001) that a focus on leisure careers might help to bring these two traditions closer to each other and so encourage more encompassing accounts of youth. The term 'leisure career' has been used previously but infrequently in youth (Roberts et al, 1990; Roberts, 1999) and leisure studies (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1975) but not in the sense that we do. Most recently, Stebbins (2004: 19) for instance, identifies a leisure career as 'the more or less steady development as a skilled, experienced and knowledgeable participant in a particular form of serious leisure'. Our concept has a broader and looser meaning, equating to the dominant modes of free-time, leisure activity and socialising engaged in by a person and how they change or persist over time (in our case during the youth phase of the life-course). Drawing upon recent, qualitative research with 'socially excluded' young people in Teesside, North East England, we introduce 'leisure career' as a concept useful to understanding exclusionary youth transitions. Given our research design and samples, we have no empirical evidence that 'leisure career' is a useful concept for understanding *all* youth transitions, particularly those of the more advantaged. This could only be tested by further studies. We are inclined to think, however, that a longitudinal focus on leisure practices and identities – and how these mesh with broader aspects of transition – *would* prove of general value in youth research.

After describing our research and the general pattern of leisure career it uncovered, we focus in on the leisure careers of young men who had become particularly marginal to the labour market and discuss how, for some of them, long-term immersion in 'street corner society' became the context for the emergence of criminal careers. This research evidence, we hope, will demonstrate our concluding argument that youth research can, and perhaps should, simultaneously attend to the youth cultural, leisure-based lives of its participants and the transitions that they make, if it is properly to comprehend each of these aspects of young people's lives.

RESEARCHING 'EXCLUDED' YOUTH

The project described here sought critically to assess the value of underclass theories and the concept of 'social exclusion' in explaining youth transitions in Britain's poor neighbourhoods [2] (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2001, 2005 for our conclusions). It focused upon the people, places and processes in which 'social exclusion' might take its most extreme form and in which 'underclass' cultures are most likely to be found (Roberts, 1997a; MacDonald, 1997).

We studied the sprawling council estates of 'East Kelby' in Teesside, North East England because it provided the opportunity for a critical case study of youth transitions in a context of severe social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Long-term de-industrialisation, persistent unemployment and poverty blight East Kelby. It suffers from all the 'joined up' problems that concentrate the difficulties of poor neighbourhoods (Power, 1998; Lee and Hills, 1998). The Index of Multiple Deprivation (DETR, 2000) gives an overall ranking of the extent of such problems in English electoral wards. All of the five wards from which our research participants were drawn featured in the top five per cent most deprived nationally and two of them ('Orchard Bank' and 'Primrose Vale') were in the worst five wards - of 8,414 - in England.

The fieldwork, undertaken between 1999 and 2000, had three strands: interviews with 40 professional 'stake-holders' who worked with young people (e.g. probation officers, drugs workers and trainers – like Karen, quoted in introduction); year-long participant observation in youth clubs, unwaged groups, Family Centres and 'on the street'; qualitative interviews with 88 young people (45 females, 43 males), aged 15 to 25 years (and virtually all of whom were ethnically white and, again typical of East Kelby, from working-class backgrounds). This sample was selected purposefully so as to reflect a wide range of youth experiences and is therefore not statistically representative. It included, for instance, youth trainees, single parents, young offenders, clients of drug advice centres, the un/employed, college students and participants in the New Deal for Young People (a government programme designed to assist the young unemployed 'from

welfare to work'). Interviews were tape-recorded and lasted up to two hours. This aspect of the research forms the basis of the paper.

The research drew upon the sociological concept of 'career' (Becker, 1963; Berger and Berger, 1972) to explore the way that individual decision-making, informed by the cultures and sub-cultures from which young people originate (and originate themselves), interacts with the socially structured opportunities facing people as they move through the youth phase to create individual and shared paths of transition (Coles, 1995, 2000). 'Career', then, is a useful concept in understanding the processual, longer-term, complex and multi-dimensional nature of young people's transitions to adulthood. Coles argues that youth transitions have three main dimensions: the move from full-time education into the labour market ('the school-to-work career'); the attainment of (relative) independence from family of origin ('the family career'); and the move away from the parental home ('the housing career'). Previous studies (Johnston et al, 2000) suggested that, in some contexts, 'criminal careers' and 'drug-using careers' can also become important in shaping the overall nature of youth transitions (these terms are explained in MacDonald et al, 2001). Although 'leisure careers' were not pre-figured in our original interview schedules, they soon emerged as analytically important in the course of fieldwork. Thus, biographically focused interviews explored recollections and experiences of transition – by the six career lines noted above - to generate holistic, narrative accounts of the processes that led young people to their current situation. They also surveyed individual's views of the future and their neighbourhood. Thus, the study generated research findings of relevance to particular debates within youth studies (e.g. in respect of illicit drug use, social exclusion and transitions; MacDonald and Marsh, 2002) and in relation to more general social scientific questions (e.g. about youth transitions, social immobility and class; MacDonald et al, 2005). Our focus here is upon leisure careers, youth (sub)culture and social exclusion.

LEISURE CAREERS IN POOR NEIGHBOURHOODS: 'JUST STREETS TO WALK DOWN'

In brief, for the large majority of young men and women in the sample, much of their leisure time during their early teenage years - that is the time outside of the demands of school and part-time jobs - was spent in the company of peers in the public spaces of their home estates. The 'invisibility' of girls to 1970s and '80s youth cultural studies was, in part, explained by the gendered segregation of youth lifestyles (young men occupied the masculine world of the street, young women were confined to the privatised, 'bedroom cultures' of the home) and the consequent methodological difficulties of researching young women (McRobbie, 1991). According to interviewees' contemporaneous and retrospective accounts (and what we observed), this physical separation of young women's and men's leisure arenas no longer holds in East Kelby (most of the few that had avoided this street-based socialising were young men). Gillian (aged 16) was typical. During the evenings she and her friends would 'just probably walk about the streets or just sit in the house and just talk…most of the time we don't hang around near houses or nowt. We just meet in, like, fields and that'. Lucy, also 16, talked about how she and her best friend Abigail would 'just walk about the streets…like, round Primrose Vale, through the park and that and we'd walk to each other's houses or summat'.

Of course, the 'street corner society' of East Kelby youth is not unique. Even casual observation of the estates of many British cities and towns would reveal exactly these sorts of public gatherings. Numerous policy and press reports have identified the 'problem' that these present for local communities (Coles et al, 1998). Describing three socially excluded neighbourhoods, Page says 'large numbers of unsupervised children and teenagers who gather in groups were a feature of all estates' and that 'on all estates, and across all age groups, the biggest single issue identified by respondents was the antisocial behaviour of children and teenagers' (2000: 37). A previous study in this locality found that adult residents identified 'crime' and 'young people' as the two issues which impacted most negatively upon quality of life and that these problems were perceived as synonymous (Brown, 1995). The age-old impulse of respectable, adult

society to corral and control those engaged in apparently unproductive, street-based leisure – especially working-class, young men (Pearson, 1983) - has culminated, of late, in the increasing imposition of 'Anti-Social Behaviour Orders' (Abrams, 2004) and night-time street curfews on British youth (introduced for under-16s in parts of Kelby in 2004; Kelby Evening Chronicle, 5 March 2004; Jeffs and Smith, 1996).

Despite this public clamour, surprisingly few sociological studies have sought to get to grips *from young people's point of view* with these contemporary, British versions of street corner society (for interesting exceptions see Valentine et al, 1998; Watt and Stenson, 1998; Pavis and Cunnigham-Burley, 1999). According to our interviewees, these sorts of street-based leisure were, in part, an outcome of interviewees' inability to finance other teenage leisure activities (such as cinema or ten-pin bowling trips) and their resistance to attending youth centres that were associated with younger children. Richy put it like this: 'you can't go into a youth club at 17! Cos they're all young 'uns, aren't they? All there is is…it's a lack of everything. There's nothing to do, just streets to walk down and stuff like that' [3].

This is not to argue that street corner society was simply the negative, residual outcome of having nothing better to do. Spending free time on the streets with others had social and psychological importance and was often talked about positively. As Hall and colleagues (1999: 506) point out: 'it is in the course of such informal interaction, away from parents and teachers, that significant aspects of young people's personal and social identities are affirmed, contested, rehearsed and reworked'. One issue interviewees contested was the equation of street corner socialising with anti-social behaviour. Although they experienced the consequences of this in terms of being complained about, surveyed, moved on and dispersed by adult authorities (chiefly the police) [4], they were adamant that delinquency (beyond occasional under-age drinking and smoking) did not *define* street-based leisure and were at pains to point out how they attempted to avoid this sort of labelling. In their view, 'everybody' took part not just those they knew to be the 'hard lads' or 'bad lads' (an argument confirmed by our study). This is not to suggest that participation played no role in the formation of criminal careers. As we argue later,

prolonged street-based leisure was – in virtually all cases – a necessary but *not* sufficient condition for the establishment of persistent, long-term offending.

For the majority, as the years passed, street-based leisure gave way to commercialised, alcohol-based, young adult leisure (see Hollands, 1995; Roberts, 1997b; Chatterton and Hollands, 2002; HMSO, 2000). Leanne, aged 16, described this general shift in leisure career:

> it's, like, the 12/ 13 year olds who are drinking on the streets and 15/ 16 year olds who are in the pubs. You see 'em all down the town. They're all *getting too old to go on the streets*, they go out into town now …//… When I started going out it was so I feel more older and like…Just going to a disco. I love discos and that, and coming in late (our emphasis).

The move from the street to pubs and clubs tended to coincide with the cessation of compulsory schooling, physical maturation that allowed individuals to present themselves as old enough to enter licensed premises [5], the getting of income from jobs or training schemes to help fund commercial nightlife and the establishment of new friendship groups via workplaces, training schemes or college courses and separation from those made at school. The hub of leisure life gravitated from the immediate neighbourhood of their outlying estates to the pubs and clubs of the town centre. In very brief outline, this was the form of leisure career reported by most of our research participants. Partly as a consequence of progress in respect of other aspects of transitions, with increased age and income, teenage street corner society gave way to the sort of mainstream, commercialised leisure lifestyles typical of many British young adults (see Hollands, 2002).

Two theoretically significant sets of informants deviated from this main pattern of leisure career: unemployed young men and young mothers. The leisure lives and social networks of the latter group are discussed elsewhere (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). In order to demonstrate more fully the influence of leisure career upon the course of youth transitions, we now turn to the inter-relationships between social exclusion, street-corner leisure and the emergent criminal careers of these young men.

STREET CORNER LEISURE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION: 'PIN-BALLING ABOUT THE ESTATES'

> JM: What sort of thing do you do in the evenings?
> Broderick (18): Drink, cause havoc, fight.

Several men in the study described how 'hanging around' the estates was *maintained* as their dominant form of leisure throughout the teenage years and into their early twenties.

Unlike counterparts from school days who had at least some (albeit limited) progression into continued education or the labour market, these repeatedly unemployed young men lacked the sites through which to establish new, more socially varied or geographically spread social networks. For them, friendship groups had hardened up, become more tightly knit and almost wholly based upon the immediate neighbourhood of home (Campbell, 1993). They associated with other similarly placed men from their immediate neighbourhood, often referring to themselves by the names of these neighbourhoods (e.g. 'the lads from the top end of Brookeville'). Whilst many contemporary accounts tend to emphasise cultural choice in explaining young people's consumer 'lifestyles' (e.g. Miles, 2000; Bennett, 2000; Chatterton and Hollands, 2002), more prosaic factors underwrote the 'leisure poverty' of these young men (Banks et al, 1992: 59). They lacked the cash with which to buy into the sort of consumer life-styles now enjoyed by others their age and were largely excluded – materially - from the pleasures of youthful nightlife in the pubs and clubs of the town centre. We are confident that material poverty limited the leisure lives of our entire research sample. Interviews were replete with instances of this (e.g. of saving up in order to be able to visit the cinema, of the absence of bus fares with which to travel to leisure venues, of the need – for some - to thieve in order to fund relatively inexpensive drug use). Our follow-up study of some participants (into their mid and late 20s) noted how most were unable to go on holiday because of the financial costs involved (Webster et al, 2004). Of course, all 'consumed' to some extent and some were, or became, better off than others (hence the ability of most, in their late teens, to fund mainstream, pub-based leisure). What we take issue with is accounts of youth culture that

fail to acknowledge the differential participation of young people in contemporary forms of leisure, partly because of material inequalities.

One of the main problems for these young men became filling time. Even though many had missed much of their formal education, the fact that they should have been at school flavoured days wandering around their estates with a little excitement. Now there was little else to do but spend every day and evening 'pin-balling about the estates', as Liam put it. Matty, 20, was asked how he filled his unemployed days: 'don't know, just hang about with a few lads. Round our way. Just come out to Primrose Vale, hang about with 'em, playing football or anything. Just hang about'. Loader (1996: 112-113) describes how young people's localised identities and persistent use of public space can be a reflection of wider, 'marginalising' transitions. Although based on a different locality (Edinburgh), his description tallies very closely with our own:

> Denied the purchasing power needed to use, or even to get to, other parts of the city (and most importantly the city centre) unemployed youths are for the most part confined to the communities in which they live…//…as a result, the 'locality' tends to retain a prominent place in the lives of marginalised young people, both as a site of routine activities and as the basis of their identities…//…hanging around the streets becomes a culturally inappropriate way of killing endless time.

Across our fieldwork, interviewees operated with subjective, mental maps of their area that sub-divided it into separate locales, each with their own reputations (i.e. greater or lesser associations with crime and risks to personal safety). In an evocative turn of phrase, one youth worker told us that local young men 'penned themselves into their own patch'.

Forrest and Kearns ponder the implications of globalisation for place-based identities. They say 'intuitively, it would seem that as source of social identity the neighbourhood is being eroded with the emergence of a more fluid, individualised way of life. Social networks are city-wide, national, international and increasingly virtual' (2001: 2129).

Their intuition may play out for 'cosmopolitans' elsewhere but it does not for the 'locals' of East Kelby. Their sense of territoriality and belonging to a neighbourhood peer group, was a rare constant in the lives of young men who, with the passing of their teenage years, had been left largely unemployed and separated from the progress that other young adults had made.

Continued engagement with street corner society was a gendered process. Whilst some young women, like Annie (aged 24) below, had been similarly disaffected from school (e.g. frequent truancy, leaving with low or no qualifications at 16), none in our study continued with street leisure into their late teens or beyond. Processes of disengagement from street corner society for young women (and some young men) - the 'time to grow up', as Annie puts it - often coincided with important steps in their housing and family careers, chiefly the onset of parenthood and the establishment of independent living. Her interview is interesting because it foregrounds the power of place and social networks in shaping individual identities and possibilities. Here Annie directly frames an account of how she strove to overcome 'the Orchard Bank attitude' in departing from her previous lifestyle to return to education (to become a university student via an Access course) with a comparison of her boy-friend's *deepening* immersion in prevailing street culture and the apparent attraction of a particular form of masculine identity in this process:

> JM: What were your friends' reactions then when they knew you were going to college?
>
> Annie: Oh 'you're the only one that's got a head on your shoulders' and all this…//…bickering and bitching, you know: 'bet you think you're summat, don't you?' Why? Why do I 'think I'm summat?' I mean, I'm from Orchard Bank like anybody else. It's just happened that I've grown out of that Orchard Bank attitude basically.
>
> JM: What do you think that Orchard Bank attitude is like?
>
> Annie: I dunno. It's just so easy to get in that role. Get into that drug scene, the burglaries. I mean it's there, handed on a plate. It's like the norm in some cases. At a young age you don't know what you're doing. Like I didn't know what I was doing when I was at school. I just thought it was a laugh. I mean if you're

knocking around Orchard Bank, it's easy. 'Oh, we're going to stand around the shops, are you coming?' 'Oh yeah, yeah'. I was like that in school. I didn't wanna know in school. But I just never went onto drugs and I never went onto burglaries. But I was hanging around, like. Then I got into babysitting [a part-time job] and that, otherwise I would have been [still] hanging around the streets.

JM: And cos you had a boyfriend, a long-term relationship, that probably affected the way you spent your time…

Annie: Yeah, well he used to knock about [outside] the shops but he used to be the quiet one, the sensible one but he used to be there. And whereas now it's totally different, it's like 'all right Sammy, you all right?', you know what I mean? He's one of the lads, like. He's '*the man'.* That's what they're like. I tell him 'oh, you're stupid'.

JM: So does he still hang around with his friends from Orchard Bank?

Annie: *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah*. And I think maybe that's our battle. I mean, I'm not saying he should grow away from them. I mean my friends are from Orchard Bank but there's a time to grow up, there's a limit.

'Disengaged' young men and the emergence of criminal and drug-using careers

Earlier we noted that the widespread street socialising of East Kelby children and teenagers should *not* be read as indicative of their social disaffection and incipient delinquency. For some, however, it *did* provide the forum for early drug experimentation (Pavis and Cunnigham-Burley, 1999) or delinquency and became, for a proportion of these, long-term alternatives to regular participation in formal education, training or employment. Elsewhere we map in detail the consolidation, development and desistance from more serious drug and criminal careers (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Here we concentrate on the processes that led to the emergence – for some of these disengaged young men – of these sorts of transition.

In general, sustained criminal careers were initiated as a group response to the tedious days opened up by frequent school absence (nine of the 11 interviewees who had been

imprisoned had been frequent truants). Danny, 21 and an inmate of a Young Offenders Institution (YOI) said: 'just me and this other lad used to nick off all the time…//…Just go and hang about the town…that was me starting days of crime and that, yeah. Shoplifting and pinching bikes, that's what it was'.

In earlier teenage years, aimless leisure had been spiced with occasional wrongdoing (typically illicit smoking, drinking and drug use and bits of shoplifting). Nearly always these were group activities, carried out by friends known from the neighbourhood and school who mutually nurtured a critical attitude to the latter. As Simpson (2004) points out, at this early stage of criminal careers (and later), the actual doing of crime was a relatively rare activity in the sense that, even for the most persistent offenders, criminal acts accounted for only a small amount of time in a typical day or week [6].

The thieving of saleable items from garden sheds, garages and cars was the next most common offence of those listed by the sample and also appeared to be the offence to which (some) shop-lifters graduated in their criminal careers. Still of school age and still filling truant time, these were as much leisure-time crimes as anything else (Stephen and Squires, 2003). Although Richy said that he had often 'mooched [stolen from garden] sheds', he did not consider himself 'a bad lad, a real thief'. At this stage, theft can be understood primarily as leisure; exciting, thrill-driven moments in otherwise dull days: 'when you pinch summat, like a barbecue set you can sell on for £10, you can buy yourselves a few bottles of cider, can't you? You can cure your boredom then' (Richy). Barney (20, in YOI) describes how stealing motorbikes had been a 'big thing' in his teenage years:

> we'd go all through the night, you know what I mean? Over a back wall and have a motorbike away. We'd always pinch them in the summer [too], drive them around on the field. We've got the bikes to take chase if the police come after us and that would make for a good buzz.

Reference to 'the buzz' was frequent in attempts to explain earlier criminality and given as the sole motivation behind the few instances of vehicle theft reported to us. Asked about this, Gazz (also a 20-year-old, YOI inmate) commented:

> No, not bad crimes, not bad stuff. Just jumping in cars which were nicked. Not nicking them. Just jumping in with the lads for a spin round. Looking back, I can't see why I did it. Daft stuff. Just the buzz. Like these two bottles of pop I nicked – and a can of after-shave – that's my two shoplifting ones. I didn't really need them. I just did it. For the buzz I suppose.

The shift from many in the sample being involved in occasional wrong-doing (typified by instances of shop-lifting) to fewer being engaged in more purposeful, acquisitive and other crimes was associated with *persistent* physical absence from school and *continued* immersion in, and affective commitment to, street-based peer groups. Looking back, virtually all those with more committed criminal careers referred to their attachments to estate-based, street youth culture in explaining their transitions to crime. Long-term participation in illicit and dangerous activities (that brought excitement, some income and social standing amongst friends) inspired a strong camaraderie that served to separate further those on this track from the wider set of peers that they knew in their schooldays. This in itself served to fuel criminal and drug-using careers. Abandoning them would mean abandoning what, in many cases, was the one thing that they valued in their current lives: their friends.

Matty was explicit about these effects. At 14, he had been – in comparison with others in the sample – a successful school pupil following a largely unremarkable path. By 15, he was burgling houses. He was adamant that the fact of living in Primrose Vale had made him vulnerable to the lure of criminal associates which, in turn, had denied the possibility of effective engagement with employment after he left school [7]. His post-school years had consisted of periods on Youth Training schemes and short-term employment interspersed with time on the dole. He was currently serving a three-year period of probation (for burglary):

JM: So you had a habit of hanging around with the wrong people? Why was that, do you think?

Matty: Dunno. Probably because I grew up around the area. It's the only reason I can probably think of.

JM: Do you still see the lads you went to school with?

Matty: Yeah, now and again. They're on the dole now mostly, or at college. Just the dole most of 'em. Half of 'em are in jail. God knows where they are, on drugs or something.

JM: When you left school do you think you could have done everything different, like get a job and maybe you might not have got involved in crime?

Matty: I was in that crowd at the time. No matter what you done, if you're in that crowd you just stick with 'em really. So you'd have just ruined that job anyway. If you leave the crowd before you get the job - that was the only way it could have changed you, I think.

JM: You said before it was because of where you grew up?

Matty: Yeah, you can't get out of it unless you move out of the area. It's the only way.

JM: So you think growing up in Primrose Vale had a big influence on what you've done in your life?

Matty: Yeah. If I'd been in a different area, I think it would have been a different lifestyle altogether. Depending on the area…//…some posh area or something.

JM: What do you think you'd be doing?

Matty: Be working somewhere.

Writing about a similar group, Collison (1996: 428) wonders 'what form of masculine identity is open to the young men of the (ex)working-class now described as an underclass'? He argues that out of the double-bind created by 'the contemporary priority given to consumption' in a context of 'persisting structural exclusions', such young men commit to the sense of active agency, excitement, loyalties and status to be gained from risky, criminally-oriented street culture (429). Hence, 'there is a level of ontological

security and trust to be found on the street which obviates some of the uncertainties and insecurities of being male on the margins of civil society' (ibid.).

In our study, such peer groups were powerful in shaping the range of activities, identities and futures that were deemed possible by their members. Their habitus defined 'things to do or not to do' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53): for example, whether it was seen as permissible and proper to attend school, sit examinations, go to college, claim welfare benefits, use heroin, burgle houses and so on. Kearns and Parkinson (2002: 2106) remark upon how young people in poor neighbourhoods seem 'extremely territorial in their behaviour, so that their action spaces or wider neighbourhoods have very limited horizons'. They ask whether this derives from 'the urban problem of fear and anxiety concerning the unknown, or due to the comforting benefits of one's familiar neighbourhood, or simply the result of "knowing one's place"'. We would confirm their depiction and suggest that all their proposed answers are correct to some extent. Our answer would, however, prioritise the progressive, contingent effects of particular combinations of school-to-work, family, crime and leisure career so that, for some 'excluded youth' but not others, social life becomes almost wholly centred on the home neighbourhood (Ball et al, 2000).

Unlike some other, influential models of criminal career informed by quantitative research (see Farrington, 1994), we are not arguing that once set in train such careers roll-on deterministically to foregone conclusions. Our interviews were replete with instances of biographies unpredictably turning one way or another, often as the result of unforeseeable 'critical moments' in their lives (e.g. the death of a parent, the intervention of a particularly supportive Probation Officer, the suicide of a close friend) (Thomson et al, 2002; Webster et al, 2004). Nor do we conclude that early risk factors can be surveyed easily to predict later criminality. Several of those who could have had all the requisite risk factors ticked off against them clung stubbornly to more conventional pathways to adulthood. Although long-term commitment to local, street-based peer groups *did* emerge as one of the key factors associated with the development of sustained criminal and drug using careers, some that displayed this sort of leisure life-style *did not* become embroiled in serial offending and persistent, problematic drug use (Webster et al, 2006).

Our longer-term perspective on youth transitions also allowed some insight into processes of desistence from criminal and drug-using careers and of re-engagement with what are regarded as more mainstream aspects of youth transition (see, for more detail, Webster et al, 2004 and MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). The forming of new partnerships, fuller engagement with employment, the coming of parenthood (or step-parenthood), and access to effective, non-punitive drug treatment programmes were all, in different combinations depending upon the individual case, described as important in these processes. Most critical, however, was a process of social – and sometimes geographic - distancing from previous peer networks. All of those with the most intractable experiences of crime, dependent drug use and social exclusion were unanimous on this point. Leaving careers of crime and dependent drug use behind meant leaving behind the social networks and leisure careers which had sustained them and a normative re-orientation away from the prevailing values of 'the street'.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS: THEORISING STREET CORNER SOCIETY

In describing the transitions of some socially excluded young people we hope to have shown the value in going beyond the normal subject matter of transitions studies. Whilst the past decade has seen laudable calls for the simultaneous investigation of family and housing careers as well as the staple of young people's school-to-work careers, we argue that a still wider analytical net is necessary if we are properly to capture the processes that give shape to youth transitions. In this instance, we have highlighted the significance of leisure careers and their associated social networks in influencing young people's biographies.

A key theoretical conclusion from our empirical findings concerns the *interdependency* of the multiple careers that make up youth transitions. Of course, progress (or lack of it) in respect of the economic dimensions of youth transition holds wide repercussions for young people but, we argue, so can the other 'careers' that they pursue. Whilst other aspects of transition (e.g. progress in respect of school-to-work or family careers)

strongly influenced the nature and detail of a young person's leisure career, developments in these other spheres were, in turn, strongly influenced by young people's leisure careers, peer networks and sub-cultural identities. This was true of all our research participants but we have chosen to demonstrate this in detail by focusing on the leisure and early criminal careers of those young men who had some of the most intractable experiences of social exclusion.

In focusing on young people's shifting and differentiated leisure experiences and associations, we have come closer to the second school of research that is said to make up British youth studies: the youth cultural studies tradition. We think our evidence shows that there is value – in both traditions of youth research - in attempting to conceptualise the way that issues of youth culture impact on youth transition, and vice versa[8]. For instance, it would be difficult to properly explain how the young men discussed here came to their current situations - or make predictions about their likely futures - without understanding how a leisure career (comprised of long-term participation in street corner society) generated adherence to a particular form of sub-culturally defined personal identity, set of values and 'life style'. These became important in circumscribing broader transition possibilities at a particularly important life stage. Conversely, it would have been impossible to comprehend how these leisure careers changed and how individuals became engaged in these different local, cultural networks without tracking the influence over time of their school-to-work, housing and family careers. In conclusion, we make a few comments about our qualitative account of leisure careers and the descriptive purchase of the concept of sub-culture.

Pilkington and Johnston (2003) criticise some recent, post-modern accounts of 'globalised youth culture' because they prioritise the importance of 'taste communities' over and above the potential significance of place-based, 'real communities'. An example might be Collison's admittedly fascinating study of the cultural identities of some young, male offenders (1996). For him, their narratives were imbued with global cultural references and were largely detached 'from fast disappearing local cultural traditions and structures' (1996: 441).

This may have been true of his subjects but it was not for the young men discussed here. Rather, the particular form of leisure, masculine identity and sociality they described echoed historical, economically derived, cultural knowledge of the way to become and be a working-class man in this place (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Local, informal street culture placed great value on becoming/ being (seen as) a young man with a particular style of resilient, 'hard' masculinity (Campbell, 1993; Hobbs, 1994; McDowell, 2001). Defining features were an hostility to abstract, academic learning, a preference for 'real' manual work (Willis, 1977), loyalty to and reliance upon close, male friends, a belief in the importance of being able to 'handle yourself' (and prove this if called upon), hostility to others who were not 'one of them' and a (perhaps self-deluding) self-image that proclaimed their ability to get by in hard times through personal, sometimes criminal effort [9].

In other words, these young men displayed and valorised a version of masculine identity traditional to their place and to their part of the working-class (despite the fact that wide-spread, rapid de-industrialisation has now largely stripped away the forms of employment that previously enabled transitions to the sort of 'respectable', secure, working-class adulthood known by their fathers and grandfathers). All those in our study experienced economic marginality and poverty in the long-term (Webster et al, 2004). For some young men, these material facts underscored their prolonged engagement in street corner society and careers of crime and drug use.

Thus, despite their fall from fashion, we believe older ideas of sub-culture still retain some relevance in helping to describe and explain the sort of leisure lives and cultural identities documented by our research. Other very recent research has reached similar conclusions (see Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006 for a discussion). Just as we think that it is unlikely that the concept post-subculture could happily capture the youth cultural experiences of all young people, particularly those with limited socio-economic resources, neither do we wish to argue that a simple notion of sub-culture would suffice

for all. That said, we need to be clear about the potential attraction of sub-cultural theory for understanding the sort of lives described in this paper.

It was the CCCS's attention to the *well-known*, *tightly-defined* and *stylistically spectacular* sub-cultures of the 1960s and '70s that has received most critical discussion (e.g. Clarke, G., 1982). When we recently re-read the theoretical introduction to the CCCS's <u>Resistance through Rituals</u> (Clarke, J., et al, 1976: 14) we were struck by the similarity between their depiction of the more generalised, 'loosely-defined' and prosaic forms of masculine, working-class, delinquent sub-culture and our description of the 'street corner society' of unemployed young men. Another CCCS volume (Clarke, J. 1979: 251) again provides a theoretical description of one form of working-class, youth cultural experience that seems to mirror exactly what we found in our study:

> Locality continues to act as a focus for some working-class cultural identifications, often amongst those who are in some sense marginal to production…//…Locality continues to act a base for collective activity among working-class adolescents, both in the sense of providing cultural identities…//…for many otherwise unnamed youth groupings…//…and constituting their 'social space' – the streets, alleyways etc., which are public and less tightly regulated than other areas.

The sort of young people and youth issues that we have discussed are more likely to be the subject of policy documents and concerned newspaper editorials than coffee-table compendiums of youth style or new academic books on consumer identities. Yet, a more encompassing, less divided youth sociology demands a more committed sociological account of the cultural lives and identities of young people like those in our study, as well as of their different experiences of transition and social exclusion. We finish by concurring with a point made by another of the CCCS contributors, Paul Corrigan. He noted that that working-class young people hanging around and 'doing nothing' are probably 'the largest and most complex youth subculture' (1976: 103). Thirty years later, it is still one of the least explored.

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Endnotes

[1] We stress 'largely' because, in each case, there are a small number of studies which might be said to share at least some of the questions and interests definitive of the other 'tradition' (see MacDonald et al, 2001).

[2] This ESRC funded project was carried out by Robert MacDonald and Jane Marsh (grant reference: L134251024). Tracy Shildrick's research generated similar empirical findings and theoretical conclusions (2002, 2003). For the sake of clarity, we only discuss the details of MacDonald and Marsh's project here. All real names of people and their immediate locales have been given pseudonyms. We are indebted to research participants, to the funders and to the editors of *Leisure Studies* and their anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on the paper.

[3] The Prince's Trust (2004: 2) found that 'almost half of all socially excluded young people…//…believe there is a lack of things for them to do' in the areas where they live.

[4] One youth service response to the apparent hostility of young people to meeting in youth clubs, to their preference for unsupervised association and to the antagonisms that this can generate with older, local residents has been the development of a 'youth shelter' on one estate near to East Kelby. This modest initiative – similar to a large bus shelter with lighting and seating, situated several hundred yards from the nearest houses – met with an enormous response, with over one hundred young people congregating there on some evenings.

[5] Some females reported greater ease of access to pubs and clubs at even earlier ages. Other young women (and men) postponed 'nights out on the town' because they feared being turned away from pubs and clubs for being underage. The potential violence that can accompany such nights out was also a deterrent for some.

[6] The crucial exception to this being those people who sustained dependent drug use through acquisitive crime: see MacDonald and Marsh (2002).

[7] Matty's commentary here was a rare instance of interviewees reflecting in detail on the potentially negative biographical consequences of living in poor neighbourhoods.

[8] Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) say more about how youth cultural studies – and 'post-subcultural studies' in particular – might benefit from closer attention to questions of transition and of social divisions.

[9] It is important to stress that these young men still clung to mainstream values about the importance of work, even if their periods of imprisonment, drug habits and street corner socialising hindered them in getting and keeping jobs.