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The realities of being young, unemployed and poor in Post-Industrial Britain

Abstract

Poverty is a complex cultural phenomenon that is very much in existence in contemporary Post-Industrial Britain. A young person's poverty struck situation, in addition to their marginalised hierarchal position shapes their repetitive life cycle comprising of different but inter-related forms of marginality. The young people in this ethnographic study were found to experience marginalisation in their education, training and work spheres, as well as in their community, family and home. The purpose of this paper is to carefully analyse the link between marginalised young people's (in)ability to participate in key social systems and their (lack of) access to financial, cultural and social resources.

KEYWORDS NEET, POVERTY, MARGINALISATION, ETHNOGRAPHY,
UNEMPLOYED

Introduction

There is wide ranging debate in education and the sociology of work studies regarding NEET (Not in Employment Education or Training) young people's transitions in and out of the labour market (Maguire 2015). Discussions of employment are intertwined with those of poverty, with work usually being posited as a means of escaping marginalisation. Of course the two are linked but the complex nature of feeling poor and the effect this has on a young person's ability to gain sound paid work requires further interrogation.

Furthermore, being in-work does not necessarily mean the individual has escaped poverty, in fact low pay, job insecurity and negative work place experiences can reinforce exclusion rather than alleviate it (Simmons, Thompson and Russell, 2014). Being and feeling poor, while simultaneously being out of decent secure paid work facilitates the production of a self-reinforcing cycle of deprivation in which people are progressively less able to escape poor forms of work (Shildrick et al 2012). The central position of this paper argues that while many NEET young people negotiate their way through the oppressive nature of various interacting structures, they simultaneously remain agentic by sometimes resisting and actively working against such structures. They work voluntarily, aspire to gain secure paid employment and

show resilience in the face of their poverty struck situation. Findings are drawn from a three year ethnography that explored the lives of 24 young people as they moved in and out of education and where applicable employment spheres. The aim of the research was to gain longitudinal nuanced understandings about how NEET young people experienced their transitions in and out of education, training and work environments while also investigating the effectiveness of the support structures they encountered.

Concerns about the current NEET population in post-industrial Britain are outlined, together with a summary of literature regarding NEET transitions in and out of various forms of employment and education in relation to poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation. Understandings of poverty and how they relate to NEET young people are drawn upon. Waquants theory is then used as a useful conceptual apparatus to understand the cumulative effect of poverty and how this may be linked to a young persons (in)ability to access work and indeed other important spheres of participation such as education, the community and family. The ethnography is then outlined before specific stories are used to highlight key issues that act to marginalise NEET young people's engagement in society. Acknowledging these complexities while moving away from deficit models of explicating poverty and unemployed youth are central messages that policy makers need to recognise if they are to help NEET young

people feel a part of society, actively engage in meaningful work and contribute to the economic security of Britain.

Youth Unemployment

Most countries across Europe, including that of Britain have seen a dramatic rise in the number of youth not in employment, education and training (NEET) since the beginning of the economic recession in 2008. 740,000 young people aged 16-24 years were unemployed in Britain from February to April 2015 with 165,000 people aged 16-24 having been unemployed for over 12 months during that same period, meaning 22% of unemployed 16-24 year olds had been long-term unemployed for over 12 months (Darr, 2015). This has led to concerns about these young people becoming a 'lost generation' impacting upon the social cohesion of post-industrial Britain (Maguire, 2013, 2015). Others such as Bryne (2005) maintain a Marxist argument and claim that the socially excluded are actually functional to the requirements of flexible post-industrial capitalism in their role as a 'reserve army of labour', a group which the NEET category may be seen to adequately fit, under this frame of theory the poor may be kept in a repetitive cycle of being poor (and unemployed) to suit the needs of the current post-industrial British economy.

The term 'NEET' emerged in the UK during the late 1980's following changes to unemployment benefit entitlement regulations which essentially removed young people under the age of 18 years from the unemployment statistics¹. Now it is widely used across EU states and OECD countries typically covering 15-24 year olds (Maguire, 2013). The concept 'NEET' is now commonly used to capture notions of youth disengagement and social exclusion in addition to a young person's unemployed status. The concept of social exclusion implies that there is a downward spiral in which labour market marginality leads to poverty and social isolation, which in turn reinforces the risk of long term unemployment (Gallie, Paugam and Jacobs, 2003). Lack of employment affects an individual's living standards and ability to access and exploit resources that impacts upon their ability to access and maintain decent paid work. This repetitive life cycle effect, referred to as the no-pay low-pay cycle by Tracy Shildrick et al (2013) is of particular concern for young people. They occupy a precarious position within the labour market due to their lack of skills and experience. **More young people are struggling to make the initial transition from education into sustained work (Sissons and Jones, 2012).** The long term effects of this are particularly

¹ Unemployment benefit has existed in the UK since before the First World War, when mass unemployment initially occurred. In 2016 the amount of Jobseeker's Allowance that's given out to unemployed people is dependent on how long they've been working and their circumstances.

damaging for society as a whole, both in terms of its social cohesion and costs to the public purse (Simmons and Thompson, 2016).

The Commission on Youth Unemployment revealed that unemployed people aged 16-24 years of age were more likely to spend longer out of work throughout their lives, be paid less when in work, have poorer mental and physical well-being and are increasingly likely to be involved in criminal activity. Estimations disclose that in 2012 the costs of youth unemployment were 4.8 billion pounds sterling, plus 10.7 billion in lost output (Maguire, 2013). The cumulative effects of the significant NEET population are revealed to have damaging effects on a young person's health, social engagement, education and employment outcomes for the NEET individuals, but are also shown to have far wider damaging consequences for society as a whole. The additional costs associated with remaining NEET far outweigh those of a successful intervention. Simmons and Thompson (2016) report that youth unemployment has detrimental consequences for the public purse in relation to welfare benefits, lost tax revenue, increased demand for health and social services in addition to the consideration of resources lost via their reduced contribution to economic activity, taken together all are viewed as having a cumulative damaging effect for the individual and society as a whole.

Poverty and social exclusion

Defining poverty has a long and complex history, from Peter Townsend's (1979) seminal study *Poverty in the United Kingdom* that demonstrated the contingent and multidimensionality of the concept, embracing both material and social factors to more recent alerts regarding the notion of in-work poverty (Marx and Nolan, 2012). Official statistics in **Britain** and the EU currently adopt a relative measure, but even this has its contentions and fuels debates about how we measure and indeed tackle the issue.

'Poverty should be restricted to forms of capability deprivation that are related to low income and wealth, maintaining the traditional definitions of poverty. Absolute poverty is living at such a low level of income and wealth that one's health, or even survival, is threatened. Relative poverty is living at a level of income that does not allow one to take part in the normal or encouraged activities for one's society (...) In a way the wrongness of poverty follows very easily from its definition. Human beings have vital needs for health and to be included in their social groups. People in poverty are unable to meet their needs, and therefore suffer from forms of deprivation. In addition, we endorse the observation by Lotter and Jones that

poverty is an affront to human dignity. We are also sympathetic to the luck egalitarian argument that those who are in poverty through undeserved bad luck suffer from an injustice. However, the distinction between luck and choice can be very difficult to make in practice.'

(Wolff, Lamb & Zur-Szpiro, pg 49/50 A philosophical review of poverty. JRF Report. 4 June 2015).

Explanations for poverty and social exclusion can be placed into two broad positions underpinned by two competing political and philosophical perspectives. Both consequently view poverty and social exclusion differently and promote different ways of dealing with them. **Reducing poverty and social exclusion have been concerns for British governments past and present (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) evident from the foundations underpinning the social inclusion programme emblematic of the transition from 'Old' to 'New' Labour to David Cameron's Conservative Government's more recent pledge to implement the 'living wage' and boost the quality and number of apprenticeships to 3 million by 2020 (DFID, 2016).** Structural explanations regard social, economic and political processes as the source and potential solution to poverty and exclusion, whilst the other emphasises individual and cultural inadequacies as the problem (Simmons, Thompson and Russell, 2014).

The theory of unemployment entrapment in neo-liberal economics views the benefit system as one of the main causes of being poor (Gallie et al, 2003). From this standpoint, sharp financial deprivation is viewed as a stimulus to get people back into work. Some countries have employed this line of thinking within their policies to increase the threat of financial sanctions for those judged not to be seeking work or unwilling to take up job offers, (Lodemel and Trickey, 2001; Fougere, 2000; Dormont et al, 2001). It is argued that welfare encourages reliance upon the state. In contrast social exclusion theory maintains that the principal determinants of labour market marginalisation are not related to motivational deficiency or cultural reliance upon the state and welfare benefits but are instead due to structural barriers that people encounter in the labour market and the way these are reinforced by the experiences of the unemployed (Gallie et al, 2003). The redistribution of wealth via taxation, improvements of welfare benefit and other forms of state intervention are put forward as interventions needed to improve the conditions of the poor (Simmons, Thompson and Russell, 2014).

Marginalisation

As with social exclusion, the concept of marginalisation divides opinions between attributing the individual to blame or by structural deterministic factors that shape and reproduce inequality. Individuals may be viewed as actively withdrawing from the labour market and opt to remain reliant on an over-generous welfare system. Employers could be viewed as being encouraged to promote low pay work options and underemployment through strategies such as zero-hours contracts or via benefits such as working tax credits (Simmons, Thompson and Russell, 2014). This paper favours the alternative view of marginalisation offered by Wacquant (1996) whereby marginalisation is understood as a process that is determined by structural logics related with neo-liberalism and globalisation, whereby the welfare state is attacked ideologically and there is a decrepitude and fragmentation of the wage labour. Thus forms of marginalisation are inherent within dominant economic and social structures and policies. Wacquant purports a complex and inter-related characterisation of marginalisation. He recognises that while the economically inactive tend to be hardest hit by recession downturns they also find it harder to benefit from subsequent periods of prosperity, thus limiting the chances of improving those people's lives based at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Labour markets are viewed as increasingly becoming fragmented which act to erode the marginalised ability to enter fruitful wage-labour relations. Moving from the

economic, Wacquant also acknowledges the socio-spatial conditions of 'bad neighbourhoods', whereby the poor living conditions in certain communities promotes the reduction of social capital some people have access to which is related to their precarious, unemployed and sense of worklessness culture. This paper takes the view that marginalised young people do not actively reject certain social norms within society such as the aspiration to work, settle down and have a family but rather they lack the cultural, social and economic resources that enables them to participate in certain social systems. A young person's poverty struck situation, often has a cumulative effect emanating from their education, employment, financial situation and lack of decent housing. Marginality for all in this study was an unattractive state and while certain forms of marginality may first appear to be the product of voluntary actions and decisions, voluntary exclusion should not always be regarded as any different in nature from exclusion itself, which is clearly involuntary.

The Ethnography

Findings are founded from a longitudinal ethnography conducted from October 2010 to March 2013. Twenty four NEET young people formed the focus of the study. The 24 young people comprised of fourteen females and eight males,

aged between 15 and 20 years at the start of fieldwork. Gaining and maintaining access with NEET young people can be problematic, especially over a longitudinal basis (Russell, 2013). Thus participants were accessed via a variety of means including the Youth Offending Team (YOT), parent groups, a housing charity, Connexions² and via word-of-mouth. The ethnography was based in two metropolitan neighbouring local authorities located in the North of England. Both regions have a significant rural dimension and have a strong history in the production of woollen textiles. The main corpus of data included over 340 hours of participant observations conducted in education, training, work, social and home settings. The research was participant led, they dictated when and where fieldwork took place, with some giving more time than others. 79 semi-structured interviews with practitioners, employers, parents, family members and young people were conducted and transcribed. Each young person completed a life-story map to exemplify life events and relationships important to them. Photographs taken by the researcher and young people were taken to portray their daily routines, special activities and feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Photographs taken by young people were used as a form of interview

² Connexions was formerly The Careers Service, a UK governmental information, advice, guidance and support service for young people aged thirteen to nineteen (up to 25 for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities), created in 2000 following the Learning and Skills Act. Its organisation altered throughout the Conservative government's privatisation process in the mid-1990s.

probing in subsequent young people interview. All young people were interviewed at least once, with some being interviewed up to five times depending upon their circumstances and preferences for data collection methods. Observation notes and minutes of meeting documents from the local NEET strategy group, copies of qualifications and certificates; minutes of practitioner meetings; national and local NEET statistics and course information literature were analysed. All data was hand-coded and triangulated. Analytical themes included; feelings of exclusion and inclusion, trajectory decisions and destinations, effectiveness of support structures, home, residence, education and training provision, employment patterns, family and peer influences and individual pathways. All participants and their associated institutions are given pseudonyms throughout this paper to protect their identity.

Rejecting notions of welfare dependency

Over the last twenty years, concerns about poverty have been discursively reconstructed as problems of participation – in education, work and other social contexts. Poverty and inter-related forms of exclusion from numerous social systems are thought to go hand-in-hand, each relating to the other creating a

cycle of deprivation **that is difficult to escape** (Simmons, Thompson and Russell, 2014).

The youth and the poor have a long history of being accused of holding flawed cultural values that serve as a detriment to the social cohesion of society (Costa and Brunila, 2016). Such powerful discourses are embedded within the public's viewpoint and political dialogues and often take priority over a detailed understanding and assessment of how social justice is experienced by the young people themselves. Negative connotations of young people in 'hoodies' and 'pramface girls' destined for a life of exclusion reliant upon benefits are rife in Britain. One example of this is the moral panic surrounding the hoodie. The hoodie again became a symbol of youthful threatening behaviour during the 2011 riots.

Feared, derided, misunderstood and still resolutely un-hugged, the utilitarian, hugely popular sportswear garment, the hoodie, has staged a comeback against a backdrop of pyromania and rioting. Worn by millions every day: a generation's default wardrobe choice was transformed into an instant criminal cloak for London's looting youth. It may be more newsworthy now, but the hoodie and the folk devil it represents have been with us for a long time.

(Braddock, 2011. The Guardian Newspaper. The Power of the Hoodie).

In addition to being young, the NEET population have to negotiate domineering structures that position them as unemployed, lazy and welfare dependant. Indeed this research revealed that the young people themselves were aware of such discourses, and although many would describe themselves as poor they would not affiliate themselves with being lazy. The professionals working with them also had to negotiate these tensions.

You can appreciate that the cost of dealing with benefit claimants and how politically sensitive that is and the public paranoia about people claiming things that they are not entitled to, so the rules have to be very clear cut and very closely adhered to.

(Local Authority Careers Director Interview. 01/10/2010).

The young people and the professionals working with them had to manage the competing discourses related to on the one hand demonising the poor, young and unemployed and on the other with their own experiences of dealing with and actually being young, unemployed and poor.

I mean you do get people being unfair to young people. You do see a media portrayal sometimes where you feel that it isn't really fair.

(Connexions Personal Assistant Interview. 14/03/2012).

Notions of welfare dependency and cultures of worklessness were present amongst the professionals working with the NEET young people in this study and the young people themselves – even though they rejected them. Although the benefit claimants fiercely denied being lazy or feckless themselves, surprisingly there were willing to apply such labels to others in the same situation (Macdonald and Marsh, 2005). Shildrick et al (2012) also evidenced such beliefs amongst the poor but also found that they were largely based on myth and hearsay, with the reality being something quite different. The nature of the current labour market in Britain means that many working-class people 'churn' repeatedly between a series of insecure and poorly paid jobs, unemployment in various education and training spheres, meaning many poor people are neither permanently unemployed nor lacking a work ethic. Indeed the young people in this study tended to view their NEET status as temporary, unwanted and often made every attempt to disassociate themselves from the 'dole dossier' label, and instead labelled others (often living on the same street within the same community) with such negative brands. Hailey a teenage

mother, describes how she does not aspire to remain on (Lone Parent) Income Support³, when questioned what people she feels are judging her, she is unable to be specific, but nevertheless feels she is being judged.

Hailey I just want to be independent really because I don't want to be taking money off people because a lot of people criticise you for that.

L R What people?

Hailey Well people just think that I've got a kid and I've got no money to support her and so I'm just dependent on the state.

(Interview 04/05/2012)

In addition to being young, poor and unemployed Hailey was trying to manage the additional aspect of being a single teenage parent. She did however express agency and actively rejected all negative connotations associated with these labels by later entering University and working on placement as part of her Business Management Degree (for more on the education and employment pathways for young mothers see Russell, 2016). Hailey like the other NEET young people in this study moved in and out of the NEET status during the

³ Income Support helps people who do not have enough to live on. It is only available for certain groups of people who do not get Jobseeker's Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance and are not in full time employment. It is a means-tested benefit - entitlement is based on income, savings and other capital.

course of the fieldwork and thus support Shildrick et al (2012) and Maguire's work (2013, 2015) that quashes the assumption that people remain unemployed for long durations and throughout generations.

Rather than viewing NEET young people as occupying a constant unemployed status, this research acknowledges the 'churn' that many young people experience as they move in, out and across education, training and work spheres. Indeed the nature of today's UK labour market means that many working-class people (irrespective of age) continually 'churn' between states of insecure poorly paid work, bouts of unemployment and assorted state-sponsored training and retraining programmes (Shildrick et al, 2012).

You get quite a lot of churn through NEET for different reasons. EET (Engagement in Employment, Education and Training) itself can be disaffecting if people get disillusioned with the programme that they are on or they find that the programme that they are on doesn't lead to anything.

(Local Authority Careers Director Interview. 01/10/2010).

Many of the young people in this study did express frustration and alienation from the workforce and certain education and training programmes that seemed

to lead them to wasted pathways. The quality of employment and training on offer matters, doing something is not always better than doing nothing, as poor experiences can indeed lead to further feelings of disillusionment and disengagement. None of the young people in this study aspired to a life on benefits, indeed many desired a 'normal' life and hoped to gain decent, secure paid employment, buy a house and settle with a family. Vernon, one of the young men who was father to two children during the course of the study often expressed his desire to gain paid work and exit a life on benefits.

Vernon I'd work in McDonalds or something like that. It's a job. I'd do anything (...) All I ever get told is that I'm lazy and all I ever do is sit on my arse all the time.

L R Who says that to you?

Vernon Some people (...) it's not that I'm lazy, because I'm not lazy. I do everything I can, if I could get a job I'd do it, but there are no jobs around here. A lot of people don't understand that. Those people that are out earning think that people are on benefits for no reason.

L R So being on benefits is not something that you've chosen to do?

Vernon It's just what's gone on.

(Interview 19/05/11).

Vernon, like Hailey felt that he was being judged for his unemployed status and often talked about his lack of ability to provide for his young family. Living on benefits (Housing Benefit, Child Benefit and Job Seekers Allowance) meant finances were tight. Vernon, like other young people in this study felt they were being perceived negatively by 'other people' for being unemployed and expressed a desire to gain paid work and provide a better life for him and his family.

Certain structural barriers related to lack of financial resources, powerful social networks, and quality of qualifications, alongside personal circumstances often impeded upon a young person's ability to gain employment and exit their poverty stricken situation, leaving many young people feeling as though they were in a downward spiral of marginalisation that they struggled to exit. These young people were often unable to participate in certain social systems due to their lack of material and cultural resources. Marginalisation for them was undesirable and at odds with their values and aspirations to work, have a family and own a home. They didn't actively reject normative schemes of being and their cultural values were not inherently flawed as deficit models of being young,

poor and unemployed would argue, rather they accommodated to and resisted the structural barriers they existed and worked within by rejecting brands of being lazy, overcoming individual circumstances, prevailing non-progressive education and training pathways and financial barriers (related to benefits and lack of financial capital in general) to (re) enter work and attempt to engage in society in a productive and meaningful way (Simmons et al, 2014).

Personal circumstances and material disadvantages

Many of the young people in this study expressed frustration regarding their financial situation, with many attributing this to their lack of ability to re-engage and participate with education and employment. Personal circumstances and material deprivation were often linked, each influencing the other and thus facilitating the challenges many young people faced even when trying to manage the simplest of tasks that could help them participate in education and work spheres.

Cayden was 19 years of age and defined as NEET when fieldwork commenced at the end of 2010. Cayden did not take part in any paid employment during the research period, but he did participate in an employability training programme and undertook two spells of voluntary employment. He worked in a Care Home

as part of the employability programme and continued to volunteer there after the programme ceased and he worked for a charitable organisation from January 2012 until fieldwork ceased in 2013. Cayden was one of the nine participants from this study, who had experienced some time in the care system after the death of his mother. He lived with his uncle and his partner for some time in foster care. He remained in contact with his Uncle but his Uncle had since moved. Cayden subsequently became an independent liver⁴ as a teenager.

Cayden's flat

I meet Cayden at his flat. I ring the bell, Cayden runs down the stairs to meet me. He lives in an end flat at the top level. It is fairly quiet around here, he has a good view. He describes his flat as 'fairly big' – he has a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and living room. There is a Christmas tree up, with some cards and presents under the tree, he says the presents are for him and his brother. He says he will spend Christmas with his older brother – who also has no other family. He says he is very lucky and has all he needs.

⁴ A term used by the professionals working with NEET young people that described their independent living arrangements. Such young people lived separate from the parental/guardian home and often financially managed their own living space.

He has photographs of himself and people important to him displayed on the wall and scattered in a cabinet that was his mums. He shows me a photo of him, his sister and his brother, taken on the day of his mum's funeral – he says this is very special. He says it has been hard being so young and watching his mum die. He still goes to counselling on a Monday.

He has a photo collage of him, his uncle and his partner on the wall too; he says he is good at taking photographs. He shows me one pebble photo that his uncle gave him as a moving in present. He talks about getting another cabinet soon but wonders about where he will fit it. Everything is in place, neat and tidy.

He talks about wanting 'to get my life back' and talks about getting ready to start thinking about work. In the long-term he wants a job and a family. He'd like to move from this flat and own a house. He says many parents struggle with prams up the stairs here.

(Field notes 17/12/2010).

Like Vernon, Cayden aspired to one day own his own home, have a job and start a family. Cayden was relatively happy at his flat but saw it as a short term living arrangement. Cayden complained about young people throwing snowballs at his window and pointed to the impracticalities of living in a top floor flat with a young family. Cayden certainly felt alone during points of the fieldwork and looked forward to our meetings.

Cayden's personal circumstances, plus his learning difficulty meant that Cayden took a particular education and home and community pathway. He did not attend mainstream education and moved residence on a number of occasions after the death of his mother. These personal circumstances plus his consequent occupation in certain spheres shaped his ability to gain certain qualifications that hold currency in the labour market. Towards the end of the field work Cayden did work voluntarily in a charity and although he benefited from the social aspect of working he struggled to exit this placement and join the paid world of work. He enjoyed working at the charity but never really gained confidence to move on from there and had little opportunity to move from volunteer to paid member of staff. Cayden gained most of his qualifications from his school in 2007, these included AQA qualifications (from entry level to unit 2) including topics such as 'shape' and 'time'; OCR Entry Level Certificates in Information and Communication Technology (Entry 3) and ASDAN Youth

Achievement Award Bronze. The young people in this research supported Wolf's (2011) findings that low-level bite-sized qualifications do not hold the same credibility as more traditional academic qualifications, nor are they so readily recognizable by employers (Russell, 2014). Indeed many of the young people in this study had folders full of certificates and credentials that would take anyone a long time to sift through, understand and remember. These low-level qualifications, together with Cayden's instable home life and learning difficulty affected his ability to gain paid work and his access to money.

Cayden, like many of the young people in this study experienced issues with transport, general administration issues and bureaucratic barriers directly impacting upon his access to financial resources he was entitled to. Upon my third meeting with Cayden, these challenges become very apparent. We meet at the local Connexions Centre along with his key worker. Simple tasks such as gaining his Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA – a sum of 30 pounds a week paid fortnightly for those young people officially recognised as being in some form of education) and a bus pass become a time and resource consuming exercise.

Accessing financial benefits

I am struck by the practicalities that could potentially act as barriers to Cayden's ability to participate in an employability programme. Simple matters such as gaining an EMA number and a bus pass are not as straight forward as one would first expect. For example, Jack (Cayden's Connexions Key Worker) explains that they need an EMA number to claim Cayden's EMA. Jack tries to gain this information for Cayden but the EMA will not give this to Jack – Cayden must do this himself. Consequently Jack and Cayden ring them together, explaining that Cayden is about to start a course. Jack initiates the conversation and then passes the phone to Cayden to verify who he is, they ask Cayden what his previous address was, he cannot remember and as such they cannot get his EMA number. Jack then tries to resolve this by contacting one of Cayden's past key workers to find this information out, but the key worker does not answer his phone. So despite Jack's best efforts this issue is not resolved and is currently left. Furthermore Cayden has no bank account currently set up for the EMA to go into.

Jack organises for a bus pass to be made up for Cayden.

These are weekly bus passes that are given to learners on a weekly basis – as some young people drop out of the course part way through. Cayden has no passport photograph so Cayden and I go to the bus station to get these done. Cayden needs my assistance with this as he does not know how to work the machine. Jack gives us some money to do this, we need a £5 note and so firstly have to change a £10 note for two £5 notes at the bus station kiosk. With mine and Jack's help, his bus pass is sorted.

(Field notes 13/01/11).

Bureaucratic inconveniences and complications gaining entitled benefits were rife in this study. Many of the young people in this ethnography experienced inconsistencies with their benefits, whether they be education or out of work base benefits. These issues sometimes took months to resolve and in some circumstances prevented the young people from engaging with education and training programmes, paid and volunteer work. They also left these financially vulnerable young people susceptible to getting themselves in debt, thus illustrating the cumulative effect of being unemployed and poor (Simmons and Thompson, 2016). For Waquant (1996) one of the key drivers contributing to the

process of marginalisation is the degradation of waged labour, and while elements of this ring true here the obloquy of unpaid labour for the working classes in addition to the day-to-day realities of being poor reveal that many young and unemployed people in post-industrial Britain are currently suffering from the effects of being in a marginalised position. Cayden certainly struggled to escape the volunteer post he occupied. For many in this study, working was not a simple means of escaping poverty, indeed for many it cemented their socially excluded position within education and work spheres as they struggled to escape the low-pay no-pay cycle identified by Shildrick et al (2012).

The realities of signing on and gaining benefits

Obtaining benefits that young people were entitled to was often problematic and very time-consuming, and frequently required the assistance from professionals working with the young people. I first meet Karla, an eighteen year old independent liver who had recently left care on an employability programme designed by the local career supervisor with the intent to get NEET young people from a Looked After Care background into work. Looked After Care NEET young people were considered a vulnerable group within the local authority and as such special employability programmes were put in place for

them to attend, along with extra financial assistance to aid their entry into work, education or training. Karla and I leave the programme with the career supervisor's instructions to go to the local job centre plus centre to access her funds.

Chasing funds

12.00 I leave with Karla. She doesn't know the area too well and wants me to go with her. We walk to the Job centre Plus Centre, ask somebody labelled 'here to help' for help and say Hazel (the career supervisor) had sent us from the Looked After Care Team for Karla's money. She takes us to a desk, we repeat why we are here again, the lady makes a phone call and says the lady we need to see has gone on her break and won't be back until 1pm. She says we can try the building across the road (next to the local connexions centre) to see if they can help us faster.

We enter the building, another man greets us and asks us if we need help, we repeat ourselves again, he takes us to a desk where a lady is sat, she asks us what we need and we repeat ourselves again. She makes a phone call and says she

cannot get the money as she has no keys but we are to wait while she receives another phone call – we don't know who, why or for how long? About half an hour passes before the lady tells us there is nothing she can do as she doesn't have the keys.

Karla says she is feeling ill; she looks pale and says she'll need to get a taxi home. I suggest she might want to see a doctor, she informs me that she has tried to register with a medical centre but they have said they are full. She says she could go to A and E if she feels any worse. I ask the lady what we should do and she looks at me with a blank face and says, 'go to the pharmacy' and Karla responds 'but I have no money'.

(Field notes 03/02/2011)

As far as I'm aware Karla never managed to receive her money, she left the centre and caught the bus home (with her one week free bus pass given to her for attending the employability programme) alone without visiting the pharmacy. Many of the young people in this study expressed frustrations with the bureaucratic, incompetent nature of their experience with the Job Centre Plus.

Young people disliked these places and loathed the repetitive mandatory rules they had to abide by in order to receive their entitlements. Many hours were wasted waiting, repeating oneself with the end result not always being financially fruitful. Jasmine's response below is typical when describing 'signing on' – otherwise known as obtaining Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). JSA is a form of unemployment benefit paid by the Government of the United Kingdom to people who are unemployed and actively seeking work. It is part of the social security benefits system and is intended to cover living expenses while the claimant is out of work. You usually have to be over the age of 18 years and are required to sign on at least once every two weeks).

L R What's it like signing on?

Jasmine Oh it's annoying. Seriously I have to get up at a really early time – at half nine every single Monday morning and my £100 that I get paid on Thursday, after I sign on, that doesn't last two weeks so I have to walk into town every Monday and then sit in there for - it depends how packed it is.

L R And what do you have to do?

Jasmine You go to the people who are sat down behind a desk and they ask if I've been looking for a job and if you say no you don't get your money.

L R Is this the Job Centre Plus?

Jasmine Yeah, in the middle of town. And then they ask about it and blah, blah, blah, blah. Some people just blag it and for a couple of weeks I've blagged it. That week I was in hospital I blagged it. I don't blag it so much now because I do look on the internet for jobs.

L R So if you've been ill do you not get your money?

Jasmine No you're only allowed to be ill twice.

L R In a year?

Jasmine Yeah.

L R And do they check if you are looking for work?

Jasmine Well if you say you're job searching they can't do much about it.

L R And what if you're in education or on a course?

Jasmine Well it's only a little course on a Wednesday so I don't tell 'em about that. But if I got to CMS or something they will put me onto income support.

L R And is that less money?

Jasmine No it's more money and I don't have to sign on.

L R So going to CMS might be something you would want to do then for that reason?

Jasmine It's just that your money gets knocked off so much easier when you're on income support. My money stopped when I turned eighteen

(Interview 29/03/2011).

Jasmine was 18 years of age when we first met, she was also an independent liver and struggled managing her own finances. She finished her schooling with 6/7 GCSEs grade A-C. She was dyslexic and suffered with bouts of depression after her mum suffered brain damage following a car accident. She attended a local Technical College to do Performing Arts, but didn't finish this as she suffered with depression. She then started an apprenticeship in childcare. She was there for 9 months but didn't manage to maintain participation as she was

living with her mum at the time. She struggled caring for her mum and training simultaneously and consequently decided to find a place of her own. She then volunteered in a nursery placement for a few months, but had to stop this as she wasn't getting paid and found it stressful. She then came into contact with a local housing support charity, she attended a 'take on' programme - a 12 week course that involved a housing support worker helping her to manage her finances and pay bills. She also attended a training centre and completed a 'pathway in', 'counselling', 'living on your own', 'dance', 'drama', 'drugs and alcohol awareness' course. After completing these courses she attended a training centre to build on her maths and English; this was an old E2E project and was then termed a 'Foundation Level One' course. She quit this as she felt it was wasting her time and subsequently decided she wanted a paid job.

Jasmine like all the participants in this study had a complex education, employment and training pathway that depicts the churn often experienced by NEET young people. Jasmine was active in her local community and regularly managed charity events aimed at raising funds for people suffering from brain injury. She completed several bite size low level qualifications that held little credibility or acknowledgement in the world of employment. She spent some time volunteering and had to cut her planned education pathway short due to the related issues concerning caring for her mum and experiencing depression.

Jasmine did some cash in hand cleaning for a neighbour to help supplement her income for a few months too. She also had a short spell working in a care home but experienced problems securing her wage. In such circumstances it is useful to be reminded about the classic Marxist concept of alienation to conceptualise many of these young people's experiences of trying to gain paid work and maintain it. None of the young people who started an apprenticeship during the course of the research completed it and the employability courses many repetitively undertook seldom led to a secure job or useful further training (for more details with regards to the insecure low paid nature of employment for young people please refer to Simmons et al 2014).

Together with demonstrating the challenges NEET young people face when experiencing the churn and signing on, Jasmynes interview transcript reveals how one has to play the game and undermine the benefit system at times just to survive. Here Jasmine demonstrates knowledge and agency in her management of the benefit system. Jasmine had spent some time in hospital after a mental break down and so had to 'blag' job centre plus professionals while signing on to ensure she gained her income support. It is paramount that the young people physically attend and 'sign on' otherwise their benefits are cut and/or stopped. Jasmine had two non-attendance marks against her due to being ill and so had to say she was looking for work during her recovery from a

metal break down even though actually this was not the case during this time frame.

Jasmine's break-down

2.00pm I meet Jasmine and Becky her friend outside McDonalds. Jasmine was late coming in as she had a gas leak to sort out at her flat – she has left workers there sorting the problem. Jasmine had a mental break down on Thursday, she rang her mum, her mum came over to her flat and she dropped a glass bottle smashing it on the floor and ripping her kitchen lining. She ended up running out of her flat with no shoes and coat, her friend Becky found her on a heap behind some houses near her house, she was admitted to hospital and spent the night there as they were concerned for her wellbeing – she had drunk a lot of alcohol and they asked Becky if she had overdosed but Jasmine says she hadn't, Becky said she found no pills and Jasmine admitted to having suicidal thoughts – she talks about how she feels everyone would be much better off if she wasn't around but goes on to explain that she hasn't thought about how she might do it. (Observers Comment - I am concerned this point but the

hospital have records of this and her housing support officer is conducting a home visit when she returns from annual leave next week). She is on anti-depressants.

(Field notes 24/02/2011).

Poor health and family tragedy were common amongst many of the young people who participated in this ethnography. These sorts of challenges sometimes acted as barriers to re-engagement, but at other times acted as motives to engage, as in Jasmine's case to raise significant funds for local brain damaged victims.

Limited opportunities

Feelings of marginalisation across work, home and education spheres were common amongst these young people and while they sometimes internalised deficit individualistic explanations of their poverty struck situation, the structural implications regarding their limited opportunities also need to be recognised. Wacquant's (1996) definition of marginalisation reminds us that one's social hierarchical position can indeed inhibit their potential to exploit other life opportunities and finances, thus adding to the 'downward spiral' many of the young people in this study described as experiencing.

...what the fuck do you expect me to do? I'm spiralling downwards; I can't live; I can't even stay in my own flat because it is unliveable; no gas, no electric, no food. Jack shit!

(Interview with Jasmine 18/12/2012).

In addition to the issues young people faced when trying to access financial entitlements, feel integrated within their community and ability to (re)-integrate into credible employment, education and training spheres due to their lack of ability to gain viable qualifications that hold currency, structural barriers relating to the local employment landscape and education and training available also need to be recognised.

L R What sort of barriers do you think the young people face both locally and nationally?

Jack Lack of opportunity. Lack of jobs. There are fewer training places now available and there are fewer training organisations than there used to be because we keep losing them.

L R Is that due to the funding?

Jack Yeah.

(Connexions PA Interview 14/03/12).

The structural barriers in addition to the young person's personal circumstances need to be considered if any meaningful strategies are to be implemented to tackle a young person's limited opportunity and fulfil their desire to exit poverty.

Conclusions

These young people are viewed as agentic individuals resisting yet sometimes still accommodating to certain class stereotypes. **They demonstrate awareness and knowledge about how to manage the nuances involved with being poor and unemployed.** How marginalisation manifests itself and is experienced by the individual shapes their motivation, ability and power to participate in education, work and education. These experiences are not inherent, but should rather be viewed as part of a process of marginalisation which is **current**, ongoing and cumulative. **Marginalisation offers a powerful lens through which to view the lives of these NEET young people.** In accordance with Waquant's (1996) conceptualisation of marginalisation, the macro impeding structures of globalisation, together with the intensification of capitalist accumulation shape the nature of wage labour in these NEET young people's localities and their ability to gain decent paid work and exit poverty. Indeed in some instances their

marginalised position can be seen as reinforced by current education, employment and welfare policy that seems to underpin their cycle of deprivation rather than alleviate it. Despite these overarching domineering structures, these young people expressed agency and often did not reject dominant normative schemes and values, indeed in most cases they aspired to them. They wanted to work, own a house and raise a family. Furthermore, certain forms of marginalisation, which at first appear voluntary, such as the action of failing to turn up for work need to be understood in terms of the overall process of marginalisation. The young people in this study felt marginalised, struggled yet still managed in certain circumstances to engage in education, work, family and community spheres and negotiated their pathway to survival.

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