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[Biography, History and Place: Understanding Youth Transitions in Teeside.](#)

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Introduction: *transitions*

This chapter is about young people's transitions to adulthood. During the 1990s and 2000s, the concept of 'transition' took some buffeting in Youth Studies. It was alleged to be overly normative and policy-driven, dominated by dry, quantitative approaches that failed to engage with the agency and cultures of young and obsolete because of the blurring of the boundaries between youth and adulthood people (Cohen and Ainley, 2000; Miles, 2000; Jeffs and Smith, 1998). We have argued, however, there remains value in a concept that captures the *inherently* transitional nature of youth as a life-phase, without prejudging what the nature, content, direction, form or length of what that transition might be (see MacDonald et al, 2001). 'Transition' has survived these earlier skirmishes. It remains one of the most important concepts in Youth Studies; by examining transitions in the youth phase we gain a particularly privileged vantage point from which to discern wider processes of social change and continuity (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; MacDonald, 2011).

The research material that underpins the chapter has been gathered in a town, Middlesbrough (at the centre of Teesside in North East England), which itself has undergone remarkable transitions: from a rural hamlet in the early 19th century, to smoky industrial boom town within fifty years, to a place world famous for its industrial prowess and output by the mid-20th century, to one of the poorest and most deindustrialised parts of the country in the early 21st century. Teesside is a fascinating place; the rapidity and sheer scale of change in its fortunes allow for close investigation of the sociological consequences of economic collapse. Dave Byrne (1999) has described Teesside 'as one of the most deindustrialised locales' in the UK and, in fact, it is hard to think of anywhere else, including amongst the rust belt cities of the USA and Europe, that has undergone such a dramatic turnaround. It is in this place that we have undertaken a series of research projects first begun in the late 1990s – *the Teesside Studies of Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion*.

The focus of the chapter, then, will be on the way that young people make transitions to adulthood in times of socio-economic change, under inauspicious conditions (of rising rates of poverty for young adults, of declining opportunities for standard, rewarding employment, a policy context that reduces social security for young adults, austerity cuts to youth services) and in a place (Teesside, North East England) that has high levels of multiple deprivation.

The first aim of the chapter is to describe these studies. The original contribution and the difference with our previous publications comes with the second and third aims. The second is to provide an overall, composite summary of the main, thematic findings from *all* of these studies *in toto*. The third aim of the chapter is to make sense of the twists and turns of economically marginal youth transitions by setting them in a developed discussion of the social, economic, geographic, historic and political context in which these biographies have played out. Emphasis is given here to the active processes and decisions that result in the

economic marginality of places and populations. Our argument is that we cannot hope to make sense of the complexities of individual biographies or answer the pressing policy problems that relate to 'socially excluded youth' without this deeper and wider sociological analysis.

Researching youth transitions and social exclusion: *the Teesside Studies*

These are a set of five main, connected studies funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council, undertaken by the authors and colleagues, that have sought to describe and theorise the transitions to adulthood made by young people who were growing up in Middlesbrough, the main town of the conurbation of Teesside in North East England. At the time of the research, i.e. from the late 1990s onwards, the research neighbourhoods (in East Middlesbrough) were amongst the most extremely deprived in the town - and the country (DETR, 2000).

Each of the studies had its own particular aims but, in general, the research has been motivated by a desire to critically engage with powerful but controversial theories and novel but abstract concepts via a qualitative, critical case study approach that puts ideas to the empirical test. An abiding aim has been to test different forms of underclass theory. The idea of a cultural underclass of the undeserving poor has a very long history, with variants appearing under different names and guises, in successive historical periods (MacDonald, 1997; Welshman, 2013). There has been considerable academic critique as well (e.g. Bagguley and Mann, 1992; Morris, 1994). In the 1990s, Charles Murray and others argued that in the UK, like the USA, there had emerged below the working-class a new, welfare dependent, anti-social and morally reprehensible 'underclass' (Murray, 1990; 1994). MacDonald (1997) argued that many of the extant studies that wished to contest these theories were methodologically unlikely to be able empirically to locate the alleged underclass (even if it existed). Thus, we have developed critical case study methods that have allowed the best possible chance to uncover a new 'underclass' and, more recently, 'cultures of worklessness' and 'families where no-one has worked over three generations' (a current phrasing of very old underclass ideas).

Each study published a main report or book, and associated journal articles and chapters in edited collections. The first two studies - *Snakes and Ladders* (Johnston et al, 2000) and *Disconnected Youth?* (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) each carried out biographical interviews (Chamberlayne et al, 2000) with 15 to 25 year olds. The combined sample totaled 186 young people (82 females and 104 males), from the predominantly white working-class population resident in Middlesbrough's social housing estates. These were purposive, theoretical samples rather than statistically randomised ones. People were recruited (via different agencies and 'gatekeepers' in the research sites, and via snowballing from initial interviews) in order for us to be able to generate convincing analyses of different aspects of youth transition and to be able to answer our theoretical questions. Both studies also used episodes of participation observation and together interviewed around 50 welfare practitioners who worked in some capacity with young people.

The third study - *Poor Transitions* (Webster et al, 2004) – followed up a proportion of the 186 interviewees (34 in total, 18 females and 16 males) to see where earlier transitions had led these individuals in their mid to late twenties (aged 23 to 29 years), including in respect of their labour market progress (or lack of progress, as was the case for most). A fourth study, *Poverty and Insecurity* (Shildrick et al, 2012a), had a primary interest in longer-term experiences of the ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ – that is, of churning between insecure, low paid jobs and time unemployed and on benefits. The sample included thirty people who had participated in the earlier Teesside studies and who were, at the time, now aged over 30 years (in addition, we talked to thirty new interviewees, aged over 40 years). The fifth study – *Are cultures of worklessness passed down the generations?* (Shildrick et al, 2012b) – was different from its predecessors in that it also included comparative research in a deprived neighbourhood of Glasgow (Scotland), as well as in Middlesbrough, and in that it included none of the original research interviewees. Rather, this project sought to investigate the value of the idea of ‘intergenerational cultures of worklessness’ – a variant of underclass theory - in explaining concentrations of poverty and unemployment in the UK. This involved a new sample of 47 interviewees from across two generations in twenty families (in Middlesbrough and Glasgow).

The first four Teesside studies incorporated elements of qualitative longitudinal youth research. This is quite rare and Gunter and Watt (2009: 516) have described the ‘Teesside School’ as providing the ‘most intensive example of youth transitions research in the UK’. Because youth transitions typically have become extended and more complex (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007), studying them requires a longer time frame. Just looking at the immediate post-school years, or even the early twenties, provides an age span that is insufficient to the task of gauging their twists, turns and outcomes. As we will note, answering important theoretical and policy questions has only been possible because our research has followed youth transitions as they play out over a longer period (until their thirties, for some interviewees). As noted in introduction, one of the criticisms of youth research has been an overly narrow focus on ‘school to work careers’. As well as a long view, the Teesside studies took a broad view of ‘youth transition’ and investigated how six facets of young people’s lives interrelated to make the overall shape and nature of their transitions to adulthood. In addition to ‘school to work careers’, these were: ‘housing careers’ (including the movement to independent living); ‘family careers’ (including the movement from ‘family of origin’ to ‘family of destination’); what we coined ‘leisure careers’ (changing patterns of free-time association and activity); ‘criminal careers’ (patterns of offending, non-offending and desistance) and ‘drug-using careers’ (engagement with illicit drug use). A final characteristic of the Teesside Studies that is worth mentioning here is that they have managed to gain first-hand, detailed and lengthy biographical accounts from the sorts of young people and young adults who are often described as ‘hard to reach’ and upon whom a variety of inaccurate labels are sometimes pinned and who, it is often claimed, need to be ‘given a voice’ (e.g. Barry, 2005). They are variously described as ‘disengaged’, ‘disconnected’, ‘socially excluded’, ‘disaffected’ and so on (MacDonald, 2008), labels which proved to be unhelpful to the job of describing their dispositions and conditions of life.

Growing up in Britain's 'Poor Neighbourhoods': Research Findings

In sum, we have gathered a substantial amount of research material from young people about transitions to adulthood under adverse conditions of multiple deprivation. We have published widely but we have not previously gathered together all of the most significant findings from these separate studies in summary form. This is what we do in the following section under five sub-headings.

Conventional aspirations

A sensible starting point is to report the sorts of values, goals and aspirations expressed by the young people we interviewed. These were stubbornly normal and conventional, even if the circumstances in which they were growing up were abnormal and unusually difficult. An abiding motivation of social scientists (sociologists interested in the underclass, criminologists interested in deviant subcultures; e.g. Cohen, 1955) has been to pin down alien, subterranean values amongst those 'at the bottom'. Rarely if ever are these found. 'They' tend to want the same sorts of things that 'we' do. This was the case with our research participants. They aspired to 'settling down' with someone they loved - and having children 'when the time was right'. They wanted in due course to have their own homes (which they owned, preferably) 'somewhere quiet'; this is a throw-away phrase loaded with meaning. They meant they wanted to live somewhere that was not as troubled with crime, anti-social behaviour, street disturbances and the ill-effects of the local heroin economy as were the neighbourhoods where they had grown up. They did not, however, want to move far away from the neighbourhoods they knew and where their extended families and friends all tended to live.

Even though dominant media stereotypes might regard these as 'welfare dependent' groups, participants predominantly imagined their futures in jobs. The work ethic expressed by interviewees was strong and typical of industrial working-class communities in the UK (Jackson, 1972). This was one aspect of their intergenerational inheritance; parents passed on norms and values about work and welfare even if the conditions of the local labour market had altered radically over the last decades of the twentieth century. There was a strong moral opposition to being 'welfare dependent'. Stigma pervaded interviewees' discussions of 'being on benefits', reflecting not only the public disgust about 'scroungers' that has been fomented by politicians and the media so vigorously in the last few years in the UK (Jensen, 2014) but longer standing working-class beliefs about being, and being perceived as, 'respectable' rather than 'rough' and part of the 'undeserving poor' (Roberts, 1971; Roberts, 2001). Thus, even being labelled as 'poor' was a source of shame (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013).

The sorts of jobs that people aspired to were the sorts of jobs that were typically done by working-class people like them. Gender norms, too, influenced choices about training schemes and possible jobs (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Rarely did we come across individuals expressing employment aspirations that seemed incredible or absurdly ambitious. Interestingly, given the speedy transformation in the nature of available employment, neither did we find interviewees expressing antiquated job preferences that harked back to the realities of previous decades. On this same theme, nor did there seem to be much of a 'crisis of masculinity' going on (McDowell, 2000). Some young men still could

find jobs that enabled the expression of what are regarded as traditional forms of 'hard' working-class masculinity (e.g. as labourers, trainee mechanics, security guards, factory workers). Others did not baulk at what are described as more feminised forms of service sector employment (e.g. working in bars, fast food restaurants, shops).

In sum, then, in terms of what are regarded as the three core aspects of transition to adulthood (employment, family and housing careers) young people expressed highly conventional views and aspirations. This was even true of our fifth study (Shildrick et al, 2012b) where we interviewed a sample of young adults who came from families that were highly unusual in the extremity and multiplicity of troubles they faced (and caused) (Shildrick et al, 2016). Indeed, the strength of this finding was such that it was a key part of our overall rejection of the validity of the 'cultures of worklessness' thesis (MacDonald et al, 2013); young people did not 'inherit' from their long-term unemployed parents values and aspirations that were different from the mainstream.

'Poor work' and the 'low pay, no pay cycle'.

If there was no obvious disconnection between mainstream social values and those of our research participants, there was a disjuncture between what they aspired to and what they achieved. For reasons of space, we will mainly concentrate on their school to labour market experiences.

They had low qualifications – and attended schools where low qualifications were the norm. Interviewees' recollections of their school days ranged through across descriptions of disappointment, dismay, disaffection and disengagement (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Oppositional working-class attitudes to school were only part of the story (Willis, 1977; Brown, 1986) and not set in stone where they existed; re-engagement with college courses in later years was quite common but the pay-offs in terms of improved labour market fortunes were patchy (Webster et al, 2004). Thus, these underqualified working-class young people tended to enter the labour market relatively early, making 'fast track' transitions to jobs, training schemes and unemployment (Jones, 2002). Unsurprisingly, all the young people we interviewed had some experience of being unemployed. These experiences were reminiscent of accounts gathered in previous decades, in the UK and elsewhere (Jahoda, 1982). The vocational courses that they undertook tended to be of poor quality and provided little obvious enhancement to their labour market fortunes. Again, this is in line with what we know about the long-standing stratification of youth training schemes (Roberts and Parsell, 1992) and the muddled and parlous state of post-16 vocational education in the UK (Woolf, 2011).

One of the 'headline' findings of the Teesside Studies is this; even in this depressed labour market young adults were able to access low skilled, low quality, low paid jobs, they were able to do this repeatedly, this work tended to be insecure (it was offered on temporary contracts or was otherwise short-lived, with employees leaving jobs most often not through their own choice) and this 'poor work' (Byrne, 1999) was central to and constitutive of a 'low pay, no pay' cycle wherein interviewees churned between insecure jobs and unemployment over months and years. Because of the hassles and stigma of claiming benefits many of those in the low-pay, no-pay cycle would avoid registering as unemployed during what they hoped would be shorter periods of unemployment. Not only did they miss out on rightful benefits they were missed from the unemployment count. For this reason,

we coined the phrase ‘the missing workless’ (Shildrick et al, 2012a). Critically, against the policy and research orthodoxy (MacDonald, 2017), the research showed that this was *not* a ‘natural’ facet of the youth labour market, i.e. that new labour market participants would eventually settle down into steady, lasting employment (Quintini et al, 2007), nor a feature of an experimental phase of ‘Emerging Adulthood’ (Arnett, 2006). Rather, this was a lasting experience. Following research participants over time showed that this was the pattern of working life for people at 17, at 27 and at 37 years. This low-pay, no-pay cycle was also a typical experience for older workers in Teesside and elsewhere (Shildrick et al, 2012a).

What effect did these forms of faltering, difficult employment career have on family and housing careers? Perhaps surprisingly, many of the research participants were able to make relatively successful housing transitions and transitions to becoming parents themselves. Indeed, we found that in later rounds of interviewing developments in these spheres of people’s lives imbued a sense of personal change and progress (even where they were still stuck in cycles of unemployment and low paid jobs) (Webster et al, 2004). It should be noted that our participants were making these transitions in the 2000s, prior to the effects of the Great Recession and subsequent austerity programmes, and in a local context where, at the time, affordable and reasonable quality, rented social housing was relatively easily available.

‘Welfare to work’, austerity ‘reforms’ and what employers want

The policy orthodoxy in the UK, as with the EU more generally, is that unemployment can be tackled by Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs), increasing conditionality tests on, and reductions in, welfare benefits, and potentially, by upskilling the workforce to meet the skills needs of employers (MacDonald, 2016). None of these policy planks was supported by evidence from our research. The unemployed were active job-seekers regardless of ALMPs¹; and the interventions of the latter had apparently little positive effect on chances of employment. In fact, official employment service practices sometimes *inhibited* informal ones that seemed to work better (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Young unemployed people in our studies collectively spent thousands of hours engaged in them but very rarely, if ever, did they get jobs through Job Clubs, Job Centre advertised vacancies, youth training schemes and New Deal programmes.

The full force of increased conditionality tests and welfare benefit sanctions regimes had not hit our research participants at the time of our first four studies. This came later with the advent of the Coalition government in 2010 and Conservative Government in 2015. We know these have had a very adverse effect on already disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, with young people hit particularly hard (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013; Watts, 2014; Unison, 2016). Dramas like the film ‘*I, Daniel Blake*’ (dir. Ken Loach, 2016) have made more visible the cruel machinations of the UK’s degraded benefit system. The perversity of these ‘reforms’ is that there is no evidence that unemployed people require more motivation to seek work; in this sense, they appear to be ‘punishing the poor’ (Wacquant, 2009) and a way of disciplining populations to the requirements of a late capitalist economy for workers ready to accept casualised ‘poor work’ (Byrne, 1999). Thus, we have argued that

¹ This was not wholly true of middle generation interviewees in our fifth study. They had unusually lengthy unemployment and, often, a host of contributory factors had led to a more fatalistic withdrawal from the labour market.

there is, in fact, *already* a close fit between what at least some local employers *really* want (which is *not* qualifications and skills but ‘the right attitude’) and what underqualified job-seekers can offer, i.e. this ‘right attitude’, which means being ready and willing to take on irregular, insecure, low paid, work, repeatedly over months and years (Shildrick et al, 2012a).

‘Social exclusion’? Social capital and deprived neighbourhoods

‘Social exclusion’, we conclude, is a label readily applied to people and places that experience social and economic inequalities and disadvantage but which does not capture the conditions of life of our participants in a literal sense (MacDonald et al, 2005). Instead, their strong ties to family and friends in these neighbourhoods (places where these families had tended to live over decades) was at the root of a sense of social *inclusion*. Social networks of friends and family enabled a sense of ‘knowing’ (other people, local cultural mores and rules) and of ‘being known’ (to other people, of ‘fitting in’). This ‘bonding social capital’ (Putnam, 1995) it is often reported as facet of working-class neighbourhoods (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Thus, rather than lacking in social capital, these neighbourhoods had a sort of supportive, bonding social capital that is perhaps lacking from middle-class suburbia. It was drawn upon in numerous ways, for example in providing emotional support in times of distress; for informal care (e.g. of children); for loans of money; in protection against criminal victimisation and so on.

A final example is one of the most significant. A traditional aspect of life in working-class communities in the UK (Marsden and Duff, 1975), this still maintained in these parts of Teesside: local networks of information and recommendation were the principle source of employment. People got jobs through ‘who they knew, not what they knew’. In thinking about patterns of continuity and exchange in intergenerational relationships, this was one of the most substantial ways in which parents could assist young people. Being connected into these community networks was essential for ‘getting by’ and getting jobs. The value of these informal networks was far in excess of the value of formal employment services and ‘work readiness’ schemes. They still ‘worked’ in a locality of high unemployment and in a context of a shift from the dominance of heavy industry to the dominance of service sector work. As time went on, however, and as older workers in the parent generation spent longer periods out of work or in only insecure ‘poor work’, there were indications that this social capital depleted and their power to assist their children in the search for jobs slowly waned (Shildrick et al, 2012a). The fact of this was evidenced by our fifth study. The middle generation we sampled had been out of the labour market for several years and they had unusually limited experience of jobs. Low on financial and cultural capital, they also lacked the sort of social capital that elsewhere can be valuable for young working-class job-seekers.

A paradox was uncovered by our investigation of ‘social exclusion’. Although the networks of social support made life liveable and helped people to get by in arduous circumstances there was also a sense in which they tied people into place, socially and geographically. Leaving - giving up the security of knowing and being known and abandoning the trusted networks that worked - was difficult to do but *not* leaving them meant facing the continued restrictions and inequalities of some of the most deprived and poorest wards in England.

Anti-social youth?

This was a locality that at the time of the research had higher than average rates of youth offending, was said to be plagued by 'anti-social behaviour' (the UK in the 1990s and 2000s had a national obsession with targeting and punishing 'anti-social behaviour', which usually meant disciplining the informal, public socialising of gatherings of young working-class men and women) and that was badly affected by 'problematic drug use' (see Simpson et al, 2007 for definitions of drug using behaviour). Thus, to reiterate, as well as the standard aspects of youth transition now researched by youth sociologists, we also investigated the leisure, drug-using and criminal careers of our participants (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2002).

The value of our long-term view of youth transitions and the longitudinal element to the research was well demonstrated by the detailed picture we gained of the typical criminal careers that were evident for a minority of interviewees. In short, disaffection from school hardened into disengagement and persistent truancy, with time spent with others in the 'street corner society' of their estates (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007). 'Leisure-time crime' – petty thieving and vandalism - spiced up the monotony of truanting days. For some, and before long, illicit but 'normal' patterns of *recreational* alcohol and drug use (of cannabis, ecstasy, speed) morphed into more destructive, addictive *problematic* drug use (of heroin, and later, crack cocaine). The intertwining of drug and criminal careers, with addiction to heroin driving chaotic, acquisitive offending and subsequent repeated imprisonment, led to some of the saddest narratives that we gathered, with participants describing their sense of shame, regret and loss at the crimes and damage they had done. Desistance from crime and drug use was possible, however, and attempts at this were reported commonly in our later studies (Webster et al, 2004); new partnerships, parenthood, employment, decent drug treatment, separation from criminogenic peer groups and other factors were important in this process (if difficult to achieve for already and otherwise disadvantaged young adults).

Our account is one that seriously questions both underclass theories of crime (Murray, 1990) and risk factor approaches (see MacDonald, 2006) (e.g. these populations were awash with all the 'worst' risk factors but only a minority offended). More contingent, biographic-level explanations – including the unpredictable impact of unpredictable 'critical moments' (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2013) - were helpful in explaining why some offended and some did not and why and when some desisted from crime. Above this, however, was a key meso-level factor that framed the sets of circumstances in which these biographies were made. This was the impact of what became known as a '*second wave*' heroin outbreak on Teesside (Parker et al, 1998), in the mid-1990s - prior to which there was no discernible heroin market in the area. The arrival of heroin on to the streets of Middlesbrough at this time in history meant that our participants were faced with the threat of a particularly destructive drug as they were passing through their teenage years. For a minority, this had dramatic consequences for their lives. The long-term impact of the early effect of heroin drug careers was demonstrated by our interviews in Glasgow with a sample of middle-aged and long-term unemployed parents. In all these cases heroin addiction in young adulthood (resultant from the UK's '*first wave*' heroin outbreak, in Glasgow in the 1980s) was heavily implicated in the later troubles of these individuals and their families.

Explaining youth transitions in Teesside: biography, history and place

In summary, the young people we talked to were united in an experience of long-term economic marginality and poverty, which lasted into adulthood. It is *not* possible to explain this in relation to deviant values or non-conventional aspirations, by outlandish expectations for the future, in relation to widespread anti-social or criminal dispositions, by negative attitudes towards employment or by 'welfare dependency', by 'social exclusion' or a lack of social capital, or by a mismatch between what they offer and the needs of local employers.

Voodoo sociology

Too often accounts of the social exclusion, unemployment or transitions of young adults rely on one-sided stories of their characteristics – which are usually painted as a series of lacks. Indeed, in the UK for politicians, policy makers, think-tanks, social welfare agencies and even some academics, 'lack of aspiration' has now become one of the most common and taken-for-granted 'explanations' (e.g. Chapman et al, 2011). MacDonald (2016) describes this as *voodoo sociology*: an insistence, against the weight of substantial available evidence, that problems of youth unemployment can be magically resolved by recanting the mantra of 'raise aspirations'. This available evidence includes a long tradition of UK sociological research that documents how young people's transitions are socially structured and not the simple outcome of agency or aspiration (e.g. Ashton and Maguire, 1982; Bynner et al, 1997; Ball et al, 2000).

Some basic labour market statistics can confound this voodoo sociology. For instance, in Middlesbrough, Teesside, in March 2015 there were 3.3 unemployed claimants for every notified vacancy. Experts agree that not all vacancies are 'notified'; there are more jobs on offer than this. Experts also agree, however, that there are more people looking for jobs than are registered to claim unemployment benefits. That in Teesside typically 28 young adults apply for every *single* manufacturing and engineering apprenticeship would seem to confirm this point (TVU, 2014). The same pattern can be seen on a bigger canvas. In the US in 2011, the McDonald's fast food chain held a hiring day. They were looking to recruit 50,000 new staff. They had 1 million applications! (eventually taking on 62,000 new workers²). Similarly, 'welfare to work programmes' falter when there are limited numbers of decent jobs to which the unemployed can be moved. For instance, the government's flagship 'Work Programme' for the long-term unemployed has a success rate in Middlesbrough of 8% (i.e. it could help fewer than one in ten participants into lasting employment) (Northern Echo, 2013).

If we are accurately to make sense of youth transitions we need to lift our gaze, from the characteristics of young people and the minutiae of the twists and turns of their transitions, and 'look up' to the opportunity structures that prevail for them and the social, economic and political forces that shape these conditions. In doing this we can seek to rise to the challenge laid down by C Wright Mills (1959) and develop a sociological imagination that connects the 'private troubles' of individuals with the 'public issues of social structure', to

² This acceptance rate of 6.2% meant it was harder to get a job at McDonalds than a place at Yale University, as one commentator noted at the time <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/05/mcdonalds-national-hiring-day>

connect biography and history. This also necessitates close attention to place – and to the biography of Teesside. This is a place that allows us to see this connection, between private troubles and public issues, between biography and social structure, in sharp focus. It is a microcosm of wider social and economic change, showing general patterns in dramatic relief.

A Story of Teesside

Arguably, nowhere else in the developed economies of the Global North has witnessed such rapid and deep changes in its economic fortunes; from ‘boom to bust in quick time’ as one report described it (Foord et al, 1995). What has happened here has happened elsewhere but it has happened here more dramatically and more quickly.

As recently as the 1960s Teesside had full employment, was one of England’s most prosperous and successful local economies, and was world renowned for its industrial prowess and productivity. It boasted the world’s largest single chemical plant (ICI Billingham) at one point, and from here came the iron and steel that built many of ‘the wonders of the industrial world’ – e.g. the Golden Gate Bridge, Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Indian railway system. Reflecting traditional class and gender patterns, Teesside was a place ‘that worked’. From a rural hamlet, it was brought into life in the nineteenth century to be a centre for heavy industry and the well-paid, high skilled (‘male’) jobs that the economy eventually provided during the boom years of the mid-twentieth century were the basis of the social and cultural life of Teesside. In the post war decades, industry brought relative prosperity. Gross Value Added (GVA) statistics measure the contribution of regions and sub-regions to the national economy (usually taking average income as a measure) (ONS, 2016b). Chiefly owing to its low levels of unemployment, the success of its core industries and the relatively high wages paid to the skilled workforce, in the early 1970s Teesside was one of the most prosperous parts of the country, having a GVA figure that was ‘above the national average and third highest in the country, after London and Aberdeen’ (Tees Valley Unlimited, 2011: 4).

Teesside’s economic collapse was sudden and not typical of wider, British industrial malaise (see Hudson, 1986: 13). For instance, industrial relations on Teesside tended to be relatively harmonious and there had been significant capital investment and support from national government. Following the global economic crises of the early 1970s, increased international competition in Teesside’s main chemical, steel and engineering industries, shifting national policy in respect of support for steel came together to presage massive restructuring and redundancy (Hudson, 1989). Production was shifted overseas to benefit from cheaper labour costs. The limit to the state’s capacity to manage a national economy under conditions of intense international competition was cruelly exposed on Teesside. In 1965 the unemployment rate in Middlesbrough stood at less than 2%. By 1987 it reached over 21% and, overall, close to 100,000 manufacturing jobs were lost in Teesside between 1971 and 2008. The scale of this is staggering and the shock and damage caused can properly be likened to a community undergoing severe trauma (from which it struggles to recover) (Walkerdine, 2010).

These manufacturing jobs were gradually replaced by ones in the service sector (92,000 were created in this same period), mainly in local government, health and education, call

centres and leisure services. Consequently, jobs became less ‘masculine’ and less likely to be full-time and permanent. A collective emphasis on industrial modernisation and technological investment in the 1960s was replaced by a government-led emphasis on employment ‘flexibility’ during the 1980s. High local unemployment, weakened trade unions and Conservative government legislation to deregulate the labour market enabled employers to adopt a much more flexible approach to the hiring and firing of workers. Thus, during the 1980s and ‘90s Teesside’s economy was transformed from one of comparatively high skilled, high waged and secure jobs, to a predominantly low waged, ‘flexible’ labour market (Beynon et al, 1994).

Even with this new service sector employment Middlesbrough has typically had significantly higher unemployment rates than the national average (usually at least double the rate) since the 1980s. Many millions of pounds have been spent on ‘area-based regeneration’ schemes and ‘action zones’ for health, employment, enterprise and so on, rolled out successively through the 1980s, ‘90s and 2000s but at the time of writing, in 2017, rates of youth and adult unemployment remain amongst the highest in the country (House of Commons Library, 2016; Elledge 2016). The long decline since the 1980s has meant that in some cases what once were popular estates of working-class council housing have become ‘difficult-to-let’ and, in others, derelict and abandoned zones of entrenched poverty and multiple social problems (Lupton and Power, 2002). Teesside’s ‘new’ service sector economy has not been immune to cuts and closure. In the 2000s, big call centres have closed as work has been outsourced to lower wage economies (Shildrick et al, 2012a). The new big employers – the public sector of health, education and local government – have themselves shed jobs, particularly since the recession of 2008 and the subsequent austerity programmes pursued by UK central government. One study from 2010 made particularly gloomy predictions for Middlesbrough. Because of its heavy reliance on the public sector for local employment – 42% of the workforce in 2010 – it was identified as the town that was ‘least resilient’ to planned government cut-backs, from 324 surveyed (BBC, 2010). In the subsequent five years, the local council shed hundreds of jobs, reducing its workforce by over 40% (Brown, 2015).

In brief, this is the story of the deindustrialisation of Teesside. Once one of the most prosperous localities in the UK, Middlesbrough now has high rates of unemployment, of poor health, of educational under-achievement and all the other objective indicators of multiple deprivation. Middlesbrough in the 2000s was the ‘poorest town’ in England (i.e. it had the greatest proportion of heavily deprived wards of any town in the country); it still features in the list of ten ‘poorest towns’ (ONS, 2016a). It was described on a popular TV programme as ‘the worst place to live’ in England (Thornton, 2007). ‘Worst’ awards come with depressing regularity; most recently the town was described ‘the worst place for a girl to grow up’ (because of high rates of child poverty, teenage conception, young people not in education, employment or training, etc; see BBC, 2016).

Hard(er) times for youth

It is against this backdrop that our research participants made their transitions to adulthood, during the 1990 and 2000s. Our direct research with them has not (so far) allowed for full investigation of the impact of the Great Recession and later austerity. What

might the consequences have been for young people and youth transitions on Teesside? Given that this is a place that some label as being in 'permanent recession' since the 1980s how much worse could things become?

The return of (inter)national recession added to deeper on-going changes in the UK labour market, wherein middle-range, intermediate jobs were 'hollowed out' of the economy (Sissons, 2011). The mass shedding of jobs in local authorities since 2010 is a good example of this process in action on Teesside. Redundant white collar workers 'bump down' increasing pressure on lower quality jobs (of the sort typically undertaken by our research participants). It becomes harder to get even insecure 'poor work'. This is one likely consequence for the sort of working-class young adults we interviewed. National research also points to the very difficult context young people have faced since the Great Recession, and earlier. For instance, Fahmy and colleagues (2015) demonstrate how in the UK young adults (aged 18 to 29 years) are now the age group most likely to experience material deprivation, with an alarming upward trend since 1999. Across every different measure of poverty, young people are especially disadvantaged compared to other age groups.

The UK government's austerity programme from 2010 onwards heavily forefronted 'welfare reform' and young people have been particularly hard hit by this more punitive regime for the provision of what used to be called 'social security' (Watts, 2014). Not only are they now denied support to which previous generations were entitled (e.g. student grants, housing benefit) compared with other age groups they are now more likely to face punitive sanctions (i.e. denial of benefit payments for infringement of tightened rules and tests) (ibid.). Some already deprived groups of young people, such as homeless young people, face an even greater risk of sanction often leading to even worse and less secure housing situations, food poverty, anxiety and depression, and disengagement from welfare and employment services (North East Homelessness Think Tank, 2016). This report implies that the latter outcome is an *unintended* consequence of 'welfare reform'; it is, of course, quite plausible that this is an *intended* consequence of these changes. Services for young people have also faced heavy austerity cuts. Between April 2010 and April 2016, £387m was cut from youth service spending across the UK. This meant that 603 youth centres closed, 3,652 youth work jobs were lost, and 138,898 places for young people in youth projects were cut (Unison, 2016). Locally, on Teesside's social housing estates, many of the youth centres, sports clubs and libraries which we used to meet and interview young people during the 1990s and 2000s have now been closed because of cuts to local authority spending. These are hard times to be young, in the UK. Recently, the author of one of the most authoritative studies of the English riots of 2011, suggested that the underlying conditions that sparked those disorders have now become more severe³. Of course, there is a generational dimension to some of these issues. A 2014 policy briefing from the *European Youth Forum* points to a wider context of rising rates of youth unemployment, increased levels of poverty and social exclusion and a growing inequality between older and younger generations.

³ Tim Newburn, quoted in the *Guardian* 5th August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/05/conditions-that-caused-english-riots-even-worse-now-says-leading-expert>

Related to this, the UK's decision to leave the EU has been seen as betraying the aspirations of the younger generation (over 70% of whom voted to 'remain'; Cresci, 2016)⁴.

In summary, it is likely that the processes that marginalised and impoverished working-class young people as they made transitions to adulthood in the 1990s and 2000s are likely to have become more intense over the past decade, particularly since the Great Recession of 2008 and the subsequent austerity programmes set in train by the UK government.

Rise and Fall: or, 'it didn't have to be like this'!

Stepping back, and returning to our main discussion, the story we have told of Teesside didn't have to be *the* story of Teesside. The biography of Middlesbrough could have been different. The fact of Teesside's industrial decline was not predestined. Limits of space mean we can only give a few examples.

Following Veit-Wilson (1998) and Byrne (1999) we prefer a 'strong' to a 'weak' conceptualisation of social exclusion; one which highlights questions of power and asks 'who or what is doing the excluding?'. The urban sociologist Alice Mah studies 'industrial ruination' (2012); the processes that create and destroy industrial centres, and the long decay and class memories of once thriving communities. Inspired by driving through 'the Rust Belt of the United States and Canada – through Detroit, Michigan, Hamilton, Ontario and Buffalo, New York—and seeing vast abandoned factories; old car plants, steelworks, chemical factories' she asks the same question that we ask of Teesside, 'what happened to produce this scale of abandonment?' (Mah, 2013). The title of Ray Hudson's important book about North East of England - *Wrecking a Region* (1989) - also indicates a powerful line of thinking which accentuates the *active* processes that underlie the decline of once great industrial centres like Teesside (and the North East more widely). This is a Marxian economic geography that explains how places – regions – are *necessarily* hit with successive waves of capitalist investment and disinvestment; this is the uneven regional development that is a chronic and integral feature of capitalist economy. Since the 1970s 'processes of neo-liberal globalisation have deepened' (Hudson, 2006: 8) and the mobility of Capital has intensified, in the constant search for profitability, new markets and reduced production and wage costs. These are strong and deep economic currents but their force can be limited or diverted (or, indeed, added to) by the policies of governments (regionally, nationally or supra-nationally, as with the EU's active regional policy). These can play a part in defending (or not) the economic viability of regions and influencing which of them experience 'growth, decline and revival' (Hudson, 2006: 6).

Following this line of argument, whilst their power should not be overstated, important social actors in the offices of government and boardrooms of multi-nationals made decisions and took courses of action which were of enormous consequence for Teesside's dramatic socio-economic collapse (and limiting of its chances of recovery). We point to three examples.

⁴ The relationships between age, class, education and place in the shaping of views and voting about EU membership are highly complex and warrant much greater space than can be given here (Antonucci et al, 2017).

Firstly, we can point to how the *laissez-faire* economics of Conservative (Thatcher) governments in the 1980s involved the choice *not* to protect the important industries of the North of England from the vicissitudes of a globalising economy (a trend evident still, with the final closure in 2015 of the last steel plant in Teesside, at Redcar, again under a Conservative government). From the 1980s, rather than acting as a buffer against globalisation, central government chose to define its industrial policy as *actively embracing* the pressures of international competition ‘as *the* mechanism through which to restructure the UK’s productive base’ (Benyon et al, 1994: 99), particularly to reduce labour costs by shedding jobs and by increasing workforce ‘flexibility’.

Secondly, we can point to how, in the boom years, employment was deliberately and highly concentrated in nationally important industries. Neither government (national or local) nor captains of industry wanted to diversify the local economy, either through the encouragement of a small and medium enterprise sector (which remains very underdeveloped to this day) or through the expansion of alternative industries. Plans to develop car production were opposed by central government and local employers because of the fear that this would threaten the supply of skilled labour to the chemical and steel industry (Hudson, 1989). Hindsight shows how catastrophic this was for Teesside’s fortunes. The over-concentration of local employment in such a narrow set of traditional industries, the political choices of national government and the globalising search for profit of big business combined with calamitous effects for the economic and social life of Teesside.

Thirdly, we can point to how the social and economic regeneration policies pursued by local and national government have, at best, served to limit and contain some of the harshest consequences of capital disinvestment and, at worst, have added to Teesside’s problems. Since the 1980s, many millions of pounds have been spent on schemes, zones and programmes to deal with the fall-out of economic collapse. Private development corporations and training agencies have made substantial profits (sometimes fraudulently; BBC, 2015); which is part of the reason that very similar schemes are rolled out again and again, over decades, with an awful ‘waste’ of public money, little sense of lessons learned and with a strong whiff of ‘policy amnesia’ (Robinson, 2005). In prime place in this cabinet of remedies have been measures to tackle unemployment by ‘raising aspirations’ and making people more ‘work ready’. In understanding the real nature and causes of unemployment on Teesside (as described in this section) we understand that such policy approaches *cannot* have significant impact on the *overall* levels of unemployment locally (albeit that the circumstances of some *individuals* may change as a consequence). Given this, it might be better to understand the motivations of such approaches in terms of their effects in: temporarily ‘warehousing’ the unemployed (and circulating them on and off unemployment benefits and reducing the unemployment count); disciplining benefit claimants (through ramped up conditionality and job availability tests) *and* low paid workers (with the fear of falling into the degradations and impoverishment of unemployment); see Wacquant, 2009); providing employment and profits for private businesses in the social welfare sector; and in setting in place ‘welfare to work’ processes which provide a steady stream of ‘flexible’, unpaid/ low paid workers for the low quality employment that now constitutes much of the Teesside labour market (Byrne, 199; Shildrick et al, 2012a).

The logic of uneven regional capitalist development is that deindustrialisation and collapse can be followed by reinvestment and recovery. This in part, as indicated, depends on active regional policy to defend and promote the interests of a place. However, as Mah (2013) puts it, for many dispossessed regions revival seems a distant prospect; ‘the “post-industrial” has yet to take hold... [and] not every old industrial city can have a Tate’. Thus, there are many ‘old industrial regions’ like the North of England (and Teesside within it) – Hudson (2006: 6) lists the Ruhrgebiet (Germany), Wallonia (Belgium), Nord-Pas-de-Calais (France), the industrial mid-west of the USA and Nova Scotia (Canada) as examples – that were once centres of capital accumulation and growth but which ‘flipped and became regions of decline, characterised by capital flight, devalorisation and disinvestment’. The future of these places – places like Teesside - remains uncertain: ‘some places are developed or redeveloped while others are left behind’ (Mah, 2013). Mah was writing in 2013 and this motif – ‘the left behind’ – has gained enormous political resonance since, in the US presidential elections and the UK EU Referendum of 2016, referring to the people and places that have lost out in processes of globalisation and socio-economic change. Indeed, the resentment of ‘the left behind’ seems to have played a large part in both. A small but striking example vis-à-vis ‘Brexit’ stands out from our own research. East Middlesbrough, our research locality in Teesside, is reported to have had the highest proportion of ‘leave’ voters of anywhere in the country, at 82.5% (BBC, 2017). On the other side of the Atlantic, the election of Donald Trump to US President seems to have reflected the popularity of his plans, via tax, the pressure of public opinion and other measures, to limit globalisation in favour of protecting US industry and jobs. One immediate outcome of this was the speedy *volte-face* by Ford Motors regarding a planned car plant in Mexico, choosing to expand a factory in Michigan USA instead (Agren, 2017). After decades of politicians extolling the virtues and inevitability of globalisation, it seems that alternatives were possible after all.

Conclusion

With our research, we have tried to give a picture of youth transitions to adulthood as they play out over the long-term, that captures a breadth of experiences and which, through detailed biographical interviews, forefronts the accounts of the sorts of ‘socially excluded’ young people who are typically the target of policy interventions. They are often talked about but less often asked to speak about their lives. After years of research, and the summary of findings we present here, one or two conclusions stand out.

Firstly, it is really quite astounding that – despite the collapse of the local economy and the time-honoured routes to respectable working-class adulthood, the impoverishment of their communities and the opportunities available to them, and the multiplicity and depth of social problems that make Teesside ‘worst’ and ‘poorest’ – that, after decades of this, young people here still retain such straightforwardly conventional, ‘respectable’, normal values and aspirations. It would be far less surprising to have discovered ‘underclass cultures’ of worklessness and ‘welfare dependency’. There is a longevity and resilience to working-class culture, even when the economic base that once supported it has become so shrunken and degraded.

Secondly, even in one of the most deindustrialised locales in the UK there are still jobs; unlike W.J. Wilson’s portrait of the US urban ghetto, work ‘has *not* disappeared’ (Wilson,

1996). This is a very important finding. We are not describing UK versions of zones of *complete* abandonment (Wacquant, 2007), or a redundant underclass surplus to economic requirements. This is part of the reason for our rejection of ‘social *exclusion*’ as an adequate descriptive term, even though it is far superior to the falsehoods of underclass theory (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Rather, economic *marginality* better captures what is going on here – for the place and its people. This economic marginality is demonstrated most clearly in long-term labour market careers marked by persistent insecurity and recurrent poverty (Shildrick et al, 2012a). The combined legacies of the persistence of structurally-caused high unemployment and more flexible, insecure employment left in the wake of de-industrialisation mean that the biographies of many working-class people are now characterised not by complete worklessness, nor by a life in steady work, but by the insecurities of churning between unemployment and low-paid and low-skilled jobs.

In the final part of the chapter we have shown how the voodoo sociology and weak versions of ‘social exclusion’ that infect much policy thinking would have it that this pattern is an outcome of individual choices or other facets of supply-side characteristics (recent versions stress young adults’ alleged preference for the fragmented work of ‘the gig economy’). It is not. It is an outcome of the fundamental restructuring of the local economy of Teesside, itself resulting from the heightened globalising tendencies of late Capitalism. The poverty and insecurity of the lives of our informants were not ‘personal troubles’ of individual biographies but ‘public issues’ of social structure (Mills, 1959). Thus, to understand youth transitions in this place we need, first, to grapple qualitatively with the twists and turns of individual biographies but, secondly, to lift our eyes so as to appreciate properly the conditions which frame the making of those lives. In doing so we are then able to comprehend how young men and women make their own histories but do so not as they please or would freely choose but under existing conditions that constrain their choice, agency and possibilities (Marx, 1852).

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