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# No choices, no chances: how contemporary enterprise culture is failing Britain's underclasses

Robert Smith and Carol Air

**Abstract:** *Despite an increasing interest in minority entrepreneurship in recent years, the issue of 'underclass entrepreneurship' and its linkages to 'enterprise culture' remain underresearched. In this article, the authors examine 'chavs' as an indigenous British underclass. Using data gathered from an Internet search and newspaper cuttings, they examine how this silent 'stereotyped' and socially constructed minority is presented as dangerous and unemployable. In the process, they uncover hidden links between the underclass and enterprise culture, and analyse how entrepreneurship can help such minorities to achieve inclusivity via consideration of role theory and the power of narrative in initiating social transformation. This framework helps us to understand how it is possible to direct young, disadvantaged individuals towards an entrepreneurial career path via self-employment. The paper raises intriguing issues relating to youth employment and tells the story of how contemporary enterprise culture is failing one of Britain's silent minorities.*

**Keywords:** *minorities; enterprise culture; criminal entrepreneurship; youth entrepreneurship; underclass entrepreneurship*

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In this critique, the term 'minority' is loosely defined as a sociological grouping that does not constitute a politically dominant voting majority, and is considered subnormal by the rest of society in terms of social status, education, employment, wealth, power and access to enterprise culture. Studies of silent minorities are characterized by storylines of poverty and discrimination and the never-ending struggle to overcome and succeed. This explains why, traditionally, entrepreneurial stories have been narratives of the poor-boy-made-good and rags-to-riches variety. Nevertheless, the British have a cultural aversion to the undeserving poor whom the media stereotype as 'chavs' (Hayward and Yar, 2006). This attitude is evident in the following quotation:

'They are ugly, ignorant, violent, thieving scum. Their "culture" is alien to civilisation. Keep them away from decent people. They should be neutered.' (unattributed article, *The Times*, 7 February 2004)

The article further describes chavs (defined in the following section) as the only hated minority against which it is still acceptable to discriminate. Whilst this example of reporting lacks objectivity, in a politically correct era when other recognized ethnic minorities are protected by law from victimization, it speaks volumes about British cultural attitudes towards economically unproductive social groups. Consequently, this article examines this interesting, underresearched social group in the context of contemporary British enterprise

culture. This social grouping has hitherto been ignored by entrepreneurship scholars.

Moreover, since the seminal study of MacDonald and Coffield (1991), the subjects of youth and underclass entrepreneurship have not received serious examination. MacDonald and Coffield painted a stark picture of youths participating in government schemes, whose lives in their late teens and early twenties were dominated by periods of unemployment punctuated by brief spells in low-paid, unstable jobs. This special issue of the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* on minority entrepreneurship is timely, given the recession and the new 'age of austerity', because hard times call for a revision of established values. In this context, we seek to examine proto-entrepreneurial issues at the nexus of youth employment, entrepreneurship and its relationship to 'enterprise culture'. We examine a raft of government initiatives instigated during the past three decades and argue that, despite such well meaning initiatives, many disadvantaged youths in Britain still have no choices and no chances. This is intriguing, given the motif of the 'poor-boy-made-good' as a central plank of both enterprise culture and the ideology of entrepreneurship. In this work, we consider the plight of the poor underclass. Although there is a burgeoning literature on the expanding British underclass, beginning with Murray (1990), it does not relate this socioeconomic issue to entrepreneurship theory, despite there being obvious links between the underclass and entrepreneurship via poverty and deprivation (Fielden and Dawe, 2004), poor-boy-made-good stories (Yolen, 1977), the marginality thesis (Dickie-Clarke, 1966) and criminal entrepreneurship (Gottschalk, 2009; Smith, 2009).

This article therefore examines the *chav* as an indigenous British underclass, using data gathered from the Internet, newspaper cuttings and articles in academic journals in order to ascertain how the stereotypical 'chav' is socially constructed as a dangerous, and thus unemployable, individual (Sarbin, 1967). Through this process, the article unearths hidden but deeply embedded links between the underclass and enterprise culture. This discussion and analysis illustrate how entrepreneurship can begin a dialogue that may help such minorities achieve inclusivity via the use of 'role theory' (Turner, 1978) and the power of narrative in initiating social transformation (Rappaport, 1993). In the process, the paper raises intriguing (and debatable) proto-entrepreneurial issues in youth employment. It is in this context that we tell the story of how contemporary enterprise culture is failing one of Britain's silent (or silenced) minorities, while illustrating the potential contribution of the work to the entrepreneurship literature. Therefore, we present some implications for this disengaged group

in relation to their (in)ability to access entrepreneurship and enterprise.

This article reviews some of the highly complex and contested variables impacting on youth unemployment, such as education and government policies, to answer the perplexing question of how entrepreneurship can help minority groups such as *chavs* to achieve inclusion in terms of employment opportunities. It is essential to understand the complexities involved in empowering the young and disadvantaged.

## Reviewing the underclass

This section reviews and discusses some highly complex and contested variables impacting on youth unemployment and, in identifying Britain's underclass, it considers the derogatory nature of the terminology and definitions associated with youth unemployment. We then turn to examine the reconceptualization of the problem as the NEET phenomenon ('not in employment, education or training'). Thereafter, we discuss education and underachievement before considering the issue of work and pride and government initiatives to counter unemployment.

### *In search of Britain's underclass*

In a British context, social commentators such as Henry Mayhew (1850) have long commented on the 'dishonest poor', using adjectives such as 'unrespectable', 'depraved', 'debased', 'disreputable' or 'feckless'. Wright (1970) even referred to the poor as the 'the great unwashed' in an era when it was the norm to treat the poor in a derogatory manner. The term 'underclass' came into vogue from the 1960s onwards through the writings of Lewis (1961), Wilson (1987), Murray (1990, 1993) and Wilson (1993). The term itself remains highly contested.

Murray (1990) developed the notion of an emerging underclass to refer to the growing social strata of unemployed and criminalized individuals reliant on the welfare system. Murray (1993) referred to a 'coming white underclass', using it as a sanitized term synonymous with the urban poor. Murray and Alcock (1990) argued that it was a 'dirty word' denoting a pernicious form of personalized poverty defined by unemployability, an obvious lack of money, bad behaviour, a lack of personal cleanliness and an unkempt appearance, among other things. The prevailing stereotype is of ill-schooled, ill-behaved, delinquent, work-shy and intemperate youth. The underclass persona is characterized by illegitimacy, marginality, single-parent families, violent crime and opting out of the labour force. The concentration of such destructive tendencies among the lowest social class is often blamed

on a lack of working fathers and an abundance of successful criminals as role models. Dysfunctional social norms are held to drive the young towards habitual criminality and hero-worshipping negative role models.

Murray (1990) argued that in Britain, the welfare reform in the 1960s had softened public perceptions of the underclass somewhat by unleashing a wave of new intellectualism, which re-labelled it as a product of a 'culture of poverty'. All poor people were homogenized as political correctness forbade us from considering them as 'ne'er-do-wells'. However, as a social construction, this was purely a figment of middle-class, parochial prejudices. Notably, all were deemed capable of achieving success if only given a fair chance (Murray, 1990) – shades of the entrepreneurial dream. During the 1970s, a profound social change occurred as poor communities that had formerly consisted of mostly of hard-working folks began deteriorating and the social fabric fell apart. A dependency culture formed, which was resistant to attempts to change it by creating new jobs or raising benefits. This led to a reassessment of the way we looked at such communities. It became popular to blame this social change on the rise of drug culture, with its increase in crime, delinquency, illegitimacy, homelessness, casual violence and a lack of engagement with education and work. The notion of the underclass is now entrenched in America and Britain, where a new generation of healthy working-aged people possess negative and socially destructive values (Murray, 1990).

Murray's theory set up a relationship between economic inactivity and social class amongst lower-class young men, whom he dubbed the 'lost generation'. The same argument is now used in respect of the current generation, and those who want to work, but cannot, still experience humiliation and desperation. To many, work is no longer a moral obligation, but a choice! We continue our reconceptualization by considering contemporary terminology used in relation to the underclass in Britain.

#### *Derogatory terminology in youth unemployment*

According to Hayward and Yar (2006), the literature on underclass discourse in the UK has been superseded by that of the 'chav', demonstrating a popular reconfiguration of the underclass idea. In the process, social marginality has been reconfigured into a pathology based upon relations to production and socially productive labour. The derogatory term 'chav' is used to describe aggressive, unemployed, underclass teenagers or adults who engage in antisocial behaviour (Anonymous, 2004).<sup>1</sup> This much maligned British stereotype has become synonymous with the marginalized youth underclass of Britain. Indeed, Webster (2008) argues

that white ethnicity is invisible and unexamined in the racism, crime and justice debates, in which 'whiteness' is seen as the default position. A new stream of cross-disciplinary, academic writing (in criminology, anthropology and sociology) is emerging around this phenomenon (for example, see Hayward and Yar, 2006; Tyler, 2006; McCulloch, Stewart and Lovegreen, 2006; Snell, 2006; Hanlon, 2007; Webster, 2008; Tyler, 2008; Rainsborough and Adams, 2008; Kehily and Nayak, 2008; Martin, 2009; and McDowall, 2009).

Recurring themes include disgust and disrespect, and the rhetoric is replete with words such as scum and filth (Tyler, 2006, 2008; Nayak, 2006; Webster, 2008; Boland, 2008; Martin, 2009). Rainsborough and Adams (2008) argue that the chav debate is characterized by mockery, disparagement, humour and distancing. Indeed, Nayak (2006) argues that in post-industrial society, young working-class men must forge new identities, looking beyond traditional notions of manhood and paid employment. In youth culture, young men compete to exhibit spectacular masculinities of white male excess by accruing a 'bodily capital' that has a currency and a local exchange value within their milieu. There are recognized clear, subtle and explicit demarcations between the 'rough' and the 'respectable' working class, suggesting that, visually, social class is also a distinctive semiotic phenomenon.

Webster (2008) and Phipps (2007) argue that this forgotten social class, as a 'visible working class minority', is both marginalized and criminalized. The vulnerability of these young adults in transition has been highlighted by four decades of research (as detailed below). This is important because as these minority youths move into maturity they need to be able to do so without unemployment frustrating the transition, due to the importance placed on paid employment and work ethics (Albion *et al*, 2002; Willis, 1977). In stark contrast, in white, capitalist Western cultures, the entrepreneur stands at the pinnacle of achievement. It is significant that this forgotten, yet ironically often enterprising, minority is portrayed as the antithesis of all things entrepreneurial.

#### *Not in education, employment or training*

Government agencies refer to chavs by the NEET acronym. A report by The Prince's Trust exposed the growing crisis of a 'lost generation' of NEETs (Prince's Trust, 2010). It is estimated that there are approximately 1.3 million NEETs aged between 16 and 24, with their number increasing by 15% since 1997. The authors of the report warn that a failure to tap their potential undermines social cohesion, damages the economy and puts a growing strain on the Exchequer, costing the British taxpayer £3.65 billion per year. Furlong (2006)

argues that this redefinition of the unemployed (as NEET) has stripped such young men and women of their identity and dignity because the responsibility for employment now rests squarely with the individual. As well as perpetuating a discourse of deficit and deprivation, the NEET discourse obscures individual differences because it includes those incapacitated by health issues, those not seeking work – for example, taking a gap year or pursuing other interests – and all others in between: in other words, those with and without choice, those who want to be included and those who do not, creating further layers of complexity in terms of definition and reach (Edwards *et al*, 2001). There is a need to seek clarification and disaggregation of this pejorative official categorization.

The NEET acronym also covers a social grouping referred to as the 'ASBO Generation' (Brown, 2009) and the 'street-wise' criminal underclasses whom society has failed (Harter *et al*, 2004; Plummer, 2000). Consequently, NEETs model themselves on a 'hard-man image' associated with criminality as an embodied masculine competence learned by men (Monaghan, 2002). Aldridge (2003) acknowledges the role of national and regional newspapers in creating pejorative stereotypes; whilst Burney (2005) accuses the press of perpetuating discrimination against youths by virtue of 'tabloid speak', labelling them yobs, thugs and louts. Newspaper articles such as 'A Neet solution' by BBC journalist Simon Cox are written in a patronizing, judgmental, middle-class moralizing tone:

"'Neet' is the latest buzzword for teenage drop-outs. Some have tried offering grants and free iPods to tempt them into action, but is what's seen as bribery the answer? "I wasn't doing much, just dosing about getting wrecked every day," says Siobhan Dennehy, who at 18 has become an expert in doing as little as possible since leaving school. Siobhan is a "Neet", a Government term for 16- to 19-year-olds not in education, employment or training. When I told Siobhan she was a Neet, she asked if it was the same thing as being a "Chav"."

According to Cox (2005), NEETs are 20 times more likely to commit a crime and 22 times more likely to be a teenage mum. In defence of the marginalized youth, McCulloch *et al* (2006) and Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) argue that chavs are demonized by society for hanging out together, and therefore it is important to consider issues of education and underachievement.

#### *Education and achievement*

Working-class and underclass boys have a history of underachieving at school (Willis, 1977; Watts, 1983;

Archer, Pratt and Phillips, 2001; McDowall, 2003; Frank *et al*, 2003; and Francis, 2006). These studies, and in particular that of Willis, point to a counter-culture in which working-class lads actively resist the school system, becoming trapped in working-class jobs or unemployment. According to Francis (2006), boys are either 'heroes or zeroes'. For Archer, Pratt and Phillips (2001), constructions of masculinity for lower-class boys are centred around non-participation, and Renold (2001) describes such resistance as a violent form of hegemonic masculinity. Likewise, Watts (1983) reported on the futility of the education system in preparing the working classes for the world of work, and accused the system of educating for unemployment. To secure a trade was to gain some very marketable social capital. Watts suggested that this process, systematically reinforced through language, signals and lack of choice, ensured that the social divide was replicated in the workplace. It is little wonder that individuals turn off when they realize the shape of what is to come (Fields, 2006; Jackson and Marsden, 1962; Watts, 1983). Moreover, for Willis, the capitalist system requires a steady flow of unquestioning workers, although participating in enterprise culture and in the practice of entrepreneurship does not require one to have qualifications *per se*.

This led scholars such as Crocker (1987), Jackson (2002) and Ingram (2009) to reassess achievement and underachievement as concepts. For Jackson, 'laddishness' is a mechanism for engendering self-worth, which holds the key to instilling entrepreneurial self-belief into young people. It is ironic that entrepreneurs are also portrayed in the media as rebels or mavericks who often succeed despite a lack of schooling. Education and underachievement must be considered in the context of work and pride.

#### *Work and pride*

Work and pride were once the pinnacle of working-class existence, given the strong association between job and identity. Individuals who regularly found themselves out of work reported feelings of shame and worthlessness. Conversely, education was tolerated as an unnecessary impediment to working life. From the 1970s onwards, a research stream emerged defending the young unemployed or those on youth training schemes of various kinds. These studies, including those of Bauman (2004), Cohen (2006), Fields (2006) and Cole (2008), documented a commentary on government attacks on their work ethic. This remains unchanged today, illustrating the enduring nature of the discourse of deficit levelled at young adults without paid employment. However, in the preceding 40 years, both the economic and social landscapes had changed beyond recognition. The UK

manufacturing base has been greatly diminished through outsourcing to low-cost regions; process and technological improvements have ensured that consumer demand is satisfied using less labour power than ever before; and jobs for life are no more – having been replaced for the most part with an array of non-permanent employment contracts in order to deal with the turbulence of operating in a globalized economy. This saw the rise of a new ‘creative class’, rendering the line between manual and mental work indistinguishable (Cohen, 2006). The new economic reality is fraught with ambiguity and instability and, as a consequence, a ready pool of labour is no longer required, leading Fields (2006) to describe the underclass as being socially, economically, culturally and personally excluded, to the extent their human dignity has been eroded. Chavs are the waste created by the creative process of production (Bauman, 2004). Excess of labour is often divorced, in the literature, from the social problems it causes, reinforcing policy makers’ abdication of responsibility for those affected (Furlong, 2006). Thus entrapment in a shop-floor culture has become entrapment in social exclusion and long-term unemployment, and the street – not the shop floor – is the new apprenticeship. This problem has been the focus of many government initiatives.

#### *Government initiatives*

When considering aspects of youth employment and unemployment, one has to remember that the issue has become heavily politicized by successive governments, although the academic literature on the poor has a lengthy pedigree. It is accepted that the poor in society are discriminated against – particularly those seen as scroungers, whom MacDonald (1997) refers to as the criminal and dangerous classes.<sup>2</sup> Between the 1970s and 1990s, in response to high unemployment and associated problems, various training interventions for the unemployed were trialled. This historical context is important because Macdonald and Coffield (1991) argue that during the 1980s unethical employment practices were rife as older, permanent workers were replaced by cheaper, ‘govey’ (government) scheme folk, and as wages rose in line with their age, they too were replaced with younger workers in a bid to keep costs down. The Enterprise Allowance Scheme of the 1980s was ineffective because youngsters were pushed into business start-ups, which often failed, sometimes leaving the participants in debt and disenchanted with the idea of self-employment. Similarly, Lee *et al* (1990), in examining the Youth Training Scheme, found that the rise of private sector training provided less than credible programmes in terms of providing meaningful work. The quality of training was perceived to be inadequate, boring and irrelevant. Youths complained about the

training and the trainers complained about the quality of the youths.

A recent initiative was the Labour Party’s New Deal scheme. Designed to tackle long-term youth unemployment, the New Deal for Young People was launched in 1998 by Tony Blair’s New Labour administration. It was funded with a windfall tax on the profits of the privatized utilities and sought to support those who had been in receipt of Job Seekers’ Allowance (JSA) for more than six months in getting back or into work for the first time. Further programmes were rolled out over the following five years, including: 25+, Lone Parents, Partners, 50+, Disabled People and Musicians (DWP, 2008).

With the onset of the recession and the age of austerity, the success of these programmes is questionable, as an exceptionally healthy economy may have offered work opportunities in many cases where credit was harnessed by the Department of Work and Pensions. All of these programmes were scheduled to be phased out in the near future to make way for the Labour government’s Flexible New Deal (FND), which was intended to support New Labour’s target of eradicating child poverty by 2020 (Finn, 2009). The Conservative Party victory in 2010 may cast doubt on the longevity of such initiatives. Only time will tell.

Contrary to the rhetoric of unemployment, deficit and responsibility, various studies highlight the fact that welfare claimants are keen to obtain employment, but reluctant to take low-paid ‘nobby jobs’ which undermine their sense of worth and self-esteem. The ethics of ‘welfare to work’ and its ‘responsibilities’ approach are questioned in terms of restricting an individual’s right to choose, consonant with the criticisms levelled at the training interventions applied in the 1980s and 1990s. From the 1980s onwards, increased competition for jobs was attributed to supply-side issues and demographic change as females of all ages entered the market. Regardless of the general competition dynamics, one area where women and young people appear to be in direct competition is in the service industries, where both are strongly represented (Jackson, 1985). Youth unemployment is a mechanism reflecting the general levels of economic activity. During the Labour era, there was a renewed push towards filling available vacancies, rather than fulfilling personal potential. This has policy implications. While some well qualified young people are lowering their employment expectations, there is also a growing demand for meaningful work and an avoidance of repetitive, monotonous tasks, evidenced in the literature of the past 40 years. Nevertheless, some youth unemployment is, in a way, voluntary (Lee *et al*, 1990; Jackson, 1985). We argue that entrepreneurship has a role to play in encouraging disaffected youth back

into (self-) employment. The overarching message is that there is a need to focus more on the individual and not the stereotype, because the chav phenomenon individualizes a group dynamic by personalizing it. Having examined the antecedents of this complex social phenomenon, we now go in search of the underclass entrepreneur.

### **In search of the underclass entrepreneur**

This section seeks to link the concept of the underclass to entrepreneurship theory and the notion of enterprise culture. In the entrepreneurship literature, there are three theoretical class positions: namely, the entrepreneurial middle classes; the working-class entrepreneur; and the peasant entrepreneur (Smith, 2006). Theories of entrepreneurship associated with class tend to ignore the underclass, with peasant entrepreneurship being associated with traditional working-class communities and values. Yet there is an ideological difference between the respectable working class and the white underclass as a disadvantaged minority. It would appear that the underclasses *per se* have been abandoned by economic theorists as being superfluous to the economy. This runs contrary to the mythology of entrepreneurship, in which the 'poor-boy-made-good', child-prodigy storylines and hard-luck tales of overcoming poverty and social injustice are pervasive.

Continuing research into the underclass by criminologists, anthropologists and sociologists only serves to reinforce the stereotype of criminality. But what of the notion of entrepreneurs being street-wise individuals (Gould, 1969; Jones, 1988; Bourgois, 2003)? Gould (1969) linked entrepreneurial motivation to moderate levels of juvenile delinquency in lower social classes. Granted, despite their entrepreneurial proclivity, street kids often lack the social capital to engage with the middle-class sensibilities of the workplace (Bourgois, 2003). Using entrepreneurship as a pathway out of crime offers a viable alternative (Cooney, 2007; Smith, 2010), but examples of successful transition from underclass situations to entrepreneurial status in contemporary Britain are rare.<sup>3</sup> We often encounter them in story form, as narrated in the following examples.

*Story 1 – The case of George Reynolds.* This story is an inspirational example of a reformed rogue/criminal, George Reynolds, who describes himself as having been dyslexic, illiterate and backward. Reynolds was a career criminal/thief until one day while serving a prison sentence, his behaviour was challenged by a priest who, recognizing his entrepreneurial abilities, advised him to use his talents legitimately. It was a moment in which a genuine epiphany occurred. Upon his release, Reynolds

started a business selling ice cream from a van and, over the course of several years, set up several businesses which prospered (source: Bolton and Thompson, 2000).

*Story 2 – The case of Mark Johnson.* This inspirational tale began when Rod Aldridge, founder of the company Capita, decided to use his business skills and wealth to give reformed offenders a fresh start in life. During this process, he met Mark Johnson, a former homeless, petty drug addict and criminal who was living rough on the streets of London. With the help of the Prince's Trust, the Aldridge Foundation helped Johnson turn his life around. Johnson initially retrained as a tree surgeon and employed other ex-prisoners, giving them a chance. In his biography, *Wasted*, Johnson tells the story of his rise from poverty and a criminal lifestyle that began at the age of eight (source: Dey, 2008).

Both stories illustrate social philanthropy in action, although such success stories are few and far between. In the case of George Reynolds, a priest initiated the change in behaviour and in the case of Johnson, Aldridge adopted this necessary role. Aldridge is passionate about tackling social injustices, and both Johnson and Aldridge believe that business and entrepreneurship are the key to turning around criminal lifestyles, arguing that prisons are full of entrepreneurs. It is just that their entrepreneurial talents have been misdirected and they suffer from a lack of genuine entrepreneurial opportunities as envisaged by Baumol (1990). Their role models are likely to be gangsters and other criminal types rather than entrepreneurs.

Yet how does one motivate men and women from dysfunctional settings to become legitimate entrepreneurs when they clearly do not have the necessary social capital to make the change themselves? This is particularly relevant, given that the most significant factor in influencing young people to enter into business is having a self-employed parent (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2007). Clearly, not many underclass children have this profile. Johnson (2007) argues that traditional mentoring by middle-aged men in suits is not the answer because, ultimately, such epiphanies must come from within the self. Yes, they can be triggered by interventions from priests, social workers, the Prince's Trust and entrepreneurs like Rod Aldridge, or even by self-tuition through the biographies of reformed criminals, but the first steps in overcoming poverty and perdition must be taken by the individual. We as academics have a social obligation to reach out and interact with society and such individuals. Indeed, Cole (2008) argues that social science researchers are complicit in the segregation of the working classes through their propensity to study each in isolation, and suggests that we need to replace the NEET label with real people with real lives and let

them promote the positive aspects of their lives within a wider social context, rather than absorbing wholesale the prescriptive, functional specifications that inhabit government initiatives. Introducing disaffected youth to better role models is one viable choice. This brings self-efficacy and social cognitive theories into play (Bandura, 1977, 2001) because possessing experience and mastery in a particular area of social skill supports the transition of intentions into measurable actions. Modelling (as a social process), linked to social persuasion (as in encouragement via stories and believable mentors and role models) facilitates the change from criminal to entrepreneurial behaviour. This necessitates further consideration of role theory (Turner, 1978) and its place in the narrative framework discussed above.

One barrier to achieving such transition is that the problem runs deep because society as a whole – and contemporary British enterprise culture in particular – appear equally culpable. No-one is spreading the gospel of enterprise and championing the poor, street-wise youth of today as did Horatio Alger in America and Samuel Smiles in Britain<sup>4</sup> during the nineteenth century. Both authors wrote in different yet evangelical writing styles, giving hope from despair, and in their own uniquely different writings, provided a blueprint for the marginalized and disenfranchised to follow. Alger bolstered the myth of the poor-boy-made-good, whilst Smiles spawned the working-class obsession with the self-help ethos. Both did so through the medium of storytelling. Indeed, narrative approaches help facilitate the adaptation of new identities (Fielding and Fielding, 2000). The criminal culture into which underclass youths are gradually socialized creates what Schmid and Jones (1991) referred to as a form of 'suspended identity' in which the youth are separated from mainstream society. Storytelling and working on the authoring of alternative biographies constitute a powerful process, and this process would help such youths to suspend their criminal identity and replace it with an entrepreneurial one. Constructing an alternative narrative, or life story, is achievable because it helps maintain a general sense of identity continuity.

However, transforming criminalized identity into an entrepreneurial identity is not straightforward because chavs are clearly the latest manifestation of the long-standing notion of the dangerous individual (Sarbin, 1967). Therefore, it is helpful to consider the underclasses as a particular 'normative narrative community' (Rappaport, 1993) in which it is possible for identity transformation to take place. This approach thus forces us to listen to the personal stories that people tell about their lives, and has several advantages, including the reduction of professional centrism and the explicit linking of individual lives to community processes. A

narrative studies framework also has the advantage of tying mutual help to a great deal of cross-disciplinary research, including cognitive psychology, anthropology, sociology and literary analysis (Rappaport, 1993, Abstract).

Identity transformation is best achieved through narrative and by personal stories (Rappaport, 1993). Tappan (2000) appreciates the socio-cultural nature of the development of moral identity and the role of a 'mediated action' approach to identity formation. There is a need for more work on strategies and tactics for helping disadvantaged youths to see and understand their lives in new ways. However, identity transformation is not a one-way narrative, as changes in collective categories of identity are at the core of social transformation (Todd, 2005). It thus requires a collective social effort to reinvent the story of soiled social identities. The work of Paulo Freire (1996) is also of relevance here in relation to narrative and change via his attempts to increase the literacy rate of the Brazilian poor through life stories.

However, there may be a danger in being overly optimistic regarding the role enterprise can play in reducing exclusion and building communities. As Blackburn and Ram (2006), echoing Bauman, argue, social exclusion is an inherent part of the dominant economic and social system. Thus disadvantage and unemployment may well be unavoidable artefacts of capitalism and the free-market economy. As part of an economic surplus, so-called chavs as an underclass may be a necessary social ill. The notion of the underclass spurs us on to achieve because we are haunted by the spectre of unemployment and the thought of what might become of us, should we lose our jobs and therefore our status and mobility in life. Most people fear failure and unemployment. Nevertheless, Blackburn (1998) stresses that being an entrepreneur gives participants a voice, a way of expressing themselves and, as such, is a valuable outlet for the self. However, further study into the sustainability of both business start-up and identity in relation to the underclasses requires to be addressed before wholesale social transformation can occur.

In using enterprise to solve social problems, we are ironically looking to the system that created them in the first place (Bauman, 2004; Blackburn and Ram, 2006). Perpetuating an economic push-pull system in isolation cannot address community sustainability, and could be viewed as a more insidious way than ever of maintaining the capitalist status quo. Considering the myriad variables impacting upon the lives of the young unemployed, it may be too big a leap to consider enterprise as an opportunity without attempting to address the fundamental underlying socioeconomic problems – the primary ones being poverty and crime



(Fields, 2006). More focus must be placed on mending the fabric of the community through capacity building and, fittingly, social enterprise. Unleashing the power of stories, however inspirational, is not enough. As we enter into a new era of politics, it remains to be seen whether there will be a new deal for Britain's minority underclasses in terms of a revised attitude towards access to enterprise.

### **Deal or no deal – the dawning of a new era**

One of the underpinning principles of the 'Flexible New Deal' was the framework supporting New Labour's 'rights and responsibilities' as a major contributor towards its goal of eradicating unemployment. Such mechanisms are skewed towards state interests as opposed to genuinely encouraging a spirit of enterprise amongst youth as a source of creativity and a possible economic sustainability agenda, based on obligation and reciprocity. Those without work must provide proof of their work-seeking endeavours in exchange for welfare benefits. Up-skilling, re-skilling and retraining comprise an attempt to rectify Britain's standing in terms of international competitiveness, in which training of all descriptions is undertaken (Sanger, 2003). This creeping conditionality, as a concept of control, may be seen as creating a type of psychic prison, with the association between poverty and individual irresponsibility serving to tighten the bars through perpetuating the discourse of deficit levelled at the unemployed (Dean, 2007). It remains to be seen how the 'New Deal' will fare under the proposed new Conservative Work Programmes, which at the time of writing are yet to be announced. The fact that the underpinning Conservative rhetoric on unemployment remains that of the deserving versus the undeserving poor is telling. Engaging with entrepreneurs' stories and pursuing the entrepreneurial dream works at a dual level as a societal fairy tale, and as an achievable reality and propagating enterprise through individual self-efficacy, is a relatively inexpensive option, given that enterprise must emerge organically from the ground up and should not be imposed from on high.

### **In search of an answer**

The authors concur with the hypothesis of Murray (1990) that, in Britain, there is an expanding underclass, excluded from the workplace. Whilst the well educated and affluent are working longer hours than ever and middle-class men and women still subscribe to the work ethic and enterprise culture, there is limited opportunity for the poor. Instilling a work ethic and values in future generations remains both a concern and a challenge. It is

widely accepted that even a raft of incentives such as training programmes, guaranteed jobs, special 'socialization' programmes (job and work-readiness skills) and 'buddy' systems often fail. Murray (1990) believed passionately that work was the centre of life and that this tenet must be reinforced in childhood and in the early years of working life. One has to be socialized into working practices, which must then solidify into habits. Without work, communities break down. Murray advocates that authentic self-government is the key to improving the plight of the lost and that communities should be given the responsibility for improving themselves. We believe that the answer lies within the individual and that the message of enterprise has become diluted. We ask: where are the contemporary champions of the underclass? Poverty should not be the end of the journey, but the beginning.

As we have seen from the work of Willis (1977) and others, the transitional period of their lives between the onset of delinquency and their entry into the workplace can profoundly affect the working patterns and job expectations of youths, dictating whether they enter into the worlds of crime or enterprise (Albion *et al*, 2002; Willis, 1977). Interestingly, Albion *et al* (2002) found a correlation between age and self-efficacy in the unemployed. Older participants tended to be more efficacious due to the positive reinforcement of their decision making over time, whereas the young did not enjoy such self-assurance to the same degree. Efficacious folk believe that they can change situations and behaviours to produce more positive outcomes for themselves. These findings raise the question of whether negative perceptions and powerlessness can be converted into positive attitudes and self-efficacy in the young (Albion *et al*, 2002).

There are political as well as socioeconomic considerations in relation to underclass criminality and the absence of a vibrant enterprise culture to which the marginalized can belong. Bennett (2008) blames the *chav* phenomenon on 10 years of Labour government penal policies. However, previous generations of scholars blamed the Conservatives and the Thatcher administration. If one is classified by birth, behaviour, circumstance or association as belonging to the underclasses, then this is merely another level of discrimination to shoulder on top of race, ethnicity, religion or belief. Granted, entrepreneurship can help minorities achieve inclusivity in terms of social and life chances, but first it is necessary to change mindsets and help such groups build social capital, which allows them to engage with middle-class entrepreneurial institutions. Chavs, like other minorities, face many distinctive constraints including discrimination, victimization and pejorative stereotyping, which limit their

employment opportunities, but, unlike many other minorities, they do not have access to the legitimate enterprise culture or a viable pathway into entrepreneurship. Crime is their main route for maximizing economic and social potential. More focus and effort should be made by policy makers: lessons need to be learned from the last period of high youth unemployment, rather than dishing up the same old push for economic activity (Fields, 2006).

There is a need to reduce the numbers in the NEET bracket – but how can this be done? Entrepreneurship provides a genuine opportunity, and Veysey, Christian and Martinez (2009) show the way by presenting a compendium of articles which investigate individual identity transformation from offender status to pro-social, non-offending roles. With regard to using entrepreneurship, enterprise culture and the spirit of enterprise to address the issue of social exclusion, it is imperative that as a society we should not be evangelical in our approach, because the disaffected youth must have a genuine choice in whether or not to engage in the enterprise agenda. Furthermore, non-exclusion is not the same as inclusion – an idea that may be reinforced by the concept of positive discrimination (Bernstein, 2000). There is a place for further research into how to instil more enterprising behaviour in youth with limited entrepreneurial inclinations.

This paper contributes to the literature by covering a neglected area of research with distinctive challenges to researchers, thus linking it to the entrepreneurship literature. In highlighting the plight of this silent minority, we gain a better understanding of their struggle even to get a foot on the entrepreneurial ladder, let alone ultimately to become fully fledged entrepreneurs. It raises serious questions. Who dares to speak up for such 'ugly, ignorant, violent, thieving scum'? Where is the help from the UK government and the European Commission for the development of entrepreneurial programmes among disadvantaged groups such as the underclass? Edwards *et al* (2001) argue that the underpinning social problems must be tackled holistically using joined-up solutions. Enabling access to enterprise opportunities is the first step.

This disadvantaged minority, shunned by its communities, with poor levels of personal contacts and impoverished networks, faces unique barriers to accessing entrepreneurial opportunities, banking and credit facilities and business information. These individuals have more chance of joining a criminal 'firm' than engaging legitimately in entrepreneurship. Greater collaboration between stakeholders is required. A combination of the social philanthropy of Rod Aldridge, the passion, determination and inspirational guidance of Mark Johnson and an acknowledgment by society and

academia that the underclasses are equal stakeholders in society would help reverse the self-fulfilling prophecy of poverty = crime. As an academic community, we must conduct more dispassionate research into entrepreneurship in street and underclass settings; otherwise another generation of 'lost boys' will grow up with limited entrepreneurial opportunity, with no choices and no chances! To return to the opening quotation, it is therefore clear that tutoring in the ways of enterprise, not neutering, is the answer.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The word is assumed to have been derived from the Romani word *chavo* for boy. Moreover, in Kent, children are referred to as 'chaveys'. The word 'charver' is common in Yorkshire and the north of England. Hanlon (2007) found that what constituted 'chavery' varied from area to area. Regional variations include 'neds' (in Scotland) and 'scallies' (Mersy-side). Rainsborough and Adams (2008) report on the new phenomenon of the 'Neds' comic strip launched by D.C. Thomson & Co Ltd. Such mechanisms illustrate what aspects of perceived white working-class lives are deemed appropriate for the purposes of mockery. In a similar vein, Boland (2008) examined the stereotypes of the scouser, scallies and the laid-back, calm-down culture.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise and masterly discussion on the social perception of poverty from Victorian times to the 1990s, see the work of Golding and Middleton (1982).

<sup>3</sup> Cooney (2007) held entrepreneurship courses for imprisoned criminals.

<sup>4</sup> Horatio Alger was the author of over 300 dime novels, the heroes of which were poor street-wise children who rose from poverty to become entrepreneurs or to hold other positions of success. These gave rise to the Horatio Alger myth that in America a boy – through luck and pluck – could rise above poverty. Samuel Smiles was a British author of self-help books such as *Thrift* and *Character*, which also shaped the behaviour and values of several generations of the working class in Britain.

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