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Published on: 01 Dec 2011 - Journal of Sociology (SAGE Publications)

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Youth transitions, unemployment and underemployment: plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?

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Robert MacDonald's research interests span sociology, criminology, social policy and youth studies. He has been involved with a series of projects that comprise the *Teesside Studies of Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion*. Beginning in the late 1990s, these have examined the long-term transitions of young adults growing up in contexts of multiple deprivation and social exclusion. Recent books, as author, co-author and editor, include: *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (2005); *Drugs in Britain: Supply, Consumption and Control* (2007); *Young People, Class and Place* (2010); and *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-Pay, No-Pay Britain* (2012)

Word-length:

Abstract

This paper argues that a key rationale for youth studies is to cast light on questions of wider sociological importance. The example pursued here revolves around continuity and change in UK youth transitions, between 1980 and 2010, and their implications in respect of inequality, the labour market and social class reproduction. Description of the familiar and new problems of youth transitions is accompanied by critique of the ways in which these problems are theorised and constructed by researchers and policy makers. The paper argues that *underemployment* is now an experience that shadows and unites the 'fast-track transitions' of the disadvantaged and the 'slow-track transitions' of the affluent, yet remains underexplored in youth studies and largely absent from policy discussion. Finally, the article examines how youth transitions research might usefully develop, particularly so as to engage more fully with questions of youth culture and identity, in understanding the position of young people in wider processes of social change and continuity.

Key words: Youth unemployment, underemployment, youth transitions, youth studies

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Introduction: what is youth studies for?

What is youth studies for? This is a question that sociologists of youth perhaps too rarely ask ourselves directly. To be clear, there is no shortage of academic sparring between some of the core approaches of youth studies. The foundational concepts of 'the two traditions of youth studies' – youth transition and youth culture - have both run the critical gauntlet¹ and faced recurrent calls for their greater integration (as this special issue attests). An argument continues between sub-cultural and post-subcultural approaches (e.g. Blackman, 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Bennett, 2005; Greener and Hollands, 2006) and, promisingly, about interpretation of Beck's individualisation thesis and its value for youth studies (see Roberts, 2010; Woodman, 2009, 2010). These are just examples of a relative theoretical and critical vibrancy *within* youth studies. The more fundamental question – about the sociological relevance of studying young people or the youth phase *per se*, regardless of theoretical camp or stance – is less rarely asked.

Different researchers will have different answers to this question. The main reason I have been committed to studying youth *transitions* – and what I hope to demonstrate in this paper – is because the youth phase allows a privileged vantage point from which to observe broader processes of *social change* and, as such, to answer questions of wider relevance for sociology². If new social trends emerge it is feasible that they will be seen here first or most obviously, amongst the coming, new generation of young adults. If 'choice biographies' replace 'normal' ones, if the work ethic dissipates, if family forms become less standard, if patterns of social inequality loosen or take on unfamiliar forms, it is likely that we will see these changes first in the youth phase, made by young people as they make transitions to adult life. Just as importantly, because youth sits 'at the crossroads of social reproduction' its study

allows us to uncover patterns of *social continuity* (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 2). Youth studies, like sociology in general, has a tendency to highlight change over continuity. Emphasising the new, the post- and breaks with the past, catches academic attention more easily than does stress on the consistent and unchanging. 'The shock of the new' grabs more headlines than 'same as it ever was'.

Given this interest in wider questions of social change and continuity as revealed by youth research, the paper has three specific aims. The first is comparative; to explore briefly how young people's transitions to the labour market were different – and similar - in 2010 to 1980. Whilst other aspects of transitions are also important, young people's engagement with economic life remains pivotal to much else (Roberts, 2003) – and certainly to questions of, for example, inequality, social mobility, class reproduction and individualisation that circulate in the mainstream of the discipline and beyond, in contemporary politics and government policy. The main empirical focus is on the UK but some remarks will be also made about wider situations.

The second aim is to reflect critically on the way that the familiar and new problems that face young people in the making of transitions are theorised and constructed by researchers and policy makers and, in doing so, to suggest important and sometimes underexplored questions that face youth research and policy. For instance, I argue that a new or at least largely unremarked upon problem faces young people; *the problem of underemployment*. One criticism of policy toward young people 'not in education, employment or training' ('NEET') is that it ignores how disadvantaged working-class young people can churn between insecure low level jobs and unemployment over the long-term. One criticism of policies that encourage extended educational transitions is that they underestimate the problems of graduate unemployment and underemployment that now face advantaged middle-class young people. In other words, underemployment is an experience that shadows 'fast-track' and 'slow-track youth transitions' yet remains relatively underexplored in youth studies and largely absent from contemporary policy discussion.

With these first and second aims of the paper I hope to demonstrate how, through this focus on change and continuity in youth transitions, youth studies can address questions of wide sociological, political and policy importance. Building on this discussion, and with the concerns of this special issue in mind, the final aim is to reflect on how youth transitions research might develop, and ‘the two traditions’ become better integrated, so as to provide more encompassing and influential studies of youth.

Plus c'est la même chose: youth unemployment and the problems of ‘NEET’

I want to compare youth transitions in 2010 with those in 1980, pointing out some of the most significant similarities and differences. In 1980 UK youth unemployment rose more than it had in the previous ten years put together. The then recently elected Thatcher Conservative government signalled a ‘new politics’ in a time of deep economic recession that brought widespread public spending cuts and massive economic restructuring. Deepening social inequality and rising unemployment presaged violent social upheaval, as witnessed in the major street disorders of several English cities – in 1980 and the following few years. During the middle of the decade unemployment rose to over 3 million and despite the rolling out of a range of youth training programmes there were over one million young people unemployed at the high point.

The restructuring of youth transitions catalysed by the collapse of the youth labour market in the early 1980s is well documented (e.g. Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Let us reel forward to the time and place of writing, the UK in late 2010. The new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government proclaims a time of ‘new politics’ in the midst of severe national economic difficulties. Public spending cuts, more devastating than even under the Thatcher regime, are in full swing. One consequence will be the deepening of pre-existing social inequalities (IFS, 2010).

Unemployment is predicted to top 3 million in 2011 as the cuts bite. Press reports have highlighted how one million young adults are unemployed, accompanied by predictions of a new 'lost generation', a phrase last heard in the 1980s (e.g. *The Guardian*, 2010).

For those of us who have researched young people's lives across this historical period much now feels familiar but a few dissimilarities are worth noting at this point. We have not yet had the extended period of mass youth unemployment seen in the 1980s. Hitherto, large-scale, violent urban disorders are absent from British cities. Contrasting with massive expansion of youth training in the early 1980s, early victims of Coalition Government cuts were policies designed to assist youth transitions (e.g. the *Future Jobs Fund* and the *Education Maintenance Allowance*). What we can say with certainty is that in 2010 youth unemployment had returned as a central feature of the social, political and policy landscape of the UK³, albeit with a different lexicon.

The problem of NEET

From 1997, the tackling of youth unemployment – under the new label of 'young people not in education, employment or training' (i.e. NEET) – became the key youth policy of the New Labour government, as part of its wider initiatives against social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The current Coalition government also sees this as an important policy area (House of Commons Education Committee, 2010). Following the UK lead, several other countries have also adopted NEET definitions, targets and strategies.

A key aspect of the restructuring of youth transitions in the UK has been that increasing numbers of young people make 'slow-track transitions' through longer-term participation in further and higher education (Jones, 2002). Now only a minority make quicker transitions to the labour market, to independent living and to parenthood and, in doing so, face greater risks of unemployment, homelessness and poverty. Being NEET is often both an outcome and a defining characteristic of these

disadvantaged, 'fast-track' transitions to adulthood. Yet, despite massive policy and research interest, the UK still has one of the highest levels of young people who are NEET of OECD countries (House of Commons Education Committee, 2010), with a high of just over 1 million 16 to 24 year olds recently counted as NEET (17.9% of the age group) (Department for Education, 2010).

Problems with NEET policy thinking

Here I will describe three problems in the *way* that the NEET issue has been configured in social policy.

Firstly, the construction of, and concentration on, the NEET category in policy has meant that *heterogeneity* within the NEET population is overlooked (Yates and Payne, 2006; Furlong, 2006). For example, some young people will be NEET because they are acting as carers for parents who are ill or disabled. Others will be so because they are embroiled in long-term 'careers' of problematic drug use or crime (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). For many it will simply be a consequence of being unable to find a job. Undoubtedly, young people who are NEET can face a *range* of disadvantages. Thus, 'NEET' lumps together a complexity of experiences under one policy heading, hindering the development of interventions appropriate to different 'sub-categories' (Coles et al, 2010). This diversity also raises questions about individual agency vis-à-vis being NEET. Potentially, better-off 'Emerging Adults' (Arnett, 2006) – experimenting with life-style choices, postponing firm occupational commitments, perhaps enjoying Gap Years – are counted equally in NEET statistics alongside unemployed youth whose agency is more 'bounded' by restricted resources and opportunities.

Secondly, youth policy tends to construe being NEET as a problem *with* young people. So, government classifies two-thirds of the NEET population as having 'no identifiable barrier to participation' (e.g. they had no serious illness) but absent from the official tally of 'identifiable barriers' are structural factors such as poor job opportunities (Department for Education, 2010). This provides a specific example of

a classic tendency in youth policy and some research to interpret youth problems in terms of the alleged deficits of young people (e.g. low ambitions or poor skills cause their unemployment). It illustrates what Veit-Wilson (cited in Byrne, 1999: 5) calls 'weak' versions of the concept of social exclusion (i.e. one that explains social exclusion as an outcome of individuals' personal characteristics). Much less commonly used in youth policy are 'strong' versions of social exclusion (e.g. ones that recognise the political and economic causes of youth unemployment). Thus, to quote Roberts (2009a: 365):

Youth labour market imbalances in the UK are not due to a poverty of ambition. Young people today are excessively ambitious relative to the jobs that the economy offers. There is... an overall shortage of jobs, not least good jobs... These are the plain facts about current opportunity structures that need to be addressed, not young people making the wrong choices.

The third and most significant problem is that 'NEET' (and 'EET') are static policy categories that are unable to capture the dynamism and flux of youth transitions that have become less linear and stable in recent decades (Furlong, 2006). Indeed, those most likely to become NEET are also those most likely to have the most insecure, 'chaotic' transitions. Government research has acknowledged that there are 'high degrees of churn within the NEET group... only 1% of young people are NEET at age 16 and 17 and 18' (Newton, 2009). In other words, long-term youth unemployment is not (yet) a significant policy issue in the UK.

The *Teesside Studies of Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion*, with which I have been involved over the last twelve years, have highlighted this more important issue of 'churning' between low quality work and unemployment (e.g. Johnston et al, 2000; Webster et al, 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Shildrick et al, 2010⁴). Undertaken in neighbourhoods of multiple deprivation in Teesside, North East England, these comprise a qualitative, longitudinal investigation of the disadvantaged young people's transitions. Crucially, the studies did not just examine the immediate post-school years but explored individuals' pathways through their

teens, twenties and, for some, into their thirties. The Teesside Studies highlight the fluidity, complexity and precariousness of labour market experiences. Churning between insecure low paid jobs, poor quality training schemes and unemployment was the norm. Interviewees recurrently moved between 'EET' and 'NEET' over years, making little progress towards more secure, rewarding labour market positions. Shildrick et al (2010) find this to be a long-term pattern stretching into middle-age.

In summary, the political and economic contexts for youth transitions in the UK in 2010 were strikingly similar to 1980 and unemployment once again features prominently. Three key flaws in NEET policy thinking have been noted. The first and second reflect long-standing problems in youth policy and research (i.e. the inability to properly grasp relationships between individual agency and social structural constraint and the tendency to interpret youth unemployment as a problem *with* young people). The third has been highlighted by recent research that shows that snap-shot government surveys of the proportions who are NEET in their immediate post-school years are rather missing the point. For disadvantaged working-class young adults, a movement from unemployment to employment does not necessarily - and certainly rarely, for our Teesside informants - signify a solution to worklessness and wider social exclusion.

Plus ça change...

Next I turn to changes in young people's transitions since 1980, noting key developments as well as some problems in the way that these transitions have been understood in research and policy.

The 'Missing Middle' and less successful 'slow-track transitions'

One valid criticism of UK youth transitions research is that it has been over-occupied with the problems faced by those 'at the bottom' rather than with the wide range of youth transitions. For instance, most of the studies in the Joseph Rowntree

Foundation's (JRF) 'Young People' programme (Jones, 2002) had their eyes looking downwards, at the 'fast-track transitions' of the most disadvantaged (as with the Teesside Studies). In characterising transitions as *either* 'slow-track' (associated with middle-class 'success') *or* 'fast-track' (associated with working-class 'failure') (ibid.) there is a danger that studies of very disadvantaged youth come to speak for the experience of working-class young people in general. In much contemporary sociology, youth studies included, 'working-class' is 'a term increasingly reserved for the dispossessed' (Byrne, 2005: 809).

Thus, as with studies of social class, there is 'a missing middle' in youth transitions research (ibid; Roberts, 2011). What is the scope and experience of working-class youth transitions above those of the most disadvantaged? Whatever happened to the working-class 'ear 'oles' mentioned by Willis (1977) and the 'ordinary kids' highlighted in the 1980s by Jenkins (1983) and Brown (1987)? What set of transition routes and identities now lie between traditional middle-class, inclusionary paths from school to 'better universities' and the exclusionary 'poor transitions' of 'the NEETS' and worst-off sections of the working-class? Maguire (2010) notes that one key difference between now and the 1980s is the dearth of studies of the UK youth labour market, so recent research can only provide hints of answers (e.g. Roberts 2011). In terms of research agendas, the 'missing middle' of youth transitions is ripe for further investigation.

A second danger in thinking of young people as falling neatly on one side or the other of a *Youth Divide* (Jones, 2002) is that all transitions through extended education are read as 'successful'. The JRF programme had little to say about the majority of young people now occupied in 'slow-track transitions' (ibid.), implicitly positioning them as on unproblematic social and economic tracks (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000, was an exception). This is in part explained as a hangover from earlier decades when these *were* solidly middle-class, elite routes to professional occupations. Transitions research has often followed social policy concerns and there has been a (mistaken) tendency to regard middle-class kids getting on via university as not being a policy problem or not very interesting sociologically (see

Aggleton, 1987). One of the most profound changes to UK youth transitions, however, has been the blurring of university education as a singular, *explicitly* classed experience. Now far greater proportions of UK university students are working-class, even if the middle-class remains dominant. I return to questions posed by these changes in conclusion.

Graduate unemployment

‘Slow-track transitions’ can prove grindingly slow. Achieving ‘success’, in the form of a graduate job, can be elusive. One key difference between youth unemployment now and in the 1980s has been identified by Nigel Meager, Director of the Institute for Employment Studies (cited by Bennett and Jenkins, 2009):

In the 1980s there were still very few graduates. Only 8 or 10% went to university... they usually got [a job] in the end... now 45% are graduates with high expectations. This is the first recession in the era of a mass higher education system. It’s not clear, when the upturn comes, whether the right jobs will be available. They may well be the lost generation of this recession.

UK graduate unemployment has shown steep increases since the 2008 recession; it stood at 14% in December 2009, a rise of 25% over the previous year (Thomson and Bekhradnia, 2010). In December 2010, the Coalition Government announced changes to higher education funding, including a large rise in student tuition fees. This is against a backdrop where the ‘graduate premium’ – the additional life-time earnings that a degree brings – has declined from a suggested £400k in 2004 to £100k in 2010 (although there have been changes in the way that this premium is estimated). £100k is the *average* predicted graduate premium, with some degrees likely to attract much lower rewards⁵. This ‘double whammy’ of rising tuition costs and declining labour market returns obviously raises questions about whether there remains a clear financial incentive to university study (especially for poorer prospective students).

Rising graduate unemployment and the falling graduate premium are outcomes of longer-term structural labour market changes (Brown and Lauder, 2003) not just - as Meagre implies (above) - of the recent recession. In the 1980s it was argued that the problem of unemployment for 16 year olds was disguised, and delayed to 18, by the 'warehousing' of young people in youth training programmes, some of dubious quality (Roberts and Parsell, 1992). Could a similar case be made for the role of expanded further and higher education in the 2000s? Have we disguised the problem of youth unemployment again, by shifting it up the age range to 21 and calling it graduate unemployment?

Underemployment and the myth of the skills economy

In policy circles, and amongst some academics, an orthodox, shorthand analysis of the problem of youth unemployment would go something like this. Unemployment, by and large, is a product of the low skills and aspirations of the young unemployed. Problems of young people becoming NEET or trapped in poor quality jobs can be solved by 'up-skilling'⁶. The numbers of low-skilled jobs in the UK will decline drastically. There will be more opportunities for higher skilled workers, such as graduates, in the coming 'high-skill, information economy'.

There is good reason to doubt this orthodoxy. Let us concentrate on the other side of 'the employability equation' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005); demand side opportunities for work rather than the supposed deficits of the supply-side (i.e. the young unemployed). The New Labour government, drawing upon *The Leitch Report* (2006), argued that 'of the 3.4 million unskilled jobs today, we will need only 600,000 by 2020' (Gordon Brown, Budget Speech, 2006⁷). There has been no sign that the current Coalition government wavers from this thinking.

Mansell (2010) argues, however, that this represents 'a fundamental government misunderstanding of employers' demand for qualifications among young people'. *The Leitch Report* (2006: 50) says, if proposed skills policies are successful, there may

be 600,000 low skilled *workers* by 2020 - not 600,000 low skilled *jobs*. Even if the *supply* of better skilled workers increases this does not mean that there will be an equivalent *demand* from employers for those skills. In fact, labour market analysis by Lawton (2009) argues that although the numbers of unqualified jobseekers will have dropped to around 600,000 in 2020 (in line with the Leitch predictions), without concerted policy action the numbers of *jobs* requiring no qualifications is likely to remain at around 7.4 million.

In the same vein, Keep and Mayhew (2010: 569) argue that emphasising up-skilling as *the* solution to unemployment or low-paid working ignores 'the scale and persistence of low-paid employment within the UK economy...the numbers of jobs requiring little or no qualification appears to be growing rather than shrinking'. They report that employers at the lower end of the labour market find 'little difficulty in filling vacancies' and show 'little demand for a more skilled workforce...low-paid work in the domestic [UK] economy remains and someone has to undertake it if the economy and society are not to collapse' (2010: 570).

Five implications of this labour market analysis can be spelled out. Firstly, we will continue to see an *over-supply* of well-qualified workers relative to demand for them from employers. Secondly, there will be increased competition for graduate jobs amongst those with degrees. Thirdly, employers offering non-graduate jobs will recruit the best candidates they can. Whilst these jobs would not traditionally be seen as such, do not demand graduate-level skills and do not offer the financial and other rewards typically associated with them, such jobs then become *de facto* 'graduate jobs' because non-graduates are unable to obtain them. Thus, fourthly, non-graduates become increasingly disadvantaged in the labour market and face *increasing* pressure to get higher qualifications in order to 'keep up', even though returns diminish relative to previous cohorts. As Byrne (1999: 142) argues 'all that is on offer for most children who achieve even at the level of degree is white collar or semi-professional work which at best offers something like the remuneration and

stability of skilled manual employment in the Fordist era'. Finally, questions about who will do the abundant low skilled work that will remain in the UK economy stand unanswered, even unasked, in this mythical vision of a high-skill, knowledge economy.

In sum, a key development described here is the growth of underemployment. There are competing definitions (e.g. ILO, n.d.; Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011) but Roberts' is useful because it includes 'high rates of youth unemployment' as well as 'high proportions of employment in part-time, temporary and otherwise marginal jobs; and over-qualification relative to the jobs that young people obtain' (2009b: 10). Even working with a narrower definition (i.e. those working on a part-time basis who would prefer longer hours), IPPR (2010) report that there are 2.8 million 'underemployed' people in the UK, that the number of underemployed men has increased by over a half during the UK recession and, significantly, that one in five of the underemployed are aged between 16 and 24.

Whilst space restricts proper discussion, the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2010: 1) has also identified the *global* 'fragility of youth in the labour market' and 'increasing uncertainty in...labour market transitions'. It estimates that, globally, 81 million young adults are unemployed (a rate of 13%); the highest figures since records began in 1991. Underemployment is particularly prominent, it suggests, in Asia, Central and South Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. The OECD (2010) predicts high rates of youth unemployment in Europe in the coming period and points to how young people are disproportionately caught in temporary, precarious, dead-end jobs. High rates of youth underemployment in Africa are reported by the World Bank (2009: 25), resulting from 'the lack of productive jobs to meet the supply of youth' and how this problem 'has fuelled unrest in North Africa' (Canadian Press, 2011). Indeed, the underemployment of young adults, including university graduates, has been widely reported as a significant factor underlying the 'Arab Spring', with the suicide of Tarek el-Tayyib Mohamed Ben Bouazizi in December 2010, a young man eking a living out of marginal employment as a street-

trader, seen as a spark for the Tunisian revolution (*The Guardian*, 15th January, 2011).

To finish this section, I quote the main conclusion from extensive research by Ken Roberts in Eastern and Western Europe *before* the recent global economic recession (2009b: 4, emphasis added):

Underemployment is now a global phenomenon in youth labour markets. In the West it is usually seen as a sign that young people need to catch up with the demands of the new knowledge economy. In Eastern Europe it is typically construed as a sign that the countries' transitions into properly functioning market economies are still incomplete. Not so: *underemployment is the 21st century global normality for youth in the labour market.*

Beyond 'the two traditions' of youth research?

Building on the preceding discussion, and a key aim of this special issue to consider the better integration of youth cultural and youth transitions research traditions, I now turn briefly to reflect on how the latter might develop in the future.

Including 'the missing middle'

The call for closer connection between youth cultural and transitions studies echoes one made by Bob Coles as long as a quarter of a century ago (1986). I have described elsewhere how the divide between these 'two traditions' can sometimes be overstated – and, as well, how the core concepts of transition and subculture can be defended against their critics (MacDonald et al, 2001; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006)⁸. Nevertheless, in each 'tradition' greater progress could still be made to attend to the core concerns and questions of the other. One way to do this would be for youth transitions research to heed Coles' original and simple call for youth studies to research 'ordinary kids'; at the time, those who were neither participants in the spectacular sub-cultures of the CCCS, nor the unemployed youth of the

Thatcher decade – but the mass of young people missing from both youth cultural studies and unemployment-focussed transitions research.

For contemporary scholars including ‘the missing middle’ would mean ratcheting up the purview of youth transitions research, away from a preoccupying concern with the most disadvantaged young people⁹. The conditions of life of those at the bottom still demand research and policy attention, especially given current economic prospects, but not at the expense of a more panoramic view that would take in the dynamics, meanings and outcomes of those working-class (and middle-class) youth biographies that are made above the dispossessed ‘NEETs’ and which have received so little attention in recent youth research. It would also allow for greater critical interrogation of ‘slow-track transitions’ through college, university and the graduate labour market, understanding their new insecurities and risks and that such transitions are no longer solely the preserve of middle-class young people nor always the high road to solid middle-class success (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Reay et al, 2009).

In 1982 Gary Clarke authored what remains one of the best critiques of CCCS sub-culture theory. In the context of the mass youth unemployment of the early ‘80s, he declared that ‘the time has come to turn our eyes away from the stylistic art of the few...’ (1982: 1). With contemporary youth cultural studies charged with ignoring the mass of ‘ordinary’ youth (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006), with young people in the UK facing the harshest socio-economic conditions in which to make transitions to adulthood since the 1980s, and with the problems of youth unemployment and underemployment widespread globally, the same call for youth sociologists to ‘turn our eyes away from the stylistic art of the few’ – and to research and report the span of youth transitions through this new social, economic and political landscape - seems again to carry some political point and theoretical legitimacy.

Youth cultures *and* youth transitions

As well as lifting its socio-demographic scope, transitions research could usefully broaden its research questions in order to connect better with youth cultural research - and, as a consequence, to better understand change and continuity in transitions to adulthood. In my view, this would also necessitate a wider conceptualisation of youth culture than is typically the case.

The movement from school to the labour market, albeit now through more circuitous pathways, has been the stock in trade of transitions studies but these cannot be understood in isolation from the wider domains of young people's lives, including how youth cultural identities shape and are shaped by the transitions people make. Hopefully our Teesside studies have demonstrated this (e.g. MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). In them attention was given to employment, family and housing 'careers' (see Coles, 1995). Drug-using and criminal 'careers' - relatively absent from transitions research and usually cordoned off into criminology - were also necessary elements of our analysis of the process of growing up in poor neighbourhoods. Finally, the Teesside studies developed the concept of, and investigated, 'leisure careers'; a step that perhaps brought us closest to the youth cultural studies tradition of research.

MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) argue, however, that we must interpret and define youth culture more broadly (e.g. than post-subcultural studies' focus on music and dance-oriented styles and identities) if we are to seriously interrogate how youth cultures interact with youth transitions (and vice versa). For example, young people's 'leisure careers' - their changing friendships and free-time activities, the sub-cultural values, identities and dispositions that are generated in these peer groups outside of school (and in school and towards school) - do much to determine patterns of participation in formal education and, consequently, later transition outcomes (ibid.). The *youth cultural* force behind working-class educational 'failure' was demonstrated convincingly by Willis (1977) and more recently the Teesside studies have shown, for instance, how becoming 'NEET' often cannot be explained without reference to similar processes of youth cultural identification and educational disengagement.

Nevertheless, very few recent studies of youth transitions, ours included, have engaged *expansively* with questions of youth culture, identity and style – and the implications of the latter for youth transitions. That combining more equally an interest in youth transitions and youth culture is far from an insurmountable challenge is demonstrated by Archer and colleagues (2007). Theirs was not a ‘post-subcultural’ study of ephemeral, post-modern, music-oriented styles, nor the sort of ‘dry’, policy-driven transitions study criticised by Miles (2000). Indeed, youth studies *in toto* are largely absent from the bibliography. I highlight this one article only because of its relevance to the main themes of the paper and because it gives an example of how ‘the two traditions’ might come together better. Archer et al (2007) examine working-class young people’s transitions through London secondary schools and their active rejection of university with a close, qualitative exposure of the tastes and performative, embodied styles that defined these young people as ‘who they were’ and might be (and, critically for their transitions, who they were not and would not be). For some of their interviewees, ‘being more of a Nike person’ meant that ‘university is not for me’. School experiences and future paths were chosen or not chosen in relation to deeply class imbued personal styles and identities. As such, the researchers provide an impressive, contemporary example of how interests in the cultural and the structural can be brought together in understanding transitions *and* in understanding youth style, and the reciprocal relations between the two, and how inequalities are reproduced in the process¹⁰.

Summary and Conclusion

In describing similarities between ‘then’ and ‘now’, and their positioning in youth research and policy, I have highlighted how youth unemployment is again a central problem for young people – and for politicians and policy makers (under the rubric of ‘NEET’). There are loud echoes of the 1980s in current worries about ‘a lost generation’. A key difference is that this ‘lost generation’ now has a wider social membership. The restructuring of youth transitions that has occurred over the past

three decades has been widely regarded as opening up new opportunities for social advancement through extended education. Declining rates of graduate employment, a worsening 'graduate premium' and graduate underemployment are just three signals that 'slow-track transitions' may be faltering. To repeat Ken Roberts (2009a: 365), 'there is a wealth of talent and a wealth of ambition, and an overall shortage of jobs, not least good jobs'. Quite simply, limited 'opportunity structures' unite the more and less disadvantaged in the experience of underemployment. The economic demand for young workers – be they higher or lower skilled - may not live up to what is claimed by exponents of the idea of a high skills economy. Youth underemployment will deserve far greater research and policy attention in the coming period.

In thinking about the future, and the aims of this special issue, I have reflected on how youth transitions research might progress. The 'ordinary kids', the 'missing middle', the *mainstream* that has been *marginalised* in transitions and youth culture research, need greater attention. A broader scope can also be applied to what we mean by youth culture, allowing greater opportunities for transitions research to come closer to the youth cultural studies tradition. Taking both these steps, I suggest, would help amplify the explanatory power and sociological relevance of youth studies.

Thus, finally, in answering my introductory question 'what is youth studies for?' I have suggested that analysing change and continuity in youth transitions can, crucially, cast light on wider, contemporary sociological processes. Certainly this discussion has opened up important questions about what current forms of labour market transition – and, particularly, the growth of underemployment - mean for inequality, social mobility and, even more fundamentally, the shape and dynamics of social classes in the UK. For instance, without doubt the 'massification' of higher education has transformed the pathways to adulthood of many working-class young people. Going to university has become part of their set of normal choices and routes, at least for less disadvantaged sections of the working-class (this may soon need to be stipulated in the past tense as, potentially, current changes to university

funding re-introduce 'class closure'). What do the swelling ranks of graduates from 'non-traditional' backgrounds mean for the way that class is composed and experienced? Do such routes signal social mobility or the way that long-standing class inequalities work themselves out in new ways with new forms (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007)? Have they led to a shrinking of the working-class and burgeoning of the middle-class as more and more move happily upward through university and the gateway of professional employment to middle-class statuses and identities? Or are 'slow-track transitions' through university to insecure and lower level 'graduate jobs' a new facet of young *working-class* adulthood? What forms of youth culture and identity are forged in these new transitions? As the distinctive cultural capital and economic power of a university education erodes, and more join the ranks of an increasingly insecure middle-mass (Byrne, 1999) from below - and those above seek to maintain class distinction via the 'top universities' and the best graduate jobs - how far are such youth transitions implicated in the blurring and stretching of 'the middle class'? In short, what do new patterns of youth transition mean for how we understand social class in the contemporary period?

In the preceding discussion I have implied answers to some of these questions. My point, to finish, is that it is the *asking* of these sorts of questions – questions about social change, social continuity, about inequality and the position of young people's transitions in these processes – that, for me, gives youth studies its particular appeal and purpose.

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¹ For example, see Cohen and Ainley (2000) and Skelton (2002) for criticisms of transitions studies and Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003) and Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004) for critique of the most theoretically important form of youth culture research - sub-cultural studies.

² When I argued this at an ESRC seminar on 'Re-thinking Youth Culture' (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2009), John Clarke made the valid reply that, additionally, studying youth provides a good service in challenging governmental discourses that socially construct 'youth' in well-known ways.

³ Youth unemployment did not disappear between 1980 and 2010. The early '90s recession saw significant rises in unemployment. Some localities have had stubbornly high unemployment rates *across* this period.

⁴ I am indebted to all colleagues who have worked on these collective projects. Thanks in particular to Tracy Shildrick and Colin Webster for their advice on this article.

⁵ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8401267.stm>

⁶ In 2006 I shared a platform with the Right Honourable Hilary Armstrong (then UK Cabinet Minister for Social Exclusion). After my exposition on the problems of churning and long-term economic marginality as found by the Teesside Studies, the Minister was asked for her response. It was three words long: 'the skills agenda'.

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/mar/22/budget2006.budget>

⁸ This necessitated criticism of my own as well and the latter paper identified some problems in 'post-subcultural studies' (e.g. Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003) that hinder a shift toward more encompassing studies of youth. These include, firstly, the theoretical and empirical side-lining of questions about social class and contemporary youth culture (and, as a consequence, the overly hasty rejection of the CCCS approach) and, secondly, the ironic repetition of some of the conceptual and methodological flaws of sub-culture theory (e.g. the structured empirical absence of the mass of youth that follows from an overly narrow depiction of what youth culture *is*).

⁹ In broad terms, it could be argued that there is a peculiar paradox in recent youth studies (in the UK at least) whereby the relative absence from most recent post-subcultural studies of the youth cultural worlds of the *most disadvantaged* is matched by the neglect of the pathways of *more advantaged* young people in the mainstream of transitions research (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006).

¹⁰ Thanks to Colin Webster for pointing out how close this description is to the ambition of CCCS sub-culture theory.