

Youth on the Edge of Society: Ten Years of Research on the Lives of NEET Young People

A photograph of a person in a dark, tunnel-like environment. The person is silhouetted against a bright, warm, orange light that filters through a brick wall. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the warm glow from the wall, creating a dramatic and somewhat somber atmosphere.

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Today's session

- Draws on findings from a series of studies conducted over the last 10 years, including research funded by the Leverhulme Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Many of the findings of the research are presented in:
 - Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2011) *NEET Young People and Training for Work* (Trentham, Stoke-on-Trent)
 - Simmons, R. Thompson, R. and Russell, R. (2014) *Education, Work and Social Change: Young people and marginalization in post-industrial Britain* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan)

Today's session

- I want to do two main things:
- Provide an overview of the research upon which the session is based, and present some of the data from the fieldwork
- Consider some of the implications of the research:
 - a) For young people on the edge of society
 - b) For practitioners working with these young people

But before that....

- I want us to think about the term NEET, where it came from, and some of the assumptions associated with dominant discourses about NEET young people
- NEET is now a term used across Europe, the OECD and further afield but:
- Where did it come from?
- What is its significance?

NEET Young people: the rise of a problem category

- Traditionally policymakers, academics and others talked about ‘youth unemployment’ but today the discourse of NEET is now much more commonplace
- The term NEET was coined in the UK and can be traced back to the 1980s, a number of important shifts which took place during that decade

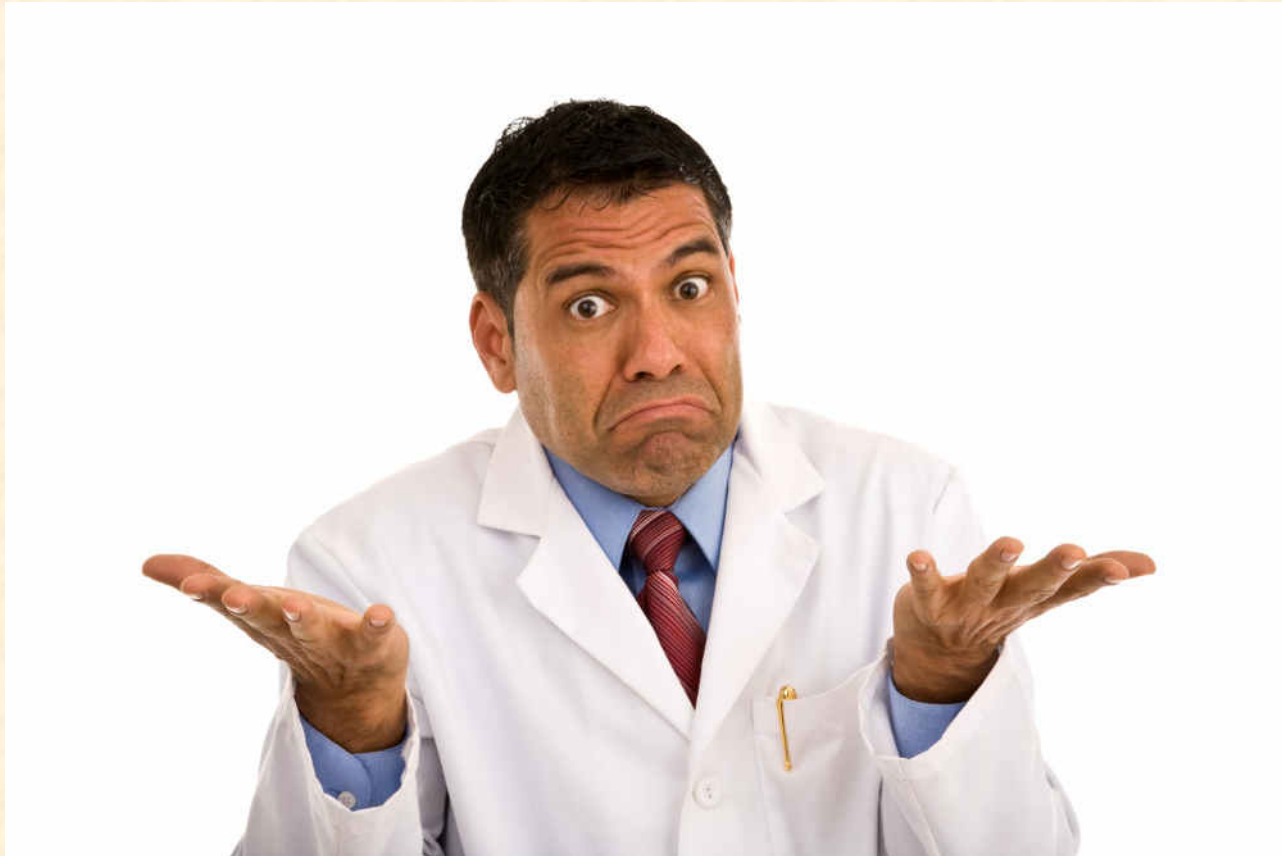
NEET Young people: the rise of a problem category



NEET Young people: the rise of a problem category



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NEET Young people: the rise of a problem category

- The term NEET then is linked to neoliberal discourses about the individual, the economy and the place of young people within the labour market
- These tend to shift the responsibility for youth unemployment from the state to the individual young person (Simmons and Thompson 2011).
- Basically then successive governments in the UK - and elsewhere – have responded by promoting continued participation in education and training as the solution to perceived deficits in the employability of young people

NEET Young people: the rise of a problem category



NEET Young people: the rise of a problem category

- Either way, youth transitions have altered radically across Europe and elsewhere. Nowadays, few young people leave school to enter full-time work. For many, access to traditional signifiers of adulthood has become delayed, disordered or sometimes suspended indefinitely (Ainley and Allen 2010).
- Social structures appear less fixed and predictable, and radically reduced opportunities for stable working-class employment have disturbed traditional notions of social reproduction.
- However, the degree of agency which any individual or group is able to exercise remains structured by a range of social, economic and cultural factors (Beck 1992).

The research

- Set against the backdrop of social, economic and cultural change, and the changing position of young people in particular
- The increasingly central role of education and training
- The desire to dig beneath the surface and unearth young people's stories

The research: Meet Jasmine

- Jasmine was 18, NEET, and living alone in December 2010. She spent the majority of her time outside education and work, in receipt of benefits, until fieldwork ended in March 2013.
- Superficially, Jasmine's behaviour reflected stereotypes about NEET young people: turbulent family relationships; fickle friendships; an intermittent series of boyfriends; generally, her personal life was full of drama.
- She was also a habitual cannabis user; prone to bouts of heavy drinking and other nihilistic behaviour.
- Jasmine believed she had bi-polar disorder and, in January 2013, announced she was pregnant.

The research: Meet Cayden

- Was 19 when we met him towards the end of 2010, and he was officially NEET until fieldwork finished in March 2013. He has learning difficulties and went to a special school. Shortly after leaving school, he dropped out of college.
- Cayden had been in care but had been living alone in a flat for about a year before we met him. His mother had died about a year beforehand, and Cayden was receiving bereavement counselling when we first met. His uncle, who had been his foster parent, had recently moved to Scotland.
- His commitment to finding paid employment fluctuated over the course of the research.

The research: Meet Sean

- Was 16 when fieldwork began. His parents separated when he was 3. Sean's step-father is a chef, his mother is currently at home looking after children, although she formerly worked as a nursery nurse.
- Sean has three young siblings, as well as three brothers aged 15-18 who, like him, live outside the family home. He attended a 'mainstream' secondary school and passed nine GCSEs, including maths and English, and two BTEC qualifications.
- HE left school at 16 and began a catering apprenticeship soon afterwards. However, Sean left his apprenticeship after two months and became NEET.

The research: Jasmine's story

- Since January 2010, Jasmine has wanted to work in childcare, policing, youth work and catering ... Jasmine is now interested in catering, she enjoys cooking. (Field notes 08/10/10 – 24/06/11).
- Towards the end of 2011, Jasmine began work as a care assistant with H-Care, a company providing care to the elderly in their own homes. However, she didn't stay in this job for long....
- Jasmine left H-Care in January 2012 after questioning a pay packet – she felt she was underpaid and kept getting ill. She describes 'throwing up' in a client's house; the client phoned H-Care and asked for someone to take Jasmine home. He was told that if Jasmine didn't do his care nobody would. She describes them as 'dodgy'. Jasmine shows me her final pay slip: her pay was docked by £60 for training. There is also a pen mark on her pay slip which states that £5 was deducted for loss of a staff handbook (Field notes 29/02/12).

Jasmine's story

- Jasmine's friend, Charlie, was also employed by H-Care before leaving to work in a residential care home.
- Charlie says she has learnt a lot ... like how to handle people properly – and that she was taught this wrongly at H-Care. She says you shouldn't stand on Zimmer frames; you shouldn't drag or pull but use a hoist or belt if the old people cannot get up ... She says a lot of H-Care's activities were 'illegal' and that they would be shut down if it was brought to officials' attention.
- Charlie says her social worker was appalled by what she was expected to do. Charlie said she left H-Care as she was underpaid and was being put with inexperienced girls when two people were needed for lifting – something she complained about as she knew it was wrong. Jasmine says she hasn't done her handling training yet but is handling people. (Field notes 1/12/11).

The research: Jasmine's story

Jasmine's commitment to work waned over time. Yet she did not lack qualifications or a range of other skills and abilities:

Yeah I got a B in drama; I got a Level 2 award in digital applications; I got a C in English, a D in maths, C in media studies, C in dance, D in my other English and D in French ... then I got a C in additional science and I got a D in science ... and ... a Level 3 BTEC national award in performing arts and I got a gold certificate for excellence in technical theatre. (Interview 29/03/11).

Jasmine also acquired more qualifications during the fieldwork, including certificates in first aid, outdoor activities, and healthy living. She also did voluntary work at a local hospital, and helped to organise a charity ball attended by the mayor of Middlebridge. Jasmine sometimes plays scrabble in her spare time – to improve her vocabulary.

The research: Cayden's story

- Cayden talked about wanting 'to get my life back together' at the beginning of the research. He seemed lonely and desperate for any form of interaction throughout the study.
- On first meeting his Connexions PA, Heather, in November 2010, she stated that Cayden would 'probably never work'.
- He is a vulnerable young man with a number of social, personal and material disadvantages. However, despite this, Cayden wants 'a normal life' – a job, a family, his own house.

The research: Cayden's story

- Cayden began a voluntary work placement at *The Avenue* Care Home in February 2011. His placement was 12 hours per week, although Cayden often worked longer hours. He made tea, helped staff with lifting and handling, assisted residents with meals, and helped them go to the toilet. He received no pay but was pleased to be given a 'free' lunch.
- Violet, the care home manager, described Cayden as 'polite', 'on time' and able to take the initiative and seek work. He seemed happy with the placement for a while, and got on well with the residents.
- Nora ... smiles and welcomes us into her room, Craig pushes a trolley down with him to freshen her water. Nora has 7 grandchildren...she jokes about having an 8th grandchild in Craig. Craig smiles, she tells him she is going home today and tells him where she lives, 'across the football pitch' – he says he knows it and she says he is welcome any time. (Field notes 16/02/11).

The research: Cayden's story

- After a while, Cayden formed the impression that that he would be offered paid employment at The Avenue. However, he was still working without pay when we visited him in May. By July, he had left the care home.
- Cayden says there was confusion over payment. Connexions said The Avenue would pay him ... Cayden says he needs a job that pays. He also tells me that his benefits are about to decrease ... (Field notes 15/07/11).
- Despite this, Cayden began another voluntary work placement in early 2012, this time a shop in Middlebridge run by a national charity. Initially, it was four days-per-week (10.00-5.00), but he was soon working six days-per-week. He deals with customers, works the till, cleans, and does odd jobs around the place. Tara, the shop manager, recognises that Cayden is vulnerable and describes taking him 'under her wing'.

The research: Cayden's story

- He seems a lot happier because when he first came here he was quite down and he used to talk about the tablets that he took and ... I'd say 'oh come on let's go and take your mind off stuff'. And the other day I gave him worry angels and he's got some at the side of his bed and he said they've taken his worries away from him now. He just doesn't seem as down and depressed and he's happy coming to work ... and, in the last couple of weeks, he's been given proper calls to make ... he does really well at selling the badges. (Tara 31/5/12)
- The Jobcentre want Cayden to find paid work but he wants to stay at the charity shop. Cayden is hopeful that the shop will pay him - although he was still working there on a voluntary basis when our fieldwork ended.

The research: Sean's story

- Sean's work placement was at *Rick's Bar* in Greenford. Initially, he worked 40-hour weeks, but Sean was soon working sixteen-hour days, six-days-a-week for £2.50 an hour (Apprenticeship rate at the time).
- He found long shifts preparing food, cooking, laying tables and cleaning exhausting. He describes going into 'robot mode' and having difficulty coping with college work alongside his placement.
- I was feeling ridiculously tired every day and [a friend] said that, legally, they aren't supposed to let us work more than 40 hours-a-week anyway and I sort of realised that it was a little bit dodgy, and I just couldn't hack it anymore with the hours we were doing so I had to tell them I were quitting ... they weren't really too bothered ... they paid me and they let me go. [Interview 18.11.2011]

The research: Sean's story

- Sean then left home, following disputes with his parents:
- There were disagreements in the house...I had to look after the kids constantly...I was applying to colleges and stuff...but none of them could take me. And the same with jobs; no one could take me on apprenticeships [Interview 18.11.2011]
- After four months without a permanent address, Sean moved back to the family home and began a nine-month period of short-lived engagement with various training courses. He felt 'annoyed' at his situation: he believed he had tried hard, and talked about struggling to get work without a reference from his apprenticeship.
- In May 2012 Sean was offered a job as a trainee chef at the Middlebridge branch of *Pietro's*, a national restaurant chain. This stemmed from a period of temporary work at a different branch the previous July.

The research: Sean's story

- Sean sees himself carving a career at Pietro's ... he will soon take his grilling exam. Then Sean might try to become a 'buddy' to help train others. He says he doesn't want to go much higher though - he wants to stay in the kitchen, not running the business side of things. He says he knows [of] people who have moved onto Michelin star restaurants after working for Pietro's. Sean hopes that one day he'll do this too.
- He is contracted to work 16 hours-per-week but usually works over 30. Sean takes all overtime offered: he wants the money. Pietro's have told him he can't work before 9am or after 11pm due to his age, and that he cannot work over 40 hours-a-week. Once he has passed his grill test Sean will get red stripes (on his uniform). The higher the worker's status, the more decorated the uniform (Field notes 20.07.2012).

The research: Sean's story

- Although, at the end of 2012, Sean was still on the national minimum wage of £6.19 per hour he expressed a certain pride in his work...
- [w]hen people know that I work at Pietro's it's like 'oh that's really good' or another thing I get is: 'oh you get free this and free that'. Whereas if you are working for McDonald's they think you're a prat, sort of thing. Pietro's is probably a bit more recognised and working for Pietro's is seen as a nice place ... So if you work for Pietro's it's sort of seen as a good thing which is not the same if you work at McDonald's. (Interview 27.11.12)

So...

- Despite assertions about cultures of worklessness there appears to be little evidence of this. Most NEET young people have quite 'mainstream' ambitions and want to work.
- However, their commitment to work can fade over time, and this is often related to negative labour market experiences.
- Much work at the bottom end of the labour market is *poor work*, characterised by low pay, insecurity and exploitation (Shildrick et al. 2012).
- Voluntary work can help a young person back into the labour market but its relationship with paid work is not straightforward

How do we understand all this?

- It has been popular over recent years for policymakers, practitioners and academics to talk about processes of social exclusion and social inclusion
- Simmons et al. (2014) argue that such a division is often a false dichotomy
- For us, the concept of marginalisation (Wacquant, 1996) offers a more effective way of understanding the position of many young people in contemporary society

Either way: what is clear is that...

- Young people's labour market experiences matter:
- Negative and unproductive experiences of work and work-related training can have a deleterious effect upon a young person's motivation and confidence.
- It seems that 'doing something' is not *always* better than 'doing nothing'.
- Conversely, reasonable rewards and conditions can make a difference, and keep young people engaged.

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