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Transmission of inequalities from generation to generation.

Transitions and Transmission: Young people and social capital in biographical context

Janet Holland

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Introduction

This paper is about transitions and intergenerational transmission in the context of an accidental qualitative longitudinal study in which the aim was to study the lives and experiences of 'ordinary' young people.

Inventing Adulthoods: A biographical approach to youth transitions

Initially, in the face of the negative public discourse. In the first of three consecutive projects funded by the ESRC in the UK, Youth Values, we wanted to see what values young people held, and how they handled conflicting value systems coming at them from all sides, home, school, peers, religion, media. We used questionnaires to 1800 young people across five sites, followed by focus groups (56) and individual interviews (57), with volunteers from the questionnaire sample (Holland et al. 2000, McGrellis et al. 2001). The sites were chosen to capture socio-economic differences and other diversities, and are: a leafy commuter town, an inner city site, a disadvantaged estate in the north of England, an isolated rural area and a city in Northern Ireland (communities mixed re social class and religion) (Thomson and Holland 2002).

In the second project, *Inventing Adulthoods*, we moved into a more dedicated biographical approach to how young people constructed their expected or desired adulthoods. We selected 121 young people across the sites, and employed a range of methods over a period of two and a half years to investigate their understandings of and strategies for transitions towards adulthood. These methods included repeat biographical interviews (three rounds), memory books and lifelines (Thomson and Holland 2003, Thomson and Holland 2005). The third component is *Youth Transitions* and we continue the biographical interviews (two more rounds and now numbering 493 overall), with a focus on families, communities and social capital in the context of a large programme of research with the Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group at London South Bank University (www.lsbu.ac.uk/families). The whole study is called *Inventing Adulthoods* (Henderson 2007).

The value in the approach adopted in the study is that it is longitudinal, biographical and holistic.

Changing transitions

There is a general consensus in youth studies and Europe wide that youth transitions have become fragmented and stretched. Jones (2005), drawing a range of work in the UK and elsewhere together, has characterised these changes as making young people's transitions to adulthood:

- more extended: with economic independence deferred
- more complex: there is no longer a conventional timetable, dependence and independence may combine and critical moments make a difference
- more 'risky': involving backtracking, risk taking and parent/child conflict
- more individualised: young people have more choice but are not equally able to capitalise on it
- more polarised: with inequalities more sharply defined in relation to more elite 'slow track' transitions and more risky 'fast track' (See too Goodwin and O'Connor 2005).

We see these types of fragmented transitions amongst the young people in our study, as well as some more traditional routes.

Theoretical background for the study

Theories that have influenced our approach to our data have been those of post or late modernity and critiques of these approaches; and the concept of social capital. We have thought about Giddens 'detraditionalisation, which has similarities with Beck's 'individualisation'. Here a transformation of the relationship of the individual to society leads to a process of moving from 'normal biographies', with pre-existing roles and life plans, to 'choice biographies' where we are responsible for who and what we become.

Drawn into youth studies, these approaches emphasise intergenerational change, where the predictable patterns of the past, powerfully shaped by gender and social class are eroded. But there are critiques of this position within the field. A general theme in critiques of these theories is that whilst there have been fundamental social changes in the recent past, these have led to the reconfiguring and reworking of class, gender and ethnicity and related inequalities, rather than their erosion or eradication. We drew on increasing critical scholarship in relation to these theories in the area of *gender studies* (Adkins 2002, Walkerdine et al. 2001), *social class* (Skeggs 1997, 2004, Reay et al. 2005), *'race' and ethnicity* (Alexander 2000, Nayak 2003) as well as a growing body of debate within the field of youth studies as to the value of late modern theory (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

Throughout the study we have used Bourdieu's typology of capitals, economic, cultural, social and symbolic as an analytic frame to understand the access to resources that characterised the young peoples lives and trajectories (Bourdieu 1986). It is also about the production and reproduction of power and inequality. More mainstream versions of the concept stress

social cohesion, and the collective goods of reciprocity, trust and co-operation.

Putnam has elaborated the concept to include bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 1993). Inward looking 'bonding' social capital, focuses on relationships and networks of trust and reciprocity that reinforce ties within groups – families and communities. Outward looking 'bridging' social capital focuses on connections outwards, across different heterogeneous groups.

Disadvantage and opportunity

Our disadvantaged estate in the north of England was in the top ten per cent most deprived local authorities in the UK, and the inner city area was in the top twenty (Index of Deprivation, 2001 Census). They stand in great contrast with the *leafy suburb*, which was in the bottom five per cent of the Deprivation Index. So we had in the sample some of the most and least disadvantaged, locations and communities in the UK. And in the disadvantaged areas we certainly found intergenerational transmission of inequalities. Family is central to the local culture and reconstituted families were the norm, with mothers at the core. What singled out some of the young people in our sample from this area, particularly young women, was their rejection of the estate, or realisation that to get on they had to get out, where others felt that it was impossible to escape from the bubble or seemed to have no desire to do so. While most developed the bonding social capital that bound them to family and community that would help them get by and cope, others sought bridging social capital, and a route out through education.

Over the years we have visited, the estate itself was an target for state intervention in relation to social exclusion, and efforts to boost access to education for the excluded - housing regeneration schemes, education maintenance grants to encourage young people to remain in education beyond the statutory leaving age, mentoring whilst at school, taster visits to nearby universities. Although the young people were bright, voluble and entertaining, given their circumstances we could hardly imagine any going to university, and many of *them* imagined a future bounded by family and community. But time was to prove us wrong, at the last count four young women had managed to get to university

Maisie, who worked throughout her educational career, obtained a degree and recognises the value of social capital built in networks of association. She has used her multiple jobs to generate such networks:

Two of the other young women had contrasting pathways. Lauren's route was riddled with ambivalence, with the pull of community and a lack of motivation on her part to resist it playing a strong part. Like many from her background, she struggled to get onto and maintain an educational route, and at a certain point her mother had explicitly drawn her back into the community and away from education that would lead to a career, suggesting she was not a paperwork person. We were unable to interview Lauren between 2001 and 2004, but caught up with her in 2004 and things had changed again, she had

reinvested in education and was in the second year of a Nursing Diploma at university.

In contrast, over the years Maureen showed an increasingly steely determination in pursuing education and a profession, and a realisation that she needed to get out of a disadvantaged community in order to get on, with all the costs that entailed. With the support and encouragement of her separated parents she resisted ties in the community, including deferring active heterosexuality and womanhood until they held less of a threat to her desired future. After a gap, we caught up with Maureen again in 2004 and she was in the second year of a law degree. Her interviewer commented: 'She seem to be making her own way now, supported by the 'friends for life' that she has made at university' (Researcher Notes 2004).

The policy focus on building social capital as a route to community and social cohesion, stands in sharp contrast to a policy discourse of social mobility and individual success in which educational achievement is central, particularly in the lives of young people. Each of the young women here revealed a different balance between individual and wider resources, and access to support and social capital, demonstrating that for young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, individual resources of ability and ambition do not easily translate into success. The 'costs' of social mobility, and community oriented values, investments and identities (bonding social capital) may militate against social and geographical mobility.

Advantage and opportunity

Amongst the more middle class young people in the study we can still find 'traditional' transitions, slower, more elite transitions for both young men and women. These young people have greater access to material and economic resources, and considerable social capital through their parents', and during the course of the study their own networks. We can see some signs of the instrumental use of social capital. Keith, of mixed class background from our rural site, with useful cultural and social capital from his mother, and a skilled deployer of social capital himself over the years, was surprised at university to find people much more middle class than himself. He observed that they did not bother much with university work, nor indeed other work, and expected to slip into Daddy's business after university. In his account, they spent much of their time aggressively creating networks that would be of use for them in the future.

From their children's accounts, many of the middle class parents in the study put considerable emphasis on a successful progress through education for their offspring, in order to provide them with the best life chances, and provided considerable support of all kinds to facilitate this. Many of the middle class young people moved relatively smoothly along this path. Our longitudinal, biographical approach enabled us to explore cases when the path was not so smooth, due to unexpected eventualities, the uncertainties of new times. There might be family break-up, depression on the young person's part, perhaps as a result of the pressure of their own and their parents' expectations, or other critical moments in their paths. Samuel in the

leafy suburb dropped out of university because he had got everything that he wanted from it, useful contacts and networks for his planned career in the entertainment business, for which he saw a degree as unnecessary 'It's about who you know not what you've done.'

Bonding and bridging social capital

The well networked in our sample have tended to be middle class young people, albeit in a range of circumstances, and with both themselves and their families experiencing some of the uncertainties of new times. They tended to be flexible and their networks span different age groups and communities – local, family, educational, work, leisure - and a range of activities, from bell-ringing to volunteering, bridging social capital. They are often well resourced by their family.

It seems also that it is the predominantly working class sites that generate bonding, and possibly negative social capital. But young people in such settings can also develop networks of support and concomitant social capital that enable their lives in the community as has also been pointed out by others (Raffo and Reeves 2000, Leonard 2004). We also found forms of networking and association for the working-class young people, through their families and communities, that can support them more generally in their activities in education, as entrepreneurs, and in terms of work and travel opportunities, helping them to bridge out into the broader community. These often have a diasporic element, with contacts amongst those in our sample in the USA, Caribbean, Australia and elsewhere. Along with colleagues in Families and Social Capital Group and others, we would argue that the move from bonding to bridging social capital is more complex than envisaged by Putnam. Exploring transitions in young people's lives highlights how many draw upon their social networks as resources to negotiate these passages. For some bonding social capital provides a solid base from which to bridge out to new networks, whilst for others bonding social capital is more constraining (Holland et al. 2007).

Young people's views on intergenerational continuities and social mobility

In the fourth round of interviews in 2002/3 when they were aged 18-24, we asked the young people about change over the generations, and expectations of social mobility and 91% (64/70) responded. They did see considerable change between their parents' generation and their own, largely in relation to increased opportunities, particularly for education, although this tendency was greater amongst the working class young people. Of those at university, nine were working class, eight of whom were women. Most of these were the first in their family to go to university, so it could be said that this group has benefited from the expansion of higher education in the latter part of the 20th century in the UK, and the improvement in access for women.

When asked if they thought they would do better than their parents, most of them thought they would, many linking it to education and opportunity.

Matching their progress to university, almost all of the working class young women from whatever site thought they would do better than their parents, who were often separated, with mothers largely in low paid work. A number of these had considerable support from parents, particularly mothers, in their ambitions. Shannon (wc, NI) thinks 'I probably will do very well', Cynthia (wc, NI) is 'Aiming high' as is Jade (wc, inner city) 'I'm aiming really high, I think. Even if I don't reach exactly where I wanna be, I'll still be up there somewhere'.

Conclusion

The main themes emerging here are that times have and are changing, and with them young people's transitions into adulthood, which have become extended and potentially fragmented. Processes of detraditionalisation, individualisation and disembedding, do not appear to have been so thoroughgoing as has been argued by late modern theorists, and family and family relationships remain critical to the wellbeing and transitions of young people. Access to social capital is an important resource for young people, with bonding social capital more prevalent amongst the working class and bridging amongst the middle class in general. Forms of bonding social capital can reinforce exclusion, but others can help disadvantaged young people to bridge out of their communities to more heterogeneous groups.

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