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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/area.12222>

PUBLISHER

Wiley / © 2015 Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers)

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Pimlott-Wilson, Helena. 2019. "Individualising the Future: The Emotional Geographies of Neoliberal Governance in Young Peoples' Aspirations". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/18827>.

Individualising the future: the emotional geographies of neoliberal governance in young peoples' aspirations

Abstract

In response to record levels of youth worklessness and socio-economic inequalities, the UK Coalition government has sought to scale back public spending through welfare cuts, emphasising self-reliance for financial provision. Education, as a tool for both personal progression and national economic competitiveness has risen up the political agenda, as the Government champions an 'aspiration nation' which rewards 'hard-working' people. Young people are increasingly tasked with looking toward the future, taking responsibility and 'raising' their aspirations in order to contribute through economic production as active citizen-workers. The power to achieve is placed firmly at the feet of individuals; yet broader inequalities which characterise the contemporary climate and powerfully shape the life chances of young people are overlooked.

This paper explores the hopes and expectations of young people living in the north west of England as they think about their own future school-to-employment ambitions. Firstly, the paper reflects on the structural changes which have occurred within the local economy over the last generation before secondly, examining how the task of responding to changing labour market conditions is internalised by the young people, with 'success' (or lack thereof) framed as an individual enterprise. Young people are negotiating a set of contradictory beliefs. They acknowledge their own responsibility as future adult citizens whilst also reflecting on the role of government in addressing inequalities, as contemporary economic restructuring and fiscal policies are reducing opportunities. The paper makes visible the emotional burdens young people anticipate as they endeavour to achieve a successful future in the context of economic uncertainty and an individualising political milieu of aspiration.

Keywords: aspiration, employment, emotions, individualisation, neoliberalism, youth

Introduction

Geographical research of the last fifteen years has drawn attention to the contingent nature of neoliberalism, highlighting the localised expressions of, and crises within, this political-economic ideology (Larner 2003; Peck, Theodore *et al.* 2010). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the UK Government has been maturing the neoliberal project, interweaving rights with responsibilities and placing emphasis on education as a tool for economic progress. This positions the atomised young person as key to the future prosperity of the

nation-state in times of economic uncertainty, geographical differentiation and structural constraints (Holloway 2014; Lister 2006). This paper furthers debate on the localised production of policy through a focus on young people's subjective responses to neoliberal governance which ties citizenship with employment, and the implications of this for their emotional geographies. Young people narrate the anxiety (and in some cases, anger) they feel in conforming to dominant neoliberal visions of success at a time of economic uncertainty; expressing the complex emotions they experience in the present and those which they anticipate will infuse their future.

Individualising the future

Socio-economic transformations present new challenges for the UK welfare state which, as a result, is undergoing significant restructuring. Since the 1970s, successive governments have been maturing the neoliberal project culminating in post-2008 austerity measures which saw the retrenchment of welfare spending and renewal of the workfare state. Employment is a central tenet of Coalition policy, underpinned by a desire to promote national economic competitiveness and to ensure that all in society are capable of responding to the challenges this presents (Jenson and St Martin 2006). In response, educational investment has risen up the political agenda in an attempt to manage future risk (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012). Until the election of the Coalition government in 2010, the Labour government promoted education as a tool for social inclusion and route out of poverty, tasking schools with producing citizens of the future who would engage in both the community and labour market (Raco 2009). With a change of government came a shift in focus, as the Coalition's stringent cuts to welfare and neoliberal policies to tackle 'new' social risks (including lack of skills, long-term unemployment and poor employment) sought to promote education as a tool for economic strategy. Education, lifelong learning and the training of individuals were pursued in order to reduce welfare expenditure by enabling future adult-citizens to provide for their own needs through paid work, simultaneously enhancing the competitiveness of the UK in the global knowledge economy. The self-reliant, entrepreneurial citizen-worker has become the epitome of the ideal neoliberal subject, as paid work has become the cornerstone by which social inclusion and successful citizenship are measured for those of working age (MacLeavy 2008; Raco 2009).

Traditional narratives also associate adulthood with labour market participation, providing the means to establish an independent home and support a family (McDowell 2003). In this vision of adulthood, education plays a key role in enabling the enterprising neoliberal future-orientated citizen to obtain employment and thus become self-sufficient (Jenson and St Martin 2006). Despite the increased complexity and protraction associated with 'becoming' adult (Jeffrey 2010), Government utilises rhetoric of individual responsibility in order to mould young people into ideal citizen-workers, building an 'aspiration nation' comprised of self-reliant, flexible and mobile individuals who conform to

neoliberal ideals of fulfilment through material consumption: “the risk takers. The young people who dream of their first pay cheque, their first car, their first home” (Cameron 2012: no pagination). Despite ubiquitous disparities, increases in university tuition fees, record levels of youth unemployment and the retrenchment of the welfare state, a powerful rhetoric of ‘aiming higher’ and personal responsibility for well-being and social cohesion persists. Political leaders place the onus on the individual to ‘aspire’ to dominant visions of adulthood rather than on the Government to address broader inequalities and barriers which young people face as they look towards their future. The power to achieve their aspirations is placed firmly in the hands of young people, transferring the burden of responsibility from the state to the individual should their dreams fail to be achieved. The family and neighbourhood, as settings through which individuals are socialised and learn to become citizens, also become sites for political attention in order to enhance social mobility (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012). This shift to an aspirational politics which normalises and mainstreams practices associated with a narrow, middle class conception of aspirations marginalises those who do not, or cannot, conform to the ideals of neoliberal citizenship (Raco 2009).

As the power to realise aspirations is transferred to young people, political rhetoric overlooks the significant economic transformations of the last 40 years. The decline of manufacturing and heavy industry has significantly altered the landscape of employment in the UK within living memory and disrupted entrenched school-to-labour market transitions for young people. Despite a general trend in the decline of the manufacturing sector and increase in service-based employment, the legacies left behind in areas once predominated by industrial work affect the residual labour market opportunities and the specialisms of particular areas (McDowell 2003; Peck, Theodore *et al.* 2010). Young people are no longer able to follow the well-trodden paths of previous generations as they seek employment in place-based industry (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

This paper considers the implications of Government narratives which emphasise individual responsibility and paid work for the emotional geographies of young people as they look towards their future pathways, contributing to an emerging recognition of the affective operation of neoliberal governance (see Brown 2011; Cairns 2013). Brown (2011) draws attention to widening participation initiatives which encourage social and spatial mobility amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such initiatives attempt to (re)orientate the hopes of young people towards graduate employment and self-sufficiency, advocating a partial middle-class notion of success and fulfilment. In her study, Cairns (2013) explores a career education programme which is couched in neoliberal principles, instructing young people to internalise uncertainty. By establishing particular future lifecourse events as valuable, this neoliberal vision creates a success/failure boundary around which young peoples’ present-day emotional work takes place. Together, both studies explore how particular educational initiatives aimed at raising aspirations impact on young peoples’ present-day emotions. In this paper, I explore further the affective and

emotional impact of young people's anxiety over their individualised responsibility for their future attainment. This emerges as *anticipated* future emotions, creating anxiety amongst those who cannot, or do not, conform to neoliberal benchmarks of success. In examining the affective and emotional geographies of young people's aspirations, 'emotions' are explored as an individual's state of feeling, represented through named sensations such as joy, sadness, fear, anger. 'Affect' is pre-reflexive and preconscious, ascribed to embodied encounters which influence the capacity of the mind and body to act (Anderson 2006; Thrift 2004). As young people assess the possible options available to them in the future, their experiences (both past and present) and chances of achieving a future aligned with dominant neoliberal codes influence their anticipated future emotional well-being.

Firstly, the paper explores recent economic changes which have unsettled conventional school-to-employment pathways within a geographically-isolated community to contextualise the uncertainties young people face in conforming to idealised notions of the adult citizen-worker. Secondly, subjective responses to neoliberal discourse venerating educational achievement and individual responsibility will be explored through the voices of young people planning for their future as they come to view their success (or failure) as an individual project. The paper will go on to uncover the ways this rhetoric of responsibilisation is internalised by young people, affecting both their present day, and anticipated future, emotional well-being. Finally, the paper highlights the perspectives of a small, yet critical group of young working-class people who are disparaging of policy narratives which emphasise individual responsibility as the primary solution to persistent inequalities; rhetoric which casts neoliberal reform as an inevitable and logical response to wider economic conditions (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Larner 2003). The paper attends to the agency and resilience of young people as they respond to broader socio-economic conditions at the local scale, to acknowledge the emotive effects of political narratives which correlate employment with successful futures.

Researching aspirations

In their concern to raise educational standards, encourage labour market participation and compete in the global knowledge economy, the Government has recently increased the age at which young people can leave compulsory education¹. The data draws upon semi-structured interviews conducted with 33 white British young people in Year 11 (aged 15-16 years old) in 2013 as they were about to embark on their GCSEs² and make decisions about their future pathways. 17 young women and 16 young men from working class and middle

¹ Before 2013, young people left compulsory education at the end of the academic year in which they turned 16. From 2013, young people in Year 11 must continue in education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17, increasing to 18 years old in 2015.

² General Certificate of Secondary Education. A qualification in a specific subject typically taken by 14-16 year-olds in the UK (except Scotland).

class backgrounds were recruited through secondary schools and youth clubs throughout West Cumbria, England. The area shares features with other English regions which have experienced a demise of traditional manufacturing industries, steelworks and mining, yet is relatively geographically isolated; bound to the west by the Irish Sea and the east by the mountains of the Lake District, it is 40 miles from major arterial routes. Since the 1970s, the traditional industrial base of West Cumbria has declined markedly (Peck, Mulvey *et al.* 2010), resulting in an increasing dependence on the nuclear industry and its supply chain, with a low representation of the finance, business services and education sectors (Cumbria Vision 2009). In recent years, the county has experienced outward migration of younger people in search of better education, employment and housing opportunities in response to a relatively slow rate of past economic growth, limited educational opportunities and low levels of income. The isolated nature of West Cumbria, alongside a relative lack of diversity in the labour market, presents an interesting case study through which to explore the localised, subjective responses of young people to neoliberal policy narratives. All interviews were fully transcribed and pseudonyms are used throughout.

Aspiring citizens

Shifting local opportunities

Significant changes within the West Cumbria economy have disrupted entrenched employment pathways, leaving young people to negotiate a set of risks largely unknown to previous generations (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Peck, Theodore *et al.* 2010). Young people experience a tension between rational, economic imperatives of government mobility narratives which, on the one hand, commend citizen-workers who are not place-bound and on the other, their spatial attachments and affinity to the people who inhabit their social and emotional lives:

“I don’t want to leave [this town], that’s not something I really want to do but I think it could end up being the right thing in the end because I know there’s not a lot round here... There’s not a lot of opportunities around here for people, young people now... I think a lot of the jobs have gone, with the loss of the steelworks and stuff like that... we’ve become more of a shopping town rather than an industrial town” (Kyle, working class).

In the context of shifting labour market opportunities, young people drew comparisons to the expectations of employers a generation ago, where “in the past, them Cs (grades at GCSE), they didn’t really matter did they? As long as you were a good grafter” (Olivia, working class). Personal attributes of hard work were recounted as key to securing paid work in the past, whereas educational capital is framed as increasingly significant in today’s labour market:

“He [dad] didn’t really bother [with education] when he was younger and he just went straight to the steelworksThere’s not really much around this area, it’s basically just Sellafield³ and [a technology-sector training provider] and little jobs in other places” (Beatrice, middle class).

Young people felt pathways to employment have become more restricted as the local economy has become dominated by the nuclear sector which, although offering comparatively stable and well-paid employment, has become increasingly more competitive to access due to the relative decline of other manufacturing work and growing demands for educational capital.

Those who had tangible skills valued beyond the examination system, the ‘good grafters’ who young people perceived to find a place within the local labour market of the past, were today finding this pathway to adulthood becoming eroded as both policy narratives and employers demand academic credentials (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; McDowell 2003):

“I know since my dad and my mam were little, till now, getting a job is so much harder now than what it was then, so it sort of makes me think, ‘ah, I want to work harder so I get the best possible chance’... employers have to sort of pick and choose ...[based on] grades and personal experience” (Chrissy, middle class).

Across gender and class, attitudes towards the opportunities offered by the local labour market are consistent. In reflecting on the economic vitality of the region in the past, employment becomes a benchmark against which young people set their aspirations, augmented by contemporary government narratives which align successful adult futures with dominant ideals of the responsible citizen-worker (MacLeavy 2008; Raco 2009). This creates a backdrop against which young people navigate their future pathways, recognising economic uncertainty, structural changes in the labour market and changing employer requirements.

Education, employment and individual responsibility

The increasing value placed on institutionalised capital produces a sense of rivalry and competition between those who are entering, as well as those currently in, the labour market. Power resides with employers who judge young people on the results of standardised tests, which thus determine how successful, or not, an individual will be in securing their first job, apprenticeship or training course.

“Do you think it’s easier or harder to get a job now?”

³ Sellafield is a nuclear reprocessing facility.

Harder because you didn't really need it [education] back then [when my parents were young] ... [Now] you've got to try and stay on track and be as good as everyone else!" (Leanne, working class).

"All employers look for A to C [grades], if you don't have that, you're basically knackered" (Zane, working class).

This sense of individualised responsibility emerges strongly from the accounts of young people regardless of gender or social class. In responding to the risks associated with the global socioeconomic landscape, young people internalise their need to perform well academically despite structural forces which may impede their progress, such as inequalities in the education system and labour market. Tom internalises the centrality of his own efforts in his education, reflecting that without five A*-C grades in his examinations, he will fail to gain paid work and thus reside on the periphery of society:

"If you don't get any good GCSE grades you're just going to be a nobody... You would be [nobody] because if you can't get a job, you can't do anything... they're [grades] down to me, it's more my responsibility than theirs [teachers]" (Tom, working class).

"(To prevent unemployment I will) Work for it, like work, get good grades, get a good reference, get as many qualifications and everything that I can...

HPW: What do you think it will mean to you if you don't work?

I'd be gutted, I'd be really disappointed, more in myself than anything else because I'll think that it's my fault, like I'll blame myself for it" (Felicity, middle class).

Young people articulate the emotional blame and shame they personally anticipate experiencing should they fail to meet normative benchmarks of success. Failure in the education system is associated with a future inscribed with failure. This illuminates the affective operation of neoliberal governance which seeks to address collective problems at the scale of the individual. It also makes visible the resilience of young people who, in facing structural constraints and responding to global processes operating at the local scale, are developing their own subjective strategies in order to secure the future they envision.

The pressure to attain traditional markers of adulthood in times of economic uncertainty impacts on the emotional subjectivities of young people. Meritocratic neoliberalism impacts on young people imagining their futures, which are infused with anticipated emotional burdens:

"(If I couldn't find employment in the future) I'd probably think to myself, 'oh my life's fucking ruined, what's the point in living if I can't even get a simple job?'. It would probably lead to depression but I wouldn't go as far as suicide" (Robert, working class).

Conventional neoliberal ideals which associate 'high' aspirations with professional careers and full-time employment overlook the affective and emotional impacts such discourse has for young people who cannot imagine attaining these goals. Whilst not experienced in the here and now, this does not take away from the significance of anticipated emotions. Young people who imagine a 'ruined' future without educational capital also pre-empt the subsequent emotional response and devise coping strategies. These anticipated future emotions (in Robert's case, just short of suicide) have consequences for both the present-day mental health of young people, alongside their dispositions and affective state. Government rhetoric of individualised responsibility overlooks the key role of structural forces in life chances and the partiality of neoliberal ideals which circulate. Imagining a future that does not, or cannot, reach normative markers of success impacts on young people at an emotional and affective level.

Individual responsibility: Strivers and Skivers

Political rhetoric of self-sufficiency and media representations of unemployed people deepen the dichotomy between those who strive for success and those who evade responsibility (Valentine and Harris 2014). This echoes through young peoples' visions of the future, establishing moral boundaries of deservedness:

"People who want to sit round, on their arse all day, doesn't do anything, doesn't get anywhere in life. ...I think I'm going to do shit [in my GCSEs] but I don't want to, I want to try and do my best...It makes me feel shit, it makes me feel I can't do nothing. But I ain't going to give up...nothing comes easy these days" (Pete, working class).

Media representations of the 'strivers and skivers' discourse permeate Pete's narrative of his own emotional struggle to make a place for himself in the context of mediocre academic performance; embodying socioeconomic problems and internalising the stigma and discrimination attached to a lack of educational and labour market success. Young people indicate that individual effort and educational performance are prerequisites for obtaining employment, yet the reality is that young peoples' transitions to adulthood are increasingly protracted and complex (Jeffrey 2010; Kintrea *et al.* 2011).

Whilst acknowledging the potential impact of recent economic change in securing paid work, Carl emphasises the importance of personal endeavour, recounting dominant discourse associated with the leniency of welfare and the personal deficits of those without paid work, negating the impacts of fiscal prudence and financial crisis:

"I hear about all these news stories, about how people just aren't finding the jobs that they need. But then again, I think maybe that's just exaggerating it a bit. ... I know people these days are saying 'oh the current economic climate's terrible and

we're in this recession' and stuff like that. But I still think, there obviously are still jobs out there, it's just harder I guess...I think some people aren't trying enough, they're just living on benefits ... and they really don't make the effort of going to the Job Centres and trying to find jobs, they just can't be bothered, no way [will that be me]" (Carl, middle class).

These moral judgements of those who do not conform to neoliberal narratives of self-reliance and determination obscure the significant hurdles young people manage in order to map out successful futures. Accountability for inequalities shifts from social structures and institutions, to be managed affectively and emotionally by young people who internalise responsibility for their future success or failure in the neoliberal economy. Those who do not conform to the discursive ideal of the active citizen-worker are blamed for their own deficits. Although this was the dominant perspective, the final section of the paper explores critique of the role of the state in young peoples' futures.

Government and Economy

Contemporary neoliberal policy individualises responsibility for structural problems; in this case, by promoting education as a route to self-improvement and social mobility without challenging the capitalist system which creates, and indeed relies upon, inequality (Holloway 2014). Whilst the vast majority of young people felt it their personal responsibility to strive for a successful future (judged primarily on the attainment of employment), some identified broader social, economic and political barriers to desired pathways. As Kyle, Chrissy and Leanne identify the changing nature of the local labour market, the increasing emphasis placed on education in gaining employment and the power of employers, others also explicitly discuss how contemporary economic restructuring and fiscal policies are reducing opportunities:

"The way the recession and that keeps going, I'd say it's probably going to be even harder [to find employment] by the time I get older....It makes companies have less money, it makes it harder for them to employ people" (Tom, working class).

Criticism of perceived government ineptitude in economic and educational affairs also surfaces amongst working class young people, particularly men, who tend to be disproportionately affected by labour market and welfare retrenchment (McDowell 2003). Robert indicates a political system out of touch with the everyday realities of those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as his own family, as broad-scale economic problems impact at the local level in terms of job loss and price rises of staple goods. Pete recognises his own role in striving for educational success. However, he is also scathing of the neoliberal economic system which unpins political thinking, suggesting that responsibility for employment levels also lies with government. Both young men express anger towards

government, as they aspire to enter a contracted labour market in uncertain economic times. This clearly illustrates the localised affective implications of neoliberal governance for young people's futures.

"I hate the Government, fucking hate them. They just ruin everything. I mean I've always had the idea, they should elect a poor person so they'd know what poor people feel like, because obviously they're raising prices on fuel and stuff for people who can't afford them....everyone's going to lose their jobs and shit, and that's going to happen to us. And then they'll [Government] be like, 'oh shit, what have we done?' and stuff, and it will be too late to fix it. And after the election we'd have some other dickhead who's going to make it worse" (Robert, working class).

"(If I can't find employment, I will feel) Like I'm worthless, I need to actually get a job and do sommat...[it's the fault of] The Government! ...Because the Government doesn't do nowt. He's [David Cameron] so bloody up his own arse, he thinks the world revolves round money. ...If he worried more about children getting jobs and making sommat of their lives, then we, then you wouldn't find children taking drugs or drinking in the middle of the street [because they have nothing else to do]" (Pete, working class).

A minority of young women also anticipate feelings of anger towards the state should their prolonged investment in education not pay off:

"[Without employment in the future] I'd have done like years' worth of college and school and been through torture and be sat at home doing nothing... Wasted my life for nothing. I'd be very angry at the Government...

HPW: And why is it their fault?

Just is, everything's the Government's fault. They ruin everything" (Teagan, working class).

The need for personal effort within the education system persists for these young people, but by explicitly associating social exclusion with unemployment and a perceived lack of opportunities for young people, accountability ebbs through their anger back towards institutions of the state. Working class people, particularly young men most at risk of social exclusion and marginalisation (McDowell 2003), believe individualised solutions to securing employment are limited and suggest that government has a role to play in addressing labour market barriers.

Conclusions

This paper furthers debate on the affective operation of neoliberal governance on young peoples' aspirations (Brown 2011; Cairns 2013), through a focus on the anticipated, pre-empted emotions of youth transitions. The empirics have traced the enduring role of employment in establishing a successful and fulfilling adult future on the part of young people despite changing labour market landscapes. Furthermore, the paper explores the anticipated, complex emotions young people imagine arising from a failure to align with dominant constructions of neoliberal success in the future. Emotions are not just experienced in the present; they are predicted, influencing courses of action as young people prepare themselves for potential future emotional angst and devise coping strategies. In conclusion, I will highlight the need to interrogate the interplay between Government policy, education and employment, and the emotional geographies of young people's future trajectories.

Firstly, the paper contributes to geographical literature examining the subject positions which are normalised in neoliberal policy, and those which are seen as 'other' (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; MacLeavy 2008; Raco 2009). By engaging with the discursive construction of young people as rational, autonomous adult citizens-to-be, responsible for their future life chances (Kelly 2001), the paper highlights the resistance and resilience of young people as they engage with this narrative. Policy emphasises the role of the self-reliant worker; young people both embrace and challenge this model. They respond to structural and institutional uncertainties, developing their own subjectivities whilst also resisting government attempts to place all blame on the individual for future success or failure. Yet tying adulthood to economic self-reliance marginalises those who do not engage in state-sanctioned forms of participation, in this case paid employment, compounding marginalisation and dividing those who are deemed deserving, and undeserving, of state support. Navigating the future is not solely an individual enterprise; Government has a significant role to play in creating opportunities (including, and beyond, the economic) for young people in the places in which they live.

Secondly, the analysis demonstrates that neoliberal policy responses to wider drivers of change need to be understood as they play out in relation to the local. Discourses which advance dominant ideals of the responsible citizen-worker mask uncertainty and risk which people experience locally, as they undertake education, seek employment and make choices about their own lives in place. The local is affected by global economic restructuring, employer decisions as well as government policy, yet the consequences are felt, negotiated and lived through by individuals rooted in place. The loss of employers within the industrial and manufacturing sectors is not confined to West Cumbria. Economic restructuring has disrupted traditional, localised school-to-work transitions, resulting in protracted, complex transitions to adulthood which are lived-out in place. Tasking young people to 'aim higher' needs to be accompanied by an appreciation of place; recognising the heterogeneous nature of local labour markets, and thus the need for localised approaches to tackling the barriers young people may face in navigating a pathway towards their goals (Kintrea 2011;

McDowell 2003). Responding to the changing nature of jobs at the local scale and persistent low pay should be a key feature of policy which seeks to reduce poverty, inequalities and marginalisation.

Thirdly, the study demonstrates how the complex interplay between neoliberal policy, labour market transformations and credentialisation has implications for the emotional geographies of young people. This case study illustrates the affective work young people undertake to embody neoliberal governance as associations between education, paid work, self-reliance and citizenship undermine the (future) emotional well-being of those at a disadvantage in an unequal educational system. Individuals who are unable, or unwilling, to conform to discursive ideals in the increasingly credential-focused global economy are stigmatised rather than collective, structural barriers to education and employment being addressed. This plague of self-doubt has implications for the emotional well-being of young people now, and young adults in the future, who believe they will be marginalised, excluded from society and 'othered' in relation to those citizens who gain employment, despite their own efforts. Fiscal policy disproportionately offloads the burden of addressing the consequences of the economic downturn onto individuals (Hall *et al.* 2013), tasking young people with developing subjective responses without challenging the pervasive nature of inequalities and structural constraints which contribute to protracted and complex transitions to adulthood. The (anticipated) emotional work in which young people engage in order to navigate their way through uncertain social, economic and political times as they strive towards institutionally-sanctioned milestones associated with adulthood and citizenship are key to contemporary issues of exclusion and marginalisation which require more than individual responses.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the British Academy who funded the research on which this paper is based through a Postdoctoral Fellowship. I gratefully acknowledge Sarah L. Holloway and Sarah Mills for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as suggestions from the anonymous reviewers and Peter Kraftl as editor. Many thanks to the young people who gave up their time to be involved with this project.

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