

“Education ain’t for us”: using Bourdieu to understand the lives of young White working-class men classified as Not in Education, Employment or Training

Key words: NEET; young men; White working class; Bourdieu; ethnography

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Abstract

This paper uses the work of Pierre Bourdieu to understand the lives of a set of young White working-class men living in a deprived urban locale in the north of England. All participants were classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training) throughout the research and had spent lengthy periods of time outside education and work **before the study commenced. Although none took part in formal employment, many participants engaged in illicit activities, often for material gain, during the course of the fieldwork.** The data presented is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork and deals with participants’ attitudes to education, work and social life more broadly. Whilst some findings are troubling, the paper challenges dominant discourses about the attitudes, values and aspirations of NEET young people, especially those from White working-class backgrounds.

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Introduction

In the United Kingdom, just over eleven percent of 16-24 year olds are classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET) (ONS 2019). Whilst this is below the levels reached following the financial crisis of 2008, UK NEET rates remain higher than in many comparable nations (House of Commons, 2018). Regional differences are also important, and parts of the UK which traditionally relied on manufacturing have more young people outside education and work than elsewhere. NEET rates also vary within particular towns and cities, especially between deprived wards and more affluent areas (Karyda and Jenkins 2018). The NEET population¹ includes unemployed graduates, young people waiting to start a job or training programme and students taking a ‘year out’, but those from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to spend extended periods of time outside education and work but. They also tend to be more prone to social isolation, poor self-esteem, low confidence, and various limiting illnesses and conditions (Simmons *et al.*, 2014). Young people who are long-term NEET are, moreover, more susceptible to involvement in crime, drug use and anti-social behaviour,

and vulnerable to adult unemployment (Scarpetta *et al.* 2010). There are also substantial societal costs related to welfare payments, reduced economic activity and greater demand for health and social services. Young people who are NEET for lengthy spells are also less likely to participate in the democratic process and demonstrate lower levels of institutional trust relating to policing, health, education, and other official bodies (Coles *et al.* 2010).

Historically, young women were most likely to be NEET, especially after the age of 18 (Maguire and McKay, 2016). This has changed over time and, in England, the proportion of males aged 16-24 who are NEET is now slightly higher than the corresponding proportion of females (DfE 2018). NEET rates also differ between ethnic groups. Although these rates are highest for young people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, White youth, especially White working-class males, are more likely to be NEET than those from most other ethnic backgrounds (ONS 2018). Educationally, White working-class boys are the lowest-performing group in Britain and, whilst pupils from poor backgrounds generally do less well at school than those from more affluent families, the gap is widest among White children (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2015). There is, more broadly, much talk about the White working-classes becoming marginalized, angry and 'left behind' (Goodhart 2017).

This paper uses the work of Pierre Bourdieu to understand the lives of thirteen young White working-class men living in a deprived neighbourhood in a large city in the north of England and classified as NEET for significant periods. It begins by discussing the rise of NEET as a problem category. The second section introduces some of the Bourdieusian concepts which are later used to understand data from the fieldwork. We then outline the research project upon which the paper is based and explain its methodology. The findings and discussion sections present data from the fieldwork including participants' orientations to education, employment and social life, drawing on the relationships between capital, habitus and field. Bourdieu's work, we argue, helps to challenge some of the stereotypes about White working-class youth which have become increasingly popular in policy circles. The paper concludes by locating our findings in wider debates about disenfranchised sections of the English working classes.

NEET - the rise of a problem category

The NEET category is now a feature of youth policy across the EU and elsewhere. It is, however, a British invention, first used during John Major's Conservative government of 1992-97. Its genesis lay in social and economic restructuring which began in the 1970s, including the collapse of British manufacturing and the demise of traditional youth labour markets (Simmons *et al.* 2014). By the end

of that decade, mass unemployment had taken root, especially in the UK's industrial heartlands and almost half of all 16-17 year olds were on employability programmes overseen by the Manpower Services Commission (Finn, 1987). At the same time, access to welfare was tightened, and 16-17 year olds were effectively disqualified from receiving unemployment benefit following the 1988 Social Security Act. This helped keep unemployment figures low but meant a new way of identifying unemployed young people was required (Furlong, 2006). Initially, 'Status-0', a term derived from careers service records, was used to describe 16-18 year olds outside education and work, but this label carried obvious negative connotations and in 1996 was replaced by the ostensibly neutral description 'not in education, employment or training' (Simmons and Thompson 2011).

The rise of NEET as a policy discourse was therefore partly expedient. Social change does not however take place within an ideological vacuum, and the experiences of young people to whom categories such as NEET are applied are conditioned by their relationship to broader political and economic struggles within the 'field of power' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 104). The post-war decades were characterized by a measure of compromise between labour and capital, with both major political parties committed to full employment, comprehensive welfare provision and a Keynesian mixed economy. However, the uneasy 'post-war consensus' finally began to collapse as social and economic crises gripped Britain during the 1970s. Margaret Thatcher then became prime minister at the end of the decade and **a new zeitgeist characterised by competitive individualism and a 'rolling back of the state': social democracy, Keynesianism and corporatism were abandoned; market forces, entrepreneurialism and economic monetarism became the order of the day.** Subsequently, almost a quarter of UK manufacturing jobs were lost under the first Thatcher government, and Britain's industrial base continued to wither thereafter (Simmons et al. 2014). Later, whilst there was much talk about fighting social exclusion, New Labour retained a commitment to neoliberalism (Hodgson and Spours 2006). The governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown embraced finance capitalism, competitive markets and human capital theory. Within youth policy, NEET became both an analytical tool and a technology for dealing with young people outside education and work (Simmons, et al. 2014, 23). Increased public expenditure was accompanied by the assumption that poverty, unemployment and other social ills could be resolved by improving access to education and training. Globalization, it was argued, changed everything; education provided the key to prosperity, both for the individual and society (Keep and Mayhew 2010).

Subsequent Conservative-led governments presented austerity as an essential response to financial crisis, human capital theory continued to dominate and official discourse on NEET hardened, with the

individualized and accusatory notion of disengagement coming to the fore (Fergusson 2013). As unemployment amongst 18-24 year olds became entrenched, the concept of youth became more elastic and, in Britain, NEET is now used to refer to 16-24 year olds outside education and work rather than its original focus in relation to 16-18 year olds. Whilst interpreting the NEET category in this way increases its diversity and reduces its meaning and explanatory power, it can be understood as part of a broader ideological shift whereby structural unemployment has been recast as a problem of individual participation (Simmons and Thompson 2011). However, the practical outcome of this shift is that poorly-qualified working-class youth have particularly unattractive options: competing with older workers, usually for low-quality employment, or receiving benefits conditional on attending 'employability' programmes which rarely help them find sustained employment (Symonds and O'Sullivan 2017).

Capital, habitus and field

Bourdieu conceptualizes class relations in terms of the unequal possession of social, economic and cultural capital, which grant distinctive but interconvertible forms of value to those who possess or embody them (Bourdieu 1986). These three fundamental capitals translate into symbolic capital (or distinction) when they are recognized as legitimate or, as we explain later, misrecognized and systematically devalued. Class itself is conceived in terms of a multidimensional relational space expressing the distribution of different forms of capital, together with the trajectory of this distribution over time (Bourdieu 1984). The primary dimension is the total *volume* of capital, which provides a broad stratification of society into the dominant, middle and working classes. A secondary dimension, defined by the balance between economic and cultural capital, provides finer divisions within these classes. However, Bourdieu emphasises the *relational* nature of class and capital. Capital only has meaning within a field, a social space conceived as 'a network, or a configuration, of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97). A field is a space of struggle, whose occupants compete for power and authority within it, aided (or hindered) by the capitals they possess. In dominant social fields, for example in education, those able to deploy their legitimate capital can reinforce their advantage. Only in more specialized and localized fields, such as the urban working-class context of 'the street', can those in subordinate positions enjoy some form of advantage, albeit context-bound and ephemeral (Sandberg and Pedersen 2011).

Bourdieu writes that 'The proper object of social science [is]... the *relation between two realizations of historical action*, in bodies and in things' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 126). The realization of history in things (social institutions, processes, relations and physical objects) is the field; its realization in the body is expressed by the concept of habitus, 'durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to act as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations' (Bourdieu 1977, 72). Habitus can therefore be understood as an internalised organizing principle, the incorporation of objective social structures into individual subjectivity. Through the embodiment of social structures, Bourdieu (1990) stresses the role of individuals in enacting implicit practical knowledge. Whilst habitus is personal, he argues that those from similar backgrounds experience similar environments and field conditions. This makes it possible to identify a partially shared habitus which expresses structuring principles whose origin lies in the similarities between the conditions of their formation. As explained above, habitus is both structured and structuring: its formation is influenced by field conditions, but habitus also provides the framework through which the field is perceived. Practices generated by the interplay of habitus and capitals reproduce the structures of the field and, in turn, help to conserve the status quo. Habitus, capital and field are therefore dialectically constituted and interpenetrating, producing an 'ontological complicity' which accounts 'not only for how the body is in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body' (Reay 2004, 432).

Dispositions comprising habitus are shaped by past events and structures, but also shape current and future practices. They are a declaration of one's allegiances and, to some extent, observable in the empirical domain, although they are not *predictive* in a positivist sense: Reay (2004) argues that habitus has to be apprehended interpretively. However, it should not be discussed in isolation, and Bourdieu advocates a three-level analysis in which the mutual interactions of habitus, capital and field are explored (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). First, the position of the field in relation to the wider field of power is analysed. In other words, the research site must be located in its socio-historical and political context, and in relation to its positioning by those with power and authority in this broader context. Second, is the analysis of the structure of the field under investigation, the individuals within the field and the positions they hold based on and expressed through the configuration and volume of the capitals they possess. Bourdieu writes that this field of positions 'is methodologically inseparable from the field of...position-takings, i.e. the structured system of practices and expressions of agents' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 104). However, the space of positions – as associated with objective distributions of capitals – tends to dominate the space of position-takings. That is, people are constrained by the capitals they hold: attempting to engage in practices for which one is ill-

equipped with legitimate forms of capital will not produce the rewards normally associated with such practices. The analysis of field structure thus makes explicit the recognized, acknowledged and legitimated medium of exchange, the defining and generating principles which give rise to a logic of practice. The third and final stage in Bourdieu's approach to fields is the analysis of individual agents: 'their background, trajectory and positioning...expressed in terms of...the characteristics of individuals, but only in so far as they relate to the field, past and present' (Grenfell and Lebaron 2014, 26). This analysis provides an understanding of relevant aspects of the individual's habitus – dispositions they have acquired via the field – and the relationships between capital, habitus and field.

Methodology

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in Greenwich, an ethnically-diverse urban ward of approximately 19,000 residents in Grantborough, a large post-industrial city in northern England (pseudonyms are used to describe the location and to protect participants' identities). Like many similar places, Grantborough suffered mass unemployment, deindustrialization and urban unrest during the 1970s and 1980s, although it has, according to neoliberal discourses, reinvented itself and nowadays the city is often represented as a fashionable, dynamic place. Undoubtedly, Grantborough has experienced substantial inward investment and regeneration but significant pockets of unemployment, deprivation and other forms of disadvantage continue to exist alongside affluence and renewal. Disparities between rich and poor – in terms of income, education, health and housing are among the widest in Britain. Greenwich is the 29th most impoverished ward in the country (out of 8414) and is characterized by high levels of crime, unemployment, ill-health and other dimensions of poverty.

Data collection took place on Greenwich's Brunford Estate, a locale dominated by social housing built on 'Radburn principles', with extensive pedestrian-only precincts. Decline and deprivation are reflected in derelict buildings, run-down terraced housing and high-rise flats which characterize the built environment; antagonism between young people, the police and other authorities is commonplace. Henry, the manager of a local youth project, said that the Estate is:

[V]ery deprived and can really limit people's natural abilities, talent and potential...

Local people are not just materially poor, but relationally poor with many withdrawn from a sense of community, belonging and identity (Henry, 27.01.17)

The ethnography followed the lives of thirteen White working-class men, aged 16-24, all of whom were NEET for at least six months prior to the research commencing (some for much longer). All

participants remained NEET throughout the research, although many engaged in illicit activities for material gain. Whilst we did not attempt to construct a representative sample of NEET young people, those who took part included young offenders, early school leavers, young parents, and individuals with a history of mental-health problems – although certain participants’ experiences cut across numerous subcategories. Over 130 hours of fieldwork was conducted between January-April 2017, largely comprised of participant observation on the street, in cafes, grocery stores, fast-food outlets, book-makers’ premises, and a barber’s shop. Field notes were written either during observations or soon thereafter. Ten semi-structured interviews were also conducted, in participants’ homes and those of their associates; these were recorded and transcribed by the researcher (not all participants agreed to be interviewed). The rest of the time was spent dealing with telephone calls and text messages, walking about the Estate or simply ‘hanging around’ with participants.

Gaining and maintaining access to NEET young people can be challenging, and the fieldwork entailed engaging with nearly forty local residents, young people and practitioners before the sample of participants was secured. The fieldwork was conducted by a researcher who had previously been a youth worker on the Brunford Estate, and was a familiar face in the area. Personal and professional contacts and localised knowledge helped in negotiating access to the field but, whilst existing relations helped build a degree of trust and openness, they may also have deterred some individuals from taking part in the study. One young man withdrew from the research shortly after agreeing to participate as he felt it would compromise his relationship with the researcher. Even after agreeing to take part in the research, participants frequently cancelled or postponed interviews, locations often changed and some failed to attend appointments. When meeting participants at their homes or friends’ houses, discussions could end abruptly as they received phone calls regarding illicit activities.

Whilst ethnography is contested territory (Hammersley 2018), it must, in our understanding, have a critical purpose, producing not merely descriptions of events and practices but contextualising lived experience within the particular location and social significance of the field (Carspecken 1996). Relations of power, social structure and theory are therefore central to our interpretation of the data presented. Ethnography also enables the researcher to go beyond narrative accounts of past events to contemporaneous observation. For example, the following field note illustrates the combination of frustration, compulsion and self-awareness underlying Hayden’s gambling habit:

[Hayden] said he just wanted to ‘fly into the bookies’...[he] walked straight over to a machine...clicked roulette and put a £20 note in, he bet on various numbers and spun a £20 stake – it returned £7.20...He looked annoyed and began making a new

bet...When we got out, he said he couldn't believe he'd just been 'sucked' by it again, adding that he lost £50 yesterday [27.01.17]

The ethnographic methods used in this research, including participant observation and qualitative interviewing, enabled the Bourdieusian tools described earlier to be operationalized and related to different levels of the field analysis. First, participants' accounts of their employment history, qualification levels and material resources were used to map each individual's capital configuration and its relationship with the structure of capital within the Estate. Second, the collection of data on participants' actions, behaviour and attitudes over a three-month period, primarily through observation and interviews, provided access to signifiers of habitus such as dress, style and language, illuminating how participants mobilised and perceived field-specific capital. The juxtaposition and analysis of data on capitals, practices and attitudes then made explicit what acted as symbolic capital within the field. These field-specific analyses were placed within the context of broader relationships linking the positioning of Brunford within political discourses and actions to the material and symbolic conditions encountered by participants. A coding system based on this approach was used to identify themes arising from the data. This involved examining interview transcripts and field-notes systematically, drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual framework to categorise key topics/events, allowing us to conceptualize the interactions between young people and the dynamics of class, space, and place.

Brunford Estate: a field analysis

It is necessary first to distinguish between social space and physical space, although correspondences between the two are important (Bourdieu 1996). When we speak of the Brunford Estate as a field, we refer not just to Brunford as a geographically-located community but to the specific milieu experienced by research participants. This milieu is physically located, and involves multiple interactions with people and places on the estate. There is, however, inevitably a process of abstraction involved in conducting a field analysis, and in presenting our findings we focus on processes affecting our participants rather than a complete depiction of Brunford and its inhabitants.

Brunford and the field of power

We begin by positioning the Brunford Estate in relation to the field of power, understood as comprising those who dominate the fields of material and cultural production and reproduction, and by whom the fate of places like Brunford is determined. At a discursive level, the most obvious manifestation of this positioning is the construction of unemployed youth and their families as both 'in trouble' and 'as trouble'. Produced and recirculated by policymakers and practitioners, these

discourses typically portray NEET young people as deficient in skills and aspirations, although they are often nuanced by promises of better opportunities. However, the positioning of deprived areas also takes substantive form, in policies aimed specifically at so-called disengaged youth but also in institutional practices and norms embedded in spheres of education and employment. Several participants perceived a significant disconnection between such policies and practices, and the needs of local people:

[T]hey just treat everyone as a number...they try to send people to all these shit employability courses, when they should be sending you to the right ones...the government should be working with...the big companies, and not let them open any stores unless they hire people in that area. People that have been on the Job Centre ages...should get priority. [Jake 08.02.17]

Education ain't for us. My friend went to enrol, but because he went in a tracksuit, they were telling him he can't come to college dressed like that...Back in the day, you could just turn up...chat with a tutor, fill in a form...Now you have to fill in loads of forms, do English, do maths...it's too much, they expect too much [Hayden 27.01. 17]

In England, education and training opportunities for low-attaining youth have historically been poor (Thompson 2017), and in addition to formal entry requirements informal barriers may also exist. Some participants believed that employers were systematically biased against them because of where they lived: "people see your CV and your address, and they will just bin it...Your school, your GCSEs..." [Andy 02.02.17].

Several participants described *others* in deficit terms and claimed that certain attitudes, habits and values were passed on via family and local networks:

I've seen people who are gangsters have sons, and their sons are gangsters, that kid was born in to it, that's all he knows, that's normal [Dean 17.01.2017]

[I]magine all the Greenwick people went to a nicer place, the same problems would happen there, people would be trying to find shots (drug addicts) to start a phone up (sell drugs), riding motorbikes and all that shit [Andy 02.02.2017]

These discourses were not uncontested; some participants related their position, at least partly, to broader social and economic structures:

Like, how can I do well in school...if I'm surrounded by violence, or an alcoholic family, having no breakfast in the mornings, or any clean clothes?...waking up on freezing-cold winter mornings and not want to get out of bed cos we had no electric or heating, so I just wouldn't go school [Michael 09.03.2017]

Contemporary political responses to the problems experienced in places like Greenwich have nevertheless become dominated by neoliberal assumptions about disengagement and its supposed solutions (Fergusson 2013). Although the involvement of private finance in the regeneration of deprived areas has often resulted in relatively large investments in skills and infrastructure, the beneficiaries have not necessarily been local residents (Hodkinson and Essen 2015). Moreover, the dominance of welfare reform as the 'solution' to economic inactivity has not been associated with clear benefits in terms of labour-market outcomes (Maguire 2015). It is therefore unsurprising that feelings of powerlessness, disillusion and neglect were evident in our data.

Class and capital in Brunford Estate

Whilst the loss of industry and secure employment has had significant implications for many working-class young people and adults, our participants came from a fraction of the working class which has been significantly disempowered and destabilised by the forces of globalisation, de-industrialisation and neoliberalism (see also McDowell 2012; Nayak 2006). The challenges they faced, relating for example to a dearth of prospects and their turbulent lifestyles, reflect the experiences of those from similar backgrounds living in comparable contexts (Connell 1995; Thompson 2017; Ward 2015). All those who took part in the research grew up in high-density local-authority housing in Greenwich and over half came from single-parent families. Although a significant proportion of parents were economically inactive, virtually all participants came from households with some history of employment. Most of their parents had worked in low-status, low-paid jobs; for example, in retail, cleaning and care work. Almost half the participants left education before the minimum school-leaving age of 16, either voluntarily or through expulsion. The remainder possessed GCSEsⁱⁱ below the institutionally-significant threshold of five passes at grades A*-C. Only two participants had any experience of post-compulsory education, although both had dropped out of vocational courses run by a local further education collegeⁱⁱⁱ.

Most participants came from households with few formal qualifications, although the mother of one participant had a degree in music and supplemented her income from her job in nursing by teaching music. Almost all of them were therefore located in more disadvantaged regions of Bourdieu's social space: conspicuously lacking in economic capital, apart from what they could glean from benefits and illegal earnings; and unable to reach the threshold for access to more prestigious opportunities in post-compulsory education. The social networks of these participants largely reproduced the distributions of capital they themselves held. Indeed, these networks were a source of the largely illegitimate 'street' capital held by participants. For these young men, low levels of legitimate cultural capital should not be conceptualised simply in terms of deficit. They are supplemented – or arguably displaced – by alternative forms of capital whose currency is restricted to Greenwich and similar environs.

Participants frequently engaged in acts of risk, aggression and hyper-masculinity attributed to Black youth but which are actually located in particular formations of social class transcending ethnic or racial boundaries (see Gunter 2010; Ingram 2012; Ward 2015; Ward et al. 2017). Although the participants in this research were all White, the notion of a *White* working class implicitly denies the existence of a broader multi-ethnic working class based upon structural and material factors rather than largely subjective and contestable cultural divisions (Khan and Shaheen 2017). 'White' is moreover far from a clear or unified category or concept, and its boundaries have shifted over time to include a range of groups and individuals with quite different histories, trajectories and circumstances (Preston 2007). Historically, there have always been cultural differences within the working class, but more recent patterns of migration and socio-economic change have led to the adoption of elements of Black street culture by broader sections of working-class youth. Young people from different ethnic backgrounds often inhabit place and space in ways which create certain forms of cultural hybridity, especially in urban locales (Back 1996). Dean, for instance, said:

I've grown up...with a lot of Black people and culture, or hip-hop culture, or whatever you want to call it... street music and gangster films... Just seeing loads of gang members, people riding past you masked up. So, seeing that, you act it out. [Dean 17.01.2017]

Specific forms of dress, appearance, speech and taste were evident.

Matthew is dressed in a black tracksuit with a baseball cap...He gets in my car and begins to play with the radio and changes the station to one that plays street/urban music [Field notes 19.01.2017]

'Just trapping'...'getting that paper'...'took chase in a ringer'...'bun a zute'...Kevin uses quite a lot of encrypted slang [Field notes 02.02.2017]

Such forms of 'street capital' were constituted as *symbolic capital*, providing status, prestige and a subjective sense of inclusion. However, they also served to isolate individuals from the legitimate culture. Jake explained how 'it was more normal to sell drugs than get a job' and that 'if you don't sell drugs no one would speak to you'. Andy suggested that participation in street culture entailed physical risk, particularly in relation to conflict with gang members. The possession of illegitimate capital also brought significant labour market disadvantages.

Everything, man...dress, where I live, talk...they don't want to give them (jobs) to people like me. They want to give them to...Harry Potter looking kids...wearing pants and shirt and all that, it's not me. So because I don't wear that I get judged and seen as less. Kin'ell its madness [Andy 02.02.2017]

Such practices and assumptions are not intrinsically a product of moral turpitude. Oscar Lewis, who first introduced the notion of cultures of poverty, argued that degraded lifestyles among the poor are often simply a response to prevailing social and economic conditions. Lewis (1966) also contended that many of those living in deprived neighbourhoods showed considerable resilience and fortitude in the face of adversity, and our fieldwork suggests that some participants could imagine an alternative future. These imaginings are grounded in the habitus, which as we have seen is both a set of dispositions conditioned by the field and a way of perceiving the field. The final group of findings to be discussed concern the ways in which habitus and field interacted for our participants.

Habitus, field and practice

Whilst the opportunities available to our participants were attenuated by the 'blemish of place' (Wacquant, 2007, 67), all but one participant had been employed at some point - despite Hayden's suggestion that nobody from Greenwicks ever worked. Experiences of employment were, however, usually short-lived and negative. Jake, for example, described leaving his job after a dispute over pay.

It's just put me off work...couldn't of been a worse experience...to be blunt, I can only get a shit job at the bottom end on low pay so it's not very motivating [Jake 08.02.2017]

No participant was formally employed throughout the fieldwork, and none actively looked for work. Common themes included smoking cannabis, drug dealing, involvement with the criminal justice system, and violent crime.

[P]eople do drugs and crime and shit...that's all you know, it's all you see, crime, drugs, police, drink, robbing, fighting, everything [Michael 17.04.2017]

Many participants' lives were characterized by turbulence, threat and danger.

Andy tells me about some gang 'beef'...a known gang member has been looking for them...He says he has been staying low-key as the guy is a 'gunman'...Andy thinks someone will end up getting hurt [Field notes 02.02.2017]

Michael has a big black eye...He said he was out 'on a mad one' ...it all kicked off at a house party...He said there were five of them and only him and his two mates, but they managed to chase them off with a knife [Field notes 20.03.2017]

Mainstream education and work was generally seen as alien and irrelevant:

From young, I just knew I wasn't going to do good in school, I never even tried...I would prefer to hang around on the streets than go to school [Michael 17.04.17]

My mates never had a job, so I didn't ever get a job...before you know it you're in a circle...same shit every day, doing nothing, same shit, different day, same circle, same people, same thing [Hayden 27.01.2017]

These experiences and attitudes appear to resonate with populist views about a burgeoning underclass fueled by drugs, alcohol and state welfare (see Murray 1990). However, a deeper examination of the data shows that the relationship between conditions on the Brunford Estate and NEET status is considerably more complex than claims about cultural transmission of underclass

behaviours imply. One of the strengths of ethnography is that it allows the researcher to 'get close' to individuals' thoughts, feelings and emotions, and conventional attitudes and ambitions were not uncommon among participants.

I do want a job, a career and things...to be working and live a normal life. To be comfortable you know what I mean, just living life...family, a house, a car, a dog and a job [Dean 17.01.2017]

[J]ust stable and humble and that's it...a job I like, a family, kids and our own home. I'm not assed about a Ferrari on the drive [Andy 02.02.2017]

We discussed Michael's future. He just wants to be 'normal', have a girlfriend, a job he enjoys and a place to call home. He said he gets a lot of anxiety about the future though [Field notes 26.01.2017]

Most participants, however, seemed to have become 'discouraged workers' (Eurofound 2016), inasmuch as negative experiences of employment rather than an intrinsic aversion to work, appeared to have put them off looking for jobs.

Habitus excludes certain practices and pursuits as unthinkable, not only through unfamiliarity but also the improbability of attaining them. Whilst Bourdieu rejects the notion of ideological domination as the imposition of an alien culture on the working classes, domination, he argues, occurs firstly by instilling recognition of the dominant culture as legitimate and, secondly, by excluding the dominated from that culture (Thompson 2011, 25). There is an implicit tendency to act in ways expected of people 'like us'; those who are disadvantaged in a particular social space often turn to self-elimination.

I knew from a young age that I lived in a rough area...you just grow up different because the odds are against you and most people you know are going to go prison and things like that...It's easier not to have ambition [Dean 17.01.2017]

[S]eeing all this shit, you're not going to go school...you see everyone else broke and struggling, you've not really got a lot of inspiration. When you look out your window and see a rundown estate, that's your expectations, that becomes normal [Jake 08.02.2017]

These young men appeared reconciled to the limited opportunities that exist for those with little legitimate capital, and their level of aspiration was shaped, at least partially, by the probability (based on experience) of achieving certain goals.

Discussion

Habitus encompasses mind and body, past and present, the collective and individual; it produces particular ways of thinking and acting, and an understanding of what is normal for people 'like me'. Whilst individuals have agency, our participants appeared to have internalized devalued social positions and trajectories. Effectively, they had become confined to the local field. By understanding what is of value on the Estate, these young men had internalised the logic that being 'someone' locally is better than being nobody elsewhere. This also raises questions about whether it is the environment that is disadvantaging, the culture itself, or some amalgamation of both. In other words, are such matters the product of individual agency or rooted in structural inequality and the distribution of wealth and power? The answer to this question has important consequences in terms of understanding and addressing poverty and inequality. Dean said:

[I]t's a mix, because they're born into the culture it's much easier for them to stay in the culture, because you just lose ambition. Because you know you're from a poor area, because your friends are selling drugs, cos' no one's ever told you, you can be someone, do something, and do good...[Dean 17.01.2017]

It is clear that most participants felt that their social environment had disadvantaged them in education, and shaped their attitudes to learning. Generally, there was a substantial disjuncture between education and their life on the Estate.

[I]t just didn't make sense...people I knew were getting arrested, getting raided...and they're trying to teach me about *Macbeth* and how to solve equations, and it just wasn't matching up with my life. That's the reality [Dean 17.01.2017]

Perhaps understandably, our participants attempted to resist pressures to engage in fields where their capital was likely to be discounted. In employment and education, their refusal to conform to middle-class conventions becomes seen as resistance, a refusal to engage with neoliberal conceptions of ambition and success - which, in turn, results in their own culture and aspirations being systematically

misrecognized and rejected. Consequently, they try to legitimate themselves as subjects of value in more familiar environs, drawing on capitals which would have little value outside the local field. Bourdieu (2000) addresses this misalignment between the objective structures of the field and the internal structured structures of habitus as a 'dialectical confrontation'. When significant disjuncture between habitus and field occurs, individuals feel like a 'fish out of water', experiencing a process of over-compensation or hysteresis. Unsurprisingly, returning to employment or study was not seen as a viable option for these young men, suggesting that initiatives which focus on education and employability may have limited impact.

Here, it is important to consider the paucity of employment available for young people with few qualifications and little work experience. Structural changes in the UK economy have, over time, driven a secular decline in youth employment. Those jobs which do exist are largely in retail, social care and other forms of employment unappealing to many young men in marginalized post-industrial locales (McDowell 2003; Ward et al. 2017). Whilst some softening of such attitudes has been noted elsewhere (Roberts 2013), those who took part in this research subscribed to somewhat narrower conceptions of work and masculinity. Either way, those engaged in such employment often toil under poor objective conditions and are frequently shifted in and out of employment in ways which make it tempting to mobilize the Marxist concept of the reserve army of labour.

There's not enough jobs...if everyone had a job, there'd be no one in prison, no one needing to work at the Jobcentre, no prison guards or police...the system needs people who are unemployed [Dean 17.01.2017]

Reserve 'army' may not, however, be the best way to conceptualize contemporary labour market conditions. The rise of structural unemployment, underemployment and chronic job insecurity has largely destroyed pre-existing forms of solidarity and community (Bourdieu 1998, 98). One could question why such circumstances might not provide the impetus to escape. However, for Bourdieu, choices depend not only on the individual, 'but also on the conditions in which his "choices" have been made, which include all the choices of those who have chosen for him' (Bourdieu 1990, 49-50).

Whilst some participants felt that young people on the Brunswick Estate were responsible for their own predicament, many recognised that the behaviour and activities in which they and their peers engaged were, at least partly, related to the opportunity structures available to them. This was evident in the way these young men talked about their experiences of poverty and deprivation, their invariably

negative involvement with education and work, and in a recognition that those with more legitimate forms of social, economic and cultural capital enjoy a range of positional advantages unavailable to them. Yet, although the exogenous dimensions of opportunity structures—the availability of work, advice and guidance services, and the quality of education and training—influence young people’s prospects, it was the *relationship* between these dimensions and individual backgrounds which framed their lived experience (Thompson 2017).

Conclusion

Relatively high NEET rates have been a political, economic and educational concern since the mid-1990s, and there have been numerous attempts to motivate, cajole or force young people into education and work (Hutchinson et al. 2016). Whilst different administrations have been more or less interventionist, the Conservative-led governments of 2010 onwards have been more punitive than their predecessors – a stance rooted even more strongly than for New Labour in the belief that being NEET is largely the result of individual shortcomings and moral malaise (Fergusson 2013). Superficially, much of the data presented here could be used to confirm such beliefs, and it would be naive to claim that some of the behaviours it reports are unproblematic. It is nevertheless important to challenge discourses suggesting that marginalised youth are largely responsible for their own exclusion. Our data suggests that participants tended to have quite conventional attitudes and ambitions, and had previously demonstrated individual agency in seeking paid work or training. Rather than being disconnected from mainstream society and its values, they appeared to be ‘discouraged workers’ whose negative labour-market experiences had undermined their willingness to engage. Their agency was largely overridden by structural forces which shaped and constrained the opportunities available to them, or at least those which they believed were realistic and viable. Whilst some participants felt that young people on the Brunswick Estate were responsible for their own predicament, many recognised that the behaviour and activities in which they and their peers engaged were also related to the opportunity structures available to them. This was evident in the way they talked about their experiences of poverty and deprivation, their involvement with education and work, and in a recognition that those with more legitimate forms of capital enjoy a range of advantages unavailable to them.

According to neoliberal orthodoxy, the marginality of certain young people is an inevitable, if regrettable, side-effect of globalisation and technological change. For such individuals, the way forward is to change *themselves*. This is to ignore the fact that neoliberalism is a political doctrine rather than a description of reality. The structures constraining the agency of our participants are not accidental, but the result of political choices made over decades. What is striking is that many of the dispositions and behaviours displayed by the young men in our research are similar to those found in studies of NEET young people conducted over the last twenty-five years (for example, Istance et al. 1994). This is not an issue of political neglect. There has now been over two decades of intensive policy focus on NEET, including £126m of public money spent on just one programme, the Youth Contract for 16-17 year olds (Maguire 2015). These initiatives and their broader policy context have not addressed the underlying factors shaping the lives and dispositions of NEET young people: poverty, an education system which fails to serve half our children, and the impact of neoliberal policies on communities and the employment that once supported them.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu enables us to go beyond the dichotomy of purely individualistic or structural explanations of social behaviour; it offers an explanatory framework incorporating economic, social and cultural factors through which to understand the lives of NEET young people, as enacted in marginalised spaces like the Brunford Estate (see also Thompson 2011). Our data show how participants constituted themselves as subjects of value in their own environs, but also how particular forms of capital and habitus were systematically misrecognised in other fields. These young men have, in Bourdieusian terms, internalised and reconciled themselves to the 'limited opportunities that exist for those without much cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 197). Bonding rather than bridging capital predominates, tying participants to their locale and its limiting opportunity structures (Thompson 2017). The dialectical interplay of habitus and field is central to these understandings, mediated by distributions of capital which, whilst evolving between and within generations, are constrained within certain regions of social space by broader structural forces.

That Bourdieu's conceptual tools retain such explanatory power in the contemporary situation of NEET young people is noteworthy in itself. However, Bourdieu himself continued to apply his ideas in trenchant critiques of neoliberalism. Partly developed in workshops which brought together academics, trade unionists and political activists, these critiques explore how insecurity, flexible labour markets and the retrenchment of welfare states conspire to create a 'utopia of unlimited exploitation' (Bourdieu 1998, 94). Neoliberal policies, Bourdieu argued, were part of a new mode of domination, *structural violence* in which individualisation is not merely a discursive trope but part of a systematic attempt to create a workforce disciplined by insecure employment which 'isolates, atomises, individualizes, demobilizes and strips away solidarity' (Op cit., 98). The findings of this paper illustrate how a habitus formed in marginalised spaces responds to such structural violence. Repeated educational failure, coercive 'welfare-to-work' schemes and labour market rejection are as much a part of the formation of habitus as they are of its manifestation. When set within the holistic experience of participants, expressions such as 'education ain't for us' encapsulate the ongoing construction of habitus in this new utopia of exploitation.

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ⁱ 'Population' is used as shorthand for the set of young people classified as NEET at a given time. It should not be seen as a fixed, or relatively stable, group of specific individuals.

ⁱⁱ GCSEs are academic qualifications taken at age sixteen by most pupils in England and Wales.

ⁱⁱⁱ In England, further education colleges focus mainly on vocational learning, although many offer other forms of learning, including special needs' education, adult learning and higher education.