



Imagining the Future in the Neoliberal Era: Young People's Optimism and Their Faith in Hard Work

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis, the future of young people is often presented in a negative light. Despite the recent difficult circumstances, our mixed-method study found that young people in Britain were still optimistic about their personal future. In this article, we explore the tension between this optimism and the (often less positive) actual circumstances of young people. Our findings suggest that young people's views of the future were shaped by their deep-seated faith in the transformative power of hard work. We shall argue that this faith results from young people's psychological adjustments to neoliberal beliefs about the potential of human agency to forge the future, with implications for views of others and society more generally.

Keywords

Young people, future, agency, individualization, neoliberalism, social class

Introduction

Amidst the continuing fallout from the 2008 global economic crisis, the future for young people is perceived negatively, as the chances of achieving the parents' lifestyles have fallen. Media headlines frequently describe a 'lost generation' facing a 'bleak future' and with little hope of achieving the lifestyle that their parents and grandparents have enjoyed (Davies, 2012; Johnston, 2015; *The Economist*, 2011).

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Public attitudes tend to be equally negative (at least in developed countries; see Ipsos-Mori, 2014; Pew Research Centre, 2006) and recent research confirms these concerns. In Britain, the global economic crisis has exacerbated youth unemployment and underemployment, the reduction in youth welfare payments and youth services, and a sharp increase in the proportion of young adults being unable to move out of their parents' home to live independently (Green, 2017).

Despite this, our recent research revealed that most young people continue to be very optimistic about their own personal future, even when their actual circumstances are not at all promising. In this article, we explore this tension between optimism and actuality by looking at young people's orientations towards the future in relation to their recent experiences in education and work. As we shall see, understanding these views offers important insights into issues of agency, structure (Leccardi, 2008), young people's perceptions of others and their wider representations of society.

Explanations of what underlies young people's views of the future vary considerably: from those who consider it the result of psychological mechanisms typical of youth as a life stage (Arnett, 2000) to those who examine the effects of wider social and cultural influences such as neoliberalism (Silva, 2013). This article brings together both individual- and social-oriented perspectives, in order to shed light on how structural discourses affect and are integrated into the cognitive worlds of young people. In so doing, we aim to provide new insights into the relationship between actual circumstances, social conditions and the sense-making mechanisms of individuals. To do so, this article draws on a large mixed-method project, which included a unique web survey of young people in their 20s (aged 22–29) and 101 in-depth interviews conducted with young people (aged 18–26). Drawing primarily on the latter, our analysis suggests young people's optimism is intertwined with their faith in the ability of hard work to improve future life opportunities.

Youth Attitudes Towards the Future: Current Theories and Debates

Recent surveys have revealed a number of interesting patterns in public attitudes towards what the future holds for young people. Firstly, public perceptions about young people's futures tend to be negative, at least in Western and developed countries. Ipsos-Mori (2014) found a substantial majority of adults in Europe and the US believed that the current generation of young people would have a worse life than their parents' generation, with perceptions in Britain being the least positive compared to the other countries. For instance, 54 per cent of the British public agreed that young people today would have a worse life, while only 20 per cent agreed that they would end up having a better life. However, youth attitudes towards the future also vary by country (Ipsos-Mori, 2014; Stellingier and Wintrebert, 2008) and indeed, between urban and rural locales (Rudd and Evans, 1998). Second, despite this cross-national variation, when young people are asked about this future, they tend to be more positive than their elders (see Galland, 2008: 45; Pew Research Centre, 2006), a stark contrast from the dominant perception of the 1990s, when young people were commonly portrayed as pessimistic and cynical (Arnett, 2000). Finally, these surveys also suggest that young people distinguish between their personal futures and those

of their generation as a whole. For example, the European Youth Futures survey found that 75 per cent of 16- to 29-year-olds in Britain were satisfied with their own lives, and yet 60 per cent were not satisfied with the general situation in their country. Likewise, 74 per cent agreed that their own future looked bright, but only 34 per cent believed that the same could be said of the country's future (Stellinger and Wintrebert, 2008).

Several different explanations have been proffered for these optimistic attitudes, each of them informed by different disciplinary perspectives and theoretical standings. One argument is that youth optimism is a transitional life stage that young people 'grow out of' as they leave the relatively safe confines of the education system and accumulate experience in the adult world (Rudd and Evans, 1998). Arnett (2000: 284) suggests that the optimism of 'emerging adults'¹ may last well into their 20s, as even at this point, possibilities 'still have to harden into accomplished facts'. In this sense, positive views of the future can perform an important psychological function, providing reassurance and direction in the face of insecurity and adversity.

Others, by contrast, have linked youth attitudes towards the future with issues of agency, choice and control. Beck's theories of the risk society and individualization (Beck, 1992a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) have been particularly influential in this strand of the literature. Through his theoretical framing, Beck places the question of the future into the much wider context of social change. He argues that in the late modern societies, risks are no longer seen as being determined by outside forces, but rather as the result of 'human actions and omissions' (Beck, 1992a: 183). This development has shifted the burden of responsibility of risk (and life planning) onto individuals, in what Giddens (1991) describes as the reflexive project of constructing a self-identity. As part of this project, individuals are constantly engaged in a process of self-construction and reconstruction, having to re-invent themselves in response to new risks and new opportunities (Ball et al., 2000: 2).

Beck (2007) claimed that this shift is part of the wider process of individualization taking place at a structural level. Individualization reduces the weight that social class, gender or family of origin have on the life course, so that individuals can now make subjective choices about their lives. This means that young lives are no longer shaped by the traditional markers of adulthood, which have characterized the 'standard biography'; instead, young people must now develop their own 'choice biography', which is highly unpredictable (Brannen and Nielsen, 2002, 2007). Thus, individualization has removed some old constraints, but it has also created new ones (Beck, 2007). As Roberts (2010: 139) points out:

Choice is not necessarily chosen; instead choice biographies are imposed upon us through institutional arrangements, meaning that a 'lack of social structures' is becoming the basic feature of the social structure.

In other words, while individualization frees individuals from old legacies, the very absence of structures creates new strictures by dissolving both security and orientation, and fostering isolation and disconnectedness.

Questions of choice and agency also emerge in research that focuses on how the neo-liberal paradigm—which has come to dominate many developed countries in recent decades—affects people's lives, values and beliefs (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004).

Put simply, neoliberalism entails a set of practices that increases economic competition at the same time as reducing state involvement in markets and state investment in welfare systems (France and Roberts, 2015). The effects of these practices are manifold and widespread but have been found to have a particularly negative impact on the opportunities available to this generation of young people, as they try to navigate the transition into and through education, employment and family formation. For instance, in their analysis of neoliberalism and education in Australia and New Zealand, Davies and Bansel (2007: 248) show how the marketization of the system—with a focus on employability, human capital and competition—has fostered the construction of ‘neoliberal subjects’ as individuals who are increasingly transferring socio-structural risks onto themselves. In short, neoliberalism promotes the assumption that the free market offers a fair system where the talented and hard-working can overcome all obstacles and achieve greater success (Brown et al., 2011: 4).

Optimism Versus Actuality

According to life course theories, historical and socio-economic conditions play an important role in shaping the life transitions and turning points of different generations (Elder, 1994; Levy and Bühlmann, 2015; Schoon and Mortimer, 2017). In light of this, we would expect the recent economic crisis to have had a negative effect not only on the life course of the current generation but also on their attitudes towards their present and future life opportunities. Although there is ample evidence to suggest that young people have borne the brunt of the crisis (Green, 2017), other research has found that the actuality of these circumstances has had unexpected effects on young people’s views of the future. In the US, for example, this has been illustrated by Silva (2013), who has explored the effects of the ideological and structural changes on individual lives, focusing on the case of working class young adults. She found that young adults’ sense of the future was affected by changes in the foundation of their selfhood, which was becoming increasingly inward looking. Silva argues that these trends relate to the influence of wider sociocultural changes brought about by the neoliberal ideas and policies of post-industrial societies. Yet while Silva’s participants continued to have faith in their intergenerational social mobility and the American Dream, Putnam’s (2016) most recent work provides evidence of its inexorable end due to growing income inequality and the related rise in the opportunity gap between the rich and the poor. Green (2017) has raised similar concerns to Putnam about youth opportunities in the UK. How, then, should we make sense of young people’s continued optimism in the face of adverse social and structural conditions?

In a famous essay which attempts to understand how people make sense of the adversities brought about by neoliberalism, Lauren Berlant defines (2006) ‘cruel optimism’ as the tendency to hold on to beliefs in ‘the fantasy of the good life’ and the promise of ‘mass upward mobility and meritocracy’ (Berlant, 2006: 21). For Berlant, the optimism of the neoliberal era is cruel because it involves the attachment to an idea (the good life) even with the awareness of its future impossibility or imminent loss. Furlong and Cartmel’s (1997) idea of an ‘epistemological fallacy’ is another way of looking at this discrepancy between the attachment to an ideal and

its actual impossibility. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue that the complexity of the social world is often reduced to individual terms. Therefore, while people's stories about their lives are permeated by an emphasis on agency and reflexivity as the main determinants of the future, the impact of structural forces remains neglected. As Brannen and Nilsen (2005: 423) point out, many people 'find the external and structural forces that shape their lives more difficult to comprehend and therefore to talk about'.

From a psychological perspective, Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance is helpful to understand how people make sense of the divergence between their cognitions (i.e., their body of knowledge, beliefs and opinions) and their actual experiences. According to Festinger, people make psychological adjustments in order to deal with the inconsistencies they encounter between their cognitions and their experiences in everyday life. When these inconsistencies become psychologically uncomfortable, individuals attempt to overcome them by minimizing the importance of the dissonant evidence. For instance, they may try to find a way to match this actual evidence with their existing cognitions and conceptions of the world. To illustrate this, Festinger points to the impact of information about smoking on smokers' behaviour: in striving for consistency, a smoker may start arguing that smoking is not as dangerous as presented. As we shall show, Festinger's theory has helped us to understand how some young people have retained their optimism, even in light of their negative life circumstances, by adapting the narrative about their present experiences to their positive cognitions of the future.

The Limits of the Individualization Thesis: Diverging Trends and Multiple Meanings

While these theories have been influential in understanding how young people 'choose' and conceptualize their future (see, for example, Anderson et al., 2005; Vinken, 2007; Woodman, 2011), others have argued that neither risk nor neoliberalism are able to explain the diversity of circumstances that shape the lives and views of young people. For example, Brannen and Nilsen's (2005) comparative study of young Europeans found that youth views of the future were not, in fact, converging towards individualization. Far from choosing individualized pathways about their future, some ethnic minority groups (such as British Asians), for instance, were following the aspirations of their first generation parents and making culturally informed career choices (e.g., to study law or medicine as in Franceschelli, 2017). Galland's analysis (2008), meanwhile, highlights that levels of youth optimism vary considerably across countries, and posits that this optimism should be interpreted in light of current socio-economic conditions, historical legacies, welfare regimes and cultural characteristics. Evans's (2002) research in Germany and the UK suggests that institutions also play a key role in explaining these cross-national differences. In these cases, the perceptions of choice and control were related to the distinct institutionalized pathways that were available to young people. Combined, then, these empirical studies highlight the need to look at variation within and between countries, and to explore the individualization thesis with caution and through a highly contextualized lens. This principle has guided the analysis that we further present.

Data and Methods

In order to explore the interplay between young people's views (attitudes and orientations) and how their actual life experiences are shaped by their age, the social-institutional context and, more generally, their backgrounds, we draw on both qualitative and quantitative data. The latter is based on a cross-sectional web survey that was conducted in 2014 as part of the wider Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) (see Keating and Kerr, 2013). This web survey was completed by 2,025 young people aged 22–29 in England, Scotland and Wales, and for the purposes of this article (and to match the qualitative data), we focus here on the responses from 1,003 young participants from England. The data is used here for descriptive, contextual purposes only (see Keating and Melis, 2017 for further analysis).

In addition to this web survey, in 2013 and 2014, we also conducted 101 in-depth semi-structured interviews in England with young people aged 18–26. The final sample includes 52 young men and 49 young women, 57 of whom were of White British origin, 19 of Black British origin, 16 British Asians and 9 of other ethnic origins. At the time of the interviews, 39 of these young people were working, 2 were participating in apprenticeship schemes, 25 were studying and 5 were studying and working. The remainder (30) were not currently employed, or at least not in activities that are officially recognized as such. This category captures a diverse range of activities, including internships, sick leave, graduates searching for employment and young people 'getting by' by selling drugs. In terms of educational qualifications, 44 of our respondents had obtained an undergraduate degree, while 57 had not. Finally, to reflect the regional differences in youth experiences, 34 interviews were conducted with young people living in the Greater London area, 44 were living in the north of England, 14 in the Midlands and 7 in the south of England.

The participants in our in-depth interviews were recruited in several ways. Around half of the sample (50) were contacted as part of their continued participation in the CELS (see Keating et al., 2010). Graduates were over-represented in this initial group, and to try to redress this, we recruited a further 34 participants using Twitter, snowballing, and by approaching Further Education (FE) colleges and youth organizations. As well as relying on two academic researchers for data collection, we also developed a small-scale participatory research project that recruited 5 young people to conduct interviews with their peers in their local communities. The young peer interviewers were identified by a national youth organization that had worked with the young people in the past. The young peer researchers were provided with training and support before, during and after their fieldwork efforts. This approach enabled us to collect a further 14 interviews, most of which were with youth that are often 'hard to reach', such as young people living in disadvantaged areas, with low socio-economic status, low skills and 'not in education and training' (NEET).

In the course of these interviews, young people were asked a range of open-ended questions about the opportunities they had in education, employment and housing, their aspirations for the future, and their views of social and political life in Britain today such as equal opportunities, prejudice and the benefits system. The transcripts of these interviews were coded using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006),

allowing for both inductive (i.e., unanticipated themes emerging from the data) and deductive coding. We illustrate these themes using the narratives and cases of specific individuals who distilled the wider patterns apparent in the data. These case studies, along with contextual information about their young lives help us to shed light on the ways in which young people talk about their future and make sense of the often-contradictory experiences of their lives. However, we have also included a few outliers and extreme cases to highlight the diversity and disparity of experiences in the sample.

Optimism about the Future: Macro and Micro Perspectives

The CELS web survey (2014), which was conducted a few years after the start of the 2008 recession, suggests that a high proportion of young people in England have remained optimistic about their own personal future. As Figure 1 illustrates, 54 per cent of young people were optimistic that they would have plenty of opportunities in life, while only 16 per cent disagreed with this statement. Almost 40 per cent of young people also thought that it is easier to ‘get on’ in life now than it was in the past, while 46 per cent expect to end up with a better job than their parents. Moreover, in line with previous surveys (Stellinger and Winterbert, 2008), a majority of our respondents were satisfied with how their life has turned out so far (57% were fairly or very satisfied, while only 18% were fairly or very ‘dissatisfied’).

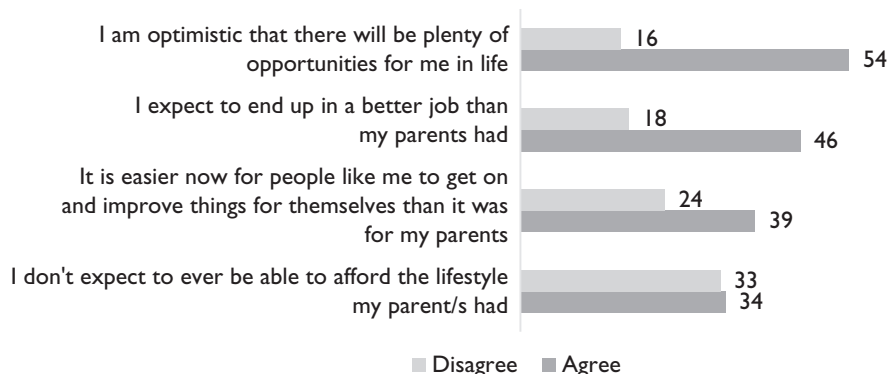


Figure 1. Youth Attitudes Towards Their Opportunities in Life

Source: CELS web survey 2014, England only data ($n = 1,003$). Figures do not sum to 100. Remaining respondents selected ‘don’t know’ or ‘neither agree nor disagree’.

These wider patterns were also apparent in our in-depth interviews with young people, some of whom who were brimming with optimism about their own life. Jamie, for example, had just completed a degree in accountancy, and he described his future with great enthusiasm:

So, I’m buzzing. Love life. (...) God! I’d say optimistic at the minute because I’ve just got my degree, I’m just young and fresh, I’m just ready to get out there in the big world, I just want to try and move, I just want to do everything in life, do you know what I mean?

So, I'd say I was very optimistic, to be honest. Obviously, I've just finished with my girlfriend, that's a bit of downer, but I'm sure I'll move on. I'm sure life will go on so...you're only young once aren't you? I've never been on a lad's holiday in my life and I'm dying to go on one of those—that's next year as well. (Jamie, White British male, living in Northern England)

In keeping with the survey trends discussed in the literature review, however, it was more common for young people to express positive views about their 'personal' future and negative perceptions about the future of society as a whole. This macro/micro split was exemplified by Anna, a young White British woman with a degree in psychology who was studying part time (for an MA in creative writing). After working abroad for a multinational company, Anna had decided that she was not happy and had made the decision to accept 'a massive pay cut' and change career. She was working as a teaching assistant, as well as studying part time, and was hoping to do a PhD in the future. Having made these changes to her life, Anna was optimistic about her own future, even though she was pessimistic about the future for 'general mankind'. As she explained:

For my personal future...I feel optimistic. For general mankind I feel more pessimistic, yes...I open a news article and I just think... I spend more time thinking 'what world do we live in?' than 'oh that's nice'... I think people are becoming more insular, becoming more detached from other people, becoming more selfish, and I think that doesn't add up to a good thing, I think that's not a good combination and contribution.

More importantly, our in-depth interviews with Anna and others also shed light on what lay behind young people's continued optimism about their personal futures.

Young People's Optimism and Their Belief in Hard Work

When it comes to the future, because it's not certain, you can always change it, yeah, you know what I mean?

In this short passage, Jeff, a young Black African man living in London, reflects a very important point for understanding young people's orientations towards the future. Although young people's accounts about their future were often nuanced and reflexive of their particular circumstances, we found that most of these views reflected a strong self-belief, a tendency to take personal responsibility for forging their own future, and the feeling of being personally accountable for both their successes and their failures. These ideas reflect wider neoliberal discourses about the power of human agency, and were most frequently manifested in our qualitative and our quantitative data by references to the importance of hard work when forging one's future.

In our 2014 web survey, we asked young people what they think it takes to get ahead in life, and as Figure 2 illustrates, hard work, ambition and 'having an education yourself' were the attributes that were most frequently seen to be 'essential' or 'very important' (83%, 82% and 79%, respectively). These findings suggest that when it comes to thinking about their future, young people tended to underestimate the role of social structures (such as class, gender, race and religion) and to place more faith in factors that rely on their personal agency. For example, only 49 per cent

felt that having educated parents is essential or very important in helping them get ahead in life, compared to 83 per cent who believed that hard work is a critical factor.

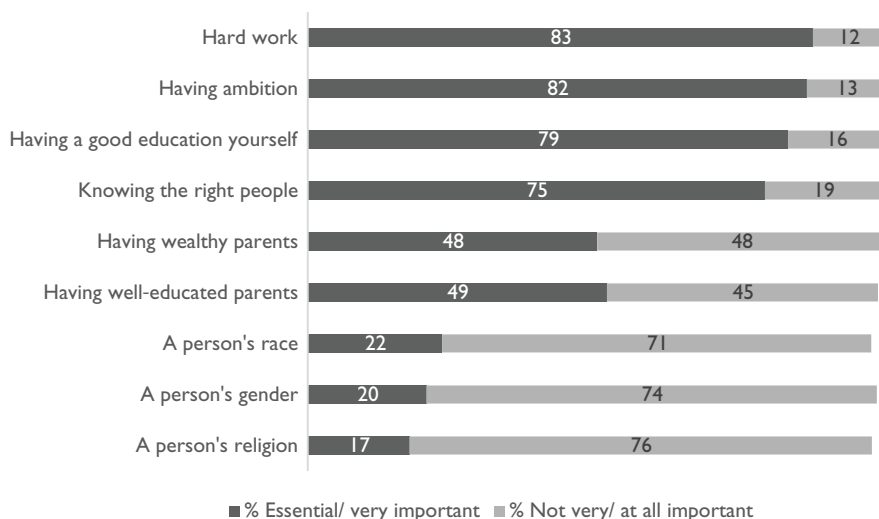


Figure 2. Youth Perceptions of What It Takes to Get Ahead in Life

Source: CELS web survey 2014, England only data ($n = 1,003$). Figures do not sum to 100. Remaining respondents selected 'don't know'.

There was a sense that personal connections and family resources played some role 'in getting ahead in life', but even those factors were overridden by the power of personal agency, as we also illustrate later. Similarly, only a small minority asserted that race and religion influenced one's chances of getting ahead—in part, perhaps, because young people themselves are more accepting of racial and ethnic diversity, and they assume that society as a whole has a similarly tolerant attitude (Janmaat and Keating, 2017).

Our qualitative interviews echo these findings and reveal that what lay behind youth narratives about their future was their deep-seated faith in hard work. This faith was epitomized by Rashid (a 20-year-old British Pakistani) who told us: 'If I work hard enough I can achieve everything I want to achieve.' In many cases, the faith in hard work was linked to a belief in meritocracy. For example, Sarah, a Black African young woman, told us:

...In my personal opinion, if you're determined and you work hard, nothing should hold you back. I don't see why any young person here should not all be able to achieve the same thing, if they have the same drive.

This belief in hard work was also linked to (and fuelled by) a sense of agency, and the perception of having control over a future that can be changed and manipulated according to individual needs. For instance, Jacob (a 22-year-old Black Caribbean young man) believed that he could turn things around by sheer willpower. When we met him, he had recently become unemployed after several years of working in a restaurant where he worked since dropping out of university. Despite the setbacks to his original plans, Jacob still had a positive outlook to life. As he explained:

I don't know, it's just... I still feel like I'm still young, I'm still very, very young... And, like, I talk to a lot of people and one thing that I've gathered is that literally, I don't think that there's anything that someone can't do... I think anything can be done, it's just based on your own actual *willpower* and how determined you are to do it. So, I will always say I'm optimistic. (...) I don't really think there's any limits.

Here Jacob was dealing with the dissonance between optimism and actuality by unveiling a belief in the power of agency to overcome obstacles. Yet, in contrast to Jamie, for whom 'being young' was an exciting life stage, for Jacob it seemed to serve as a justification and reassurance, and a means to put the recent past into perspective and look forward towards a better future.

Freya and Michael: Contrasting Reasons for Faith in Hard Work among the Very Elite and the Very Disadvantaged

The importance of agency also emerges from Freya, a 22-year-old White European who graduated from an elite Oxbridge university and felt empowered to 'manipulate her future' through a combination of luck and privilege. Life after university had so far been busy but rewarding for her. After an initial transition period when she was not sure what to do, Freya managed to complete several unpaid internships and a prestigious (and paid) internship working for a TV channel in another country. In more than one instance, Freya also made references to her 'luck':

I didn't even realise when I was applying at all, but then I got there and I realised I was actually much more of a big deal than I thought, because most internships, you know, you're just one of about a million interns that come and go. So, I think I got really lucky...

Yet she was aware that luck and agency were only one part of the reason she could achieve the future she desired. When describing her forthcoming unpaid internship, she acknowledged:

I'm so lucky that my parents are in London, you know, I've already written things, I can get in touch with people—and it's all about networking [in my chosen field]. And obviously [having a degree from an Oxbridge University] is a big advantage for that. But for a lot of people, I think it's quite a struggle.

The combination of financial security (from her parents) and access to opportunities informed her views of the future:

I'm quite optimistic because I'm in a good situation... I mean, I'm optimistic because I think I have the chance to manipulate the situation for my better, like, for example, moving out of London for a couple of years or things like that. And obviously, I'm not tied down with children or anything like that. I'm in, like, the smallest group of lucky people, I think. I really feel that way. That I shouldn't complain about it basically.

In short, Freya's optimism was simultaneously shaped by her awareness of her own personal advantages, and at the same time, the disadvantages that others face.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to Freya, there was Michael, a 19-year-old, White British young man originally from the North West of England. We met Michael several months after his move to London, where he was sleeping rough and begging on the streets to 'get by'. After leaving education with no qualifications (because of difficulties with concentration which led to disruptive behaviour) Michael worked in a take-away restaurant and had a couple of jobs in warehouses through the job centre. These jobs did not last long—as he explained, he 'couldn't cope with the routine'. After that, Michael had been unemployed for one year, 'desperately' applying for jobs rather than 'choosing' a career path:

I was just desperate for finding a job so I was just applying for everything that I saw, do you know what I mean? I don't particularly want to work in retail, but I was applying for retail jobs and stuff like that, just applying for everything.

To get by during this period, he explained that he had dabbled in small-scale drug dealing, but he left that type of lifestyle, as he wanted 'to live his life normally'. Becoming homeless happened relatively quickly, but through stages. After leaving home because of problems with his mother, Michael got help from the local council and moved into a hostel, then a B&B and finally to a flat, from which he was evicted for having visitors who used drugs. He then spent some time 'sofa surfing', but when he ultimately moved to London with a friend, he ended up sleeping rough. Despite these difficult circumstances, and with no home and no financial support, Michael attempted to stay optimistic about his future:

[Am I optimistic about the future?] It depends what time of the day you ask me really, to be honest! Like sometimes I tell you 'no, I have no hope' and then sometimes I'll tell you 'yeah I'll get sorted'. But on the whole, yeah [I'm optimistic].

The importance of personal agency to his self-identity was epitomized by his attitudes towards claiming social welfare benefits, which he felt would undermine his efforts to get work and transform his life. As he explained:

I know [I could claim benefits but] ... I feel you can lose motivation if you do that, do you know what I mean? Especially me personally. I know other people, like, they could sign on and they'll be searching more because they're signing on. But me like, I don't know... I just feel like I'd lose a bit of motivation... If I sign on I'll do exactly what the job centre tell me to do, but if I'm not signing on I'll do what I tell myself what to do. And like, I'll tell myself to do more than they'll tell me what to do. Do you know what I mean?

In his view, then, personal agency was the only way to achieve the future that he aspired to, whilst reliance on welfare was perceived as a hindrance and not a source of help.

Cruel Optimism and the 'Anchor of Hope'

Freya and Michael represent two extreme poles but their stories help to understand that optimism and the related faith in hard work had different meanings for young people in different circumstances. For some, like Freya, being optimistic was about

acknowledging her opportunities and feeling empowered to make full use of them. For other more disadvantaged young people like Michael, however, their belief in themselves, and the future, seemed more tenuous, more of a coping strategy than an article of faith. For this latter group, this would seem to fit with what Berlant (2006: 21) described as cruel optimism: a way of dealing with the experiences of adversities by holding on to ‘compromised conditions of possibility’.

One of our participants explained how the cruel optimism exhibited by disadvantaged young people played an important function and provided a source of solace. Hashim (a 22-year-old from a British Pakistani ethnic background) worked with us as young researcher and conducted several interviews with peers who were long-term unemployed, NEET and/or involved in crime. While giving us some feedback about his experience of interviewing, he reflected on why, according to him, the future is for some young people just an anchor of hope. Hashim argued that having highly positive perceptions of the future, even when the actual circumstances were not promising, was not a conscious mechanism, but rather the result of a lack of education and knowledge of what it would take to achieve aspirations. Still, he welcomed this lack of awareness, which he saw as a possible escape from what he believed would be very limited prospects. As he explained:

I think they’re optimistic [due to] the fact that they’re not educated enough to see what it actually takes. And if they do see that, I think it will depress them even more. So, I think it’s very good that they’re just not educated enough at the moment and they’re optimistic and they’re motivated to carry on and try.

His words point to people’s commitment to a ‘fantasy’ of a good life, even in times of enduring difficulty, and so they mirror Berlant’s cruel optimism.

The Negative Social Consequences of this Widespread Faith in Personal Agency

Many of the young people we interviewed viewed themselves as the architects of their own futures and as being personally responsible for achieving these goals. By contrast, few of our in-depth interviewees mentioned social structures when discussing their aspirations for their future or their achievements to date. Those who showed awareness of the role that social background can play in shaping opportunities tended to be more educated and more privileged, such as Freya and Anna. But for some of the young people we spoke to, their faith in the power of their own agency seemed to require a turn away from thinking about larger civic and social issues, although not necessarily from family and close relationships, as Rashid—from a British Pakistani background—exemplifies. Rashid told us ‘there’s no point in getting hung up on things that you can’t change’, and went on to explain:

I know that everything I want to achieve I can, but it’s more down to me and what I can do for me, rather than thinking about big issues and let them wander round my head, like if so and so policy is going to get passed or not...

However, his focus on his own agency did not preclude awareness of the role of specific others such as his sister and parents. Rashid followed his sister’s path and

opted to study for an optometry degree and he acknowledged the positive role his parents played in achieving his successful educational path:

They were all supportive. They always said that I need to do well in my education because, obviously, they came here with no education and they found it hard [and] struggled to do well for themselves.

Rashid's words echo a well-known trend amongst first generation immigrant parents who, having missed out on education, invest highly in the future of their children (Franceschelli, 2017). He also reflects Brannen and Nilsen's (2005) contention that youth choices are still shaped by their cultural background, and are not, as is often claimed, highly individualized.

Stephen, by contrast, presented a highly individualized account of his future, and illustrated how this perspective can have negative implications for the wider society. Stephen was 23 years old and living in a small town in Southern England when we met him. His views about society and the future were highly inward looking:

I'm content with how I am now. I'm not content with how the world is now, because personally *I haven't got to worry about the rest of the world, they have to worry about themselves*. I have to worry about myself... I know what I'm capable of doing and so I'm happy with doing what I... just carry on doing what I'm doing.

This sense of personal agency was coupled with a strong belief in the importance of hard work. After leaving school at 16, Stephen quickly found work as a welder in small local business, where he was still working when we met him. He spoke extensively about his hard-working ethic, 'inherited' from his mother, which brought him to find a job straight after school without having to rely on benefits. This emphasis on hard work was also his way of evaluating—and denigrating—others, as he described unemployed people and migrants as lazy 'scroungers' unwilling to work and contribute. Moreover, his faith in hard work informed his political views: he was a supporter of far-right groups (such as the British National Party and the English Defence League), whose rhetoric had deepened the views of migrants 'scrounging off' the system.

Stephen's political beliefs were extreme, and only a small minority of young people in our sample supported far-right parties and policies. However, the view that migrants and people on benefits were not 'hard working' was widespread, and shared by many from different backgrounds. This recurrent discourse resonates with Jeffrey and McDowell's (2004) observation that when neoliberalism promotes the idea that the free market offers a fair system and success to the talented and the hard working, it also fosters a split between successful achievers and 'losers', with failure becoming a new social label.

Conclusion

This article has explored how young people in England view their future and has reflected on the implications of these views for their perceptions of others in society. We found that although there was some recognition of the struggles and difficulties posed by structural conditions, when young people thought about their own future,

they were, on the whole, optimistic. When we turned our gaze to look at what lies behind young people's optimism, we found that a deep-seated faith in the power of hard work to overcome obstacles was the lynchpin of their narratives about the future. In contrast to Beck's individualization theory, our research suggests that the belief in hard work is not the result of the diminishing importance of traditional markers of inequality (e.g., class) but rather that the circumstances and background of young people continue to shape the meanings and purposes they attach to their personal agency. Hence, we found that young people deployed their optimism and the related belief in hard work in different ways: for some, it was a reflection of their privileged access to opportunities, while for the most disadvantaged, it was an 'anchor of hope'. If others (e.g., France and Roberts, 2015; Franceschelli, 2017) have already highlighted how—during times of change and austerity—social class continues to shape the opportunities of young people, our analysis suggests that it can also influence their individual identity and sense-making mechanisms, as well as how they comprehend the social world (Franceschelli, Evans and Schoon, 2016). Furthermore, we believe that the faith in hard work that we have observed relates to two interconnected processes. At a societal level, it shows the effects of neoliberal discourses, which suggest that the free market offers a fair system for allocating rewards and that the talented and the hard-working will ultimately succeed. And at an individual and cognitive level, young people's reliance on the self is a way of dealing with the tensions between their actual circumstances and the optimism they professed to feel.

Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance has been useful to advance our understanding of how neoliberal ideas influence the way young people make sense of their life prospects, showing how young people's cognitions about their future sometimes departed from their rather less positive lived realities. We saw that young people adopted a self-focused approach to process dissonant information and experiences. This, we argue, explains why the way they spoke about their own personal life chances became, at times, inconsistent with either their own experiences or views of others in similar positions. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have described this as 'an epistemological fallacy', but Berlant's words (2006) are also apt: for many, the use of cognitive dissonance as a sense-making mechanism is just another way of manifesting a 'cruel optimism'.

This interplay between psychological and social explanations has been central to deepening our understanding of the different ways in which discourses of personal agency and hard work are being deployed by young people in neoliberal societies like England. But while the underlying reasons may vary, the youth narratives that we have presented suggest that the belief in hard work and personal agency is widespread and has become deeply embedded in young people's sense of self- and sense-making processes. The implications of this extend beyond the individual or the theoretical, and become social and political. As this article has shown, the belief in one's own agency can lead some to blame others for their perceived failure to work sufficiently hard and to achieve the success that this discourse has promised. As this accusation is already frequently levelled at the poor, the unemployed and the benefits claimants (Macdonald et al., 2014), this could ultimately lead to an increasing demonization of the disadvantaged groups and even greater threats to the social welfare structures that are supposed to support them.

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Note

1. Arnett (2000) argues that the late teens to mid-20s, as emerging adulthood, is a distinct period in terms of life experiences and identity explorations. This concept is widely used in the psychology, social psychology and US literature, but its premise has also been contested within the British sociology of youth literature that we draw on here (cf. Bynner, 2005).

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