'Oh I do like to be beside the seaside': opportunity structures for four un/underemployed young people living in English coastal towns.

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Abstract

Long term unemployed young people are a 'social concern' in many countries. The focus for research is usually cities, but may also include rural areas. The qualitative study described in this paper focuses instead on four young people living in coastal towns in South East England. The study suggests that their experiences in education and employment markets are shaped, negatively, by their particular location and the ongoing opportunity structures. The paper outlines their views and discusses the three main themes that emerged from the analysis: opportunity structures; supported resilience and the impact of living in a coastal town. Implications for targeted youth guidance are considered, alongside a consideration of the reflexive role of the researcher in such work.

Introduction

An investigation into social justice for those living in coastal towns in the UK asserts that 'cities have come to embody how we view modern deprivation and poverty. Yet some of the most pronounced disadvantage in the UK exists away from the big cities' (Centre for Social Justice, 2013, p.4). This is supported by recent research by Ward (2015) who argues that many seaside towns are hotspots of social exclusion. She argues that there is a need to pay greater attention to exclusion in seaside locations and to engage in further research beyond the existing rural/urban binaries. Her work also reveals how problems connected with houses in multiple occupancy (HMOs) exacerbate exclusion in many seaside towns where the housing stock is cheap and therefore available for those in receipt of housing benefit (a state funded welfare payment). This finding concurs with the earlier work of Smith (2012) who also highlighted that coastal populations in the UK are under-researched in terms of studies

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into social exclusion, transient populations and disadvantage. His study considered the effects of HMOs in a town close to the area of study reported in this article and concluded that the social and economic consequence of such concentration of disadvantage leads to fragile community cohesion and divided communities.

Many young people who live in large cities experience particular challenges, which, for some may present significant disadvantage in their lives. These in-depth and often complex issues have come to represent a somewhat generic view of 'troubled youth'. Concerns over gang culture, drugs, crime, unemployment, dis-engagement and so on, have informed research, decision-making and policy development focused on the support that young people require and how that support should be delivered. This is not, in itself, a problem. Young people in all communities experience, to a lesser or greater degree, barriers in their lives, and national as well as global events (such as war and a marked increase in migration) will have an impact on these. Whilst it is important to be aware of the issues facing communities where the majority of young people reside, there is also a need, as argued above, to be mindful of the lives of those located outside the inner city environment, to ensure that the guidance and support needs of young people who live in rural and coastal areas are recognised.

This paper attends to one such area. It focuses on an interpretive study to explore the lived experiences of four young people who were unemployed or underemployed (i.e. in short term work or training) for a period of 12 months or more, and who live in coastal towns in the South East of England. Using a research methodology that draws on biographical methods (Merrill & West, 2009) the researchers invited unemployed young people between the ages of 16 and 19, in the eastern coastal region of the county of Kent, to share their stories. Whilst there are many pretty villages and pockets of affluence, the area is one of social disadvantage and job paucity. Although we focus on a particular area in England, it is expected that the issues raised, connected to socio-economic disadvantage in specific locations, will resonate with researchers and practitioners in other countries and career guidance contexts. In current times, coastal towns across Europe and the Gulf region are struggling to cope with the effects of mass migration. Many newcomers will move to the cities in search of work, but the impact on coastal and island communities is on-going and significant.

In this article we present four young people's experiences: 'Dan', 'Courtney', 'James' and 'Sally' (the names are pseudonyms). We introduce them here before returning to their experiences in more detail later. Dan is 18, unemployed and living in a 'bed sit' in a former

seaside Bed and Breakfast hotel, now in multiple occupancy, in an area he describes as 'rough'. His girlfriend is expecting a baby and there are difficulties with the pregnancy. He is in receipt of housing benefit, but wants a job and a better place where they can live together. Courtney is 18, lives at home in a small seaside town with her mother. She was unemployed for 12 months but eventually used the local support service. She has done well so far at college, but is now not attending and her mother does not know. She describes the stress involved and the difficulty of travelling to a college further away. James is 17 and his career horizons are limited to work in fast food outlets, as the only possibilities he sees available. After a long period of unemployment, by the end of the study he started on a catering course at college which he is enjoying. Sally, now 18, is estranged from her parents and has lived independently from the age of 15. Prior to this she looked after a younger sibling at home, often on their own without a parent figure. Sally does not express any career ambitions, and wants to leave the UK as soon as possible.

In the analysis we explore three main themes and, we argue, the specific environment (i.e. growing up and living in a coastal town) has had a significant impact on their lives, in relation to the choices available to them and the decisions they have made subsequently. Their own thoughts about the barriers they face and the factors that influenced the choices they have made are examined.

Background to the research

The research literature on youth unemployment is extensive and a brief selection of our initial search is outlined here. For instance, Cartmel and Furlong (2006) studied the lives of unemployed young people located in rural areas, but there appears to be little else in the literature that focuses on young people's experiences of growing up, engaging (and disengaging) with education and making transitions into further education, training or employment in specific geographical locations in the UK, that are not inner city areas. That said there is literature centred on the experiences of young people who are NEET (**n**ot in **e**ducation, **e**mployment or **t**raining) from a European dimension (Evans, 2002; Kieselback, 2003; Walther, 2006; Mourshed, Patel & Suder, 2014). Furthermore the experiences of specific groups of young people with shared needs have been researched; for example young people in and leaving care (Stein, 2012), young people and gang culture (Fleming, 2012), young offenders (Muncie, 2009), pregnant teenagers (Arai, 2009) and so on. The lives, experiences and barriers faced by NEET young people as a discrete group in the UK (but from no specific geographical dimension) have also been examined extensively (Simmons,

Thompson, Tabrizi & Nartey, 2014; Furlong, Goodwin, Hadfield, Hall, Lowden, O'Connor & Plugor, 2015).

In our study the young people are both NEET and have a particular barrier to employment created, we argue, by living in disadvantaged coastal town locations. Thus, where young people located in inner-city areas have a 360 degree outlook, those in coastal towns are restricted to a 180 degree perspective, with the sea ahead − offering limited opportunities for employment - and the land behind (which is rural in nature). It is these coastal towns and the lives of young people residing in these towns that form the focus of the study.

The research into the experiences of unemployed young people is centred around two coastal towns, often described as 'depressed' in terms of the local economy and job opportunities. The UK has 11,000 miles of coastline. The coastline has been, historically, part of its defence structure against 'invasion' and it remains less porous than some countries, for example - and in relation to the current migrant populations from Asia and North Africa - Italy, Malta, Greece and other southern European states. The title of our paper however, troubles at a positive representation of living by the sea in the late 20th and early 21st century, where the 'sea-side' suggests images of holidays, sun, sand and ice cream. It is taken from an English music hall song written in 1907[i]. 'Oh I do like to be beside the seaside' is part of the chorus, conveying an image of days out by the British seaside, promenading with 'brass bands playing'. As a music hall song, it related to the ordinary workers of the time who saved their money all year for a holiday on the coast. Some coastal towns in the UK, have weathered the transition from defensive port to thriving communities, from reliance on traditional industries such as fishing, to the growth of the sea-side holiday destination in Victorian times and beyond into the 1960s (CSJ, 2013). These have continued to establish vibrant economies and become cities in their own right: Brighton, on the Sussex coast, would be a good example of this successful transition. Many, by contrast, have struggled to find a new identity, diversify, develop different industries and provide opportunities for employment for their populations, including their younger citizens. Rickey (2009) describes how many economically vibrant sea-side communities began to lose their economic purpose with the advent of cheaper and more accessible 'foreign' travel in the 1970s. The Centre for Social Justice investigated levels of deprivation in five coastal towns in the UK - Rhyl, Margate, Clacton-on-Sea, Blackpool and Great Yarmouth - and found that 'the proportion of working age people on out-of-work benefits in the five towns… ranges from 19 to 25 per cent (against a national figure of 11.5 per cent for England, Scotland and Wales)' (2013, p.4).

Furthermore, the survey asserts that many local people had experienced or knew others who had experienced up to four generations of unemployment. Since 2013 there has been an improvement for adult employment in the UK, but this is fragile and unemployment for young people remains high.

It might be thought that seasonal work would be available to the young people in our study (and they were interviewed during the spring and summer months), yet the young people in the project did not indicate that seasonable opportunities were available for them. In part, this may be due to the depressed economy in the two towns – one was attempting to reinvent itself with new tourist attractions and the other is now a ferry port, in other words less of a seaside town in the 'bucket and spade' sense. Participants also spoke of depression and the motivation to look for temporary work may have been suppressed. One spoke of 'youthism', others of living in the wrong postcode. For seasonal work, in an economically depressed area, they would be competing with adults and other young people in more 'stable' situations.

Theoretical framing

Our theoretical framing for the work was based on structural theories that focus on socio-economic status and the organisation of work, stratified along divisions that aid or constrain the possibility of choice. Roberts (1977, 1997, 2005), has repeatedly challenged the prevailing psychological and individualistic approach to career theorising by arguing that for many young people choice is a chimera, since the first job gained is largely determined by social class. Family background and access to social capital from this macro viewpoint, shapes the educational experience, career aspirations and career actualities for vast numbers of young people, constrained as they are by their socio-economic position. Most young people, it is argued, in these circumstances do not choose occupations they simply take what is available. Young people are also less 'mobile' than adults and in difficult times are unlikely to move away from family and friends to find work elsewhere. With the decline in traditional employment routes for young people, they often become warehoused in education and training schemes that do not necessarily offer the kinds of qualifications that are valued by employers or the society at large (Roberts, 1997). Work and occupations are now diffuse and unemployment has become an individualised experience, where the individual often feels personally responsible for their inability to find work. Sultana (2011) relates this to neoliberal economic policies that focus on market forces as the solution to employment issues. Despite a recent decrease in unemployment and an upturn in some economies, the prospects of

employment for many young people across Europe (Eurostat, 2015) and other 'Western' economies is fragile and in some places remains bleak. However, considering also the level of what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) describe as 'cultural capital', we wondered about the degree of individual agency that young people in the area were able to demonstrate. Bruner described agency as the ability to act, to be reflexive and to speak independently 'under the control of our own intentional states' (1990, p. 40-1). What were our participants' views about the future and did they see this as determined by their background and current experience? And we wondered if the young people demonstrated 'resilience factors' (Newman, 2004) that enabled them to 'keep on, keeping on'.

To explore the views of unemployed or underemployed young people about occupational structures, job opportunities and their future, we devised the following research questions for the study, which took place in 2013:

- What are young people's perceptions of the opportunities available in their area?
- What factors do young people think have contributed to their current unemployed or underemployed status?
- What, in the views of young people, would make a difference in terms of increasing job opportunities?
- How do young people view their futures?

Methodology

Our rationale for the selection of a qualitative and interpretive research methodology is as follows. It is the lived experiences of the four young people located in coastal towns in the South East of the England that is of particular interest as an illustrative account, rather than a desire to offer generalisable findings. The young people were invited to speak openly about their lives, their experiences, their thoughts and their feelings, with little direction. This approach can offer an opportunity for deep and rich reflection on the part of participants and provide in-depth insight for the researcher (Merrill & West, 2009). We were interested in the unique perspective and narrative of each young person, albeit we expected that location and the lack of job opportunities would influence these. There were, as would be expected, differences in their individual life stories but for this article we concentrate on the similarities that emerged across the material.

Initially, contact was made with Kent Connexions service (CXK: the local youth support and career guidance agency) and a meeting took place between the lead researcher and two managers working in the areas where the study took place. The project was discussed fully and the managers were invited to share their own perceptions of the barriers young people living in coastal areas of Kent face, before their help was sought to locate young people as volunteers to participate in the project. Their views added to our understanding of the nature of living in a coastal town and resonated with the material derived from the young people's interviews. An information sheet was provided which clarified that a participant was under no pressure to take part and could withdraw at any time. The young people were asked to attend for two individual research interviews, each lasting for about an hour. Their experiences, thoughts and feelings were recorded, transcribed and analysed. It was made clear that the participants were invited to be involved at various stages of the process, from discussing a consent form, to reading the transcript, to requesting changes, comments or additions as they felt necessary. Ethical approval for the project was given by the University in which the researchers are located. In the next section we discuss how participants were recruited and later we describe the analytical process.

Recruitment of participants

Guidance practitioners in the coastal region of Kent spoke directly to young people with whom they were working and asked for volunteers to be involved with the project. The initial conversation with the area managers identified general problems with housing, family relationships, numerous transitions from college courses to training places, part time employment to unemployment – all of which often result in fractured lives. Stability and consistency appear to be in short supply for many who are identified as NEET and therefore finding young people who were in a situation where they felt that they could commit to undertaking two interviews over a three month period was problematic.

Four young people came forward and agreed to be interviewed; one young man and three young women, all between the ages of 18 and 19, all born in the UK, all un/underemployed. The researchers made appointments directly with the young participants at Youth Centres and Connexions offices in the local area. Both researchers were required to rearrange appointments a number of times as the young people developed other commitments, or had forgotten to attend. Both researchers also experienced situations where the 'named' participant did not attend for the appointment and practitioners contacted other young people who were willing, once informed about the project, at very short notice to

participate. Again, it was made clear that participation was voluntary. The resulting opportunistic sample of two young men and two young women makes no claims for representation of a wider group. Of those, only two (one male and one female) were able to attend for both appointments and despite keeping in contact and a willingness to participate in a second interview, the other two were unable to attend subsequently. The researchers decided that repeated attempts to contact them might amount to harassment of young people who were already leading stressful lives. The interviews were loosely structured and the purpose of the study was shared with each young person at the outset and informed consent was obtained. The six interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and the transcripts sent for comment and approval to each young person.

Analysis

After both first and second interviews had been carried out and the anonymised transcripts had been accepted by the young people, each researcher undertook an independent analysis of all the interview material using an auto/biographical approach (this terms refers to a reflexive positioning of the researcher as outlined below). A pro-forma designed for auto/biographical research analysis was used (Merrill & West, 2009). This invites the researcher to 'live with' and examine the words of the participants in-depth, paying attention to context and process issues: in order to begin the work of identifying patterns or themes in each person's story. Both researchers analysed the four participants' interview/s; in other words, both the young people they had interviewed and the young people interviewed by their colleague. The pro-forma also asks the researcher to note other aspects that relate to the interview, such as process issues resulting from the nature of the venue, any prior knowledge of the participant, the relationship between the researcher and the participant, the impact the researcher may be having on the interview and the analysis, plus any other thoughts that may aid the developing analysis, and so on.

As always, the movement from the interaction in the research interview to the words on a transcript cannot fully capture the conversation that took place. This crisis of representation in qualitative research is understood, but the independent initial analysis and the discussion that followed between the two researchers helped to increase the rigour and the trustworthiness of the suggested findings. The initial individual analyses were compared and discussed fully by the two researchers and the discussion helped us to highlight any differences in interpretation, which is likely to occur, particularly when only one of the researchers was present in the original interview.

It was important to treat the material with care, to stay with the words of our participants and not move too quickly to identify common themes in the material. Our next step was to construct a case study or research narrative for each of our participants to avoid the fragmentation of their individual story, before moving to what might be common in their experiences. Following the initial individual analysis and our discussion, the pro-formas and case studies were then revisited in order to undertake a detailed thematic analysis. This focused on what had been said that appeared to be universal between the participants. In this article, and within the constraints of the word limitations, we will make reference to each individual narrative as we move to what appear to be the common themes across the material. After doing this we will comment on the reflexive process that we engaged in during the analysis.

Findings and discussion

The findings and discussion focus on three main themes identified as opportunity structures; supported resilience and the impact of living in a coastal town.

Opportunity structures

Each young person described the limited nature of the opportunities available to them relating to employment in their coastal town setting. Dan explains:

'What, opportunities for work? Pff, there ain't any. Like every time I've applied for a job I've either not heard anything back or it's just a plain no.'

Courtney reflects on her situation and makes the link between lack of readily available employment opportunities and the impact this has on family life. The dearth of available opportunities in her case, leads to pressure from family, which serves to exacerbate her situation:

'I mean my family knew that I was trying. But where my mum was getting quite agitated that I wasn't working, the rest of my family got agitated. Um, I quite often got 'It's easy to get a job you've just got to look hard, you've just got to try harder'.'

James talks only about retail and catering, and states:

'Um for young people in the area, without looking it doesn't actually have anything. You have to have a proper look because it isn't exactly like everyone's like jumping out 'Come on people, come here.''

Sally is pessimistic. Her focus is on leaving the area altogether as, she says, the employment opportunities are few:

'Yeah, to be honest I wouldn't care what it is, as long as I earn a good wage and it gets me out of the country I would do anything.'

There are striking resonances here with Roberts' work on Opportunity Structures (e.g., 1997). He suggests that young people are influenced less by aspiration than by the reality of what is available in relation to employment opportunities, particularly at times of recession. Each of the research participants talked about the lack of opportunities, not necessarily as a deficit model, but rather as an accepted reality. In structural terms, Simmons and Thompson (2013) suggest that a fundamental re-think of UK education and training arrangements is needed in order to create new opportunities. They argue for broader ranging economic and political initiatives in order to extend employment opportunities for young people. Furthermore, the link between education and employment cannot be overemphasised. In the area of the study almost one third of over 16 year olds has no qualifications at (Office for National Statistics, 2011). In our group, despite, in some cases a disrupted education; three of the four young people had achieved General Certificates of Secondary Education at age 16. But in spite of their achievements their decisions regarding employment were, in most cases, opportunistic and largely pragmatic, based on the availability of work rather than aspiration or even preference - reminiscent of the work of Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson in 1996. Dan, for instance, makes pragmatic decisions, taking what is available:

'Generally it weren't so much of 'Oh I'm going to choose this, I'm going to go for this' it was more what was there at the time…... It's not like I really wanted to do it – it's just I needed to do something.'

By the time of the second interviews, the situation had changed for all the participants. Where James had been unemployed and applying for jobs in catering, in a fast-food outlet, he was now undertaking a catering course at a Further Education College (FE). Courtney was enrolled on a childcare course in FE, but was not attending. Sally had found work as an assistant in a home for people with mental health issues and for Dan, the pressure to find work had increased as his girlfriend was pregnant and he was anxious about finding a way to support his new family. It is important to note that they all wanted to work.

A significant point made by Dan, Courtney and James was the importance of gaining work experience opportunities. The lack of work experience was viewed as a serious deterrent in being offered employment. Where in recent years many 14 – 16 year olds were encouraged to undertake periods of work experience in England, this initiative is, currently,

largely available only to 16 – 18 year olds in education (DfE, 2013). The young people in this study did not have the opportunity to engage in work experience during their formal education. Beyond schooling, work experience was only available if linked to a training programme: even voluntary work was severely limited and in all areas of employment young people competed with adults with greater work experience.

Models and methods of career learning and development, in the main, focus on raising aspiration, expanding horizons and overcoming barriers in relation to employment, and yet it is opportunity structures theory that appears to intersect here (Roberts, 2013). For three young people in the research, there appeared to be little evidence of the opportunity to expand their horizons at the time of the interviews. James is the exception. He hopes that his catering course will provide him with the means to open his own restaurant one day. Sally has no career ideas, but has a clear life-plan, which focuses on moving away from the UK and living elsewhere as soon as she is able. James and Sally could be viewed as speaking 'agentically', but are constrained by their circumstances and degree of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997). Dan had been interested in graphic design whilst at school, but now simply needs to earn money to support himself and his girlfriend, whilst Courtney doubts her, once certain, choice of a course in childcare. For Dan and Courtney, previous ambitions appear to have been squashed by current circumstances. Whilst not suggesting that the young people themselves discussed the neo-liberal agenda that places responsibility for finding work on the individual, they did discuss more structural issues – as noted later.

Before discussing the next theme, it is important to recognise that their experience at the time of the research does not determine their future. By emphasising the impact of the opportunity structures within which they operated at the time, we risk suggesting a socially deterministic conclusion to the trajectory of their lives. There seemed little place for vocational psychology at this point in their lives, in terms of explaining their career development or applying techniques for matching their interest to a career profile. Yet they are four individuals who will continue to have separate experiences where opportunities to act with agency in terms of their future life courses will take place. Rather than present the argument as a polarity between structural determinism and individual agency, their future opportunities will be a result of the interaction between the two. Law (1981) identified this more nuanced argument in his Community Interaction Theory and we acknowledge it here.

Supported resilience

It was striking that each young person described painful circumstances and, at times, elements of despair regarding their lives. All four young people had experienced a disrupted education, three had been excluded (or excluded themselves) from compulsory education (up to the age of 16 in the UK at the time of the study) and one had left the sixth form (post-16) voluntarily. Two of the young people had little, if any, contact with their parents. Housing was an issue for two of the young people who were living independently, one in state funded accommodation and the other 'sofa surfing'. Mental health problems have affected three out of the four, with two of the young people being prescribed anti-depressants. Much has been written elsewhere about these particular issues (for example, Burton, Pavord & Williams, 2014), but what was notable about the young people's responses to their experiences was a lack of self-pity concerning the situations in which they found themselves. For example, Sally explains that her school did everything that they could to support her to remain in education:

> 'Well I think they did, well they tried to do all they could. But at that point I didn't listen to anyone. But now, when I look back at it, I think, I wish I did listen to them. And all that they said to me was right, everything… but then nothing would have changed my mind.'

James shares this view; he explains his response to teachers who were trying to support him:

> 'No I ignored them. It's the worst thing to do. They are not saying it because they like to say it, trust me they hate it as much as you.'

Dan describes employers as being 'stuck in a common youthism' whereby they are judging all young people on pre-conceived, largely negative notions, whilst at the same time acknowledging 'people think I'm immature sometimes because of the way I act.' He continues to value work rather than state support and, despite the lack of opportunities, he does not give up:

> 'Like I went on benefits a month ago. Already I want off it. Already I want a job. I'm out most days, giving my CV into places trying to get that job, but I'm still not hearing nothing. And that's when it comes back to 'common youthism'.'

Courtney also reflected on her situation:

> 'After again sitting down and thinking to myself 'it's only me it's going to affect in the long run and without me going to college I won't be able to help my mum with anything,' so then I decided it was time to go [to see the Connexions adviser].'

The ability to 'keep on, keeping on' demonstrated by each young person was a consistent factor. This could be termed resilience and the need to develop resilience has been a repeated theme in the literature regarding youth and adolescence (Coleman & Hagel, 2007; Gilligan, 2009). However, this can mask a neo-liberal discourse that suggests that all young people can make it if they just try hard enough: failure then becomes a matter of personal responsibility (Sultana, 2011). The rhetorical use of the need to develop resilience risks reinforcing overly-individualistic responses to the crises of contemporary capitalism. Many problems, especially in marginalised communities, are more structural – such as the distribution of opportunities, inequality and poverty, alongside the absence of jobs for young people (Roberts, 2013). At the time of the study, the numbers of unemployed young people in the UK was nearing the one million mark.

All four young people appeared to have a generally positive self-concept and to a greater or lesser extent, a sense of well-being, despite their individual, often complex circumstances. That is not to say that the stories told of the lives lived were not challenging and at times disturbing, but rather that the young people did not describe negative feelings about the way in which they viewed themselves and their selfhood. Newman (2004) suggests that resilience is more likely to be developed where key factors are present. These include good social support systems, the presence of a key unconditionally supportive parent (or attachment figure), a mentor from outside the family who is committed to the young person, a positive educational experience, engagement in extra-curricular activities, self-belief, the ability to re-frame problems, a sense of community identity and the opportunity to develop problem management skills. In the case of the young people in this project, where not all the above factors are evident in every case, each young person does identify key figures, either in or outside of the family who has offered support. In the case of Dan, this support has been notably inconsistent, and Dan, out of the four young people interviewed, although at times appearing up-beat seemed to feel the most stuck in relation to his future. Thus the concept of supported resilience is identified as a theme here, acknowledging that resilience is not an individual trait or context free – its generation needs to take place within trusting and sustainable relationships. As researchers we recognised that we were working with young people who did value the help of guidance agencies (it is how we gained our sample): there would be many others who would be beyond the reach of agencies and probably unsupported – the level of their resilience is not known.

Returning to our case studies, Sally speaks at length about her older sister who she identifies as a role model. She talks about the route that many young people she knows have

taken; early motherhood, 'living off benefits for the rest of your life', and she cites her sister as central in ensuring she does not choose this road herself. Dan appears to have an ambivalent relationship with his mother and lives alone in bed and breakfast accommodation (as noted, funded by social security payments within poor housing stock in the area – often defunct seaside hotels). He does not identify a single figure of support, but he talks more widely about a range of supportive professionals who have helped him. But Dan also feels let down by the agencies, and in particular the individuals with whom he has formed relationships. He says, 'So like my worker down at the council doesn't even work there anymore – went down the other day and she's quit.'

In terms of Newman's model (2004) Dan appears to be missing many of the key factors that assist the building of resilience. He talks about his 'mates' and he makes reference to his girlfriend, but there is no clear attachment figure identified (Bowlby, 1988). Courtney describes the support she has received from her Connexions adviser and in the second research interview; she refers to her relationship with a counsellor at college with whom she has been working. Courtney acknowledges the need to talk and she recognises the importance of these significant trusting relationships. She has experienced a particularly traumatic incident and has also suffered with depression. She recognises that there are options, but has lost confidence, although clear that she needs support to make sense of what to do next.

Like Courtney, James also acknowledges the need for support. He talks at length about his relationship with both his mother and his girlfriend and in particular he cites his Connexions adviser as being central in working with him. When asked where he'd be now if he had not been supported by Connexions he responds:

'Probably still in the same place where I was six months to a year ago, to be honest. Probably wouldn't have gotten out of bed.'

He goes on to describe the way in which his Connexions adviser offers support:

'He never, like, told me to do things. He was just, like, connecting every two weeks...he'd never, like make me do something… it was always… 'do you want to do this? It's out there if you want it'.'

Sally's perception of the Job Centre, the public employment service for adults, is quite different to James' experience of Connexions. She explains:

'All they care about is hitting targets. Obviously they have targets to hit as a job, so they don't look at you as a person. They look at you as a..a…number. That's what I reckon anyway.'

Bee and Boyd (2010) identify the importance of 'attachment' in helping young people to engage actively and positively with their lives. In the language of Winnicott (1971), the significant other provides a transitional space, supporting them at a time in adolescence that James described as being like 'fledgling adults'. However, cuts in public funding and a fundamental shift in the ways in which youth support services are delivered are making it increasingly problematic for young people to identify and build a positive helping relationship with a significant other in a helping agency, like Connexions. In addition the help they currently receive is age limited and will stop once they reach the age of 19.

The impact of living in a coastal town

Each young person expressed an awareness of the significance of their particular geographical location. The Centre for Social Justice (2013) describes the of location of two of the research participants, as a large town in which 30 percent of neighbourhoods are in the poorest 10 percent in the country and a third of children live below the poverty line, whilst 70 percent of households are recorded as being 'deprived'. The decline in tourism and the drastic loss of jobs in 2011 at a pharmaceutical company based locally that offered a range of employment opportunities and service jobs for the community, are all cited as a contributing factor in this decline. The report sets out some of the measures put in place to assist in the regeneration of the area; the building of the Turner Contemporary Art Gallery and the redevelopment of the Dreamland amusement park, but local representatives do not agree unanimously that these measures will be effective (CSJ, 2013). The perception seems to be that visitors to the Turner Gallery, for example, do not spend time or money in the town, just at the Gallery. And at the end of 2015, the reopened Dreamland Park was reported in the media experiencing severe financial difficulties

The remaining two young people live in a nearby town with a large port, but transport/ferry routes to and from the continent have been reduced, due, in large part to the increased access to low cost air travel and the advent of the Channel Tunnel. The nearby army barracks have closed with a further loss of servicing jobs for local people. Public transport links are poor and there is very little for young people to do in the area. Courtney explains that where she lives nearby is:

'Only a small town so you've literally got the park, you've got the swimming centre and gym. And you've got a paddling pool on the beach. So there is nothing to do

there… there is nowhere to go, except for a walk somewhere or go to the beach. You couldn't afford anything else.'

Dan agrees with Courtney about the cost of living. He explains how he responds to those who tell him to look for work outside of his area:

'I can't! There's no point in me finding a job outside because I ain't gonna be able to pay for, like, me travel. Because it's quite a hefty sum. Like to travel to [the next big town], like, here and back every day is quite a lot. For, like, 5 days a week, it's a lot of money.'

The young people also make links between the lack of employment opportunities in the local area and their perception of the increasing numbers of migrants. They express strong views concerning the impact of immigration on the area: Sally blames the government for putting migrants and all the 'unemployed people in one spot to make them all together in their own poverty'. Many migrants who come to the UK travel through Europe arriving on ferries in the area and there is, anecdotally as expressed by the young people, a perception, possibly enhanced by certain media outlets, that these individuals are often housed and given work locally. Furthermore, according to the local managers who were interviewed, in the past decade several London Boroughs have moved migrant families and 'looked after children' (i.e. children not living with family but cared for by the state) from London to the area due to the low cost of accommodation. This claim is supported by the work of Smith (2012) and Ward (2015). James, however who lives in the coastal region of Thanet in Kent, thinks beyond this negative view. He identifies the importance of the community and taking an active part in ensuring its development. Where Sally wants to move away, he says:

'Well, everybody's got the idea of we're in Thanet, we're ****ed, basically. If you can change that, actually get them motivated in the community and see the community as their community and not that 'It's Thanet! That's nothing to do with us.' Then they won't be as violent, won't be so much destruction of property, because they'll see it as **their** property.'

He continues, suggesting that jobs could be made in the community which are about and for the people of the area. . He becomes animated saying:

'The more that Thanet people are going to see it as their place, their home, not just somewhere they live. And to do that would see a great crime drop because people start becoming a community, not just people you live near.'

Each young person spoke freely about the high cost of public transport, the dearth of local employment opportunities and, with the exception of Courtney who lives in a relatively affluent location, the deprivation of the area. The opportunities are sparse and appear to be limited to vocational courses at a further education college; not one of our participants referred to Higher Education courses, which may be a reflection of their social group and the opportunities they perceive as available to them. Higher Education may not be within their 'horizons for actions' as described by Hodkinson, et al (1996).

James, as noted, is more positive and describes himself as 'a Thanet boy forever' and visualises a future where he finishes his catering course, opens his own restaurant and eventually goes back to teach catering to students at the college where he is currently studying. He explains forcefully:

> 'I want to give back to my community. …this is my area. I may not like the place, I may not like the people here, but they are still Thanet, the people in it, they are Thanet.'

We might question the realism of James' ambitions, but Sapin (2013) argues for the need to encourage young people to engage more actively in their local communities. She argues that their voices should be heard and that the helping professions have a part to play in making these opportunities happen. Courtney suggested that young people's views are supposed to be listened to, but felt 'that doesn't really happen'. All the young people in the study welcomed the opportunity to express their views about their situation.

Researcher reflexivity

A number of important issues arose for us, the researchers during the research process. We are both academics and experienced career counsellors. Westergaard is also a British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy accredited counsellor with experience of long-term counselling practice with young people. Interesting questions were raised concerning the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the research participant, the young person. These relate to the boundaries between interactions that focus on listening respectfully to young people's stories in order to use their responses in a research context, rather than a counselling intervention (Reid, 2016). We were both challenged by the personal and sometimes traumatic nature of the material raised by the participants; in two cases potential issues of safeguarding were disclosed. It was important that the impact on the researcher of the disclosures made by the young people was discussed and we made time,

aside from the analysis process, to meet and review this. We had limited the study to young people over the age of 16, the age of consent, and were confident we were acting ethically. The relationship of trust between the researcher who is taking an in-depth approach, and listening with empathy and respect, is likely to engender a response that may need to be 'contained' within the research process. We agreed that we had provided a containing 'safe space' for our participants and our reflexive discussion was, as in therapeutic work, a supervisory space where we were able to process the impact on us of the stories told in a research setting – alongside considering our presence in the research (Stanley & Wise, 1993). It is important to note, as above, that ethical considerations had been examined prior to the research and both researchers were satisfied that the young people had access to other professional support to discuss their issues.

Implications

Each young person identified themselves as being part of a coastal town community, for better or worse. The commonalities or themes identified here focused on a number of issues that may have significance for practitioners working in the guidance professions. First, the perception of the lack of opportunities for young people living in this area – be it as a result of access issues (transport etc.), shifting populations, limited job vacancies, competition with adult job seekers or what Dan perceives as 'common youthism'. The lack of opportunity also relates to macro issues, i.e. their socio-economic position and the wider opportunity structures within which employment is organised. Second, the need to develop supported resilience in the form of strong helping relationships that are less about instruction and more about support, as suggested by James. And third, the Coastal Towns dimension where community cohesion is fragile and social exclusion and deprivation is condensed into areas where 'poor housing', plus multiple occupancy of houses supported by housing benefit, is prevalent (Smith, 2012; Ward, 2015). Community has ceased to mean something positive for many young people and re-engagement in terms of meaningful community-related activity and structured support, not 'flight', as Sally plans, may provide a way forward. Smith (ibid) asserts that there is a need to focus on the processes that lead to the concentration of social and economic deprivation in coastal towns. When policies are designed to support unemployed youth in the light of funding cuts and changes to national welfare systems, the importance of a specific place-based approach, that is coastal towns, (Ward, 2015) cannot be overlooked.

In focussing on the individual cases of our young people, there is a risk that the discussion slides into an over-psychologised debate that again ignores the wider social, political and economic issues that are far beyond the control of our participants. Even with supported resilience, they were experiencing on-going difficulties. Practitioners and service managers working with young unemployed people are navigating the on-going cuts to public services and the rhetoric of 'having to do more with less' in terms of funding. Inevitably this leads to short-termism, when any job or short training course becomes a solution, however good or otherwise the fit may be with the young person's interests. However, the young people we worked with really wanted to work and were prepared to take opportunities that would solve the immediate financial and social problems, but those opportunities were not readily available. The Connexions service in England had worked with the wider issues that were affecting young people's employability prospects, but cuts have led to the service being disbanded, and yet the multiple barriers many experience have not disappeared. Seen by the UK 2010 – 2015 coalition government as a failure, there is little available to replace the help that Connexions was providing for young people living complex lives. The opportunities for individual growth, nurtured by career advisers are limited in disadvantaged areas and many of these young people appear to need what we might better refer to as career counselling. In other words, an investment of time where their needs and their concerns can be heard in a more collaborative approach which involves more listening, less 'fixing'. More listening though will not provide more jobs, but meaningful and supportive relationships with professionals can help to develop a sense of self-esteem, positivity, motivation and resilience in young people, meaning that they are better placed to find and secure available opportunities. At the same time the support of mentors, counsellors, youth support professionals or career guidance practitioners offer positive role models, and, in some cases, even attachment figures that some young people appear to be lacking in their lives. The resources for young people like James to engage in activism to build the community he envisions could do more to increase the opportunities and might be more effective in the long term.

As emphasised, the impact of location seems important and in the case of the young people in the study, a particular location, coastal towns. Living in an area disadvantaged by poor housing stock and weak employment prospects, exacerbates the problems for our young people and for the migrants also living or passing through the towns. This situation is not unique to England and many career guidance practitioners across Europe and elsewhere will find resonance in the stories our young people tell. It would seem that targeted guidance

support – not generalised helping – is required; that is, schemes that involve the community, drawing on their knowledge of what is sustainable. This is likely to mean engaging directly with young people, listening to their perceptions, needs and ideas, and in turn enabling them to become involved with projects that seek to benefit their community, whilst developing their skills, self-esteem and resilience. This does not mean that support has to be individual and where agencies struggle to find resources to support young people, working in group situations can be beneficial. Thomsen (2012) has challenged established ways of thinking about the predominance of the one-to-one 'delivery' of careers work. Her research suggests that it is the community rather than the individual that should be the starting context to begin the process of career guidance. Thomsen views working in a group context as more effective for many clients, of varying ages, in terms of the career learning and development achieved. She suggests that such collective and communal practice can avert the tendency to assume individuals make career and educational 'decisions', divorced from their social context. In an increasingly diverse cultural context, this has even greater resonance.

Conclusion

This study did not aim at breadth or the creation of generalisable data. We wanted to pay attention to the particularities of the lives of individual young people and by so doing, illustrate the personal experience of long term youth unemployment in its wider social context. Our work, we contend, pays attention to the inner and outer worlds that the young people in our study inhabit, or as stated by C. Wright Mills, 'Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of individual life' (1970, p. 247-8). In the words of Courtney, 'It's about so much more than just getting a job'.

Cuts in public services, the impact of shifting populations and community regeneration schemes, are areas that merit further research in terms of the impact on youth employment in coastal towns. The interdisciplinary link between employment, geographical studies of exclusion, mental health and well-being also emerges as worthy of further consideration for policy makers and researchers – on the latter, three of our four young people described periods of depression. This may not be unique to coastal towns, but when linked with other access issues, as argued, location intensifies the problems faced. It would not be possible to illustrate the particular struggles of Dan, Courtney, James and Sally through a statistical analysis or large-scale survey; their stories as outlined here, reveal the personal and subjective impact of long term under or unemployment. After all, life as lived

by these young people is subjective, lived in the present. They 'keep on, keeping on' but in difficult circumstances where the official agency support they received at the time of the study was under threat and unlikely to continue.

Finally, as indicated earlier, applying a life-course perspective adds a further 'agentic' dimension to the discussion. What we have presented in this research is a moment in time (Sandelowski, 1991), which we have brought into sharp focus in terms of the struggles of our four young people. Yet this is not the final story, it is only part of what may or may not be a continuing struggle for livelihood and career identity. Currently unknown opportunities and resources may become available to our four young people: their opportunity structures may change, alongside their personal development.

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[i] Composed by John A Glover-Kind 1907