



The imagined futures of young people on Sheppey in 1978

Timescapes/ESDS Qualidata Conference,
University of Leeds 15 November 2010

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Summary of presentation

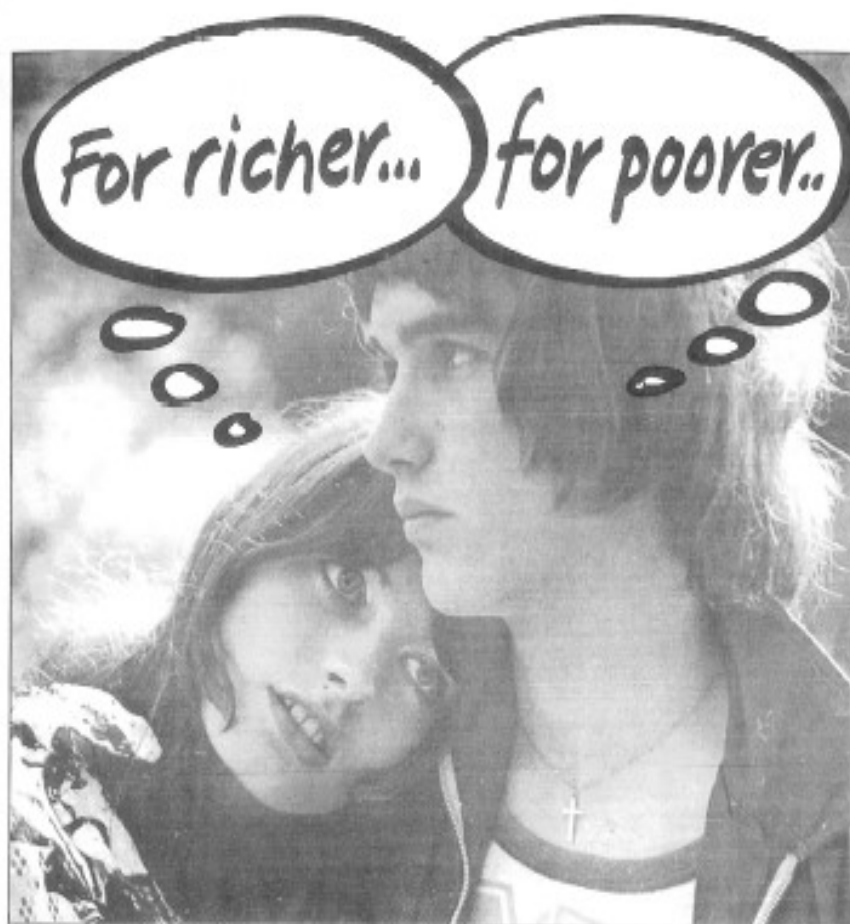
- Background to essays written by young people imagining their futures
- Some selected data on 'community' and 'turning points'
- Reflections on the potential and limitations of the method

The original study

- *Divisions of Labour* (1984) based on an extensive, team-based, mixed methods project
- Methods included essays written by 142 school leavers in May 1978 (mainly 16-year-olds, 90 boys, 52 girls), asked to imagine themselves towards the end of their lives and looking back
- Essays now archived at UK Data Archive
- Speedy publication of 'Living without a job: how school leavers see the future' *New Society* 2 November 1978: 259-62; focus on themes of work, unemployment and family

NEWSociety

2 November 1970 vol 48 No. 899 30p weekly Australia NZ \$5 cents W. Germany DM2.00 United States (air freight) \$1.00



R. E. Pahl: How school leavers see their future

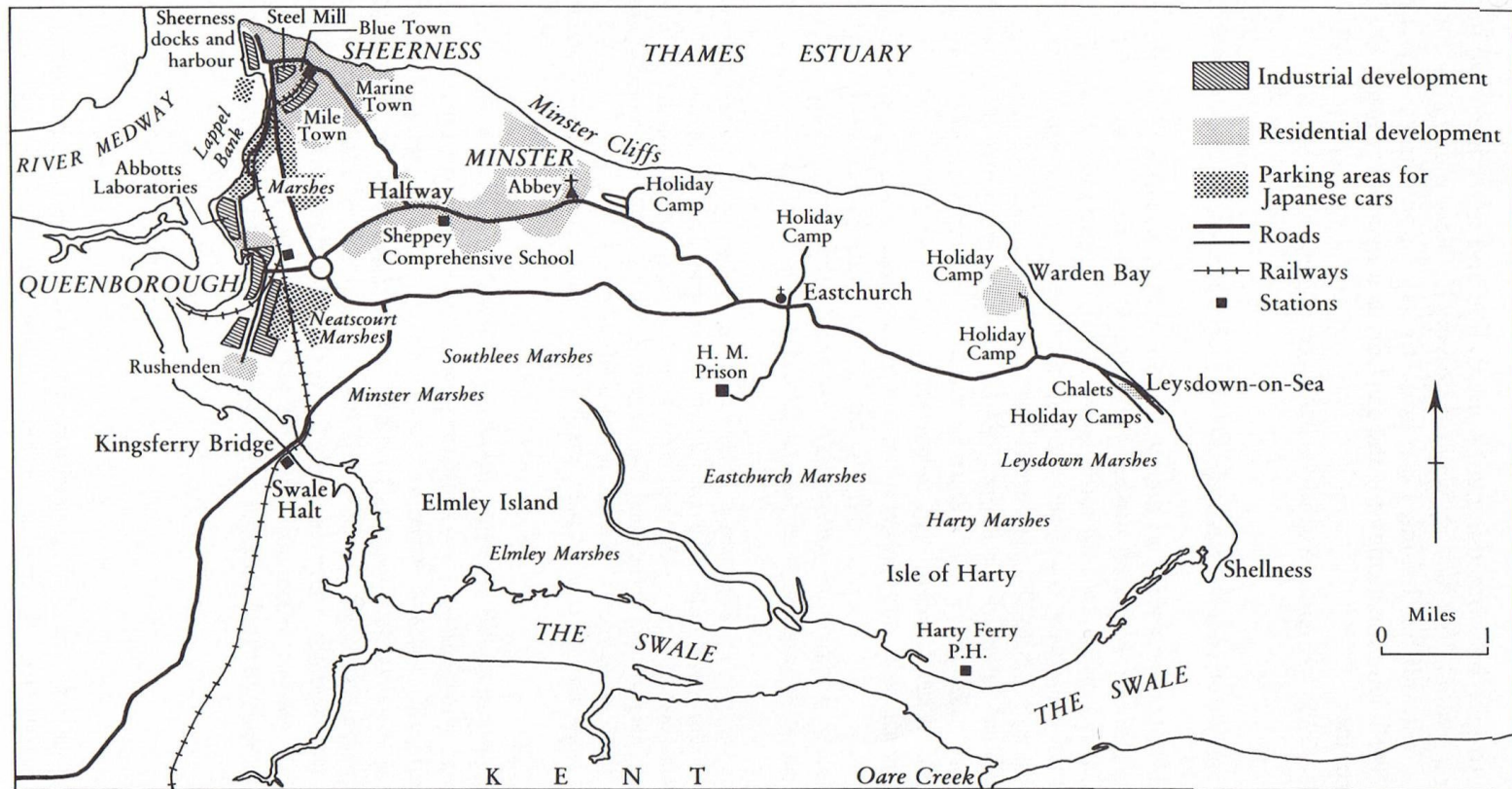
The original study and current re-study

- Pahl acknowledges that article doesn't do full justice to essay material which 'would be extremely hard to interpret without some knowledge of the local context. As this improves, I may wish to modify my present interpretation' (1978: 262)
- Analysis of young people developed further in Claire Wallace's *For Richer, For Poorer* (1987), based on ethnography and questionnaires
- Current (2009-10) small-scale re-study of Sheppey involving 106 essays, with better gender balance

Location of Sheppey



Map of Sheppey



The Isle of Sheppey in Kent

Why focus on community and turning points?

- 'Community' and the 'Big Society' agenda
- 'Turning points' a key concept for analysing life histories
- Andrew Abbott and the need to make the case for qualitative data
- Turning points as the redirection of paths, not movement from one stage to another in a predictable trajectory
- Entry into the job market can be 'a quite chaotic turning point' (p.247)

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- 1978 essays say very little about 'community' beyond immediate family and friends
- Essay 114, female, married at 22 and had a family then retrained as a teacher in her thirties, 'I became more aware of my society and began to give up a few evenings a week to help out at childrens homes and play groups. The more I help these children the more I felt I done something worthwhile with my life'
- 'I firmly believed in a form of Marxist society as the ideal society' (essay 23, male) – exceptional in making explicit reference to politics

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- 'Mum found me a nice office job. I took it without a word of protest.... The rebel in me had died.... A[t] forty I can safely say my life had ended. It was too late to start again. I wasn't content but I just had to accept it' (essay 4, male)
- Essay 93, female, left school at 16, went to college and then got a secretarial job, met and married husband, continued working until birth of children, moved house, children got married in their twenties, and produced grandchildren.
- Essay 95, female, left school at 16, went to work in a factory, then moved to Northampton to live with her nan, worked in a shoe factory for four years, 'then I did a good days work, I got married without any doubts'.

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- The author of essay 96 imagined herself working in a shirt factory and dreaming that she would 'go off to Canada and marry a rich millionaire and...live happy ever after....but instead I met Robert', who was a year younger. Married and moved to near Doncaster and had 4 daughters, working as a bar assistant. Husband a motor bike racer. 'Although I didn't mind Robert going racing, I was always sure some kind of accident would happen and it did'. Robert confined to a wheelchair and needed care so author gave up job to look after him, but said this was all she ever really wanted. She imagined by the end of her life having 4 daughters all grown up with children of their own.

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- Some essays do identify turning points beyond conventional life course trajectories
- The author of essay 6 passed his exams at 16, was accepted as an apprentice mechanic for four years, during which time he joined a rock group and got engaged. 'I couldn't get married until I was twenty because I didn't finish the apprenticeship until then'. Moved to Essex for work and had two children, but joined a new group aged 33, gained a record contract and spent increasing amounts of time touring. Aged 35 his wife divorced him because 'she couldn't take no more'. Children stayed with their mother.

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- ‘This really broke me down and I went on to taking drugs as a lot of musicians did at that time.... Then I became religious, something I never expected to happen. This brought me out of drugs. I was religious until I was forty eight, but I retired from the music seen at the age of forty five’. Lonely and suicidal, ‘but a surprise at that [time] was when my daughter and son turned up at my door. They had married and had two sons and a daughter each.’ Eldest grandson asking for advice on what to do with his life led to reflection that ‘my life had been a failier. I only warned him to take care and think.’ Narrative of success, failure and redemption.

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- Essay 19, male, left school at 16 and worked in a factory, 'out nearly every night drinking', continued living at home but 'By now my parents had began to question me about moving out of their house (father mainly) and thinking of settling down finding some property and getting married of course'. Married aged 27 but soon divorced. 'After looking back at the past I had realised that now at 30 years old I had dun bloody sod all with my life and had no goal, this is when I decided to return to night school and get some decen qualifications'. Remarried aged 35 and climbed up the career ladder. 'I thought of all those years between the age of 16 and 30 and shamed my self because how I had wasted them'.

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- Essay 20, male, left school at 16 for an apprenticeship, but concentrated on enjoying himself rather than his career 'until I met a girl who was understanding and calmed me down'. Married aged 20, had children and moved with family to Germany. Then had 'an affair which somehow my wife discovered. By the age of 30 my marriage was on the verge of destruction, but being what I was I was able to make things up and it turned out to be stronger than it ever had been before'.

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- ‘I was just eighteen when I finally left school and to me that was like being released from prison.... I had been knocking around with Julie and I thought I Loved her so I popped the question we were married in June 1988. At first all things went well but gradually we began to drift apart until we were arguing every other minute...It was inevitable that we would get divorced... At the age of thirty six I had become one of the randiest managers going. I was on my sixth secartary when I found it to be more than a just elongated one night stand’. Married and had three children. ‘As I sit here and write this I feel contented and fulfilled’. (Essay 9, male)

What do the essays say about community and turning points?

- Essay 15 (male) recounts a successful life, married with children and grandchildren, wealthy living in a six-bedroomed house, but 'sometimes I wonder what would've happened if I hadn't been lucky in business, if I didn't make the money I had now. Would I be like my school friend Mark who is still working at the factory job he found when he was sixteen, and how lucky I thought he was to take home £40 a week'.

Reflections on the potential and limitations of the method

- Essays written as a teenager may not be very 'realistic' (although essay writers were asked to be)
- Archive of 1978 essays includes Ray Pahl's notes about the essays, including (on a few):
- 'total fantasy' (on 8)
- 'totally unrealistic idea of what he earns and what he gets – own house, car etc.' (on 38)
- And author of essay 64 identifies the difficulty of the task, asking 'how can you right about something that has not happan or may never happan'

Reflections on the potential and limitations of the method

- However, 'Any suggestion that teenage magazines befuddled the girls' minds with romantic dreams would be hard to substantiate from the evidence of these essays' (Pahl 1978: 261)
- Language may be drawn from other elements of popular culture:
- 'Every Wednesday morning at about the hour of ten/
I give the Queen my autograph, she gives me the yen/
The man behind the counter smiles, the doorman bows
again/ Just another day down on the dole queue'
(Roy Harper, 1977, One of those days in England)

Reflections on the potential and limitations of the method

- Question of whose voice is being heard here – young people themselves, or their parents/older siblings?
- Graphic imagery: ‘I was sixteen and faced with nothing, only a hearse of a life that would eventually lead me to the cemetery gates’ (essay 17, male)
- Issue of ‘silences’ - no grammar school children included
- Essays a relatively inexpensive method, but lesson of Sheppey study is that the data generated are much more useful if part of a larger, mixed methods project in which other methods help to provide context



- 4 The collapse of the apprenticeship system means that some young people learn their trade in the street.

Reflections on the potential and limitations of the method

- Echoes of home and family-centredness in later publications from the Sheppey projects
- 'Young adults argued that they would postpone getting married until they had saved up the money for a house, a proper wedding and the material goods for the matrimonial home' (Pahl and Wallace 1988: 140)
- *Divisions of Labour* ch.11 comparing Linda and Jim and Beryl and George uses individual life stories to illustrate social polarization and the arbitrariness of turning points (down or up)

Reflections on the potential and limitations of the method

- The case study of Linda and Jim's extended family that Ray Pahl and Patricia Wilson undertook following the publication of *Divisions of Labour* prompted the comment that sociological textbooks based on dated or partial evidence mean that students 'learn a sociology that is widely at variance with their own personal experiences' (Wilson and Pahl 1988: 262) – a point that comes out from the essays, which include divorce, lone parenthood, stepfamilies, widowhood.

Reflections on the potential and limitations of the method

- Material links in to wider on-going debates generated by use of this and other techniques about young people's ambitions, aspirations, plans, strategies, expectations, dreams, fantasies, and the best ways of capturing these
- Different interpretations by different members of the research team regarding 'hope' and 'constraint'
- It would be fascinating to get accounts of what actually happened in the lives of the 1978 essay writers now aged 48
- In particular, what would they say about views expressed on ageing: 'my wife died when I was 50 and I went into an old peoples home' (67, male); 'by 50 I was old' (129, female)?

References

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