



Timescapes Policy Briefing Paper Series

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My Place in Society: Young People's Perspectives

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Background

This briefing outlines a study that asked young people about how they saw themselves and their relationships, following their lives over a period of eight years as they grew from childhood into their teenage years. The young people talked about themselves as current and future workers and carers, as women and men, and as sisters and brothers.

This policy briefing focuses on three key findings of short and long-term policy and practice relevance. The broader study encompasses a rich dataset illuminating change and continuity over time in relation to a series of social issues.

As youth unemployment figures increase, there are more difficulties in young people's pathways to adulthood. The economic recession has led to concerns about a 'lost generation', especially 'NEETS' who are 'not in education, employment or training'. The youth labour market has changed since the previous period of high youth unemployment in the 1980's, however, with fewer young people in paid work, and many more remaining in education, they are often the responsibility of, and economically dependent upon their parents for longer periods of their life. (See Edwards and Weller 2010a.)

Over half of children in the UK live in households containing more than one child, and a fifth of these contain three or more children. The state of relationships between siblings is an issue of enduring interest. In childhood, sisters and brothers can spend more time together than they do with their mothers and fathers, and siblings can be important in shaping the way that children and young people think of themselves, act as girls and boys, and grow up to be women and men. (See Edwards and Weller 2010b.)

Key points

Moving into adulthood in an economic recession

Young people carry with them different resources based on family and wider social circumstances as they enter into adulthood – these differences are accentuated in a recession, heightening inequalities.

Siblings and gender

Children's everyday exchanges with their sisters and brothers are important in how they develop gendered identities, and learn how to relate to others.

Siblings, care and support

Sisters and brothers often provide an important range of resources, support and care for one another, even though they may not always get on all the time.

Care and support is another part of young people's relationships with their brothers and sisters in childhood, and as they grow into adulthood. The sort of care provided, and how it is viewed, can change over time, and according to the different sorts of places in which it can occur. (See Weller 2012.)

The Study

The 'Your Space! Siblings and Friends' project (www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/yourspace) is part of the national Timescapes qualitative longitudinal study. It has been following the lives of more than 50 children and teenagers, documenting their perspectives on change and continuity in their lives and relationships, particularly with siblings and friends. The study also examines how young people see themselves and their place in society as they grow older. It provides a rich dataset,

illuminating change and continuity over time in relation to a wide range of contemporary issues.

Children and teenagers involved in the study were born between 1989 and 1996, came from a variety of backgrounds and were living in a range of family circumstances, distributed across England, Scotland and Wales. The participants were first interviewed when they were aged between 6 and 13, in 2002-5 (Wave 1); then when they were between 10 to 17 years old in 2007 (Wave 2), and again when they were 12 to 19 in 2009 (Wave 3).

Findings

Moving into adulthood in an economic recession

We asked participants in our study about their experience of becoming an adult during a time of recession. Our research shows that young people enter into a crisis such as economic recession with prior resources of various kinds and uses, and the crisis accentuates whatever it is they bring to it. These resources include cultural and parental expectations, the material resources available within and to families, wider social networks, the availability of economic and welfare opportunities for employment, education and training, housing and so on. This means that young people from less advantaged backgrounds are likely to fare worse during these times.

We have been particularly interested in whether young people's plans for the future changed during the recession. We found that some young people, particularly those who had always planned to go to university and had financial support from their families did not appear to be changing their plans. They were prepared for a slow move into the financial independence of adulthood. For example, over the years, Michael – a Black British socially mobile young man living in an inner city area – consistently told us how his parents carefully monitored his and his brothers' schoolwork and leisure activities to ensure that they are able to go to university. In 2009, when he was 16, he spoke of the emotional and material benefits of living at home whilst at university:

I really don't fancy moving outside of London to go to University anyway because I don't think I could handle that ... moving away and being on my own, no matter how much I think I'm ready for it, I just don't think me personally, I'll be able to handle it at that time ... I'd probably end up staying at home as well [like my older brother] just for the simple fact that I'd save money.

Others had never had firm plans about the future but a range of different ideas. Again, with some degree of support from their families they took up any opportunities as they arose, and seemed to teeter on the brink of adulthood, as semi-independent. For instance, when we last interviewed her in 2009, 19-year-old Louise – a White British middle class young woman living in a suburban area with her parents – was leaving her administrative job of two years standing, which her father obtained for her through a friend of his, to follow the example of her friend and work in a summer camp for young people in the United States:

I don't have anything that I wanna do and that's why I think I should go to America because you learn most about yourself out there.



Those not in education, employment or training and without the resources provided by middle class parents appeared particularly vulnerable to the effects of the recession. Even before experiencing unemployment they often felt uncertain about the future, but desired an early move into adulthood. Over the years, Rooney – a White British working class young man living in a small city – never expressed a strong sense of an employment future. In 2009, age 16, he was unemployed like his parents, and felt that little choice of jobs were available to him, and he had little chance of setting up home with his fiancée and starting a family:

When my mum and dad were 16 they could get a flat easy, you know what I mean? They could just say, 'Oh yeah we need to move out because of our parents and that' ... [In the future] I could have a kid and it could grow up and get a flat, just like that! But there again, it could be homeless for about seven and a half months. It depends on the way the future goes.

Others also desired early, independent adulthood, but had a firm idea of what they wanted to do when they were young and had stuck with that idea. The recession appeared to be making them more determined to fulfil their ambitions. For example, when he was age 14 in 2007, Dan, a White British working class young man living in a rural area, told us he wanted to follow in his family footsteps vocationally:

My hope is to get into college and do agriculture because my granddad, uncle and ... my other uncle works in agriculture.

In 2009, age 17, despite some learning difficulties, Dan was at college studying agriculture as well as undertaking part-time work for some financial independence, and he was planning towards a home of his own with his girlfriend and starting a family.



The nature of the family, cultural, material and welfare resources available to young people shapes the impact of economic disruption on their lives.

Siblings and gender

We have drawn on our participants' accounts of their everyday lives to explore the significance of sibling relationships in shaping gendered identities over time. We found that brothers and sisters make judgments about each other's gendered behaviour, which shape their relationship, but which can change over time. For example, when she was age 13, Cora – a White British working class young woman living in a rural area – was contemptuous of her 16-year-old brother because of his refusal to act in an appropriately masculine teenage fashion, which she felt reflected back badly on her:

He's just immature. He doesn't act like older. I wish he'd go out more and act more like a teenager. Cos I've sort of grown up more faster than he is. He's just basically hanging around with people younger than him.

Four years on, Cora regarded her older brother as a friend. He gave her lifts in his car to and from the nearby town, and they mixed as part of a large group of friends going out together in the evenings and weekends.

Another example is provided by Marshall – a White working class young man living in a deindustrialised town – in his relationships with his older brother and younger sister. When he was 12, Marshall talked about how his relationship with his teenage brother was marked by aggression and abuse, but was able to express love and affection towards his baby sister. Four years later, Marshall had grown closer to his older brother:

We are quite similar personality-wise. If we don't like someone we'll tell them. We've grown up together so it's natural.

Marshall and his older brother continued to be involved in violence, but together as part of groups of young men rather than towards each other. He no longer saw his little sister as a source of affection:

She's like me; she's got a short fuse. You've only got to look at her and stare at her and try and wind her up and she'll bite.

Gender is embedded in and constructed through the dynamics of everyday interactions between brothers and sisters over time.

Siblings, care and support

We asked our participants to discuss the giving and receiving of help and support amongst their sisters and brothers. Siblings often provide an important range of resources, support and care for one another. For example, older siblings can be helpful to younger ones in coping with the move to a new school, providing advice about homework, and/or tackling bullying at school or in the neighbourhood. This can be the case even if they rarely get on when they are at home.

The sort of care provided, and how it is perceived, can change over time, and vary according to the places in which it occurs. For example, the growing sense of sibling care and support experienced by DJ Kizzle – a White British working class young man living in a small city – undoubtedly helped him to cope with the bullying he faced at school and in his local area. For instance, age 8, he had stuck up for his younger brother and sister during an altercation in the local park. Over time, DJ Kizzle and his siblings began to share more inter-dependent caring relationships, helping one another with school and domestic work, and standing up for one another. For instance, DJ Kizzle helped his younger sister tidy her room whilst his younger brother helped him with his homework and stuck up for him in the park. He said:

If anyone bullies him then I'll stick up for him.

To which his brother interjected: If anyone bullies you then I will stick up for you.

Despite their many arguments the emotional support provided by DJ Kizzle's siblings afforded him the confidence and resilience to cope with bullying at school and in the local area.

Over time the dynamics of care in sibling relationships can shift, sometimes in response to changing family circumstances. For example, Alisha – a British Pakistani middle class young woman from the suburbs of a major city – discussed the changing nature of her relationship with her older sister. Her sister provided her with protection and comfort during arguments between their parents when she was young. When Alisha reached her teenage years, her sister's ill-health meant that she

Policy and Practice Implications

Material inequalities may be exacerbated as young people enter adulthood. It is important to consider such differences and to recognize the diverse needs and aspirations of young people in providing guidance and support services. Educational, employment, youth and family support resources are important for young people's career paths and housing and family needs.

Practitioners attempting to intervene in families that appear to be divided by sibling difficulties could reflect on the extent to which practice interventions are assuming or reinforcing fixed versions of gendered behaviour. They need to bear in mind that young people's relationships with their brothers and sisters can change over time rather than being fixed.

Siblings can be a source of support or help and could be included as a resource to deal with issues like bullying or family crisis, even when there is conflict between them. Schools could be encouraged to recognize the significance of siblings in providing support and guidance with school work, friendships and family life. Likewise, services could work to help siblings stay together at times of crisis or family change.

found herself providing care for her sister and mother:

I suppose there's a cultural difference in the time ... because my Mum was an older parent and everything so the time period difference and in mentalities and my Mum doesn't really understand eating disorders... so I've spent a LOT of time trying to explain it to my Mum ... I've offered to take [my sister] to appointments but it's very personal things.

Alisha's example not only highlights care and support provided by younger siblings to their older sisters and brothers but also demonstrates the role many play in providing care and support for their parents.

References and Further Reading

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