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Understanding youth exclusion: critical moments, social networks & social capital

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Abstract

The paper reviews some key findings from research in North East England that was based on young people’s accounts of growing up in poor neighbourhoods. The studies were neither youth policy evaluations nor investigations of the potential of mentoring. However, in focussing on the role of ‘critical moments’, social capital and social networks in shaping youth transitions, the paper highlights questions that are relevant to professional work with young people in the context of social exclusion. It identifies two examples of positive professional practice that assisted young adults in turning away from destructive lifestyles and transitions. It concludes, however, that even the proliferation of this sort of best practice but would be unable to reverse the longer-term, deeper set processes of collective downward social mobility and economic marginalisation experienced by informants.

Key words: social exclusion/ youth transitions/ social capital/ critical moments

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Introduction

Over the past ten years, we have been involved in research that attempts to understand youth transitions in a context of severe social exclusion. Whilst both concepts – ‘transition’ and ‘exclusion’ – are ones with which we critically contend, our critique here will be necessarily limited (see Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Rather, this paper is directed toward providing brief overview of some of the central findings and conclusions of our studies.

It is important to stress that our research were not evaluations of policy or practice (of any sort), nor did they have any close interest in mentoring. They were, though, ones that placed young people’s own accounts – of growing up in poor neighbourhoods – at the centre of analysis and which sought a broad and longer-term understanding of youth transitions. In this paper we draw attention to sets of findings that might be particularly relevant to an understanding of youth exclusion from the point of view of professional work with young people.

Biography and social structure

A key – and for us continuing - theoretical dilemma is about how best to understand youth exclusion, even when armed with detailed, extensive, first-hand research findings. To be frank, we are still surprised by the volume of policy and academic output that claims to explain the socially disadvantaged and economically marginal positions that some young people find themselves in, by main reference to the (lack of) qualities of those young people (of suitably high levels of ‘aspiration’ or ‘employability’ or the correct types of human or social capital, for instance).

Less common are explanations from youth policy and research that pay similar attention to the changing social and economic conditions that impact upon young people, and the places in which they live, as they make transitions. In other words, we suggest that at least equally sensible, valid explanations of youth exclusion could be laid out at the macro-level of global socio-economic change and local consequence (with much less
recourse to the alleged deficits of youth). In respect of our own studies and research site (Teesside, in the North East of England) this short answer would emphasise in particular:

- massive economic restructuring and de-industrialisation in the latter third of the twentieth century;
- the rise of ‘poor work’, government programmes and recurrent unemployment in place of decimated, traditional employment routes to ‘respectable’ working-class adulthood (Brown and Scase, 1991);
- a now taken-for-granted normality of economic marginality for substantial swaths of the contemporary working-class, including its young adults;
- a process of inter-generational, down-ward social mobility whereby limited futures and ‘poor transitions’ became the norm for many working-class young people in places like this;
- finally, in our case, the social damage for individuals, families and neighbourhoods wreaked by new, imported heroin markets and associated criminal economies (Parker et al, 1998).

In other words, we believe an answer to the question ‘what causes the social exclusion of young people in Teesside?’ that operated with these facts is at least as compelling as one that detailed the personal capabilities, decisions and choices of individual young people. Yet these bullet points do not tell the whole story.

Even if economic marginalisation and poverty were standard experiences in youth and outcomes in adulthood (as they were), this does not mean that there is – at the same time – an interesting story to be told of individual differences, personal solutions and striking dissimilarities in youth experience. Thus, we hope not too grandly, our research seeks to fulfil CW Mills famous call for sociological studies that connect ‘personal troubles’ of individual biography with ‘public issues of social structure’ (1970: 14). There is a longer answer to our question that necessitates shifting our gaze downwards, from social structure to biography, in order to unravel the more complicated, differentiated and perhaps more useful story – for youth policy intervention and professional practice - revealed by our research. Firstly, though, we need to describe our studies.
The Teesside studies

Our research has explored the life transitions of young adults from some of Britain’s poorest neighbourhoods; in Teesside, North East England. As noted, this is a conurbation that has undergone remarkably speedy economic change. Famous for its industrial prowess and economic success in steel, chemical and heavy engineering industries in the post-war, Fordist period of full-employment, by the end of the century it had become ‘one of the most de-industrialised locales in the UK’ (Byrne, 1999: 93; Beynon, et al, 1994).

Our first two studies - *Snakes and Ladders* (Johnston et al, 2000) and *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain’s Poor Neighbourhoods* (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) – conducted fieldwork between 1998 and 2001. They investigated youth transitions in a context of severe socio-economic deprivation. We undertook research in Teesside wards that were in the top five per cent most deprived nationally, with some ranked amongst the five most deprived wards (from 8,414) in the country (DETR, 2000). Both studies involved periods of participant observation with young people and interviews with professionals who worked with young people or the problems of poor neighbourhoods (e.g. Youth Workers, Benefits Agency staff, New Deal Personal Advisors). At their core, though, they relied on lengthy, detailed, tape-recorded, biographical interviews (Chamberlayne et al, 2002) with 186 young people (82 females and 104 males) aged 15 to 25 years from the predominantly white, (ex)manual working-class population resident here. Our third project, *Poor Transitions* (Webster et al, 2004), sought to follow the fortunes of a proportion of the earlier sample (34 people from 186, 18 females and 16 males) as they reached their mid-to-late twenties, in 2003. In each study, sample recruitment was purposive and theoretically oriented toward capturing as diverse a set of experiences of transition as possible.

We draw here upon all three projects. In doing so, we reflect on longitudinal, qualitative research with so called ‘hard to reach’ young people as they grew up in the poorest neighbourhoods of one of the poorest towns in England.

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1 Paul Mason, Jane Marsh, Donald Simpson, Les Johnston, Mark Simpson, Colin Webster, Andrea Abbas, Mark Cieslik and Louise Ridley participated, at different points, in these projects. We are indebted to them, to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) for their support and to all the participants in their study. All real names of informants and their immediate neighbourhoods have been changed.
Researching and theorising transitions

The research theorised youth transitions as reflecting the outcome of the interplay between individual agency, local (sub)culture and social structural constraint. The studies adopted a particular empirical and analytical focus upon six aspects of transition, or ‘careers’ (Becker, 1963; Berger and Berger, 1972): These were:

- ‘school-to-work’ (e.g. experiences of training, jobs, unemployment);
- family (e.g. of becoming a parent, partnerships);
- housing (e.g. of leaving home, independent living);
- leisure (e.g. of peer associations, identities, pastimes);
- criminal (e.g. of offending, desistance);
- and drug-using (e.g. of recreational and/or dependent use) careers.

Throughout, we have sought a ‘holistic’, broad understanding of transition that has been enabled by examining closely the interdependent relationships – within and across individual cases – between these ‘careers’ (Coles, 1995, 2000). For instance, we found it useful and more plausible to attempt to explain an individual’s criminal offending in relation to a range of other factors in that young person’s life (e.g. in respect of their school to work, family, housing or drug-using experiences) (Barry, 2006). We analysed the research material we gathered in ways standard to qualitative methodology, for example by searching for thematic similarity and difference across all interview transcripts, but also examined individual cases longitudinally (i.e. tracking continuity and change in a person’s life over time and seeking explanations for this).

Whilst it is impossible to describe the research findings in the space we have here we can point to how this holistic, longer view of wider aspects of young people’s lives revealed:

- shared poverty & economic marginality across our interviewees as a facet of youth transition and as an outcome in early adulthood;
- a preponderance, then, of ‘poor transitions’ and striking uniformity of experience of ‘school to work’ careers (which were complex, unstable and non-progressive);
• greater differentiation of transitions in respect of young people’s housing, family, leisure, criminal and drug-using careers - even when class, ethnicity and neighbourhood were constant.

The following two parts of the paper reflect on what we see as some of the key influences on these transitions²: firstly, the significance of ‘critical moments’ in young people’s lives and secondly, the role of social networks and social capital in explaining transitions.

**Influences on transitions, 1: ‘critical moments’**.

Our ‘close-up’, biographical method – in which young people were asked to describe and reflect upon their lives to date and imagine their futures – demonstrated how usually unforeseen ‘critical moments’ (Johnston et al, 2000; Thomson et al, 2002) had acted as ‘turning points’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) in youth transitions. This and similar concepts have been discussed by other writers. Giddens (1991) describes the role of ‘fateful moments’ in late modern lives. Williamson’s (2004) re-visititation of ‘the Milltown Boys’ forty years on remarked upon the significance of ‘wake-up times’ in some of their lives.

In brief, our conceptualisation is of particular events and episodes defined by interviewees themselves, in the context of a retrospect interview, as having an important effect on the course of their later lives. Mostly, these critical moments were recognised by informants as momentous at the time of their occurrence. In a few cases, their impact was only really recognised later, looking back (e.g. Annie described her growing realisation of the lasting significance of the death of her brother, several years earlier). Whilst we argue that, actually, some of these events might not be so unpredictable given the social situation of the sample, they remained unpredictable at the level of the individual case. For example, we were struck by the extent of ill-health and bereavement in the lives of interviewees. This should not have been so surprising given the socio-spatial concentration of health inequalities and the objectively poor health record of the neighbourhoods we studied.

² It is important to stress that these are just two sets of influences; the research identified and discussed others as well.
Many described the ill-health of themselves, friends or family members. Strikingly, over half in the Poor Transitions follow up study (Webster et al, 2004) mentioned the death of a loved one (i.e. a parent, sibling, child or close friend; this figure excludes grandparents). We do not have – or know of – appropriate statistics with which to compare these findings so as to judge whether this is an unusually high rate of bereavement; it seems so to us. Furthermore, we did not ask questions directly about bereavement or health; these were usually experiences mentioned to us spontaneously in the course of discussion of other topics. We suspect, therefore, some under-reporting (for instance, of bereavement). Whilst this is not an exhaustive list, critical moments were also described in respect of: parental separation; housing moves from one estate to another; family revelations (e.g. learning one’s ‘father’ was not biologically one’s father); and the interventions of professionals (e.g. a particularly ‘positive’ encounter with a New Deal advisor, a notably ‘negative’ run-in with a Probation Officer).

Sometimes such critical moments appeared relatively trivial or mundane (to us) but carried dramatic and literally self-explanatory weight for the interviewee. Matty (aged 20) traced his later criminal career back to a process of school disengagement from his early teens and the comment of a particular teacher that ‘you’ll never make anything of yourself’. Clearly we would not want to elevate this passing comment to the status of cause of subsequent criminality (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) but the significance of this moment to Matty is also clear in that he homed in on its details, several years later, in seeking to explain the course of his life since then.

Some critical moments, on the other hand, would surely be obvious to all as dramatic, traumatic and heavy with potential for disruption of the life course. Importantly, such single episodes seem to be able to turn people towards and away from more destructive, disorderly life-styles. Lisa (23) told us that she used to be ‘in with a crowd getting into trouble and doing drugs’ until she was raped by one of them. Zack (24) said that ‘the turning point’ in his life was when ‘my best mate hung himself’. He had now ‘calmed down’ and given up ‘all sorts of mad stuff’. We suggest, then, that perhaps more surprising or interesting than questions about the prevalence of the occurrence of critical moments of one sort or another is the apparent unpredictability of their outcomes for individuals.
Let us give one or two more examples, even if we do not have the space to reflect on how and why it was that different people responded differently to similar-looking events. Martin was interviewed three times over several years. Within the terms of our findings, he had one of the most successful ‘school to work’ careers (e.g. in terms of the relative security, income and enjoyment that came from his job as an office administrator). Yet Fate had certainly seemed to deal Martin a particularly bad hand. In a five year period from the age of 18 his life had been littered with traumatic critical moments. By the age of 23 and our most recent interview with him, he had experienced the suicide of his father and of his best friend, the hospitalisation of his mother for reasons of mental illness, the diagnosis of his own chronic illness and the perinatal death of his first child. He reflected how, on each occasion, his personal response to loss had been to re-commit his energy, time and self-identity to working. Speaking of the death of his father, when Martin was 18, he says: ‘I think it’s made me a bit more successful, trying to succeed more. I’ve worked a lot harder since it happened, for me own good. I want to succeed more’. In comparison, other interviewees would describe how similar types of critical moment had been spurs toward more negative pathways (such as chaotic housing careers or careers of dependent drug use).

**Influences on transitions, 2: social networks & social capital**

Contemporary social theory has termed the networks and bonds of trust and reciprocity that exist between people as ‘social capital’ (Putnam, 2000; Barry, 2006). This is a concept that has become remarkably fashionable and influential in academic and policy thinking in the UK and globally in quick time. Different and competing understandings of the concept are offered by key theorists (Barry, 2006 provides a useful review). A common argument – especially as these ideas have percolated to the level of policy and practice – is that that the success and prosperity of people and places can, in part, be explained not just by their different levels of human (e.g. skills, qualifications) or economic capital (e.g. finances) but also of their social capital. Terms differ but distinctions are usually drawn between ‘bridging’ (or ‘linking’) social capital which typically provides sometimes weaker but more numerous contacts to more socially diverse and perhaps geographically widespread contacts and ‘bonding’ social capital (e.g. strong, often kin and place-based networks).
A key, overall finding across the studies was that the informal support that came from social networks of family and friends – bonding social capital - was crucial to making life liveable for young adults under conditions of poverty, multiple deprivation and social exclusion. Interviewees pointed out, for example, the value of: informal childcare for young mothers (from other young mothers or family members); loans of money between individuals or households when cash was particularly tight; protection from criminal victimisation (‘watching’ each others’ houses to ward against burglary, recovery of stolen goods after theft); emotional support at times of distress; informal job search strategies that relied on ‘who you know, not what you know’; leisure lives that revolved around local friends, family and neighbours. Policy diagnoses that interpret poor neighbourhoods as lacking social capital (or the right sort of social capital) are in danger of not recognising the central, positive importance to life in poor neighbourhoods of the sort of mutual support we found.

Ironically, then, the functioning of these social networks generated a strong, subjective sense of social inclusion (in places and amongst people labelled as socially excluded). Similarly, this sort of inclusion – and perhaps solidarity – engendered implicit acceptance of the normality of unusual hardship. This is what life was like; you got on with it, with the help of family and friends.

A corollary of this form of inclusive, bonding capital was, paradoxically that it tended to limit individual social and spatial movement away from the conditions of social exclusion. These forms of social networking helped make life liveable but they also kept people in place. Our longitudinal research found that social networks became increasingly locally embedded, culturally uniform & narrow as the years passed. By the time interviewees were in their mid to late twenties - in general - young mothers associated with other young mothers, the recurrently unemployed socialised with others like them, ‘heavy end’ drug users/ offenders moved with the same. The loyalties, allegiances, associations and friendships developed through these local, informal networks reinforced transition pathways, narrative possibilities and social identities.

The significance of social networks in shaping individual transitions was far-reaching and examples were abundant across interview topics. For a significant minority, anti-school
peer group orientations had been crucial in shaping earlier school disaffection and disengagement (Brown, 1987). Post-16 ‘career’ choices were strongly informed by family experiences and expectations of suitable work for working-class young men or women (Cockburn, 1987). Because job-search largely functioned via ‘who you know’ it limited young adults’ options to the insecure, low paid ‘poor work’ done by the people that they did know (Morris, 1995). Housing careers and moves were locally circumscribed because of the strong attachment young adults felt to their neighbourhoods and social support they found there (MacDonald et al, 2005; Rugg, 1999). Teenage ‘street corner society’ was the foundation (for some) of later criminal/ drug careers (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007). Prison sometimes seemed attractive to those offenders who wished to leave the coercive lure of ‘the street’; release was often viewed with apprehension by those keen to desist from drug and criminal careers, for the same reason. Young mothers who wanted to achieve a different or additional identity (as a university student) were subject to hostility from otherwise and previously friendly circles of other young mothers.

Speaking of research on social exclusion in Southern Italy, Antonella Spanò (2002: 73) exactly captures this potential weakness of having strong ties to family, friends and neighbourhood:

‘Networks based on kinship as well as on friendship can easily become a constraint…by enclosing the subject in a limited social space, they can preclude the possibility of having new opportunities, of working out new projects, of maturing new aspirations’.

Or as the key exponent of social capital theory puts it: ‘bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves’ (Putnam, 2000: 23).

**Policy and practice interventions**

It is important to stress that – unlike many reports on social groups or places like this – our studies were not evaluations of policy. Inevitably, however, discussion in interviews would often turn to how informants had experienced a particular scheme, programme or agency. Sometimes interviewees would focus parts of their account as well on the professional representatives of agencies/ institutions that they had encountered (e.g. a
teacher, police officer, probation officer, New Deal advisor or youth worker). It may well be, therefore, that there were very positive examples of policy and professional practice happening in these neighbourhoods at the time of the fieldwork that our method failed to detect.

On the basis of the accounts that we did collect in interviews it would be possible to paint a depressing picture of the intervention of policy and professional practice in the lives we researched. After all, Teesside in general and these neighbourhoods perhaps especially have been subject to repeated rounds of area regeneration initiatives during the 1970s, ‘80s and 90s (Beynon et al, 1994). Yet, at the time of the research at the end of the ‘90s and early 2000s, all wards that constituted our research sites were in the five per cent most deprived in the country.

Perhaps the single most significant ‘policy’ investment in these young people’s lives has been through state education. Yet they emerged at school leaving age extremely poorly qualified and in many cases with strong anti-school attitudes. Overall, accounts of school were dismal and depressingly familiar of long-standing, working-class, school ‘failure’ (Willis, 1977). Careers advice and guidance was generally seen as partial and perfunctory and resulted in the confirmation of class and gender stereotypical ‘choices’ about early school leaving and enrolment on government sponsored schemes of one sort or another. Accounts of youth training were uniformly negative, again exactly reminiscent of the way that post-school schemes for poorly qualified young people were reported in earlier decades (Finn, 1987).

Official employment services and their job search strategies – such as the speculative sending of letters to employers (names and addresses derived from Yellow Pages) regardless of whether they were advertising jobs or not - were universally derided as ineffective, ‘stupid’ and a waste of time. Not one person received a job offer as a result of this method, despite the samples having sent literally thousands of such letters. By the time individuals were in their mid to late twenties, there was, however, evidence of greater use of private employment agencies in informants’ working lives. The New Deal for Young People fared better than immediate post-school schemes in interviewees’ assessment, with some commenting on the positive, enthusing, personalised care and support they received from advisors. Others, though, were very critical of this
programme and described it in ways similar to the depiction of youth training (Kemp, 2005). Indeed, some individuals found themselves back at the same very training agency and building a few years after graduating from post-school schemes, this time to enrol on New Deal.

Few interviewees commented on youth work provision, with virtually all, by their mid-teens, preferring to spend their free-time leisure in unsupervised ‘street corner society’ (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007). Whilst some acknowledged that they had attended youth clubs earlier in their lives, these were largely regarded as ‘for kids’ (i.e. going by these accounts, those under 14 or 15 years). Perhaps surprisingly, relatively little was said about criminal justice agencies or professionals. We think that this partly reflects the ‘taken-for-granted-ness’ of interviewees’ perspectives on police, probation and prison. The minority of interviewees who did have serious criminal careers seemed not to expect these encounters to be anything but ‘negative’ (although one or two did comment positively about the encouragement or kindness of a probation officer or prison officer).

Returning to our earlier discussion, there was little obvious positive welfare involvement in the lives of those young people as dealt with critical moments (indeed, some of these were caused by what might be regarded as malign professional intervention). For instance, psychological ill-health appeared to be relatively frequent in our samples. The receipt of professional support or care for such conditions appeared to be infrequent, except for the prescription of anti-depressants. We say ‘receipt’ because interviewees often made clear their preference for informal social support, from family and friends. Many will not have sought professional help.

We can, however, finish this part of our discussion on a more positive note. A scan of our interviews for ‘good news’ stories about policy and practice, identified two interesting exceptions to the tale we are telling.

The first was in respect of drug treatment and reported by those young adults with serious, long-term careers of problematic drug use. Elsewhere we describe in more detail careers and transitions like this (Webster et al, 2004). Here we note how amongst that constellation of factors that seemed to effect the move toward committed desistance from lives revolving around habituated heroin use and burgling, shop-lifting, street
robbery or prostitution – and the social networks that sustained them - therapeutic, quick and non-punitive drug treatment proved significant. At the time of our fieldwork, one local GP surgery stood out as a beacon of good practice in the treatment of heroin users. Interviewees praised this intervention, in comparison with drug treatment agencies and regimes they encountered elsewhere, and paid testament to its effectiveness – and its key staff - in helping them change their lives.

The second was a voluntary sector, youth work project that had a base on the estates we researched. Several of those interviewees with longer-term engagement in ‘street corner society’ and/ or lengthier careers of offending had begun to attend this project in their late teens and early twenties. Participation in its organised leisure activities, excursions and vocationally-oriented, basic short courses helped to fill their time, divert their energies into more positive activities and broaden social and geographic horizons. This is one example of the sort of ‘purposeful activity’ that we identified as another significant factor in processes of desistance from criminal and drug-using careers.

Roy (aged 21) and his friends used to attend nearly every day: ‘in there you can learn activities – it’s not just playing pool like in a normal youth club – learn how to handle yourself and stuff like that’. These young men talked very positively of going along together, supporting each other informally. What was particularly interesting in its description was how it stood out from the generally negative depiction by interviewees of most training and employment organisations that they had encountered. It also contrasted with the general rejection of youth services/ centres as ‘for kids’ that we have noted. The wholly voluntary nature of participation, the fact that attendance by pre-existing friendship groups was encouraged, that activities were not tied to explicit, ‘hard’ employment outcomes (that might be perceived as pointless) and that the project was run by professionals whom participants perceived as trustworthy and empathetic (i.e. they understood the pressures these young men faced, in some cases through biographical experience), are all factors that help explain this. To re-iterate, our research was not about mentoring and nor did uncover much obvious evidence of mentoring relationships between adult professionals and young people. Indeed, we have noted the general lack of professional support for young people in their critical moments. The relationships developed in the youth work project described here were, perhaps, the closest thing to mentoring that the studies uncovered. Whilst not experts in this field, we
wonder whether the sort of model and principles of youth work described here might be ones that could usefully inform attempts to build mentoring relationships with 'socially excluded' young adults. Interestingly, this youth work project also incorporated – perhaps with no knowledge of this fashionable language – practical attempts to broaden out young people’s social capital by offering wider, different views of individuals’ social and geographic horizons (see Boeck et al, 2006 for a discussion of youth work and social capital).

**Conclusion: understanding youth exclusion**

In this paper we have described some of the important themes and findings of our research, focusing upon the influence on youth transitions and processes of exclusion of firstly, critical moments and secondly, social networks and social capital. Returning to the theme of the beginning of the paper, we conclude that it is important not to overemphasise the twists and differences of individual biographies – and explanations of these - in understanding collective youth exclusion (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007). Despite the variation we found in young adults’ family, housing, leisure, criminal and drug-using careers – and in interviewees’ subjective understandings of their changing lives – unstable, non-progressive ‘school to work’ careers typified virtually the entire sample. Poverty and economic marginality were uniform experiences in youth and outcomes in early adulthood. To explain this we must, we argue, properly appreciate those deeper, macro-level processes of social and economic change, described earlier in the paper; processes that provide the broader context in which such transitions are made. Speaking of our samples, Webster et al (2006: 9) say:

> ‘Our cohorts were born on the cusp or in the depths of accelerated social transformation (between 1974 and the mid-80s), which de-industrialised their neighbourhoods, polarising their experiences and class positions. These crises were shifted onto the life histories of individuals’.

Undoubtedly, policy and practice interventions of different sorts can help individual young people make better progress to adulthood, even in the contexts of multiple deprivation in which our participants lived. Crimmens et al (2004) describe, for instance,
the potential of street-based youth work in helping those young people described as socially excluded (or at risk of becoming so). Despite some of their more generally negative experience of (most forms of) state intervention in their lives, we were able to point to two clear examples of more positive professional practice; both examples assisted young adults to turn away from destructive lifestyles and transitions. Of course, even the proliferation of this sort of best practice with young people – of mentoring, drug treatment, youth work or whatever – would be unable to reverse the longer-term, deeper set processes of collective downward social mobility and economic marginalisation experienced by our informants.

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