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# **Youth disadvantage and the new politics of poverty**

**Child and Youth Poverty: Contexts, concepts and consequences**

**Tracy Shildrick, University of Leeds**

**[T.Shildrick@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:T.Shildrick@leeds.ac.uk)**

**@tracyshildrick**

# Employment insecurity in Middlesbrough in 1907

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‘We are apt to believe that once employment is secured, once what seems like regular work is obtained, all must be well...yet we forget how terribly near the margins of disaster the man walks. The spectre of illness and disability is never far...//...many workers were ***absolutely poor***. More were **so near the poverty line** that they were **constantly passing over it**. Life for a third of these **workers** is an unending struggle from day to day to keep abreast of the most ordinary needs’

(Lady Bell, ‘At the Works’ 1907)

# Employment insecurity in Middlesbrough in 2012

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‘Repeated engagement in jobs **failed to provide routes away from poverty** largely because of the weaknesses of the opportunities available in the local job market...The predominant experience was of moving in and out of **low paying jobs** but **never moving far from poverty**...Wider aspects of disadvantage (e.g. ill health) led interviewees to lose and leave jobs...day to day life was a juggling act and interviewees faced **significant financial hardship**’

(Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R., Webster, C. and Garthwaite, K. ‘Life in low pay, no pay Britain’ 2012)

# Talk overview

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- ❑ Poverty Propaganda
- ❑ Youth poverty and disadvantage
- ❑ The research
  - Low pay, no pay and in-work poverty the dominant story
  - Amanda and Diane's stories
  - The cumulative nature of class disadvantage
  - Declining working class opportunities
- Conclusions – The importance of class and place (and a word on Brexit)

# Poverty in the UK

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- The level of poverty in the UK is shameful. This should be a place where everyone can live a decent, secure life. Instead, 13 million people – half of whom are in a working family – are living without enough to meet their needs (Julia Unwin 2016)
- Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent, or buy essentials for your children. It means waking up every day and facing insecurity, uncertainty and impossible decisions about money. It means facing marginalisation – and even discrimination – because of your financial circumstances (JRF anti-poverty strategy 2016)

# Poverty propaganda (Shildrick 2017 forthcoming)

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# Poverty propaganda

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- ❑ Increases in poverty (as a direct result of policy)
- ❑ At the same time an increase in stigmatization of those experiencing poverty (particularly in relation to 'welfare')
- ❑ Easy sound bites ('hard working families', 'shirkers' and 'strivers', recent new focus on 'the poor' and 'poverty' in Conservative party politics)
- ❑ Distancing 'us' from 'them'

# Young people and poverty propaganda

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- ‘...on some estates...often **three generations of the same family have never worked**’ (Iain Duncan Smith, 2009).
- ‘What I found most disturbing was the sense that the hard core of rioters came from a **feral underclass**’ (Kenneth Clarke 2011)
- **Benefits mum of eight rakes in 31k a year** (The Sun, June 2016)

‘Underclass’ rhetoric has a long history but can be called upon in moments of crisis (or at particular policy moments)



**THE Sun**  
**2 FREE TICKETS TO HORROR PARK** £76  
**WELCOME TO THE REDS, JOE**  
 Color's first sending off... on debut

**12th KID FOR JOBLESS SCROUNGERS**  
**DOZEN IT MAKE YOU SICK**  
 Fury at benefits tribe

**35p GET YOUR DAILY EXPRESS FOR JUST 35p**  
**DAILY EXPRESS**  
 Now Colin Firth's King's Speech is up for 12 Oscars  
**Cut out the little things and save a small fortune**  
**75% ON SICK ARE SKIVING**  
 Benefit cheats are taking us to the cleaners  
 Sky TV's foul £1.7m a year football pundit is fired

**FREE ROD STEWART CD FOR EVERY READER**  
**SUNDAY EXPRESS**  
**FREE SUMMER BULBS** £20  
**FREE RIBENA**  
**MANSIONS FOR SCROUNGERS**  
 We are forking out £6million a year to keep families of up to 17 in the lap of luxury  
**Ice queen Amy: How I won my winter gold medal for Britain**



**LET'S CUT BENEFITS FOR THOSE WHO REFUSE WORK**  
 Vote Conservative



**30p GET YOUR DAILY EXPRESS FOR JUST 30p**  
**DAILY EXPRESS**  
**WIN £3,000 IN MARKS & SPENCER VOUCHERS**  
**Now the obese face a 'fat tax' if they won't lose weight**  
**FURY OVER £28BN BILL FOR WORKSHY**  
 Half a million scroungers get benefits...and you pay  
**TRIBUTES TO BRAVEST OF BRAVE ON VJ DAY**

**DAILY STAR**  
**Shame of benefit Britain**  
**Work's boring and you have to get up early...**  
 £800-A-MONTH DOLE SPONGER, 20, SHUNS 11 JOBS



# The 'bad luck' generation' (ILO)

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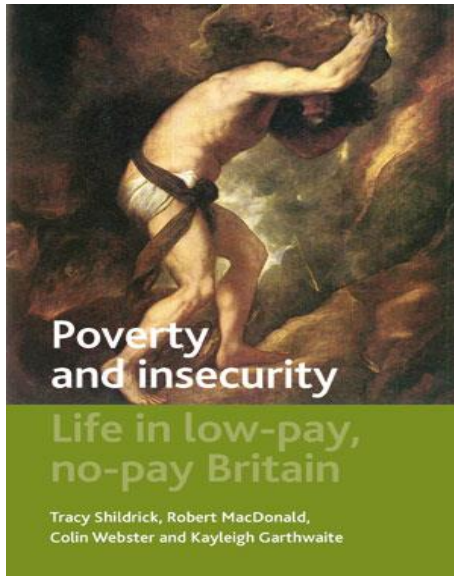
- In 2015 The Equality and Human Rights Commission reported that today's younger generation are facing the worse economic prospects for several generations and that the life prospects for young people had worsened dramatically since 2010
  - Rising unemployment and underemployment
  - Low(er) wages
  - Austerity
  - Recession

# Youth poverty

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- ❑ The largest poverty increases are in the 16 -19 and 20 – 24 aged groups. These age groups now have the highest poverty rates of all adults, at 34% and 29% respectively (MacInnes *et al* 2015: 26)
- ❑ Yet ‘youth poverty’ a blind spot in policy and practice with most attention focussed on children and pensioners (same can be said of working age poverty more generally)
- ❑ Ruddy (2016 forthcoming) refers to the ‘thick volume of adversities’ young people experiencing poverty face

## 2 Key studies with main focus on poverty & worklessness



- ❑ **Low-pay, No-pay: Understanding Recurrent Poverty (Shildrick *et al* 2012)**
- ❑ How/ why people (60, aged 30-60 yrs) are trapped in cycle of **churning between low-paid jobs & unemployment**, over years



- ❑ **Intergenerational Cultures of Worklessness? ( Shildrick *et al* 2012)**
- ❑ Do we have places where 3 generations of family have never worked? What **inter-generational processes** shape poverty & unemployment? (20 families in Teesside & Glasgow)

# Teesside – ‘born of iron: made of steel’

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- ❑ From the ‘youngest child of England’s enterprise’, fastest growing town in England in 19<sup>th</sup> century, through full employment, 3<sup>rd</sup> most prosperous UK sub-region in ‘60s & ‘70s
- ❑ ...to one of poorest & ‘most deindustrialised locales in the UK’
- ❑ Scale & depth of socio-economic change is enormous and generates serious social challenges
- ❑ Can’t understand the latter without understanding the former



# Post-school transitions

□ Unemployment = common & recurrent for all...

□ ...but so was employment

□ *Long-term* post-school transitions, into 30s = *insecure & non-progressive*

age 16-18: School-youth training-unemployment-/  
age 18-26: job unemployment-FE -unemployment-  
New Deal.../ age 26-36+: unemployment-job-  
unemployment-job-unemployment...

□ Not labour market *exclusion* (or idle *underclass*) - but long-term churning **underemployment & economic marginality**



# Long-term, precarious transitions

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- Doing the same ‘poor work’ at age 17 & 27 & 37 years
- Same pattern of ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ amongst older workers in 40s and 50s – not just a problem for young adults
- **Low-paid, low-skilled, insecure jobs = not stepping stones to something better**
- ‘the precarious nature of many low-paid jobs’ means that getting ‘a job may only represent a turn in the cycle of poverty’ (McKnight, 2002: 98)
- **Insecurity of employment = prime driver of ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’** (conclusion of other national studies too) i.e. people left/ lost jobs involuntarily.

# 'Low-pay, no-pay' insecurity: Richard (30, currently unemployed)...

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**'Just jumping from job to job it's no way to go.** It's a nightmare! Jack of all trades, master of none (laughs). I just want something with a bit of job security - where maybes I can buy me own house in the future rather than just where you've got to be on a wing and a prayer type thing... **just a job that I can call me own,** you know what I mean? **Rather than just looking for one all the time or just jumping from job to job'.**

## Since age 16:

- ❑ 15 episodes of unemployment
- ❑ 5 training schemes
- ❑ 9 jobs (longest 18 months), now via emp. agencies
- ❑ Minimum wage jobs



## ... low-pay, no-pay cycle partly driven by strong commitment to work/ stigma of unemployment

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- ❑ Virtually no positive comments about being unemployed/ on welfare
- ❑ Strong working-class views about self-reliance, hard work & family respectability
- ❑ Wide-spread opposition to being - and to be seen as - '**a dole wallah**', to be on benefits



# Unreliable and unpredictable welfare

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- ❑ Interviewees deplored claiming welfare and where they could they resisted claiming altogether
- ❑ Claims were often slow, complicated and difficult to resolve and it was not unusual for interviewees to be left with little or no income, and sometimes for lengthy periods of time
- ❑ Interviewees were often subjected to decisions about claims which they failed to understand and frequently felt powerless to challenge



# Hard, demanding work...

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- Interviewees described instances of:
  - Not being paid properly for hours' work done;
  - Being required to do extra hours at very short notice (often with the threat of dismissal if they did not)
  - Being required to undertake tasks that seemed unreasonable and outside of their normal role;
  - Being treated unfairly in relation to other workers;
  - Of the refusal of requests to leave work early or take time off for family reasons (e.g. because a child was sick);
  - Losing maternity allowances because of employers' bureaucratic errors;
  - Being sacked for taking a day's sick leave, and so on.

# Amanda's story (50, Middlesbrough)

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- Very difficult childhood & youth (lower middle-class parents)
  - emotional & physical abuse (from mother – father worked away); (sexual abuse by brother?)
  - ...troubles at school: angry outbursts against teachers (abuse not identified), truancy & expulsion at 15, no qualifications
  - Various jobs (e.g. shop assistant)
  - ‘Everything went ridiculous. I ended up **getting married [aged 18]** and just sort of falling back into, ‘oh this person will look after me’. He’s got a home. He’ll look after me...but it didn’t work like that. My **husband turned out to be violent and aggressive**... it wasn’t out of love it was out of...rebellion: ‘I’ll prove to her. I’ll be free from her [her mother]. I’ll be accepted. I want to be accepted’.

# Amanda's story (50, Middlesbrough)

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- ❑ 1<sup>st</sup> child at 18 (separated from husband at 19)
- ❑ Childhood experiences as causative, psychologically causative of string of relationships with violent/ abusive men – further five children
- ❑ ...Seeking new partners to protect her: ‘I didn’t love this guy. He was a big fat bully, but “I’ll look after you, he’s been battering you, hasn’t he?”’.
- ❑ ...Constant moves to escape violent partners
- ❑ Long-term mental health problems (‘a very deep depression, sunk in from about 12, 13’), ‘mental breakdown’ & ‘alcoholism’.

# Amanda's story (50, Middlesbrough)

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- ❑ ...impacting on her own children: all 'in care'/ adopted because physical abuse by Amanda: 'you've got a pattern of rejecting your daughters, and that's what's killing me... I didn't know how to be a Mother'.
- ❑ FE college ambitions thwarted by childcare costs + demands of college/parenting
- ❑ 'I literally dropped to pieces physically and mentally. I could not do five days a week, three kids, everything, doing my homework. It just proves I could have done with a bit of help. If I had got the support I would have sailed through it. You're back to thinking you're useless, you've failed'.

# Amanda's story (50, Middlesbrough)

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- ❑ 1<sup>st</sup> job since teenage, at 49 ('Burger Delight'):
- ❑ 'desperation makes me put my hand down toilets and retrieve needles and burners, when you're supposed to be just a table wiper... you're working and working and working. Eight and a half hours a day, eight days solid...They scream at you negatively all the time. You're not allowed to stand still and the sweat is dripping off you... you end up crying... They cut my hours and you're scrimping to pay the rent. *I'm cleaning toilets at Burger Delight!* In the end I got ill. My back literally went [quit].
- ❑ At 50, claiming JSA, in psychological therapy & seeking reconciliation with children/ grand-children

## Diane's story (23, Middlesbrough)

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- ❑ Brought up by Amanda, until age 8; physically abused, into care; little further contact until recently.
- ❑ 'I'm fine now but I think it [going into care] probably had an affect on me when I was 14 or 15 because of the way I behaved. I used to go out and get drunk and get arrested and I never used to go into the Home – because they can't make you do anything really. It's just you live there and they provide the food, do you know what I mean? It wasn't like a family it was just staff, coming and going'.
- ❑ School 'alright till I was about 13' but then got in with the 'wrong people', expelled, 'alternative education'
- ❑ Days out to the seaside: 'the staff would be sat smoking fags and eating ice creams and we'd be in the amusements'.



## Diane's story (23, Middlesbrough)

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- ❑ At 16 = left school (no qualifications), became pregnant (whilst still in care), got 1<sup>st</sup>/only job (call centre –3 months, sacked for missing targets).
- ❑ Son, Callum, immediately placed on the 'at risk' register; 'heavy' social services interventions (including 24-hour supervision)
- ❑ Elder sister tries to force adoption of Callum, legal case failed.
- ❑ 'I proved her wrong and I proved everyone else wrong. That in fact I am capable of looking after a child. And I am not going to abuse him and I am not going to do what people think that I was going to do'.

## Diane's story (23, Middlesbrough)

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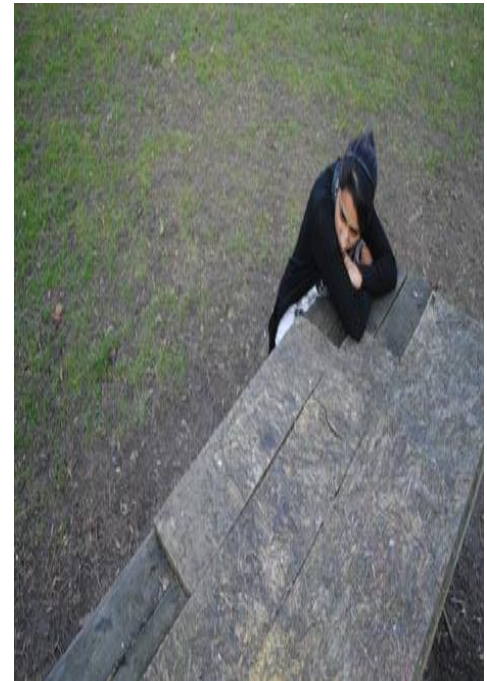
- ❑ Not 'repeating the cycle':
- ❑ 'It felt like I was being labelled. Just because I'd been in care doesn't mean that what had happened to me, the reason I was in care, doesn't mean I'm going to do the same thing. Just because my Mum used to batter me doesn't mean I'm going to batter my kids.... I think it is true sometimes people do do what's been done to them...But maybe people who aren't as far, like... they wouldn't do it because it's been done to them. They know how it feels to be left out and abused by people - so they wouldn't do it. They'd make the child's life different, to make them feel better and be brought up differently to have a happy childhood and not to have the same as them'.

# Diane's story (23, Middlesbrough)

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- Recently turned down a part-time job (costs of child-care for the flexible, non-family friendly hours) but:

'Hopefully when I get a job, I'll keep my job, and *I'll show him*. He won't end up in care and he won't end up having a kid at sixteen. He won't end up doing the things that I done... *I want it to change*. I wouldn't want to sit in a council house doing nowt with my life. Do you know what I mean? I want to show Callum that you work; you get nice things from working. People have maybe got a bit more respect with you'.



# What can we learn from Amanda and Diane's stories?

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- ❑ Accidents of birth can have lasting and sometimes devastating consequences
- ❑ The desire for change often driven by becoming a parent
- ❑ Importance of understanding the difficulty of poverty escapes (adversity and 'resilience')
- ❑ Local labour market opportunities is crucial but also wider family and life experiences (that impact on how young people are able to engage with employment)

# Complex lives and multiple disadvantage

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- Key to our research has been the ambition to understand lives holistically:
  - Lots of ill health across the sample and in their wider families and networks
  - Widespread caring responsibilities (which were often frequent and unpredictable)
  - Widespread experiences of bereavement (with unpredictable and often long-term consequences)
  - Living in heavily risk laden neighbourhoods (drugs/ crime and victimisation)

# Declining working class opportunities in places like Teesside

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The bankers, you say they had to be bailed out and the steel works wanted to much money, a lot less than what the bankers wanted and they wouldn't give 'em it. They had to shut the works down, shut the works down, then the shops started closing, clubs started closing. It's like a viscous circle (Ryan 54, Teesside)



## Angry, astute but 'not political'...

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- 'The worst ones who are blatantly fiddling the government and they do it in public. Get them to live on this street. Yes, get them to live on this street for four weeks. They couldn't 'f\*\*\*ing do it...//...they wouldn't even know what it's like to go into Netto because they've never been. They just don't have a clue about the average person. They wouldn't know what it's like to pick something up and I can't have that because I can't afford it. Or say to the kids 'no we can't afford that'' (Vera 54, Teesside)

# Conclusions

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- Poverty propaganda and worsening opportunities for working class lives
- Appeal by political right to **'fight burning injustice of poverty and working class disadvantage'**, to work for those **'who are just managing'** and in the **'interests of the disadvantaged rather than the powerful'** (Teresa May 13<sup>th</sup> July 2016, first speech as MP)



## Money (and inheritance) matters...

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- Recent PM David Cameron's mother gave him an extra £200,000 months after his father, stockbroker Ian Cameron died in September 2010, having left his son £300,000 in his will. **It meant the money was paid to the Prime Minister free of Inheritance Tax**
- A source close to David Cameron vehemently denied any wrongdoing, saying: 'This is the kind of **sensible, perfectly legal and proper tax planning that millions of ordinary people do.**'