

Social Exclusion and the Transition from School to Work: The Case of Young People Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET)

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In the modern labor market what Côté (1996) describes as “identity capital”—comprising educational, social, and psychological resources—is at a premium in entering and maintaining employment. One consequence is the extension of education and training while young people acquire the qualifications and skills that will enhance their employability. In accordance with the perspective of life span developmental psychology, this places particular pressure on those young people growing up in disadvantaged circumstances and lacking support, especially when attempting to negotiate the transition from school to work. A particular policy concern in Britain has been directed at those young people who leave full-time education at the minimum age of 16 and then spend a substantial period not in education, employment, or training (NEET). This article reports the result of analyzing longitudinal data, collected for a subsample of the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study surveyed at age 21, to model the relationship of NEET status to earlier educational achievement and circumstances and to assess the added difficulties NEET poses in relation to the building of adult identity capital. It is concluded that although poor educational achievement is the major factor in entering NEET, inner city living for boys and lack of parental interest in their education for girls are also important. For young men the consequences of NEET lie mainly in subsequent poor labor market experience. For young women, the majority of whom are teenage mothers, the damaging effects of NEET extend to the psychological domain as well. It is concluded that effective counseling targeted at high risk groups, along the lines of the new UK “ConneXions” service, are needed to help young people avoid the damaging effects of NEET and make a successful transition to adult life. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA)

Key Words: transition to work; human capital; social capital; identity capital; training; unemployment; education; labor market; qualifications; teenage motherhood.

It is well established that the social and economic context of youth transitions is critically important in determining their shape and their outcomes for different groups. These effects, operating across the life course and from one generation to the next, draw attention to the need to study interactions between developmental processes and the social context in which they take place. Life span developmental psychology offers a set of perspectives for doing this (Super, 1980; Vondracek,

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Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986; Savickas, 1985; Blustein et al., 1997; Bynner, 1998; Crocket & Silbereisen, 2000; Silbereisen, 1994).

Contexts are changing over time so different cohorts of young people will experience their effects differently. Life course theory (Brooks-Gunn, Phelps, & Elder, 1991; Elder, 1974, 1991; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000) underlines the point that, regardless of social origin, young people in successive cohorts face different sets of obstacles and opportunities when constructing their own life courses. One facet of social change that has been noted by numerous commentators is a prolongation over the past 20 years or so of the transition from school to work and the increased complexity encountered in passing through it (Jones & Wallace, 1992; Banks et al., 1992; Bynner, Chisholm, & Furlong, 1997). Predictability of life course "trajectories" originating in certain locations in the social structure to particular outcomes in the labor market "opportunity structure" available locally (Roberts, 1984) gives way to the individualized life course in which personal agency is of paramount importance in the "negotiation" of the transition that has to be undertaken (Evans & Heinz, 1994; Crocket & Silbereisen, 2000). In what has been described as the "risk society" (Beck, 1986) there is increasing uncertainty about the choices to make and increasing probability that the wrong ones will lead to inferior life chances. But despite the loosening of structural constraints, as some writers have been at pains to stress, much of the old determinacy remains: Individualization is still bounded by class, gender, and ethnicity (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Roberts, Clark, & Wallace, 1994; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001). The concentrations of disadvantage identified with location in the social structure continue to be reproduced from one generation to the next.

Under the conditions of the risk society certification and the skills acquired through kinds of employment experience become increasingly important in maintaining a position in the adult labor market. Those who do not have these "human capital" attributes (Becker, 1975), deemed important by employers, face difficulties not only in entering employment but in sustaining any kind of fulfilling career. Categorized in the United States as the "high risk category of non-college bound youth" (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997), such young people often find themselves on the margins of the labor market, moving between various short-term unskilled jobs and unemployment; young women frequently exit early from the labor market to pursue the alternative route of motherhood (Bynner, Ferri, & Shepherd, 1997; Coles, 2000). Such polarization between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in terms of human capital is increasingly characterized as *social exclusion* for a substantial minority from mainstream adult life. Apart from patchy employment prospects, subsequent consequences may include difficult relationships, lack of social and political participation, poor physical and mental health, drug abuse, and criminality (Robins & Rutter, 1990; Atkinson & Hills, 1997).

Although human capital, as embodied in skills and qualifications, serves as some kind of insurance against social exclusion, may not on its own be sufficient to sustain a fulfilling adult life. In addition to the need for social support networks, or "social capital" (Coleman, 1998), and family know-how, or "cultural

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