

Shaped by place: young people's decisions about education, training and work

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This article explores the ways in which young people's decisions about post-compulsory education, training and employment are shaped by place, drawing on case study evidence from three deprived neighbourhoods in England. It discusses the way in which place-based social networks and attachment to place influence individuals' outlooks and how they interpret and act on the opportunities they see. While such networks and place attachment can be a source of strength in facilitating access to opportunities, they can also be a source of weakness in acting to constrain individuals to familiar choices and locations. In this way, 'subjective' geographies of opportunity may be much more limited than 'objective' geographies of opportunity. Hence it is important for policy to recognise the importance of 'bounded horizons'.

Introduction

There are ongoing policy concerns about the deprivation of individuals, poverty relating to place and how the prospects of deprived places and people living there might be transformed. These concerns have prompted interest in the role of geography in the labour market behaviour of, and access to employment by, people in deprived areas (SEU, 2004). With changes in the spatial distribution of jobs as a result of labour market restructuring, transport problems and inaccessibility have been highlighted as reinforcing social exclusion for disadvantaged people in deprived areas, hindering or preventing access to training and work opportunities that are available (SEU, 2003; Lucas, 2004).

In debates about access to work, the role of subjective factors, including perceptions about what constitute relevant opportunities and job search areas, has been relatively neglected. This is despite the fact that labour markets are institutional and social constructs (Peck, 1996) shaped by lived traditions and experiences within local areas and that labour market decisions are based on information that has come through a perceptual filter. Research in North America and the UK has indicated that individuals' choices about whether and where to work are based on subjective values and aspirations, which, in turn, may be constrained by objective opportunities available to individuals at local level (Galster and Killen, 1995; Ritchie et al, 2005).

Over 20 years ago, a study of school-leavers in Birmingham found that job search tended to be limited to familiar localities, while there were accessible areas of the city where jobs were not sought (Quinn, 1986). Hence, 'mental maps' were such that 'perceived' job opportunities were a subset of 'actual' job opportunities.

Since the 1980s, there have been important changes in the structure of the economy and transitions of young people from education to work have become longer, more complex and more varied. Increasing numbers of young people continue at school post 16, study for further qualifications at college on a part-time or full-time basis and enter higher education. Others are on training courses with work placements, in apprenticeships or in employment. However, there is a particular policy focus on those in jobs without training (Maguire et al, 2008) and those not in employment, education or training (NEET). Numbers in the NEET group have remained stubbornly high since peaking in the mid-1980s – in 2006, there were 206,000 young people NEET, accounting for around 10% of all 16- to 18-year-olds (DCSF, 2007). This is despite concerted action by government and the introduction of both the Connexions Service to provide advice and guidance and the Education Maintenance Allowance to support and incentivise participation. In the context of government plans to reduce numbers in the NEET group, extend the school-leaving age to 18 and provide Skills Accounts for young people to pay for training (DWP and DIUS, 2008), it is important to consider how young people's perspectives and attitudes are shaped by place.

Recent research in Belfast suggests that 'bounded horizons' and relative immobility continue to constrain the labour market behaviour of young people (Green et al, 2005). In this context, it is relevant to note that recent labour market initiatives such as Working Neighbourhoods (Dewson et al, 2007) and City Strategy (DWP, 2006; Duffill and Hurrell, 2006) emphasise the importance of recognising the local context in planning and delivering interventions to help people into employment.

This article contributes to research on the role of geography in decision making and labour market behaviour by exploring the role of place-based social networks and attachment to place in shaping young people's outlooks and how they interpret and act on the opportunities they see for post-compulsory education, training and work. In so doing, it highlights how decisions are shaped by place in two main ways: first, place influences 'subjective' geographies of opportunity, and second, 'objective' geographies of opportunity vary by location.

Data

The article draws on case study evidence from three deprived areas in England: the Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton New Deal for Communities (NDC) areas (as outlined in the next section of the article; see Green and White, 2007, for further details). The focus is on young people from the age of 15 (that is, in the final year of compulsory education) through to their early twenties, who were variously in education, training and employment at the time of the study.

In each of the three case study areas, a guided, structured, self-completion survey was conducted with around 60 young people (recruited purposively via schools, colleges, youth groups and community involvement workers). Information was collected on a range of topics, including links and attitudes to the local area; patterns of spatial mobility and use of transport; current economic position and future intentions and

employment aspirations; and job locations and individual characteristics. Four focus groups were conducted in each case study area (with participants recruited from survey respondents) to explore in greater detail perceptions of the neighbourhood and city (via sketching of mental maps); the nature and strength of attachment and attitudes to the local area; knowledge of local job opportunities; factors influencing education and training decisions and job search behaviour; and barriers to mobility. Social networks, attachment to place, attitudes, perceptions, experiences and future intentions were discussed in more detail in individual interviews. The information collected from young people was supplemented by material from face-to-face interviews with stakeholders, training and other service providers and employers.

The case study areas and objective geographies of opportunity

The Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton NDC areas were selected to provide similarities and differences on a number of dimensions. Key features of the three areas of foremost interest to the focus of this article are summarised in Table 1.

From a geographical perspective, the case study area in East Hull is easily the most remote of the three. While the city centre is a bus ride away, there are no other main employment centres within easy commuting reach of Hull, by either public or private transport. The Walsall case study area is also a bus ride away from the main urban centre, but in this instance Walsall forms part of the broader West Midlands city region and commuting to other centres in the Black Country and in Birmingham is feasible (albeit direct public transport links to other centres from the case study area are limited). By contrast, the Wolverhampton case study area is adjacent to Wolverhampton city centre and is within walking distance of direct public transport links to a range of other centres (including Birmingham) within the West Midlands city region.

In line with general labour market trends, each of the three case study areas has witnessed significant employment restructuring over the past 25 years, with a decrease in jobs in traditional sectors – notably in manufacturing (and dock-based industries in Hull) – and an increase in employment in services. At national level, there has been a growth in demand for higher-level non-manual occupations and although opportunities in manual occupations for those with lower-level skills remain, it is clear that those with poor skills have lost out overall (Green and Owen, 2006; Wilson et al, 2006; Berthoud, 2007).

Changes in the sectoral and occupational composition of employment have been accompanied by changes in the spatial distribution of employment opportunities: new jobs have often been created in different locations from those where jobs have been lost. Hence, there are important local and sub-regional differences in objective opportunities in the external labour market. There has been a general trend (which is also apparent in the case study areas) towards spatial decentralisation of employment in cities, with more jobs on the urban periphery than was formerly the case (Fothergill and Gudgin, 1982; SEU, 2004). It is more difficult to provide public

Table 1: Selected key characteristics of the case study areas

Characteristic	Hull	Walsall	Wolverhampton
<i>Economic context and employment opportunities</i>	Loss of dock-based employment; sluggish economy – low levels of growth, productivity and earnings	Manufacturing decline in the neighbourhood; new jobs, especially in services, nearby	Employment restructuring, with loss of traditional manufacturing employment. Wolverhampton city centre is earmarked for retail expansion and there is a growth in service employment
<i>Neighbourhood location</i>	East Hull – three miles from Hull city centre	Peripheral location – north-west Walsall, a bus ride away from Walsall town centre	Central area – adjacent to city centre
<i>Sub-regional context</i>	Peripheral city – no other major urban/employment centres close by	Edge of West Midlands city region	Main city in Black Country and part of the West Midlands city region
<i>Location vis-à-vis jobs</i>	Very few jobs in immediate vicinity; jobs mainly in other parts of the city	Job opportunities not in immediate vicinity, but close by and in other parts of the city region and in Staffordshire	Job opportunities in the NDC area and close by in Wolverhampton city centre and in other parts of the city region
<i>Public transport</i>	Reasonable bus links – especially to Hull city centre	Good bus service to Walsall town centre; poor links to industrial estates	Good public transport links, by bus, metro and rail, to other parts of the West Midlands

transport for these new geographies of employment. Hence, those individuals with access to private transport are likely to have geographical access to a greater range of opportunities than those reliant on public transport.

Objectively, it would be expected that the likelihood of an individual finding a job or training opportunity would be related to the distance that individual is prepared to travel, since this widens the geographical pool of job openings. Analysis of commuting patterns reveals strong relationships between occupations and wages on the one hand and distance travelled on the other, with people in professional occupations commanding higher wages tending to travel further than those in less skilled occupations with lower wages. The relative costs of commuting are higher for people in low-wage occupations than in high-wage occupations, such that a low wage-earning capacity confines individuals to a smaller area. Hence, objective geographies of opportunity at local level matter most for those individuals who face most constraints in the labour market (Green and Owen, 2006). Given the focus of this article on young people in deprived areas, it is salient to note that research focusing explicitly on young people has also highlighted the importance of local

opportunities, especially for the least qualified (Roberts, 1995; Hodkinson et al, 1996; McDowell, 2003).

Having established that objective geographies of opportunity matter, and matter especially for young people and those who are otherwise disadvantaged, and also that the volume and nature of opportunities differ by geographical location, the subsequent sections of the article explore how place-based social networks and attachment to place help to shape the outlooks of young people and the subjective opportunities they act on, within the context of the broader set of opportunities objectively available.

Social networks and place attachment

Fifty years ago, Young and Willmott (1957) described the important role of kinship systems in understanding the lived experience of a deprived community in East London. Despite dramatic changes in the world of work and the fracturing of families since the 1950s, it remains important to consider perceptions, attitudes and experiences towards place, training, employment and future aspirations in their wider social context. Young people continue to derive from their class and family backgrounds particular sorts of social and cultural capital rooted in local economic history and conditions (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Hence, an appreciation of the extent, nature and quality of social networks of family, friends and other contacts that young people have access to helps in understanding how attitudes and behaviours are shaped (Deviren and Babb, 2005).

In all three case study areas, but especially in Hull and Walsall, there was a strong reliance of family and friends in shaping aspirations and intentions in education, training and the labour market. This is perhaps not so surprising for young people at the start of their careers. Reliance on family and friends – particularly at this stage in their lives when young people were making decisions about leaving school, staying on at school, moving on to further or higher education, looking at training options and seeking employment or building up their work record and seeking to advance – was seen as natural by most of the young people who participated in the research. For some of the young people participating in focus groups and interviews, it was clear that knowledge and information from family and friends was considered more reliable (because they “tell it how it is”) than that from colleges, training providers and service providers (such as Connexions).

In some instances, reliance on social networks of family and friends had a positive impact, providing valuable support in encouraging young people to pursue their interests and take up education and training courses and in helping them decide on which opportunities to pursue. There was evidence of social networks directly influencing patterns of recruitment, where family members and friends had connections with employment networks (something that is of particular importance in word-of-mouth recruitment; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) and/or were able to make useful suggestions regarding channels for gathering further information concerning opportunities for further/higher education and training.

However, in other instances, social networks acted as a constraint on subjective opportunities, operating to reduce young people's ambition by discouraging them from pursuing their interests or taking up further education and training opportunities, or serving to curtail choices to familiar options and familiar locations. This was particularly the case when the knowledge or information sources relied on were outdated, incomplete or blinkered.

Whether positive or negative, in all three case study areas social networks played an important role in shaping behaviour. The fact that in many instances they were more important than formal services is a significant finding from a policy perspective.

For most of the young people interviewed, social networks were strongly place-based; results from the young person survey, focus groups and individual interviews emphasised the local area where networks of family, friends and acquaintances are concentrated. In Walsall and Hull especially, and to a lesser extent in Wolverhampton, most young people reported that their family and friends lived locally. Indeed, several focus group participants and interviewees had grandparents, siblings, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles and cousins living in the same or adjacent streets. Many young people had lived in the local area all their life, and having extended family close by reinforced their familiarity with the local area and their attachment to place. In Wolverhampton, more of the survey respondents and interviewees had experience of living elsewhere and/or had family members outside the local area, in other parts of Wolverhampton, the West Midlands and the UK. Their social networks were more spatially extensive and their attachment to place was generally less strong than in Hull and Walsall.

In an attempt to gain further insight into place attachment and spatial awareness, participants in focus group were asked to draw a sketch map of Hull, Walsall or Wolverhampton (as appropriate) in as much detail as possible, starting with their own local area (including their home, school, college, job location, other landmarks), noting transport routes and key employment locations. They were also asked to identify areas they knew well and any areas where they would be fearful to go.

The importance of place and attachment to place was evident from these sketch maps and associated comments. A content assessment of the sketch maps revealed that social networks of family and friends played an important role in shaping the mental maps drawn by young people (see Green and White, 2007, for examples). Most of the mental maps showed localised outlooks, but those young people with social networks that were geographically more widespread generally had broader mental maps and in individual interviews and focus group discussions demonstrated a broader spatial awareness. Generally, wider sub-regional awareness was reflected in more geographically extensive mental maps in Wolverhampton than in Hull or Walsall across the age range. A further factor indicative of greater spatial awareness was that transport routes and hubs were more prominent in the Wolverhampton maps than in either Hull or Walsall.

There was a broadly negative relationship between amount of detail and distance covered by the maps. In Hull and Wolverhampton, most young people put their home and neighbourhood at the centre of the page. In general, this was less common in Walsall, where homes in the case study area (in north-west Walsall) tended to be

on the edge of the map, with an orientation towards Walsall town centre. In the case of East Hull, most maps only had an arrow to the town centre and West Hull was generally 'off the map'. In Wolverhampton, nearly all mental maps also included the adjacent city centre, which emerged from discussion as an important location for meeting friends from other parts of the city and beyond and so was very familiar to the young people. The mental maps confirmed that, in general, young people in Wolverhampton had more extensive spatial horizons than those in Hull and Walsall, while those in Hull and Walsall demonstrated a greater attachment to place and tended to have more detailed knowledge of the immediate local area than those in Wolverhampton.

Just as social networks can have positive or negative influences, so attachment to place can be a source of strength (providing young people with a sense of rootedness and an identity that is important to them) or weakness (particularly if it appeals to the parochial and encourages people to look excessively inwards or to be fearful of adopting a more outward-looking perspective). Overall, it was clear from the case study evidence that attachment to place was very important to some young people.

Subjective geographies of opportunity

Influential place-based social networks and strong attachment to the immediate local area may be indicative of strong 'bonding' social capital but weak 'bridging' social capital. The latter has been identified as playing an important role in facilitating labour market entry and advancement (Granovetter, 1973). In the case study areas, the young people's social networks tended to be strong on 'bonds' and weaker on 'bridges' (especially in Hull) – at least on bridges that could bring significant advantage. However, it is important not to overlook the role of familial and place-based social networks (indicative of strong 'bonding' social capital) in facilitating labour market inclusion, especially in circumstances where jobs are advertised by 'word of mouth' (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005).

In each of the case study areas young people were asked what they knew about training, further/higher education and employment opportunities and where those opportunities were located. This information provides insights into their subjective geographies of opportunity and can be compared with objective geographies of opportunity. The evidence suggests that in Wolverhampton and Walsall knowledge about the location of opportunities was reasonably accurate, but in Hull knowledge was more limited (as were objective opportunities outside Hull but within daily commuting distance).

When asked how far it was reasonable to travel to work or training and how far they would be prepared to travel, the respondents' foremost response was 'it depends' – on the nature of the opportunity (whether it was a 'career job' or a 'dead-end job'), pay and the cost and availability of transport. It is pertinent to note here that Jobcentre Plus has requirements regarding acceptable travel times for jobseekers. In their initial claim, an individual can make restrictions on the localities within which they are available for work, as long as they can show they still have reasonable

chances of finding a job. However, if they are offered a job, they only have 'good cause' for turning it down if the journey time is over one hour each way during the first 13 weeks of a Jobseeker's Allowance claim and one and a half hours after that. In general, the maximum reasonable travel time that was considered feasible by the survey respondents on a daily basis was two hours (that is, around one hour each way), although a journey of no more than 30 minutes was preferred. This is in accordance with findings from local household surveys in other areas (Green, 1995). Of course, some would not be prepared to contemplate such a long journey, and how long/far people are prepared to travel in practice is more limited than in theory. What is clear is that preferred travel times are considerably shorter than Jobcentre Plus requirements.

The case study evidence indicates that the geography of young people's social networks was sometimes a factor in widening spatial horizons, with some young people indicating their preparedness to travel for longer times/distances on the basis that family members did the same, while in other instances social networks operated to curtail horizons, as indicated by one young man from Hull: "I want to work round here. All my mates work round here: they won't look for work anywhere else".

In Wolverhampton, there was a general willingness to travel to get to work in the wider sub-region and most respondents displayed a good working knowledge of travel facilities. In general, they were more widely travelled than their counterparts in Hull. Many young people in Wolverhampton saw Birmingham as having a lot of employment (and social) opportunities and were prepared to travel there. Birmingham was also an employment location considered by some young people in Walsall, but the journey there is less straightforward than from Wolverhampton.

In Hull and Walsall, in particular, stakeholders pointed to a widespread unwillingness of local people to travel very far to work – particularly in the context of low pay (in other words, it is not worthwhile travelling very far for a low-paid job, because of the cost of travel). 'Wanting a job on the doorstep' was a common refrain and this was acknowledged by some young people who said that they wanted a job 'close by' and referred to friends not being prepared to take up any opportunity unless it was in the immediate vicinity.

Several reasons were forwarded for an unwillingness to travel. In Walsall, one stakeholder considered that not travelling far and only wanting to work in certain areas can be traced to family tradition, characterised by the view that: "We have always worked here. You don't want to be going there for work". He noted that: "The fact that the industry has gone is immaterial". There was a feeling that parents, and some young people themselves, expected to make the same local commuting journeys as their grandparents, despite changes in the location and nature of employment. Fear of travelling out of the home area 'comfort zone' was mentioned by stakeholders and young people alike.

Other stakeholders and young people pointed out that there was an unwillingness to put up with the 'hassle' and time taken in travelling beyond the local area – particularly if it involved taking two buses. In both Walsall and Hull, there was widespread unwillingness among young people and the population in general to travel

on more than one bus, in a context where 'one bus' goes as far as the city centre, but not beyond. It was clear that this 'two bus' problem curtailed travel horizons for many young people dependent on public transport. Some young people and stakeholders reported that parents were sometimes unwilling for young people to travel far – even if opportunities were accessible by 'two buses' or a 'bus and train'.

Stakeholders also mentioned that many young people and other local people lacked the necessary discipline to travel by public transport to arrive at a place by a certain time; as one asserted: "Transport itself isn't the problem – it's the attitude of people towards using it". So despite shortcomings in the public transport system, the suggestion was that transport was used by some as an 'excuse' rather than a 'reason' not to take up available opportunities – in other words, travel difficulties are more 'perceived' than 'real'.

Among the young people interviewed there was some recognition of the potential benefits of considering opportunities over a wider geographical area. Such awareness was especially developed in the West Midlands (notably Wolverhampton), where a greater range of employment centres was within commuting reach. There was also some recognition of this among young people in Hull, although it was less clearly articulated. Sub-regional geography plays an influential role here: Hull is very much separate from the large conurbations of West and South Yorkshire – Leeds and Sheffield are over an hour away. As outlined previously, unlike their counterparts in Wolverhampton and Walsall, who can access, relatively easily, other parts of the West Midlands conurbation and wider region, Hull is relatively isolated geographically. Nevertheless, for those young people in East Hull with the most localised mental maps, a preparedness to consider opportunities beyond the immediate local area and their 'comfort zone' of familiar social contacts to other parts of the city would extend their range of choices.

Conclusion

Where people live matters in terms of the availability of education, training and employment opportunities and their access to them. Objectively, there are more accessible opportunities in some geographical locations than in others.

Where people live also matters in terms of their perception of the opportunities objectively available to them. Social networks and place attachment shape aspirations and intentions in education, training and the labour market. Hence, where people are looking from affects what they see, or choose to see, and how they interpret and act on it.

For some young people, place-based social networks and attachment to place are very important factors in their decisions about life choices. Localised outlooks may mean that they do not consider opportunities beyond their neighbourhood or home town, or opportunities that are different from those conventionally followed by local people. Hence, while some young people 'transcend space' in their aspirations, search and take-up of education, training and employment opportunities, others are

seemingly 'trapped by space' (Ball et al, 2000) because of the constraints on actual opportunities or the opportunities they choose to consider.

From a policy perspective, it is important to recognise that the spatial and social context in which people are located matters. It influences how they see the world and their access to opportunities. 'Bounded horizons' mean that people may follow conventional opportunities in familiar locations, and may not consider automatically all available options.

Current initiatives to widen young people's horizons take various forms and aim to tackle actual and perceived barriers to education, training, employment and social participation across several policy domains. Key foci include transport (raising awareness of available services and help with costs); visits, trips, sporting and social activities designed to provide new experiences, enhance confidence and broaden spatial horizons; and educational and work-related initiatives designed to raise awareness of opportunities and pathways and provide experiences of relevance to the workplace. All of these have a role to play. Youth workers, community workers, schools and charitable organisations often play a key role in such activities, sometimes in partnership with transport providers, education-business partnerships, training providers and employers (Green and White, 2007).

More generally, the research findings presented here suggest that policy interventions need to take account of 'place' if they are to be successful; different approaches may be needed for different areas within the same city. Some of the City Strategy Pathfinders are taking this into account in their planning and delivery; more time is needed to evaluate their success.

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