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Postal address:
Centre for Applied Youth Research Inc.
PO Box 5011 UTAS LPO
Sandy Bay Tasmania Australia 7005
Email: jays@cayr.info
Web: http://cayr.info/jays/

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Editorial

Where we live, work, play and engage with family, friends and community has a huge influence on how we think and feel about the world around us. Place is fundamental to who we are, the way others see us, and how we interact with those near and far from our own locale.

A foundational aspect of JAYS is that the journal is dedicated to description and analysis that provides theoretically informed interpretation of youth issues, youth work and community development. Exploring the practice-research-policy continuum is central to this task.

So too is providing a forum for the concrete expression of ‘Southern Theory’ – that is, a viewpoint that privileges the voices, interests, needs and insights of the vulnerable, the marginal and those living and working “on the periphery” wherever they might geographically be located.

But geography, as such, counts nonetheless.

In this issue no.3 of JAYS we are pleased to announce that the Centre for Applied Youth Research (CAYR) is now co-producing JAYS with the Asia Institute Tasmania (AIT), located at the University of Tasmania. In recognition of this new partnership, the subtitle ‘Asia-Pacific’ has been added to the Journal. This arrangement reflects our commitment to publishing work from Australasia, Asia and the Pacific, as well as from further afield.

The reader will see evidence of the “proof in the pudding” in this issue: we have selections from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Argentina and New Zealand, as well as Australia. Submissions have been coming in from the northern and southern hemispheres, and we are grateful that the journal is developing a strong regional as well as international reach.

The articles in this issue also reinforce our commitment to the close connection of theory to practice, especially in the applied areas of youth work and community development. By providing informed research and comment, it is our hope that young people and workers with young people will find this of benefit in their concrete everyday activities.
The *Journal of Applied Youth Studies – Asia-Pacific* thus continues to grow and develop. As it does so, it reveals our own location on the planet as one that is intrinsically important and valuable to global understandings and participation in international trends and events. While we share much in common, our “home” in the Asia-Pacific very much shapes our perceptions and lifestyles, cultures and economics. This, too, contributes to the international social mosaic that constitutes the world of applied youth studies.

*Rob White*

*Academic Editor*
‘One-eyed hobby horses’, practice theories and good youth work

MICHAEL EMSLIE

This critique of some of the prevailing approaches to youth work argues that theories of practice offer better ways of understanding and achieving good practice. A significant body of literature suggests good youth work involves engaging young people in education and training, implementing a practice model, or acting upon young people’s feedback. However, criticisms of these accounts suggest they are inadequate. This article makes the case that we need to think about the problems youth work is trying to address as ‘wicked problems’ that call for ‘wicked solutions’ and argues that practice theories missing from the youth work literature provide more in the way of wicked solutions compared to the conventional approaches to youth work. Three practice theories – from Arendt, Bourdieu and Shove, Pantzar and Watson – are examined together with discussion of their implications for conceptualising and realising good practice.

“Practice” is typically represented in the youth and community work literature in Australia, European Union countries (EU) and the United States of America (USA) in three ways. First, there is a tendency to dichotomise, compare and subjugate the idea of practice to a range of other ideas that include theory, policy, research, knowledge, discourse and education (herein I refer to these different ideas as theory); that is, something referred to as practice is usually conceptualised as “Other” and inferior to something else described as theory (Green 2009; Nielsen 2007). Second, a thing called practice is conceived as something that emerges from and is dependent on another thing called theory (Buchroth & Parkin 2010; Schön 1991, 1987). And, finally, the concept of practice does not receive comparable intellectual attention to that of theory. For
example, Drury Hudson (1997), Gambrill (2013) and Thompson (2000) examined types of theory and kinds of knowledge that they argued are relevant to human service work. However, the authors did not explore sorts of practice. These observations point to a failure to adequately examine the idea of practice in the youth and community work literature.¹ This failure helps to explain the significant body of work that suggests good practice in youth work is fairly obvious. This can be described as the common sense account practice that relies on a good deal of talk about quality relationships, empowerment, skills, passion and other “one-eyed hobby horses” (Stanner 2010, p.218). In this article I examine some of the prevailing approaches to youth work, and I explore some more sophisticated ways of thinking about good youth work practice.

I begin by analysing three ways good practice in youth work is commonly described and pursued. I argue that such approaches are based on inappropriate reasons, overlook criticisms, and are inadequate because good practice in youth and community work is better thought of as a wicked problem that requires wicked solutions (Rittel & Webber 1973). I make the case that practice theories, which are missing from the youth work literature, offer more in the way of wicked solutions compared to the conventional approaches to practice that I critique. I examine three theories of practice and discuss their implications for conceptualising and achieving good youth work.

Three prevailing approaches to youth work

Youth engagement in education and training

Youth engagement is typically conceived as a good in youth work practice. Youth engagement practices in youth work encompass young people’s engagement with peers, family and community, young people’s involvement in political processes and decisions affecting their lives, and youth participation in policy and program development and evaluation (Sapin 2009; Slattery 2001; VeLure, Roholt & Cutler 2012). At the same time in Australia, the EU and the USA, there has been a preoccupation with engaging all young people in education and training and to a lesser extent employment (Australian Government 2010; Bessant & Watts 2014; Council of Australian Government 2009; European Commission 2015; Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs 2013, p.7). In Australia, for example, this interest has coincided with numerous funded youth work initiatives that aim to contribute to young people’s

¹ Whether this same literature adequately examines the idea of theory is another question that is beyond the scope of this paper and in need of further investigation.
participation, attainment and retention in education and training, to support young people’s “positive” pathways into the labour market and school-to-work transitions, and to identify and respond to vulnerable and disadvantaged young people “at-risk” of leaving school early (Australian Government 2015; te Riele & Gorur 2015). Programs have included the Transition to Work program, Youth Connections, Local Learning Employment Networks (LLEN), School Focused Youth Service (SFYS), truancy officers, career advice and various supports services that include youth workers in schools and other educational settings. Engaging all young people in extensive periods of the right sort of education and training is represented as good way to address critical youth issues and to create opportunities for young people. For example, proponents argue that such engagement promotes and enables young people’s employability, workforce participation, productivity, income stability, financial security, social mobility and development of the right skills and capacities to adapt to economic and technological change (Deloitte Access Economics 2012; Foundation for Young Australians 2015a, 2015b; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008; Wyn 2009). It is suggested that engaging in education contributes towards preventing a range of social, health and wellbeing problems (Australian Youth Affairs Coalition 2012; Education to Employment (e2e) Working Group 2015; KPMG 2009; The Smith Family 2014; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011). And investment in quality education and intellectual or human capital is said to result in positive economic payoffs that include increased economic growth, improved employment prospects and better paying jobs (Becker 1993; Foundation for Young Australians 2014; Gillies 2011).

However, a number of “inconvenient facts” and “uncomfortable knowledge” suggests problems with these reasons for youth engagement in education and training (Bessant & Broadley 2015; Weber 1946). For example, in Australia, youth unemployment, long-term youth unemployment, youth underemployment and child and youth poverty are significant and intractable problems (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015; Foundation for Young Australians 2014; Headley & Moffatt 2015; Phillips et al. 2013). Parker (2016) reported that at the same time higher education has expanded, a fact that coincides with increasing participation and retention in others levels of education, social inequality, income inequality and wealth inequality have also risen. There are reports that it is taking many young Australian longer to find full-time work after graduating from higher education and that precarious low-paid insecure jobs and incomes are becoming the norm for many young people (Campbell 2015; Chohan 2016; Foundation
for Young Australians 2015a, 2015b; Jackson 2015; Standing 2011). Basically, there are not enough full-time well-paid jobs for all the young people who want one. It is well recognised that income support measures for young people and students in Australia are inadequate especially in light of Australia’s high costs of living (Marsh & McGaurr 2013). These problems are coupled with high rates of deprivation, financial stress and housing affordability stress among Australia’s university students and young people, and increasing higher education and other debts that contribute to a range of social, health and wellbeing problems (Bexley et al. 2013; Davie 2015). Similar problems have been reported in many EU countries and the USA (Giroux 2012; Howker & Malik 2013; Males 1996; OECD 2014; Putnam 2015). It is unclear whether and how engaging all young people in education and training is addressing these “inconvenient facts” and achieving the goods that such engagement is reasoned to secure. Zizek (2015, 2011), Vally and Motala (2014) and Quiggin (2012) suggest that the “inconvenient facts” indicate fundamental problems with global capitalism and neoliberalism, and no amount of engaging all young people in any sort of education and training will resolve them. In light of these problems youth work practice that aims to improve young people’s engagement in education and training for the reasons previously mentioned might be an example of what Berlant (2011) describes as “a relation of cruel optimism”. Moreover, these critiques suggest that engaging young people in education and training is not necessarily good youth work.

**Practice models**

A significant body of literature in Australia, the EU and the USA suggests good practice in youth work is achieved by mastering and implementing a specific intervention, framework or model. This is the idea of theory as a model of, or for, practice that is exemplified by Egan (2010) and includes approaches such as strength-based practice and integrated service models, developing young people’s emotional intelligence and mindfulness and using assessment and screening instruments (e.g. Carr-Gregg, Enderby & Grover 2003; Elkington et al. 2006; Gullone et al. 2000). Given the space constraints of a journal article, I cannot examine every example and instead provide a case study to demonstrate the limitations with such accounts. The Search Institute’s approach to positive youth development provides a good example (Search Institute 2015).

According to the Search Institute (2015, n.p.):

> … 40 Developmental Assets, which … [are] a set of skills, experiences, relationships, and behaviours … enable young people to develop into successful
and contributing adults … Data collected from Search Institute surveys of more than 4 million children and youth from all backgrounds and situations has consistently demonstrated that the more Developmental Assets young people acquire, the better their chances of succeeding in school and becoming happy, healthy, and contributing members of their communities and society.

Moreover, according to the Search Institute, good youth work involves ensuring young people’s positive development, and this can be unambiguously articulated, measured and evaluated using the 40 developmental assets.

However, a number of critiques suggest that this may not be good youth work. For example, the approach uncritically relies on developmental theory and ignores the many and varied criticisms of such theory (Bessant 2012; Pacini-Ketchabaw 2011). The approach also relies on a universal, essential and linear account of transition from vulnerable, risky and dependent adolescence to caring, responsible, productive and independent adulthood. According to Bradford (2012), Kelly (2000), Wood and Hine (2009) and Wyn and Woodman (2006), young people’s lives are far more complex, fragmented and non-linear, and any account of youth (or childhood, or adulthood) is a social construct and an artefact of power/knowledge or expertise rather than a normal or natural process. The Search Institute’s approach also follows the logic of risk-based and technical or instrumental approaches to youth work practice that have also undergone significant scrutiny (Bessant, Hil & Watts 2003; Kelly 2007; Lupton 1999).

Furthermore, the Search Institute’s approach frames and focuses the responsibility of problems and their resolution with individual young people, rather than emphasising social, political and economic conditions, such as income inequality, poverty, underemployment, austerity and bad policy that may be more significant to young people experiencing problems than a lack of Developmental Assets. Constituting young people as deficient and in need of Developmental Assets can paradoxically serve to produce the very problem it aims to address, as young people can take on and enact the ideas that they are weak, vulnerable, at-risk and deficient. Thinking about young people in such ways also uncritically reproduces stereotypically and prejudicial ways of knowing young people as troubled and troublesome, incapable of making good decisions and not to be trusted. In light of such criticisms it is unclear whether the Search Institute’s framework is the way to conceptualise and achieve good youth work. The critique also suggests that simply implementing practice models, or using theory and applying a model for practice, might not be good youth work.
Service user feedback

Another prevailing approach to youth work is the claim that good practice can be assessed and achieved by obtaining and acting upon service user feedback or young people’s voice (te Riele & Gorur 2015; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2013). Moreover, it is common practice in the human service sector to assess the efficacy of an intervention by accessing the voice of those receiving the help and using this feedback to argue that practice is useful, effective or good. For example, according to Miller, Duncan and Hubble (2004) practitioners in human services can and should get regular feedback from service users on their interventions, and they argue that doing just that is a helpful way of making services more effective. Continuous feedback from clients is a critical component of the “PCOMS” approach to therapy, which according to Duncan (2012) and Duncan and Reese (2015) has been clinically tested and proven to improve client outcomes. D’Cruz and Jones (2014, p.38) argued social workers “risk practicing in oppressive ways by disallowing … clients’ voices”. And getting feedback on the effectiveness of support services is typically suggested as a worthwhile way to involve and empower young people and aligns with rights-based practice that includes respecting the rights of consumers to have a say (Head 2011).

However, according to McCord (1978, p.288) “… the subjective judgment of … [a program’s] value as perceived by those who received its service” or feedback from service users is not a good indicator that good practice has been achieved. McCord (1978, p.284) reported on a 30-year follow-up study of over 500 men, half of whom had been assigned to a treatment program that lasted approximately five years, involved regular contact with counsellors and social workers, and aimed to prevent “delinquency”. McCord (1978, p.284) reported:

> Although subjective evaluations of the program by those who received its benefits would suggest that the intervention had been helpful, comparisons between the treatment and control groups indicate that the program had negative side effects as measured by criminal behaviour, death, disease, occupational status, and job satisfaction.

Similarly, Egan (2010) argued there are problems with “client satisfaction studies”. “It has … been demonstrated that client satisfaction does not always mean that problems are being managed and opportunities developed” (Egan 2010, p.20).

Client satisfaction research and service user feedback cannot tell us whether the client would have improved anyway if the intervention had not been used, and doing research
on just that is not possible. There are also problems with using feedback from service users because it may be skewed towards only getting responses from those who found a service effective. Moreover, people who found an intervention ineffective or harmful may be reluctant to provide feedback. Feedback that puts a support service in a positive light also does not definitely tell us whether a similar intervention will work for others, and such research is unreliable. Finally, reports from service users on the effectiveness of an intervention do not necessarily indicate whether or not a practice is good. Bourdieu (1998) suggests people might follow and reproduce relations of domination, exploitation and marginalisation without realising they are doing just that when they give feedback on service interventions (Grenfell 2008). Farthing (2012) similarly argued the merits of youth participation practices, such as getting service user feedback, need to be critically unpacked and may not be desirable or intrinsically a good thing. Privileging young people’s voices may distort or erase aspects of the cultural contexts in which the stories are embedded and that might be more relevant to achieving good practice. Moreover, these critiques suggest that good youth work should not just uncritically rely on young people’s voices or young people’s feedback.

**Wicked problems call for wicked solutions:**

**The case for practice theories**

Criticisms of the three aforementioned approaches to youth work have a number of implications for youth work practitioners, managers, policy-makers, educators and researchers. For example, the critiques suggest that the prevailing ways practice is conceptualised, described and pursued may not be good. Problems with these approaches also suggest that other ways of thinking about practice are needed for good youth work. Rittel and Webber (1973) provide a useful suggestion of what this could be in their critical framework for thinking about tame and wicked problems and solutions. In particular, Watts (2015, p.162) argued:

> [Rittel and Webber’s framework] offers nothing less than a unifying account of the conjoint ontological and epistemological features of those social problems which humans in general, and politicians and policy-makers in particular, confront.

Watts (2015, p.162) made the case that “The entire field of juvenile justice is best thought of as a field of wicked problems”. Similarly, Bessant and Broadley (2015, p.2) argued the “Child protection system is a system characterized by wicked problems”. And the problems that youth work aims to address, that often coincide with the field of juvenile justice and the child protection system, also correspond with Rittel and
Webber’s characterisation of wicked problems. According to the Australian Public Service Commission (2007) and Rittel and Webber (1973) wicked problems are characterised by a number of distinguishing features that include being difficult to define, having no clear solution, being socially complex and having many interdependencies. I previously demonstrated that there are disagreements on the problems youth work is trying to solve as well as how to solve them. For example, I argued there is a lack of agreement on whether engaging young people in extensive periods of education and training will address critical youth issues such as youth unemployment. Furthermore, according to the relevant literature, youth and community work is better conceptualised as complex, unpredictable, context-dependent and messy (Schön 1991; Spence, Devaney & Noonan 2006). And youth work practice involves a diverse range of entangled elements that includes many and varied people, institutions, settings, intentions, knowledges and practices. Moreover, youth work is characterised by wicked problems and this calls for wicked solutions.

Wicked solutions are more than the “one-eyed hobby horses” or the “one-best answer” that are prevalent in the youth work literature and that include the approaches I critiqued (Rittel & Webber 1973, p.169; Stanner 2010, p.218). The Australian Public Service Commission (2007) and Rittel and Webber (1973) describe wicked solutions, and I do not repeat their accounts here. Instead, I pursue theories of practice, which up to this point have been missing from the youth work literature and that also offer fruitful ways for tackling wicked problems. A number of practice theories recognise that achieving good practice is not so straightforward. In particular, Arendt, Bourdieu and Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s characterisations of practice resonate with the Australian Public Service Commission (2007) and Rittel and Webber’s (1973) descriptions of wicked problems. These practice theories also offer more sophisticated ways of thinking about and pursuing good youth work.

**Arendt**

According to Dunne (1997, pp.88-103) and Higgins (2011, pp.85-110), Arendt retrieved ideas from Aristotle and recovered the ancient divisions between and within the *vita contemplative* and the *vita activa* to make the case that there are different modes or categories of activity in practical life. However, whereas Aristotle differentiated poiesis (making) to praxis (action), Arendt (1958) explored the distinctions, relationships and complementarities between labour, work and action. Arendt characterised labour as a
cyclical process through which people are immersed in the urgent, unremitting and futile struggle with nature’s implacable demands on them, repetitiously and endlessly reproducing the needs of life (Dunne 1997, p.400; Higgins 2011, p.92). Arendt (1958) argued that due to the necessities and aspirations revealed by her conceptualisation of the human condition or the six conditions of human existence – natality, mortality, biological survival, worldliness, plurality, and the sixth that Arendt does not define but could be understood as Arendt’s take on reflexivity – there is no complete escape from reproductive practices or labour (or work or action for that matter). At the same time and in response to the human conditions, people engage in other sorts of activities that ease the burdens associated with reproductive labour. In particular, work, or making or fabrication, rises above the imperatives of nature by creating a world of durable objects (Dunne 1997, p.400; Higgins 2011, pp.92-93). Key features of work or productive practices are the division and linear sequence between knowing and doing. Moreover, work involves knowing the ends-to-be, and then figuring out and implementing the most efficient doing, means, instrument or technique to achieve those pre-specified ends. Arendt recognised that productive work has its place in the life of humans and most concrete occupations that require relatively high degrees of foresight and predictability are forms of work (Higgins 2011, p.86). However, Arendt argued that in modern times “human life has been reduced to labour and the scientific-technological pursuit of aids to that labour” (Higgins 2011, p.92). And practising all human activities as this form of entangled labour/work is a problem because it can lead to imprudently doing without thinking, thoughtlessly following orders, foolishly obeying authority, irresponsibly being compliant and, worse still, unethical conduct, wrongdoing and evil (Arendt 1963; Midgley 1984). According to Arendt, the conventional approaches to youth work practice previously described fall into this characterisation of human activity and have these accompanying problems.

The third category of practical activity, which according to Higgins (2011, p.101) Arendt argued is the “pinnacle of human activity, the sine qua non of leading a fully human life”, is action. Arendt argued that action is characterised by meaningful stories that are singular, do not follow a pattern and are produced by the inseparability of action and speech or deeds and words (Arendt 1958, p.236; Higgins 2011). Other features of action include “the unpredictability of its outcome, the irreversibility of the process, and the anonymity of its authors” (Arendt 1958, p.220). Conceptualising youth work as a form of action suggests those involved in the practice ought to constantly think about
what they should do and are doing, reflect-in-and-on-action, make moral judgments, and act with care, empathy, imagination and thoughtfulness – or phronesis (Midgley 1984; Schön 1991; Schwartz & Sharpe 2010; Williams 1985). Furthermore, when thought of as action, everyone involved in youth work should share as a common object of concern exactly what good youth work is and how it should be achieved rather than just relying on pre-determined outcomes or being preoccupied with the implementation of a prefigured process. Arendt elevated action above the other the modes of practical activity at the same time as arguing that practices consist of entanglements and complementarities between labour-like, work-like and action-like dimensions. Moreover, Arendt suggested that the roles and relations between reproduction, production and action are ambiguous, unresolvable, and require ongoing consideration. This aspect of Arendt’s account of the complexities of practice suggests that youth workers should be supported to think deeply about practice so they can distinguish and navigate the possibilities and limitations associated with each of the modes of practice.

Bourdieu

According to Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012, p.5), “Bourdieu did not develop a consistent theory of practice over his works”. These authors also argued that within Bourdieu’s writings, habitus and practice are in a recursive relationship (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012, p.5). On the contrary, Maton (2008, p.51) argued that Bourdieu represented practices as the result of a relation that can be summarised in the form of an equation:

\[
\text{[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice} \]

This equation can be unpacked as stating: practice results from relations between one’s dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of that social arena (field).

Maton (2008, p.52) made the case that practices for Bourdieu are “not simply the result of one’s habitus but rather of relations between one’s habitus and one’s current circumstances” (emphasis in original). In the same way Bourdieu (1998, p.vii) argued his philosophy of action notes the relations between “the potentialities inscribed in the bodies of agents and in the structure of the situations in which they act”:

This philosophy is condensed in a small number of fundamental concepts – habitus, field, capital – and its cornerstone is the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (those of the habitus).

In this instance, Bourdieu acknowledged his reduction of his theory of practice; as Grenfell (2008, pp.213-16) observed, Bourdieu (e.g. 1977, 1990, 1998) had many more
concepts that formed a framework for capturing, constructing and validating practices. Given the space constraints of a journal article I cannot give a more thorough account of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, and, like Bourdieu (1998, p.vii), I stick with his elementary and fundamental description of human action. At the very least, this abbreviated account demonstrates Bourdieu’s attempt to break with what he argued was the inadequacy of a series of opposing traditions for understanding human action, including structuralism and existentialism, objectivism and subjectivism, and determinism and free will (Grenfell 2008, pp.43-47). This basic formulation also illustrates that Bourdieu’s theory of practice is complex and wicked and provides useful lessons for conceptualising and understanding good practice in youth work.

For example, unlike Aristotelian inspired accounts of ethically oriented conduct, that includes Arendt (1958) and MacIntyre (1984), or Weber’s (1968) account of rational social action, Bourdieu suggests that people cannot assume that they are always aware of what they do or why they are doing what they do. Furthermore, people may be unaware of their biases, privilege and disadvantage, and oblivious of latent but influential interests and values at play in their views, choices and actions. And people can believe they are doing something other than what they are doing, and reproducing prejudices, inequalities, and relations of domination without realising it. Moreover, people may be oblivious to the ways that their habitus (and capital) is structured by and structuring of the field in which practice takes place, how these underlying relations and processes shape and constitute what they think, feel and do, and how this can result in social suffering and symbolic violence (Schubert 2008). Youth workers, policy makers and others involved in the institutionalisation and reproduction of youth work might think that a particular practice is good, for example the conventional practices I critiqued, but such practice may be serving other more powerful interests, reproducing prevailing “doxa”, and not benefiting young people as intended (Deer 2008a). Bourdieu (2004) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggested that people involved in youth work need to do reflexivity to understand these two-way relationships and the underlying generating principles or structures of action, as well as their implications, for example, on what can and cannot be thought, felt and done and the potentially harmful effects of that. However, Bourdieu (1977, 1990) argued not everyone is capable of his genuine reflexive approach, only those who have been educated on his method (Deer 2008b). Bourdieu’s theory of practice and his suggestion that achieving something that might be conceived as good practice in youth work requires the practice of reflexivity
has implications for the education and ongoing professional development of youth workers. For example, youth workers should be taught Bourdieu’s thinking tools and practice theory. And, subsequently, youth worker’s capacities to be reflexive and recognise and control the effects and influence of their own perceptions and comprehensions of the social world, youth work and young people on their understanding and approach to practice should be developed (Deer 2008b).

Shove, Pantzar and Watson

Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s (2012) account of the dynamics of social practices somewhat breaks from Bourdieu’s and Arendt’s theories of practice. In particular, these authors follow Gidden’s (1984) structuration theory rather than Bourdieu’s two-way relationship between objective structures and incorporated structures or Arendt’s take on the recursive relation between people’s condition to make things and how the things people make condition them further (Higgins 2011, p.88; Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012, pp.2-4). Shove, Pantzar and Watson also borrow from many other practice theorists, in particular Schatzki (2012, 2002), Reckwitz (2002) and, to a lesser extent, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999), to present a practice theory with accompanying language and array of concepts that offers a way of understanding good practice in youth work. According to Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012, pp.119-20), “The bare bones of our account can be put in just a few sentences”, and this includes:

Practices-as-performances involve the active integration of elements (materials, meanings, competences). Practices-as-entities are constituted through such integrations … Practices change when new elements are introduced or when existing elements are combined in new ways … If practices are to survive they need to capture and retain practitioners willing and able to do this integrating …

There is considerably more to their theory; however, this brief introduction to some of the key aspects suggests good practice in youth work involves recruiting and retaining faithful and committed carriers who are willing and able to make and sustain links between a diverse range of interdependent elements that constitute that practice.

Shove, Pantzar and Watson suggest achieving good practice in youth work is better thought of as a wicked problem and their practice theory offers a wicked solution. For example, according to the authors, approaches to practice are typically informed by “a thoroughly individualistic understanding of both action and of change”, in particular “a view that behaviour change is an outcome of personal preference”, individual attitudes and choice (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012, pp.140-46). The prevailing approaches to
youth work I described earlier, such as engaging young people in extensive periods of education and training and using models of practice that are based on standardised interpretations of youth development and transitions, generally focus on encouraging, supporting and enabling individual young people to make better choices for themselves. Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012, pp.3, 164) argued this is a problem because “it locates both the problem and the response as a matter of individual behaviour” which downplays the recursive relationship between “human activity … and the social structures which shape it”. Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012, p.146) add that practice is better understood as emergent and unpredictable and involving processes of emergence, persistence and disappearance (e.g. of practice elements) that are essentially uncontrollable. In light of this, the authors suggest that those interested in good youth work should consider how they can influence, facilitate and hinder the availability, circulation and connection of elements of which better and worse youth work are formed, as well as secure and maintain resources and practitioners willing to keep these elements alive (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012, pp.147, 156). And this involves ongoing deliberation on what these elements are.

Conclusion

The practice theories I examined in this article suggest that conventional approaches to practice in youth work are inadequate. In particular, Arendt and Bourdieu and Pantzar, Shove and Watson suggest that good youth work needs to involve more than engaging young people in education and training, implementing practice models, and obtaining and acting upon young people’s feedback. According to Arendt, these approaches are examples of a particular mode of practical activity that prevails in modern times and that emphasises means ends efficiency, which is a problem because it can lead to doing without thinking, unethical conduct, wrongdoing and evil. Bourdieu suggests such practices might be serving prevailing interests, reproducing relations of social dominance, and not benefiting young people as intended. Shove, Pantzar and Watson suggest these activities focus on encouraging, supporting and enabling individual young people to make better choices for themselves, and this is a problem because it conceals the role of contextual factors and social conditions in shaping people’s lives.

I made the case that Arendt, Bourdieu and Pantzar, Shove and Watson’s theories of practice offer more sophisticated and fruitful ways of thinking about and pursuing good youth work. A key lesson from Arendt is that youth workers should be supported to
think about practice in more complex ways than is typically the case and to act in ways that are aligned with an activity she described as “action”. Bourdieu suggests achieving good practice in youth work requires a particular way of thinking and acting that he characterised as reflexivity, and this involves practitioners recognising and controlling the effects and influence of their own perceptions and comprehensions of the social world, youth work and young people on their understanding and approach to practice. And according to Shove, Pantzar and Watson, practices feature the integration and enactment of a diverse range of interdependent elements that include materials, competence and meaning. These authors suggest that good practice in youth work involves ongoing deliberation on what these elements are as well as securing and maintaining the resources and practitioners willing and able to keep these elements and connections alive.

This article focused on aspects of youth work in Australia, the EU and the USA. Further research is needed to examine the relevance of the arguments made herein to other practice approaches and other countries. Arendt, Bourdieu and Pantzar, Shove and Watson are not the only authors that recognise practice is better conceptualised as complex and wicked. For example, Aristotle and neo-Aristotelian Weber, and Habermas’s theories of practice may also offer valuable lessons for conceptualising and achieving good practice in youth work. Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012, pp.139-64) described some of the challenges associated with promoting and making transitions from conventional approaches to practice to more sophisticated practice-theory orientations. More work is needed to understand these challenges and to promote and make these transitions in youth work practice.

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Author

Michael Emslie is a lecturer in Youth Work in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria.
Trapped in the middle: Hong Kong youth transitions from a risk society perspective

VICTOR WONG & VIENNE LIN

Transitions from school to employment in post-industrial economies are characterised by risk and uncertainty where the “trapped middles”, be they sub-degree holders or students, are bound to ascribe to the influence of stratification and commodification of tertiary education. Underpinned by the perspective of risk society, this paper examines Hong Kong young people’s perception and negotiation of risks pertinent to their transitions and explores the interplay between their aspirational pursuits and the reality of the contexts in which they live. An analysis of 24 respondents holding or pursuing sub-degree qualifications, in which gender, level of income, and social status are the sampling criteria, identifies three major groups of in-betweener: those who align themselves with the mainstream ideology of pursuing educational credentials; those who eagerly live up to normative expectations but fail owing to poor academic results or high tuition fees; and those who are nebulous about their future but consider sub-degree programs as a buffer to delay making decisions. The analysis shows that impacts derived from uncertainty, stratification and commodification of higher education are no longer confined to a particular group of moderate achievers; all young people are affected.

The notion of “missing middles” is currently in vogue in studies of the sociology of youth. In contrast to previous research discussions, which mostly focus on dichotomous experiences between fast lane and slow route navigators (Jones 2002), recent studies explore the transition journeys of missing middles who do not fit neatly into these
categorical cleavages (Roberts 2011; Connelly et al. 2013; Gayle et al. 2016). Despite not matching the typical profile of potential risk, such as being low skilled, disabled or involved with drug use, the subjective experiences, individual aspirations and even struggles of those who undergo non-mainstream tertiary education pathways – and so appear to be unproblematic – nonetheless remain under exploration in Hong Kong’s youth studies.

Informed by the risk-society perspective, this paper examines whether sub-degree students/graduates are indeed “trapped in the middle” and in what ways they are trapped or free from being trapped. Sub-degree programs in Hong Kong are post-secondary and largely divided into two types: associate degrees and higher diplomas. The former are more academic and prepare students to further their studies at degree level, whereas the latter are vocational in nature. Twenty-four respondents (12 male, 12 female) were recruited by purposive sampling, selecting interviewees based on their gender, level of income and social status. The paper sets out to delve into sub-degree young people’s risk perception and management during their transition journeys and explores the interplay between their personal aspirations and the social and economic contexts of their lives. The paper first provides a major literature review on structured individualisation, individualisation thesis and bounded agency. It goes on to explicate the research methodology and present findings of the 24 individual interviews along with a profile of respondents. The paper looks at respondents’ pathways and their aspired transition sequences and sees how the two come into play in individuals’ transition experiences when exposed to an era of knowledge-based economy where tertiary studies are seen as a commodity and an investment characterised, respectively, by high costs and uncertainties in terms of return.

**Background**

The force of post-industrialisation and globalisation today has brought a growing sense of insecurity and higher levels of manufactured risks, economic, social and political (Beck 1987, 1992; Giddens 1991; Zinn 2008; Roche 2010), and has led to new forms of social division, nationally and internationally. With the transformation of the production mode from material and labour-intensive to knowledge-based (O’Brien & Penna 1998), those with higher levels of income, power and academic qualifications are more able to protect themselves against risks than are those without.
Given the surge in the information age (Castells 2010) and neoliberalism (Lazzarato 2009), there is a continuing rise in emphasis as to whether young people are capable of foreseeing and managing risk on an individual basis, which in turn points to the notion of individualisation. Individuals are required to negotiate calculable risks and incalculable uncertainty (Beck 1992). They may endure unknown consequences or new risks generated from their personal decisions, which could stand contradictory to their intention (Bauman 2001; Tulloch 2008; Zinn 2008). The individualisation thesis also holds that young people face greater choice and autonomy while also assuming greater burden and responsibility for their own construction of biographies (Mythen 2004). Choice biographies (Brannen & Nilsen 2002) or elective biographies (Glastra, Hake & Schedler 2004) appear to replace normal biographies that portray a comparatively predictable and linear transition from youth to adulthood along with paid jobs, education and family formation (Woodman 2009, p.243). In this sense, young people are expected to make choices amid a complicated variety of possibilities (Giddens 1991). This espouses Beck’s notion of the Do-It-Yourself project of the Self, especially for those who live in late modernity (Beck 1992). As Atkinson (2007) and Mythen (2007) suggest, one key shortfall of Beck’s notion of risk is to downplay structural constraints in the making of life chances. It is maintained that the capacity for risk perception and management as well as reflection on choice and decisions are interrelated with class, gender and ethnicity (Mythen 2005; Lupton 2006; Threadgold & Nilan 2009).

While cautious about the structure/agency dichotomy, middle ground theories such as Roberts’ structured individualisation (1995) and Evans’ bounded agency (2007) analyse young people’s school-to-work navigation “through the lens of the dual epistemology of agency and structure” (Brannen & Nilsen 2002, p.523). Bounded agency refers to the fact that opportunity structures shape individuals’ social positions, perceptions and decisions while constraining or enabling their agency during their transitions situated in specific social contexts. Youth transition journeys are therefore contingent upon a string of personal decisions, social pathways and opportunity structures alongside relevant institutionalised restrictions (Heinz 2009, p.4). Individuals are in charge of their decision-making but “not under the circumstances of their own choosing” (Furlong & Kelly 2005, p.212) and not all are able to be the choosers (Bauman 1998) who are able to take risks with social locations and resources in a relatively safe environment (Rolfe 2010).
A body of school-to-work research has been conducted on the typology development for the interlocking relationship between agency and structure (Walther & Plug 2006; Bradley & Devadason 2008). Yet the study on youth pursuance of aspirations remains underexplored and largely absent from discussion. More often than not, young people’s trajectories may not be in line with their aspirations. The pursuit of aspirations may then be seen as risk-taking activities. Nonetheless, Schoon (2006, p.123) argues that personal aspirations and positive thinking about the future play a long-term protective role in mitigating the effects of early potential socio-economic risk derived from ones’ lower social locations. Some research (Lowe & Krahn 2000; Edwards & Burkitt 2001) reveals that a decline in occupational aspiration is found among young people when they enter the workplace. Yet Bryant and Ellard (2015) highlight the role of hope as a form of agency in disenfranchised youth’s future orientation, although opportunity structures are limited.

With the changing nature of late modernity, there is a perceived need to adjust to the “high skills economy” (Lunt 2008). Higher education therefore becomes a new mass education sector where tertiary studies are supposed to help young people remain competitive in growing insecure and volatile labour markets (Cuervo et al. 2013, p.5). Some young people see investment in higher education as a “neoliberal opportunity bargain” which rewards them with better job opportunities (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011, p.10). Some even see investment in a second degree as worthwhile in order to achieve employment security (Cuervo et al. 2013, p.10). Knowledge is, in effect, unavoidably turned into a commodity that could be purchased in the world’s marketplace (Naidoo 2003, p.250). The rise of “knowledge capitalism” foregrounds the importance of market principles (Olssen & Peters 2005) and configures higher education as personal investment and responsibility (Wyn 2012). An effect of this is that student debt levels are on the increase, especially for those with low socioeconomic family backgrounds (Bexley et al. 2013).

**Research methodology**

This research explores how young people in Hong Kong perceive and negotiate risks and opportunities during their education-to-employment transitions and investigates how their pursuance of aspirations, their contexts and experiences combine to shape their individual biographies.
Under a clear conceptual framework for the current research, purposive sampling (Tongco 2007, p.147) was adopted to recruit respondents who have obtained tertiary (sub-degree) educational credentials or were pursuing sub-degree programs alongside three criteria: gender – males versus females; class – the median monthly domestic household income as a reference of people with comparatively advantaged or disadvantaged family backgrounds; and social status – those who were in education, employment or training and those who were not at the time of interviews.

Research method and data collection, following Dornyei (2007, p.137) and Berg (2009, pp.114, 140), included two pilot interviews. Ethical clearance was endorsed before initiation of the study, and at the start of each interview respondents were given a brief introduction to the study and were assured that access to the interview content was strictly limited to the research team. Participants were assigned common and gender-specific pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 male and 12 female sub-degree students or graduates on a semi-structured and face-to-face basis. All were recruited from four sources, including helping professionals, respondents, the team’s indirect social connections and the team’s direct social networks. In relation to “level of family income”, there were 12 respondents above median income and 12 below. In the “social status” classification, 12 respondents were employed or in education, and 12 were not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Essential questions, including choices, opportunities and negotiations of risks in relation to respondents’ transition journeys, were asked to draw out specific details relevant to the research objectives. Interviews were all audio-recorded by two digital recorders and were transcribed into semi-formal written Chinese. In order to ensure respondents’ lived experiences remain central, representative verbatim quotes and stories translated into English are presented throughout the paper for further discussion.

With the deployment of purposive sampling, all informants were recruited according to their gender, level of income and social status as well as educational attainment. Those who fit in the four specified primary sampling criteria were invited as participants. Without setting secondary purposive sampling requirements such as disciplines of studies, nine out of the 24 informants (37.5%) coincidentally belonged to the faculty of Social Sciences, including Sociology, Social Work, Psychology and Human Services. Although a good number of respondents share a similar stream of studies, emphases should be given to their fluid, subjective lived experiences.
Findings

The 24 respondents’ transition pathways, aspired transition sequences and family resources are detailed in Table 1. In particular, informants’ transition pathways were divided into three groups: 1) those who aspired to follow the mainstream routine to degree tertiary education; 2) those who entered the world of work without degree qualifications but intended to remap their transitions towards degree tertiary learning; and 3) those who saw working as an alternative and did not see having degree qualifications as a necessity. Six specific aspired transition sequences are identified among these three groups of “trapped middles”.

Table 1: Profile of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Transition pathways</th>
<th>Aspired transition sequence</th>
<th>Family resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Remapping</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree → Aspire to study a 1st degree</td>
<td>Well above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Remapping</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree → Aspire to study a 1st degree</td>
<td>Below median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree</td>
<td>Below median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanche</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Study a 1st degree → Work → Aspire to study a 2nd degree</td>
<td>Below median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosco</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree</td>
<td>Above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>Remapping</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree → Aspire to study a 1st degree</td>
<td>Above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Remapping</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree → Aspire to study a 1st and 2nd degree</td>
<td>Above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherry</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree</td>
<td>Above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Study a 1st degree → Work</td>
<td>Below median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Study a 1st degree → Work</td>
<td>Below median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Study a 1st degree → Work → Aspire to study a 2nd degree</td>
<td>Above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Study a 1st degree → Work</td>
<td>Below median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree</td>
<td>Above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree</td>
<td>Above median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Remapping</td>
<td>Work without a 1st degree → Aspire to study a 1st, 2nd &amp; 3rd degree</td>
<td>Below median</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mainstream followers

In late modernity, many governments were dedicated to transforming higher education from elite participation to a mass experience (Furlong & Cartmel 2009, p.121) where knowledge is seen as a resource, a commodity and an industry to sharpen national competitiveness (Wyn 2009, p.98). Tertiary education is taken as the new mass media sector to promote economic growth for countries, social cohesion and individual development (OECD 2007b, cited in Wyn 2009). Participation in higher education therefore becomes normative for the young in the knowledge-based era. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region also sees higher education as a vehicle to upgrade the quality of its human resources and to develop itself as a regional education hub (Lui 2013, p.46). A second expansion of tertiary education was launched after the Government’s 2000 Policy Address, which set out an objective to enable 60% of young school leavers to have access to post-secondary education. The Government supports the parallel development of the publicly-funded and self-financed higher education sectors (ibid., p.47). Currently, there are 20 local degree-awarding higher education institutions, including eight institutions funded by the public through the University Grants Committee, 11 self-financing institutions and one publicly funded institution. A wide variety of locally accredited sub-degree programs are also provided by community colleges of government-funded universities as well as by newly established institutions (Lui 2013, p.48). In 2013, 21.1% of the population aged 15 and above received education to first degree level or higher, compared with
10.4% in 1998 (Census and Statistics Department 2014). It is therefore evident that the number of student enrolments in tertiary institutions is on the increase. With the expansion of tertiary education, which in turn signifies the greater importance governments attach to it, a majority of young people unavoidably aspire to the mainstream ideology that pursuance of degree qualifications is important insofar as higher educational credentials are nearly universally linked to better income and employment stability (OECD 2007b, cited in Wyn 2009, p.101). In other words, having attained a degree qualification may contribute to a sense of superiority in young individuals who may receive greater recognition from (prospective) employers or simply from their peers.

As shown in Table 1, ten of the 24 respondents are mainstream followers who want to obtain their first degrees before going to work or want to do a second degree after having worked for a while. Wendy’s story is a case in point. Her atypical navigation between the old and the new academic structures illustrates the mainstream ideology that having a degree qualification is crucial. Not only does she want to be a degree holder, but she is also concerned about the type of programs offered and the institution that confers her degree. As a student of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), she used to study Arts subjects for the public examinations. Due to academic underachievement, she was eligible only for a self-funded associate degree in Bilingual Studies. Although she received two self-financed degree offers from the Open University of Hong Kong and the Education University of Hong Kong upon completion of the associate degree, she rejected them because the offers were not in an Engineering program that she desperately wanted. She was then convinced that switching the stream of study would be a shortcut to achieve her aspiration and decided to do a self-study of Science subjects as a diploma of secondary education (HKDSE) student under the new academic structure. After the first attempt at the HKDSE, she was given another self-financed degree offer from the Open University of Hong Kong but rejected it again. With a strong determination, she had a second attempt at the HKDSE and at the time of the interview was awaiting the results. When asked if she regretted her choice to give up on being a university student and go back to do a diploma of secondary education, she replied:

No, I didn’t. If I did succeed in doing what I wanted (having an Engineering license), the returns would be impressive. The returns would definitely outweigh the pain that I had gone through ... I lost a lot of social time with my
friends. I simply had no time. I neither knew how to smile, nor gained any weight. While I was studying, I didn’t feel like being a human.

Wendy’s obsession with the mainstream ideology leads to her unusual journey from being an Arts student in the HKCEE and HKALE, an Associate Degree holder in Bilingual Studies, to a Science student in the HKDSE. Her voluntary withdrawal from participation in self-financed tertiary degree education plainly reflects that the perceived value of programs and institution hierarchies do exist and play a key role in decision-making.

**Remapping navigators**

Seven of the 24 informants of the study are remapping their pathways. In particular, most of the remapping navigators wanted to articulate to degree programs but failed to do so due to the tuition fees, individual aspirations and motivation, or personal academic ability. They usually started off working without a degree but may consider returning to do a first, second or even a third degree study during their life courses. The time it takes them to return to study resides in the levels of determination to acquire a degree qualification. Andrew shows the strongest determination, Cathy and Anne come next, followed by Brad, Jack, Ken and Steve.

Having a single-digit result in the HKCEE, Andrew had no choice but to seek an alternative way to obtain a formal qualification for the purposes of employment and further study through the study of the Diploma Yi Jin (DYJ) Program. Upon completion of the program, he was employed as a teaching assistant at a local school for a year. His strong determination to keep learning comes from a painful conversation he had with a native-speaking English teacher (NET) at school. As Andrew recalled:

*I just realised that I couldn’t communicate with (the teacher). I kept sweating! ... My self-esteem was heavily damaged and the awful dialogue just struck me down. I thought I really needed to do further studies.*

After doing a Pre-associate Degree and an Associate Degree, Andrew continued to do a part-time self-financed degree while having a full-time job. He was constantly reminded by his boss that, once he has a degree qualification, he would be able to increase the chances of promotion. He would then be entitled to a certain level of position. Or if he were able to gain a master’s degree, he would be given a better offer. Although Andrew has a reverse and protracted transition from work to school, he sees education as an
investment in himself that enhances his self-esteem and self-confidence as well as being a necessity for better career development. Participation in tertiary education is both a personal and career achievement.

Cathy and Anne also recognised that chances of better job opportunities reside in the attainment of a degree qualification and thus they are likely to do a degree program in the future. The affordability of tuition fees, however, is an important consideration for further studies. This resonates with Anne particularly, who rushed to land a job soon after completion of a higher diploma because her father, the chief breadwinner of the family, suffers from physical health problems. Not coming from an advantaged family, she decided to postpone her plan for doing a degree until she has enough savings and the financial situation of her family improves. Anne commented:

In reality, it was too often that employers would give you an interview simply based on whether you had a degree qualification. So, I decided I would do a part-time degree program at a night school a few years later when my younger brother would be in the workforce.

Brad, Jack, Ken and Steve all mentioned thinking about returning to further studies at some point of their lives without specific plans. Currently working as a social worker of an outreaching team, Brad would like to spare a few years on developing rapport with youth in the community although he acknowledges the importance of having a degree qualification. Being passionate about physics, Jack has a genuine interest in doing a first, second and third degree. However, while doing his associate degree in Construction Engineering, his poor proficiency in English became a barrier for him to perform well in the coursework and examinations. Owing to the academic underachievement, he is in a dilemma about which direction he should go. Similar to Jack, Ken experienced academic failure in IT modules. Despite his poor results of the higher diploma, Ken may consider doing a part-time degree program one or two years later since he agrees that it is always good to have higher levels of educational qualifications. Unlike Brad, Jack and Ken, Steve sees undertaking a degree program as an option, not a priority. Coming from an advantaged family, he has time to pursue what he likes. Wanting to join the disciplinary force of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), Steve works out every day and does preparation for interviews and examinations. He receives full support from his family, financial and spiritual, and trusts his inner voice on what he should devote his time to. He knows he can always go back to study as his family can afford the fees.
Alternative seekers

The remaining respondents are alternative seekers who are contented to enter the workplace without having a degree qualification. Undoubtedly, this group of in-betweeners had aspired to be degree holders. Yet after spending years doing sub-degree programs, they finally find their direction and are no longer nebulous about their futures. They become those who either have a strong sense of agency over their aspirations, which are not aligned with the mainstream ideology, or accommodate the fact that they do not see degree qualifications as necessary.

April, Bosco, Iris and Grace all have their own dreams or simply realise what is important to them. April, with a Pre-associate Degree and an Associate Degree in Business, was offered a top-up degree in the field but rejected it. As she recalled:

*If you did a top-up degree that you weren’t interested, it was simply a waste of time and a waste of money! If I spent time working and figuring out what I liked while all other people were doing their top-up degrees, wasn’t that much better?*

Time and interest had become the prime concerns for April. She wanted time to look for something that genuinely interested her, whereas Bosco, Iris and Grace had already reached that point. Bosco was launching his online website “Enter Hong Kong” to promote local culture and ultimately to benefit the local community through providing visitors with travel plans. Iris spent one and a half years on a working holiday in Australia, but before she left home, she did a course in henna body art so that in Australia she wouldn’t have to depend on typical working holiday farm jobs. Grace, on the other hand, desperately wanted to join the Hong Kong Police Band where she could use her talent as an oboe player and have a stable and good-paid job. She therefore underwent refractive eye surgery in order to increase the odds of achieving her dream occupation. These cases illustrate that young individuals can exercise great autonomy in crafting their own biographies and assume more responsibility for making their choices (Mythen 2004). They all realised that degree qualifications are not the sole key to success.

Respondents Cherry, Kitty and Nancy were satisfied with graduating as sub-degree holders. Throughout the interviews, the three did not show any intention of enrolling in degree tertiary education. Cherry and Kitty mentioned the need to do some continued
learning; in particular, Cherry would like to pick up German in order to know more about her favourite country and its culture, and Kitty wanted to look for courses relevant to her interests or beneficial to her future career. It is interesting to note that although Kitty and Nancy do not have degree qualifications, their lives and salaries are likely to be guaranteed by their professional sub-degree qualifications in accounting and social work, respectively. Young individuals with professions or with accommodating mindsets are, it seems, less likely to feel “trapped in the middle” when opportunities for degree tertiary education seem unavailable.

**Discussion: Why sub-degree holders are or are not ‘trapped in the middle’?**

In general, 17 out of the 24 respondents could be categorised as followers of the mainstream tenet, which suggests that the acquisition of degree qualifications is of crucial importance in a knowledge economy. A closer look at those who aspire to acquire degree qualifications before working reveals that they are confronted with greater risk and have to undergo significant struggles in a number of ways when they choose to undertake sub-degree programs. A seemingly subtle but, in fact, important point to make is that the nature of sub-degree courses provides a more favourable ground for those who undertake associate degrees than those who do higher diplomas. In particular, associate degree students are able to apply for credit waivers on the basis of General Education units when they are accepted into undergraduate or top-up degree programs. This reduces the study workloads and may further lead students to better integration into university life. This advantage especially prevails under Hong Kong’s New Academic Structure where students in all degree programs are required to take General Education courses to improve their life-long learning skills and remain competitive in the workplace.

Additional challenges that face both associate degree and higher diploma students/graduates are the problems with recognition of their sub-degree qualifications and the burden of potential student debt. With the development of neoliberalism, education has been reconfigured from a public investment in individuals to a personal responsibility for young people and their families (Wyn 2012). Parallel to this development, an increasingly marketised society has led to a changed relationship between universities (“providers”) and students (“purchasers”) (Lunt 2008, p.747). A majority of sub-degree programs in Hong Kong are self-financed with charges made on
a credit unit basis at different rates. As Bexley et al. (2013) suggest, it is evident that students have increased their debt owing to studies over the past ten years, and that those in debt tend to be of low socioeconomic status. Students without adequate family resources have to take on debt to undertake their highly commodified sub-degrees. When most sub-degrees are turned into a commodity, there are unavoidably subsequent recognition problems with their sub-degree qualifications. For one thing, sub-degree students/graduates have to come to terms with the fact that the proliferation of self-funded sub-degree programs has resulted in poor perceived value of the programs. The perception of sub-degree programs as being of less value is, in effect, illustrated by the downward estimated earnings premium and the highest variance of log income (i.e. income dispersion) among non-degree tertiary holders (Lui 2013, pp.61-63). In addition, it is likely that sub-degree students/graduates are exposed to qualificational stratification even though they are able to acquire degrees. According to the Education Bureau of Hong Kong, there are approximately 14,600 first-year-first-degree (FYFD) places through the eight institutions funded by the University Grants Committee. Each academic year, there are around 2,000 senior year undergraduate intake places for graduates of sub-degree programs and students with other relevant qualifications. It is therefore clear to see that the numbers of those who are able to earn a publicly funded bachelor’s degree through FYFD places are under stress. Consequently, sub-degree students/graduates who fail to receive offers from the two means mentioned may seek to undertake top-up degree programs, and there lies the conundrum: since this type of program is universally self-financed, its perceived value is lower than that of publicly-funded bachelors’ degrees.

When substantial upward earnings mobility enjoyed by first-degree graduates is confirmed, and when degree graduates’ long-term earnings prospects are better than sub-degree graduates or below (Census and Statistics Department 2016), young people are tempted to try harder to pursue degree qualifications, putting themselves under a considerable amount of stress. Eric, one of the mainstream followers, recalled his awful experience when, during a social gathering, he was asked which university he attended. The experience made him hostile to those who seemed to put people into groups, so in order to avoid this type of exclusion he isolated himself from such gatherings. Fiona, another mainstream follower, was so stressed that she was sent to hospital. She could not eat or sleep and even thought of committing suicide. She told her mother that she had to be discharged from hospital since she could not afford to spare time from her
already packed study schedule. Contrary to these mainstream followers, those who do not see the acquisition of degree qualifications as a necessity are unlikely to be trapped in the dilemma. Although they may encounter other challenges during their transition journeys, their withdrawals from the mainstream avoid some known undesirable consequences such as student debt issues, especially for those with low family incomes, and potential mental problems when individuals are unable to deal with stress. Another interesting case is Rose, an ethnic minority student and a mainstream follower. Rose said she was proud of being an associate degree student. Her strong sense of agency enabled her to overcome a language barrier – not being proficient in reading Chinese – and to break a stereotype that Pakistani women should stay at home. Although there are reservations about the accreditation of sub-degree programs, their perceived value is still high to Rose. Her attempt at higher education gives her status within her ethnic community in general, and particularly as a female.

**Conclusion**

This research has attempted to reinvigorate attention to the intermediate group of in-betweener who are neither NEETs nor degree graduates. These young people aspire to pursue tertiary studies yet are not able to get into university upon completion of secondary education. The individual interviews with the 24 sub-degree students/graduates, has identified three major groups according to their transition pathways: mainstream followers who adhere to the ideology that the acquisition of degree qualifications is, without doubt, important; remapping navigators who work without degrees but may return to further studies; and alternative seekers who figure out their own aspirations or simply do not see having degrees as relevant. Mainstream followers are confronted with great risks and challenges in a variety of ways. One major intragroup difference resides in the fact that those who undertake associate degree programs enjoy a more favourable ground for degree articulation programs than those who do higher diplomas. Nonetheless, all sub-degree students/graduates are exposed to recognition of value problems with their non-degree tertiary qualifications along with potential student debt, particularly for those with less adequate family resources. Some even have to accept that the perceived value of their self-financed top-up degrees is lower than that of publicly funded bachelors’ degrees. Despite all these known undesirable consequences, they are convinced that increased income and opportunity awaits them. Some, however, fail to have appropriate stress management or social support, thus putting themselves in social isolation at best, and thinking of self-
destruction at worst. Although examples of the trapped middles abound, there is also cause for optimism, such as in Rose’s case, which illustrates a renegotiation of how the perceived value of sub-degrees can be different when it is situated within a different ethnic and linguistic context.

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Authors

Victor Wong is Professor, Department of Social Work, Hong Kong Baptist University.
Vienne Lin is Senior Research Assistant, Department of Social Work, Hong Kong Baptist University.
Adolescent motherhood in an Australian context

NICOLA SHEERAN, LIZ JONES, LISA FARNELL & JENNIFER ROWE

Adolescent motherhood has historically been conceptualised as a social problem requiring intervention, particularly in the US and UK where the issue has headlined policy for several decades. We draw on Australian and international literature to explore constructions of adolescent motherhood in Australia. We interrogate the common construction of adolescent motherhood as a primarily age-based problem and examine alternate discourses that could influence policy. We argue that constructing adolescent motherhood as an age-based problem perpetuates stereotypes and stigma and is potentially damaging to young mothers. We conclude that policy and funding decision makers need to reconsider how they are conceptualising the issue. Recommendations for addressing this include acknowledging the heterogeneous experiences of young mothers, reframing the issue as one of disadvantage rather than age, and shifting from a deficit to a strengths-based dialogue.

In Australia, as in other developed countries, adolescent motherhood has been persistently constructed as a societal problem. Recently, however, there has been an increasingly insistent discourse suggesting that defining adolescent pregnancy as a problem is misguided (SmithBattle 2012). Our aim is to review the comparatively limited Australian literature (although international literature and perspectives are included to provide historical and international context), and interrogate the common construction of adolescent motherhood as problematic, in order to propose alternate constructions which, in turn, could influence policy and service planning.
**Adolescent motherhood as a societal problem**

Research investigating the impact of adolescent motherhood on both the adolescent and the infant began in earnest in the 1980s, particularly in the United States (US). The literature suggested that women who became mothers during their adolescent years were not developmentally ready to manage the demands of motherhood (Sadler 1983), placing both the young mothers and their infants at risk of poor outcomes (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan 1987). Since then, internationally there has been a consistent deficit discourse regarding adolescent motherhood, focusing on the psychological health of the young mothers, and the effect on the young women’s life chances and their children.

The early international literature on adolescent mothers’ psychological health suggested they are more likely to become depressed, anxious and stressed than their older counterparts (Baldwin & Cain 1980; Barth, Schinke & Maxwell 1983; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan 1987; Reis 1989; Williams, Joy, Travis, Gotowiec et al. 1987). However, these studies frequently compared young women (often African American) from low SES backgrounds to married or middle-class adult mothers. When young mothers are instead compared to samples matched on pre-existing economic disadvantage, education or race, there are few differences in reported levels of stress (Barratt & Roach 1995), distress (Milan et al. 2004) and depression (Troutman & Cutrona 1990). Similarly, associations between adolescent motherhood and poorer physical and mental health outcomes compared to adult mothers are reduced or eliminated when familial, demographic and environmental factors are controlled for (Patel & Sen 2012). In Australia, Farnell, Jones, Rowe and Sheeran (2012) found that adolescent mothers of preterm infants experienced less stress and better psychological health than adult mothers as they transitioned home from hospital.

Lee and Gramatov (2006) used the Australian longitudinal study on women’s health to investigate predictors and outcomes of early motherhood. Their findings suggested young mothers experienced socioeconomic disadvantages and unhealthy lifestyles. However, when pre-existing disadvantage was controlled for, the problems experienced by young mothers were relatively minor. Their analysis also suggested that adolescent motherhood is not the precipitator of the trajectory of longer term unhealthy lifestyles, low education or the ensuing ill health and disadvantage, and, overall, young Australian mothers were coping well emotionally and maintaining good health (Lee & Gramatnev...
2006). Hence, what may appear to be a strong relationship between age of parenting and psychological distress may be accounted for by pre-existing differences.

International research also suggests adolescent mothers have poorer life chances and are economically disadvantaged compared to women who delay child bearing (Card & Wise 1978; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale 1989; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan 1987; Rudd, McKenry & Nah 1990). Australian research by Bradbury (2006) similarly found adolescent mothers are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society, having low levels of education and high reliance on income support payments. Long term, Bradbury found adolescent mothers were less likely to be partnered, less likely to own their own home and, if partnered, their partner was more likely to be low-income. Further, Australian adolescent mothers are also highly mobile, with instability in relationships, accommodation and employment interfering with tasks of daily living (Quinlivan, Box & Evans 2003; Quinlivan, Petersen & Gurrin 1999). However, these studies are primarily descriptive, often comparing groups of mothers, but not establishing causation (Bradbury 2006).

Pre-existing differences similarly call into question the causal role of young maternal age in educational and financial outcomes for adolescent mothers. For example, longitudinal US research used a large national data set to compare a subset of sister dyads who were either early or late child-bearers with the overall sample. They found few differences in high school completion or employment rates for sister dyads regardless of whether they were early or late child-bearers, despite differences in welfare assistance, education and marital and employment status, when the early child bearers (i.e. adolescent mothers) were compared to the overall sample (Geronimus, Korenman & Hillemeier 1994). Further, longitudinal research from NZ found many adolescent women who became mothers had disengaged from education prior to falling pregnant and not as a result of becoming pregnant, suggesting mutual predictors of school disengagement and early pregnancy (Fergusson & Woodward 2000).

Internationally, being an adolescent mother has also been found to have a negative impact on the young mother’s children (Baldwin & Cain 1980; Haskett, Johnson & Miller 1994). However, the causal role of young maternal age in the outcomes for infants of young mothers has been questioned. For instance, Shaw, Lawlor and Najman (2006), in a prospective study of Australian women who received antenatal care,
investigated the effect of maternal age on children’s outcomes 14 years later, finding the associations between maternal age, psychological distress, school performance and smoking and alcohol use were all largely explained by socioeconomic factors, family structure and maternal health. They also confirmed that the majority of Australian adolescent mothers and their offspring had good outcomes.

In summary, contemporary studies have highlighted how pre-existing differences between adult and adolescent mothers have not often been considered. Adolescent mothers are a heterogeneous group. Thus, when factors such as SES are controlled for and appropriate comparison groups used, fewer or no differences are found, suggesting that negative outcomes for adolescent mothers may have been overstated and, instead, it is pre-existing disadvantage that is a risk factor for, and predictor of, long-term disadvantage for adolescent mothers. This raises the question of why age has been targeted as the problem.

**The construction of adolescent motherhood as a social problem**

Adolescent motherhood as a social problem is a 20th century construct (Rhode & Lawson 1993). Historically, women married and gave birth in their adolescent years. Those who were not married either gave their babies away or entrusted them to family to be cared for. It is only in recent years, as a result of societal changes, including a greater emphasis on education and career attainment for women, and changing social policies, that giving birth as an adolescent woman has been defined as problematic (Rhode & Lawson 1993). Further, factors that are analytically and empirically distinct, such as chronological age, marital status, and the planned or wanted nature of the pregnancy, have been conflated (Macintyre & Cunningham-Burley 1993), resulting in adolescent pregnancy and motherhood being defined as “the problem”.

The ongoing increase in the average age of mothers in Australia (30.1 years in 2012) and the decrease in the average number of children per woman (declining from 2.74 in 1972 to 1.8 in 2012) (ABS 2010; AIHW 2014) has made adolescent mothers appear increasingly deviant, with a UNICEF report in 2001 highlighting that “…adolescent parenthood has come to be regarded as a significant disadvantage in a world which increasingly demands an extended education, and in which delayed childbearing, smaller families, and two-income household, and careers for women are increasingly becoming the norm” (UNICEF 2001, pp.5-6).
Expectations of, and experiences around parenting have fundamentally shifted in the past few decades, with children seen as more vulnerable (Faircloth 2014), precipitating a shift in parenting practices to an intensive parenting ideology (Hays 1996). This parenting ideology (Hays 1996) proposes that being a good parent is less about the provision of basic needs and more about material and social resources (Gillies 2005). Mothers do far more than feed, change and shelter their children, devoting large amounts of time, energy and emotional and material resources to their children, and parenting has become more public: “What parents feed their children, how they discipline them, where they put them to bed, how they play with them: all of these have become politically, and morally, charged questions.” (Faircloth 2014, p.29). Expertise on children and their care, up-to-date knowledge on child development research, and an affiliation to particular education and child-raising strategies are skills needed to enact this new style of parenting (Faircloth 2014). However, women from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as adolescent mothers, are seen as lacking these skills and are targeted for surveillance and intervention (Pitt 2002; Romagnoli & Wall 2012). The discourse of risk to the child, coupled with mothers being seen as responsible agents, perpetuates the negative perceptions of adolescent mothers, who are judged as lacking the required resources or skills. Breheny and Stephens (2010) concluded that “concern about adolescent motherhood is as much about the wrong sort of women becoming mothers, as mothering too soon” (p.307).

In summary, the continued emphasis on age as the defining problem can be understood from a historical and current cultural perspective, where shifting societal norms mean childbearing at a young age has become increasingly counter-normative and where pre-existing disadvantage has been ignored. What has also been ignored is evidence about the positive aspects of adolescent parenting.

**Motherhood as positively influencing young women**

A growing body of research has investigated adolescent women’s experiences of motherhood, giving rise to an alternative discourse of adolescent parenting that challenges existing constructions. Spear and Lock (2003) reviewed 22 qualitative studies investigating adolescent motherhood and found that most adolescent mothers viewed parenting as a positive experience. Further, research from the US and UK suggests adolescent mothers often return to school, value education and report being committed to providing the best life for their children that they can (Arai 2003; Arenson
1994; Carey, Raliff & Lyle 1998; Clarke 2013; Spear & Lock 2003). Australian research has found becoming a mother is associated with increased self-esteem and sense of identity (Sheeran, Jones & Rowe in press; Mulherin & Johnstone 2015; Shea, Bryant & Wendt 2015), including Indigenous women from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds in Queensland (Larkins et al. 2011). Becoming a mother is globally reported as a catalyst for changes in lifestyle, often dramatically changing trajectories, facilitating maturity and career development, and decreasing risk-taking behaviour (Breen 2014; Hanna 2001; Seamark & Lings 2004; SmithBattle & Leonard 1998). Further, SmithBattle (1995) found adolescent mothers did not share the social scientific view that mothering jeopardised or limited their lives. Instead, adolescent women saw pregnancy and motherhood as a positive experience, but the stigma associated with the label “adolescent mother” added to the challenges they faced.

Becoming an adolescent mother may, in particular, be a positive life choice for women from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to alternative options. As highlighted by SmithBattle (2005), postponing parenthood would not enhance the life experiences for some young women unless the disadvantage that existed pre-pregnancy was addressed. According to Arai (2009), it is the political and middle-class perspectives of adolescent pregnancy that should be subject to scrutiny, not the young women’s decision to become parents. Indeed, Breheny and Stephens (2007) argue that adolescent mothers are not seen as contributing value to society by being mothers, because motherhood is only sanctioned when social conditions such as financial independence and marriage are met; yet there is little consideration that these may be unachievable for some women at any age (Breheny & Stephens 2007).

Implications of the ‘age is the problem’ construction

Using age to define mothers as a social problem has a range of implications for adolescent mothers. First, adolescent mothers are viewed as a homogenous group, where negative outcomes pertaining to a small number of adolescent mothers are generalised to all adolescent mothers, who are then automatically assumed to be bad parents, incapable of raising their children appropriately. In Australia, adolescent mothers face negative attitudes, harsh stereotypes and perceive differential treatment from members of communities and health and service providers due to their age (Hanna 2001; Robb, McInery & Hollins Martin 2013; Roberts, Graham & Barter-Godfrey 2011), with young mothers perceived as less able than adult mothers (Perolini 2015).
Policy decisions designed to make motherhood a less attractive option for adolescents often mean young mothers are treated differently to adult mothers, possibly exacerbating the stigma and perpetuating the poverty cycle (Fessler 2008). One example in contemporary Australia is the baby bonus government payment provided to women once they give birth. This government initiative was introduced to increase the attractiveness of having children, as a result of the ageing workforce and declining reproductive rates (Guest 2008; Guest & Parr 2010). However, one widespread belief was that providing young mothers with monetary incentives increased the attractiveness of becoming a parent at a young age, where there would be an increase in adolescent pregnancy rates as they became parents purely “for the money” (Grattan & Nguyen 2004). This attitude prevailed in the media and in popular discourse (Grattan & Nguyen 2004) despite no discernible increase in rates of adolescent pregnancy following the introduction of the baby bonus (Laws, Grayson & Sullivan 2006; Laws & Hilder 2008; Laws, Li & Sullivan 2010). At best, the incentive program slowed the rate of decline in adolescent pregnancy in Australia (Lain et al. 2009). Recently, discriminatory practises at a structural level have been introduced, for instance, changing payment schemes so that young women must return to study or work when their infants are 12 months old versus seven years old for adult mothers, and issuing lump-sum payments to adult mothers and part payments to young women (Milne 2006). McArthur and Winkworth (2013) found consistency between the hopes and dreams of young mothers on income support and Australia’s key policy outcomes for children and families. However, many factors hampered the achievement of those hopes and dreams, including stigma, lack of access to resources, networks and social support, and the everyday realities of caring for very young children. Policies and practices that mandate change in personal behaviour rather than addressing structural inequalities reinforce negative stereotypes of adolescent mothers by not acknowledging individual circumstances, a criticism levelled at other policy decisions that are both overly prescriptive and fail to address heterogeneity in groups (i.e. the Indigenous welfare payment scheme; Mendes, Waugh & Flynn 2014).

A consequence of feeling stigmatised is the reluctance of adolescent mothers to access services (McArthur & Winkworth 2013). Research in Australia investigating the uptake and experiences of young mothers utilising support services (Jones, Rowe & Sheeran 2008) identified several factors influencing whether young mothers would access services. All mothers in the study were highly aware of the negative connotations of
being an adolescent mother and thus strove to distance themselves from this label, which often meant they would not ask for help from anyone, including family. They also related to a person not a service, so if the mother had not built a good relationship with the individual, they would not engage with the service. Thus, mothers who experienced service providers as rude and judgmental would no longer access the service. Adolescent mothers who most needed help (i.e. those not transitioning well to parenting, reporting diagnoses of post-natal depression, having no partner support, with histories of drug use and/or violence/DV or living in rural or regional areas with no transport) also reported poorer relationships with service providers and were particularly reluctant to ask for help (Jones, Rowe & Sheeran 2008). In contrast, group programs specifically aimed at supporting young mothers were praised, for normalising the experience of difficulties associated with parenting, for the non-judgemental attitude of those running the group, and for providing the opportunity to take time out from the demands of parenting. This is consistent with international research showing group programs are well received and important to adolescent mothers (Ellis-Sloan 2015). However, most young mothers who needed additional support did not have access to group programs.

Overall, then, classifying mothers by age perpetuates stigma, resulting in feelings of judgment that may act as a barrier to help-seeking, diminish satisfaction with motherhood and jeopardise mental health. One final implication from defining age as the problem, rather than acknowledging the precipitating role of disadvantage, is that blame and responsibility for change are placed on the adolescent mother – when they may not have the agency to change it. Resolving systemic disadvantage presents a complex challenge for researchers and policy-makers alike (Committee for Economic Development of Australia 2015). Thus, shifting the focus to adolescent motherhood as the problem may seem a comparatively attractive option for policymakers, service providers, media and the community.

**Supporting adolescent motherhood in Australia**

In Australia, interventions to support young mothers have typically adopted a deficit model of adolescent parenting (Brand, Morrison & Down 2014); what adolescent mothers are not doing well. However, deficit models may inadvertently promote negative outcomes by eroding trust between young mothers and health workers, perpetuating stigma and stereotyping, negating adolescent mothers’ positive experience
of motherhood, and undermining their sense of efficacy as mothers. Deficit models are also at odds with how adolescent mothers view themselves and their daily experience of parenting and challenges (Sheeran, Jones & Rowe 2015). In contrast, a strengths-based model, focusing on aspects of parenting that young women are doing well, is more likely to promote trusting and effective relationships between young mothers and health workers, in turn maximising the uptake and success of interventions to support adolescent mothers. Congruent with this, Ellis-Sloan (2015) found support services are effective when they are informed by an ethic of care, a model responsive to need and congruent with the women’s view of themselves.

In addition, service providers and policymakers alike should be mindful that many of the challenges associated with adolescent parenting are a result of systemic disadvantage. As such, they are unlikely to be resolved by interventions that focus on the individual. For example, a recent meta-analysis of youth and early intervention programs aimed at reducing adolescent childbearing in the US showed a moderate reduction in risk but also found that early intervention programs do not influence the complex factors leading to early parenthood (Harden et al. 2009). Instead, interventions addressing systemic pre-existing disadvantage, including social inequality, housing and transportation, poverty, and engagement in education and the workforce are needed. However, the first step appears to be acknowledging that disadvantage is the main problem, not age. A second step is shifting from simple models of adolescent childbearing to considering the more complex biological nature of reproductive behaviour (Dickens, Johns & Chipman 2012) and how childbearing is related to environmental factors (Roberts, Graham & Barter-Godfrey 2011). Interventions that increase safety and improve the environment may have flow-on effects to issues such as early childbearing (Dickens, Johns & Chipman 2012). Both these suggestions require a reconceptualisation of adolescent pregnancy to inform policy.

Australia has some unique challenges when addressing adolescent parenting that have thus far been ignored in the literature. For example, Australia has six times the national rate of adolescent pregnancy in Indigenous populations (ABS 2010), yet little research has explored adolescent pregnancy for these women (Ireland et al. 2015; Senior & Chenhall 2008, 2012). Conflated with this issue is the difference in access to health services/health outcomes between rural, regional and urban areas (Hennegan, Kruske & Redshaw 2014; Matich et al. 2015), as most Indigenous adolescent parents live in rural areas. The psychosocial profile of women who become mothers in regional/rural areas,
as well as environmental factors (i.e. access to services) may increase risk of both pregnancy and poor outcomes (Roberts, Graham & Barter-Godfrey 2011; Smith & Grenyer 1999). Further, Australia has a growing population of adolescent mothers from immigrant/refugee backgrounds who face substantial challenges (McMichael 2013; Ngum Chi Watts, Liamputtong & McMichael 2015). To the extent that research needs to explore and address pre-existing disadvantage and risk, we argue it is important to understand the intersection between such risk factors and outcomes for adolescent mothers.

Finally, some researchers have questioned a fundamental assumption underpinning the collective discourse around motherhood perpetuated by other researchers, policymakers and community members: the belief that motherhood is chosen in the absence of a promising future. Such an assumption negates the view that motherhood is a promising future and that social structures do not support or acknowledge this path (Arai 2003). Current society dictates that motherhood is a substandard profession, not the young mothers (SmithBattle 1995). As such, we need to explore the way adolescent motherhood is embedded within the larger discussion of women in the workforce and the impact of child rearing on women’s financial and career aspirations.

**Conclusion**

We have reviewed the limited Australian literature on adolescent pregnancy and parenting to identify issues pertinent to the Australian context. We have argued that historically international research, which has informed our perspectives, has overstated the negative outcomes for adolescent mothers and their children. More recently, research has shown that many of the negative outcomes have less to do with age and more to do with pre-existing social disadvantage. Moreover, the outcomes for many of these women would not have been significantly better had they delayed childbearing. However, a pervasive discourse around the negative impacts of early childbearing and a relative disregard of the adolescent mothers’ positive experience of parenting has perpetuated negative stereotypes and the stigma experienced by young mothers, with ramifications for the mother’s internal view of self and willingness to access support when needed. Policy decisions also differentiate mothers due to age, contributing to stigma and stereotypes. Recommendations for addressing this are: acknowledging the heterogeneity of young mothers’ experiences, shifting from a deficits dialogue to a strengths-based dialogue and reframing the issue as one of disadvantage rather than age. We also argue for a more nuanced understanding of how contextual factors relate to
reproductive behaviour and outcomes, and how pre-existing disadvantage can be mitigated.

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Authors
Nicola Sheeran is a lecturer in Clinical Psychology in the School of Applied Psychology, Mt Gravatt Campus, Griffith University, Queensland and was previously a counsellor and community educator on unplanned pregnancy, contraception use and adolescent pregnancy prevention.

Liz Jones is an associate professor and social and organisational psychologist in the School of Applied Psychology, Mt Gravatt Campus, Griffith University, Queensland. Her research interests are in health and intergroup communication, as well as the transition to parenthood with a preterm infant.

Lisa Farnell is a PhD candidate in the School of Applied Psychology, Mt Gravatt Campus, Griffith University, Queensland. She is exploring social influences on the emotion process.

Jennifer Rowe is an associate professor in nursing in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Paramedicine, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. Her primary research is in early parenting adjustment.
A re-education initiative and its impact on reoffending among indigenous New Zealand youth

DANIEL POA & SARAH WRIGHT MONOD

Māori youth are over-represented within the New Zealand criminal justice system. Māori youth comprise 60% of the total youth apprehensions but represent only 20% of New Zealand’s youth population. This paper draws on narrative interviews with six young Māori men and women who had been in trouble with the police. The interviews sought to increase understanding of how their engagement in a program funded by a re-education initiative – the Youth Guarantee policy – impacted upon their offending. A set of effective and non-effective practices toward preventing criminal offending among indigenous young people are drawn from the findings.

Young Māori are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system in New Zealand, as are young indigenous populations in Australia (White 2014), Canada (Greenberg, Grekul & Nelson 2016) and the United States (Hartney 2008). Māori represent 20% of New Zealand’s youth population, yet in 2014 60% of total youth apprehensions were of Māori (Statistics New Zealand 2016). Young Māori are also more likely to be prosecuted, convicted and sentenced than are any other ethnic group (Workman 2011). This, in turn, compounds the criminal justice statistics for Māori adults. Māori men currently make up 50% of the adult male prisoner population, and Māori women make up over 60% of the adult female prisoner population. The UN Sub-Committee against Torture (2015) recently expressed grave concern at these figures and called for an increase in efforts by the incumbent and future governments to address not only the present situation but also its underlying causes. Criminologists are divided as to
what explains the overrepresentation of Māori, but tend to be in agreement that more research is needed (see Workman 2011; Bull 2009). This paper draws on data from narrative interviews conducted with Māori youth who have been in trouble with the police. The aim of the study was to understand if, and how, a re-education initiative may have affected criminal activity by these young people.

**Crime and education**

Most western industrialised nations espouse to a *risk* and *responsibility* framework when responding to criminal offending by young people (MacDonald 2015; White & Perrone 2015). The notion of risk holds that there are empirical associations between crime and other measurable variables – *risk factors* – and that criminal behaviour can be both predicted and controlled by identifying these. Risk factors are variables that are often beyond one’s control, such as poverty, family breakdown, mental illness and low IQ. The emphasis upon responsibility can be attributed to the move away from welfare-based approaches to youth justice to more punitive approaches. Under a welfare approach, risk factors indicate the need for support. However, where there is a “get tough” justice agenda, individuals are required to manage their “risk” and are held accountable if this management fails. Young people who would previously have been seen to be “in need” are now seen as “posing risk” – threatening, possibly criminal, sub-criminal, disorderly, disrespectful and/or potentially problematic (Cunneen, White & Richards 2015). One problem, of course, is that one may exhibit many risk factors, but not go on to commit crime (MacDonald 2015). And, in settler societies such as Australia, Canada, the US and New Zealand, policies and practices stemming from the risk and responsibility framework have been found to disproportionately impact indigenous peoples simply because, of all ethnic groups, they are most subject to a number of risk factors (White & Perrone 2015; Cunneen, White & Richards 2015).

Education, under the risk and responsibility framework, is seen as a *protective* factor which can moderate the effect of exposure to risk factors (De Matteo & Marczyk 2005; Lösel & Farrington 2012; Glowacz & Born 2015). Other protective factors include: having a positive attitude and a sense of confidence; a strong bond with at least one parent and above average socioeconomic status; and, living in a cohesive environment (Glowacz & Born 2015). Education is said to be protective in that one’s life chances are enhanced with the attainment of qualifications (negating the need to engage in illicit activity), and that the school environment nurtures a sense of social inclusion (see Moore & McArthur 2014). However, a review of longitudinal studies examining
protective factors found that effects differ substantially in relation to variables such as age, gender and ethnicity (Ttofi et al. 2016). Scholars also stress the cumulative nature of protective factors, arguing that a particular configuration between them is what counts most (Glowacz & Born 2015). These insights have led to calls for research into the relationships between protective factors and social variables, as well as those between individual protective factors (Ttofi et al. 2016).

**Māori youth in education**

When compared to other ethnic groups in New Zealand, Māori have lower levels of educational attainment. In 2014, Māori school leavers had the lowest rates of achievement of the National Certificate of Achievement (NCEA) Level 1 when compared with other ethnic groups (Ministry of Education 2015a). They also had the lowest rates of achievement of NCEA Level 3 (Ministry of Education 2015b), and the lowest proportion of students remaining at school to age 17 (Ministry of Education 2015c). These figures mean that Māori youth are more at risk of engaging in criminal activity and therefore more likely to be held accountable by the justice system.

The New Zealand Government developed the Youth Guarantee policy in 2009 to provide opportunities for 16- and 17-year-olds not participating in education to re-engage by encouraging education providers to practice in new ways (Ministry of Education 2015d). The policy was not directed at Māori, but significantly more Māori qualify to participate in its programs than do other population groups given the levels of disengagement from mainstream education among Māori youth. Nor is the Youth Guarantee policy explicitly aimed at preventing crime. However, it is an initiative which operates under a broader policy schema known as Better Public Services (BPS), which has as one of its aims the reduction of youth crime by 25% by 2017.

The study this paper reports on aimed to identify the impacts the Youth Guarantee may have had on reoffending practices among young Māori participants who had all attended a Youth Guarantee funded program offered by the same provider. The objective was to capture their perspectives about reengaging with education and to identify some of the factors of that process – factors which these students believe were vital in their desisting from criminality – with a view to better inform policies and practices aimed at reducing reoffending among indigenous youth more widely.

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1NCEA has three levels of achievement, and these are sought by students in Years 11, 12, and 13 of the New Zealand secondary school system. Year 13 is the final year of secondary school.
Sample and method

Human ethics approval to undertake the study was sought and obtained via Victoria University of Wellington’s Human Ethics Committee. A purposive sampling strategy was used. Each participant was a student of a Youth Guarantee funded education centre run by a non-government organisation (NGO) in one of New Zealand’s main cities. The NGO has an open door policy, which means that the institution refuses to expel students who have been excluded from other education centres as well as those who have extensive histories with the police and the justice system. Prospective participants were approached and asked to take part by the lead author, who had worked as a volunteer at the NGO.

Six young Māori men and women aged from 16 to 20 years agreed to participate in the study. All of the participants had been in trouble with the police but had not yet spent any time “inside”. A screening conversation with each of the participants would determine that they had also experienced a significant reduction in contact with the police while at the education centre run by the NGO.

Under the Youth Guarantee policy, a provider can receive funds to run an education program for up to two years. The education centre at the NGO offers a range of NCEA accredited courses and provides a community-based setting and an emphasis on “hands-on” learning with a view to meet individual needs in a holistic way. Staff at the centre strive to understand what each student aspires to and subsequently tailor programs to suit. All of the participants involved in this study had spent between 12 and 18 months at the education centre at the time that the interviews were conducted.

Narrative interviewing is a method frequently employed by researchers working with Māori as it draws on the tradition of storytelling to impart knowledge (Bishop et al. 2009; Hollis et al. 2011; Myftari 2015; Nahkhid & Shorter 2014). Each of the participants’ narratives were collected via individual interviews conducted by the first author, who is of Ngati Kahungunu and Ngai Tuhoe descent. Participants did not receive payment for their involvement in the research, but, in accordance with Māori tradition, food was provided and travel costs were compensated.

Analysis and results

Transcripts were read several times to identify themes that pertained to the aims of the study. Three principal themes were identified: belonging, feeling valued and access to support. The results section discusses each theme in turn, drawing on illustrative quotes.
from the transcripts. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants’ anonymity. A brief introduction to the contexts in which the participants began their offending, as described by them, is presented first.

**Starting to offend: Background contexts**

All of the participants were between nine and 13 years of age and were with their peers when they first started getting into trouble with the police. Wanting to feel part of something often triggered this. Tyler, for example, claimed she engaged in activities she might not have normally done so in order to feel connected:

\[
\text{I just wanted to be part of my family and what they wanted to do ... We would just steal cars and that ... I would be the sheep and follow.}
\]

Criminal activity was also associated with substance use. As Mike explained:

\[
\text{Every time I'm on weed and alcohol I get into like a criminal mind. I just go, ah yeah, I just want to go rob something, and like when I am angry I want to rob something.}
\]

Other participants attributed their offending to a need to acquire drugs. Toni, for example, talked about her addiction to “synthetic cannabinoids” and how she would steal money in order to buy them.²

All of the participants in some way or another also described that they were living “rough” before they were enrolled in the education centre at the NGO; that is, they were on the street or in overcrowded housing with poor conditions and limited access to food. Some of the participants were homeless and their offending solely stemmed from a lack of basic needs. If they were hungry, they had to steal food or hustle money in order to eat.

The participants also talked about why mainstream school didn’t work for them. They spoke of feeling out of place, picked on or subject to teaching that they felt was ineffective. Tui explained that she had initially lost interest in education because she found it hard to relate to the teachers at school. All the participants spoke of “wagging” (playing truant) a significant amount of school that resulted in them finishing their education early. Kahu explained that he started wagging when he was around 15 or 16 year old. When asked why, Kahu said:

² Synthetic cannabinoids are chemicals that mimic the effect of THC, the part of cannabis that offers a “high”. These chemicals are added to a mixture of dried plant matter and sold in New Zealand under brand names such as “Kronic”, “Spice”, and “K2” (New Zealand Drug Foundation, 2014).
Um, I guess the teachers sort of seen me differently. Started to treat me differently at the time because of what I was doing outside of school so drinking, smoking.

Their experiences of mainstream education, therefore, had been predominantly negative ones.

**Desisting from offending: Time at the NGO education centre**

**Belonging**

All the participants spoke of experiencing the family *wairua* (spirit) of the NGO, which would, in turn, come to have an impact on their offending. The students felt as though they belonged to something bigger than themselves, which, as noted, was also a factor in precipitating their offending. While enrolled in the NGO education centre they became attached to something different. Mike, for example, said:

*Cause no matter what happens at [the NGO] stays in the [NGO]. It’s just like a family. Pretty much so we have all got each other’s back here. We all good with each other, no dramas.*

Another student, Toni, said that after six months of participation in the NGO, he stopped doing burglaries and stealing. When asked why he had stopped, he said:

*I guess … cause I’d do it during the day when I was at [the NGO] and there would be a group of us. And that they’d know that they were [NGO] kids, and then it was just more the pride that this was the place that was helping me and bring a bad name back to them was worse than bringing a bad name to just myself. If you know what I mean.*

Another sense of belonging was facilitated by the NGO’s education centre, one beyond its own physical and metaphysical space. *Te reo* (Māori language) was regularly drawn upon and *tikanga* (Māori values and customs) were often applied and reinforced within the curriculum and at the centre. For two of the participants who had little knowledge about their Māori heritage, having *te reo* and *tikanga* in the curriculum helped them to connect with being Māori, which in turn assisted them to tackle some behavioural issues. For example, learning Māori culture helped Luke develop a sense of deference for authority figures:

*Helped me understand like other Māori and like just the way they are. Yeah, a bit more respect for the elders and that.*
Tui referred to a Māori cultural trip where the tutors and students travelled to marae (meeting houses) around the North Island and learned about Māori history, values and customs. Tui claimed that this trip helped her with her temptation to consume drugs and alcohol:

*I think it was like they took us everywhere ... and explain to us like “see, you don’t need alcohol”... Like they’d just say stuff to us and then I would just take it back in my in my head and then I just understood everything. ... I see things clearer.*

While developing a new sense of who they were, the participants also noted a change in their sense of self-worth during their time at the NGO education centre. They began to imagine an alternative future to that which they were previously resigned. Tyler began to realise that she had many options available to her. She explained that she had grown up in a gang pad and that she had once aspired to be a woman in the gang culture:

*I was telling myself ... I wanted to just hook up with a mungie [Mongrel Mob gang member]. Just find someone there who is a patch member and then, yeah, just stay with them. Go on the benefit. Just watch them do what they do and, yeah.*

**Feeling valued**

This theme was primarily talked about in relation to the staff of the NGO. The tutors of the education centre were often talked about in terms of going “above and beyond” for the participants, which prompted them to want to “do better”. Kahu talked about one of the tutors in this way:

*Well, she gave me a lot of opportunities for jobs, courses, you know, productions. Just things that can get me involved instead of me going out drinking every day, and more of a brighter way of doing things, I guess, pretty much.*

Toni also explained the importance of having others believe in her:

*You can do it. You can do anything ... just tell me. I just need to hear those words and knowing that someone believes that I can do something. Just, yeah ... brings a lot of confidence to someone ... Even just a couple of words can bring a lot, a lot. Some people don’t notice that.*
Access to support

Participants also noted that support received outside of the NGO, but as a result of being enrolled in its Youth Guarantee program, was significant in reducing their offending. Mike, for example, was now able to receive free alcohol and drug counselling, and this meant that he reduced his drug and alcohol use. Participants also benefited from a free health care provider for teens and financial assistance from Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ). Students Luke and Tyler said the social workers dedicated to the NGO helped them to obtain a youth benefit. They had previously encountered problems applying themselves because without the social workers. For Luke, obtaining an income was significant as it helped address homelessness, the biggest factor in his offending:

... It wasn’t until [the social worker] came that I started getting in touch with WINZ and stuff ... they hooked me up with a youth benefit. And that was mean, bro. I could start giving money to my bro ... I was staying up at his place, was giving him like 50 bucks a week, and he would get like food ... aye, was mean.

Discussion and conclusions

The themes identified from the stories told by the six Māori youth in the study reported here are similar to those identified by others who have examined education’s protective factor against criminal offending by young people. The participants attached themselves with pride to the NGO education centre and were protective of its name. An emotional connection such as this has been argued to be a key factor in preventing crime among Australian youth (Reid 2009). A change among the participants’ sense of self-worth as they achieved goals was noteworthy and an especially salient feature for indigenous youth. As Kidman (2015) notes, young Māori are all too often represented in public discourses as dangerous, wayward and lazy, an image that invites public resentment and rebuke. Research has found that young Māori, like other indigenous young people, are acutely aware of this imagery, and it affects the images they have of themselves (Maynard, Wright & Brown 2013; White 2013). Another salient feature for this group of young Māori was the opportunity to learn of their Māori culture and heritage at the NGO education centre. Apena (2007) has found that criminal offending is more prevalent among ethnic minorities who do not have strong knowledge of their cultural heritage.

The participants also spoke of the significance of having socioeconomic stressors addressed as a result of being enrolled in the NGO education centre. Fundamental
strains, such as a lack of income and housing, produce additional strains for young people, inclining them to anti-social behaviour and criminal activity (Agnew 2006; Deuchar & Ellis 2013; Higgins, Piquero & Piquero 2011). The young people participating in the Youth Guarantee program at the NGO were able to be connected with social workers who could assist them in accessing social security benefits for basic items, thus enhancing the emotional and social capital gains they were experiencing.

The sense of feeling connected and valued during their time at the NGO education centre may in part be due to the centre’s “open door” policy. The participants felt that no matter what they had done they would always be welcome there. International research has found definitive links between school exclusion and offending (see Deuchar & Ellis 2013; France, Bottrell & Armstrong 2012; McVie 2014), particularly among minority youth (Krezmein, Leone & Wilson 2014). As both Sutherland (2011) and Krezmein and colleagues note, exclusions sever young people from established bonds with significant adults and prosocial peers, which in turn decreases the authority of constructive social and moral norms. Thus, the Youth Guarantee policy, insofar as it has materialised in a holistic, non-discriminatory program at the NGO education centre, has been effective in reducing the tendency for criminal activity among this Māori youth sample.

A holistic, non-discriminatory program takes account of key stressors and responds to these with effective practices. Drawing on the results of this study, we propose that such a program might foster the development of pro-social relationships between young persons and staff; it might identify and respond to individual needs; it might use or draw on indigenous language, customs and values; it might expose young persons to multiple opportunities; and it might enable links to be made with social agencies to address any socioeconomic deficits being experienced. Such a program might also ensure that it didn’t engage in practices that may have some immediate behaviour modification outcomes but serve to exasperate stressors (by, say, reflecting the negative imagery that indigenous young people so often hear about themselves). Practices like considering individual behaviour to stem from personal decisions and/or enacting zero tolerance policies may undermine any important pro-social gains made to that point.

It is difficult to propose a time frame by which a provider could expect to see significant changes occur and be able to adjust practices if required. One participant (Toni) noted a period of six months before offending ceased. The other participants were not as specific. It is additionally difficult to determine how long changes might endure once
enrolment in a program ends. A young offender, not part of this study but enrolled in a different alternative education program, reported that he not only had achieved NCEA level 2 while enrolled in that program, but had gone on from there to enrol in tertiary education. In turn, his desistence had been maintained: “I’m busy now and I’ll never do that [offending] again” (Mussen 2016). Thus, both the achievement of academic credentials, and that his time was now spent doing other activities, appear to be have been important for this young person’s turn around. The results of our study indicate that the delivery of education is important to secure a commitment by students to achieve academically and to concentrate on other activities. Alternative education providers should be also cognisant of the contexts of social disadvantage that many young indigenous people will continue to encounter beyond a period of enrolment.

Research with adult offenders suggests that the motivation to be crime-free is a complex and ongoing process that is affected by a number of internal and external factors (Rowe & Soppit 2014). It is therefore important to consider how to maintain any opportunities offered and to support links made by way of a given program.

We note that ultimately a policy-level change is required. As MacDonald (2015) argues, a focus on youth crime as an outcome of personal decision-making by young people ignores the social and economic exclusionary effects upon them that have stemmed from the rapid and deep process of de-industrialisation from across most of the western world over the past few decades. In settler societies, it is indigenous young people who are the most excluded, their circumstances compounded by the enduring effects of colonisation (White 2014). Indeed, if the risk of indigenous youth coming into contact with the criminal justice system can be reduced by addressing the social inequities they are disproportionately subject to, then holding indigenous youth wholly accountable for their transgressions may be seen as a function of discrimination. Such policy-level change might be brought about by practices initiated by those at the coalface of youth services.

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**Authors**

Daniel Poa is a community law advisor and restorative justice co-ordinator. He has worked with young “at-risk” Māori as a mentor and youth advocate.

Sarah Wright Monod lectures in the School of Social and Cultural Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.
Using participatory design to engage young people in the development of a new online tool to increase help-seeking

VICTORIA BLAKE, KERRIE BUHAGIAR, SYLVIA KAUER, MARIESA NICHOLAS, LENA SANCI & JULIE GREY

Participatory design methods were used to engage end users in the development of an online tool designed to increase help-seeking for mental health issues among young adults aged 18 to 25. The research found that the help-seeking journey for young people can be overwhelming, non-linear and often reliant on a young person’s ability to find appropriate help and supports. This situation may be mitigated by the development of a tool based on a three-step process that supports young people to ‘explore and reflect’, ‘accept’ and ‘act’.

As many as one in four young Australians aged 16 to 24 years are currently living with a mental health difficulty (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2008). Timely and appropriate help-seeking can reduce the long-term health, social and economic impact of many of these mental health problems (Rickwood et al. 2005), yet studies repeatedly show that the majority of people experiencing a mental illness do not get the professional help they need (McLennan 1998). Recent national survey data suggests that rates of help-seeking have increased in the last 10 years with 65% of “in need” 12- to 17-year-olds seeking help (Lawrence et al. 2015). This increase is most likely due to the recent investment in service delivery and promotion in Australia (Hickie & McGorry 2007). Nevertheless, at least 35% of young people are not getting the help they need. Young adults (18- to 25-year-olds) who can no longer access school services,
and may have less parental involvement in their health care than younger cohorts, may experience more barriers to seeking help. Furthermore, this survey found that 65% of those who had sought help found the care they received did not meet or only partially met their needs (Lawrence et al. 2015). Left untreated, mental health problems can not only become more severe, but also often lead to other difficulties including social withdrawal, breakdown of family and personal relationships as well as poorer education and employment outcomes and overrepresentation in the justice system (Meadows et al. 2015; NSW Mental Health Commission 2015).

There are several well-established barriers that prevent young people from seeking professional help for mental health problems, these include: lack of knowledge of where to go for help; limited access to and availability of services; the stigma associated with accessing a service; poor mental health literacy; a desire for autonomy and self-efficacy; being unsure whether their symptoms warrant support or are “normal”; negative past experiences with health services and clinicians; and the help negation effect wherein increasing levels of distress or suicidal ideation decrease young people’s intention to seek help (Wilson & Deane 2012; Gulliver, Griffiths & Christiensen 2010; Wilson et al. 2010; Wilson & Deane 2001; Wood et al. 2005). Stigma often manifests as young people being embarrassed about seeking help, and fearing what others, including friends, family and the clinician, might think (Gulliver, Griffiths & Christiensen 2010; Barney et al. 2008).

Interventions or services that increase young people’s willingness or readiness to seek help are needed in order to increase the number of young people who seek professional care and thereby improve their mental health outcomes (Haller et al. 2009). The theory and development underlining such interventions, particularly online interventions, are rarely evaluated or published (Hegarty et al. 2008). Without a sound theoretical basis, interventions may lack the mechanisms required to affect young people’s service willingness, or readiness to seek help (Bilardi et al. 2009; Craig et al. 2008). The concepts within the theory of planned behaviour (Azjen 1991) and the help-seeking model (Rickwood et al. 2005) are closely linked, but not necessarily in a linear manner. Together, they provide a useful conceptual framework for designing tools and interventions to improve help-seeking, including relevant theoretical constructs such as: increasing awareness of symptoms and services; improving attitudes towards help-seeking; decreasing self- and social-stigma; and increasing young people’s control of access to mental health services (Kauer, Buhagiar & Sanci 2016).
Using online technology to design a solution

The internet provides a unique opportunity to reach young people in spaces where they already interact, and to overcome or reduce barriers to help-seeking. Over 95% of Australian young people aged 16 to 25 access the internet daily (Ewing, Thomas & Schiessl 2008), with many using multiple devices in a day (EY Sweeney 2016). A study by EY Sweeney, found 79% of 18- to 34-year-olds check their mobile devices as soon as they wake up and spend more time on their devices than they do sleeping, with an average of seven hours and 20 minutes sleep and 10 hours on devices (2016).

Young people use the internet for a combination of entertainment (including streaming videos and audio, online gaming), communication (including social networking), research and browsing (Australian Communications & Media Authority 2016). The internet has been shown to be accessible, anonymous, engaging and informative, and to provide a space in which young people can feel empowered and confident to talk about sensitive issues (Burns et al. 2010; Gould et al. 2002).

Young people increasingly look to the internet as a source of support and information for issues such as depression (Griffiths & Christensen 2007), sexuality (Suzuki & Calzo 2004) and physical activity and nutrition (Spittaels & De Bourdeaudhuij 2006). In addition, the internet offers low-cost, 24/7 access for young people while reducing costs for content providers (Hosie et al. 2015). Most importantly, young people report feeling comfortable accessing information about mental health issues online, and the anonymity of online interventions has the potential to engage young people who avoid face-to-face services because of the stigma associated with mental illness (Oh, Jorm & Wright 2008).

Burns et al. (2010) found that young people’s first step in sourcing information about mental health and wellbeing online was consistently a search engine such as Google. Due to the vast amounts of information available it can be difficult for a young person to discern which information is trustworthy. Based on ReachOut Australia’s qualitative research with young people and service providers, as well as an audit of existing services in Australia and overseas, the need was identified for a self-directed online tool that could help young people make sense of the plethora of information and services available and improve their timely access to support (Kauer, Mangan & Sanci 2014). ReachOut works in partnership with young people to understand their needs and perspectives on mental health and wellbeing, and to design and deliver relevant online services with those young people. Along with the University of Melbourne, ReachOut
Australia was funded by the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre to design an online tool to facilitate help-seeking among young people.

Participatory design methods were used (Hagan et al. 2012) to involve end users in the design of the tool. In participatory design, the end users of a service are considered experts in their own lives and partners in the design and development process (Sanders 2013). The research is conducted in partnership with individuals or a community of interest in order to ensure the end design is useful and engaging for them, thereby increasing uptake (Orlowski et al. 2015). As such, young people are involved at every stage of the design process, from defining the central problem or need, designing the tool and evaluating its usefulness. This paper outlines the first stage of the participatory design process – defining the requirements of the online tool.

**The study: Designing an online tool with young people**

**Objective**

Participatory design methods were used to define the requirements for the development of an online tool to support help-seeking in young adults aged 18 to 25. Specifically, the research sought to understand a typical help-seeking journey for young people in Australia, what factors inhibit and facilitate help-seeking online and offline, and the design features that are important to young people in order for the tool to be useful and engaging.

**Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through advertisements distributed by mental health organisations via their social media profiles (Twitter and Facebook) and email lists, and through university bulletins. Advertisements described participation in the project as an opportunity “help build a new national online health and wellbeing service for young people”.

Participants were eligible if they were 18 to 25 years of age, lived in Australia, and had sought some form of support (phone, face-to-face or online) for mental health difficulties, either for themselves or a friend, in the previous 12 to 24 months. Young people who had prior knowledge of the mental health system were selected as they could share their experiences of help-seeking, what worked well and what could be improved. Participants were provided with a $100 voucher for electronic store JB HiFi as an incentive to participate.
**Participants**

A total of 23 young adults (7 males and 16 females) aged 18 to 25 years participated in the research. The participants were recruited from around Australia, with six participants from regional Australia. The majority of participants were studying at university.

**Procedure**

Two workshops were conducted a week apart; the first included 11 participants and the second included 12 participants. A facilitator guided participants through three main activities, which are described below.

**Method one: Persona immersion**

Personas are a well-documented participatory design method (Bødker 2000; Blythe & Wright 2006), which involves introducing participants to “personas” – fictional characters or archetypes that represent potential users of a service (Miaskiewicz & Kozar 2011). These personas allow participants to talk about and give their opinion about sensitive issues like mental health, without disclosing their personal experiences. They also enable participants to build empathy with the future users of whatever they are designing (Nicholas et al. 2012). The personas used were developed on the basis of field research conducted by ReachOut and by utilising the concepts of the help-seeking model (Rickwood et al. 2005) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991), wherein different personas had different awareness of their symptoms, stigma about mental illness, exposure to others who had sought help, and barriers to accessing care.

Five personas were designed to represent a relevant mix of gender, age, mental health symptoms and risk factors. Participants worked in small groups of two and three, each of which was assigned a persona. In order to build empathy with their persona, each group undertook an immersion activity. They were provided with a template and instructed to create the Facebook page for their persona. The template included sections for their persona’s interests, photos, friends, recent conversations etc. (Figure 1).
**Method two: Mapping the help-seeking journey**

Within the same small groups, participants were instructed to map the pathway and steps that their persona might take from their current situation to a point where they were feeling more in control of their mental health, including how they might connect with and use mental health information and services. Participants were prompted to map the steps involved, how the persona would feel at different points in the journey and the enablers and barriers to getting help along the way.

Participants were asked to answer questions including: How would the persona feel at different moments along the journey? What would they be looking for online and offline at different stages? What would make them feel comfortable, at ease and reassured? How would they like information to be presented to them? When might they feel most frustrated or worried?

**Method three: Designing an online experience**

Following this, participants undertook an individual activity where they designed the ideal online experience for their persona using a future state vision of an online mental health tool designed specifically for young people. Participants described the different stages in the ideal experience and what their persona would need from the tool at these
different stages (e.g. on their first visit, after a few weeks etc.). They also listed some of the features and information they thought the service should have in order to provide the best experience for their persona.

**Data transcription and analysis**

The workshops were audio recorded and transcribed. Numerous visual artefacts were also produced throughout the workshops including post-it notes, drawings, storyboards and pathway designs, which also underwent analysis.

Thematic analysis of both the transcripts and the artefacts was undertaken by the researchers in order to identify patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Three researchers individually coded the data and then came together to discuss the findings. Themes were distilled into a set of “user goals” that described features necessary to motivate and engage young people to use the online tool (Hagen et al. 2012). These goals served as an important reference point for stakeholders (including researchers and digital agencies) when designing the tool.

**Results**

This research found that a typical help-seeking journey for young people in Australia can be overwhelming, non-linear and often reliant on a young person’s ability to find appropriate help and supports. Participants indicated that an online tool designed to increase help-seeking should simplify this process and make it easier to connect with support services, validate the users’ feelings, provide hope and reassurance along the way and be accessible on any device.

Visual and verbal data suggested three key stages in the help-seeking journey: “exploring and reflecting”, “accepting”, and “acting”. These steps, described in detail below, interrelate in an iterative cycle rather than a linear process.

**Stage 1 – Exploring and reflecting**

A common theme was the difficulty in knowing if help was needed and where to go in order to start the process. One group commented that their persona might feel that something is not quite right or be told that they “are not themselves”. Analysis indicated that this exploratory stage is a time of growing awareness of symptoms and questioning about whether to seek help and how to go about it. For many young people, this exploring and reflecting stage can be quite informal, often learning from peers rather
than professionals. Participants gave the example that their persona may spend time browsing forums, blogs or video blogs (e.g. Tumblr or YouTube) and from there discover stories about other young people who have sought help and overcome mental health issues. They would also speak to friends, family and use search engines such as Google.

Participants felt that their personas may search online using Google for their symptoms (e.g. “how to get to sleep”, “how to get motivated” “balancing study and social life” “why do I wake up feeling crappy every morning?”), but suggested they might feel overwhelmed with the range and volume of information returned, and unsure where to go from there. They suggested that this experience can trigger feelings of fear, loneliness, uncertainty and anxiety for the young person. In describing their persona’s help-seeking journey, participants commented:

Challenging, she [the persona] may go through uncertainty ... get frustrated or worried ... being confronted with the information ... not knowing what to do next...

You need help with a place to start ... if you go into a situation you have never been to before you don’t know where to start and you’re just stuck ...

Assessing, she [the persona] would feel scared at this point, she doesn’t know what she can do, she’s already overwhelmed by her situation ...

Stage 2 – Accepting

Participants commented that once an issue or problem was identified, steps were needed to overcome the stigma of the problem, accept the issue and confirm that the issue was serious enough to seek help for. To assist with this, they suggested that the online tool should include a self-assessment style quiz or interactive questionnaire which could provide language to increase understanding and help young people make sense of what they may be experiencing. Participants felt that a quiz or questionnaire could help young people learn more about what feelings and symptoms need to be addressed. Participants also felt that such a tool could work to validate emotions and reassure young people that their experiences are important and warrant support. Participants suggested that any quiz or assessment used should be evidence-based and trustworthy; not overly clinical, and avoid jargon and technical language; relate to the symptoms young people may have; and be positive, reassuring and demonstrate that other people
experience similar symptoms. When describing the purpose of a quiz for their persona, one participant commented:

*Confirmation that something is wrong and lead him [the persona] to finding a GP... we [the group] thought he didn’t want to go ahead with too much because he didn’t know whether it was a legitimate reason to go looking for help. Being able to understand that it was okay ... online mood surveys, realising you may have some symptoms.*

**Stage 3 – Acting**

Participants identified that making contact with a recommended service was probably a step outside their comfort zone for many young people, and that taking this step may make them feel vulnerable and uncertain. Participants thought that questions young people asked themselves may prevent help-seeking, for example: “How can I explain what I’m feeling?” “What if I don’t like or relate to the counsellor?” “What will other people think about me seeing a counsellor?” “What if there’s nothing wrong with me?”

Participants also indicated that getting help was likely to take a long time and include many setbacks. When speaking about the process, one participant explained:

*He [the persona] goes to see his GP who is not overly helpful and then he goes to see a counsellor. His first counsellor sucks. He’s taken a few weeks to do that and then steps back ... it could take him up to three months to continue ... his initial thoughts would be stuff it. He needs to build up confidence.*

Participants suggested that the online tool should help young people feel prepared and confident to access a service by providing reassurance and explaining what to expect from the service. It should also act as a sanctuary or safe place to retreat, “... this is a safe way to express herself [the persona] away from that life over there ... the rest of the image she has portrayed on Facebook”.

Figure 2 is an example of a journey map created by one group for their persona. It shows the barriers the persona faces, including feeling overwhelmed, uncertain and vulnerable, and not knowing where to go.
General findings

Participants thought that it was very easy to lose motivation during the help-seeking journey. Just seeking information could leave them feeling overwhelmed and cause them to give up. For this reason, any language used throughout the tool needs to be accessible and relevant, and focused on signs and symptoms that young people may be experiencing rather than using diagnostic terms:

*Change the language so it’s a bit softer for young people … do you feel fiddly, worthless — they’re really confronting words. It doesn’t have “do you have periods where you feel down” or “is it hard to get out of bed in the morning” … if a young person doesn’t know anything about mental health and it says in the past four weeks how often did you feel depressed. They are not going to know, they won’t know what it means.*

They also wanted to feel in control of their help-seeking journey:
I need to feel like I am always in control and provided with choices.

... there would be urgency going on “I need to take control of this and if you can’t help me straight away I’m going to look elsewhere”...

Figure 3 describes the user goals generated from the research.

**Figure 3: User goals**

User goals summarise the features the online tool needs in order to be useful and engaging for young people. They formed a basis for the development of the product.

Young people want the tool to:

- Validate my feelings
- Give me hope
- Give me a place to start and show me what’s next
- Enable access anytime on any device
- Make it easy to act/connect
- Walk me through the process
- Provide a safe place away from the pressure.

**Discussion**

The two participatory design workshops provided an understanding of what young people need and want from an online tool designed to facilitate help-seeking. The research revealed that young people experience help-seeking as a complex process that is non-linear and repetitive, which often takes place over months or years. Three iterative stages of help-seeking were identified and conceptualised as: “exploring and reflecting”, “accepting” and “acting”. The findings provide an in-depth description of the “lived” experience of help-seeking, which theory alone cannot articulate, most notably the significant period of exploration, questioning and uncertainty that characterises the help-seeking journey for many young people. This journey is overwhelming with many barriers along the way, which can hinder progression through the stages; a young person can get “stuck” at a certain point and give up, or they may come back after a year or two. Online tools need to consider these barriers and stages in order to increase timely access to support for young people.

These two participatory design workshops were part of a broader service design project which consulted end users at every stage of the development of the online tool through
co-design workshops, concept testing and prototype testing. Design elements were also mapped back to a theoretical framework for behaviour change, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Azjen 1991); the detail for this process is described in a separate publication (Kauer, Buhagiar & Sanci 2016). A randomised controlled trial, reported in a separate publication, was also conducted to evaluate the tool’s impact on young people’s affect and help-seeking intentions and behaviour.

**Limitations**

A limitation of the study was that participants were not wholly representative of the intended audience of the online tool. It was difficult to recruit young men, meaning that only seven of the 23 participants were male. The majority of participants were attending university. Furthermore, participants were recruited through mental health service providers as it was important that they had experience of the mental health help-seeking process, what aspects worked well, and areas that were challenging. As such, the participants were already engaged with services and potentially were not representative of the target audience for the online tool, which is young people who are experiencing psychological distress but who are currently not seeking help for their distress. Future research will endeavour to include a more diverse sample of young people.

**Conclusion**

It is well accepted that many young people experiencing psychological distress do not readily seek help for their concerns (Gulliver, Griffiths & Christensen 2010). This research used participatory design methods to work with young people to understand their experience of the help-seeking process, the enablers and barriers, and their needs from an online tool. We found that the help-seeking journey for young people can be overwhelming, non-linear and often reliant on a young person’s self-efficacy to find appropriate help and supports. This may be mitigated by designing services that support young people to “explore and reflect”, “accept” and “act”.

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Authors

Victoria Blake is research coordinator at ReachOut Australia specialising in participatory design research in the context of online program development.

Kerrie Buhagiar is Director of Service Delivery at ReachOut, Australia's leading online mental health organisation for young people.

Sylvia Kauer is postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne, specialising in youth mental health, and mobile and Internet interventions.
Lena Sanci is the Deputy Head of the Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne and leads a research stream on improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people through primary care and technology.

Mariesa Nicholas is a participatory design researcher and is Director of Research at ReachOut Australia.

Julie Grey is an experienced consultant with expertise in digital strategy and project management of online design and development projects, communications, program and product design, governance, community engagement, evaluation and research.
Towards a participation ecosystem
A literature review on participation in decision-making for children in state care

LUKE FITZMAURICE

Children and young people have a right to meaningfully participate in decisions which impact their lives. However, there are a number of barriers which prevent them from having their voices heard, particularly when they are perceived as vulnerable. This literature review discusses the barriers to meaningful participation for children and young people, with a particular emphasis on those in state care. It concludes that what is required is a participation ecosystem, with comprehensive systems enabling participation to occur and a broad, shared understanding of what meaningful participation entails.

All children and young people under the age of 18 have a right to participate in decisions about their lives and to have their opinions taken into account. A number of barriers, however, prevent them from having their voices heard, barriers ranging from the practical to the theoretical. This essay summarises the literature on children’s and young people’s rights to participate in decisions about their lives, with a particular emphasis on those in state care. It traces the development of frameworks to enable participation, and highlights the barriers to meaningful participation. It concludes that what is required is a participation ecosystem where both adults and people aged under 18 have a broad, shared understanding of what participation entails, and where systems are in place to enable meaningful participation to occur.

1 The UN defines “child” as anyone under 18 years. This essay uses both “children” and “young people” interchangeably and inclusively to refer to all those under 18 and to avoid the subliminal, colloquial and academic weighting of “children” as a reference to pre-teens.
The right to participate

That children and young people have a right to participate in decisions about them is now a well-established principle. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives them the right to express their views in matters which affect them, a ground-breaking addition at the time the convention was drafted in the 1980s (Smith 2016). It has since been confirmed that participation in decision-making needs to be meaningful in order to give effect to Article 12 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009), leading to the question of exactly how this should occur.

Participation has been defined as “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives” (Hart 1992, p.5). This has both an individual component (decisions which affect one’s own life) and a collective component (decisions which affect one’s community) (Tisdall 2015a), both of which are included within Article 12 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). This means that children and young people in care have a right to participate in the evaluation of services, policies and procedures in addition to participating in decisions about their own circumstances (Cashmore 2002). The collective participation rights for those in care have received less attention in research (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012).

Benefits of participation

Involving children and young people in decision-making has a number of potential benefits, which fall into three broad categories: upholding rights, improving services and intrinsic benefits for children and young people (Bessell 2011; Head 2011). These have been alternatively categorised as “upward-looking benefits”, describing the impact of participation on service development and decision-makers, and “horizontal benefits”, describing the impact on children and young people (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012).

Upholding children’s and young people’s rights was one of the drivers of the participation movement (Sinclair 2004), but subsequent research has increased the focus on the “upward-looking benefits” of participation. Participation can be instrumental in creating more responsive policy by facilitating access between children, young people and policymakers (Bessell 2011; Cashmore 2002). It can lead to improvements in wellbeing (Kirby et al. 2003) and can also have educational value (Crowley 2015). Perhaps most importantly, research with children and young people has confirmed that having the opportunity to express their views and have those taken into account has value in and of itself (Bessell 2011).
Making participation meaningful

The emergence of participation frameworks from the 1990s onwards was designed to help make participation more meaningful. The work of Hart (1992) was one of the first models to address this issue and remains one of the most influential (Malone & Hartung 2010). Hart’s ‘ladder of participation’ describes eight levels of participation for children. The bottom three levels (“manipulation”, “decoration” and “tokenism”) are described as non-participation, while the top of the ladder (“child-initiated, shared decisions with adults”) describes processes in which children and young people incorporate adults into projects which they themselves have designed and managed (Hart 1992).

Hart’s ladder has since been built on and adapted by others. Treseder (1997) developed the “degrees of involvement” model in response to a criticism that the “ladder” metaphor implies that the most effective forms of participation are at the top, which isn’t always the case. Others have applied the model to particular contexts, such as child participation in urban planning (Francis & Lorenzo 2002). Shier’s ‘Pathways to Participation’ (2001) is perhaps the most influential adaption of the “ladder” approach, building on Hart’s work by describing the steps needed to embed different levels of participation into practice.

More recently, there has been a shift away from the “frameworks” approach towards more nuanced ways of enabling and measuring children’s and young people’s participation (Malone & Hartung 2010). The models have been criticised as too simplistic, as acknowledged by Hart (2008) and Shier (2010) themselves. A critique from the childhood studies field is that the engagement envisaged by the linear models of participation remains rooted in adult-centric structures and processes (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012). They have been criticised for prescribing roles of “adult” and “child”, perpetuating the dominant sociocultural image of childhood rather than treating children and young people as social actors (Mason & Hood 2011). There is now recognition that meaningful engagement is a fluid process with a range of factors influencing the appropriate form of participation (Horwath, Kalyva & Spyru 2012).

Barriers (and enablers) to meaningful participation

A number of existing factors can either inhibit or enable meaningful participation, and many of these are interrelated. Some are unique to children and young people in state care, while others are factors that affect participation generally. There is also a third
category of barriers and enablers which affect all forms of participation, but may be particularly relevant for those in care. These challenges are discussed below.

**Factors affecting the participation of children in care**

**Vulnerability**

Children and young people in care are often prevented from being able to meaningfully participate in decisions about them due to their perceived vulnerability (Powell & Smith 2009). Often this is a valid concern; there is a risk that people who have experienced trauma may be further harmed if participation does not occur in an ethical way (Cater & Overlien 2014; Lansdown 2010).

However, these concerns can be overstated. The tension between a need for protection and a right to participate is often a false dichotomy (Atwool 2006), but the dichotomy persists despite the evidence that the negative consequences of exclusion can far outweigh the risks of participation (Powell & Smith 2009). When social workers hold the view that a child or young person needs to be protected this can limit their participation rights, which are often perceived to be in conflict (van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2015). In these circumstances the child’s right to participate may be viewed by professionals as secondary or unimportant (Horwath et al. 2012), and the responsibility to protect may develop into overprotection (Powell & Smith 2009).

**Adult tensions and conflicting professional obligations**

Decisions about the care of children and young people can involve highly charged interactions between adults. This may diminish a child’s or young person’s opportunity to have their voice heard, even when legislation is in place to enable this (Atwool 2006). Professionals tasked with enabling participation in decision-making may have to manage multiple stakeholders and conflicting considerations, such as a child’s or young person’s right to participate, what is in their best interests, and the role of their parents in decision-making (van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2015). There is sometimes a tension (either real or perceived) between enabling a young person to participate and determining what is in their best interest, and as the “best interests” test is discretionary, this can lead to adults silencing or side-lining a young person’s views (Tisdall 2015a).
The care system being monolithic and inflexible

The nature of the care system itself may also be a barrier to participation. In research with care-experienced young people in Australia, Bessell (2011) identified the sense of “the system” being unresponsive as a common theme. This was echoed in a recent review of the care and protection system in New Zealand, which found that organisational systems and practices did not prioritise listening to children (Expert Panel 2015). This may be affected by practical considerations such as staff turnover (Bessell 2011; Cashmore 2002), or a lack of sufficient complaints mechanisms (Broad 2013). Opportunities for children and young people to have their voices heard may also be limited by a risk-averse culture within social work agencies, with a strong emphasis on protection and risk management and a lesser emphasis on enabling participation (van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2015).

Factors affecting participation generally

The dominant sociocultural image of children

One factor limiting participation generally is that false assumptions are often made by adults about young people’s capacity to contribute to decisions. Smith (2002) notes that “age and stage”-based views on the capacities of children and young people have been largely disproven but persist in practice. This can act as a significant inhibitor to meaningful participation as decision-makers don’t expect children and young people to actually influence decisions, even when they are allowed to speak (Crowley 2015). Meaningful participation means viewing children and young people as social actors, which is not only about letting them speak but also exploring the unique contribution that their perspectives can provide (James 2007). This doesn’t always happen in practice.

Similarly, the dominant sociocultural image of childhood can lead to the experiences of an individual child being considered representative of the experiences of all children (James 2004). There is a risk of assumed representation, whereby once a participation structure is set up, those participants become “the voice of children” (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012). The assumed homogeneity of children’s voices is problematic. There is also a risk that once a centralised participation mechanism is established (such as an independent advocacy organisation for children in care) decision-makers will avoid wider, more meaningful consultation (Cashmore 2002).
Authenticity and filtering by adults

The degree to which participation is meaningful depends on the degree to which adult intermediaries filter, interpret or translate young people’s views (James 2007). Adults can filter a child’s opinions without necessarily intending to, as opposed to “gatekeeping” (discussed below), which tends to be a more deliberate process of exclusion.

In some contexts (such as family law proceedings) children’s voices may be supplemented by those of professionals, which can have the effect of determining how much weight the child’s view should be given (Tisdall 2015a). Other times there may be a selection bias whereby only those children considered “mature” or “articulate” enough to contribute are invited to participate in collective decision-making, further marginalising disadvantaged groups (Horwath et al. 2012). There is also a risk that children’s and young people’s views can be excluded when they don’t “follow the rules” of certain spaces, particularly in specialised settings such as central government policymaking (Tisdall & Davis 2004). Their views may not sit neatly with adult agendas (Percy-Smith 2010). Finally, those doing research with children and young people must remain aware of the power imbalances between the young participants and adult researchers (James 2007).

The lack of a participation ecosystem

There are several broader, more fundamental barriers preventing children’s and young people’s participation from being meaningful. These include the lack of a “participation culture” (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012), a lack of “participation infrastructure” (Lansdown 2010), a lack of shared understanding of what meaningful participation entails (Tisdall 2015a) and a lack of research on the policy impacts that participation can achieve (Crowley 2015). These are distinct factors but are so interrelated they could be considered a single broad category, which could be labelled a “participation ecosystem”.

A “culture of participation” requires all professionals to adopt participatory practices rather than leaving this up to specific individuals (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012). Legislation enabling children to participate does not guarantee that participation will occur (Atwool 2006), and a change in practice requires a change in attitudes, along with
the development of the necessary skills (Cashmore 2002). This includes cultural competency, as it has been noted that effective participation may differ across cultures and contexts (Shier 2010; Sualii & Mavoa 2003).

“Participation infrastructure” involves elements of time, space and approach. One frequently cited barrier to children having their voices heard is that children’s participation often occurs as a one-off process rather than through on-going engagement (Lansdown 2010; Marchant & Kirby 2004; Sinclair 2004). Particularly in the context of care and protection matters, children and young people need to be able to have ongoing input, rather than only being asked to contribute their views at one particular time (Vis & Thomas 2009). As Smith (2010) notes, participation is most effective when the young person’s inclusion in decision-making is an ongoing and integral part of their lives. Similarly, there is a need to recognise the young person’s participation in their “everyday” spaces (Percy-Smith 2010). While safe spaces can be useful, this can also isolate children from decisions instead of making them more involved (Tisdall 2015b). There is a risk that this can “ghettoise” participation instead of bringing it into the mainstream (Tisdall 2015a). Governments and decision-makers should take a broad approach to participation rather than a piecemeal one (Lansdown 2010). Youth participation mechanisms should be integrated as much as possible with wider community engagement structures across generations (Crowley 2015; Percy-Smith 2010).

Often there is a lack of shared understanding between adults and children about the purpose of participation, with children believing they are there to influence decisions, and adults viewing participation as more of a learning exercise (Tisdall 2015a). Even when the young people are asked for their views, decision-makers, who hold traditional views of children as vulnerable and in need of protection, may not expect those views to actually inform decisions (Crowley 2015). Children and adults may also have differing views on when children’s participation in decision-making is appropriate (van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2015).

This may be, in part, due to a lack of research on the impacts of participation, and collective participation in particular. Crowley (2015) notes that while there is a wealth of literature on how and why to involve children and young people in decision-making, there is less research about what policy impacts can be achieved. Others have also cited a lack of impact measurement as one of the barriers to a more comprehensive approach to participation (Lansdown 2010; Sinclair 2004).
Factors exacerbated by being in care

The importance of stable, trusting relationships

Trusting relationships are crucial to enabling children to have a voice in decision-making (Cossar, Brandon & Jordan 2014). Reviews overseas have found that a majority of young people cite friends and family as their most likely first choice of support (Pithouse & Crowley 2007). For children in care, these relationships may not exist, severely limiting the opportunities for a child to have her or his voice heard (Ashton 2014). The relationship between the young person and their social worker has been labelled the key factor in determining whether that child’s participation rights are given effect (Cossar, Brandon & Jordan 2014; van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2015). This can be made difficult by practical issues such as resource limitations or staff turnover (Cashmore 2002).

It can be even more difficult for young people to voice their opinions on the care system itself, given the power imbalance between children and social workers (Ashton 2014). Complaints mechanisms are often ineffective without children having a trusted adult to advocate on their behalf, even when they are well known (Cashmore 2002). Independent facilitators can be crucial in this respect, and youth-led independent advocacy organisations can make a significant difference as well (Bessell 2011). Professional facilitators can also help adult decision-makers who are keen to enable children and to have input into decisions but may not know how to do this effectively (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012).

Gatekeeping by adults

Finally, the marginalised position of children and young people as a group means that they are inevitably dependent on adults to facilitate participation (Lansdown 2010). This can become an issue in research with children, where researchers are sometimes impeded by the unwillingness of adults to allow children to be interviewed (Smith 2011). The need for informed consent can lead to increased gatekeeping by parents and other adults, particularly when asking children about sensitive topics (Powell & Smith 2009). Children and young people almost always say that participation is appropriate, but social workers point out multiple circumstances when they believe this not to be the case (van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2015). This can be an issue when those social workers control whether or not meaningful participation occurs.
Potential for further research

As noted, there has tended to be a lesser focus on the collective participation rights for children in care (Thomas & Percy-Smith 2012), and the policy impacts that collective participation can achieve (Crowley 2015). Children and adults often hold different views on when participation is appropriate and what meaningful participation entails (van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen 2015), which could be, in part, due to a lack of collective participation in decision-making. The dissonance between what children and young people believe participation entails and what adults believe constitutes appropriate participation may continue as long as children’s and young people’s views don’t shape the system itself. This is an area that could benefit from further research.

Towards a participation ecosystem

The common theme throughout the literature is that adults must broaden their understanding of what it means for children and young people to meaningfully participate in decisions about their lives. Children and young people must be invited to participate individually and collectively, and should be supported to form stable relationships with trusted adults who can help to make this happen. Adults must view children and young people as social actors, challenging their own assumptions about the capacity of youth to contribute to decisions. Participation must be an ongoing process, not just a one-off event. Perhaps most importantly, systems and process must be in place to ensure that participation of children and young people is comprehensively integrated within decision-making mechanisms. This should be supported by a culture of participation, where all adults and professionals value the unique contributions that children and young people can make. Only with such a broad understanding of what participation entails will children and young people be truly able to have their participation rights upheld.

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Author

Luke Fitzmaurice is a children’s advocate from Wellington, New Zealand. He is currently an Advisor for Oranga Tamariki and a postgraduate student at the University of Otago.
Turning thirty:
Youth transition processes in 21st century Argentina

RENE BENDIT & ANA MIRANDA

This paper contributes to discussion of the concept of youth as a transition process from education to employment through an empirical analysis of material gathered in Argentina during the post-neoliberal period. Based on the argument that youth studies should incorporate the historical context and economic policies of the moment studied, the paper has been developed on the basis of quantitative data from standardised surveys and 30 biographical interviews carried out in 2013 with people who graduated from high school in 1999. The interviews covered the whole process of transition from high school education to the workforce in one cohort of young people at the end of one of Argentina's most important crises (in 2001) and who moved into adulthood within an economic framework very different from the neoliberal model.

At the beginning of the 21st century, different studies noted that youth and, particularly, youth transitions had suffered significant changes, with a move towards diversification, extension and de-standardisation. At the same time, structural economic transformations from Fordism to Post-Fordism (Giddens 1990) and radical changes to job markets caused by globalisation produced instability, greatly reducing the confidence of the new generations. Young people had no choice but to work within this instability, which has also led to new models of reference and identification (Casal 2000). As a point of reference, the world of adults has been shrinking in both symbolic and emotional terms, though it has also become more important in terms of the material support parents increasingly provide owing to the
fact that young people cannot always depend on education or work to organise their transition into adulthood (Bendit 2008).

Youth today involves its own set of substantive elements that allow young people to be, to think and to act as individuals. Nowadays, in accordance with the economic and social characteristics of each country, societies offer young people activities such as internships and work-study programs to ease the passage through high school and higher education and on to their first job market experience. The passage also entails the search for and creation of one’s own lifestyle (including life with a partner or in communities) and the consumption of goods produced by the globalised cultural industries. These options, however, are offered in an ever more fragmented and unequal way, which represents a source of bewilderment and concern among broad population groups.

The aim of the paper is to contribute to the theoretical debate on the notion of youth as mainly a transition from education to employment and then on to “adulthood”. In this regard, we will consider both the global discussion of these topics as well as an empirical analysis of material gathered in Argentina during the post-neoliberal period between 2001 and 2013. This article presents the results of ‘La inserción laboral de los egresados de la escuela media: 10 años después’ (‘Labour Market Integration of High School Graduates: Ten Years Later’), a research project funded by Argentina’s Scientific and Technological Advancement Agency and CONICET. The project was designed and carried out by the Research Program on Youth Studies inside the Latin American School of Social Sciences – FLACSO Argentina – and it replicates a previous study carried out from 1999 to 2003. In both projects, the methodological strategy was based on the follow-up technique in which a sample of high school seniors was defined and then contacted by phone at regular intervals during the first years after graduation. Our discussion here is based on the analysis of quantitative data from both surveys as well as thirty biographical interviews conducted in 2013 with high school graduates from the class of 1999 who were 32 years old at the time. The interviews covered the complete transition process from secondary education to the workforce among one cohort of young people at the end of one of Argentina’s most important crises (2001) and who moved into adulthood within an economic framework very different from the neoliberal model.
Theoretical framework for youth as a transition process

According to the perspective of youth as a transition process to adulthood, two key ruptures or critical events in young people’s lives must be analysed and interpreted: the passage from education to work and the setting up (foundation) of one’s own home, which also entails establishing an independent family. In this interpretation, the setup/acquisition of individual autonomy that later marks adulthood takes place. In other words, at an individual level, the transition represents the ways in which people move from a state of dependence/wardship to one of autonomy/independence. On the other hand, at a social (or macro) level, the theory posits that during the transition, young people settle into a certain social class (classification, to use Bourdieu’s term) as a result of their passage and labour market integration (Casal et al. 2006). In this way, over the course of the transition process the general trends towards mobility or towards reproducing social structure become evident, especially in relation to the occupations or jobs that young people get hired for as young adults, placing them in labour segments that determine their future perspectives (Bendit 2007).

This idea of transition has been modified over the years with a range of conceptual frameworks. Furlong (2013) has described the metaphors or emblems that have accompanied research in different decades, listing the transitional metaphors from the first approaches to the psychology of adolescence and on to the structural and post-modern versions. According to the author, the hegemonic metaphors in the 1970s referred to roads or routes, which are used to bring the topic of tracking into the discussion. During the 1980s, the spike in youth unemployment and the diversification of itineraries and choices brought with it the notion of “trajectory” as the predominant term. Within this context, the ideas of “atypical” trajectories became particularly significant in the mid-1990s as a way to describe the increase in youth’s vulnerability. Similarly, the EGRIS group did comparative analyses in different countries of Europe (EGRIS 2000; du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco 2004).

In later years, the processes of individualisation, more pluralistic lifestyles and the emergence of new risks and vulnerabilities led to the concept of navigation, the latest theoretical tool used to approach the new transitional youth forms (Roberts 1997; Furlong 2009). In the discussion among European researchers, there was an increased perception that young people should become experts at navigating their own biographical itineraries based on reflexive self-awareness as one of the core elements of
late modernity (Giddens 1990). This can also be seen in discussions on the expansion of individualisation and the new social risks related to the transformation of what some authors referred to as “post-industrial societies” (Beck 1992).

Moreover, the interpretation of economic and social contexts gives more scope and complexity to the analysis of the structure-agency binomial in biographical youth itineraries. By including historic context and/or the concept of social generation (Woodman & Wyn 2006, 2013), the analysis is significantly enriched and gives insight on the effects of public policies and their impact on young life conditions (Walther 2006). Similarly, scholars have verified that periods of high unemployment and neoliberal policies tend to restrict individual agency, limiting people’s options and exacerbating the background reproduction phenomena, just as the periods of economic growth and/or expanded social and welfare policies can enhance individual abilities and exercise of agency (Furlong 2011).

In view of the increased focus on specific contexts and places, Cuervo and Wyn affirm that the conceptualisation of transitions as the main metaphor of youth studies acquires greater precision and depth when the notions of belonging are incorporated. According to the authors, the factors related to space or location (place), personal bonds (relatives, peer groups) and historic context are central to the transitions into adulthood. Notions related to affectivity, peer groups (friendship) and a sense of belonging are central elements in daily life, determining young people’s choices and opportunities (Cuervo & Wyn 2014).

Finally, there is a set of discussions centring on the idea of employment as the biggest factor of youth transition. In this case, the inquiry proposes placing the value on “work” as opposed to employment, especially considering the tenets of gender studies (feminist theory). In contemporary capitalist societies, personal care and reproductive tasks done at home continue to be undervalued and overlooked. This theory acknowledges that most scholars in the field only examine activities that culminate in paid work – work for other people; in contrast, reproductive work has no social or economic value and is thus not addressed in the scholarly examination of youth transition. How do we explain the transitions and classifications among young women of different social classes who dedicate themselves to caring tasks at an early age? The answer is telling; in general, these women are assigned to a group called NEET or “NI-NI” in Spanish (for example, see Simmons, Russel & Thompson 2014), defined negatively by the fact that they don’t
study or have a paid job. The feminist economy largely challenges these affirmations. The refusal to acknowledge the societal value of activities associated with maintaining a family contributes to women’s subordinate position, especially low-income women, with broad consequences for young people.

**Youth transitions and a historic juncture**

The analysis of youth transitions to “adult” life acquires new meaning when such transitions are not understood as an “essential” depiction of what youth will become. Instead, these transitions should be viewed as part of more complex processes in which structural and subjective conditions interact in a very specific way within each society, region and social condition, producing different frameworks of growth and development for young people. Thus, young people are not considered individuals exclusively dependent on macro and micro-social conditions, but as actors who influence or at least manoeuvre the structures influencing their lives based on the opportunities they have access to during their youth.

Numerous studies have indicated that youth transitions have always been marked by continuous change. This can mainly be attributed to accelerated scientific/technological advances, changes to the social structure, increasing economic and cultural globalisation, and the specific characteristics of the job markets for young people in each country. As a result of this, youth and youth transitions in both central and peripheral countries are becoming increasingly complex (pluralisation), creating a greater need for resources from both the family and the State to support them in their transitions. Many researchers point out that transitions to adult life are not only more complicated, but also increasingly more fragmented and differentiated (Casal 2000; Du Bois-Reymond 2003; Machado País 2004). In this sense, some have stated that there are now different “transition regimes” (Walther 2006) as well as new youth regimes.

Along the same line, researchers such as Wyn have proposed the notion of social generation as a new interpretive framework that has become a recent topic of discussion. France and Roberts (2014) take issue with the fact that the defenders of the social generation concept overlook the complex relationships between context (structure), subjectivities and youth practices in the configuration of transitions to adulthood. We acknowledge France and Roberts’s argument on the heuristic nature of the social generation concept when it is used to try to explain the complex relationship between social change and continuity and their effects on young people today. However,
here we argue that it is possible and enriching to analyse youth transitions in a broader referential framework like that encompassed by the concept of social generation. To interpret such effects, it could be useful to follow the methodological outline of France and Roberts when studying the connections between social change and continuity and their effects on the life of young people today; to do so, we must explore the connections between the macro and micro processes that are at work in young people’s daily practices. In keeping with these authors, the study of these connections could show how certain macro-micro economic and social processes can shape the worlds of young people’s lives, limiting what is possible for them. This focus seems very appropriate when interpreting the quantitative and qualitative data of the panel study carried out in Argentina in which the itineraries and trajectories of two cohorts of high school graduates from different historical periods and socioeconomic contexts were studied. The historical context of the first cohort was marked by crisis, and the other by significant and continuing economic growth along with the recovery of social policies aimed at income redistribution. Given this background, we posit that the two cohorts examined in our research probably belong to two different social generations and consequently have developed specific individual and collective identities, as well as different strategies for the move into adult life.

Based on the theoretical positions described here, this work aims to answer some of the questions associated with the processes of transition to adult life in Argentina. These include: what characteristics are typical of the transitions to adulthood among young people from several social groups in the two mentioned historical contexts? How did the socioeconomic status of their family influence their trajectories towards job market integration? How did the post-neoliberal political and social context influence the transitions of young people? However, before trying to respond to these questions, we will briefly describe the research methodology and the type of data that serve as the basis of this text, as well as the macro-socioeconomic contexts in which youth transitions have taken place in Argentina from 2001 to date.

**Research strategy**

To provide a background on the theoretical aspects of modern youth in Argentina, the following methodological research strategy was designed. The goal was to analyse different types of transitions from education to employment and adult life in different economic and social contexts of Argentina. With this goal in mind, a study conducted
from 1999 to 2002 titled “La inserción ocupacional de los egresados de la escuela media” [“Occupational Integration of High School Graduates”] was replicated from 2009 to 2013 from a longitudinal methodological perspective. Due to the important changes in the economic and social context of Argentina starting in around mid-2000, it was considered useful to re-examine the link between youth, education and work. Among the central hypotheses that guided the 1999 study, one specifically stood out: the idea that the job market does not have a universal or predetermined economic function. Instead, the function of the job market can only be defined by analysing specific socio-historical contexts. Therefore, replicating the study in the new context could represent a significant contribution to the theoretical debate and to the empirical study of these subjects.

Furthermore, the 1999–2002 study clearly showed that the first years of job market integration were not enough to forecast the entire transition trajectory. It was thus considered necessary to take into account a broader period of inquiry with the idea of reconstructing the transitions of the members of the first study through biographical interviews. The fact that we had access to the original database with individualised information segmented according to the first years of job market integration offered a singular opportunity to reconstruct trajectories in a whole itinerary of young people up to age 30.

With this goal in mind, and as a first step, a new study was carried out titled “The occupational integration of high school graduates: Ten years later” (“La inserción ocupacional de los egresados de la escuela media: 10 años después”). The aim of this new study was to compare results with the 1999 study (and its follow-up in 2000 to 2002) in order to analyse transitions from school to work and compare independent life between two groups of young people who had finished or were finishing secondary education in two very different economic and social contexts. As part of the new study, a panel comprised of high schools graduates from 2011 was formed.

The new project was based on an intentional and segmented sample of educational institutions (high schools) with a range of educational orientations in different locations with students from several social classes. The educational establishments were selected

1 The sample consists mainly of young people living in Greater Buenos Aires, the largest urban area in the country. After the in-school surveys, a successful telephone follow-up was done. For the 1999 group, the first telephone survey reached a total of 570 of the survey takers, representing a loss of only 8% of young people in
according to criteria used for the analysis of educational segmentation in Latin America. Following a tradition in the field of the sociology of education, the segments had to take into account the following indicators: a) school infrastructure; b) teacher certification; and c) the socioeconomic characteristics of students. The sample of educational institutions where the survey was performed was divided into three socioeconomic groups or sectors: upper, middle and low. At the institutions included in the sample, a questionnaire was given to 600 young people in their last year of upper school.²

**Initial results of the comparative quantitative analysis of two generations**

As mentioned above, for the purpose of comparing the transition between education and employment, in two cohorts of high school students who were part of social generations with distinct life experiences, the project replicated a follow-up procedure of graduates 12 years later.

**Different socioeconomic contexts and consequences for young people’s transitions**

Initial comparisons of continued education versus job market integration showed there was a relationship between different contexts and life experiences and how these affected their personal expectations for educational continuity and job market integration. In the first case, the young people who graduated from high school in 1999 spent their first few years in a context of great economic recession and neoliberal policies. They experienced major difficulties during their first job market integration as social vulnerability was the predominant trend. In the case of the second group, the cohort that graduated from high school in 2011 spent their first years after graduation in a context of economic growth, stricter labour regulations and enhanced social protection through public policies. The quantity of students who opted to continue studying increased notably, with tertiary admission programs offering scholarships to youth with fewer resources who opted to continue in school. The results of this study provided

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² In both projects, we worked with an intentional and non-probabilistic sample of educational institutions. The definition of the sample corresponded to the amount of financing that was obtained in each case. The non-probabilistic nature added great complexity to the analysis of the information; the values obtained must be read as comparative trends within each of the samples.
vitaly important information for the comparison of youth transitions in the different contexts and were published in several major journals (Bendit & Miranda 2015; Miranda & Corica 2014; Bendit 2015).

**Social function of education and expectations**

As a result of the initial comparison of the panels, we confirmed that there were real changes not only in relation to the sense of the social function that students attribute to education, but also in relation to young people’s future expectations during their last year of high school. Students from several social groups were found to attribute new meaning to secondary education. In the context of changes of the general economic context, youngsters from lower income households expressed that high school, in fact, contributed to educational continuity and job market integration. Among young people belonging to the upper- and middle-income families, more young people offered a positive assessment of secondary education in term of sociability and integration with their peers.

**De-standardisation and pluralisation in labour integration**

The comparative data referred to job market integration of young people and their future expectations as evidence of greater de-standardisation and pluralisation and less linear youth transitions. Moreover, the greater number of options may complicate the decision of what to do after high school. Likewise, a more intense individualisation process along with a broader selection of new activities create a need for facilitating the transition process through intensified educational and vocational guidance and training for technical/professional careers during high school.

**Fewer erratic itineraries?**

Based on these results and from a “transitional” perspective, we state that in a context of economic growth, an increased national budget for education and enhanced social policies to support lower income families, it is possible to observe a progressive decrease of the educational/job itineraries defined in the 1999–2001 study as “erratic” or “vulnerable” itineraries, even if such a decrease occurred only gradually.

**Some results of the qualitative study**

A sub-sample was carried out among the graduates from the first cohort (1999–2003), which allowed for a qualitative study conducted through in-depth interviews. The main purpose of the qualitative strategy was related to the possibility of
retrospectively reconstructing the complete educational, job and family trajectories of a specific segment of young adults today who were about to start in 2000, 2001 or had already initiated their transition from high school to higher education (technical/professional formation) or college or who sought jobs. Likewise, and on the basis of the typology of post-high school itineraries carried out in 2000/2001/2002, 30 of the young adults were interviewed qualitatively (biographical interviews), including 19 men and 11 women.

The change of context and the centrality of employment as a social integration mechanism generated a segmentation with less social polarisation, in a framework where the social promotion of education was clearly visible and contributed to stabilising the job trajectories of the young people interviewed. Most of the stories of the young people interviewed reveal the de-structuring of the transitional itineraries in relation to a search that begins at the age of 20. This is seen, for example, in the following cases:

When I finished high school, I had no idea about what would happen, but I found my path and I am doing what I like. If you ask young people now, they have no idea what they want to do... (E16, male, living with his partner and three children, type of trajectory: Incomplete university studies).

... In fact, I wouldn’t call it a decision, it’s not that I got up one morning and decided what I would do ... it was a search. I didn’t make a decision ... although I am always thinking about what I want to do, I don’t necessarily do that. I enrolled in film school but things didn’t always go how I hoped (E2, woman, living alone, type of trajectory: Professional).

The decreased importance of the adult world in symbolic terms, and the increasing importance of the economic support of transitions, mostly in terms of access to housing, was a frequent issue. To start their own family, youth face major difficulties caused by the rise in housing costs, part of a general process of Western capitalism. For example:

Now I have to think about money too, because I have my wife, my little girl and my father and we’re adding on to the house to have our own place upstairs (E10, male, living with a partner and one daughter, type of trajectory: Incomplete university studies).
When my son was born ... I kept on living with my parents. When he got married my father also lived with his parents in this house. My parents helped me to build my own place ... We lived there while I was pregnant and for several months after my baby was born. It wasn’t like we were living with my parents. We come in through the same door but there is a separate apartment upstairs. (E3, woman, living with a partner and one son, type of trajectory: Complete advanced studies).

Affectivity, personal bonds and establishing roots were central elements in the choices of the young people interviewed. Decisions, plans to move to another country and general life choices varied according to the importance attributed to loved ones, family and close friends. Similarly, bonds (Cuervo & Wyn 2014) were decisive in guiding young adult strategies towards job integration and living on their own.

Discussion
The comparative analysis of the data from both studies shows that the socioeconomic and social policy changes in Argentina in two different historical contexts did affect young people’s understanding of education as well as their expectations in relation to it. This effect can also be observed in relation to the educational continuity and the types of labour market integration experienced by young people. With reference to these research dimensions of our study, it is important to consider that the two cohorts of young people investigated belong to different social generations, each facing different structural transition conditions and each coping (or not coping) with them in different ways (for example, our two different transition models).

The qualitative analysis completed in 2011 based on biographical interviews with a sub-sample of the first cohort was comprised of interviewees aged in their 30s. This analysis revealed that in a context of economic growth and social and educational redistribution policies, new types of transition from education to employment arise. Thus a new transitional model is created, one that has been the focus of this work in the hope of hearing what experts and youth researchers have to say about this model. It is a model that shows the transition between education and the employment world of a segment of high school graduates.

This first aim of this new transitional model was to provide an updated and a critical analysis of the normative elements that often establish priorities within the transitions to
adulthood or “normalise” them. For example, and as described in the theoretical framework, the new model proposes, first, going beyond those which describe the ideal itineraries and designate those who stray too far from the “normal” itinerary as “problematic”. Second, it proposes combining the trajectories in higher education with its effects on the type of occupation that the young person has at the end of his or her itinerary. Finally, and as can be seen in the results, this model highlights that even though the first years of labour market integration were highly volatile among young people from all social groups, the higher income groups – especially those who had graduated from college – perceived greater opportunities for their future career.

In summary, perhaps one of the most important initial findings of the qualitative study is that the changes to economic and social policy in Argentina after the collapse of the neoliberal model enhanced homogeneity and reduced social polarisation among the young. In this sense, employment, a key element of social integration, was one of the signs of diminished intra-generational inequality as a particular segment of Argentina’s class system, the middle class, was expanded and consolidated.

This sample of young people were high school graduates, often from widely different social origins, revealing the need for an empirical discussion on the policies of redistribution and its positive effects on long-term living conditions.

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**Authors**

Rene Bendit is with the Youth Research Program Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), Argentina.

Ana Miranda is with the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) and Youth Research Program Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), Argentina.
Getting connected
Researching organisational engagement and community connectedness among Gen Y youth in Malaysia

STEVEN ERIC KRAUSS, HASLINDA ABDULLAH, ZURAIDAH ALI, ADRIANA ORTEGA, ISMI ARIF ISMAIL, DZUHAILMI DAHALAN & ZAIFU ARIFFIN

Disengagement among Gen Y youth in Malaysia: Growing practice and policy concerns

One of the most enigmatic groups in Malaysia today is the millennial generation, also known as the digital generation, net generation or Gen Y. Gen Y youth are typically considered as those born between 1980 and 2000 and are the first generation to experience information-communication technology (ICT) as a fixture in everyday life (Black 2010). Gen Ys currently range from adolescents to young adults and are today’s secondary school students, university students and young workers. In many cultures throughout the world, Gen Y youth are completing educational programs, getting situated in their first jobs, forming relationships that will extend through adulthood and learning to become contributing citizens.

In Malaysia, Gen Y’s perceived lack of connectedness to traditional institutions such as family, school and community organisations is of growing concern. Whitlock (2006) has conceptualised connectedness among youth as “a psychological state of belonging in which individual youth perceive that they and other youth are cared for, trusted, and respected by collections of adults that they believe hold the power to make institutional
and policy decisions” (pp.14-15). Prevailing stereotypes about Gen Y differ little from those in the West – that they are highly connected technologically yet are socially disconnected from employers, parents and real-life communities (as opposed to online ones) (Myers & Sadaghiani 2010). Contributing to these sentiments is a lack of understanding on what connectedness means to Malaysian Gen Y young people, and how engagement in youth and community work leads to a greater sense of connectedness to their communities.

This lack of theoretical insight on connectedness has hampered policy makers’ ability to address the growing problem of youth disengagement in the formal youth sector. As reported by Hamzah et al. (2002, 2011), an increasing number of Malaysian youth associations are becoming inactive or are experiencing declines in membership. According to the Malaysian Youth Index (2011), only 17.8% of young people reported being involved in youth clubs and associations, down from 2006. Furthermore, the Index reported low scores and/or negative trends on domains relating to other indicators of connectedness such as volunteerism, empowerment and political socialisation. As reported in a recent report by the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), Malaysian young people’s participation in politics is among the lowest among Commonwealth countries, with a ranking of 47th among the 51 Commonwealth nations surveyed (Commonwealth Youth Development Index 2013). These indicators, along with anecdotal data from multiple private sector employers, teachers and other adults that work with Gen Y youth, raise the spectre of a worrying trend that is not well understood.

Despite these indicators, few formal efforts have been made to study the experiences of engagement and connectedness among Malaysian Gen Y youth directly. To date, the majority of empirical work on this generation has been limited to studies on employability, consumption patterns and consumer behaviours (Kueh & Voon 2007; Madahi & Sukati 2012). Researchers and policymakers in Malaysia have little in-depth understanding as to how young people’s engagement in the form of interest, motivation and commitment to youth and community work within program contexts affects their sense of connectedness to the communities in which they work – a factor that is critical for becoming engaged citizens later in life (Zeldin & Topitzes 2002).

Expectations of Malaysia’s Gen Y youth are high. Several recent major policy initiatives such as the National Economic Transformation program, the National Educational
Blueprint, and others, have squarely placed the burden of national development on the shoulders of Malaysia’s youth. Recent studies report lower rates of youth participation in civic engagement as well as declining youth perceptions about support from neighbourhoods and non-familial adults (Abdullah et al. 2014). These trends run counter to the inherently collectivist culture of Malaysia, comprised of strong communal values and social trust (Ndubisi et al. 2011). Consequently, policy priorities have foregrounded empowerment and connectedness as necessary outcomes to prepare young people for productive economic and leadership roles, as well as for participation in community development, social issues and global citizenship alongside adults (Ahmad et al. 2012; Hamzah 2005; Nga 2009). Nevertheless, many believe that further youth disengagement from families, communities and institutions threatens the future outcome of these policies.

The study: Toward understanding how Malaysian youth get engaged in youth and community work and how engagement leads to community connectedness

In response to the aforementioned needs, a team of researchers at the Institute for Social Science Studies (IPSAS), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), has embarked on a two-year study to better understand the process of youth engagement and its relationship to community connectedness among Gen Y youth. By targeting highly engaged exemplars from youth programs and community organisations in Malaysia, we are taking a best practices approach to conceptualising the key elements and processes that contribute to young people’s engagement in organisations and programs. Informed by the above research background, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- How did the study participants initially become involved in youth and community work?
- How do they become engaged in the work of their organisations/programs?
- How does engagement in youth and community work lead to a greater sense of connectedness with community?
- What are the individual developmental benefits that result from engagement?

From the findings, we aim to produce a conceptual model and subsequent organisational assessment measure to help organisations and policymakers gauge youth engagement in a way that is both relevant and applicable across different organisational settings. These
include school-based after-school programs, community-based youth programs, university-based organisations and programs, as well as voluntary organisations, both national and international.

**Preliminary findings**

To date, the research team has conducted in-depth interviews with 14 young people from diverse backgrounds. They include leaders of local youth organisations, university students actively involved in volunteer and community work, and active members of international volunteer organisations like the Red Crescent Society. Diversity in gender, race, and field of interest are additional sampling criteria that have been given due consideration. The age range of the current sample is from 20 to 35 years. In Malaysia, the official “youth” age is 15 to 40; however, the recently revised National Youth Act reduced the age ceiling from 40 to 30 years of age. The new Youth Act is scheduled to go into effect in 2018.

**What gets young people involved in youth and community work?**

In response to the first research question, findings to date indicate the importance of other people in young people getting involved in youth and community work, namely *family*, *peers*, and *other adults* like organisational leaders with whom young people have come in contact. Then, our participant spoke at length about coming in contact with organisations and programs whose work *aligns with young people’s personal interests*. Several participants spoke about having parents and siblings that are active, and how being “socialised” into a culture of activism and community engagement early on motivated them to also become involved. On the other hand, for several participants active peers introduced them to youth and community work. For many, it was a combination of people – parents, peers and others – who introduced them to organisations or programs that resonated with their interests, personal goals and sense of purpose.

**What keeps young people engaged?**

Once involved or “in the door” with youth and community work, our participants talked extensively about how they became engaged. To date, five themes have emerged. The first we call *empowering settings*. Empowering organisational and program settings allow young people to feel valued – being listened to, having their ideas and views taken seriously and having opportunities to participate. Some of the ways through which this
occurs include being allotted meaningful roles in organisations and having opportunities to make decisions. Empowering settings also include psychological safety, where participants are given the space to make mistakes and try again. Second is **opportunities to contribute** and give back to the community by helping those less fortunate, sharing knowledge and information and facilitating others’ voice or advocating for others. Third is **personal growth**, which includes seeing the connection between youth and community work and personal goals, pushing personal boundaries and learning about oneself, finding satisfaction in seeing the transformation of others, and developing competency through acquiring new knowledge and skills. The fourth way that our participants spoke about getting engaged in the work is through **social capital**. This includes the experiences of meeting new people and forming new personal networks, as well as strengthening existing social bonds with friends and peers. Lastly, having a strong **sense of purpose**, life mission, or desire to serve God, were also mentioned by several of our participants as a source of motivation for engagement in the work.

Several of the participants also spoke about the critical role that program adults play in fostering engagement. The importance of adults was discussed according two main streams. The first was the qualities of adults as **role models**. Participants spoke of adult leaders as admirable, respected, inspiring, visionary, and always being able to give ideas related to the work. The second way that participants spoke about program adults was in terms of **how the adults worked with the young people to facilitate the latter’s engagement**. This includes being able to play multiple roles (mentor, motivator, advisor), provide young people with voice and autonomy in learning and executing decisions and tasks (and meaningful roles to play), giving young people space/time when they needed it, having high expectations and challenging the them, and being inviting and open to questions and ideas. Lastly, they emphasised the importance of the adults being supportive when the young people faced problems either within or outside of their respective organisations or programs.

**How does engagement lead to community connectedness?**

In response to the third research question, increasing their sense of connectedness to their respective communities occurred first through **building meaningful relationships**. This happened through the personal relationships that resulted from working with community stakeholders and other branches of their own organisations, and through forming relationships with other young people as a result of working in community
projects and activities. Participants also spoke about having connectivity with multiple stakeholders in communities and bringing them together to address youth issues. Bringing together community stakeholders for a program on first aid and CPR, for example, allowed youth leaders in the Red Crescent Society to establish relationships with community members that continued with subsequent programs in the future.

The second way engagement enhanced feelings of connectedness was through community education. Participants mentioned the importance of role modelling and setting an example for others, especially other young people in the community, sharing new ideas with community stakeholders, and helping community members by clarifying complex issues. These types of interactions facilitated our participants’ sense of connection to both the place and the people living in the communities in which they worked.

**What are the developmental benefits of engagement?**

Our study participants have discussed several perceived benefits to their personal growth and development resulting from their engagement in community and youth work. We have broken these down into two groups: leadership qualities and soft skills. In terms of leadership qualities, these include both interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities, such as the ability to adapt to change and work with different types of people, being more approachable, acquiring a greater sense of focus and discipline, and realising one’s own abilities and strengths. Our participants also spoke about the important qualities of developing self-awareness and self-reflection, which they felt contributed to their maturity as young activists and leaders.

The second group of benefits in the form of soft skills includes time management, training and communication skills (public speaking, languages, asking questions, negotiation), as well as leadership and decision-making skills. The participants saw their experiences as a form of transformative learning and personal evolution in that several spoke about how they went from introvert to extrovert and passive to proactive as a result of their engagement in the work.
Conclusion

This paper presents preliminary findings from ongoing research in Malaysia on understanding how young people experience engagement in youth and community work, and how that work helps them increase their sense of connectedness to communities and contributes to their personal development. Findings to date indicate that engagement is driven by a combination of opportunities, circumstances and relational supports, including relationships with adults who value youth voice and meaningful participation. Furthermore, community connectedness results from engagement through the deeper embeddedness that engagement fosters in the form of new relationships and personal networks, and being involved in educating the community directly through knowledge-sharing and indirectly through setting an example and role modelling. The findings have also unveiled numerous personal benefits to the participants’ skill and identity development as well. The research team plans to continue data collection to strengthen the current findings, with a particular focus on better understanding the deeper relationship between engagement and connectedness to communities.

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The past five years have seen numerous protest movements and calls for democratic reform by young people around the world. This issue spotlights work from the Carnegie Rising Democracies Network, a research network of leading experts on democracy and foreign policy, dedicated to examining the growing role of non-Western democracies in international democracy and human rights support.¹

Non-Western ideas for democratic renewal

A call for shared experimentation among democracies

Richard Youngs, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

It is commonly asserted that Western liberal democracy is losing credibility and that the international community must be more open to tolerating, and even encouraging, non-Western political models in developing and rising powers. Calls for non-Western forms of democracy have been around for many years but are now becoming louder and more ubiquitous. This trend can be expected to deepen as an integral element of the emerging post-Western world order.

The desire of people outside the West to contribute new ideas to democratic regeneration and to feel stronger local ownership over democracy is healthy. More needs to be done to nurture a wider variation of democratic processes and practices. This variety will be necessary to shore up democracy’s long-term credibility. Forms of democracy that differ from prevailing Western norms should be encouraged rather than

¹ The Rising Democracies Network is a project of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace and is carried out in partnership with the Robert Bosch Stiftung, with additional support from the Ford Foundation and the UK Department for International Development. This article appeared on 21 April 2016; additional articles and information are available at http://carnegieendowment.org/specialprojects/Rising DemocraciesNetwork
simply dismissed as a cloak for illiberalism or authoritarianism (though recognising that sometimes they are).

At the same time, it is highly questionable that a wholesale non-Western variety of democracy stands perfectly defined and ready to be implemented. Indeed, the calls for non-Western democracy exhibit many aspects that are far from convincing. Non-Western critics need to recognise that the concerns about social justice, community identity and consensus that they frequently express as part of critiques of the Western democratic model are also present in Western debates about democratic renewal. Rather than a binary competition between Western and non-Western (or regionally specific Arab, African or Asian) democracy, joint experimentation is needed among people in between different regions to find ways of updating the forms through which democratic accountability and representation are achieved.

Given these mixed pluses and minuses relating to the idea of non-Western democracy, is it, on balance, helpful or harmful to the overall cause of democracy that this idea is being advanced and debated in different non-Western settings? Four experts from Carnegie’s Rising Democracies Network provide answers here.

**Latin American innovations**

*Oliver Stuenkel, Getulio Vargas Foundation, Brazil*

In Latin America, analysts’ attention has focused on the way that left-wing populist regimes have come to directly challenge Western, liberal democracy. But it is necessary to look beyond the well-worn debates over chavismo to see how interesting innovations to democracy are emerging in Latin America.

In recent years, mass protests have been staged across Latin America – in Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico and elsewhere. New movements have been set up by young people who seek to enhance political accountability and strengthen their capacity to participate in the democratic process beyond voting in elections. Anger over corruption is often a driver of the protests, but the major concern is usually the low quality of public services because it perpetuates socioeconomic inequality.

In Brazil, in particular, the young reject traditional political structures, opting for alternative ways to make their voices heard. Civil society has led an increasing number of highly original initiatives. One example is Nossas Cidades (Our Cities), a
nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that creates digital platforms to make political engagement easier by helping citizens contact public officials responsible for specific issues, identifying others willing to work for similar causes, and pointing to politicians who have acted to protect their own vested interests.

Some NGOs are bringing together lawyers who provide free legal advice to those apprehended by the police during protests. Others denounce environmental degradation through graffiti art. Another example is the deployment of an app that tracks a congressman’s voting record, tax declarations and campaign donors. And the organisers of Ônibus Hacker (Hacker Bus), which advocates public transparency and open data, teach schoolchildren how to write legislative projects and send them to lawmakers.

Through such initiatives, activists are not so much seeking a wholesale change to the nature of the democratic regime as more effective dialogue with the government. They are driven by the hope that such civic activism will offer better ways to reduce the inequality in society.

A certain paradox remains: in Brazil’s most recent presidential elections, the country’s established parties were victorious, while alternatives – such as Marina Silva’s “third way” – foundered. Instead, change is occurring through new types of civil society organisations. These new forms may not represent a completely different model of democracy, but they offer useful lessons to both Western and non-Western democracies around the world.

**Looking beyond traditional Africa**

*Gilbert Khadiagala, Witwatersrand University, South Africa*

Ideas about and practices related to varieties of non-Western forms of democracy have a long tradition in African political analysis. They undergird some of the core assumptions about political culture, such as the legitimacy of traditional structures and consensual power sharing. Pundits perennially invoke these debates to claim an African political distinctiveness.

Cultural arguments that challenge liberal democracy in Africa have been prominent since the 1960s, when postcolonial governments started to construct one-party states. African elites mobilised the alleged power of the traditional values of consensus building, accountability, and participation to depict unique forms of African democracy.
While these views remain powerful, what is also interesting is that cultural explanations justifying specifically African forms of democracy have gradually been supplemented with more pragmatic practices around state and nation building.

In the early 1990s, facing multiple pressures for pluralism, Yoweri Museveni, then and now the president of Uganda, popularised a new version of African democracy: the non-party democracy that sought to restrain political competition through a movement that Museveni strictly controlled. Although non-party democracy did not gain widespread acceptance in Africa, some of its key organisational principles still inform the practices of semiauthoritarian regimes from Ethiopia to Rwanda. In these systems, the argument that there is a uniform set of African values is often used as a tool to disarm errant political opponents.

Traditional structures have failed to gain traction in Africa’s democratic innovation in part because these structures are diverse and contested even within countries. Some have been associated with egregious forms of authoritarianism, sexism and human rights abuses. In countries where traditional norms have been incorporated into decentralised structures, they have often fostered exclusion and failed to promote accountability and transparency. Moreover, many African leaders over the years have conjured up the power of tradition while presiding over the collapse of their states and societies.

As a result, while many in Africa seek more legitimate forms of local politics, traditions have become a sensitive and contested matter in building democracy. The dominant debate at the heart of African democracy is how to reconcile democratic values with Africa’s diverse socioeconomic structures, particularly the realities of regional and ethnic fragmentation. While African countries are ultimately going to differ over how they manage these problems, there is also growing consensus among citizens about the centrality of the basic universal norms and values that constitute democracy. This budding consensus reinforces the point that people need variations in democracy rather than entirely different institutional models.

**Overstating the Asian model**

*Niranjan Sahoo, Observer Research Foundation, India*

Politicians and dominant opinion makers in Asia routinely insist that the Confucian ideals of respect for authority, strong family ties, and sacrificing individual rights for the
greater good represent common Asian values. They claim that these values underpin a distinctive form of democracy that is more stable and efficient than the individualistic and adversarial model of Western democracy. These values, it is commonly said, go hand in hand with the strong states and strong leaders that have made Asia the world’s economic growth engine.

It is certainly true that many countries in the region can rightfully claim to have adapted democratic institutions and processes to local cultural and social conditions and produced effective governance models. Yet to say that so-called Asian values have helped indigenise democracy is too sweeping an interpretation.

These values are hardly unique to Asia. They can be found in most successful societies, be it in the Global South or the West, and they have little to do with types of democracy. Indeed, these values are much more strongly present in authoritarian states, such as China. It is a category mistake to conflate cultural and societal values with certain forms of democracy.

Rather than exhibiting consensus and uniformity, Asia houses deep diversity and variety in its institutional forms. The way diversity is managed in India and Indonesia, for example, has little to do with the famed Singaporean model. India has a strikingly adversarial political system, with ferociously competitive political parties and often a clear absence of consensus over key policies. Talking about an Asian model of democracy that patently does not describe the world’s largest democracy raises serious questions about the claim.

There are undoubtedly interesting new institutional variations at work in Asia. But to argue that the region has – or should follow – a different version of democracy from that which exists in the West is not convincing. This is quite apart from the fact that most ideas about the so-called Asian model have been propounded by politicians and diplomats from Asia’s semidemocratic or semiauthoritarian countries. Whatever the successes and virtues of such countries, these voices do not represent political preferences in other parts of the region.

**Progress and setbacks in the Middle East**

*Senem Aydin-Düzgit, Istambul Bilgi University, Turkey*

The Middle East has become central to debates on non-Western democracy, especially with the rise of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in Turkey
in 2002 and the aftermath of the Arab Awakening in 2011. There is huge variation among the countries of the region with respect to whether they have achieved a transition to democracy. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that no state in the region has yet succeeded in expanding the Western model of liberal democracy through novel variations on individual rights, economic justice, communitarian values, alternative forms of representation, or legal pluralism. These fronts remain the subjects of local debates.

Even Turkey, probably the most democratically advanced Muslim country in the region, is suffering from what could be called a middle-democracy trap. That is, its well-known middle-income trap is now accompanied by a parallel trap of illiberal democracy. Checks and balances are being eroded, democratic institutions weakened and fundamental freedoms curbed. Between 2002 and 2011, the country had given hope to many Arab reformers that a model going beyond Western democracy could be possible. Individual rights were widened, while expressions of Islam in the public sphere were substantially expanded. Nonetheless, this potential was wasted as the country reverted to a more limited democracy where individual rights were restricted.

What has distinguished Turkey from Egypt and Tunisia is the crucial role played by the secular rule of law in strengthening women’s rights in a Muslim setting. This draws attention to the fact that calls for different, sharia-based types of legal systems as a component of non-Western democracies in the region should be treated with caution, particularly concerning matters of gender equality, and that legal pluralism should be restricted at least by a minimal understanding of secularism.

Another positive example has come recently from Tunisia, where power sharing between Islamists and secularists shows how a consensual democratic model can function, certain problems notwithstanding. Nonetheless, rather than constituting new non-Western models, these examples show the enduring importance of the core elements of the so-called Western model, such as secularism and power sharing, in those countries struggling to consolidate their democracies in the region. Hence the Middle East can be considered as still in the process of reaching minimal components of Western democracy and far from fostering non-Western democratic practices that could enrich the conceptualisation and practice of liberal democracy.
BOOK REVIEW

Just a ‘spoonful’ of pop culture to help the theory go down?

JOSHUA SPIER

Teaching youth studies through popular culture
by Sarah Baker and Brady Robards
2014, ACYS Publishing
ISBN Paperback: 9781875236664 (paperback)
Price: AU$36.80 + $7 postage. Order from The Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Locked Bag 66, Hobart TAS 7001, email: Krista.Brinckman@utas.edu.au

This book stems from its authors’ own tried-and-tested approach to teaching youth studies in the Australian higher education context. As Baker and Robards’ introductory chapter clarifies, their resource is built around a shared conviction that for the sociological-cultural studies of youth to be meaningful for increasingly diverse learners, traditional pedagogies must be supplemented by the use of multiple modalities of popular culture. The proceeding nine chapters serve to illustrate this chief premise. While promoting the use of popular culture artefacts in the sociology classroom is not an original endeavour, the uniqueness of Baker and Robards’ work is that it aims to advance the teaching of the sociology of youth.
The book is organised into two parts. Part 1 gives teachers an overview of ways that popular culture can be appropriated to enhance the learning experiences of students. Each chapter couples a distinct stream of popular culture with a specific application, although there is discernible overlap. Chapter 2 considers how “film” can be used to facilitate students’ “sociological thinking” about course topics. Chapter 3 discusses how “small screen” material (including television and video games) can be used to help students engage with sociological “concepts” (like class) in relation to young people’s lives. Chapter 4 looks at how “popular music” can be used to enable students to challenge dominant societal “understandings” of young people, including prejudices students themselves may hold. Chapter 5 explores how “literature” (including novels, poems, comic books and “zines”) can be a vehicle for students’ “critical consciousness” of the relationship between young people’s personal lives and social structures. Chapter 6, the final chapter in the first part of the book, conveys how “print media and advertising” texts can be used in helping students to analyse common “representations” of young people in society.

Each chapter in Part 1 follows a common formula, beginning with a synopsis of how other sociology teachers have previously used the type of popular culture in question. This is followed by concise examples of how the authors have used each type within their own teaching contexts. Not wanting to limit possibilities to the specific pop materials featured in their practical examples, the authors add a resource table in each chapter, pointing readers to further items that could be used.

At the end of each chapter in Part 1 (Chapters 2–6) the authors also propose assignment prototypes that might be developed in relation to each specific form of popular culture. These assignment suggestions are a particularly useful feature of Part 1. They invite course designers to ponder how they could weave popular culture into the very fabric of the assessment processes they are planning, rather than merely mixing it in as a “spoonful of sugar” to help students digest social and cultural theory. On this point, the authors insist they are not encouraging teachers to abandon traditional assessment methods, but rather to look at composing archetype assignments, such as essay topics, which ask students to analyse issues with reference to popular culture artefacts, such as a song or television series (pp.40, 54, 69).
I wonder if a more helpful structure for Part 1 might have been to place the thematic applications front and centre (‘Facilitating sociological thinking’ in Chapter 2, “Illustrating concepts” in Chapter 3, and so forth), rather than dividing chapters according to specific mediums. This may have entrusted readers to consider how they could blend various popular mediums to catalyse learning outcomes that underpin most sociological-cultural studies courses.

The second part of the book moves from introducing forms of popular culture to building a more in-depth understanding of how these forms can be applied. To do this, Baker and Robards draw four case studies from their progressive approach to teaching youth studies. Chapter 7 builds on the earlier Chapters 2–3 on screen media forms. This first case study is the highlight of the book. It chronicles how the lead authors (with Sue Lovell) have integrated digital storytelling to enable students not only as critical readers, but also as co-creators of screen media texts.

The second case study in Part 2 seems a little out of place in this resource. Chapter 8 evaluates the practice of adopting karaoke in the youth studies classroom. This “icebreaker” activity has merit, but was primarily developed as a strategy to assist young students in their transition to university life, rather than as a robust tool of teaching youth studies curricula per se. After this brief detour, the central focus of the book returns in the following chapter. Chapter 9 gives an intriguing account of how film has been used in a youth cultural studies course, with the specific aim of equipping students to conduct their own ethnographic research into a youth subculture of their choice.

The final chapter in Part 2 takes a surprising turn. It is entitled “Social media in youth studies education”, with its focus less on popular social media websites (such as Facebook and Twitter) as objects for analysis and more on the authors’ embracing of social media as a way to mediate their own pedagogical relations and encounters with their students. This chapter features a good discussion on ethical ways of extending the bricks-and-mortar “classroom” to the online “spaces” that many students already inhabit, such as Facebook.

In the book’s concluding chapter, the authors encourage fellow teachers to make popular culture pedagogy their own. Driving their project is a commitment to empower students to learn (by doing) the art of “deconstructing popular culture” (p.151). It is with this final note that one nagging concern arises, which I will now touch on before summarising the overall strength of the book.
An explicit thread within this book is the idea of popular culture. What is popular culture? The term “popular culture” itself holds different meanings within different contexts and disciplines. Perhaps this central idea requires further attention than what it receives in the introductory chapter and throughout, especially given the book is not only intended for old hands but newcomers to the teaching of youth studies. The underpinning approach to popular culture, with the exception of Chapter 7, is largely “commercial” in that it corresponds to material that is produced-for-profit and typically consumed-for-entertainment.

Students and young people are positioned in the book as “critical” rather than “passive” consumers of popular culture. Nonetheless, the emphasis remains on consumable media. A more critical approach, aligned with the Birmingham tradition of cultural studies, may have been to deconstruct the idea of popular culture itself before moving to how students can learn how to deconstruct popular culture.

For such a task, Stuart Hall’s essay remains as relevant today as it was when first written in 1981. Hall argues that “popular” culture does not signify the consumable products that corporations feed us, but refers to a site of political struggle (Hall 2009, p.512). From this view, the interest turns to an everyday and contested relationship between “the people”, particularly young people, and the cultural industries. Establishing popular culture as a site of resistance and agency may have expanded the discussion to consider how students can be encouraged to see how young people are already co-creating expressions for social change that push back against dominant cultures (Allison 2013, p.69). This idea might provoke teachers to go further than enabling students to analyse issues and meanings within particular cultural forms. An additional challenge is perhaps helping students to become critically aware of the way “different meanings with possibly contradictory political inflections can be articulated [by young people] within the same cultural formation” (Melville 2014).

Despite this possible oversight, the overall strength of this book is that it gifts teachers with an articulate and research-based guide in the appropriation of popular culture. It seeks to support readers to enliven learning in their own youth studies classrooms. Using this methodology, however, is by no means a merry sing-along. Through their critical and candid reflections on student feedback and their own experiences, an important insight comes into view. That is, incorporating popular culture is by no means an easy solution, or edge, for educational designers vying for student-consumers in a
niche marketplace. Rather, with candour and generosity, the authors reveal that taking up this way of teaching youth studies is difficult. Despite often demanding more creativity and perseverance than conventional pedagogy, this book makes a compelling case that the benefits of integrating popular culture, in terms of student learning, may well be worth the challenge.

**Reviewer**

Joshua Spier is a PhD graduate and associate member of the School of Education at Flinders University, South Australia. He has previously taught sociology and cultural studies in a higher education youth work program.

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The Centre for Applied Youth Research (CAYR) co-produces JAYS with the Asia Institute Tasmania (AIT) and the University of Tasmania. The mission and purpose of CAYR is to promote and support the development of applied youth research, policy and practice, including the social, moral, cultural, emotional, spiritual and physical development of young people, particularly in the 12 to 30 age group in the Asia-Pacific region. CAYR’s principal communication medium is the Journal of Applied Youth Studies (JAYS), an online interdisciplinary, research-based, peer-reviewed resource with information and analysis on issues affecting young people as they prepare for the responsibilities of adulthood and citizenship.