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# **Poverty traps not stepping stones: young adults' long-term experiences of precarious work**

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# Aims

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- To explore apparent contradiction between
  - social theoretical assumptions about the *proliferation* of precarious work (a.k.a 'contingent', 'insecure', 'non-standard')
  - (some) survey-based, empirical evidence that deny this
- To report findings of long-term, longitudinal research with marginalised young adults in NE England
- To consider the significance of precarious work in processes of youth marginalisation

# Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (1992)

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- **‘The boundaries between work and non-work are becoming more fluid. Flexible, pluralized forms of underemployment are spreading’.**
- Rising precarious employment affects all sorts of work & worker, replacing regular jobs
- Is leitmotif of risk society & indicative of late modern capitalism
- The social theoretical wisdom (Beck, Sennett, Castells, Giddens) - influential in youth studies

# BUT, Fevre's (2007) review of UK, US, Europe labour force data shows, e.g....

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- ❑ average job tenure has *not* declined
- ❑ workers' feelings of insecurity *have* declined
- ❑ (some evidence) that rates of long-term employment are *growing*
- ❑ the proportion of UK non-permanent employees was *lower* in 2006 (5.8%) than in 1997 (8%)
- ❑ a *downward* trend in 'contingent' employment in the US between 1995 & 2001
- ❑ *long-term* employment relationships remain the norm for most European workers (International Labour Office/ Auer and Cazes, 2003)

Fevre (2007) 'the idea of a new age of employment insecurity is a myth'

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'it has not been employment that has become insecure and flexible but social theory' that makes claims 'without undertaking empirical research'.

# But, most insecure work = amongst younger & less educated workers

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- ❑ Fenton and Dermott (2006: 205) survey in SW England:
- ❑ ‘a sizeable majority, mostly of low paid workers whose working lives can be described as discontinuous and fragmented...**employment fragmentation is concentrated among young adults with less education and in lower status, lower paid occupations**’.
  
- ❑ Furlong and Cartmel (2004: 27) labour market careers of disadvantaged young men in Scotland:
- ❑ ‘...**their main problem was not finding work, but keeping it.** This employment insecurity tended not to reflect negative attitudes...or necessarily a lack of skills; it was almost entirely a consequence of the “flexible” nature of low skilled employment in modern Britain’.

# Precarious jobs as stepping stones?

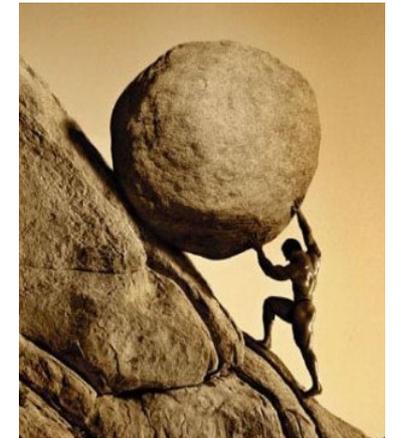
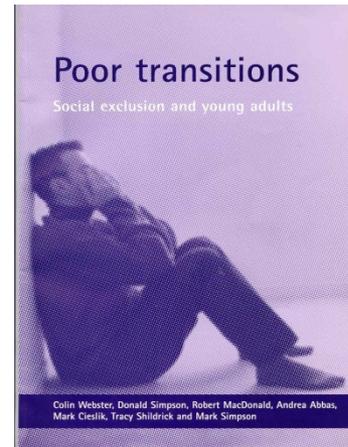
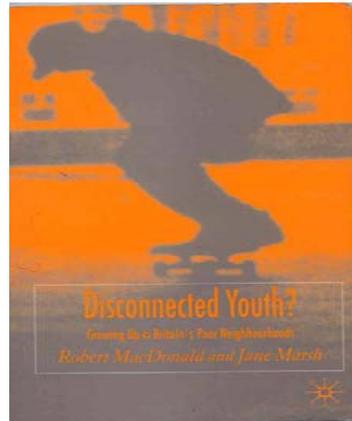
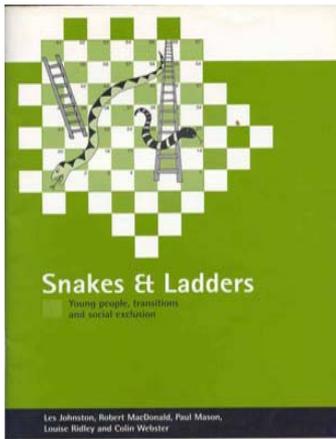
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- ‘whether young people have to “queue” in temporary jobs while waiting for a permanent job or whether they are “trapped” in insecure, secondary jobs with no bridge to stable employment’? (Auer and Cazes, 2003).
- ‘Unsurprisingly, youth represent a high proportion of new hires and job changers [and job quits]...***this is just part of the natural dynamics of settling into the world of work***.  
(Quintini et al, 2007, summarising youth transitions in OECD countries)

# Or precarious work as a poverty trap?

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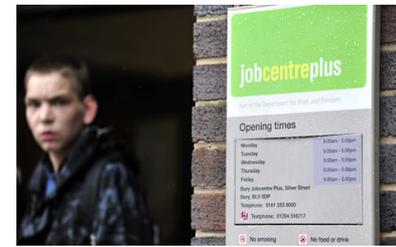
- ❑ Is young people's rapid movement between jobs an expression of late modern, 'choice biographies'/'emergent adulthood'?
- ❑ Or evidence of new forms of marginalisation for working-class young adults?
- ❑ Middle-class students 'paying their way' through university may *choose* to do lower quality jobs temporarily - to finance study and leisure
- ❑ For working-class young adults precarious employment can *define* their labour market transitions and be the outcome.



- ❑ 4 long-term studies of youth transitions & social exclusion (fieldwork 1998-2003 – and then 2008/9): ESRC & JRF
- ❑ Most recent study, Tracy Shildrick et al November 2010, JRF *Low-pay, No-pay: Understanding Recurrent Poverty*
- ❑ In some of poorest neighbourhoods in England (Teesside)
- ❑ 186 white, working-class 'hard to reach' young adults
- ❑ Qualitative, in-depth, wide-ranging interviews
  - education & labour market 'careers'
  - housing & family 'careers'
  - leisure, criminal, drug using 'careers'
- ❑ (Quasi)/longitudinal, following (some) same individuals teens to 30s

# Post-school transitions

- Unemployment = common & recurrent for all...
- ...but so was employment
- *Long-term* post-school transitions, into 30s = *insecure & non-progressive*  
age 16-18: School-youth training-unemployment-job.../ age 18-26: job unemployment-FE -unemployment-New Deal.../ age 26-36+: unemployment-job-unemployment-New Deal-unemployment...
- Not labour market *exclusion* (or idle *underclass*) - but long-term churning **underemployment & economic marginality**



# Insecure, economically marginal transitions

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- ❑ Low paid, low quality, low/ no skilled & insecure  
e.g. factory workers, bar/ fast food staff, care assistants, security guards, labourers, shop assistants
- ❑ Easily *hired* into, & *fired* from, the abundant 'poor work' at the bottom of the labour market



# Why did they leave/ lose jobs?

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- ❑ Typically involuntary:
  - Short-term contracts (particularly via employment agencies)
  - Redundancy
  - Dismissals (often apparently unfair, sometimes illegal)
- ❑ Sometimes chosen (quitting), but choices often ‘forced’
  - Physical ill-health (e.g. via work related injuries)
  - Mental ill-health (e.g. depression, anxiety – sometimes job related)
  - Care responsibilities (extended family)
  - Financial reasons (e.g. rising costs of childcare, travel)
- ❑ Overall, demand-side **insecurity of employment = prime driver of ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’** (conclusion of wider JRF programme too)

# Longer-term poor transitions

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- ❑ Precarious work trapped interviewees in lasting poverty & economic marginality
- ❑ Doing the same 'poor work' at age 17 & 27 years
- ❑ Most recent study (Shildrick et al, 2010) shows pattern of 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' continued for these young adults into 30s
- ❑ **Not stepping stones to something better**
- ❑ Similar findings in other studies that focus on disadvantaged places & people (contra *general* labour force surveys)
- ❑ 'the precarious nature of many low-paid jobs' means that getting 'a job may only represent a turn in the cycle of poverty' (McKnight, 2002: 98)

# 'Low-pay, no-pay' insecurity, one example: Richard, 30, currently unemployed

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

Since age 16:

- ❑ 15 episodes of unemployment
- ❑ 5 training schemes
- ❑ 9 jobs (longest 18 months), now via emp. agencies
- ❑ highest pay £7.50 ph, usually £5.50 ph.
- ❑ **poor & deeply in debt** – accrued whilst 'signed off' doing short-term agency jobs (loss of benefits)
- ❑ **general finding:** people often financially better off on benefits...but do risk increased poverty by working!

# How do we explain this?

## The marginal transitions equation

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old, class-based, normative aspirations for 'real work' (cf. Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 1977)

+

massive, socio-spatially concentrated de-industrialisation

+

continued abundance of precarious 'poor work'

+

UK policy to move young & poor from 'welfare to work' & poor quality post-16 quality training/ educ. programmes

=

Long-term low-pay, no-pay cycle

=

Lasting poverty/ economic marginality (that signal intergenerational downward social mobility)

# In other words...biography & social structure

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- ❑ De-industrialisation shifted *social structural crises onto individual life histories*
- ❑ Downward social mobility - but young people of this stable, white working-class cling to old values & practices (e.g. 'not being a dole wallah')
- ❑ 'Getting by' via precarious poor work & churning economic marginality



# Conclusion

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- ❑ Social theory may overestimate extent of precarious work as general phenomena
- ❑ Young/ less educated = most likely precarious workers
- ❑ Policy orthodoxy sees this as ‘natural’ & ‘passing’: normal stepping stones
- ❑ Yet qualitative/ ethnographic studies can show it as widespread & lasting (difference explained by...)
  - Social & geographic concentration of precarious poor work
  - Contractually permanent work *experienced* as temporary
  - Wider, ‘every day’ definitions of precarious work as ‘poor work’ – low paid, low skill, poor quality, not just temporary

# Conclusion

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- ❑ Despite policy pronouncements about a high skill, high tech economy, jobs requiring no qualifications will *remain* at around 7.4 million in 2020 (IPPR, 2009)
- ❑ Low skilled/ paid work will remain abundant in UK: *who will do this poor work?*
- ❑ Precarious, poor work entraps disadvantaged, working-class young adults in economic marginality, ensuring lasting poverty
- ❑ ‘Poor work’ a new signal of youth marginalisation & downward social mobility, for WC young adults in Teesside
- ❑ More widely – ***‘underemployment is the 21<sup>st</sup> century global normality for youth in the labour market’***, with precarious work a facet of this underemployment (Roberts, 2009: 4).

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