The thinking and behaviour
of young adults (aged 16 - 25)

Literature review for the Social Exclusion Unit

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Contents

Key findings

1   The thinking and behaviour of young adults reflects their social context. All the events associated with adult status involve changing social relationships. Young adults thus vary in their experiences far more than younger people, partly because education is no longer central. Policies need to be sensitive to the ways that their needs and obligations also vary as a result.

2   The social networks of young people in their families and communities are significant sources of cultural beliefs and of social support. These can function as bridges or barriers to opportunity. Some young people need to separate from these social bonds if they are to improve the quality of their lives.

3   Currently and increasingly, young adults depend on their parents for financial resources. While many parents are willing and able to support them, others are not. Increased dependence on parents reduces the scope for young adults to make decisions about their own lives and increases the power of their parents. Some parents place a higher value on early employment than on extended education.

4   As young people begin to separate from their families of origin, their social networks can change. Those who are beginning to settle down and take on new responsibilities, can develop new competences, as workers or partners or parents or householders, which affect their self-perceptions. Those who were previously perceived as failing in the education system can thus develop new and more positive identities.

5   Time perspectives change with new configurations of responsibility, competence and resources. As they become older, some young adults begin to take stock of their circumstances and develop longer-term plans (such as returning to education). This change in outlook can result from changes in responsibility and social networks. There are 'key moments' which can affect their lives - and their perceptions of their lives.

6   Policy incentives and disincentives designed for young adults need to take account of the latter's social context. Policy constructions of behaviour to be rewarded and circumstances in which sanctions should be applied may vary from the values held by young adults and their parents.

7   Although emphasis is currently placed on individual choice - and incentives make sense mainly within this rhetoric - young adults' choices are framed by structural factors such as their local labour and housing markets, and by their dependence on resources over which they have no control.

8   It is the dynamic nature of young adulthood which is most difficult to capture in policy structures and which is suppressed by the current policy emphasis on age boundaries.

1   Young Adults with Complex Needs project

The period of transition from dependent childhood to 'independent' adulthood is becoming increasingly complex, difficult and imbued with risk. Without effective intervention, social exclusion in youth will increase and continue into adulthood and the next generation.

The SEU project *Young Adults with Complex Needs* thus aims to identify how services can best fit the needs of 16-25 year olds experiencing problems in the transition to adulthood. It identifies three primary concerns: age boundaries in existing provisions; delivery of holistic services; and the need to understand the thinking and behaviour of young adults.

- *Age boundaries.* The structuring of most policy provision according to age rather than need results in a paucity of provision for young adults. Many of the services designed to support young people end at 18 or 19. Services designed for adults may have very different aims and methods. The report on young people for the SEU's *Breaking the Cycle* Series[1] identified a need for policy and provision to be 'vertically integrated' across the life course, rather than restricted by age barriers. The trend towards grouping young people with children in policy frameworks will, though recognising the risks associated with the transition from childhood to youth, still leave the transition into adulthood exposed to risk. The SEU research on 16-25 year olds seeks to identify ways of providing appropriate and sustained support during this period.

- *Holistic services.* Many young adults with multiple needs are not supported by current provisions. Some may experience duplication and overlap in (single issue-based) services provided, while others may fall through the gap. A holistic approach to young adults involves holistic services, including through a trusted adult, and good co-ordination between services, such as in one-stop shops. Holistic services would go beyond the single presenting problem to recognise that all aspects of an individual's life are connected. The problem is how to integrate holistic and life course perspectives.

- *Thinking and behaviour*. Policy interventions aimed at influencing or changing behaviour can have unanticipated consequences. This is partly because of the focus on a limited age group or specific problem. There is a 'conformity assumption', that young people will concur with the aims and targets expressed in policy and provision[2]. Young people may, however, be resistant to change that cuts across their own beliefs. Their resistance may originate in and be supported by their families, their peer groups and their communities. Previous research indicated that policy and provision for young people needed to 'go with the flow' of their beliefs rather than cut across them[3]. Thus, services would be designed to 'fit' their thinking and behaviour (rather than the other way around).

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[1] Bynner et al., 2004.
[2] Jones and Bell, 2000.
[3] Bynner et al., 2004.

This literature review[4]

This review is intended to inform policy development by addressing the specific circumstances of young adults. It's main focus is on their 'thinking and behaviour' in response to three questions:

- *How does the thinking and behaviour of socially excluded young adults vary according to specific factors?*
- *Why do some young adults desist from 'risky' activity (e.g. substance misuse) while others continue such activity into adulthood?*
- *What are the time imperatives for policy interventions to maximise benefits to the quality of the young person's life?*

These questions are examined through an analysis of the ways in which the beliefs of young adults are formulated, affecting their behaviour. The main theme is thus the relationship between thinking and behaviour. Concepts such as agency and choice recur throughout, but are put into a wider context. The main questions are whether young adults are really able to choose between the 'opportunities' increasingly available to them, what barriers and constraints may stand in their way, and how they may develop ways of coping with these.

The relationship between thinking and behaviour is indirect, as illustrated in Figure 1, but this should be seen as a dynamic model within which the different elements are subject to change during a individual's transition through young adulthood.
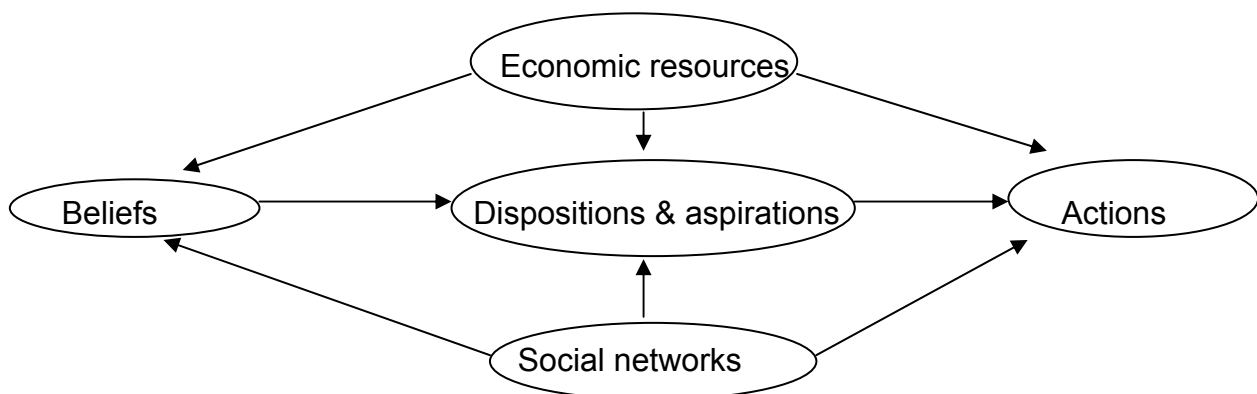
Figure 1: The relationship between beliefs and actions

It is important to understand:

- The ways in which beliefs and values are influenced by young adults' social contexts
- How their beliefs about themselves and the social world affect their aspirations, dispositions, and approaches to decision-making
- The inequalities in access to economic resources, which affect the ability of young adults to take control of their lives

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[4] Various academic colleagues have helped in the production of this review. I would particularly like to thank Rachel Thomson, Pat Allatt, Rob MacDonald and Andy Furlong for their insights.

- The *dynamic* nature of the transition to adulthood, which results in changing social networks, relationships and responsibilities, changing perceptions of self-identity, and changing access to resources.

2   Young adults and young adulthood

Policy constructions

One of the purposes of this review is to examine whether policies for young adults should be different in essence both from those designed for 'working age' adults, and from those designed for young people up to the age of 18. What is particular about young adults 16-25? In addressing this question, we must be wary of the danger of simply creating a new 'phase' in life. It is not just a matter of refining or adjusting age boundaries in policy legislation and provision. Transitions into adulthood need to be viewed from a wider life course perspective.

Guillemard (2001) suggests that the welfare state, based on age thresholds, effectively standardised the life course into three phases, of education (childhood), work (adulthood) and rest (old age), thus accentuating the differences between these states rather than the relationships between them. With the increase in longevity, and changes in patterns of responsibility and dependence across the life course, it has been argued that the life course has been de-standardised. The result, according to Guillemard, is a 'crisis of normativeness' in which people's lives have come adrift of policy structures. In other words, experiences previously associated with different age groups, or even 'life stages' such as childhood, adulthood and old age, are less predictable. Jones and Bell (2000) go further and argue that 'youth' has never been successfully incorporated into UK policy thinking. Instead, various age-based frameworks have developed in different policy contexts and been crystallised in legislation over the last century, leading to a somewhat haphazard policy formulation of 'youth'.[5]

In order to understand the problems associated with young people's transitions to adulthood, we have to have some conception of what 'adulthood' currently means. The notion of adulthood is problematic, being usually based on an understanding of independence that could be physical, emotional, moral, social, geographical, or economic. Jones and Wallace (1992) focused instead on the development of social citizenship during the period of youth. In these terms, children were quasi-citizens because their parents 'held' citizenship rights on their behalf, but as they grow older, young people become citizens in their own right. In these terms, not only is gradual emergence from dependence on parents integral to an understanding of transitions to adulthood, but so is recognition in policy terms that adulthood has been achieved. At present, policy constructions only serve to confuse. Thus, currently, young people become adult citizens at 18 (age of legal majority with right to vote), 22 (National Minimum Wage legislation) or 25 (Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) arrangements), though they may be 'adult' in many other respects.

The period of transition to independence thus extends well beyond the statutory start of adulthood (18), and the age divisions between childhood and youth, as between youth and adulthood, have broken down. Age markers prevalent in policy constructions lack resonance in the lived experiences of young people. Policy/legislative attempts to find more sophisticated ways of defining adulthood have

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[5] Jones and Bell, 2000, Table 3.

used the concepts of 'competence' and 'capacity', but it is hard to operationalise and apply these.[6]

What does it mean to be 'adult'?

Nevertheless, adulthood does mean something to young people. In broad terms, it means independence, specifically from parents, but this is measured in a range of ways. A generation ago young people thought of adulthood in terms of work (the key to financial independence[7]) and marriage (the key to home and family[8]). A study[9] of constructions of adulthood among 16-21 year-olds finds perceptions of competence to be more significant than age markers or events. Thomson et al. (2004) identify two main forms of understanding of adulthood between which young people may move:

- **Relational** - associated with caring for and responsibility for others, domestic responsibility and embeddedness in relationships;
- **Individualised** - adulthood is associated with the development of competences over time, and with increased choice and autonomy.

Thus, individualised notions of adulthood can give way to relational ones, as young people 'settle down'. Young people in their teens, especially, think of independence in terms of autonomy, responsibility and maturity[10]. As they enter young adulthood, young people experience transition events such as setting up home, becoming a parent, gaining an adult income, etc, and retrospectively begin to identify adulthood with these. In these terms, adulthood may 'start' at any age between 16 and 40. Not surprisingly, given that cohabitation is more common than marriage, and the average age of new parents is around 31 years for men and 29 years for women[11], these statuses have become less significant than leaving home, or earning an income from work[12].

Young adulthood in context

In order to understand the lives of young adults, it is important to understand their life course and social contexts.

Life course context

The lives of young adults are changing in many respects: they may be seeking independence and autonomy; they may be becoming geographically independent of their families of origin; and they may be forming families of their own. The transition from childhood dependence to adult independence is not along a continuum. It is

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[6] Jones and Bell, 2000.
[7] Willis, 1984.
[8] Leonard, 1980; Pollert, 1981.
[9] Thomson et al., 2004.
[10] Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Jones, 2004.
[11] ONS, 2000; Barrett, 2004.
[12] Sennet, 2003 comments on respect being associated with independence through work, and he argues that this needs to be revised.

now broken down into different but inter-connected strands or pathways[13] to economic, social and geographical independence, including:

- from education to labour market
- from child to partner/parent
- from living in parental home to forming households and starting housing careers
- from dependence to independence

To these could be added, for some young people, other 'careers', such as drug careers or criminal careers, both involving change over the early life course in patterns of recruitment, involvement and desistance.[14]

Young people can become 'adult' along one strand but not another. Thus they can become 'economically independent' through employment but still live in the parental home, or may feel responsible for their own lives, or be geographical independent, living in an independent home, but still remain in need of parental or state support[15].

However, the concept of 'transition to *adulthood*' must be questioned, when the statuses associated with adulthood (secure jobs, long-term partnerships, independent housing, etc) are more imbued with risk. This insecurity has implications for defining a 'successful' transition. The risky nature of adulthood means that many young people have to backtrack, and in doing so revert to a form of dependence (for example if they lose their jobs, break up with their partners, or have nowhere to live)[16]. They may return to their parental homes or need financial support from their parents. This return to dependence may threaten their perceptions of their status as adults, and force them to redefine it - for example by stressing autonomy and responsibility again, or by emphasising the independence of their social lives outside the home[17]. They and their parents may have to resist the temptation to fall back into dependant/provider roles, and find new ways of defining their relationship[18].

Though the period of dependent youth has been extended for a growing majority of young people, independence continues to be 'accelerated' for others. The result is that inequality has become more sharply defined. Inequalities in income have increased among young people[19]. There is increasing polarisation in education, work, health, family formation and civic participation[20]. The net result is that while most young people are taking slower routes to adulthood, others are precipitated onto the 'fast track'[21]. The differences in the pace, ordering and length of transitions are continuations of longstanding class cultural practices.

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[13] These pathways are to some extent policy constructions, followed by young people rather than created by them (see comments by Raffe and Côté, below).
[14] Webster et al., 2004.
[15] Jones, 2002; Thomson et al., 2004.
[16] Holland and Thompson, 2005, call these 'interrupted transitions', but perhaps we should think of backtracking as part of a normal transition (e.g. Jones, 1995).
[17] Jones and Martin, 1999.
[18] Jones et al., 2005.
[19] Jones and Martin, 1999.
[20] Schoon, 2002.
[21] Bynner *et al*. 2002, Jones, 2002.

- **Slow track transitions** typically involve staying on in post-compulsory education and delaying entry into full-time employment and family formation (often until 30 or later). Slow track transitions involve many semi-independent statuses, requiring different levels of parental support. Slow track transitions, following longstanding middle class practices, are problematic for those without middle class models of extended economic support from parents. This is reflected in the number of 'broken' or 'fractured' transitions which occur.
- **Fast track transitions** may typically involve leaving education at or before the minimum age, and risking unemployment or insecure and badly paid work. Failed fast track transitions may result in young people ending up not economically active (i.e. 'NEET'). They may also involve early family formation - including teenage pregnancy. The risk of involvement in problematic social behaviour - offending, abuse of drugs and alcohol - is also higher among this group. Fast track transitions follow a working class pattern where young people are expected to be self-supporting[22], and are particularly problematic when they cannot be, because of low wages, unemployment or teenage motherhood. It is from this latter group that most 'socially excluded' young people come.

Though in some respects fast track transitions could be seen as early achievement of adulthood, in practice they are more likely to be seen as premature loss of childhood. The policy response to teenage parenthood is an example.

Social context

Young people's social networks (social capital) can be key (or act as barriers) to 'successful transitions', partly because they can be associated with other forms of capital (cultural and economic) needed to support transitions to adulthood. Social networks change during early adulthood, affecting aspirations, resources and outcomes. Socially excluded young people are often far from socially isolated, but may be embedded - even trapped - in their communities. Others, such as those who have been evicted by their families or have been in care, may experience a sudden and drastic loss of social networks. In some circumstances, it is changing (and/or loss of) social networks, rather than their consolidation or extension, which may be key to changing outlooks and behaviour.

For those on the 'fast track', social relationships may be changing dramatically because life course events are more likely to converge, leading in some cases to a loss of social networks (for example, if someone leaves school and home at the same time[23]). For others, longstanding social relationships are re-negotiated and new types of formal and informal relationships developed (as worker/employer, as partner in an intimate sexual relationship, as parent to a child) as transitions develop. It may be important for a young adult's 'well-being' that existing social relationships can evolve and adapt, and be ongoing through times of crisis, or later re-formed.[24] Though the protective role of parents diminishes as young people become independent adults, there is still a need for the support that personal relationships, such as through partnerships (intimate relationships), can provide.

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[22] Jones 2005a, 2005b; IARD, 2001.
[23] Care-leavers are often particularly disadvantaged.
[24] A current study by Nick Emler, supported by the JRF, reviews social relationships in youth, and is due to report in summer 2005.

Success and failure

It is tempting to distinguish between positive and negative thinking and behaviour, but there are real dangers associated with this. Transitions are complex and there are many reasons why we should be wary about defining them in terms of success or failure.

1. Processes are ongoing, and different processes are ongoing at different speeds. Outcomes at 25 years are not 'destinations'.
2. Success in one area of transition (e.g. employment) may not be matched by success in another area (e.g. housing).
3. Definitions of success and failure may change during early adulthood - according to life course and social context.
4. Labelling young people on the basis of success and failure can be both stigmatising and damaging in the longer term. Perceptions and experience of 'failure' and 'success' affect later outcomes.
5. Hard and 'soft' policy targets are matched by hard (event) and soft (qualitative, subjective) definitions of independence among young people. It is important not to focus solely on hard policy targets as evidence of success.
6. 'Success' and 'failure' are likely to be constructed differently by young people, their parents and policy makers.
7. 'Success' and 'failure' tend to be attributed to the individual, implying greater agency than usually exists. If the concepts are to be used, they should equally apply to the institutional structures (education, work, welfare, etc) through which young people pass.

Young adulthood is a period during which there is particular risk, partly because any change in status (leaving school, starting a job, leaving home, etc.) is associated with risk, and risk taking is therefore unavoidable. It is also necessary, since it is through taking risks that young people come to recognise their abilities and limitations. However, rapid and dramatic change on many different fronts means that young people face a very high level of risk, compared with the general population[25]. Some 'failure' is therefore inevitable.

While success in policy terms may be defined in terms of increase in qualifications and staying on rates, decrease in teenage pregnancy rates, etc., it should be remembered that these are indicators of success for policy initiatives, rather than for young people. It is very clear from research that young people may share among themselves sets of aspirations (such as for a good job, good income, house, family and car), but they do not have a common set of methods (or even sense of method) for achieving these. Many still believe in work rather than education routes to better jobs in the labour market; many young mothers aspire to be good parents rather than return to education or work. Perceptions of success are not according to conventional policy criteria.

Criteria of success are changing. The following quotation from a young woman provides a construction of success which is largely based on long-term economic considerations, but does not depend on extended transitions through education and

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[25] Bynner et al., 2004.

training. Madeleine dropped out of college for financial reasons. Nevertheless she has a clear notion of success[26]. Madeleine is unusual, and acknowledges this.

> Some people think it's odd that I'm engaged. I mean, I personally don't. You know, I've got a good job, I consider a good wage at my age, I've got good opportunities, I've got a pension set up, I've got a savings account set up, I've got savings for me deposit on me house. I'm looking at buying a house. I think I've done better really (*than I expected*). (Madeleine, aged 19, quoted in Jones et al., 2005 forthcoming)

Summary

Policy structures have come adrift of people's lives. The age structuring on which many policies are based is complex, inconsistent, and does not facilitate the assessment of need. In seeking to address this problem, there is a danger of creating a new 'phase' in life rather than understanding the continuous nature of the life course. Young people already form a marginalised and often stigmatised age grouping.

It is important to take account of social context and in particular the social relationships of young adults and the ways in which these change during their early adult years. Understanding social relationships is the way in to understanding cultural beliefs and relationships of economic dependence and responsibility. This is important in determining who needs to be convinced of the merit of policy objectives - young people, their parents, or others.

The extension of dependence in youth creates a division between young people who have a source of support (family or state) and those who are trying to follow the traditional working class pattern of supporting themselves through work. Though unsupported transitions carry a high degree of risk, support also comes at a price, since it is providers who hold the resources have the power to use them to influence behaviour.[27] Young people's ability to choose can thus be compromised.

Adulthood is a risky business, and young people should not be blamed if they have been unable to escape risk.

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[26] She made it clear in the interview that although her parents gave her little financial support they actively taught her how to be independent.
[27] Jones et al. (2004, 2005 forthcoming), on parental power and influence in relation to education and partnership.

3   Social, cultural and economic factors

How does the thinking of young adults vary according to their social context? The section begins with the **wider social context** - inequalities associated with social class, gender, ethnicity and age. It then examines the types of 'resources', or forms of capital, which may be available to young people and which will affect their beliefs, behaviours and 'outcomes'.

a)   The concept of **social capital** (networks and relationships) provides a framework for understanding the more immediate (though changing) 'conduits' for the transmission of other forms of capital.

b)   The concept of **cultural capital** (defined here to include education, work and family ethics) helps to explain why young adults' belief systems vary and can change.

c)   The central issue is **economic capital**, but, when the dependence of young adults on their parents has been extended, their access to financial resources is particularly affected by their access to social and cultural capital.

These different forms of capital - discussed below - relate to one another and are affected by an individual's structural and social location, as proposed in Figure 2.
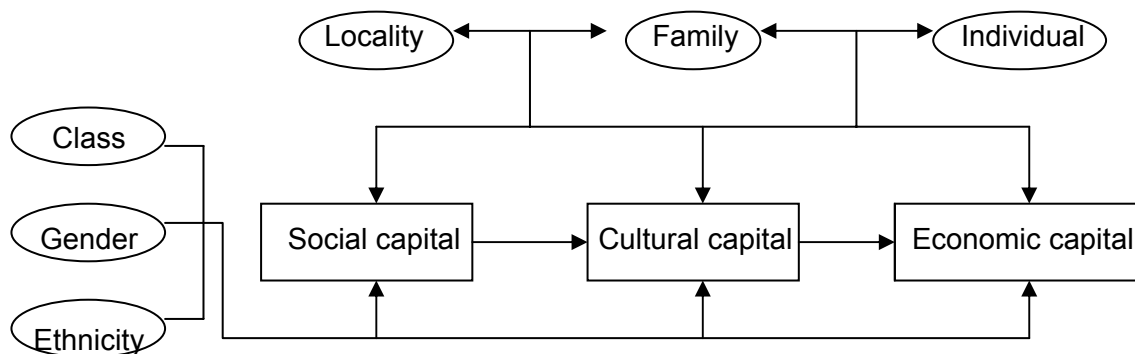

Figure 2: Forms of capital.

The factors affecting young adults' beliefs and experiences interact in complex ways between levels (individual, family, and locality), and there are theoretical debates about the relationship between them. The main concern is the structure/agency debate, with, at its extremes, explanations stressing structural inequalities, which some find too deterministic, and explanations based on the characteristics of the individual, which some find too pathologising. Most commentators try to find middle ground between the two. In doing so, there is some convergence between new developments in social class analysis, and current applications of the concepts of social and cultural capital, both of which may help to explain cultural variation in beliefs. The main element of most current theories is the interaction between agency and structure rather than their opposition.

These theories have a particular salience for young adults. Compulsory schooling has a unifying effect on young people in that, though there are inequalities among them, there is a broad structure which most follow and which sets (alongside their family lives) a framework for other aspects of their social and economic lives. Once

the age of compulsory education has passed, young people's transition paths diverge and inequalities become more visible. The centrality of education to all their lives has gone. The problems they face are more diverse. People of the same age may live very different lives and have different needs - for example, as a higher education student, a Modern Apprentice, or as a parent.

Wider social context

Inequalities among young people have their origins in wider social structures. Though the influence of **social class** origin has declined, it remains substantial, partly because access to education is not equal[28]. Dolton *et al.* (1999) found that social class of origin continues to have a strong effect on labour market outcomes at 23 years. Recent research within the ESRC's Youth, Citizenship and Social Change Programme found a continuing social class effect, heightened by local labour market structures[29]. The concept of social exclusion does not replace that of social class and it is important to understand social divisions beyond the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy.[30]

Cross-cutting structural inequalities still largely determine young people's life chances, in complex ways. The effects of social class interact with those of **gender**. Gender inequalities have undergone transformation in recent decades but continue to affect young women's life chances[31]. It has been argued that while the position of women has greatly improved, that of many working class young men has deteriorated. 'The feminisation of society', resulting from increased educational achievement among women, and an increase in service industry jobs in the labour market[32], has created new problems for working class young men. As a result, risk among young men leads to unemployment or marginal employment, while among young women, risk may be associated with teenage pregnancy.[33]

Inequalities on the basis of race and ethnicity are complex. There is variation between ethnic groups both in participation in post-16 education and in labour market outcomes[34]. Berthoud found that inequalities between ethnic groups were increasing. Young people may face discrimination, including on the basis of their postcode address, age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and/or sexual orientation.[35] Structural disadvantage is compounded by beliefs and prejudices at a wider level, reducing young people's scope for achieving 'against the odds'.

Social capital

Commentators have recently made use of the concept of social capital as a theoretical tool for understanding variations in transitions to adulthood[36]. Social capital broadly refers to social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustfulness

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[28] Marshall et al, 1997; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000.
[29] e.g. Dolton, 2002; Harris et al., 2003 (quoted in Catan, 2004).
[30] Savage, 2000; Jones, 2002.
[31] Women and Equality Unit, 2002.
[32] Stafford *et al.*, 1999, p. 3.
[33] McDowell, 2001; Johnston et al., 2000; Ferri, Bynner and Wadsworth, 2003; Bynner et al., 2004.
[34] Berthoud, 1999; Jones, 2002.
[35] Pascall and Hendey, 2002; Valentine et al., 2003.
[36] Catan, 2004.

that arise from them (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986). These networks carry resource potential. Bourdieu sees social capital as convertible in certain conditions into economic capital, while Coleman (1988) goes further and sees it as a resource that can help to build up human capital (in the form of skills and abilities), through the link between families and their communities. Social capital potentially creates a framework for links with new networks (such as with employers) and also for the transfer of beliefs (cultural capital) and economic capital between individuals.

Access to social capital

Clearly, though, access to social capital varies. Families generate the main 'conduits' of social capital. Coleman (1988) argues that the breakdown of family networks as a result of divorce, separation and loss, affects the accumulation of social capital. Many young people are experiencing their transitions to adulthood during a period when their parents are separating and their families breaking down. Some young people become embroiled in family conflict; some are taking into local authority care. Johnston et al. (2000) found that early family experiences, including bereavement and homelessness, could be very significant determinants of outcomes in young adulthood.

Changing sources of social capital

Families are not the only sources of social and cultural capital, however. As (most) young people grow up, their social networks widen and change: their relationships with their friends, partners (and in-laws), and neighbours are also based on constructions of reciprocity and trust, and became alternative sources of cultural capital. As Emler (2001) indicates, over time, peers may supplement parents as sources of self-esteem. Pat Allatt (2005) refers to the 'youthful autonomy' achieved through peer relationships. Recent research on 13-17 year-olds[37] suggests that when family networks are restricted, young people can be active in the development of community level social capital, through 'between-family links'. Entry into employment may enhance social and cultural capital and bring with it new forms of social support. A good employer who encourages and supports good quality education and training can be key to 'successful' adult outcomes among those at risk[38]. The enhancement of social capital may be an element in the formal relationships between young people and their personal advisers, through Connexions and the New Deal, for example.

Emler and McNamara (1996) comment that too little attention has been given to young people's social relationships during transitions to adulthood. Their study of 18-19 year olds who were HE or FE students, employed or unemployed found that roles as family or household members, and in the institutions of education and work, provided young people with *almost all the basis for their informal social lives*. Lack of a formal role was not compensated for in other ways and meant lack of informal social contacts - thus unemployment could lead to social isolation. The significance of this is that personal relationships provide access to a range of resources, and lead to new social bonds of responsibility and obligation.

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[37] Seaman and Sweeting, 2004.
[38] Webster et al., 2004.

A neglected area in policy thinking is the development of intimate sexual relationships in young adulthood, as young people take the first steps away from their families and friends and begin the process of 'settling down'. These relationships with partners lead to new identities and will be seen to be significant in their effect on young adults' perceptions of and aspirations for the future.

Social capital can be bridging or bonding

Social capital takes different forms, and it helps to consider the concept within a wider framework of inequality. The intergenerational transmission of social capital can lead to social reproduction and act as a barrier to social mobility. Putnam (2000) distinguished between social capital which is 'bridging' and that which is 'bonding'.

- **Bridging social capital** enables links to new social networks. This can take the form of links to employers and labour markets. Young people with geographically scattered families have a resource they may be able to draw on to escape disadvantage and move to more prosperous areas to study or work.[39]
- **Bonding social capital** may be a characteristic of poor communities, or disadvantaged groups, based on tight bonds and solidarity, but creating boundaries through which it becomes difficult to pass - it can thus act as a barrier to other forms of capital (c.f. Coleman, 1988).

Leonard (2004) points out that even this differentiation does not go far enough because it does not address inequality within communities, or the role of self-interest. Bridging capital benefits individuals rather than communities.

This has implications for policy initiatives which focus on poor communities. There are dangers in blanket stereotyping of a community as disadvantaged: within any area there are likely to be pockets of affluence, or some areas worse than others. This applies both to rural areas and to urban ones[40].

Community solidarity (bonding social capital) confirms the distinction between the community and the world outside, and is protective, allowing the community to tolerate negative labelling by outsiders, at the price of gossip and lack of privacy[41]. Studies in the north-east of England[42] found that informal social networks in the community helped many individuals manage their lives (whether as workers, unemployed, drug-users or criminals). Staying on in a disadvantaged community meant becoming more embedded in the community, diminishing social networks, and increasingly restricted access to wider support and longer-term education, training and employment opportunities.

Young people wanting to escape negative community labelling need to build up bridging capital - but this is at a cost. Young people wanting to avoid post-code discrimination by prospective employers, or wanting to get off drugs, have to form different social networks outside the area. Thus, earlier social networks which supported drug-related behaviour might be replaced with the support of family and

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[39] Jones, 2001; Jamieson, 2000; Thomson and Taylor, forthcoming.
[40] Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Pavis et al., 2000; Johnston et al., 2000.
[41] Ghate and Hazel, 2004; Jones, 1999.
[42] Webster et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2000.

partners who do not. The loss of these earlier networks may be difficult[43]. The building of bridging social capital (as a policy initiative) and the resulting loss of existing bonding capital can lead to the reinforcement of existing inequality (Leonard, 2004: p. 942).

A study of young offenders[44] has identified

- **'Risk navigation'** associated with bridging social capital and enabling young people to construct alternative pathways; and
- **'Risk stagnation'** associated with a form of bonding social capital, which, while providing protection and instant reciprocity, restricted young people's outlooks, or dispositions.

Cultural capital

Young adults' beliefs cannot be separated from their social context. Dolton (2002) found that young people's decisions about education and training had little to do with the information available and more to do with the opinions of family and friends obtained by chance, rather than careful planning. Beliefs thus lead to the formation of particular dispositions. Cultural assumptions, values and beliefs help explain the lag in behavioural change that follows new policy, such as the introduction of new qualifications and other incentives to stay on, despite the collapse of employment opportunities[45].

The concept of cultural capital is useful here, because:

- It helps us understand the source of young people's beliefs, linking beliefs to social networks
- It helps to explain why parents will provide moral, emotional and economic support to their adult children for some things and not for others
- It provides a means of understanding some forms of intergenerational reproduction.

Cultural capital is defined as transmission of middle class advantage in the education system, largely the result of socialisation within the family[46]. Bourdieu (1986) saw cultural capital as **convertible, under certain conditions**, into economic capital, and therefore as part of a broader system of social reproduction. However, he does not specify the processes by which cultural capital is mobilised across the generations[47]. In Bourdieu's construction, cultural capital is a rather vague concept, incorporating language use, manners and orientations/dispositions[48]. Halsey et al. (1980) use parental academic achievement as an indicator of the amount and quality of cultural capital in the home. With the 'right kind' of cultural capital, young people are more likely to succeed academically.

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[43] Johnston et al., 2000; Pavis et al., 2000.
[44] The ongoing study, by T. Boeck, J. Fleming, and H. Kemshall is part of an ESRC-funded Network *Pathways in and out of crime: risk, resilience and diversity.*
[45] Bynner et al., 2004.
[46] Bourdieu and Passeron, 1973.
[47] Devine, 1998.
[48] Jenkins, 1992.

Young people are exposed to (if not socialised into) the beliefs of significant others in their changing social networks as they become adults.

Family cultures

Families act as mediators of external structural factors, and transmitters of both advantage and disadvantage. Some policies emphasising parental choice can thus exacerbate social inequalities; an example is parental choice in education, through which middle class parents can enable their children to exploit their social and cultural capital while working class parents cannot.[49] Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that in combination, higher socio-economic status and intact families have been found to have a positive effect on educational achievement up to A levels[50]. A stable family environment with parental commitment to education can help to override the effects of poverty and disadvantage[51]. In some cases, parental beliefs and behaviour can be detrimental. A study of drug use among young people in care found that parental drug use had normalised drug use[52].

A significant factor in labour market achievement among unqualified young people is the educational level of the mother[53]. In other words, the level of cultural capital in the home is clearly a significant factor affecting transitions to adulthood. Thomson et al. (2003) present three case studies of young women from disadvantaged communities, showing the type of support, advice and encouragement offered by mothers to be crucial. In only one case did the mother enable her daughter to break the prevailing local social norms and enter HE; the others followed traditional models of womanhood - jobs and partnerships.

While some parents may encourage their children to succeed academically, and create the conditions for them to do so, other parents encourage their children to succeed in the work place. These different stresses on education and work have their origins in wider social divisions. Parents' beliefs affect the extent to which they provide support for young people and thus the confidence with which young people can begin to think about their futures. There are strong and persisting traditions in many working class communities that adult status is gained through employment, and progression through work experience rather than qualifications[54]. The beliefs of parents often do not equate with those of policy-makers who put considerable value of education and training.

Peer cultures

Peer cultures play an increasing part in shaping young people's thinking and behaviour, as they begin the process of independence from their families of origin.

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[49] Rachel Thomson, personal communication.
[50] Catan, 2004; Scott, 2000.
[51] Schoon and Parsons, 2003; Schoon 2002. Scott and Chaudhary, 2003;
[52] … and the downward spiral continued because little treatment was available while they were in care (Newburn and Pearson, 2001). Young people sometimes find ways of overcoming these influences through wider family resources (Bancroft et al., 2004).
[53] Stafford et al., 1999.
[54] Jones et al., 2004.

The worsening position of working class young men in education and the labour market brings back into focus some of the studies of youth subcultures of the 1970s. Many of the beliefs of working class young people were rooted in their social class background. As Willis (1977) pointed out, the question was not why middle class young men obtained middle class jobs, but why working class young men let them. The answer lay in working class subcultures which valorised manual work, and several studies explored the anti-school subcultures among young men from working class families[55]. When research turned its attention to young women (an earlier omission), the question became why young women dropped out of the labour market to marry and have children. The answer here lay in media-fuelled, romanticised notions of marriage which were supported within the peer group and seemed like an escape from a labour market which held few prospects for working class women[56].

The culture of white working class masculinity seems to have resisted socio-economic change, among a minority at least. Several recent studies have shown that anti-school cultures persist, bound up with particular models of masculinity[57]. It has been argued that those who persist with a hegemonic model of masculinity are reduced to affirming their male identities through aggression and intolerance (especially of women, gays and ethnic minorities)[58].

- McDowell (2001) for example, found an 'assertive masculinity', among the white, working class young men she studied, in which they were disparaging about girls, and expected to become breadwinners. Though emphasising the value of work over education, they had little awareness of the changing realities of the labour market. They had clear beliefs about the kinds of jobs appropriate for men, and expressed no fears about finding one, even though their current jobs were often temporary, casual or part-time.
- Though most of the sample in Johnston et al.'s (2000) study aspired to a 'proper job', few were able to secure long-term or rewarding employment. Nevertheless, they saw no positive aspects to worklessness and most were prepared to work for low pay in poor conditions, sometimes merged with criminal activity. Risk factors became apparent as young people began to disengage from school at 12 or 13, and become involved in street drinking, drug use and petty crime.
- Furlong and Cartmel (2004) also found that young people in poor communities may not see the relevance of education to their lives. If they resisted peer pressure, they risked being bullied and some withdrew from school.

Being a 'swot' may not be compatible with maintaining an existing peer network. There can be pressure in working class communities not to stand out from the crowd[59].

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[55] eg Willis, 1977; Brown, 1987.
[56] Griffin, 1985; Leonard, 1980; Pollert, 1981.
[57] McDowell, 2001; Johnston et al., 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2001, 2004.
[58] Mac an Ghaill, 1999.
[59] Sennett, 2003.

Community cultures

The cultural norms of a community - relating to bonding social capital described above - can be supportive of beliefs and practices which policy makers would like to change.

An example is attitudes to teenage pregnancy, where local cultures may be at odds with policy targets. Turner (2004) found that young women from disadvantaged areas perceived fewer negative implications of becoming a mother and were more likely to continue with a pregnancy. The expectation of parental support plays an important part in young women's decisions whether to continue with a pregnancy[60]. Young mothers may need their families around them to support with informal child care, or friends who are also mothers[61]. Individuals have to justify their behaviour to their neighbours in the light of prevailing neighbourhood values[62]. Thus local cultural beliefs affect both young people's behaviour and that of their parents. Informal networks of parents reach consensus about desirable behaviour[63], in approaches to education, teenage parenthood, amounts of board money, eviction from parental home, etc.

Formal sources of cultural capital?

Family homes vary in the cultural and material resources available for learning, with the result that some young people are very much on their own or dependent on formal sources of support[64]. Furthermore, some forms of cultural 'capital', such as anti-school cultures, may need to be challenged rather than reinforced. Part of the role of mentors or personal advisers in policy initiatives such as Connexions or the New Deal is to attempt to compensate for a lack of support from parents.

It is clear though that formal support needs to be sustained and not limited by age boundaries. A recent study of care-leavers at university found that the corporate parenting provided by local authorities varied considerably and only a few local authorities offered continuing personal and emotional support through the course. Many students were left to sink or swim in the university situation (Jackson et al., 2005).

Institutional cultures affect young people's beliefs and behaviour. There is a long history of research indicating that academic achievement is associated with the expectations of teachers and others. Thus, there can be an institutional bias (reflected in low expectations) against young people because of their ethnicity, disability or experience of care[65]. Some commentators have argued that this can be exacerbated by the system of league tables[66]. Reay (2004, p. 1019) reports that most of the children in her study, experiencing schools differentiated by ethnicity and social class, 'confronted schooling as academic fate'.

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[60] Tabberer, 2000.
[61] Webster et al., 2004.
[62] Jones et al., 2005.
[63] Seaman and Sweeting, 2004.
[64] Bates and Wilson, 2004.
[65] Berthoud, 1999; Bignall and Butt, 2000; Britton et al., 2001.
[66] Bynner et al., 2004. Conversely, Forsyth and Furlong (2000) found that in under-achieving schools, teachers focused on the less motivated pupils, to the detriment of academically able young people.

At its best, the education system can help to redress inequalities in cultural capital from parents, while at its worst it simply reproduces or reinforces them[67]. In theory at least, Higher Education should have a levelling effect and compensate for a disadvantaged background. Brooks (2005) research on the status attached to institutions versus qualifications suggests, however, that there is considerable variability between institutions in whether HE is a leveller and able to add cultural capital.

Economic capital

The main sources of economic support for young adults are from their own employment, from their parents, or from state benefits. Typically, young people in the UK have provided a lot of the support for their transitions themselves[68] but incomes from employment are too low for the high costs now involved (not just for education and training, but also for housing and transport). State policy provisions now treat young people as at least partially dependent on their parents, and young adults are now dependent for longer on their parents for economic support in the forms of financial or material help, a room to live in, etc. The extension of dependence in youth (though youth policies) has not however been paralleled with an extension of parental responsibility towards young people (through family policies). Many parents seem to think that their legal responsibility to provide food, clothing and shelter ends at around 18 years or earlier, that they have no responsibility to subsidise low youth wages, and they have no idea how long they should provide financial support for education.[69]

Parental support

Parents play a key role in helping their children become independent and thus supporting their transitions to adulthood[70]. However, with the extension of the period of dependence, and with the withdrawal of state support in many areas, parental support is under strain.

Parental support depends on parents' financial resources, their other responsibilities (ranging from paying their own mortgages or towards their pensions, to providing for other family members), and the quality of the family relationships. But it also depends on how they construct their responsibilities towards an individual child:

- Do they share with the child a set of aspirations? This relates to their cultural capital and will affect their beliefs about the relative value of education, training and employment, or about young parenthood.
- Do they expect to provide ongoing support through an extended period of transition, following more middle class practices, or is their aim to encourage young people to 'stand on their own two feet' as soon as possible (according to more working class practices)?

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[67] Halsey et al., 1980.
[68] Jones, 2005a; IARD, 2001.
[69] Jones, 2005b; Jones and Bell, 2000; Smith et al., 1998.
[70] Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Jones, 1995a.

In practice, young people describe three forms of parental support[71]:

- **Basic** maintenance, ending with full-time work or age (usually 18 or 21).
- **One-off** large-scale support for specific needs, such as a flat, car or baby.
- **Safety net** support in emergencies, expected to be available over a longer-term.

Few parents in the UK give regular financial support to 16-25 year olds - these are mainly middle class parents supporting students. More common are irregular payments and help in kind, including letting children live at home[72]. This leads Holdsworth and Morgan (2005) to describe most parental support as a response to crisis management rather than as a strategic practice. They distinguish between 'help up' as a support strategy, aimed at helping young people become independent, and 'handout' which is more associated with maintaining dependence, applying this distinction to support both from the family and from the state.

Some forms of support have a longer term impact and demand a longer-term investment. Support for extended education requires parents to believe either in the intrinsic value of education or its instrumental value in leading to better jobs[73]. Since only a very small proportion of parents themselves continued into higher education on leaving school, many parents may lack the social and cultural capital needed to support these beliefs. They may therefore be reluctant to provide financial support even if they have the funds, and many lack the resources to support their adult children. Others, who do decide to make the investment required, have to juggle existing resources (e.g. by cashing savings), or access new resources (e.g. by doing overtime or taking on a second job), in a manner which suggests a need for strategic thinking[74]. There is no doubt that lack of financial resources affects continuation in education. Several research studies have identified the problems for poorer prospective HE students. Not only does lack of financial resources affect entry into HE, but the need for many students to take on part-time work affects their academic work. This jeopardises the whole justification for the sacrifice they (and/or their parents) are making in going to university[75].

Young people may reject the education route, because it means continued financial dependence on parents and a deferment of scope for independence. A study of parental support for leaving home found that young people are very reluctant to ask their parents for help, partly through fear of rejection, and are dependent on it being offered. Similarly, parents may be afraid of damaging their relationship with their child through seeming to interfere[76]. The result can be a stand-off, until one side gives way[77]. Parents in a recent study[78] indicated the importance of 'being there', treading the fine line between protection and support, and interference. Parents are very afraid of losing their children, and rows - for example over boyfriends - can lead to young people running away from home.

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[71] Jones, 2004.
[72] Hutton and Seavers, 2002.
[73] The paucity and variability of support for care leavers in HE is discussed above, citing Jackson et al., 2005.
[74] Jones et al., 2004.
[75] Forsyth and Furlong; Jones et al., 2004; Christie, et al., 2001.
[76] Jones et al., 2005.
[77] Jones, 1995b.
[78] Jones et al., 2005.

Middle-aged parents have been described as a 'pivot generation' with responsibilities both to their children and to their own parents[79]. They may be trying to make arrangements for the care of older relatives, for their own pension schemes, or for the various needs of their different children. The complexity and size of a family - in particular perhaps the number of children - may be critical in this respect. In deciding who and what to support, parents evaluate whether the claim is legitimate or not. This enables them to deal with competing claims on the basis of a sense of fairness, but it means that young people have to justify their request, and in determining its legitimacy, parents may be drawing on outmoded or ill-informed criteria. Parents may have different views from policy makers on matters of education and training because they lack knowledge about the structure of options available and their cost implications.

There is also the issue of reciprocity. Alongside the age-structuring in policy legislation and provision, there are assumptions of dependence or independence, but the reality is often in between. Given the discussion on social capital (above) it is perhaps not surprising that, as they become adult, young people feel an increasing obligation towards their parents. Many contribute to the household in the form of various kinds of caring work or domestic work which may have an economic value in enabling a parent to be employed, or to save the costs of child care. Young people also make a financial contribution in the form of board money, which is paid by nearly all those who are not in full-time education, and this includes those who are unemployed or on trainee allowances. Board money is expected by most parents, and rows over board money can spark evictions from the parental home.[80]

It will indeed be interesting to see whether young people in receipt of EMAs or other payments seen in policy terms as incentives will be expected to pay board as well. The main point is that financial incentives to young people will not act in the way intended if they find their way into the household budget. The question here is really whether incentives to young people are a form of bonus for good behaviour or whether they are - and should be recognised as - a response to individual need.

Summary

This section has examined the various types of resources - social, cultural and economic - young people may be able to draw on during their transitions to adulthood.

Social inequalities, which have been to some extent suppressed during schooling, emerge among young adults. Disadvantage resulting from social class background, gender or ethnicity will impact on resources and 'outcomes' in adulthood. Needs in young adulthood differ widely between individuals, and may relate to, for example, the costs of post-school education, of having a child, or of setting up home.

Social relationships provide various forms of **social capital**, which can act as a bridge or a barrier to wider opportunities. Some social networks can enable young people to play a full part in the wider society. Others can restrict their horizons - albeit

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[79] Attias-Donfut and Wolff, 2000a.
[80] Hutton and Seavers, 2002; Smith et al., 1998; Jones, 1995b.

sometimes supporting their current circumstances. Parents can play an important part in building links with new networks, for instance in the labour market. Where parents are unable to transmit social capital to their children, they may become reliant on other sources such as peer relationships, or (possibly) formal agencies. As young people enter the labour market and adopt adult statuses, their social networks change.

Social capital is associated with systems of obligation, responsibility and trust. Their social networks, through the transmission of **cultural capital**, help young people to define their identities, their values and their aspirations. Parents' beliefs about education, and their own levels of educational achievement, vary according to social class and ethnicity. Many working class parents, for example, still place a higher value on work experience than on qualifications. Where young people are more dependent on their peer network, they may be more likely to adopt anti-school cultures, or in the case of young men, forms of assertive masculinity. Though policy makers would not wish to support some of the cultural beliefs which prevail, it is nevertheless important to recognise why and how policies which cut across cultural values are likely to meet resistance.

Social and cultural capital can be converted into **economic capital** in some ways. Young people are more likely to gain financial support from their parents if they and their parents have the same values and aspirations (i.e. share cultural capital). Parents are more likely to provide financial support if they approve of what their children are using their money for. Thus, there are many situations where young people have to justify their need for financial support to their parents, who will decide whether this is a legitimate and appropriate case.

Resources such as these are critical during young people's transitions to adulthood, but they are not usually resources over which they have control. Those without parental support cannot demand it, and may have to rely on their peers or on formal provision, or on their own personal resources, to which this review now turns.

4   Individualisation and agency

The previous section considered social and cultural influences on individual thinking in young adulthood, and the ways in which different forms of capital may act as resources, to which young people may or may not have access. In this section, the role of theories of the individual in explaining variation in thinking and behaviour is considered. The value of the concepts of self-esteem and resilience are briefly discussed. Then 'individualisation thesis' is explored as a way of reconciling the roles of agency and structure in the formation of individual identities and biographies.

Aspects of 'individual' capital

Some commentators stress that some people can succeed 'against the odds' on the basis of their individual attributes and characteristics. This can be a fall-back situation when structural inequalities associated with social class, gender, ethnicity etc have become so complex, cross-cutting and difficult to measure. Variation in the experience of young adults can never be fully 'explained' by their social location, relationships with others, and cultural beliefs. However, individualist explanations are found to be inadequate.

- The raising of low **self-esteem** among young people in disadvantaged groups is seen by some as a panacea for social ills. Emler's extensive review (2001), however, found that self-esteem mainly derived from parents, through genetic transmission and also through their behaviour (support, communication, abuse, family conflict and marital breakdown). Self-esteem therefore is an intergenerationally transmitted form of capital. Over time self-esteem may become more aligned with peer approval, though parents' opinions remain significant even into adult years. Emler found little evidence that self-esteem can be viewed as an individual resource which can enable disadvantaged young adults to succeed against the odds. Although low self-esteem appeared to be a risk factor in teenage pregnancy, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts and behaviour, and (among males) low earnings and extended unemployment, it had little or no impact on criminal behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, or educational underachievement.
- The concept of **resilience** has been used to describe the ways that some young people achieve 'against the odds'. A study of children coping with parental substance abuse found 'resilience' dependent on protective factors such as a supportive extended family, rather than evidence of agency[81]. Some stress that resilience is not an individual attribute, but a process. By deploying a range of 'protective factors and processes' at individual, family, or wider level, young people can make the most of their individual resources and enhance their competence[82]. Resilience has been defined as 'positive adaptation in the face of adversity'. Nevertheless, even resilient young people, showing high competences and aspirations despite socio-economic disadvantage, do not succeed to the same extent as young people from more privileged backgrounds[83]. Competence and aspirations, like high self-esteem, are not enough.

[81] Bancroft et al., 2004.
[82] Schoon and Bynner, 2003.
[83] Schoon and Bynner, 2003.

- Some individual attributes do nevertheless matter, of course. Brown (1996) adds individual **'charisma'** as an increasingly important element of human capital, applied as a selection criterion by prospective employers, in the face of increasing credentialism.

Individualisation thesis

The individualisation thesis has been developed through the writings of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), both of whom are now frequently referred to in youth studies. Beck's (1992: 130) suggests that, in a 'risk society' in which social structures and solidarities have broken down, 'the individual himself or herself becomes the reproduction unit for the social in the lifeworld' (*sic*). Giddens, on the other hand, recognises the continuing role of structural constraints on action. The structure/agency relationship seems to have been set up as a debate: many researchers stress the increased role of agency in young adults' decision-making[84], *in the face of* increased risk at a wider (societal) level, while others stress the continued impact of external structural constraints.

Decades ago, Bourdieu (1960) warned that the most 'individual' projects were simply aspects of structurally determined subjective expectations. Savage (2000) criticises Beck and Giddens for emphasising the significance of agency over structure. Savage suggests that the rise in individualisation should be understood *within social class analysis* as a shift 'from working class to middle class modes of individualisation' (2000, p. xi). This links with the observation (above) that working class families are now expected to function according to middle class norms of extended support, despite their relative lack of resources[85].

'Default individualisation'

The raft of policy and provision structures, with their particular underlying assumptions, leaves little scope for the development of individual biographies. Even if young people are becoming more individualised, there remains the question, bluntly, did they jump or were they pushed? Côté (2002) distinguishes between

- 'developmental individualisation' - strategic approaches to **personal life projects**, and
- 'default individualisation' - passive acceptance of **pre-packaged identities**.

The pathways devised by policy-makers create pre-packaged identities into which young people are expected to fit. Raffe (2003) argues that the use of the term 'pathways' focuses attention onto the *design* of pathways, which is under the control of policy makers, and distracts from the ways transition paths are determined by structures of inequality such as social class, ethnicity and gender. Disadvantage, and failure to fit, can be seen as an individual problem.[86] The points made here relate

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[84] Catan, 2004.
[85] Jones, 1995b, 2005.
[86] The answer, according to Raffe, is not simply to build in more flexibility, because this may increase the disadvantage of those who lack the resources to capitalise on flexible and longer pathways, particularly where these are market-led.

closely to one of the starting points of this review, that policies should reflect people, rather than the other way around.

Furlong and Cartmel (2004) similarly stress that inability to integrate into the labour market was not an individual deficiency of the young people they studied, but due to labour market characteristics[87]. New forms of employment (in particular the trend towards casualisation of labour, especially agency working) made it all but impossible for young adults to break the cycle of unemployment and precarious work in which they were trapped. The real barrier, they say, is to do with facilitating movement from insecure to secure employment, rather than with ending a period of unemployment (p. 8). They therefore argue that policies need to be designed to provide the more vulnerable young people with a 'competitive edge' (p.7) to get into better jobs, rather than focus on the boundary between work and non-work and seek 'disincentives' to unemployment.

Institutional arrangements (in education, labour market and welfare) have a significant effect on both beliefs and occupational and labour market outcomes[88]. A study[89] found that in contrast to Germany, where youth transitions are highly regulated through occupational structures and the apprenticeship system, England has a more diverse and unregulated approach. As a result, young people in England needed to be more proactive and to maintain a positive approach to opportunities. They felt more responsible for their failure or success - more 'individualised'. Unemployed young people in England felt forced onto schemes and not in control (though still responsible for their situation) - with a sense of 'frustrated agency' at their lack of success. Evans indicates that the least advantaged may feel the most exposed by (default) individualisation[90].

Personal life projects?

The personal life project approach - 'developmental individualisation' in Côté's terms - stresses the role of individual agency. A little further along the agency/structure continuum lies the concept of reflexive biographies developed by Giddens (1991). This means reflexivity between the individual and the external world - Jenkins (1996: 20) calls this an 'internal-external dialectic'. The point is that there is an iterative process between the individual and external structures through which self-identity, beliefs, self-esteem, sense of control/agency, strategies associated with coping or resistance, even 'resilience', are constructed. Individuals have limited power to build their own biographies without other resources. The concepts of 'bounded agency'[91] and coping strategies[92] or strategies of resistance[93] - discussed below - all recognise the limited power of individual agency.

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[87] A point also stressed by MacDonald and Marsh, 2001, 2004.
[88] Isengard, 2003.
[89] Behrens and Evans, 2002; Evans, 2002.
[90] The 'underclass thesis' which was popular in the early 1990s, reinforced the individualisation of risk and disadvantage, and led to moral panics about an 'underclass culture' (viz. Murray, 1990).
[91] Evans, 2002.
[92] Thomson et al., 2002, but see also Goldthorpe, 1998.
[93] See Crow, 1989.

Identity

Explanations of identity can also be located along the agency/structure continuum. On the one hand, Cohen (1997) proposed a general theory of 'cultural identity', referring to the construction of identity through cultural capital (i.e. competences and skills, associated with social class and gender). Many commentators would now see this approach as too deterministic and prefer to allow a degree of individual agency in the construction of identities.

Thus, Jenkins' review of the concept of identity found that some young people absorb the labels applied to them, constructing 'reflexive identities'[94] around their 'successes' and 'failures' within the system and adjusting their aspirations accordingly. However, Jenkins stresses that labelling is a cumulative process, and the consequences differ. In some circumstances young people can resist external identification, in other cases they reinforce it. Thus, the labelling in schools of young people as achievers or non-achievers can be reinforced by anti-school peer cultures and vice versa.[95]

Competence (and recognition)

Thomson et al.'s (2004) longitudinal study found that young people's identities were not necessarily centred on their academic labels, but were multi-faceted. They develop different identities in different areas of life, reflecting different degrees of competence in each - according to a combination of assessment by self and by others as competent. Those who failed to gain competence through education tried to do so through other (albeit often overlapping) fields of competence, such as employment, or leisure and consumption, or the domestic sphere of caring and parenthood. These constructions of competence were central to their 'imagined futures', constraining or shaping their life plans. The research stresses the important of the investments (e.g. of time and energy) made by young people in relation to these different areas of competence - investments which depend on

- a feeling of **efficacy**, which can change in response to the accumulation of experience and
- access to material, emotional, social and cultural **resources**, which can re-configure over time, making available different identities, tactics and strategies.

Thus, young people's identities change over time in a 'continuous project of self'[96]. Of course, time and energy to invest are a finite resource, so that the more invested in one area, the less is available for another. There may be key times when the investment shifts from one area to another (a point further developed in the next section). Pathways are contingent and open to re-sequencing.

Summary

Research on the power of individual attributes to compensate for other disadvantage thus makes depressing reading. Characteristics which are perceived as individual, such as self-esteem, resilience and competence, do not in practice originate at

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[94] Jenkins, 1996, p.75
[95] MacDonald and Marsh, 2004; West et al., 2002.
[96] Thomson et al., 2004, p.224.

individual level but are transmitted intergenerationally or develop through interaction with others. They should thus be seen alongside other resources, or forms of capital, which are unequally distributed. The ability of individuals to succeed against the odds and without external resources is thus very limited. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) refer to the belief that young people should be able to achieve 'against the odds' as an 'epistemological fallacy'.

The significance of perceptions of confidence and constructions of identity will become apparent in the next section, which brings together all these 'individual attributes' into a formulation of the dispositions of young adults, in a discussion of processes of decision-making.

5   Decision-making

This section considers how young adults develop their dispositions towards decision-making, their sense of control, and the somewhat problematic concept of strategy.

The section starts with an examination of theories of social action which take account of varying degrees of agency and structure, and concludes with a review of the time frameworks of young adults - the extent to which they look towards (and can plan for) the future.

Control beliefs

When faced with a choice, young people's dispositions are framed by their perceptions of **what can be done**. Flammer (1997) refers to the importance of 'control beliefs'[97], which vary by age and culturally, and comprise:

- **competence** beliefs - beliefs about capabilities to act in ways which will produce the desired outcomes
- **contingency** beliefs - beliefs in the probability that certain actions will affect outcomes in particular ways.

Control beliefs, though held at an individual level, are both socially and temporally embedded. Young people with positive beliefs about their competence, coupled with a belief that they have the power to change their circumstances are in possession of an important potential resource, depending on their actual place in the social structure. Lehmann (2004) similarly suggests that young people form dispositions on the basis of a reflexive understanding of their place in the social structure, and the degree of risk associated with this.

Competence beliefs depend largely on experience of success or failure, such as in the education system. The evidence is thus that poor motivation is as much a consequence of negative experience as a cause of it[98]. Emler (2001) found that self-esteem was affected by experience of success and failure, though modestly. Recent research[99] indicates that young people develop a learning identity from their successes and failures in the education system and through this they develop dispositions. They may be reluctant to access opportunities to avoid risk of failure, and therefore vary in their demand for the choices available to them. In other words, it is not just a question of external barriers to opportunities.

The question therefore is whether new competences can be developed through the construction of new identities (or the acquisition of new social and cultural capital), as Thomson et al. (2004) have suggested.

Rational action theory

In several areas of social policy there is an assumption that financial incentives or disincentives (discussed below) can influence behaviour. This assumption is based

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[97] Quoted in Evans, 2002.
[98] Catan, 2004.
[99] Cieslik and Simpson, 2005.

on economic theories of 'rational choice' - the assumption that people are rational, instrumental and calculative; they are motivated by money, and will undertake a cost-benefit assessment before deciding what to do. Rational choice theory reduces complex social phenomena to individual actions. The theory has been criticised for failing to take account of collective actions (involving co-operation between individuals), the problems of social norms (involving altruism and obligation), and wider social structures[100].

Goldthorpe's (1998) 'Rational Action Theory' (RAT) re-incorporates a class perspective and attempts to explain some of the mechanisms through which class differences in educational attainment persist. RAT is based on the assumption that individuals have goals and the means of pursuing these; they then evaluate the costs and benefits of following one course of action or another in the context of some knowledge about the opportunities and constraints which they face[101]. Thus, people with similar goals may take different steps towards achieving these, their actions being conditioned by the distribution of resources, opportunities and constraints produced by the social class structure as a whole (Goldthorpe, 1996: p. 486). The point he makes is that the pursuit of education, for example, may have different costs and benefits (including likelihood of success or failure) for different classes. He argues that disadvantaged families need greater assurance of success than more advantaged families before ambitious education options are pursued (Goldthorpe, 1996, p. 496) [102].

This approach too has been criticised for overstressing economic resources and neglecting cultural and social resources in the reproduction of advantage - the aspects that Bourdieu attempts to take on board. Savage (2000) advocates greater recognition of how cultural processes are embedded within socio-economic practices. Devine (1998) concludes that the theory is a materialistic and instrumental view of social action, which assumes that people have goals and make conscious choices. Recent youth research[103], nevertheless, makes use of the idea of instrumentality in decision-making, albeit with some reservations.

In other areas of social science, theories of action are broader based, to include (Scott, 2000):

- traditional or habitual action (where repetition substitutes for choice)
- emotional or affectual action (impulsive)
- other non-economic forms of value-oriented action (on the basis of other perceived benefits, such as social approval, intrinsic satisfaction)[104].

Bounded agency

Evans (2002) goes much further down the individualisation line, stressing the continuing role of individual agency. She argues (from an instrumentalist perspective)

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[100] John Scott, 2000

[101] Devine, 1998.

[102] Sennett points out that young people from privileged backgrounds have safety nets in the form of cultural capital which allow them to ignore risk.

[103] e.g. Macdonald and Marsh, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2004; Jones et al., 2004.

[104] These other - less rational - forms of actual will be discussed below.

that young people's behaviour is equally well explained by an *individually* perceived need to maximise options and minimise risk. She studied the effects of wider societal features, social background and institutional environments on 'the struggles of young adults to take control of their own lives'. The research found that, despite feelings of lack of control in the least advantaged groups, and disbelief in aspects of individualism and meritocracy, young adults attached importance to individual effort, though they also stressed the importance of social connections (social capital) as a bridging resource.

Evans (2002) argues that social divisions among young people are obscured by a universalised belief in competence, and that social and cultural inheritance (capital) is being converted into action in new, but nevertheless still socially differentiated, ways. She proposes the concept of 'bounded' or 'socially situated' agency:

> Socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by structures and emphasising internalised understandings and frameworks as well as external actions' (2002, p. 248).

Wyn and Dyer (1999) similarly find that many young people are making pragmatic choices which enable them to maintain their aspirations despite structural constraints, and interpret this as pro-activity in the face of risk. Hatcher (1998) finds that young people make education choices on the basis of pragmatically rational decisions, opportunist and context related. Both Hatcher (1998) and Boeck et al. (2005) point out that emotion may interfere with rational choice[105]. Some recent studies have indicated that young people *feel* responsible for their own situations and are active in deciding between the options on offer.[106]

Concept of strategy

Problems with the concept

The concept of 'strategy' is frequently used in social science to describe actions by an increasingly wide range of social actors (individuals and collectives), in an attempt to move beyond a structure/agency dichotomy and shed light on questions of rationality. Crow (1989) advocates caution because the term implies conscious and rational decisions, made within a long-term perspective and linked to an objective. The concept of strategy is based on the individual, and becomes more problematic when attached to a grouping - such as peer group, or family (as Savage, 2000 also indicates). It is also context specific (such as workplace strategy) rather than generalised. Because the concept of strategy implies a conscious decision, it is problematic when applied to 'survival strategies' or 'coping strategies' - partly because survival and coping are not to be aimed for in the longer term, and constitute a response to constraint rather than choice. Crow suggests that in these circumstances application of the term can be pejorative. The study of strategies developed under conditions of extreme constraint can probably tell us more about structures than about individual actors.

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[105] Emotion is also a constituent part of personal relationships. Whether or not young people can access family resources may depend on family relationships, which may be shaped by emotion rather than rationality.
[106] Anderson et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2003; Allatt and Dixon, 2000.

A range of 'strategies' may be consciously or unconsciously employed by young people either to cope with (and make the best of) their situations, or more proactively to deploy whatever resources may be available and change them for the better. De Certau (1988) distinguishes between 'strategies' and 'tactics', the former being informed by power. Some behaviour among young people may reflect tactics in the face of powerlessness rather than strategies, which need a higher level of resources. Thomson and Taylor (forthcoming) describe tactics as the tools of the powerless, but exhibiting a kind of false agency. Similarly, Furlong and Cartmel (2004) stress that though many of the 'strategies' employed by young people may be short-term, unconscious, and simply a means of 'getting by', they may still take up a lot of energy.

A further consideration is whether strategies/tactics can be located along a time-frame continuum, with strategies being longer term and tactics being short-term. Anderson et al. (1994) found that strategies were not fixed, but could be constantly reviewed and altered in the light of events and changing context. Strategies are therefore of different types, reflecting inequalities in risk, resources and power. Individual strategies are distinguished here into whether they are short, medium or long term.

Short-term strategies

Short-term 'strategies' tend to be based around coping and survival. They are most likely to be taken by those with the least power to change their circumstances, including the young and the most vulnerable. They may come within the category of affectual, or habitual, rather than rational action in some cases, and they may be better described as tactics. Note though that affectual behaviour can cut across rational decision-making - such as when a partnership relationship interferes with existing education and training plans[107]. Examples include the following.

- Lowering aspirations to reduce the risk of failure associated with disadvantage[108].
- Valorising traditional gender and class cultures to resist change[109].
- Using 'bonding social capital' to reinforce current identities and resist change
- Feeling responsible for circumstances beyond their control - false agency[110].

Medium-term strategies

Medium-term strategies may represent an intermediate phase: interim and tentative risks to be taken as the first step in what may lead to a longer-term strategy. They may help reduce the impact of change, and also allow for re-assessment (including of success and failure) before the next step is taken. Some of these strategies may be associated with searching for a feasible and appropriate path. Examples include the following.

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[107] Jones et al., 2005 forthcoming.
[108] Lehmann, 2004.
[109] MacDonald and Marsh, 2004; McDowell, 2001; Turner, 2004.
[110] Evans, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997.

- Being proactive and taking risks (e.g. taking up educational opportunities even if this means leaving the comfort zone[111].
- Distancing themselves from peer groups and localities where risk behaviour was the norm.[112]
- Finding new strategies to maintain existing networks, despite change[113]. This provides some potential fall-back protection in the event of failure.
- Deferring commitment to a life-plan and focusing on current commitments[114] - see below.
- Finding risky (and possibly short-term) escape routes - such as leaving home through forming a risky partnership, though partnerships are the only way young people can leave home and stay on rural areas[115]. This category also includes part-time working among HE students as a means of survival at university, since this can be detrimental to academic performance.
- Finding a new identity and competence, for example as a young parent?[116]
- Mobilising 'protective factors' against risk (resilience theory), to succeed 'against the odds'.[117]

Long-term strategies

Long-term strategies are the realm of the most privileged, including those with the highest levels of competence and control beliefs, who may formulate these strategies at an early age and have the resources to put them into effect. Nevertheless, *apparent* long-term strategies may simply involve replication of patterns set by parents, or following the paths laid out by policy-makers (examples of traditional or habitual action, perhaps, where repetition substitutes for choice[118]). Others may join this group of longer-term strategists, on the basis of re-appraisal of their competences, development of new identities based around new competencies, and the development of new resources (through employment, partnership, etc). Examples include the following.

- Developing instrumentality in approaches to education[119].
- Adopting instrumental strategies of adaptation around unequal distribution of resources - rational action theory[120].
- Mobilising available resources (economic, social, cultural, human and emotional capital) to overcome disadvantage and capitalise on the choices available[121].
- Converting social capital into cultural and human capital and thence economic capital?
- Adaptation of beliefs about competence and control in response to experiences of success and failure[122].

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[111] Behrens and Evans, 2002; Hutton and Seavers, 2002; Webster et al., 2004.
[112] MacDonald and Marsh, 2004.
[113] e.g. Brooks, 2002 on students going away to HE but finding ways of preserving their earlier friendships.
[114] Brannen and Nilson, 2002; du Bois-Reymond, 1998.
[115] Jones et al., 2005 forthcoming; Jones, 2001.
[116] Thomson et al., 2004.
[117] Schoon and Bynner, 2003.
[118] Scott, 2000.
[119] MacDonald and Marsh, 2004; Jones et al., 2004; Brown, 1987.
[120] Goldthorpe, 1998.
[121] Catan, 2004; Scott 2000; Scott and Chaudhury, 2003; Schoon, 2002; Schoon and Parsons, 2003.
[122] Thomson et al., 2004; Evans, 2002.

- Formulating life plans and modifying short-term strategies.[123]

Collective strategies

Many of these strategies are not possible at an individual level but depend on some form of collective action. For example, strategies depending on parental support require a strategy on the part of the parents as well as the young person. Furlong and Cartmel (2004) stress the importance of the family in helping young people to develop strategies for coping with worklessness and financial hardship. This raises the question whether there are such things as 'family strategies'.

Savage (2000) questions whether collective actions such as instrumental family strategies, are feasible when there is a clash of individual interests. The aspirations of young adults and their parents (for them) may be different, as they may weigh up the costs and benefits of different education strategies differently[124]. Thus, in relation to parental support for education, Savage asks:

> What instrumental reasons might parents have for sacrificing their own well-being (in terms of childrearing work, financial support, etc.) to their children's disposal? Would parents in a rationally acting household choose to devote all resources towards one child's education, so minimizing the chances of other children in the household, or share the risk? (Savage, 2000, p.86).

Even assuming that individuals function according to self-interest rather than altruism, there could be several explanations. One answer, according to Leonard (1980), is that parents are rewarded for their financial support with continued closeness to their adult child. Another is that parents are socially judged by the quality of their products - in this case, the behaviour of young adults deemed to have been 'successfully' reared. As a result, their reward is social respect[125].

In practice, according to Holdsworth and Morgan (2005), parental support is often given in response to crisis management rather than as a strategic practice. This would arguably place it alongside the short-term 'strategies' outlined above.

The temporal frameworks of young adults

To what extent are young adults aware of the longer-term significance of their immediate actions?

Choices (whether to stay on at school or leave) at 16 years have become more critical in recent years in terms of adult outcomes by 23 years.[126] The decisions made at 16 are likely to affect the rest of their lives, since many are unable to get a second chance. Research suggests that many young people take a short-term view, based on immediate benefits or pressures, rather than a longer-term view. This does not apply to all young people however. Research has indicated that some young people can be identified as planners - more able to identify longer-term objectives and to

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[123] Anderson et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2004.
[124] Marshall et al., 1997, quoted in Schoon and Bynner, 2003.
[125] Harris, 1983, p. 241.
[126] Dolton *et al.*, 1999: 69.

work towards achieving these[127]. Ford et al. (2002) studied young people housing transitions, and found them to be of four main types: chaotic, unplanned, constrained, or planned. Planned housing pathways are found to be the preserve of those with resources, mainly provided by the family.[128]Jones et al. (2005) identified planners, searchers and escapers among those involved in partnership formation. Mansfield and Collard's (1988:73) study of newly-weds distinguished between 'planners', 'venturers' and 'roamers', but found that partnerships were more usually conducted along a 'haphazard' trail.

Brannen and Nilson (2002)'s study of 18-30 year olds in Norway and Britain found that thinking about the future varied according to life course factors and structural factors. They identified three models, representing differing degrees of individual control.

- **Deferment**: living in the present, keeping planning for the future at bay[129]. Many of the young people (18-20 year-olds) in the middle of education and vocational training emphasised present options, including immediate concerns about gaining qualifications. Their perspectives reflected their status as young people living and enjoying their lives *now* and not thinking too much about responsibility and adulthood. Their aspirations for adulthood were abstract, but the women did not want to replicate their mothers' patterns.
- **Adaptability**: a contingency mentality. Older male and female groups in HE discussed the future in more concrete terms, and thought they could shape it through short steps and adaptations. British students had less of a sense of mastery over their routes in the labour market, and more of a sense that they would have to be flexible and adaptable.
- **Predictability**: striving in the long term for security. Others had a clear view of a future adulthood which they saw as relatively secure as long as they worked to achieve their goals. They were planners following clearly charted (rather than individualised) courses. Good job and good income were seen as preconditions for starting families, and they expected to follow the 'traditional' patterns set by their parents.

Short-term perspectives

Young people's aspirations are affected by the labour market and other opportunities in their local area, as experienced by the people they know; their beliefs about the own abilities; their sense of control over their circumstances. As indicated, local communities however disadvantaged can provide bonding social capital which is hard to relinquish for the sake of an uncertain and distant prize. The offer of a job here and now - and the income that comes with it - may be hard to turn down for the sake of an extension of education and training and the possibility of a better job later. Younger people anxious to assert their independence from their parents may find this immediate 'solution' appealing.

Short-termism does not necessarily lead to 'fast track' transitions, though. Brannen and Nilson (2002) found 'deferment' to be characteristic of young people in education

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[127] e.g. Ford et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2004, 2005.
[128] Catan, 2004; Ford et al., 2002; Jones, 1995.
[129] Also, du Bois-Reymond, 1998.

and training. It has been observed that young people can avoid economic and housing risk by continuing to live with their parents[130]. Their increased spending power and the scope for greater participation in leisure activities are short-termist attractions, because they are unable to save towards the costs of future independent living and become trapped in the parental home[131].

Those most likely to take a shorter-term view have been found to have experienced family crises[132], be in insecure circumstances and have experienced failure[133]. Young adults try to formulate realistic plans, based on probability of success, rather than pipe dreams[134]. Some are seeking immediate and urgent escape from untenable current circumstances, such as unhappy family lives[135], and their actions can often be seen as **'emotional or affectual',** rather than rational. They therefore lack the economic, family and individual resources which would enable them to be strategic and forward-thinking in their thinking and behaviour. The result can be 'chaotic' housing careers[136], drifting between jobs, and further experience of failure and rejection.

Longer-term 'planners'

Brannen and Nilson distinguished between planners who took short steps towards a longer term aim, and those who followed established tracks, mainly set by the experience of their parents. A similar distinction between 'trail blazers and path followers' has been made in connection with migrants and stayers in a rural area[137], and between 'planners, searchers and escapers' with respect to partnership formation[138]. Parental patterns may form a template path to follow or resist.

Some young adults following longer-term life plans are therefore following particular prescriptions, and their actions could be categorised as **'traditional or habitual'** rather than rational and more strategic[139]. However, as Raffe and others have indicated, paths are also mapped out in policy structures, and scope for 'off piste' experimentation is thus constrained. Planning on the basis of shorter-term step-by-step strategies may be an appropriate means of coping with the UK policy structures, while still retaining a sense of some, limited, control.

For the most part, longer-term planners are young people who have resources and who are able to deploy them in pursuit of their aims. They therefore tend to be middle class, and from advantaged social backgrounds[140]. Their thinking and behaviour therefore lead to social reproduction. Some parents actively encourage young people to think longer-term. Jones et al. (2004) found that the decision to defer entry into the

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[130] Hutton and Seavers, 2002.
[131] Jones and Martin, 1999.
[132] Catan, 2004.
[133] Anderson et al., 2005.
[134] Anderson et al., 2005.
[135] Jones, 1995.
[136] Ford et al., 2002.
[137] Jones, 2000.
[138] Jones et al., 2005 forthcoming
[139] Though by following a traditional path, young people may be more likely to gain parental support, including financial backing (Jones et al., 2004, 2005 forthcoming). Thus, elements of rationality may be in their actions.
[140] Madeleine, quoted above, is an exception.

labour market and obtain better qualifications requires not only the prospect of family support, but also family encouragement to take a longer-term view. Those who continued into HE or planned to do so took an instrumental approach to extended education as a means to better jobs, but involving a long-term and considerable family and individual investment. If the intrinsic value of education is questioned, its instrumental value - in leading to better jobs - is not. In these circumstances, partnership and family formation must take second place to academic ambitions - in other words, life plans may have to encompass many different strands of a young adult's life[141].

Changing from short-term to longer-term perspectives

Static typologies based on long-term planners and short-termist non-planners - and various 'stages' in between - fail however to take account of the dynamic nature of young adulthood. This will affect their decision-making. Allatt (2005) refers to the way that young people may change their priorities over time. Many of those entering work routes want incomes and the independence which comes with them, and are not necessarily thinking about the future. With hindsight some young adults say that when they were at the decision-making age they had not been sufficiently mature to think ahead, and had no clear idea of what they wanted to do, or why higher education would help them[142].

Over time, and in the light of their experience, more young people begin to take a longer-term and more strategic perspective. There may be several reasons for this change in perspective.

Anderson et al. (2005) found a willingness to modify plans, especially among the short-termists. The majority of young adults in their study by their early 20s felt in control of their lives (but the authors stress that this was not an age effect), agreeing with the statement that 'what happens to me is my own doing'. Further, most were able to exercise forethought, seeing the future in terms of opportunities for choice and for formulating life plans across a wide range of areas of activity. These findings are in contrast to research which argues that in an uncertain world, people have little sense of control even when making decisions (Sennett, 1998); and perhaps more significantly Karen Evans' research, which found that planning only occurs on a solid foundation of past success, and that young people feel individually responsible for their own circumstances *even when they are not* - thus, 'reconstructing fate as choice?'[143]

Increased foresight and re-formulation of life plans are not merely the result of becoming older. Furlong et al (2003) researched young people's life management strategies. On leaving school, young people broadly divided into those with a clear focus (strategic planners) and those without (drifters). The role of the family was seen to be crucial because young people lacked the knowledge needed to be able to focus their efforts. Drifters were de-motivated by the experience of failure and under-achievement in secondary school. The authors describe a process of 'rationalised individualisation', on two axes: whether work (or family) was central or peripheral to

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[141] Jones et al., 2005.
[142] Jones et al., 2004.
[143] Evans et al., 2001.

self-concept, and whether management style could be described as strategic or 'drift'. However, they note that *drift could subsequently move towards a more strategic approach*. They also note that motivation changes over time as more importance can be placed on work as an area of achievement or source of status.

> After a period in the labour market and having had a chance to reflect on their careers, some young people develop more strategic management styles and begin to take control of their lives. (Furlong et al., 2003, Conclusion to Chapter 6).

The suggestion is that processes involving 'overcoming the odds' can be ongoing into young adulthood. However, it is difficult to identify what causes the change in disposition towards wanting to take control. Furlong suggests[144] that external pressures (family, partners, peers) could make young people realise that they were being left behind. In other cases, it took time for young people to work out how to plan their careers in a particular occupational setting.

Macdonald and Marsh (2004) found that some young people became more instrumental in their late teens. When younger, they faced a choice between the school institutional ethos and that of their non-academic peers, and many were not prepared to lose face among their peers (and risk being bullied) by looking conformist[145]. However, some moved from disaffection with education to instrumental engagement as they neared the end of their compulsory schooling. Others, who became unemployed or parents after leaving school, looked back on the sociable aspects of school, for the viewpoint of their current comparative isolation[146]. With hindsight, they then wished they had worked harder at school and improved their job prospects (a link which they had previously ignored), even though they could see evidence to the contrary (perhaps as a consequence of lack of local job opportunities). The reality for most of their sample was that entry into employment marked the start of a career which was predominantly insecure because of the local labour market[147]. However, there was another element - *the expectation of failure also deterred some from trying*.

Summary

This section has examined the relationship between thinking and behaviour by considering processes of decision-making.

Young people form dispositions on the basis of their constructed identities, their earlier experiences, and the resources they perceive as available to them.

They may develop various forms of strategy either to maintain or improve their situations, maintenance strategies being largely short-term and improvement strategies being longer term. These strategies are ways of deploying resources, sometime, but not always, with a conscious and defined aim in view.

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[144] Andy Furlong, personal communication, 14 March 2005.
[145] See also Willis, Brown, Jenkins, etc.
[146] This isolation is also commented upon by Emler above. Is this realisation of comparative social isolation sufficient to encourage them to try to change - and improve - their circumstances?
[147] Macdonald and Marsh, 2001.

There is a political agenda - common among policy-makers, practitioners and researchers - to promote the notion that young people are individual agents who have the power, or can be empowered, to make choices on the basis of structures of opportunity. In practice, young people who are disadvantaged in terms of resources or who have been damaged by their experiences lack the power to make free decisions. The concept of rational action is an attempt to show the relationship between goals, resources and choice of pathway. Though rational action theory takes little account of the social and cultural influences described earlier, it does add another layer to the explanation of the relationship between thinking and behaviour.

According to one commentator at least, some behaviours among the poor have reflected a culture which favoured habit over reason, and represented poverty of aspirations rather than an insistence on immediate gratification. In an article on Aneurin Bevan, Hayhurst suggests:

> Everything in the capitalist experience had taught the people to go for easy satisfaction, and the result had been to leave the poor with no sense of anticipation and a culture that favoured habit over reason. The inability to defer gratification undoubtedly existed, said Bevan. But it was due to the *poverty* of desire not its excess. Social democracy would enthrone reason and teach people to strive for better things. (Mark Hayhurst, Essay on Aneurin Bevan, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2005).

The main focus of this section has been on the implications of taking a life course approach to policy making in respect of young adults. Not only do young people's needs and susceptibility to risk change during their early adult years, but so do their social contexts and their thinking and behaviour. The research suggests that competences, dispositions and resources - can change over time, affecting the time frameworks of young people and leading to a shift in perspective towards long-term thinking and perhaps also planning. This change in perspective presents both a challenge and an opportunity to policy makers, because:

- policies need to be responsive to it, by creating opportunities for those who do revise their aspirations over time (this involves a move away from age-based opportunity structures), and
- policies can also influence it, not least by changing beliefs and 'teaching people to strive for better things'.

6   Catalysts for change?

Why do 'adult outcomes' differ (among socially excluded young people)? What causes some of them to change their priorities, approaches to decision-making, time perspectives, and so on. Why do they begin to re-assess their current circumstances?

This section examines the notion of turning points, and identifies some catalysts for change:

- Fateful moments lead to a re-shaping of biographies;
- Changing social relationships bring new responsibilities or exposure to new sets of beliefs; and
- Incentives and disincentives may act as a spur to changes in behaviour.

Key 'fateful' moments

There may be turning points in young adults lives which may lead to a 'change of disposition' or outlook. 'Fateful moments' are identified by Giddens (1991) as times when a particular configuration of events forces an individual to take stock, assess risk, and make a decision which may affect the course of their lives. A key issue in identifying potential turning points in the life course of a young adult will according to Giddens be a particular configuration of events - i.e. not necessarily a single event.

Thomson and Holland (2002) distinguish between actual turning points and narrative devices.

- **'Fateful moments'** form turning points in an individual's life course, and can act as catalysts for attempted change. The fateful moment can come when people are exposed to new experiences and new social contacts, and begin to compare their own situations with those of others.
- **'Critical moments'** are mainly narrative devices (e.g. retrospective definition of independence in terms of an event such as leaving home). Critical moments are hard to anticipate, because they are unpredictable. Thomson et al. (2002) map both the original key moment and responses to it onto a continuum from fate to choice. As Webster et al. (2004) have also found, both key moments and responses to them may be unpredictable.

They refer to this as the difference between 'a life that is lived and a life that is told'[148]. *The narrative use of critical moments allows young people to use the language of choice, control and agency, although these in practice depend on the requisite resources*. Young adults finding themselves in situations that are escalating out of control, or experiencing the consequences of risk-taking behaviour, can re-assess their circumstances. They may *claim* responsibility[149], but be unable to take control and go through the whole process of risk assessment, reskilling and identity work indicated by Giddens. It is only when young people have **access to the requisite resources** that they can respond constructively to events and changing circumstances - and this is where incentives may come into the picture.

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[148] Thomson et al., 2002, p. 351.
[149] (as Evans also found).

Jones et al. (2004) found that some young people could recover from early dropout from education and get 'back on track'. For some, experience in the labour market showed that qualifications were needed and led some back into education, mainly through their own perseverance but often with parental encouragement[150]. Some young women had dropped out of education because of early relationships which had since failed. In other cases, job and career aspirations had become clearer. In these cases, young people had to overcome their earlier experience of failure, and begin to believe (and persuade others) that they could be successful second time around.

Furlong and Cartmel (2004) re-interviewed young men aged 25-29 (following a 1996 study when they were aged 18-24), to see how some overcame the effects of early longer-term unemployment and the local labour market. Though most were still in insecure jobs with periodic unemployment, some were now in relatively successful careers. Those young men who had 'succeeded against the odds' and were able to enter stable work came from families that were better equipped to provide resources and support, had left school with stronger qualifications, and had obtained further vocational qualifications. Realisation that they had fallen behind or become isolated had provided a catalyst for some young people to take stock, re-think their priorities and re-formulate their objectives. The problem is that this does not give them the power and resources to take control of their lives. Their energy may be totally focused on survival.

Webster et al. (2004) similarly indicate that the cyclical careers of education, training and employment experienced by the young adults they studied meant that the latter were too busy juggling with the various demands to be able to formulate longer-term plans.

Changing social relationships

Changing social relationships are central to transitions to adulthood, each of the life events involved being associated with the formation of new relationships (as employee, cohabiting partner, parent, etc) and the re-formulation of old ones (changing relationship with parents, etc). These new relationships can expose young adults to new ideas and bring new responsibilities. They allow young people to develop new identities and capacities[151]. Thus, identity as a mother or as a partner can become more central than a previous, perhaps more problematic, identity. Changing social relationships can thus create the circumstances for a turning point in an individual biography.

Changing social relationships may be key to both involvement in drug use and desistance from it. Young people wanting to get off drugs had to form different social networks in which drug use was discouraged. Some young people stopped offending when they 'settled down' with a girlfriend, or became engaged in training or college

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[150] The research suggested that Personal Advisers through the New Deal for Young People could also provide the support needed, at least initially, where no parental support was available.
[151] Thomson et al., 2004.

courses, or in temporary, informal or legitimate work.[152] Quinton et al. (2002) found that becoming a parent could lead to desistance.

Partnership formation can be a very problematic issue. Partners may incur the disapproval of parents by interfering with young people's education plans: in one study, some young women who followed their partners to university dropped out when the partnership broke down[153]. Early relationships have a high rate of breakdown, affecting teenage lone parenthood. The overriding factor affecting young fathers continuing involvement with the baby was the quality of the relationship with the mother during pregnancy[154]. Partnership formation can mean the loss of supportive family or peer relationships, and the breakdown of the partnership can lead to social isolation.

Nevertheless partnership formation can also form a step in young people's settling down, taking stock and re-assessing their priorities. In situations where the relationship is seen as beneficial rather than damaging to their child, parents may provide various forms of support to help a couple set up home together (though in other situations, family conflicts can result). There is little state support for young couples, since most of the provisions for socially excluded young people tend to treat them as individuals[155]. A key factor in provision for young adults should be recognition that they are forming partnerships which are more likely to be long-lasting and beneficial if they are supported.

Incentives and disincentives

Incentives or disincentives are seen by policy makers as ways of influencing behaviour. Thus, EMAs are seen as incentives to encourage young people to stay on in post-16 education rather than try to enter the labour market. Benefit reforms have frequently been seen as ways of 'dis-incentivising' welfare dependence, or as means of tackling issues such as teenage parenthood or homelessness. The recent review[156] of financial support for 16-19 year olds develops a framework whereby maintenance support is paid to young people if in employment, or to their parents if they are living at home and in education or training. Over and above this, the EMA scheme of incentives is to be extended, as a form of payment to young people themselves.

The evidence base for such policies is sparse. Most evaluations of incentive schemes, though driven by policy considerations, have been criticised for their failure to identify how the incentive is hypothesised to impact on the individual. With regard to health, economic incentives appear more effective as distinct and short-term behavioural interventions, but less effective for longer term and wider ranging life style changes, (Kane et al., 2004). Kane et al argue that those planning to use incentives should be very clear about their goals. Kavanagh et al. (2005) similarly argue that whilst incentives may work by creating an extrinsically-derived motivation for compliance with a preferred behaviour, there remains uncertainty about the

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[152] Webster et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2000; Graham and Bowling, 1995.
[153] Jones et al., 2004, 2005.
[154] Quinton et al., 2002.
[155] Bynner et al., 2004.
[156] HM Treasury, DfES and DWP, 2004.

mechanisms by which they work. Further, they point out that there is a longstanding debate in psychology as to whether the use of extrinsic rewards discourages the development of intrinsic motivation that is necessary for the long term maintenance of behaviour changes.

There are some assumptions underlying the use of incentives. The use of financial (dis)incentives employs some of the reasoning behind rational action theory. It assumes that people weigh up their chances of achieving certain goals and assess the financial resources at their disposal. As resources are increased, so risks are reduced. Individuals are seen as more likely to act in the pursuit of their goals.

- Rational action theory was criticised for failing to take account of **cultural differences**, and the use of incentives can be criticised in the same manner. It assumes that young people have beliefs which lead to the same personal goals as policy makers have for them, and only inadequate resources hold them back. In practice, their beliefs vary according to the cultural capital available to them. In some circumstances, this can change as young people become more independent of their parents, in other cases, they may remain dependent on local cultures and have more fixed aspirations.
- Incentives paid to individuals need to take account of how the money is likely to be spent. Incentives paid to young people and thence into a family budget, in the form of board money, may act as an incentive to **parents** to support education, rather than as an incentive to young people themselves. Incentives to parents may indeed be appropriate, and the proposed extension of Child Benefit to include trainees is a more explicit recognition of this. The issue of inter-dependence (rather than a simple distinction between dependence and independence) becomes significant here, and it is important to understand the mechanisms and beliefs surrounding financial practices within families.
- The social contexts of young adults are very diverse, and are changing. This means that policy initiatives based on the individual young adult may be ignoring the extent to which they have changing **social and economic responsibilities** for others. Most young adults are forming partnerships and some are becoming parents. There are few incentives to support young couples who may be at the start of a lasting and supportive relationship, but plenty of structures which can put the relationship under strain.
- Financial incentives paid to young people tend to be at around (or slightly below) the rate that they would receive incomes for training or through JSAs. They are based on assumptions that young people need immediate gratification, and that they are making **short-term** plans, if at all. The rate of income is a spending bonus, to enable them to 'keep up' with their peers in employment, perhaps. Time perspectives have been found to change during young adulthood. It is not at all clear that incentives would work to enable a longer-term plan to be put in place.
- Incentives are based on the individual, and assume a high level of **individual agency** in decision-making. In practice, the problem may lie elsewhere, such as in the inadequacies of local labour markets. Low levels of unemployment benefit are designed to act as a disincentive to 'benefit dependency' but result in strategies of survival rather than escape: they lower self-esteem, reduce participation in social and community life, and can cause family conflict.

Unemployed young men spend more time trying to survive on inadequate benefits than on searching for work. (Furlong and Cartmel, 2004)

- Incentives are used to reward behaviour seen as good and can be withdrawn if the 'contract' is broken. However, as Kane et al. (2004) point out, individuals can become dependent on the incentives. Damage can be caused by the withdrawal of incentives, especially when very vulnerable people are concerned, since such sanctions can be seen as further evidence of victimisation, as Allen et al. (2003) found when piloted EMAs were withdrawn from teenage mothers who breached course attendance criteria.

There is a strong element of 'Nanny State' in the idea of incentives. Parents typically use systems of reward and punishment as methods of behaviour modification. Thus, young people may be allowed particular privileges in reward for good behaviour, and the withdrawal of privileges for bad behaviour. Young people are thus unlikely to find anything new in the notion of incentives, and their response may well be affected by the way in which these have been applied to them in the past. Parents will only support behaviour that they approve of, and in the face of social change may have difficulty in deciding what behaviour is currently socially acceptable and appropriate (Jones et al., 2005). Similarly, policy makers' differentiations, between 'positive behaviour' which is rewardable and other behaviour which is not, may not be shared by either young adults or their parents.

Summary

Just as parents have to be able to maintain some flexibility in supporting young people and attending to their changing needs, so do policy provisions. Policies for young adults need to take account of how appropriateness and 'rightness' - the basis of incentives, for example - are construed in the 'real world'. They need to be responsive to the possibility of change, both at the wider level of society and also at the level of the individual life course. They therefore need to be sensitive to the possibility of the longer-term damage that can be caused by negative labelling and by sanctions.

At the same time, though, policies need to recognise what is specific about this period in the life course, for instance in terms of particular risks and particular needs, but also avoid ascribing characteristics relating to age. The changing social relationships of young adults may be key to their functioning. Policy interventions at the individual level will thus become increasingly problematic. Policies which can recognise the potential benefits of young adults' developing relationships and their scope as catalysts for change, could be key to providing young people with an ongoing structure of opportunity.

7   Conclusions

Young people need support through their transitions into adulthood, and this means developing a coherent framework of policies for young people beyond the age of 18 years. This represents a major challenge to policy frameworks, which have overly relied on age criteria in determining individual need.

There are two main issues to be taken on board in recognising the needs of young adults and developing policies to support them:

- Young adults vary in their experiences far more than younger people, partly because education is no longer central. Their aspirations and needs also vary, not just by age.
- Young adulthood is characterised by its dynamic nature, and individual change is likely to be rapid. Individual needs, and risks and opportunities are therefore constantly changing and need to be constantly under review.

Changing social contexts

All the events associated with the transition to adult status involve changing social relationships.

The thinking and behaviour of young adults reflects their social context. The social networks of young people are significant sources of cultural beliefs that can either raise or lower their aspirations. Social exclusion and disadvantage may be associated with forms of community and peer solidarity which, though supportive, are barriers to change. Some young people find that the only way they can desist from crime or drug use, for example, is by moving away from local networks, which support their current behaviour. In considering the community involvement of young adults it is important to recognise that communities are heterogeneous and can be damaging or helpful. It is also useful to remember that peer relationships lead to communities constructed on the basis of age group as well as locality.

Currently and increasingly, young adults need to depend on their parents (or carers) for financial resources. This represents an extension of their dependence, which may prevent them from leaving the parental home, from taking on adult responsibilities and from developing their own distinct social networks. However, access to parental support is very variable, and can be conditional. Parental support depends on parents' own beliefs that the support is appropriate and that they have an obligation to provide it. Some parents would prefer to see their children in employment and paying them for their board than in post-16 education. Some parents do not believe that they have a responsibility to support young adults, and some cannot afford to do so. Access to parental support thus varies considerably between individuals. However, the degree of access to parental support, while critical in determining young adults' needs, is difficult to identify.

Although emphasis is currently placed on individual choice - and incentives make sense mainly within this rhetoric - young adults' choices are framed by structural factors such as their local labour and housing markets, and by their dependence on resources over which they have no control.

Incentives and disincentives are standard features of parenting, as good behaviour in childhood is rewarded and bad behaviour punished. However, behaviour modification is easier within a closed family setting and in the context of a long-term family relationship. Policy incentives and disincentives designed for young adults need to take account of the latter's social context. Those enabling young people to become more independent of their parents may have more appeal.

As young people begin to separate from their families of origin, their social networks can change. Those who are beginning to settle down and take on new responsibilities can develop new competences, as workers or partners or parents or householders, which affect their self-perceptions. Those who were previously perceived as failing, for example in the education system, can thus develop new and more positive identities.

Perceptions of competence, formulated from experience of success and failure (and labelling by others), and of control (whether they feel they have the power and resources to change their circumstances) frame young adults' dispositions towards decision-making and choice. These can change over time.

Temporal and life course contexts

Young adults' time perspectives also change as they enter new configurations of responsibility, competence and resources. When younger, they may be 'short-termist' in their aspirations, for example, wanting a job and income *now*, as a means of achieving independence from parents. As they become older, some begin to take stock of their circumstances and develop longer-term plans (such as returning to education in order to obtain a better job later, even if this means deferring independence). This change in outlook can result from changes in responsibility and social networks. There are 'key moments', particular events or circumstances which cause some people to take stock in this way and can lead them to make changes to their lives.

It is therefore important that young people are not inadvertently written off as failures when at school or in colleges, training or jobs, either because they have not achieved what was expected of them, or because their potential was misjudged. It is not simply a question of providing a structure of second (or even third or fourth) chances, but providing a flexible system which will allow young adults to capitalise on the potential of key moments as catalysts for change.

In developing policies for young adults, it is important to maintain both a linkage with higher and older age groups, and to recognise (and focus on) the distinctiveness of this age group.

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