

Churning or lifeline? Life stories from de-industrialised communities.

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Background

One of the key features of the economic history of North East England was its dependency on large scale heavy industries such as coal mining, iron and steel and ship building. Fowler et al, (2001, p.120-135), argues *'that communities were created around these industries and became dependent on them'*. The working class was employed in these traditional industries with the insurance, according to Friedman (1980, p.158), of *'cradle to grave'* employment and the respect and self-esteem that accompanied it was actively dismantled. These industries employed tens of thousands of workers, mainly men and their decline has had an immense effect on individuals, families and communities. According to Pimlott (1981, p.51), the *'speed of economic change'* that took place from 1973 has caused deprivation and *'psychological problems'* and a *'loss of self-esteem'* in North East industrial working class communities.

The emergence of a new form of economy is based primarily on a combination of neo-liberal economic policies (McCafferty and Miller, 2010, p.24) and its production practices are characteristic of post-Fordist techniques of small batch production and an increasing feminisation of the workplace (Amin, 1994, p.251-280). The industries that emerged demanded an entirely new range of skills from the older heavy industries. Many men made redundant possessed skills that were non-transferable and in the new industrial climate they became surplus to requirement. The new industries have been re-configured in such a way that employers expect their workforce to meet the new demands of a flexible, temporary, and low paid labour market with short-term contracts and the resultant insecurity and anxiety that can accompany these developments. Some would see this as the destruction of the traditional British working class. In its place there emerged a society in North East England living on

low income with much less security and more anxieties than had previously been the case.

County Durham, where this research study took place, experienced the Miners' Strikes of 1984 followed by the demise of the coalmining industry and the closure of its major steel plant in 1980. According to Foden et al, (2014, p.7):

The Miners' Strike of 1984 may now be receding into history but this legacy of job losses that followed in its wake are still part of the everyday economic reality of most mining communities. The consequences are still all too visible in statistics on jobs, unemployment, benefits and health including mental health and a very large diversion of working age-men out of the labour market into 'economic inactivity' often on to incapacity benefits.

The demise of the local occupational structure that was focused for many generations on manual work in the coalmining and steel industries and its way of life suddenly came to an end and a new way of life emerged.

According to Foden (et al, 2014, p.6) the new way of life for many was unemployment and ill health:

14% of all adults of working age in the coalfields are out of work and in receipt of benefits. The incapacity benefit rate (sickness benefit) is 8.4% of all adults between 16 to 64 years of age.

The Study

This article examines the major effects of de-industrialisation on the lives of two adult learners attending mandatory government programmes in different de-industrialised communities of County Durham. Secondly, the study poses the question of whether

government programmes have shaped the position, disposition and identity of the learners and changed their lives for the better.

The study uses Hirschmann's (1970) theory of 'Exit, Loyalty and Voice' as a framework for understanding the experience of learners and how they react in times of economic crisis. The sample focused on in this paper is related to the aspect of 'exit', where learners are expected to get a skill and move on in to employment. For this study the theory will provide a framework to make connections between the effects of de-industrialisation and the effects of government programmes on the lives of the learners. The findings indicate that 'exit' is not working. It is argued that 'churning' (Sunley et al, 2001.p.484) and controlling the lives of learners between welfare and short term government initiatives in depressed local labour market areas provide a lifeline support service rather than meaningful employment.

Participants and settings

This article presents findings from two life stories taken from a wider study of data collected from a sample of sixteen learners aged thirty years plus. All sixteen learners had returned to second chance learning through the government's Welfare to Work Programme or community adult education for a minimum of two years. All learners were born into what was once an industrial community, which became de-industrialised. Most had no or low level qualifications, and some had moderate literacy difficulties. The sample was made up of 50% men and 50% women. The reason I chose the thirty years plus cohort is that this age group is more likely than a younger age group to have experienced the process of industrial decline. The requirement of a minimum of two years participation in learning is also identified by Crosson et al, (2003, p. 63) who informs us of the '*fragility of adult learners' identities and the uncertain nature of the learners' careers resulting from differing circumstances'*. A sample of 8 key stakeholders in adult education is also included in this study to explore how adult education has changed in response to de-industrialisation in these communities. Interviews took place at five community venues in deprived wards across County Durham.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative collective case study to address the questions that the theoretical context raises. A qualitative approach enabled me to *'interact with, hear the voice of, and understand the social reality of learners'* (Hammersley, cited in Silverman, 2003. p.38). Data was collected through semi-structured narrative-based interviews exploring the life history of each learner. These interviews aimed at understanding the views and experiences (past and present) of how social and economic structures and the culture of de-industrialisation had shaped and determined their life course (Dollard, 1935.p.8).

Based on Thomas's (2011, p.98) criteria for a case study, I have constructed the following design frame from which to research a comparative investigation made up of case studies in five de-industrialised communities. Each case study will be made up of life history stories of three learners and set against the background of the local history of de-industrialisation and how adult education has changed in response to de-industrialisation in each community. This is an instrumental case study as it is an inquiry with the purpose of finding out more about the effects of learning on the lives of learners in de-industrialised areas. It is also explanatory, as it will attempt to make connections between the effects of de-industrialisation and changes in a learner's disposition and identity and if this has led to outcomes related to Hirschman's theory of 'exit, loyalty and voice'? Above all, this case study will reflect the social reality of those being studied and provide the opportunity for the voice of the learner to be heard.

Themes from Life History Stories

Key themes emerging from the research are the way in which learners are constantly churned and recycled to and from welfare to work interviews to government programmes. In this way their lives are controlled and disciplined through mandatory attendance at these programmes. How demoralised these learners must feel as they know they are going nowhere.

Brian

Since leaving school in this former mining community Brian's life has lacked the economic security enjoyed by his father and grandfather. Brian recalls how difficult it was to find work in this area of high unemployment after leaving school. *'After a length of time I am starting to struggle to find work'*. Rather than become unemployed he enrolled as a full time student at a further education college for two years.

On leaving college at eighteen his search for work continued in this area of high unemployment, but proved fruitless. Brian's only option was to move on to welfare benefits which lasted for four years. Throughout this time Brian recalls that he attended evening classes for computing to keep himself motivated due to difficulties in finding work; *'I am starting to struggle to find work...to keep myself motivated I did lots of temporary courses on computers at the college at evening classes'*. Brian attended in the evening so it would not affect his welfare benefits, as he was required to be available for work during the day.

At the age of 22 years Brian hoped for a better future as he entered the labour market for the first time *'through an agency on a temporary basis'*. Since then he has been intermittently employed on short term agency contracts. This precarious work lasted until 2005 when he finally secured permanent work. However, as a result of the 2008 economic crisis his job disappeared in 2010.

In the wake of the economic downturn, Brian explains his precarious circumstances and his unsuccessful efforts to secure work:

I am struggling and I have been struggling ever since and going round in circles getting nowhere ...the Job Centre put me on a 13 week course ...the minimum number of job applications was 5 applications a day...the Yellow Pages you go through and apply, apply, apply it's hard work.

Since 2010 he has had no choice but to claim welfare benefits. The Coalition Government, through its welfare reforms, has instituted a range of 'conditions' which welfare claimants must fulfil. Brian must be '*genuinely seeking work*' and he is mandated to attend temporary government programmes for vocational related learning, otherwise his welfare benefits will be sanctioned and then eventually will be stopped. Brian explains how he is disciplined through the welfare system:

The Job Centre put me through the training provider called Partnership Trust for 2 years to do the basics on how to look for jobs, how to do CV, how to act at work, how to treat people at work, how to respect other people. I attended 3 times a week and then the Partnership Trust sent me to this government programme. I was supposed to go on a customer based training course. The next thing I am in a warehouse, there are no customers in a warehouse. It is not just me who is having these issues there are other people as well. The training provider is getting rid of people and putting them where they want them and they don't care what the learners think.

Brian has achieved some low level qualifications through the government programme but it has not helped him cope with anxiety and loss of control over his life. In the aftermath of the decline of the coalmining industry Brian's life has been a constant struggle. In his present precarious existence he cycles around his local area in search of work, but with no success.

Henry

Since leaving school in this steel town, Henry has lacked economic security and direction in his life. Unlike his father who held permanent manual work in the steel industry Henry, has experienced long periods of unemployment mixed with short-term government programmes. Henry describes his employment history as '*patchy.. it has been a lot like that yea in and out of factory work and everything*'.

He recalls the number of government initiatives he has attended while unemployed *'over the years I have been all over the town in various places with different training provider. I have dipped in and out of different courses at different times'*. Henry found the benefits of engaging in learning were better than being isolated at home and he is excited about recently achieving level 2 in numeracy skills. He explains:

It made me feel I was wasting all me time when unemployed you know it was nice to be doing something. I have got me level 2 numeracy but I've got me level 2 literacy skills to take in a couple of weeks.

Henry enjoys his participation on the government programme as he works towards achieving his literacy qualification. However, he is becoming anxious and feels insecure as he expresses concern regarding the Job Centre Plus universal job match system, that monitors the number of job applications he makes. He vividly describes the effects of the welfare reform system on himself and other claimants:

It's now more stricter on the dole now and I have to go on this job thing every day. I have to go on the job's match. I feel more under pressure, whereas before it wasn't as difficult yes it has made me feel more pressurised and every time you sign on you are always worried that you haven't done everything just right because they will stop your money you know ..yea.. exactly every time I go around there I get nervous because you have to make sure that you have done everything right.. definitely a bad thing like.. I know a lot of people say it's like, 'light a fire under us', as we have to please them rather than focus on your job search yea 'light a fire under us'.

The Coalition Government, through its welfare reforms, has instituted a range of 'conditions' which welfare claimants must fulfil. Henry, must be 'genuinely seeking work' and he is mandated to attend temporary government programmes for vocational

related learning, otherwise his welfare benefits are sanctioned and eventually they may be stopped.

Participation in government initiatives has provided Henry with a lifeline of a local support service that has prevented him from becoming socially isolated and enabled him to overcome his literacy and numeracy difficulties. It has not provided him with secure employment as he continues to live a precarious existence.

Analysis of Stories

These two stories enhance our understanding of the long term effects of de-industrialisation on learners attending government programmes in depressed labour market areas. Stories show that such economic structural changes in communities from the 1970s and neo-liberal policies such as flexibilisation of the workplace, have increased poverty and left a legacy for future generations that now experience insecurity, anxiety and a precarious existence. This contrasts with the traditional working class culture enjoyed by their father's generation.

According to Wacquant (2008, p.25) writing from an urban perspective tells us: *Mass unemployment has caused the deproletarianization of the industrial working class to a precarious existence along with material deprivation, family hardship and uncertainty about their future that causes anxiety.* Wacquants' findings from urban areas are also relevant to rural de- industrialised communities.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (1999, p.26):

Welfare-to-work policies are ultimately delivered at the local level. They must therefore be adapted to local needs ... If local policy-makers are given flexibility, they can design approaches that respond to local needs and opportunities, or bend mainstream programmes to local circumstances.

Life stories reveal that government programmes are localised and delivered in the heart of communities to respond to local need as recommended by OECD. Despite this the major effect of de-industrialisation on the lives of these male learners has been their exclusion from sustainable employment since leaving school. According to Sunley (et al 2001, p. 484) this is due to these learners living in a depressed labour market area '*workfare programmes are less effective in a depressed local labour market geographical area*'.

The stories show a struggle for survival by these learners that is conveyed through being on demand for short term, low skilled, low waged work. These short-term working patterns are mixed with long periods of unemployment with attendance on 'welfare to work' programmes. According to Wacquant (2008, p.27) '*economic restructuring has brought not simply loss of income and erratic employment but outright denial of access to wage earning activities*'.

The stories reveal that the process of 'churning' learners through 'welfare to work' government programmes is a form of government control and discipline in return for welfare payments. As Brian explained 'it is hard work'. According to Robinson (cited in Sunley et al 2001, p.485):

There has been a significant departure from traditional welfare systems in that they require people to work in return for social assistance benefits. In contrast to pre-existing social welfare and unemployment benefit programmes, in which state support was passive, unconditional and entitlement-based, the new workfare systems are strongly conditional.

Their exclusion from sustainable working practices is an outcome of the neo-liberal policy and practice of '*flexibilisation*', which according to Sennett (1998.51-54) focus mostly on the aim of '*bending people*' to the demands of the economy. According to Sennett, (2008, p.22) this new way of working has created short term opportunities

with no future and a new way of *'organizing time, particularly working time'* for those who have become known as the *'precariat'*.

The life stories suggests that the lives of these learners have become precarious as their lives are insecure due to poor economic conditions and their time is controlled in a bureaucratic way through the *'welfare to work'*. According to Standing (2011, p.12):

Individuals who have insecure employment and jobs of only a limited duration with minimal labour protection and no sense of a secure occupational identity are known as the *'precariat'*. Their lives are defined by short-termism and insecurity which could evolve into a mass incapacity to think long term, induced by the low probability of personal progress or building a career or social mobility.

Brian and Henry's confidence has been undermined and they feel demoralised due to the insecurity and anxiety caused by the present economic disorder with its *'welfare to work'* system and its lack of *'no long term'* possibilities. According to Standing (2011, p.12) *'the precariat lives with anxiety... are insecure in the mind and stressed, at the same time underemployed'*. According Wray and Stephen (2012, p.329-336) in their study of mining communities in County Durham claimed the consequences of de-industrialisation caused *'depression and loss of self -worth and confidence at an individual and collective level'*.

Brian and Henry remain dependent on welfare in these former coalmining and steel working areas. According to Wacquant (2008, p.200) there is a strong connection between *'place and dependency'*.

Both learners have achieved low level qualifications through government programmes. Henry has found the government programme at local level a lifeline in preventing him from becoming socially excluded. Brian continues to be *'churned'*

through government programmes and is going nowhere. According to Biesta (2011, p.96-104) *'learning can provide valuable knowledge and skills but can be involved in situations where no satisfactory progress is achieved but it helps to give stability in life'*.

Conclusion

This research study is on-going. Consideration in the future could be given to a re-evaluation in learning in what is effective in shaping position, disposition and identity of learners in rural de-industrialised communities in order to prevent *'advanced marginalization'* (Wacquant,2008.p.243-247), however as (Sunley et al,2001.p.484) points out this cannot be achieved without *'improved labour market conditions'*.

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