

“My aim is to take over Zane Lowe”: Young People’s Imagined Futures at a Community Radio Station (UK)

Introduction

Youth service provision, which is the responsibility of the local state, has seen significant reduction in available central funding since the UK financial crisis of 2007. Cuts to government spending in the UK have significantly affected young people. Figures released by the House of Commons show that 729,000 young people aged 16-24 were unemployed in March to May 2015 (Dar, 2015). This unemployment rate sits alongside cuts to State support for young people. For instance, under the 2010 to 2015 coalition government, Education Maintenance Allowance for 16 to 18 year-old pupils in education or training was cut. Correspondingly, there has been a significant increase in University fees in the UK. This combination has resulted in heightened uncertainty for young people.

I use the case study of KCC Live, a youth-led community radio station in Knowsley, neighbouring Liverpool, UK, to explore the imagined futures of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training [NEET] who volunteer at the station. This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I present a brief overview of literature on youth transitions and introduce the concept of young people’s ‘possible selves’. I then outline the methods used in this study, also introducing KCC Live and the Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley (referred to as Knowsley hereafter) where the station is based. Then I present the findings of this research around three themes: making it big; less defined possible selves; and the strength of weak ties. This chapter contributes to existing literature by providing an evidence-based consideration of

contemporary ideas of youth as concerned about their futures, whilst critiquing existing understandings of young people and ‘celebrity goals’.

Youth Transitions

Being NEET is often positioned as an outcome of the “fast-track” transition to adulthood (Macdonald, 2011:430). The key markers of this transition have been considered to involve: completion of full-time education; entry into the labour market; leaving the parental home; establishing an independent household; entry into marriage or cohabitation, and parenthood (Evans and Furlong, 1997). This positions youth as a phase through which we pass in order to become adult, and adulthood is positioned as “the age and stage of arrival, accomplishment and achievement” (Skelton, 2002:107). Yet, for NEET young people who have not secured entry to the labour market, this model would imply that their transition to adulthood is incomplete. This idea of failed transitions is problematic as it reinforces negative representations of young people (Skelton, 2002).

Jeffrey (2010) identifies three problems with a transitions approach. First, a transitions approach implies that young people will achieve adulthood; in some parts of the world the scale of social crisis means that ‘youth’ is a permanent condition. Second, it is not clear how far transitions literatures have moved beyond some of the normative teleological assumptions of life stage models. Third, the concept of transitions is underpinned by the assumption that people move from dependence to autonomous selfhood. However, in many parts of the world, adulthood is imagined in terms of interdependence rather than autonomy (Punch, 2002), and people may become less, rather than more, independent as they mature. If the concept of transition is to have any real explanatory power, it must be broadened to include young people who do not fit with the conventional understandings of transition.

Other work critiquing the idea of a linear transition has advanced the theory of individualisation (e.g. Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bryant and Ellard, 2015). Individualisation theories postulate that life is no longer clearly shaped by class divisions or traditions, and mapped out with defined stages, and that individuals now have greater agentic potential to choose between different lifestyles, subcultures, and identities (Beck, 1992). While individualisation may be useful for explaining the complexity of young people's lived transitions, in arguing that each individual is free to choose their own life path, it denies many structural factors which impede the opportunities of many young people (Tolonen, 2008). For instance, the social variables of class, gender, and race, have been positioned by other authors (e.g. Morrow and Richards, 1996) as affecting transitions and the possible outcomes of different adulthoods. Skelton (2002:103) critiques an individualised approach, for not replacing, but "tweaking", the idea of a normal transition, and thus placing the failure of transitions on the individual young person, as opposed to social and economic relations and structures.

Towards young people's possible selves

Markus and Nurius (1986) developed the term 'possible selves' to explore the link between imagined, possible outcomes and motivation in the present. Possible selves encompass "visions of desired and undesired end states" (Markus and Nurius, 1986:159). Possible selves are important because they function as incentives for future behaviour and provide an interpretive context to view the current self. Exploring narrative accounts of young men's transitions into the workforce in Luton and Swindon, UK, Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell (2015) asked young men about their present circumstances, opportunities, and future directions. They found that possible selves which possess a motivational capacity are usually accompanied by institutional and/or relational support, and by known routes to the young person's desired ends.

This allows young people to direct their actions to achieve these goals. Some young men had “viable pathways to imagined futures”, others had “vague or vacant possible selves” (Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015:167;168) and did not articulate specific fields in which they could see themselves working. Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell (2015:164) argue that, when young people are asked about aspirations, it is difficult to determine whether their responses are based on expectations, or “hopes and dreams” that may or may not encourage them to pursue trajectories towards future possibilities. I join Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell (2015) in promoting the usefulness of the concept of possible selves for a theorisation of the link between imagined possibilities in the future, and motivation to act in the present.

Methods

This chapter emerges from a larger research project which employed a range of methods, including 18 months of observant participation at KCC Live (see Wilkinson, 2017 for further discussion of this method), more than 95 semi-structured in-depth interviews with volunteers and staff, two focus groups; a listener survey which generated 460 responses; listener diaries with five listeners; and follow-up listener diary interviews. These methods enabled engagement with the different communities (listeners, staff and volunteers) involved in KCC Live. Herein, I focus on data arising from the interviews with volunteers and staff. In the presentation of findings that follows, the young people feature by their self-selected pseudonyms. Many of the young people chose pseudonyms after pop stars, DJs, and presenters.

Tuning in to KCC Live

Founded in 2003, KCC Live was originally set up as a college-based enrichment and work experience radio station, based at Knowsley Community College. KCC Live acts as part of the college’s retention strategy and intends to function as a bridge for NEET young people to re-

enter education and training. When first set up, KCC Live had three full-time staff positions (Programme Controller, Station Co-ordinator, and Community Liaison Co-ordinator). However, due to staffing cuts to reduce costs in the college, this dipped to one during the course of this research project. KCC Live positions itself as a youth-led radio station, with volunteers from the college and the wider community assuming the role of presenters, producers, newsreaders, segue-technicians, music programmers and web-editors. KCC Live hosts around 50-200 volunteers at any one time. The station typically has a 14-25 year-old volunteer base (KCC Live, 2007), although at the time of conducting this research all volunteers were aged over 16, and a number of volunteers were aged over 25.

KCC Live prides itself on a volunteer body that is representative of a variety of subgroups and cultures, in terms of hobbies, musical tastes, and sexuality. Music aired on KCC Live predominantly falls into the following genres: Dance; Trance; Scouse House; Urban; Hip Hop; RnB; Chart; Classic Rock; Alternative; and Acoustic. The station also airs music by local unsigned artists. The station's target audience is 10-24 year-olds in the centre of the Knowsley. KCC Live positions itself as an "exciting, non-elitist, highly-varied radio" (KCC Live, 2007:4), which values and explores young people's musical tastes, opinions and daily lives, in ways that are relevant to them. The station's ethos is to provide "Community Radio with Attitude" and it aims to sound like a "youth club in your bedroom" (KCC Live, 2007:23; 56).

KCC Live is based in Roby, a town within Knowsley, Merseyside, and forms part of the wider Liverpool City Region, in North West England. Knowsley is among the most deprived Boroughs in the country. 29.8% of children (under 16) in Knowsley live in relative poverty, 21.4% of children live in a house where no parents work, and 49% of lone parents are out of work and claiming benefits (Knowsley Council, 2014). Notably, 70% of children are born

outside of marriage, leading to a rhetoric in the media of Knowsley as “the town that marriage forgot”, and a social class stigma of “single mother central” (see Platell, 2010, no pagination).

Significantly, 9.79% of 16-18 year-olds in Knowsley are NEET; this is one of the highest rates nationally (Knowsley Council, 2012). Though Knowsley has made progress in raising educational attainment, its performance lags behind the national level, and Knowsley remains at the bottom of the league table nationally for GCSE grades (see Knowsley, 2012b). 43.7% of young people achieve five A*-C GCSEs, compared to a national average of 59% (Knowsley Council, 2014). There is no A Level provision within schools and colleges in the borough.

Young people’s imagined futures

Within the transitions literature young people are characterised as thinking ahead and concerned with their futures (Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell, 2015). This is important when considering that young people, particularly those from deprived areas, such as Knowsley, can become “locked in a revolving door of unemployment and low-paid insecure jobs” (Miller et al., 2015:469). As Hywel, consultant to KCC Live, makes clear, for some young people, KCC Live is an important site for realising potential and possibility:

Some young people have a lot of energy, and in a place like Knowsley that energy goes to destruction and they’ll smash bus stops up. If you can give them something which they don’t have much of in Knowsley...if you can capture them, and if you give them a chance to do something, in my experience it really develops them....There was one kid who came in and he couldn’t read very well at all, very very dyslexic, but also wasn’t engaged with reading at all. He said “I want to be a news reader”, and we sort of went “right?”, and he taught himself to read. He started reading books constantly because he wanted so much to be on the radio as a news reader.

(Hywel, 34, consultant to KCC Live, interview)

Hywel positions KCC Live as providing opportunities for young people to convert their energy into a positive resource. This can be understood through a resilience lens, whereby spare time activities can have resilience-enhancing potential (Gilligan, 2000). That is, for those young people who are experiencing adversity, it is important for them to have “havens of respite or asylum in other spheres of their lives” (Gilligan, 2000:38). Adding weight to this, KCC Live volunteers Andy and Hendrix speak of the transformative potential of KCC Live:

I want a career in radio and this place has helped. It can open a lot of doors, it's just knowing how to take the opportunities kinda thing, so it's kinda just making contacts and biding your time, learning the trade

(Andy, 24, interview)

I've never really known throughout the entirety of school, college, university, what I've wanted to do as a career...I think working in radio has helped me realise that I might want a career in radio yeah, but the creative media in general sort of, whether it be marketing, something along those lines. It's certainly helped me, err, look at different industries and decide what I want to do from there

(Hendrix, 23, interview)

Andy and Hendrix can be seen to be crafting ‘agentive selves’ (Hull and Katz, 2006). Andy acknowledges that KCC Live “can open a lot of doors” for a broadcast career, whilst Hendrix has a more general aim of a career in the creative media. Such narratives are significant because, as Hull and Katz (2006) argue, for young people from marginalised or disadvantaged communities, it is especially important that they have confidence in their competences and imagined futures.

Making it big

For some young people, their imagined futures contain a vision of “making it big” (Lange and Ito, 2010:289), or as one participant described it, “tunnel vision” for prominent commercial radio jobs:

I'd love to do presenting for like a national radio. I have a bit of a tunnel vision for 1Xtra. Erm, so hopefully with all the experience and just, you know, the development of meself, it will hopefully lead to that goal... I'm just gunna keep on producing demos and building a KCC Live portfolio, which I can take with me and be like “well here's all, everything I've done so far”

(Nikki, 22, interview)

Me course [at university] is Television and Radio, but it's radio I wanna do and to graduate in that...I just wanna, my aim is to take over Zane Lowe¹...I speak to Zane Lowe, he's a lovely man, and I'd just like, I'd feel horrible taking his show because it's his job, but I wanna be on Radio 1...I just wanna get paid to present radio...preferably on the BBC, if not Capital or something like that

(Calvin, 20, interview)

The above quotation from Nikki is illustrative of how a young person's imagined future can affect their present (see Worth, 2009). Nikki is producing demos and building up a portfolio to assist her into her desired career. This relates to Hardgrove, Rootham, and McDowell's (2015) point that possible selves are rooted in daily life and in personal experiences that help an individual to picture what his/her life could become. Nikki's 'possible self' took shape through

¹ Zane Lowe is a UK radio DJ presenting on BBC Radio 1.

her commitment to KCC Live. She believes the experience she has gained through KCC Live, including her placement at BBC Radio 1Xtra, puts her in a good stead to secure her desired career. Calvin's more specific aspiration to "take over Zane Lowe" stands apart from the socio-economic landscape within which his life is entrenched. As McInerney (2009:28) tells, "young people who are subjugated by oppressive social, economic and cultural forces are denied any real sense of agency and lack a capacity to act on and change their world". It is necessary to draw on the notion of habitus here, which Bourdieu (1984:473) argues inculcates "a sense of one's place", resulting in an individual's disinclination to seek employment and experiences outside of what is normalised for his/her particular habitus. Unlike in Bourdieu's (1984) thesis, Calvin has not become content with what he has, rather he is seeking opportunities to fulfil this goal, including forming a social tie with Zane Lowe himself.

Although other research (e.g. King et al. 2008) finds that celebrity goals stated by participants masked a troubling reality of no career planning in their lives, Calvin's imagining of a high-profile career is supported by his active involvement in activities which help shape his biography, most principally his university course in Television and Radio. Calvin told me in a later interview: "I'll be like that annoying kid who always walks in with stuff, constantly giving them CDs and demos". As such, Calvin's narrative also opposes Prince's (2014) finding that young people's imaginings of their possible selves are interrelated to the physical and affective qualities of their localities. Whilst Reay (2004) argues that social circumstances can impact dispositions towards possible futures, that is, habitus can be transformed through process to raise individual's aspirations, I attribute this potential to KCC Live.

Less defined possible selves

Although most young people at KCC Live are full of hope and optimism for the future, those with complicated biographical circumstances had “far less defined possible selves” (Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell, 2015:168). Take the following illustrative quotations:

I’m someone who’s struggled to find a career or a job that kind of fits me. So erm, I think I’ve struggled a lot more over the last year or two, because I am reaching 30 and I think that I should have some sort of career. And I like radio and I like doing it, but at the same time it’s difficult to get a career in radio, and I’m not the most motivated person when it comes to sending demos or networking...I’m now looking for employment within the world of radio but I don’t know quite what it is that I’m after, because there’s so many jobs in the world of radio

(Modest Mouse, 28, interview)

Me aims for the future is to get even more experience in radio and to pass me qualification, maybe even study Level 2 [BTEC award, certificate and diploma] next year. I also started thinking about uni lately, maybe that’s a possibility, I’m not too sure yet, but I’m just taking each step at a time really

(Chris, 17, interview)

Modest Mouse and Chris struggle to imagine a concrete future beyond their current circumstances. Modest Mouse reveals that his future is characterised by uncertainty, owing to the difficulty in securing a job in radio, and that he lacks motivation in seeking out opportunities. Chris’ career trajectory is less certain still. This resonates with Woodman’s (2011:113) finding that some young people are “present-centred”, owing to the overwhelming insecurity and scepticism they possess about their futures. It is worth saying that Chris is

younger than Modest Mouse, and it is therefore perhaps more natural that he has a less defined future, resulting in him “taking each step at a time”.

One volunteer, Fearne, discussed her fluid and varied senses of self. She is divided between her desire to be a Solicitor and a DJ, although noting: “at the minute I’m set on becoming a solicitor”.

I haven’t really planned my future out, because like the way things are going now, it’s changed a lot since I like started on KCC Live...I do still wanna become a solicitor, but I think, like only if I was to get some sort of good way in the DJing and stuff, like have a proper job, like working in the night clubs and things, and you know residencies and stuff because you’d be getting paid good money for that...Like, for example, Fearne Cotton², she’s doing well and stuff and obviously she’s on Radio 1 and I wouldn’t mind being her. But like at the minute I’m set on becoming a solicitor, that’s why I’m at university doing Law and Criminal Justice, I’ve kept me options open because that was the safest thing to do

(Fearne, 21, interview)

A few weeks later, in a follow-up interview, Fearne told me that she now wishes to become a DJ:

Since I last spoke to you, I won a competition for me DJing. And I get to warm up for a DJ...if you’re into the DJ scene and clubbing then you’ll know who he is, and he’s really big. So I’m getting to warm up for him, that was the prize you win in the

² An English television and radio presenter.

competition. But erm, there was eight of us in the competition and I was the only girl, so it sounds boss, it sounds well good. It felt great like, my head just blew up from that.

I definitely want to be a DJ now, I'm set on that

(Fearne, 21, interview)

Fearne's conflicting narratives illustrate how young people's "storied selves" (Hull and Katz, 2006:45) are numerous and shifting within the context of everyday actions and relations. Fearne, alongside Modest Mouse and Chris, is experiencing confusion over "who and what" (Halpern, Barker, and Mollard, 2000:470) she may become. I thus argue that KCC Live's practice of training young people yet not providing them with direction for 'next steps' is reminiscent of "sending youth on a journey without a map" (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Bockern, 2002:107).

The strength of weak ties

Many young people used KCC Live as a platform to progress onto a career in the media or further education. To provide two examples during my fieldwork, one volunteer secured a place at Oxford University and another gained paid full-time work at Liverpool commercial station Radio City. Many young people maintain/intend to maintain ties with KCC Live when they move on from the station. Take the following quotation:

I'd always like to have some involvement at KCC Live, cos I'd like to think this is where it started. So, you know, whether it be in ten years or twenty years, when hopefully I'm getting a paid presenting job, you know, I'd come back here and teach the next generation....and radio as well, it's such a hard area...if you have a job and then all of a sudden you get dropped and one day you could have a job, one day you couldn't.

(Andy, 24, interview)

Andy's discussion of KCC Live as "this is where it started" evokes a sense of KCC Live as "a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (Massey, 2005:130), characterised by meaningful interactions attached to this place. Andy emphasises that he would "always like to have some involvement at KCC Live" owing to the precarious nature of the radio industry. I therefore argue that some young people maintain/intend to maintain ties with KCC Live owing to the ambivalence in transitions to adulthood and the lengthening processes of these transitions (see also Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004).

A further explanation for maintaining ties with KCC Live can be attributed to the sense of home, family and belonging that young people feel in relation to the station:

Chrissie: The retention rate of KCC Live is really good, but it's not supposed to be. It's supposed to be a stepping stone into the world of radio, or employment or education or whatever it is, but it's not. We tend to retain people while they're on their journey of whatever it is they're going for. So whether it be going to uni, they'll still come back here, whether it will be going and getting a job, they'll still come back here.

CW: For what reason do you think you retain people?

Chrissie:...I think the bonds that they have with people at the station, that sense of community and sense of family brings them back. So when you're in a world where life can become stressful...I think we all need that escape from those norms of life, and I think the station has accidently found itself being that escape.

(Chrissie, 30, Station Manager, interview)

As Chrissie illustrates, KCC Live is intended as a "stepping stone"; in other words, young people should use the space to reengage with employability skills, but it should not be an "end point" (Podkalicka and Staley, 2009:5).

The young people Chrissie is speaking of have moved on from KCC Live (i.e. secured employment or further education), but maintain ties. However, my research found that such ties and bonding social capital can be “disabling and constraining” (White and Green, 2011:51) in accessing additional training or work opportunities for some young people who remain at the station. Modest Mouse, who describes himself as a KCC Live “veteran”, explores this:

With me being here for five years now, I do think it may be time for me to move on in the next year or so...That's not a knock on KCC Live, that's more me feeling like I have to move on to progress...I might get settled and get too comfortable in an environment and I almost get a little bit lazy and I sometimes feel like I need to push myself out of that and find a new challenge. Erm, and my ultimate goal is to get a job or career that pays and that's something that I haven't got at the moment, and that could very well mean moving away from KCC Live to achieve that

(Modest Mouse, 28, interview)

In an interview almost 18 months later, Modest Mouse told me:

I feel like I've learnt everything that I possibly can...The only way I'm going to learn to do new things is through other places...obviously, I would prefer to not stay here for the next five years, because if that's the case I still won't have a proper full-time job, erm which isn't the be-all and end-all in life, but you know. Erm, so it does feel tough sometimes when it feels, it kind of feels to me like I'm treading water now. I've gained all the experience I need to gain

(Modest Mouse, 29, interview)

Modest Mouse is self-confessedly “treading water”. He tells that he remains at KCC Live, although he has gained the experience that he needs to progress beyond the station. Within the

first excerpt, Modest Mouse states that “in the next year or so” he intends to move on from KCC Live, yet in the later excerpt Modest Mouse remains at the station. Unlike Modest Mouse, Bruce expresses no immediate desire to leave KCC Live:

I need some more consistent work...I need to get out of that fucking house, argh, families! I've not got a job that is consistent enough to warrant paying for my own accommodation, electric, bills, water and so on. Personally, that's a massive goal for me because, well, independence. I think I'm reaching a period of stability, I am on the road to that period of stability. Right now I am just happy doing what I am doing for a bit. I don't have plans to leave any time soon. I'm happy as long as I have a little slot where I can do what I want. Obviously I'm quite, erm, spontaneous...I'm quite like “I'm done with that, what's the next thing?” But I'm unlikely to do that at KCC Live where people are relying on me

(Bruce, 24, interview)

It is clear that Bruce has place attachment to KCC Live; despite his spontaneous character, he feels compelled to stay at the station because of the dependency people have on him; in other words, the strength of community ties. As Manzo and Perkins (2006:347) tell, “people are motivated to seek, stay in, protect, and improve places that are meaningful to them”. This is significant, as place attachment may limit social and geographical horizons (White and Green, 2011), and may impede social and spatial mobility and individual progress (Fried, 2000). As such, Bruce's emotional and affective bonds made at KCC Live, may limit his awareness of / motivation for employment and training opportunities outside of the station.

Thus, I argue that a regrettable consequence of KCC Live's homely environment, and the strong ties built, is that, for a small number of young people, the sense of belonging is so

powerful that they do not wish to leave. The following quotations from MJ and Beard add credence to this point:

I did five weeks [work experience] here and I fell in love with the studio and the people here and I decided to stay on for the summer, and that's why I'm still here

(MJ, 22, interview)

It's a bit like the home is where the heart is, it's that saying where how you live your life is where you feel most comfortable. That's what I'm like at the station, that's why I've been here for donkey's

(Beard, 28, interview)

MJ tells that, due to friendships she has made with volunteers at KCC Live, she has stayed at the radio station beyond the time allocated for her work experience. Further, Beard, who has volunteered at KCC Live for ten years, tells that “home is where the heart is”, explaining that he has remained at the station as it is the place he feels “most comfortable”. This is perhaps an upshot of the fact that, through community radio, young people are producing new communities and founding new ways of belonging (Bloustien, 2007). Just as in White and Green's (2011:51) study, “the insular nature of strong ties” may result in “bounded horizons” for some young people at KCC Live. Even if these young people are a minority, they indicate a need for support and encouragement to achieve imagined futures.

I presented the finding that some young people lack direction for moving on from KCC Live to station management. Hywel demonstrates acknowledgement of this trend:

I hold my hands up, and this is all to do with staff reducing, and the amount of time that I would much rather be putting towards direction, rather than constantly trying to be the politician for the business...I feel that we've sent them down a mineshaft with a

pickaxe and a helmet and then we've not seen them again for six months and I totally totally agree. I'd certainly like to do that more

(Hywel, 34, consultant to KCC Live in joint feedback interview with Chrissie, 30, Station Manager)

Hywel acknowledges KCC Live's role of training volunteers and equipping them with skills, yet not providing direction for life outside of the station. He describes this process as sending the young people "down a mineshaft with a pickaxe and a helmet". Hywel attributes this to staffing cuts, yet affirms that he would like to devote more time towards working through future directions with volunteers. Thus, as Evans (2011) writes in relation to 'Big Society' in the UK, although volunteer time is unpaid, the training, co-ordination and support of volunteers' work requires accountable management, and requires clarity about the purpose to which their time and skills can contribute most meaningfully.

Conclusion

This chapter used the case study of youth-led community radio station KCC Live to explore the imagined futures of NEET young people. Some young people at KCC Live had 'celebrity aspirations' – to 'become the next Fearne Cotton' or 'take over over Zane Lowe'. For those young people with complicated biographical circumstances, they had far less defined possible selves, characterised by an insecurity about their futures, and the competitiveness of the 'radio world'. For a small number of young people, the sense of belonging to KCC Live was so powerful that they did not wish to leave. Thus an unanticipated finding of this research was that the sense of 'home' and 'family' generated at community youth organisations can be disabling and constraining in accessing additional training or work opportunities. This chapter argues that even if these young people are a minority, they indicate a need for support and encouragement to achieve imagined futures.

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