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**Crisis of youth or youth in crisis? Education, employment and  
legitimation crisis**

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## Crisis of youth or youth in crisis? Education, employment and legitimisation crisis

### Abstract

This paper uses the Habermasian concept of legitimisation crisis to critique the relationship between post-compulsory education and training and the chronic levels of youth unemployment and under-employment which now characterise post-industrial Western economies, such as the UK. It draws on data from an ethnographic study of the lives of young people classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training), or at risk of becoming so to challenge dominant discourses about youth unemployment and the supposed relationship between worklessness, skills deficits and young people's lack of 'work-readiness'. The central argument of the paper is that the labour market insecurity experienced by many young people in the UK and elsewhere derives not from some supposed crisis of youth but is symptomatic of the inherent contradictions contained within capitalist modes of production which, it is argued, are exacerbated under neo-liberal policy regimes. Following Habermas (1976) and drawing on Strathdee (2013), the paper contends that various government-led initiatives which purport to prepare young people for the workplace, create links between the individual and the labour market, or force the unemployed into the labour market are, in Habermasian terms, part of an attempt to resolve the crisis of legitimisation associated with contemporary capitalist societies.

### Key Words

Habermas, legitimisation crisis, post-compulsory education, NEET young people

### Introduction

This paper uses the Habermasian concept of legitimisation crisis to critique the relationship between post-compulsory education and training and the chronic levels of youth unemployment and under-employment which now characterise post-industrial Western economies, such as the UK. [In the process we want to update Habermas to take account of the effects of neoliberalism.](#) [#The paper](#) challenges

dominant discourses about youth unemployment and the supposed relationship between worklessness, skills deficits and young people's lack of 'work-readiness'. The central argument of the paper is that the labour market insecurity experienced by many young people in the UK and elsewhere derives not from some supposed crisis of youth but is a result of the inherent contradictions contained within capitalist modes of production which, it is argued, are exacerbated under neo-liberal policy regimes. Following Habermas (1976) and drawing on Strathdee (2013), the paper contends that various government-led initiatives which purport to either prepare young people for the workplace, create links between the individual and employers, or compel the unemployed to take part in the labour market are, in Habermasian terms, part of an attempt to resolve the crisis of legitimation associated with contemporary capitalist societies.

However, it is not quite that straightforward. We want to complicate Habermas' legitimation crisis somewhat, by arguing that while the intent of neoliberalism is the material and ideological transfer of 'risk' from the state to the individual via markets (see for example, Means, 2015) the effect can nevertheless still be coercive and punitive. As an ideology, neoliberalism seeks to transform individuals from dependent citizens into entrepreneurs of the self (Rose, 2000) as active responsible agents, and those who fail to do so through mechanisms like lifelong learning are deemed to be failures in the market (Bauman, 2007) and thus responsible for their own misery. While the unstated intent of neoliberalism might be that of letting the state off the hook, the tangible lived effect on the individual is nevertheless a damaging and punitive one. In the process, what is legitimated is the supremacy of the market as a regulative device, and the death of the individual through his/her own hand by the market, especially in an area as contested as the youth labour market.

While, as Habermas (1976) tells us, portrays increasing state intervention as being necessary to try to assuage the contradictions inherent within capitalist modes of production, the exact nature such interventions take is contestable, and it is possible for the state to deploy a range of strategies which are have the effect of being more or less punitive in nature when trying to secure legitimation. Whilst it is possible to discern different broad trends associated with different regimes, it is evident that the Conservative-led coalition which governed the UK from 2010-2015 was determined to overturn some of the limited redistributive policies introduced by previous administrations, and so embraced punishing strategies in a more concentrated and far-reaching fashion than was the case hitherto. This, we argue,

that this consisted not only of an increasing use of overtly coercive methods such as benefit sanctions, workfare initiatives and a growing discourse of derision, but also entailed reshaping certain forms of education, advice and guidance, and support to become more disciplinary in nature.

The paper begins with an overview of Habermas' theory of the state ~~and by~~ explaining how increasing levels of government-led intervention have become necessary to legitimate youth unemployment and the prevalence of 'poor work' associated particularly with the Anglo-Saxon context. It then discusses the changing nature of youth transitions and the rise of NEET (not in education, employment and training) as problem category in policy discourse. The paper goes on to present findings from an ethnographic study of young people classified as NEET or at risk of becoming so, set in the north of England. It uses these findings to illustrate some of the tensions and contradictions contained within three strands of state intervention designed to 'reclaim the disengaged' which Strathdee (2013) describes as *motivational*, *bridging* and *forcing* strategies. The data presented illustrate how young people from disadvantaged backgrounds experience various provisions intended to engage or re-engage them with the labour market. ~~They focus, in particular, on~~ These provisions bring into focus how certain forms of education and training which purport to equip young people for the world of work can in fact contribute to their on-going marginalisation, and illustrate how the state attempts to subjugate working-class youth to the neo-liberal project.

In invoking Habermas we acknowledge that his theory of the state was conceived during the crisis of Fordism, and to that extent events have overtaken it and it needs updating in terms of how neoliberal power dynamics and its ideology are giving a very different inflection to what is meant by legitimisation crisis—most notably, that education and training have become the 'cause' as well as the 'solution' to the youth employment crisis. This has particular salience in the way the legitimisation crisis is now being constructed through the exporting of responsibility from the state, and being placed on individuals to develop their own human capital through lifelong learning. The way the state is legitimating neoliberal economic, social and political arrangements, is through a process of redistributing risk and responsibility as well as through coercive strategies and modes of discipline and punishment. The sharpest way to put this is that the state under neoliberalism is engaged in handling the legitimisation crisis in ways that are rhetorical in terms of demands to shift risk onto

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citizens, and while this might be a more nuanced and covert process than that described in earlier times by Habermas, it is no less real in its effects. Any apparent retreat of the state with the divestiture of responsibility onto the individual, is not really a diminution of state power at all, but rather a recasting of how it actually works.

### **Habermas, the capitalist state, ~~and~~ legitimation crisis and the neo-liberal turn**

According to Habermas (1976) capitalist relations of production contain inherent contradictions which, if unchecked, will ultimately lead to a crisis of legitimation and which will eventually result in systemic breakdown. But, for Habermas, capitalism cannot itself resolve the contradictions it creates, and so the state must act to support capitalism if it is to avoid collapse – although it also needs to conceal the processes through which the necessary conditions for accumulation are secured if legitimation is to be maintained (Held, 1982, p. 184). The state therefore uses various strategies to try and ‘transform the issue of economic management into a purely instrumental, tactical, administrative exercise’ (Plant 1982 p. 348). But, whilst it can attempt to compensate for some economic problems, the state cannot resolve the inherent problems of capitalism, such as the tendency for profits to fall and so repeated crises are likely, each of which, over time, lead to greater levels of intervention (Strathdee, 2013, p. 32)—including the strategy of moving risk.

Habermas (1976) proposes a model of capitalism which is made up of three inter-linked subsystems: the economic, the political-administrative, and the socio-cultural subsystems. The state, he argues, is required to maintain each of these subsystems in order to sustain capitalist modes of production but each sub-system has a tendency towards crisis. There are, Habermas (1976) contends, four dimensions associated with this tendency towards crisis:

- Economic crises are related to the distribution of costs and benefits which are often at variance with normative values used to justify its operation

- Crises of rationality are said to occur when the political-administrative subsystem cannot effectively resolve the contradictions created by the economic subsystem.
- Legitimation crises are a result of attempts to impose instrumental or technical rationality on the traditional social system which, in turn, tend to lead to a further erosion of this base.
- Motivation crises are, it is argued, caused when a disjuncture between institutional arrangements and individual aspirations is allowed to develop.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (Strathdee, 2013, p. 33)

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These different forms of crisis, Habermas (1976) argues, require different forms of response but it is necessary for the state to regulate, deregulate or otherwise intervene on behalf of capital if legitimation is to be maintained. Much of this, for example, the enforcement of law and order to protect private property rights, has become accepted as the social norm, and generally goes unchallenged. But, over time, state intervention has become necessary across an increasingly large range of activities, and across different dimensions of social and economic activity. One example of this is the concerted attempt to normalise participation in post-compulsory education and training which, it is claimed, is the key to resolving youth unemployment as, according to official discourse, it is caused largely by a lack of skills, and low levels of commitment and motivation to work (Avis, 2009). Such processes, Habermas (1987) refers to as being part of the 'life-world', a set of taken-for-granted assumptions governing everyday life and consisting of run-of-the-mill expectations and shared, tacit understandings about the nature of society (Strathdee, 2013, p. 33). This life-world is, however, vulnerable to the systemic pressures of capitalism and so, over time, more and more intervention becomes necessary to sustain capital. Intervention through either the political-administrative system or the economic system is, however, problematic, not least because this tends to harm many of the cultural life-forms that have traditionally supported capitalist production – for example, traditional working-class orientations to education, employment, production and consumption.

We are attracted to the analytic heuristic of Habermas' legitimation crisis because it allows for a new and somewhat more nuanced, albeit complicated, analysis of education and youth training programmes for a least three reasons. First, in order to

manage the crisis of capitalism due to its tendencies towards the inherent contradictions well documented by Habermas (1976, p. 45), the state has to be seen to be responding, and in the context of the neoliberal turn, and it does this by seeking *legitimation* of the political/administrative system by seeming to devolve power, while in effect shifting responsibility onto individuals to manage their own destinies. Second, because there is an erosion of motivation due to a rupturing of traditional values that have hitherto underpinned the economic system, young people are questioning the basis of education and work. This is what Habermas (1976) calls the *motivational crisis* (pp. 75-92). For example, the way this is given expression in the neo-liberal context, as Strathdee (2013) points out, is when: 'students ask, "why should I work hard to gain qualifications when there are no jobs". The unemployed ask, "why should I go to work when rates of pay are so low and the conditions poor"' (p. 33). Third, Habermas is helpful in enabling us to see more clearly what Robertson and Dale (2002) argue are neo-liberal governance regimes to 'manage...[the] tensions and contradictions within the framework of *political rationality* itself' (p. 463 emphasis added). Neoliberalism does this by 'systematically relocat[ing] aspects of its governance to the local level' (p. 463), by invoking notions of self-responsibilisation and choice that force 'workers (including future workers) into competition with each other' (p. 463). Dale (1997) argues that this amounts to a 'fusing [of] legitimation with accumulation' (pp. 212-213) through forms of 'neoliberal localism' or 'local states of emergency' (Robertson and Dale, 2002, p. 465), requiring, for example, the 'introduction of notions of market-like competition between schools' (p. 479), institutions of further education, and youth training programmes.

The collapse of Britain's traditional industrial base and the increasing complex nature of youth transitions has, as will see later in the paper, required increasing levels of state intervention in order to ensure continued capitalist accumulation – although there have been certain moments, for example the inner-city riots which took place across England in the summer of 2011, when an overt challenge to the authority of the state has occurred. The rise of in-work poverty and the increasing prevalence of insecure, transient forms of employment also undermine neo-liberal discourses about the relationship between educational achievement, equality of opportunity and economic success. Yet education has become a key tool for the capitalist state in attempting to maintain legitimation, and vocationally-orientated training is now largely a substitute for employment for many young people. Early departure from education is generally viewed as problematic and working-class youth, in particular,

have become more reliant on the state as the normative base which traditionally informed their decision-making has become disrupted and diminished (Strathdee, 2013, pp. 33-34).

### **An analytic framework for the paper**

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As already indicated our focus is on the critical theorist Jurgen Habermas (1976), and in the paper we want to bring this into conversation with the work in youth studies of Rob Strathdee (2013). While Habermas' (1976) notion of 'legitimation crisis' provides us with a broad philosophical framework for the paper, Strathdee's (2013) much more gritty materialist categories for re-engaging youth (p. 35) around 'motivational, bridging and punishing' strategies (p. 29), provides a middle-range set of analytics with which to make sense of the youth crisis, especially as it applies to youth unemployment and training programmes. Together they provide a nice synergy for this paper, although we will primarily deploy Strathdee's three strategies in analysing our data, invoking Habermas where appropriate.

Strathdee (2013), drawing on Habermas (1976), highlights three ways in which Western governments have tried to ameliorate the tensions and contradictions described above. Briefly, *Strathdee argues that motivational strategies* are intended to imbue young people with the skills, attitudes and, dispositions deemed necessary for labour market success; *bridging strategies* aim to generate links between the unemployed and employers and create networks which lever the jobless into work; *punishing strategies* are designed to discipline and, if necessary, force the unemployed into labour market participation via the use of various penalties and sanctions. In the UK, motivational strategies have mainly taken the form of the expansion of state-sponsored education and training – although, as we will see, it is questionable whether it is appropriate to describe some of the provision aimed at NEET young people as motivational. Successive governments have attempted to realign the curriculum more closely to the perceived needs of employers and have increased participation levels across all social groups. Consequently, post-compulsory education and training is no longer confined mainly to the relatively privileged but it is important to recognise that participation remains highly differentiated with those from lower socio-economic groups substantially over-represented in low-level work-related and pre-vocational provision (Simmons &

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Thompson, 2011). This is problematic, not least because such provision usually offers participants little labour market advantage upon completion (Wolf, 2011), although, as we will see later in the paper, the value of such forms of training is questionable in numerous ways. Bridging strategies are often used alongside motivational strategies and there have, over the years, been various government-led initiatives which have attempted to connect or reconnect young people with education and work, although New Labour's national Connexions<sup>1</sup> service was perhaps the most systematic and concerted attempt to do this. Research nevertheless shows that many businesses prefer to recruit workers through family and community-based networks which, they believe, provide more reliable workers than those referred to them via agencies of the state (Katungi, Neale & Barbour, 2006).

The capitalist state can, as Robertson and Dale (2002) explain, be more or less punitive in the way it approaches questions of youth (un)employment, and this is dependent both upon objective circumstances and ideological orientation. Social democratic and 'third way' regimes tend to place more emphasis upon motivational and bridging strategies, whereas more neo-liberal regimes prefer to emphasise punishing strategies, at least when dealing with working-class people; and, although disciplinary undercurrents existed under the New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (Levitas, 2005), a more hard-edged approach has been evident since the coalition took power in 2010. Expanding education systems and developing bridging strategies is costly and requires at least some degree of economic redistribution, and so goes against the grain ~~for~~ among the coalition's leadership, which is committed to a less diluted neo-liberal policy agenda than its predecessors. Consequently, over recent years, Connexions has been dismantled, its services cut back and contracted out to private and voluntary sector providers; the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the Future Jobs Fund have been abandoned; and various other initiatives, such as the New Deal for Communities, have also been undone. There has, alongside such measures, also been a revivification of populist notions about the growth of a so-called underclass – or, in other words, the belief that a certain section of society characterised by fecklessness

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<sup>1</sup> Connexions was an integrated advice and guidance service for young people in England aged 13–19.

and a culture of dependency is essentially work-shy. Such beliefs are strongly endorsed by the current Conservative Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Ian Duncan Smith who said:

There is no point assuming...that everyone understands the intrinsic benefits of work, the feelings of self-worth, or the opportunity to build self-esteem...For someone from a family or peer group where no one has ever held work...the notion that taking a job is a mug's game...across generations and throughout communities, worklessness has become ingrained into everyday life.

—————(Duncan  
Smith, 2012)

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Despite the lack of robust evidence to support the claim that widespread inter-generational worklessness exists across the UK (Shildrick et al, 2012), reductions in both the availability and level of welfare benefits, and the introduction of conditionality by tying eligibility for welfare to participation in education and training are strongly linked to such beliefs.

### **Youth transitions and the rise of NEET as a problem category**

The three decades after the end of World War Two are often described as the golden age of British capitalism (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 257). Although class-based conflict was not unusual, low levels of unemployment and the expansion of education, health and a range of other public services helped improve social conditions, and promote economic security. Effectively, the state was able to legitimise capitalist accumulation through the limited redistribution of wealth and the adoption of broadly social democratic policies – and, although there were some differences in emphasis between different Labour and Conservative governments, broadly such principles held sway until the end of the 1970s. It is, however, important not to romanticise this period. Overt sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination were not unusual in education, the workplace or elsewhere and, although the majority of young people secured employment consistent with their

ambitions and expectations, some did not bed easily into the labour market, shifting repeatedly from job-to-job before settling into the world of work (Finn, 1987). Most young people were nevertheless eager to leave education and, at least for working-class males, the most sought-after form of employment was an apprenticeship (Willis, 1977). Such arrangements, whilst favouring relatively privileged sections of the working class, helped maintain a state of legitimation and support capitalist accumulation (Cohen, 1983), and can, in Habermasian terms, be regarded as an important part of the life-world which characterised the social democratic settlement which existed at that time.

Although signs of strain were evident for some time beforehand, Britain's uneasy post-war consensus finally began to crumble following the OPEC oil boycott of the early-1970s (Ainley, 2007). The collapse of much of the UK's traditional industrial base and the demise of the traditional youth labour market from that time onwards significantly reduced young people's opportunities for paid work, especially secure, full-time employment. Much of the life-world – the family and community links with local industries, and traditional patterns of recruitment which previously facilitated rapid school-to-work transitions – was shattered. By the end of the 1970s, there was mass unemployment in many parts of the country, especially amongst young people (Tusting & Barton, 2007, p. 12). Today, few leave school to enter full-time work and, for many young people, access to the traditional signifiers of adulthood has become disturbed or suspended, sometimes almost permanently (Ainley & Allen, 2010). Social structures now seem less permanent and predictable, and established forms of identity have been fragmented and disorganised by far-reaching social and economic change. Consequently, some argue that class-based analyses of young people's lives are now less appropriate, and that alternative forms of identity have become more significant (Maffesoli, 1996). But, whilst contemporary youth often construe the social world in highly individualistic ways, an epistemological fallacy associated with late modernity is that life chances remain closely linked to the enabling and constraining dimensions of structural inequality (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

Either way, according to neo-liberal discourse, the future of the UK, like other Western economies, lies in transforming itself into a 'knowledge economy' based largely upon creative industries, niche manufacturing, and a high-quality service

sector. Within this *zeitgeist* the dual role assigned to education and training is both to drive economic competitiveness and promote social inclusion by supplying individuals with the human capital deemed necessary to gain and sustain employment (Avis, 2009). But the nature of employment available, especially to many working-class individuals, does not reflect the high-skills rhetoric promoted by the state (Jones, 2012), and young people often 'churn' chronically between different sites of insecure and lowly-paid employment and various employability training programmes, interspersed with periods of non-participation (Simmons et al., 2014). This is problematic both for the individual and the state: whilst the reconstitution of a reserve army of labour may serve the interests of capital by forcing down wages, it also incurs financial costs to the state and threatens capitalist accumulation through restricting the pool of talent upon which it can draw (Ainley, 2013).

Whilst concerns about youth unemployment in the UK stretch back at least forty years, the term NEET is a more recent policy discourse stemming from a series of technical and ideological shifts which have taken place since the end of the 1980s. These not only disqualified most young people from a range of benefits but incrementally shifted responsibility for the shortage of work to the level of the individual. Although the term NEET emerged specifically in the UK and 'not in education, employment or training' has something of the classic English fudge about it, NEET as a policy discourse is now used across Europe and the OECD. Initially the acronym NEET was applied only to 16-18 year olds, but over time its usage has broadened to include all young people under the age of 25 outside education and work. Various consequences flow from this. On one hand, it allows the responsibility for unemployment to be relocated to a greater range of individuals but it also means that NEET figures have reached headline-grabbing levels, topping one million in the UK in 2012. Moreover, whilst the NEET category always included a heterogeneous collection of individuals, it now includes 'gap year' students, redundant workers with significant labour market experience and unemployed graduates, as well as teenagers with little or no work experience. But, whilst some young people spend extended periods outside education and employment, the majority of the NEET population move between different forms of participation interspersed with periods of non-participation (Furlong, 2006). For most young people, however, being outside education and employment for substantial periods is not only a consequence of disadvantage, but increases the likelihood of involvement in crime, drug use and anti-social behaviour, as well as incurring greater risk of long-term unemployment (DfES, 2007).

~~Dividing young people outside education and work into sub-groups, such as young offenders, those with a disability or illness, or young parents improves our understanding of the NEET population to an extent (DCSF, 2009). Such disaggregations have been used to inform a range of initiatives aimed at engaging or re-engaging young people in education and work (see, for example, Scottish Executive, 2006; Spielhofer et al., 2009). But, as Finlay et al. (2010) note, young people with similar experiences or characteristics are not necessarily members of a homogeneous sub-group and a variety of interventions may be necessary to meet the needs of individuals with apparently similar circumstances. Whilst, for example, young people with special educational needs share a particular broad circumstance, they are likely to experience and understand their situation unevenly, and to require diverse forms of support. In any case, being outside education or without work may not be the most immediate challenge facing a young person. Young people with behavioral problems, those who are sick, homeless or suffering from various forms of addiction are, for example, likely to require more targeted interventions before being ready for the labour market.~~

#### **Motivating, bridging or forcing-punishing NEET young people?**

This section of the paper presents data drawn from a longitudinal ethnographic study of the lives of NEET young people which took place across Middlebridge and Greenford, two local authorities in the north of England. Middlebridge has a population of approximately 400,000 and consists of two large towns and several smaller settlements. Greenford has a population of about 200,000 and is made up of one major town and its environs. The history of both places has been strongly influenced by the textile industry and, like many British towns and cities, Middlebridge and Greenford are ethnically diverse: over 10 per cent of the population is Asian, mainly Pakistani or Indian, and there are significant numbers from African-Caribbean and mixed-race backgrounds. Over the last decade a substantial number of migrants from Eastern Europe and elsewhere have also come to live in the area. In many ways, Middlebridge and Greenford reflect the changing nature of 'new urban economies' (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2003) and as manufacturing industry has declined, employment has shifted towards mental and emotional labour rather than manual work – although, in both places, manufacturing still accounts for a higher proportion of employment than the UK average. Nevertheless, over 70 per cent of employment in Middlebridge and 80 per cent in

Greenford is located in the service sector. Across the two authorities, unemployment rates exceed the UK average; one-third of employment is part-time; and much work is insecure and lowly paid. Reflecting national trends, 16-to-24-year-olds are more likely to be unemployed than the rest of the working-age population.

Fieldwork for the study took place between October 2010 and March 2013. 26 individuals, aged between 15 and 19 at the beginning of the research, participated although six did not take part after March 2012. Of the remaining participants, 12 were female, and eight male; four young women and one young man were parents, each with a child aged two or under. 10 participants had spent time in looked-after care, and fifteen lived outside the family home. Two females were Asian and one male mixed-race; the others were white British. The main corpus of data includes 280 hours of participant observation conducted in benefit offices, Connexions centres, workplaces and training providers' premises, as well as in young people's homes and other locations. 78 interviews were conducted and transcribed, including 20 with Connexions advisers, Jobcentre staff and other practitioners; three with employers; and 54 with young people. Other data were gathered through constructing life-history maps, discussing photographs taken by the young people or researcher, and by using qualification certificates, records of achievement and other documents as reference point for debate.

Obtaining and maintaining access to NEET young people is challenging and, to some degree, participants constitute an opportunity sample. Contact was made through Connexions and other support services, via training providers and by 'snowballing', whereby those taking part in the research introduced us to other potential participants. The sample nevertheless contains representatives from a range of NEET sub-groups including care-leavers, young people with learning disabilities, young parents, early school-leavers, and young offenders. Although most came from disadvantaged backgrounds, contrary to populist discourses about NEET young people, all participants had parents with at least some history of employment, or self-employment, usually in manual or routine non-manual occupations. Whilst some had successful school careers, most participants had found compulsory education to be unrewarding, and behavioural problems and frequent changes of residence – particularly for those who had been in care – had

often led to disrupted schooling. Some had few qualifications and found it difficult to re-engage with education in any meaningful sense.

The data presented below provide some insight into the nature of participants' experiences during the course of the fieldwork. They have been chosen to illuminate each of the three strategies [Habermas' Strathdee \(2013\)](#) argues are deployed by the state in its attempt to engage young people in capitalist accumulation.

#### *Motivating strategies*

All the young people who took part in the study attended at least one employability programme during the course of the research, and some did so several times. But rarely did they secure employment consistent with their ambitions or expectations as an outcome of such training. It is, however, worth considering the nature and content of employability programmes and the assumptions which underpin such provision before going any further. The roots of today's employability programmes can be traced back to the collapse of the traditional youth labour market in the 1970s and the creation of the Youth Opportunities Programme at the end of that decade; and whilst, over time, these programmes have been serially repackaged, generally such provision tends to be promoted as an alternative to more traditional forms of education and training, especially for those who have not done well at school (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p. 42). Consequently the settings in which employability programmes take place and relations between staff and young people undertaking such training are often less formal than in many other educational environments. The following field notes taken when observing Isla, a young woman who took part in the fieldwork, are illustrative of some of these processes.

There is a slow start to the morning, the young people are just chatting and eating...Bryn eats his sandwich, screws up the wrapper and asks 'Do you reckon I can get it in from here?' He tries to throw the paper in the bin but just misses...

The young people sit on soft chairs...There are no tables, other than one with drinks and biscuits...No-one needs pens or paper.

We do a warm-up game. We have to pass a clap around the table as fast as we can...The group seem to enjoy this, they laugh and find it difficult in places...

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(Field notes, 3/2/2011)

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Pedagogy and the nature of the curriculum also tend to be rather different to conventional modes of schooling, with teaching and learning often emphasising confidence-building and self-presentation alongside basic-skills training, CV preparation, and 'job-search skills' (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). It is important to note that such activities are not without value: some young people begin employability programmes with significant barriers to learning, and a caring and nurturing approach is often valid and necessary when trying to engage or re-engage those on the margins of participation (Hyland, 2009). But it is also necessary to recognise that not all those who participate in employability programmes are low achievers or 'troubled teenagers'. Moreover, concentrating on building generic, transferrable skills and compliant dispositions can be problematic if it denies participants access to the coherent, principled knowledge contained either within established academic subjects or more traditional forms of vocational learning which are also supported by theoretical or subject-based knowledge. Thompson (2009) drawing on Bernstein (2000), argues that the principles underpinning many employability programmes tend to deny 'the dynamic interface between individual careers and the social or collective base', and so effectively place a socially empty concept at centre of education (p. 48). There are, after all, only so many times a young person can update a CV or improve their interview skills before coherent and robust forms of skills and knowledge also need to be gained in order to add substance to any inter-personal abilities that have been accrued (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p. 171).

Initially, many participants felt there was at least some value in the employability programmes they attended. But, over time, repeated exposure to similar or

sometimes identical training produced significant levels of frustration and negativity. Here it is worth examining the experiences of Danny, a young man who rarely attended school from the age of 14, but was 17 years-old and on an employability programme when he began taking part in the research in early 2011. This was one of a series of such courses in which he participated, although the nature of the training available to him appeared to reinforce rather than ameliorate his disadvantage.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I thought we'd come in and have a structured lesson and we'd get work...but, in reality, it's just come in and look at possible job applications; do a couple...send them off. It's just a doss about...I think basically the tutors don't realise our potential...I feel like I'm wasting my time.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Danny, 4/3/2011)

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He was equally scathing about the value of the qualifications associated with which such programmes:

Interviewer: Have you told prospective employers...that you've got a Level 1?

Danny: No.

Interviewer: Has anybody ever asked you about those qualifications? Do people...know what a Level 1 is?

Danny: I don't think so.

Interviewer: So that qualification has no meaning for you?

Danny: No. That's the problem with these sort of courses: the teachers are not proper teachers; they're just there to get their money and I don't think they really care for the students.

—————(Danny, 4/3/2011)

When interviewed a year after he started taking part in the research Danny was on a basic IT training programme, although he had already completed a virtually identical course some time ago. Perhaps understandably, Danny seemed frustrated about his lack of progression.

Interviewer: The last time I interviewed you, you were basically finishing the 'Voyager' course at Middlebridge College. That came to an end...

Danny: September, October.

Interviewer: And you wanted to apply for a Level 2 in IT at Middlebridge College?

Danny: Yeah...Apparently they sent me a letter...I never received this letter so I missed the interview. I ended up going for the open interview and they told me that I couldn't apply for the Level 2 now because of blah, blah, so I've got to go on to a Level 1 course...

Interviewer: So what sort of stuff are you doing?

Danny: Sat on a computer...Wednesday and Thursday I'm on the computer all day and Friday I'm doing maths and English, and a bit more IT.

Interviewer: But you're not really going in – why?

Danny: I'm not into the routine here. No one questions anything.

~~Interviewer: Have you got one tutor?~~

~~Danny: I've got one main tutor and I've got a maths tutor.~~

~~Interviewer: And he doesn't say...~~

~~Danny: Yeah, he rings me up but he's pretty cool and he knows that the whole class are repeating the course.~~

Interviewer: So the whole class is repeating it?

Danny: Well, there's four of us that have done this course...

~~Interviewer: Have you got exams to take and things like that?~~

~~Danny: One exam in maths on March 23<sup>rd</sup>...an English exam sometime.~~

Interviewer: Do you think you'll pass them exams even if you don't go to college much?

Danny: I'm going to pass them! I don't know anyone my age who can't pass a Level 1 Functional Skills exam.

Interviewer: So how does that make you feel?

Danny: It makes me agitated! I wake up early for nothing. I've done this course. I've done maths and English for two years and not got any qualifications.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Danny,  
10/2/2012)

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The essence of Danny's story is that he is a young person who is unemployed but who has been provided with access to a training programme. His case throws up serious questions about the relevance of what Danny has been provided, its rigour, and ultimately his capacity to 'cash in' his qualification for work. The impression given is that those who provide such programmes are absolved from any further responsibility after its creation, and the efficacy of the programmes is a matter entirely dependent on the extent of Danny's motivation—which is low because of his perceived irrelevance of the qualification. In other words, Danny is the 'cause' of his own motivation crisis, as indicated by: his lack of organisational skills in receiving a letter for an interview; his failure to progress from one level to the next; his inability to productively use his time on the computer; and in the end, his failure to secure a job through lodging job applications. All of this smacks of a system that appears to believe that it is up to young people to develop themselves as saleable human

capital and as an entrepreneurial self—and if this does not occur, then it must be their 'fault'.

Although Danny's experiences of education and training were amongst the most negative of all those who took part in the study, it would be fair to say that most participants were skeptical about the value of much education and training available to them. This is perhaps unsurprising: the most common destination after completing an employability programme was a return to NEET status, whereas the second most common outcome was participation in similar training.

#### *Bridging strategies*

According to ~~Habermas (1976)~~ Strathdee (2013) bridging strategies aim to connect or reconnect those outside the labour market with the world of work, ~~and in the UK context, notably~~ Connexions (SEU, 1999) was set up ~~at the turn of the twenty first century on the recommendation of a report entitled~~ *Bridging the Gap* (SEU, 1999). ~~To address the demise of most of the UK's traditional industrial base left~~ gaping holes in the sociocultural sub-system ~~left by the demise of the UK's traditional industrial base, which, in the past, promoted rapid transitions from education into work, especially for working class youth, and increased bridging initiatives could, from a third way perspective, simultaneously benefit labour and capital through helping the jobless find work and providing business and industry with a ready supply of workers.~~ For New Labour then, this new approach would be seen as contributing to both economic competitiveness and social inclusion, especially as this related to working class youth.

Although most of the Connexions advisers and other practitioners interviewed during ~~the course of~~ the research recognised that the NEET population is made up of a diverse range of young people with varying abilities and aspirations, a common theme was a belief was that many of them needed increased levels of confidence. The words of Hailey, who began taking part in the fieldwork after being asked to leave college for 'health and safety' reasons when she became pregnant, illustrate the anxieties some of the participants felt.

I feel like I have low confidence really. I'm a bit, like, cautious...I feel I don't want to be judged...I think about what people might think about me the way I dress so I try not to stand out.

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\_\_\_\_\_ (Hailey, 24/3/2011)

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Individual orientations to education and work were, however, uneven and could fluctuate over time, although this usually related to participants' experiences of the labour market where low pay, poor relations with employers and questionable working practices were commonplace. Nevertheless, virtually all the young people who took part in the study aspired to obtain the trappings of conventional adult life – including a job, a relationship and a decent home. Sean and Hailey below were not untypical.

[A] nice little house...with a car and working as a chef in a local restaurant...so I can live comfortably without having to stretch my money. And just being able to settle down and not having to worry...

\_\_\_\_\_ (Sean,  
18/11/2011)

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I really want to do an apprenticeship because it's experience which you need for a job and they are more likely to take you on after...I don't want to be on benefits the rest of my life...I just want to get rid of that and be independent really...

\_\_\_\_\_ (Hailey, 4/5/2012)

To some extent, social services, the various voluntary and charitable organisations we came across during the fieldwork and the Jobcentre ~~and~~ can all be seen as providing bridging services— although it was clear that most participants regarded the Jobcentre as essentially a coercive agency of the state. Reduction, suspension or disqualification from receipt of benefits was, for example, normally associated with

failure to attend interviews or comply with Jobcentre rules and regulations, although not all participants regarded the Jobcentre negatively. One young man, Jackson, found work as a welder through using its services— although it is worth noting that this appeared to owe as much to personal connections as official procedures, and is arguably more illustrative of the social and cultural processes through which many school-leavers obtained work in previous decades.

I had a good personal adviser at the Jobcentre. She was the best one because she had loads of contacts and her husband works at a firm...She's my mum's friend and that's why I asked for her...it's good pay. And I get bonuses for doing a good job.

\_\_\_\_\_(Jackson,  
23/11/2012)

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Participants' experiences of Connexions were also variable and again this depended, to some extent, on inter-personal relationships between young people and personal advisers.

[T]hey went through everything like what happened and why I wasn't in education or anything and they said 'right. Sit down and we'll fill all your forms out and stuff', and they sent them off for me and they helped out with my CV and stuff. Yeah, they helped a lot.

\_\_\_\_\_(Sean, 18/11/2011)

I do feel supported in a way but not in the right way...If people would listen. Do you know like it's supposed to be my review and...I don't even get the chance to speak. My review officer has been with me a few years and I haven't been able to get a word in.

\_\_\_\_\_(Jed, 10/5/2012)

Either way, evaluations of support services for NEET young people have consistently shown that relationships with practitioners is a significant factor in the effectiveness of any intervention (Spielhofer et al., 2009) – although it is important to

note that this is bounded by the availability and nature of education and work available to young people locally, and jobseekers with access to 'employment-rich' social networks continue to enjoy significant advantages when trying to find work (White & Green, 2011).

Strathdee (2013) presents the notion of bridging strategies as being ones 'designed to repair deficits in an individual's social capital' (p. 41). As we indicated earlier, because of the inherent deficiency of technical rationality, capitalism has to incorporate or appropriate the everyday life skills and competences of individuals—what Habermas (1987) termed the 'colonisation of the lifeworld' (p. 355). As Habermas (1987) put it, this is 'like colonial masters coming into a tribal society—and forcing a process of assimilation upon it' (p. 355). In the voices of the young informants just cited, we see how bridging strategies are forced upon young people in the way they have to use personal and familial connections, and those manufactured through amenable personal advisers, to secure work and the attributes of a decent life—a house, a car, and a family. For other young people without such connections, we saw that the effect was further marginalisation. The main point to be made here is that our data show that young people felt they were 'more likely to obtain jobs through their social networks than in the open labour market' (Strathdee, 2013, p. 41)—an indication of how capitalism has to imperialistically appropriate life skills in order to guarantee continued accumulation, in a context of the failure of technical rationality in the form of training programmes.

#### *Punishing strategies*

Bridging services such as the EMA and the Connexions service were effectively dismantled during the course of the study but there was also evidence that remaining support services were being forced to operate along more disciplinary lines—including forms of self-disciplining. Although many participants were reluctant to undertake employability training, especially after completing several such courses, benefit payments were often conditional upon attending such programmes.

Tim starts the session by explaining the ground rules...He says they are here on a voluntary basis and can leave if they choose – although that is not strictly true as the young people would lose attendance payments if they didn't turn up.

\_\_\_\_\_(Field notes,  
3/2/2011)

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Participants receiving income support were required to attend 'learning-focused interviews' at the start of their claim and at certain points thereafter. They needed also to demonstrate they were actively seeking work and sanctions were routinely used to force claimants to pursue forms of work which they often had little desire to obtain or chance of getting.

Well, if I don't get this job then they'll kick me off the dole...they've offered me jobs...like working as a mechanic...I've no experience...But they said I had to apply for it. They said I had to get my CV and send it in and if I didn't they would cut my benefits. I've asked them if they could find me a course on midwifery because that's what I want to do.

\_\_\_\_\_(Karla,  
23/3/2011)

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More generally, young people often expressed frustration with the labyrinth of rules and regulations with which they were forced to comply or else lose access to benefits.

Oh, that's doing my head in, absolutely doing my head in! I'm meant to bring, right, this form to say what day I go on college course, where it is, the times, and to say I'm attending it all the time.

\_\_\_\_\_(Kelsey,  
25/2/2011)

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A particular discourse associated with coalition government discourse has been about making work pay, with many of their welfare reforms supposedly designed to 'encourage' the jobless back into employment (BBC, 2014). Some practitioners

struggled to reconcile trying to support young people in adverse economic circumstances with the disciplinary role bestowed upon them by the state.

There aren't the jobs ... 60% of employers in Middlebridge don't employ anybody under the age of 25. We're working on that...with employers to try and get them to give a young person a chance. And that's why the Future Job Fund was so successful...So it is difficult because, of course, that's finished now.

—————(Jobcentre manager,  
04.02.11)

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Others appeared to endorse populist beliefs about the cultural roots underpinning youth unemployment:

Some people are better off on benefits...it's also the culture because with some of these incapacity benefit customers...a young person's dad has done alright on incapacity benefit and so that's what they do – they'll say they've got a bad back. So it's to try and break that cycle.

—————(Jobcentre adviser, 04/2/2011)

Whether struggling to support the young people, or acquiescing to deficit populist views of them, in terms of our overall argument, personal advisers (counsellors, youth workers, managers and adult educators), were often frustrated as much as the young people in their inability to handle the legitimisation crisis—and in that regard they were being co-opted in precarious ways as well.

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~~But, whilst~~ While research ~~evidence~~ shows the vast majority of young unemployed people actively want to work even when being in a job provides little financial premium over and above unemployment (see Shildrick et al., 2012), welfare policy is increasingly predicated upon the assumption that punitive action is necessary to drive

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the unemployed back into the labour market (BBC, 2014). Such beliefs are often underpinned by claims that that welfare benefits are too generous and the fieldwork reported in this paper took place during a period of severe welfare cuts. We saw certain participants were being forced into a state bordering on absolute poverty.

[W]hat the fuck do you expect me to do? I'm spiralling downwards. I can't even live. I can't even stay in my own flat because it's unliveable. No gas, no electric, no food. Jack shit!

\_\_\_\_\_ (Jasmine, 18/12/2012)

Poverty can also act as an obstacle to labour market participation and some of the young people who participated in the research could not afford bus fares to get to job interviews or training courses, or to attend work until they received their first pay packet. A lack of resources also presented barriers to participation in less overt ways too. For example, whilst some might regard access to a computer as something of a luxury, increasingly job applications and benefit claims are conducted on-line and lack of internet access was a real hindrance for many participants seeking work. It was also evident that, for many participants, finding a job was as problematic as being unemployed. Here we turn once again to Jasmine and her experiences of working for as a care assistant for H-Care, a company providing care to the elderly in their own homes.

Jasmine left H-Care...after questioning a pay packet – she felt she was underpaid...Jasmine shows me her final pay slip: her pay was docked by £60 for training. There is also a pen mark at the top of her pay slip which states that £5 was deducted for the loss of a staff handbook...

\_\_\_\_\_ (Field \_\_\_\_\_ notes,  
29/2/2012)

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When coupled with the repetitive, unfulfilling employability training programmes she was required to undertake it is perhaps unsurprising that Jasmine's motivation and commitment to find work faded during the course of the research.

The informants' voices in the data around punitive strategies bears witness to our central argument in several ways. First, the conditional nature of benefit payments is presented as if its withdrawal was the result of choice actions on the part of young people, rather than due to the bureaucratic and labyrinthine nature of the procedures, which made the job application process untenable. Second, young people were required to wear the blame themselves and the punishment that came with it, for mismatches in the labour market and the skewed recruiting practices of employers. Third, the fact that the effect of these punitive risk-shifting strategies pushed many young people into poverty, is seen as further evidence of their inherent fecklessness.

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The harsh reality is that, for significant sections of the working class, paid work no longer offers a way out of poverty, or a route to dignity and self-esteem. This has prompted Simmons et al. (2014) to argue that we need to look past the false duality of inclusion and exclusion when thinking about the nature of labour market participation or non-participation. For Simmons et al. it is still possible to be socially excluded whilst officially participating in education, and so they prefer to use the concept of *marginalisation* – a state whereby individuals may be at least nominally included but to all intents and purposes continue to live outside the mainstream.

## Conclusion

This paper has used Habermas' (1976) *Legitimation Crisis* to examine how the British state has attempted to tackle questions of youth (un)employment and drawn on ethnographic data to illustrate how NEET young people experience the various strategies designed to connect or reconnect them with education and work. There are various forms which this can take but there are, as we have seen, three main ways – motivating, bridging, punishing (or forcing) strategies – through which the state attempts to do this. Whilst, over time, increased levels of state intervention are necessary to protect and maintain capitalist accumulation different emphases are possible and different regimes have, as +we have explained, adopted a more or less

aggressive stance to the intractable problem of youth unemployment. Whilst the coalition has placed an increased emphasis on benefit reductions, workfare initiatives and the use of various other sanctions, provision which isare, at least officially, intended to motivate and support young people into education and work, is now also closely aligned with the more overt forcing strategies mobilised by the state. Although education has always been associated as much with social control as emancipation (Lawton, 1975), Ainley (2013) has discussed the warehousing function of much low-level vocational training and the 'worthless' certification associated with such provision (p. 46). Either way, it is difficult to avoid the Marxist concept of the reserve army of labour to conceptualise the lives of many young people and their relationship with education and work – although 'army' may not be the best way of describing this. Neo-liberal policy regimes, after all, tend to isolate, individualise and demobilise large sections of the working class, and fragment what were once collective experiences (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 98) while shifting risk onto them.

Although traditional attitudes to education and work remain important for many young people, particularly those from working-class backgrounds (Shildrick et al., 2012; Shildrick & Macdonald, 2007), and most of the young people who took part in the research reported in this paper remained remarkably resolute in their orientation towards work, it was also evident that repeated negative experiences of education and employment could have a deleterious effect upon their commitment to find paid work. Within neo-liberal discourse, education and training is essentially presented as vehicle through which to make good supposed skills deficits, yet most young people are over-qualified and under-employed for the opportunities available to them (Allen & Ainley, 2013). This disjuncture between claims, on the one hand, about the UK's transformation into a high-skills knowledge economy, increased participation in education and training and higher social expectations, and, on the other, chronic youth unemployment and underemployment, growing inequality and the prevalence of poor work brings questions of legitimisation into sharper focus than ever.

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