Introduction for Special Section of Sociological Research Online: The Marginalised Mainstream: Making Sense of the 'Missing Middle' of Youth Studies

by Steven Roberts and Robert MacDonald
University of Kent; Teesside University

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1.1 Research in the field of youth studies has produced many important insights and has been influential in critiquing, shaping, and changing our understandings of, and social policies in respect of, young people's lives. The social scientific focus has, rightly so, oftentimes been on those young people more obviously situated on the margins of society and possibly at risk of becoming excluded or disconnected from it. There has been some occasional and direct research interest in the lives of more advantaged young people who follow more successful youth transitions through extended education. Often, however, it is taken for granted that those on 'slow track transitions' *are* 'successful' - and un-problematic in social policy terms. Regardless, in adopting this dualism - successful versus unsuccessful transitions, slow-track versus fast track trajectories, advantaged versus disadvantaged - youth research is in danger of ignoring the experiences of young people who fall somewhere in-between.

1.2 This is not a new concern. In the 1980s, partly as a response to the perceived elitism of British sub-culture theory, several researchers highlighted the need for more attention to 'ordinary kids' (Jenkins 1983; Coles 1986; Brown 1987); in Phil Brown's terms, 'the "invisible majority" of ordinary working class pupils who neither leave their names engraved on the school honours board nor gouge them into the top of their desks'. Nonetheless, and despite much work in the field of youth sociology and beyond that seeks to demonstrate the proliferation of possibilities, this 'invisible majority' of young people remain notable by their marginality to contemporary youth sociology. Twenty years after Phil Brown's study, France (2007) noted again the need to explore and develop our understanding of apparently 'ordinary' or 'unspectacular' experiences of youth. More specifically and more recently, Griffin (2011) explains that we still know little about young white working-class men in white-collar jobs and what such spaces might look like in the 'new global economic order'. Such gaps in our knowledge have been described as a 'missing middle' (Roberts 2011). Correspondingly, considering the issue from a social policy-making perspective, Birdwell et al (2011: 33), in a report for the Demos think-tank, recently contended that this neglect extends to a 'forgotten half' who do not go to university, commenting that there is a 'dearth of evidence about what happens to these young people post-school'. Using the same phrase, the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations has also outlined the significance of this group of young people - who do not go into HE or high quality apprenticeships - by expressing concerns about routes into work which resemble 'an unmarked field of landmines' (ACEVO 2012).

1.3 The strand of youth sociology concerned with cultural practices and identities appears to have been equally blinkered. In what remains one of the most incisive critiques of CCCS sub-culture theory of the 1970s, Gary Clarke argued that it was time to turn our eyes away from the 'stylistic art of the few' (Clarke 1982: 1). Despite this - and despite its explicit critique of the failings of sub-culture theory - the 'post-subcultural studies' of the last 20 years appear to have followed suit, concentrating mainly on the spectacular dance and music-based 'scenes' and neo-tribes of the minority at the expense of broader and more ordinary youth cultural forms (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006).

1.4 Considering these empirical gaps in our knowledge, MacDonald (2011: 433) summarises the issue at hand, asking 'what set of transition routes and identities now lie between traditional middle-class, inclusionary paths from school to "better universities" and the exclusionary "poor transitions" of "the NEETS" and worst-off sections of the working-class?' These are questions of significance for several reasons. First, and most obviously, addressing the gap in our understanding about those young people who live their lives a ratchet or two up the social scale from the most disenfranchised and most vulnerable allows for a more thorough and holistic theorisation of the contemporary youth period. For instance, a broader lens would allow us to better identify and even address the ways social inequality manifests in the lives of those who, on the surface at least, might appear to be 'getting by'. We would also be better placed to understand the full range of possibilities that the excluded are excluded from, which would in

turn enable us to understand the limits, constraints, and/ or forms of resistance experienced and exhibited by those in the 'middle' in relation to more successful transitions. Secondly, directing our attention to the detail between the two extremes of successful and troubled trajectories means that greater consideration can also be given to the diversity of experience and outcomes of those *within* the 'successful' half of the dichotomy: for instance, what does 'success' mean when extended educational transitions feed high levels of graduate un- and underemployment? Taking these two reasons together, we would argue that moving towards this more comprehensive set of sociological knowledge would be fruitful for the debates in youth studies which consider and critique the notion of the opening-up of the biography to new uncertainties (see Woodman 2009; Roberts 2010, 2012). Finally, and of primary relevance to the aforementioned debates, a thorough investigation of the lives of 'the missing middle' might provide the necessary building blocks for us to start to effectively bridge the divide between the 'transitions' and 'cultural' perspectives in youth studies (Coles 1986; MacDonald 2011). For if 'looking at young people's everyday lives and cultures can help researchers trace changes in how patterns of class, gender, race and ethnic inequality reconfigure over time' (Furlong et al 2011: 357), then considering the marginalised middle in youth studies –the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday – with renewed sociological imagination seems an appropriate place to start.

Overview of papers

2.1 In November 2011, the BSA Youth Study Group held a one day conference that made an initial effort to map out this 'missing middle' and consider how this notion might make sense in relation to a raft of youth related research. Where Roberts (2011) provides young people in low-level but relatively secure service sector employment as a starting point to exemplify the overlooked 'missing middle', the conference brought together a group of scholars determined to shed more light and to raise new questions about occurrences, incidences, activity and outcomes in the lives of young people who were neither the overtly successful, educational high flyers nor the most deprived and marginalised.

2.2 The articles presented in this special section are a combination of those presented at that seminar and others which were stimulated by debates originating on the day. Drawing upon a range of theoretical resources and exhibiting a variety of positions both in the interpretation and engagement with the very notion of the 'missing middle', each paper uses the concept as a point of departure, regardless of whether the paper has an empirical or theoretical emphasis.

2.3 Providing a more detailed analysis of some of the themes laid out in this introduction, in the first article Ken Roberts explicates the ways in which youth sociology appears to work in cycles of both acknowledging and then forgetting about 'middling youth'. An expertly marshalled review of the key youth transitions literature leads Roberts to demonstrate that ordinary youth are currently at a point of low academic and policy interest. Crucially, however, Roberts draws attention to the hollowed-out and hour glass shape of the contemporary economy to explore how and why ordinary young people of the 1980s were less economically vulnerable compared to their contemporary counterparts.

2.4 Maintaining a focus on the social structure, Patrick Ainley and Martin Allen provide a wide ranging commentary that illustrates an inconvenient truth for policy makers in relation to education and the labour market. Regardless of policy-makers' efforts at professionalising the proletariat, their paper illustrates a 'class structure gone pear shape'. An increasing number of ordinary young people are argued to be entering a growing reserve army of labour as education and training become little more than forms of social control – which Ainley and Allen cite as a key reason why the majority of ordinary young people were *absent* from the widespread social unrest and rioting in England in the summer of 2011.

2.5 Drawing upon the Australian 'Life Patterns Project' (a 20 year longitudinal transitions study), Dan Woodman takes the changing social world as his starting point in considering 'the missing middle'. Rather than advocating more thorough attention to the experiences of 'ordinary' or 'middling youth', Woodman's primary argument is instead conceptual in nature. Complementing his other recent writings on the limitations of middle ground theoretical approaches in youth studies (e.g. Woodman 2009), Woodman proposes that the legacy of the sociology of generations can help contextualise the experience of 'ordinary youth'. Paying attention to the ways that the possibilities open to young people change over time and between generations, Woodman suggests, will enable us to understand the experiences and the measures by which young people may be considered 'successful', 'excluded' or 'ordinary'.

2.6 In the next paper, John Goodwin and Henrietta O'Connor use arguments about the 'missing middle' in youth studies as the basis to take a reflective stance on their own research. Seeking to redress the balance, they revisit some of their own secondary analyses of Norbert Elias's research of the 1960s, delivering a refreshing self-critique which acknowledges their tendency to have concentrated on the nonlinear and problematic over the unremarkable transitions in the original data. Goodwin and O'Connor also consider the issue of why the ordinary has become lost in youth research. Like Ken Roberts, they observe the tendency towards duality in sociology, but their approach also delivers something of a rebuke to generational analysis, and, to some extent at least, a contestation of Woodman's position in the previous paper.

2.7 Moving towards a more obviously empirical focus, Gayna Davey and Alison Fuller examine the case of young people undertaking 'hybrid qualifications'. These are ones that are aimed at bridging the well-known yet stubborn academic/ vocational divide in the UK education system by providing access to HE as well as to high skilled jobs in the labour market. With little research or media attention to date, young people on these programmes of study are a clear example of the 'missing middle'. Using Bourdieu's conceptual tools as a lens to view the data, the article explains how the enduring nature of the English system's binary approach positions those on these educational trajectories, and the proponents of these qualifications, as 'swimming against the tide' in their efforts to achieve educational legitimacy.

2.8 Staying with empirical analyses of education, Roxanne Connelly, Susan Murray and Vernon Gayle turn to longitudinal datasets to focus on young people's GCSE results from 1996 to 2005. Acknowledging that no one data set would conclusively be able to address the issue of whether or not there is a 'missing middle' in youth studies, Connelly and colleagues use the British Household Panel Survey to consider the viability of the notion that there is an 'ordinary' group that sits somewhere in the middle of the qualifications distribution. While problematising the binary of 'good' and 'bad' qualifications, this article demonstrates that there is need to move beyond even a three part typology. Rather than a middle group, these authors argue school attainment should be understood as being on a continuum rather than having discrete and demarcated boundaries.

2.9 In the penultimate article, Emma Davidson looks at the issue of anti-social behaviour in deprived areas of Scotland. This might at first appear out of kilter with the core theme of this special section, but Davidson's exploration and detailed analysis indicates the weakness of a rhetoric that sees young people as 'angels or devils'. Here, anti-social behaviour is shown to be something that occurs, but that the attention it is given mischaracterises it as a majority experience. Whilst active negotiation might need to take place, Davidson makes clear that a middle ground position can and is taken even at the margins of society – not everyone is a victim or a perpetrator. Prioritising the voices of those who live in communities typically presented as being hot beds of anti-social behaviour, two clear messages are delivered: first, such behaviour does occur, but that it should be understood as a consequence of material disadvantage; and secondly, its everyday occurrence can be used a reference point by which young people distinguish themselves as normal, versus the misbehaviour of others.

2.10 The final paper, by Ruth Lewis, Cicely Marston and Kaye Wellings, takes the utility of the notion of the missing middle in quite a different direction. Here the focus is on the 'normal' development of young people's sexual practices and the 'normal order' of sexual transitions; yet, there are still central connections to the special section's core theme of the 'missing middle' of youth. First, where much research looking at young people's sexual transitions considers only vaginal intercourse, Lewis et al pay closer attention to young people's experiences of and meanings attached to non-coital sexual interactions. Secondly, the practices discussed are those considered by young people to be ordinary or normal, and, indeed, experiences of the 'majority'. Consequently, paying attention to this specific topic, this paper complements the broader discussion of ordinariness, the everyday and unspectacular experiences in young people lives as was the primary focus of the previous seven articles.

Conclusion

3.1 As can be seen from the array of papers, this special section seeks to explore, analyse and theorise the cultural and transitional experiences of 'muddling youth' and identify the parameters of what might constitute the empirical middle ground in an effort to build a more complete picture of youth in the 21st century. Because the lives of young people are widely understood as a barometer of social change, investigations about the contemporary 'missing middle' are beneficial not only for what they tell us about youth *per se*, but what they tell us more broadly about the reshaping of society and the economy.

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