

ENTREVISTA A TRACY SHILDRICK, COORDINADORA DE LA XARXA YOUTH AND GENERATION

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L'Observatori Català de la Joventut (Direcció General de Joventut), en col·laboració amb la xarxa d'investigació Youth and Generation (Associació Europea de Sociologia), va organitzar el Congrés "Youth in crisis? Linking research, policy and practice", el passat 21 i 22 de setembre al Món Sant Benet, a Manresa. El congrés va acollir 40 investigadors procedents de 27 universitats europees i es va debatre sobre el futur de les polítiques de joventut a Europa.

El Col·legi va entrevistar Tracy Shildrick, coordinadora de la xarxa Youth and Generation i catedràtica de Sociologia de la Universitat anglesa de Teesside. Shildrick és especialista en vulnerabilitat juvenil i en l'anàlisi de l'impacte de la crisi econòmica en els joves. Ha dedicat la seva trajectòria professional a investigar sobre la pobresa i l'exclusió social entre les persones joves. És també editora adjunta de la revista Journal of Youth Studies. Juntament amb l'Observatori Català de la Joventut va ser la impulsora d'aquest Congrés.

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What impact this crisis is having on European youth?

It is clear that vulnerable groups, such as young people, are being disproportionately negatively affected by the current crisis. Whilst there are variations across countries, many young people are facing great challenges in making their transitions to adulthood. In terms of labour market participation young people have always been a vulnerable group, but the current crisis appears to be making the situation significantly worse. For example, young people traditionally faced difficulties in getting a good foothold on the labour market, but in the current crisis for many young people the situation is now critical. Experiencing periods of unemployment, or even long-term unemployment, will have ramifications for young people across all aspects of their lives. We know, for example, that what happens in terms of transitions into work, impacts on many other areas of young people's lives (for example, housing and family transitions). If young people are unable to gain decent jobs they are unable to properly progress in other areas of their lives. Young people from all economic backgrounds are being impacted by the current crisis but we must remember that those at the bottom will be faring worst. Even in better economic times, we know that some young people are seriously disadvantaged by their social class background and their family circumstances. It is those who are most vulnerable people who will feel the effects of this crisis most acutely and also for the longest time.

What will be future consequences for today's youth that it does not work, or suffer job insecurity and cannot be emancipated?

The consequences will be long term and will inevitably reverberate through the generations. Disadvantages experienced by young people today will have an impact not only on the lives of the young people themselves, but of those of their own families and children. Unless policies are enacted and with some urgency, to try and limit these negative effects, the long term damage will be inevitable and difficult to reverse.

Many young people have to endure the crisis twice: in his own life and his family, with several family members unemployed. That must mean enormous pressure to them.

What do you think?

Unemployment is a major challenge but it is becoming increasingly clear that cycling in and out of low paid work and on and off benefits is a common experience in many countries. For example, in the UK, this is the typical work profile for many disadvantaged young people. So, we are not seeing a completely disconnected youth 'underclass' as some segments of the popular press like to assert, but rather we see young people shuttling in and out of short, term, low paid jobs that offer neither labour market stability nor routes away from poverty. In the current economic climate this pattern of working may well now be extending to other groups, such as graduates. The extensive research that myself and colleagues from Teesside University have undertaken with young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods has shown very clearly that young people from poorer backgrounds retain strong work commitment. Indeed the resilience of the work ethic, despite work opportunities being largely poor quality, short term and low paid, is one of the strongest findings of our in-depth work with young people in the North East of England.



How sociological research can influence the design of public policies for youth?

Transferring research into public policy is not an easy task. As researchers we have to work hard to ensure that we not only have robust research on relevant issues but that we are able to present our work in ways that are both accessible and usable. Policy makers also need to be more amenable to seeking out and using research in their day to day practice. As researchers we have to get better at reaching out to those groups who have the power to change policy and practice, rather than working with groups who may be easier to reach, but may have little power to change institutional practice and policies. Universities also need to support

researchers undertaking this sort of work.

In what areas of research are you currently working?

Recently and with colleagues at Teesside University I have undertaken two projects funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). The first was looking at the 'low-pay, no pay' cycle. As part of the project we interviewed younger and older interviewees who were trapped in low paid, short term jobs. A key finding of this work is that people are keen to work and will take jobs, regardless of quality and that the sorts of jobs that people did rarely allowed them to escape from poverty. We found that many people became trapped in a long-term cycle of low-paid jobs and unemployment (the 'low-pay,no-pay' cycle). Ours was one of the first concerted studies in the area. Through in-depth in-depth life history interviewees, we have been able to illustrate the consequences of this pattern of working for the lives of individuals and their families. Our research in Teesside provides a case study example of the wider processes of labour market polarisation that relegate some to a life of hard work in low-paid temporary jobs that neither relieve poverty nor provide pathways up and away from it. Young adults who become trapped in this pattern of working have little chance of escape over the life-course. Contrary to popular opinion and to policy assumptions, these jobs are not always 'entry-level', 'stepping-stone' type jobs reserved for younger workers or new economic migrants.

A link to the report can be found here -

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/understanding-recurrent-poverty>

Most recently we completed another project, also funded by JRF, which was exploring the idea of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness'. The idea that there are families that have never worked, and that such families pass anti-work attitudes to their children, is very popular in the UK. This project sought out such families for research. The work will be published by JRF in October.

What do you think should be the public policy of youth?

Policy needs to focus on the long term and seek to redress economic inequality. Inequality and lack of opportunity lie at the heart of most problems which young people face. These problems are exacerbated in the current crisis, but they were with us before the crisis and they will remain after it has abated.

The Youth Report presented by the European Commission on 10 September highlighted employment and social inclusion as the main priorities for youth policies. Young people should be the main focus of the employment policies of the Member States?

There ought to be a specific focus on the situations of young people. We know that young people face particular challenges in respect of the labour market, not just in the current economic crisis, but in more general terms too. Employers should be offered incentives to work closely with young people. Many writers now argue that we are seeing – and likely to see into the future greater levels of under-employment and perhaps more so amongst better qualified workers. Evidence from the UK suggests that the numbers of graduates working in lower skilled jobs is increasing. We need wider recognition and discussion of the sorts of labour market opportunities which await young people when they enter local, national and international labour markets.

According to this report, the Youth Strategy of the European Union (2010-2018) has improved the creation of opportunities for youth in many EU countries. What do you think?

I believe the impact is variable and not always positive. In the UK young people face increasingly punitive policies in respect of employment. Policies which are focussed on 'forcing' young people towards an unforgiving labour market with little concern for the quality of jobs that are available are destined to fail in the longer term. There is an emerging body of research that argues and practice that demonstrates that 'bad' jobs can be made 'better'. Improving the working conditions which greet young people in the labour market needs to be a key priority of all governments. This proposition runs directly counter to the direction of policy in many EU countries and certainly in the UK. Policy needs to move away from working from 'myths' about young people to working with clear evidence. Our work in Teesside runs counter to many of the popular myths about young people which abound in the UK, for example, that young people are lazy or that they have no real desire to work. Despite many years of detailed and in-depth research with young people in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, we find abundant evidence to the contrary. Unemployment was despised by young people and avoided at all costs. Young people embraced not a 'culture of worklessness' but cultures of working, even when this led them towards poorly paid, short term jobs. People wanted decent, lasting jobs; they got low-paid, low-skilled and low-quality poor work.

Finally, what is your opinion about the situation of Catalan and Spanish youth?

It seems clear that Spanish and Catalan youth are bearing the heaviest weight of the crisis. For example, their unemployment rates are much higher and salaries seem to be lower than elsewhere. Many young people are returning home, even after having left and they increasingly have to rely on family support. In Spain the family already takes greater responsibility and for longer than in many other countries so this will inevitably increase the strain on many families. It is clear, as with in many countries, that in Spain young people will have less opportunities than their parents have had. However, if the crisis was more evenly distributed (in age-related terms) there is a risk that the basis of the system would come under threat. Thus, it seems likely that the future of the young people is going to be "sacrificed" to ensure the best chance of the maintenance of at least minimum living standards for the wider population.