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Marginalization and the White Working Class: an Ethnographic Study of NEET Young Men in a Northern Inner City

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**University of Huddersfield**  
**School of Education and Professional Development**

**Marginalization and the white working class: an ethnographic study  
of NEET young men in a northern inner city**

**By**

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**September 2017**

*A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of MA by Research (Education) to the School of Education and  
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## **Abstract**

This research is an ethnographic examination of 13 white working-class NEET young men aged between 16-24, located in a particular urban space. A Bourdieusian theoretical framework was deployed to conceptualize the lives of these young men. The key findings were that the young men's identity and culture disadvantaged them in achieving in education, and gaining employment, subsequently, resulting in NEET status. This was primarily due to the young men not prepared to sacrifice their cultural identity – which was an embodiment of class and race - despite a concerted attack by neoliberal discourse. Consequently, they became marginalized, and thereafter, engaged in the local value system of their community to create counternarratives to middle-class culture and constitute themselves as subjects of value. The young men however, still maintained key values and dispositions associated with employment, family and home life as they all projected mainstream attitudes. However, the practices that actualize their local identities, contribute to keeping them NEET within a process of 'advanced marginalization'.

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## Introduction

This research is primarily an investigation into the lived experience of a set of NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) young men. Previous studies around NEET young people have been largely quantitative with many facts and figures on youth unemployment, but there is much less qualitative research on the question of NEET. This research, following Simmons et al (2014), tries to understand the lives of 13 NEET young men, aged 16-24, from white working-class backgrounds, set in a particular urban location. Over 3 months, the research explores their day-to-day lives as they try to navigate their way on and through the margins of society. It attempts to understand how and why they became and continue to be NEET, and to understand their lives, attitudes and opinions through the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. The aims of the research are to:

1. Investigate the experiences of white working-class young men currently classified as NEET
2. Contribute to further development of theorisation about NEET young people
3. Contribute to debates about white working-class identity, aspirations and values, and broader analyses of social inequality, in particular relation to young men

Over recent decades, youth unemployment has emerged as a significant issue - it would seem there is large swathes of disenfranchised and marginalized youths being 'left behind'. In recent years the NEET phenomenon has gained attention in the mainstream media and public consciousness with references to a 'lost generation'. NEET young people are often stereotyped as the epitome of failure, with moralistic connotations linked to populist images (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Such narratives often caricature NEET young people as lacking work ethic, and blame moral turpitude for their predicament; these are often class-based discriminations in tandem with the denigration of the

working class (Skeggs, 2002). This provides a motivation for the research, which aims to challenge such narratives.

Most NEET young people in the UK come from white working-class backgrounds. This is often explained, at least in official discourse, through their lack of educational attainment, and a lack of aspiration. According to The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2015), across Great Britain, children from poorer backgrounds performed less well in education than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds; this was, it was argued, especially true for white pupils, particularly boys where the attainment gap was greatest compared with more affluent white peers and other ethnic groups. At age 16 in 2013, 28.3 per cent of white working-class boys achieved the GCSE threshold (5 A\*-C's) in England, compared with 59.1 per cent of more affluent white boys. A report by The House of Commons Education Committee (2014) also found that white working-class boys are consistently the lowest performing group across the country, and that other ethnic groups are generally making faster improvements. The gap appears at age 5 and widens over time with white working-class boys consistently the lowest-performing children at age 16. The report suggests that while underachievement in education may once have led to a lifetime of employment in traditional routine manual occupations in factories, the consequence now is more likely to be NEET status for substantial periods. This provided the basis for the research as the increasing disparities in educational attainment are highly influenced by ethnicity, gender, and class – most notably, white working-class males – which greatly impacts on life chances and opportunities; an ethnographic approach enables an intersectional examination of this.

Being NEET has major implications for a young person's future prospects, as those who have been NEET for substantial periods often suffer from 'scarring' effects - characterized by long-term unemployment, or lengthy spells of insecure and low paid work, crime, ill-health, et cetera (Simmons and

Thompson, 2011). Consequently, this is also associated with a variety of negative social and psychological ramifications for both the NEET individual and the wider society (Macdonald and Marsh, 2005). The Prince's Trust (2016) Youth Index Report shows that a significant number of NEET young people live their lives feeling unsafe and unhappy, with particular issues of anxiety, low confidence and poor motivation. Half (51 per cent) of jobless young people say anxiety has affected them being able to look for a job, whilst forty-seven per cent felt that even if they tried, they would not succeed, suggesting strong feelings of powerlessness over their lives and future. It argues, young people urgently need support, or many will be left isolated from their peers, the job market and society. Not only is being NEET detrimental to the individual, but it also has wider societal repercussions in the form of losses to public finance estimated at between £12-32 billion, and £21-76 billion to the UK economy (Cole et al, 2010). Nonetheless, NEET young people's perspectives can provide insight and contribute to understanding what some of the wider problems are in regards to youth unemployment, and their disengagement from both education and the labour market, whether voluntary or not.

“There was an estimated 790,000 (11.1 per cent) young people (aged 16 to 24) in the UK who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) between April to June 2017” (ONSa, 2017, p1). 65,000 of these were aged 16 to 17, and 725,000 aged 18 to 24; this is expected to increase when the next quarter is published as NEET rates do fluctuate quite a lot throughout the year, particularly in line with seasonal patterns that reflect the academic year – lower rates in the autumn, gradual rises through spring, and peaking late summer. The proportion of 16-24 year olds who were NEET remained relatively steady between 2002 and 2008, and at the beginning of 2008, 13.4 per cent of all young people in the UK were NEET. The proportion steadily inflated following the 2008 recession and peaked in July-September 2011 when 16.9 per cent of 16-24 year olds were NEET (1.25 million people) (ONSa, 2017; DfE, 2017). Thereafter, the number of NEET young people remained around 1

million for a number of years, but as of late, has slightly decreased. NEET has also been an international problem; countries such as Spain, Italy, and Greece have suffered from particularly high rates of youth unemployment since the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis.

NEET rates across England have often been linked to deindustrialization. Many parts of post-industrial northern England have particularly high NEET rates and generally, the south of the country has fewer NEET young people – the south east (10.7 per cent) and south west (12.8 per cent) have the lowest NEET figures in England. The regions with the highest proportion of NEET rates were the North East (18.6 per cent), Yorkshire and the Humber (17.5 per cent) and the West Midlands (14.9 per cent) (House of Commons, 2016), all of which were traditionally associated with manufacturing and industry. The picture is, however, quite complex and it would not be accurate to say there is a clear ‘north-south divide’ in NEET rates. Some parts of London, such as Barking and Dagenham (5.8 per cent) or Greenwich (6.2 per cent) for example, have significantly higher NEET rates than more affluent northern areas, such as Chester (2.9 per cent), or Nottinghamshire (2.5 per cent) (DfE, 2017). There are, however, at least two important considerations to take into account when comparing and contrasting regional NEET statistics. Firstly, they are confined to 16-18 year olds; secondly, ‘unknown status’ can be as great, or in some instances, greater than the recorded NEET rate itself. There are also significant variations within and between different towns and cities across the country, so divisions are not rigid, but generally, the cities with the highest NEET rates are located in northern areas that have suffered from deindustrialization, or poor urban areas within big cities (Simmons et al, 2014).

This research will be located in the city of Grantborough, which is part of one of the largest urban conurbations in the UK. Grantborough has a rich industrial heritage and its history is concerned with textile manufacturing, and associated industries. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Grantborough begun to expand

rapidly due to the effects of the industrial revolution, and its growth as a centre of trade and manufacturing. Many from across the UK and further afield travelled to Grantborough for work, and to feed its growing trade and population; industry later diversified and other forms of manufacturing grew in and around the city. Meanwhile, its infrastructure began to expand with the extension of the canal system, and the growth of road and rail.

The mid-twentieth century marked a turning point for Grantborough; the impetus behind its growth began to decline from the 1950s, followed by rapid deindustrialization, and a degree of depopulation. Grantborough's population peaked at about 766,400 in 1931, but declined thereafter, reaching its lowest point in 2001 with a recorded a figure of 392,800 (ONSa, 2017). Many regard the economic policies of Margaret Thatcher's government – which instigated a sharp ideological shift from social democracy to neoliberalism, in a process of economic restructuring supposedly to adapt to the demands of globalization - as the beginning of the end for UK manufacturing industry (Simmons et al, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012). Depopulation and large-scale unemployment were the parallel ramifications of deindustrialization. Grantborough was then regarded as one of Britain's most deprived cities throughout the '80s and '90s with high unemployment and crime rates. But despite many decades of decline, the city's population is now growing again due to regeneration and reinvention as a city of culture and enterprise. As of 2015, the population stood at 530,300; 70.6 per cent (374,400) of the population is of working age (16-64); of these, 262,300 are economically active, 241, 200 are in employment (including self-employment), while 19,700 are unemployed (ONSb, 2017).

Ongoing deindustrialization and repeated recession meant that many British cities fell into decline during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For Grantborough, regeneration was seen as necessary to revitalize the economy. To achieve this, it has had to radically shift its image by forging a new identity to escape its redundant gloomy shadow. Alongside strategic marketing

campaigns through major sporting events, and success in spheres such as football and music, central to the regeneration interventions, were flagship developments and city centre renewal - iconic and prestigious buildings with high symbolic value reinvigorating the city's national, and international profile. The city centre is now a conglomeration of offices, leisure, cultural and commercial venues - Grantborough, it could be argued, has managed to develop a new identity and rebrand itself as being modern, vibrant and trendy - at least in the popular imagination. In reality, the nature and makeup of the city is complex and uneven, and significant pockets of unemployment, deprivation and other forms of disadvantage continue to exist.

Depopulation was, at least in part, a result of economic and industrial decline of the city; however, this was intensified by poor quality housing in inner-urban areas, which was exacerbated by the pressures placed on social housing from the 1980s onwards. Large parts of Grantborough were effectively left behind by the neoliberal rhetoric of privatization, aspiration and enterprise (Harvey, 2005). To ameliorate the effects of poor quality housing, the local authority set in motion various initiatives for property renewal as part of its wider strategy to attract new residents and the workforce to sustain the pro-growth agenda. Much of the investment has been focused on central and east Grantborough, but much of north Grantborough, and the inner-urban south, are still highly deprived. Where investment and regeneration has taken place, this has resulted in a degree of gentrification with new apartment blocks for young professionals replacing old social housing. Meanwhile, industrial buildings close to the city centre have been turned into office spaces.

Population fell in urban areas as many pursued better housing and employment opportunities. This void has primarily been filled by immigrants, resulting in ethnically diverse areas, and overall, a multicultural city. Historically, Grantborough was a predominantly white working-class city, with waves of Irish, Scottish and Welsh migrants dating back to the 19th Century – and white

groups still account for the majority of Grantborough (66.7 per cent of the population). In the latter half of the twentieth century, immigration predominantly came from Asian groups from Pakistani and Indian backgrounds who now account for 14.4 per cent, as well from those from Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds who constitute 8.6 per cent of the population. Mixed, Chinese, and 'other' ethnicities make up the remaining 10.3 per cent (ONSc, 2017). More recently, there has been an influx of immigration from the European Union, predominantly from Eastern Europe. Diversity is particularly apparent in the inner-city areas - the white working class residing in these areas seems to have become a minority. In some wards, Black and Asian ethnicities exceed White-British population.

Grantborough can, in some ways, be understood as a tale of two cities, in terms of social and spatial divisions of inequality. Regeneration projects have primarily been geared to particular growth priorities, such as attracting particular kinds of residents – namely, educated young professionals equipped, according to popular discourse, to meet the demands of the new global economy. Despite Grantborough's population growth in recent years, the model it is pursuing is likely to create further inequality in the city. Grantborough is often heralded as an iconic post-industrial city but high levels of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion exist alongside affluence and renewal. According to the Government's indices of deprivation, it has the fifth-highest rate of multiple deprivation and the highest rate of child poverty in the UK (Local Authority, 2017). The local authority, however, reiterates the same market-led, and pro-growth strategy underpinned by discourses of neoliberalism - based upon the belief that growth itself will alleviate poverty and exclusion. However, 'trickle-down economics' is not evident across all sections of the city, and many have been 'left behind' within impoverished inner-city districts, creating a disparity between rich and poor bound by implicit relations of social class. 'Trickle out' to the suburbs might seem a more accurate description.

## Literature review

This section critically reviews the literature on NEET young people. It initially utilizes a historical macroscopic approach to contextualize the landscape NEET young people are located within. It provides the backdrop for the research and introduces a framework for theorizing social class. The aim is to crystallize how individual lived experience relates to, and is influenced by the broader social and economic matrix within which NEET young people are situated.

### **Broader context**

Over recent decades, the UK has undergone far-reaching social and economic change as its traditional industrial base has withered and declined. According to the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher, which took power in 1979, Britain was struggling to compete in the global marketplace with emerging economies. This she attributed to Keynesian-regulated capitalism and the social-democratic policies, which characterized the so-called post-war consensus. Subsequently, this resulted in a sharp ideological shift, embracing and implementing neoliberalism, anchored in discourses of competition, privatization and quasi markets (Harvey 2005). This arguably accelerated long-term trends, and resulted in a process of rapid deindustrialization and economic restructuring – accompanied by mass unemployment across much of Britain. Whilst globalization is a contested concept, it is generally associated with key principles revolving around mounting interdependence between countries based on increasing levels of economic, political and cultural connectivity. However, Simmons and Thompson (2011) argue that globalization is not an entirely new phenomenon, so should not be referred to as a conclusive break from the past, but rather, an amplification and intensification of capitalist trade.

Kotz (2002) argues the link between globalisation and neoliberalism is, above all, because corporations and banks wanted freedom from political burdens and

restraints as they confronted one another on world markets - the goal of neoliberal capitalism is a largely deregulated global market society to maximise profits. This can be exemplified in the growing inequality in Britain in recent decades; more latterly, the world's wealth disparity, according to Oxfam (2014), has grown enormously in rapid succession - 1% of the world's population now has more wealth than over 50% combined. Although living standards have risen for the majority, there has also been a widening of the gap between the richest and poorest, especially in neoliberal Anglophone nations such as the UK and USA.

Resistance to change, especially class-based politics or other forms of social solidarity, is increasingly viewed as old-fashioned. Jones (2012) describes a 'class war', which has witnessed an onslaught on the working class through the disassembling of manufacturing and industry, which were also the backbone of militant trade unions, consequently, disorganizing and individualizing the labour force. This had far-reaching ramifications for the working-class – it has shattered their communities, fractured solidarity, and eroded working-class pride and identity. Jones argues that this was a deliberate method of neutralizing working-class power and eliminating any threat trade unions presented, to maximize profit through the abandonment of a regulated economy under the social democratic model of capitalism. Nonetheless, the point being, neoliberal capitalism created mass structural unemployment across the nation (Simmons et al, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012). What is left in these communities today is a demoralized, disempowered populace, with deep-rooted social problems (Macdonald and Marsh, 2005).

Simmons et al (2014) suggest that traditional working-class jobs and the youth labour market have been largely replaced by part-time, temporary and casualized service sector work. On the whole, most new jobs in the service sector are filled by increasing numbers of women, migrants, semi-retirees and redundant workers 'trading down', largely to the detriment of working-class

young men. Shildrick et al (2012) argue there is no coherent youth labour market today, rather an economy dominated by poor-quality, low-paid and insecure work. Their research stresses the importance of class and place in shaping youth transitions and explains how locally-embedded social networks can perpetuate and reproduce poverty, exclusion and class inequality. While local networks can help in coping with the problems of growing up poor and generate a subjective sense of inclusion, Shildrick et al (2012) argue that they also serve to close down opportunity and limit possibilities for escaping these conditions, entrapping young people in economic marginality, inhabiting a cycle of no pay/low pay insecurity. They describe a secondary labour market in which working-class adults and young people occupy and compete for the same forms of poor work. This has been intensified by the 'feminisation of the workplace', increasing numbers of immigrants willing to accept lower pay, and middle-class students who seek part time work as a 'stepping-stone'. For the working class, this secondary labour market is a career of insecurity and low pay that defines their transitions (Simmons et al, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012).

Tomlinson and Walker (2010) propose a segmented labour market theory. They use primary and secondary labour market to describe the distinction between the more stable, better-quality and higher-paid employment and the insecure, poor working conditions and low paid at the other end of the spectrum. They also recognize that divisions within a single company can occur ascribing the terms core and periphery, which parallel the former two divisions. Byrne (2005) has a similar analysis, although he adds further categories: a large group of disposable labour that engage in poor and precarious work; an intermediate category enjoying relatively secure middle-class employment; and a small elite who have benefited from post-industrial change. Either way, the salient point is that those at the bottom of the tier occupying the worse jobs and conditions effectively constitute Marx's reserve army of labour. Yet Simmons et al (2014) argue that 'army' may not be the best description, as mass unemployment and underemployment actually isolates, individualizes and demobilizes the

working-class population.

Ainley (2010) identifies increasingly protracted transitions from school into work and adult life for working-class boys; these are sometimes suspended almost indefinitely. Transitions were once collective and a lot smoother as the working class often shared similar aspirations, expectations and trajectories – they would leave school, often with no qualifications, and go straight into work in factories in their community, with school friends and work alongside local adults and family members; followed by family and marriage in quick succession. In postindustrial Britain, notions of social reproduction have been disturbed and largely obscured as traditional structures and old certainties have been replaced by a diversity of biographies and ambitions; arguably, making traditional structural analyses of class-based inequality outdated. Yet despite the shattering of traditional working-class identity and culture, traditional orientations towards work still exist, as choice and ambition are still heavily influenced and constrained by an individual's social class and background. Stahl (2015) suggests white working-class males draw on historically-validated dispositions to confirm masculine identities. Ulrich Beck (2002) argues that individualization does not necessarily equate to emancipation - although biographies may have diversified, trajectories remain structured by the social matrix individuals are located within, meaning that structural inequality is just experienced on a more individualized level. Class still exists, although inequalities have largely been recast in terms of the individual's ability to respond to the disadvantages facing them.

### **Conceptualizing Class**

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice is a useful way of understanding and theorizing social class. Bourdieu is primarily concerned with the dynamics of power and how it is transferred in the reproduction of social order hierarchy. He aims to uncover the relations of power and the principles upon which they

are based and questions whether social classes actually exist, or if they are a scientific construct (Grenfell, 2014). For Bourdieu, social class is a lived condition - a set of practices enacted based on different principles in different contexts. These practices, Bourdieu argues, are for classification through distinction - individuals classify themselves through their practices. Rather than attributing a particular set of practices to membership of a social class, he constructs a model of social space, which accounts for a set of differentiating practices found within different spaces based on the principles defining one's position in that social space (Bourdieu, 1987).

Bourdieu's theory of practice' incorporates a tripartite of 'tools' that work interchangeably – habitus, capital and field. He uses the metaphor of *a game* to help visualise them – the *game* being a battle for power. Habitus has many matrices and is the most challenging of his concepts. Bourdieu describes habitus as:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1977, p72)

Primarily, habitus is an internalised organizing principle - the inculcation of objective social structures into the subjective mental experience. Through the embodiment of social structures, Bourdieu (1990) stresses the role of individuals in enacting an implicit practical knowledge. This is a set of structured dispositions - pre-reflexive actions for engaging with the social world, what he refers to as the *feel for the game*. According to Bourdieu (1977), early experiences in the family and school are two of the most

influential forces in shaping habitus, followed by the environment and peers. Whilst the habitus is personal, Bourdieu (2002) also argues that individuals from similar backgrounds will have been exposed to and experienced similar environments and conditions, meaning their habitus will be similar – encapsulating a collective habitus.

Capitals are the personal resources to which an individual has access, and which can be operationalized at any given moment – these are divided into economic, cultural, social. Alongside being a resource for investment, they also locate an individual's social position, determining life chances and opportunities, as well as expectations and aspirations – what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as the *field of possibles*. Bourdieu conceptualizes power relations through the unequal possession of different capitals that grant social position and value to those who embody them. The three main capitals translate into symbolic capital (or distinction) – this is a representation of capital that is recognized and legitimated; or in the case of symbolic violence, unrecognized and therefore, individuals who embody unrecognized capitals are systematically devalued. When capital is recognized, it can be exchanged across fields, legitimizing the privilege it bestows on its holder to the extent that it is naturalized. Habitus and capitals exist and imply one another – aligning embodied actions with social location (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, habitus is a product of divisions in social space based on the mechanisms of different types of capital.

Field, or what Bourdieu (1977) calls *le champ* (meaning battlefield in French), provides an environment for habitus and capitals to function. Fields are multidimensional social spaces (institutional, occupational, and cultural) within the wider field of power – this conceptualizes the social world where individuals *play the game*. Each individual field contains doxa, which roughly

translates to the *rules of the game* - a doxic situation can be understood as congruence between objective external structures and the subjective internal structures of the habitus establishing harmony and providing a 'practical sense'. The field is not reliant on habitus for legitimization – it progresses along its own trajectory incorporating its own logic, therefore, requiring individuals who want to *play the game* on offer, to reconfigure their practices in accordance with the orthodoxy of the field, creating doxa.

According to Bourdieu, the field structures the habitus, which is the individuals' basis for understanding their lives, including the fields they occupy; social positions are determined by capital configuration, which is the medium of field manoeuvres - habitus and capitals interact and ascribe individuals a social position within the field, which they internalize, and from which they express and reproduce their dispositions, and compete for the distribution of different kinds of capital. Paradoxically, the practices generated from the combination of habitus and capitals, reproduce the structures of the field, which in turn, shapes the next generation's habitus and capitals – therefore, conserving the status quo of wealth and power, dominated and dominator. Habitus can be envisaged as a continuum – social structures become embedded within a person, at the same time as a person contributes to their reproduction – essentially two sides of the same coin as individuals are simultaneously products of, and productive of the fields in which one inhabits.

Nonetheless, those who hold similar volumes of capital constitute an identifiable group as they share similar positions in overall social space, meaning they will also share a collective habitus and similar trajectories, which is a way of relating social classes on paper with what exists in reality (Grenfell, 2014). This framework offers a valuable tool for analysis of social class experiences. Habitus and capitals produce practices that not only create and

reproduce structure, but also, are for classification through distinction. The examination of capitals therefore enables us to understand how individuals have differential access to power, and how some are able to assert a greater level of agency than others, albeit still within structural constraints of the habitus. This makes explicit the 'logic of practice' uncovering the principles of power. These three tools can only work in relation to each other and have been employed in this research to conceptualise the lives of NEET young people. A fuller discussion of the philosophy and epistemology underpinning Bourdieu's theory of practice, and the way in which his tools are used, is located within the methodology section.

## **Policy**

The acronym NEET was coined in 1996, replacing its predecessor, the politically contentious term 'status zero', which stigmatized young people as worthless. Status zero was introduced as a result of changes to the benefits system in the late-1980s which disqualified most 16-18 year olds from unemployment benefit and thereafter, were removed from official unemployment statistics. Rising training schemes, such as Youth Opportunities Programme, Youth Training Scheme, and Youth Training, were used to manage and conceal the large numbers of unemployed youth (Simmons et al, 2014). This trend carried on into the New Labour years as NEET featured heavily within social exclusion discourse and can be associated with the normalization of post-compulsory education and training. The main argument for the shift in focus from employment to education, was supposedly, because young people were being left behind by 'globalization', largely ascribing the significant rise of youth unemployment to a skills deficit (Simmons and Thompson, 2011).

The normalization of post-compulsory education and the classification of young people outside of education, training and employment, effectively meant the unemployed young person ceased to exist, and was replaced with a more troublesome youth who was outside education and employment - ultimately creating a whole problematic group (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). The category itself conflates a wide variety of young people with differing aspirations, abilities, prospects, opportunities, circumstances, barriers, characteristics, dispositions and so on (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Arguably, the NEET acronym has individualized social and economic inequality by shifting the blame for youth unemployment onto the individual. This echoes C. Wright. Mill's (1959) 'public issues and personal troubles' inasmuch as youth unemployment is a problem for the state, whereas being NEET is viewed largely as problem for the individual. This can be understood through Bourdieu's (1989) 'power of the constitution' of the state, which he describes as:

Power to preserve or transform objective principles of union and separation, of marriage and divorce, or association and disassociation... to conserve or transform current classifications... through the words used to designate or to describe individuals, groups or institutions (Bourdieu, 1989, p23)

This is an exercise of symbolic power by the state to impose the legitimate version of the world, by 'making things' that way with words. This power derives from symbolic capital, or social authority, granted to those who are recognized to be in a position to impose recognition. Or conversely, to impose misrecognition through negative naming and representation. Bourdieu is critical of all forms accepted language and is reluctant to categorize individuals or groups, recognizing the unequal concentration of power relations, which raises questions of legitimacy in the naming of others, because if accepted, it takes precedence over another view. Therefore, more often than not, it is those who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo that hold the power in the assignment of definitions and its members, which is a form of symbolic

violence. A prime example would be the term ‘NEET’, a word infused with political ambitions.

Deficit discourses about young people lacking aspiration, skills, and being ‘left behind’, paved the way for various supply-side initiatives supposedly aimed at building human capital. Such beliefs underpinned New Labour’s wider focus on ameliorating some of the inequalities of capitalism, such as Connexions and Educational Maintenance Allowance, Tax credits, various employability programmes and the national minimum wage, although there was less focus on stimulating the demand for labour. Simmons and Thompson (2011) argue that these initiatives presented participation in education and training as a vehicle to social inclusion and the new desired post-16 trajectory. This is evident in the New Labour report *Bridging the Gap*:

The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience ... Getting this right offers the prospect of a double dividend. A better life for young people themselves, saving them from the prospect of a lifetime of dead-end jobs, unemployment, poverty, ill-health and other kinds of exclusion. A better deal for society as a whole that has to pay a very high price in terms of welfare bills and crime for failing to help people make the transition to becoming independent adults (SEU 1999, p.6)

However, Shildrick et al (2012) argue that the number of jobs requiring little or no qualifications appears to be growing, despite claims suggesting “demand for skilled workers is currently outstripping supply” (Cabinet Office 2011, p11). There is also the argument that employment does not necessarily equate to the alleviation of social exclusion with low-pay poverty-wages commonplace in the UK, along with job insecurity and negative work experiences (Simmons et al, 2014). Either way, Simmons and Thompson (2011) argue that strategies which aim to build social capital with a focus on social integration have been largely ineffective. They also suggest that many training courses are actually

warehousing NEET young people and concealing unemployment rates, offering little labour market advantage. Often, young people churn between various poor training schemes, transient, temporary, poor-quality work, and NEET status (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Simmons et al (2014) also argue that despite claims about skill shortages, young people nowadays are often overqualified and underemployed, particularly when compared to previous generations. Despite arguments about raising aspiration and education being seen as a progressive force for social mobility, Stahl (2015) suggests the UK remains quite low in international rankings of social mobility. The second half of the twentieth century saw a rise of middle-class employment, but then, has stagnated.

Byrne (2005) regards social exclusion as a discourse used to depoliticize poverty. Simmons and Thompson (2011) suggest the shift in focus from poverty to social exclusion made explicit New Labour's break from its social democratic past - the principles of the old Labour Party being geared towards ameliorating structural inequality, at least to a degree. Byrne (2005) argues that neoliberal values emphasize freedom, individualism and liberty over equality and solidarity, and creates a dichotomy between individualism and collectivism. Social exclusion presupposes there is nothing wrong with inequality as long as society is inclusive – therefore, emphasizing social cohesion over equality underpinned by neoliberal values (Byrne, 2005). Inequality on a vertical model makes explicit hierarchy, whereas the horizontal model of social exclusion paints a cohesive society, representing the majority within a circle of acceptable conditions and the problem being the excluded are not within it, camouflaging the rich and powerful (Byrne, 2005). Levitas (2005) makes a similar analysis, arguing that the concept of social exclusion disguises the enormous inequalities in wealth and power in contemporary societies. It has implicitly sugarcoated poverty and discursively restructured inequality as a problem of participation. Byrne (2005) suggests that:

Social exclusion refers to the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society – social exclusion may therefore, be seen as the denial, or non-realization of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship (Byrne, 2005, p2)

Arguably, not only is social exclusion a policy discourse regarded as a method of closure in debate as far as inequality is concerned; those who are socially excluded are closed out in a process by which privileged groups consciously lock others out by monopolizing resources to maintain and protect their privilege (Byrne, 2005). Exclusion can encompass several different levels of collectivity - from an individual to a whole nation lacking in resources. Bourdieu (1986) argues those who hold dominant resources in particular fields often exclude others to defend and protect their own privilege and interests. He suggests this is achieved through symbolic boundaries erected by dominant groups, that exclude dominated social groups – this he calls symbolic violence. This is achieved through the orthodoxy of the field – by recognition and misrecognition of practices including modes of behavior, lifestyle choices, aesthetic preferences, tastes, and speech/accent. This is about what dominant groups view as propriety and legitimate. If individuals possess culture and characteristics the dominant embody, they are recognized, and able to gain access to resources; conversely, misrecognized individuals are excluded. Therefore, the buying power of capitals remain fixed, the field legitimizes this through doxa, whilst the habitus renders this as the natural order of things (Bourdieu, 1986). From a Bourdieusian perspective, populist discourses about social mobility and meritocracy are merely rhetorical. Many are systematically shut out in a process of economic marginalization, blighted by class and cultural disadvantages (Simmons et al, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012). Arguably then, exclusion from resources is justified under a guise of rhetoric of choice, encouragement of individual aspiration, and achieved through symbolic violence.

Neoliberal discourses emphasize narratives of welfare dependency and moral turpitude. It is often claimed that there are generations of families that have never worked, yet little evidence of intergenerational worklessness has been found (Shildrick et al, 2012). Nonetheless, recent governments have vowed to get tough with a hardening of stance. This has included a roll back of the state with means-testing, however, it seems to be a reflection of Victorian values with the notion of less eligibility, judging the poor as deserving or undeserving; this ideology also later reflected in the rough and respectable working-classes. These ideas re-emerged as fashionable in the 1980s and can be associated with the ideas of Charles Murray (1990; 1994) and others on the Right. He insists the roots of social problems are due to a culture of dependency and an overgenerous welfare state.

Jones (2012) argues that the mainstream media perpetuates such narratives, promoting populist stereotypes through ‘poverty porn’ that manipulates social attitudes against the poor. Similarly, Skeggs (2002) suggests that working-class has become synonymous with tastelessness, vulgarity, and disgust, with the UK media tacitly endorsing such representations. There exists a long history where “most representations of working-class people contribute to devaluing and delegitimizing their already meagre capitals, putting further blocks on tradability, denying any conversion into symbolic capital” (Skeggs, 2002, p. 76). Such representations of the white working-class are encapsulated in the ‘chav’ caricatures discussed by Jones (2012), associated with criminal, feckless, inner-city working-class young men. Jones contends these are dangerous myths propagated to deflect attention away from poverty and inequality by redirecting blame onto the individual. He argues if anything, the symptoms have been confused with the causes, inasmuch as poverty is not usually derivative from personal idleness or lack of aspiration. Such narratives perpetuate negative representations of working-class youth, which creates stigma. This, in turn, results in experiences of symbolic violence for those from a working-class background, and contributes to reducing their life chances and

opportunities. Many offer a probing critique to the notion of the underclass (Macdonald et al, 2005; Shildrick et al 2014; Simmons et al, 2014), suggesting there's very little evidence of an underclass, at least culturally – rather, individuals and groups that have experienced a process of 'economic marginalization'.

Ultimately, the NEET category has reconstructed structural youth unemployment as a problem of participation, holding systematically marginalized young people accountable for their own predicament (Simmons et al, 2014). It places an emphasis on voluntarism, often with moralistic connotations and derogatory overtones, although research suggests that most NEET young people are not drawn from a moral underclass and usually have aspirations to work (Simmons et al, 2014; Macdonald and Marsh, 2005). Simmons et al (2014) assert that being NEET is predominantly a class issue associated with a number of factors surfacing from structural inequality, in the form of living in deprived neighbourhoods, coming from a poor family background and having low educational attainment; and also indirectly, by broader socio-economic change, exacerbated by neoliberal policies. They argue that individual agency is important, but just as important is the broader social matrix that shapes and structures the choices and opportunities available. Therefore, maintaining the notion that individual circumstances can only be fully conceptualized by drawing on a perspective that considers the broader context (Simmons et al, 2014).

This perspective illustrates the broader social and economic changes that led up to the formation of NEET as a problematic category. It illuminates how youth unemployment was created through mass structural unemployment requiring demand-side intervention. However, policy responses have been aimed at supply-side initiatives, that in the process, through discursive policy constructs, have sugarcoated poverty, obscured inequality, and deemed young people responsible for their predicament. This creates difficulty for working-class

young people growing up and making transitions in to adult life, such as trying to enter the labour market, not only due to being systematically marginalized, but also confronted by many class disadvantages that create further obstacles to overcome before they can participate. Individualization is as much a product of capitalist forces as it is ideological - individual agency is important, but choices are not made in a vacuum, they are shaped and structured by the social and economic matrix within which individuals and groups are located (Simmons et al, 2014).

## **Education**

Education is viewed in official discourse as a progressive force which can tackle social exclusion and promote economic competitiveness, with participation and opportunity central goals. The English educational system has however undergone substantial critique for many decades for its role in the reproduction of class-based disadvantages and social inequality; particularly through the transmission of middle-class culture resulting in an unequal distribution of economic rewards (Bourdieu, 1980). “According to Bourdieu, the function of the education system is to reward those whose habitus, and with it their accumulations of social and cultural capital, are best adapted to the dominant culture of the field” (Simmons et al, 2014, p21). Bourdieu (1980) suggests that the content and structure of education reflects the power of dominant groups to determine the value attributed to different forms of knowledge, and to disseminate such knowledge in ways which serve to maintain their position. This can be reflected in the common division between practical knowledge with manual labour and academic knowledge with intellectual labour, enshrining a hierarchy in the dominance of academic over vocational. However, this is far from just formal recognition, but also informal recognition embedded in everyday discourse and interaction.

Cultural capital exists in three different dimensions – embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The embodied state is the ability to decipher cultural codes – including accent/dialect, mannerisms, aesthetic preferences, and general cultural awareness/knowledge; while objectified indicates cultural goods usually revolving around certain tastes; institutionalized includes the likes of educational qualifications and titles that symbolize cultural competence and authority. Cultural capital creates a distinction and differentiation between social classes through tastes that have judgment attached, which enables a non-economic form of domination through hierarchy as certain forms of culture are valued over others, which gives recognition and translates to symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1986, p56) says: “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier”. Sharing similar forms of cultural capital creates a sense of collective identity and social position (people like us). This then gives rise to an unconscious acceptance of social difference, and legitimizes social inequality as all forms of power require legitimacy, and culture is where this materializes amongst individuals who battle in the field. Stahl (2015) says superior cultural capital translates into superior academic performance, and back into economic capitals through superior jobs, which in turn, reproduces superior culture. Education therefore reproduces social inequality, and the whole process is legitimated by the field; mainly through an unequal distribution of academic qualifications (Stahl, 2015).

Such processes lead to misrecognition of working-class culture and identity in middle-class social spaces, because only that which is acknowledged by middle-class culture is recognized and valued; subsequently, systematically devaluing working-class individuals leading to experiences of symbolic violence. Bourdieu (1992, p167) describes symbolic violence as “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity”. This includes being treated as inferior and disrespected, which happens mainly in middle-class social spaces where working-class identity, culture, and practices are not legitimate. For example, working-class children acquire cultural

behaviour through their initial socialization within the family and local environment, and often encounter middle-class teachers who consider their behaviour problematic, leading to underperformance and disaffection (Stahl, 2015).

Although traditional working-class life should not be romanticized, it provided potential routes to a dignified life with a decent job and income for working-class youth, even for those who weren't especially academic (Simmons et al, 2014). The demise of old manufacturing industries, to an extent, means that having good educational qualifications is more important than ever, particularly now that qualifications are more widespread, making those without qualifications stand out as worse than the rest. Nonetheless, the middle class with an abundance of cultural capital, are in a much better position to achieve that. Generally, the result is, the reproduction of class inequality in education and therefore, the wider society.

The phenomenon of working-class underachievement and underperformance in education is well documented (see, for example, Willis, 1977). More recently though focus has shifted specifically to the 'white' working class as they are the lowest performing group, particularly boys (EHRC, 2015) with typical explanations of lacking aspiration. Stahl (2015), using Bourdieusian tools, examines the interplay between identity, culture and schooling against the backdrop of neoliberalism to shed light on the phenomenon of white working-class underachievement in education. He argues that the white working class are often depicted as devoid of aspiration, but suggests they do have aspirations, even if these are not sufficiently middle class, or legitimate, to be labelled as being aspirational in neoliberal Britain. Contemporary discourses of neoliberalism have devalued and misrecognized traditional working-class culture, seeing it as a state to abdicate in a process of upward social mobility.

Stahl (2015) believes it has become increasingly complicated to combine academic success with a traditional and respectable working-class identity. The boys in his study battled to reconcile social and learner identities – often resulting in habitus disjunctures because they simultaneously occupied two different fields with contrasting logics of practice particular to each field. These were competing ideas of what it is to be an upwardly-mobile neoliberal subject and simultaneously an authentic white, working-class male. This, Stahl argues, will either end up reinforcing the working-class identity through rejection/disengagement, or developing new dispositions associated with middle-class values in accordance with education's neoliberal 'aspirational' agenda. However, Stahl also found working-class boys, in their identity work, manage to reconcile a stable identity, which he refers to as a 'middling identity'. The boys articulated how fear was a two-sided coin - a fear of failure and a fear of success - as they wanted to do good, but not great. On one hand, they faced failure or mediocrity, but success in remaining authentic to oneself. On the other hand, they feared academic success, as good exam results would mean uprooting from their cultural origins and being pushed in to unfamiliar environments where they could feel uncomfortable and be vulnerable to risk.

Stahl (2015) suggests a working-class habitus requires transformation in order to function and fit in middle-class contexts – this transformation results in a secondary habitus, a cleft habitus or habitus clivé, where individuals accept a particular ideology but simultaneously maintain key dispositions in their habitus of origin. As a result of the 'middling learner identity', Stahl's boys accepted the legitimacy of the education field but often projected an egalitarian outlook infused with historic working-class, solidarity and communal values. This is based on, what Stahl calls an 'egalitarian habitus', which contests a potential cleft habitus by maintaining value in a field where it perceives a lack of capital to be successful. It is a modified secondary habitus that enables individuals to accept a certain ideology revolving around social mobility, but also retain traditional dispositions associated with the field of origin. The

egalitarian habitus demonstrates an embodied history infused with traditional working-class values. Stahl understood this as constructing counternarratives in resistance to the neoliberal aspiration agenda with a desire to remain in one's class and culture, and protect their social identity. It enables the boys to find a stable identity that can help them 'get on' in education but without feelings of selling out, class betrayal; therefore, staying true to oneself and being authentic.

As Stahl's boys had to consciously fight to guard their self-worth against the dominant school culture, there is a danger of excluding themselves from the school's neoliberal aspiration agenda. Stahl (2015) suggests this is often misconstrued as a lack of resilience, as other ethnic groups from similar socioeconomic backgrounds outperform white working-class boys, but argues it is simply not the case. Typical explanations of why white working-class pupils underachieve usually point to a lack of aspiration, parental attitudes toward education, and an insufficient work ethic. These are, in some cases, contributing factors but Stahl argues that white working-class underachievement is symptomatic of a much larger social, cultural and economic inequality, which plagues the English education system.

## Methodology

An ethnographic approach was used to generate the data presented later in the thesis. Ethnography was thought most appropriate as it enables an exploration of lived experience by drawing rich qualitative data from participants in the form of interviews, observations, field notes and so on. This thick descriptive data provides access to the complexities of interrelated factors and assists in building a well-rounded picture concerning the aims of the research (Denscombe, 2007). Specific objectives of the research are to:

- Examine participants' perceptions of key events which have shaped their experiences and expectations of education and work
- Establish why they became NEET
- Investigate their lived experiences of being NEET
- Discover what barriers to participation they face
- Identify their hopes, aspirations, and expectations

Ethnographic inquiry seeks to uncover meanings and perceptions on part of the participants, viewing these understandings against the backdrop of their worldview or 'culture' (Bradford and Cullen, 2012). This offers the chance to explain why outcomes occur, rather than just what outcomes are. Attention is given to processes –such as the process of being NEET, and also, the likelihood of staying NEET.

Etymologically, ethnography is the writing of people, society, and/or culture. The essence of ethnography is storytelling - the art and science of describing a group or culture. It is usually used to investigate 'closed' cultures – see for example, James Patrick's (1973) *A Glasgow Gang Observed* – and aims to generate meaning and understanding of such cultures. Ethnographic research focuses on the everyday and the mundane rather than the unusual; the identity of individuals is largely unimportant - what the research is trying to achieve is

a greater understanding of how a particular culture functions. Bryman (2001) suggests five key characteristics of ethnographic research:

- Ethnographers immerse themselves in a society;
- To collect descriptive data via fieldwork;
- Concerning culture;
- From the perspective of the meanings members of that society attach to their social world;
- And render collected data intelligible and significant to fellow academics and other readers.

In relation to the first, I have, at least to an extent, always been a part of the culture under investigation. Two, three and four were central to the fieldwork. And the fifth - which moves beyond the process to the product - can be seen in the analysis section.

## **Context**

Greenwick, located south of Grantborough city centre, is where the fieldwork for this study was carried out. The population of this ward is, according to the 2011 census, 19, 250. It is highly ethnically diverse – 35.5 per cent of the population is white; 6 per cent from mixed-heritage; 17.7 per cent Black; 27.4 per cent Asian; and 13.3 per cent from ‘other’ ethnicities (ONSd, 2017). Greenwick is also heavily impoverished – 29<sup>th</sup> out of the 8414 wards nationally. Particular indicators include high unemployment, low educational attainment, poor health, and high crime rates. Of those in employment, the large majority works in either wholesale and retail, or accommodation and food services. Of all people working age, 31 per cent are claiming benefits – over double England's 15 percent average (ONSe, 2017).

Most Greenwich residents have not felt the benefits of Grantborough's recent economic growth. There is, however, a stated intention to regenerate the locality. The local authority developed a plan, which was formally approved in October 2007 and is currently in motion. This covers the entire Greenwich ward, and sets out to address the perceived physical, social and economic needs of the area. It is part of a wider initiative to contribute to the city's social and economic objectives and policies set forth by the Central Grantborough Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF). The local plan provides the mechanism through which the broad objectives of the SRF can be delivered:

Grantborough's economy has been transformed... over the next 10 to 15 years, there will be an estimated 100,000 new jobs created. Many of these...will be financial and professional services, creative and media industries, and health. We want to transform areas like Greenwich into places where people choose to live and work, which attract new higher-earning residents while encouraging local people to stay in the area and benefit from the improvements (Local Authority, 2007)

The local plan identified education and learning as the most important issue facing the ward – however, arguably there are more immediate challenges facing the area, such as deprivation and a lack of resources. It argues that improving the level of educational attainment and the ability of Greenwich residents to access employment opportunities will be key to reducing worklessness, raising economic activity and improving long-term prosperity. Arguably, this discourse is rooted in a neoliberal deficit model, emphasizing the shortcomings of certain individuals and groups, such as those classified as NEET. The local plan suggests that:

Overcoming the lack of peer role models is important to stop the cycle of dependency on benefits and encouraging young people to engage in employment, training (including pre-employment training such as basic skills) and learning. Youth nuisance continues to be a major feature of life in Greenwich... acting as a disincentive for people to stay or for others to move into the area.

The causes are varied but include worklessness, drugs, alcohol abuse, poor quality community and youth facilities, as well as a deep-seated culture of low aspirations, negative peer pressure and too few positive role models (Local Authority, 2007)

It could be argued that the local plan aims to instill middle-class aspirations and values in residents. This is controversial as it implies that individuals and communities are largely responsible for their own predicament, rather than recognizing the economic restructuring which has systematically marginalized them. The manager of a local voluntary sector youth project commented that:

The community needs equal access to resources - especially funding - as the community is very deprived and can really limit peoples natural abilities, talent and potential, and not just equal access but equitable, biased in favour of the poor, vulnerable and ill who need more to have equal opportunities. Local people are not just materially poor, but relationally poor with many withdrawn from a sense of community, belonging and identity (H.G, 2016)

Greenwick encompasses a number of neighbourhoods, one being Brunford estate - the main research site. Brunford is one year in to a 25-year private finance initiative (PFI), which aims to improve housing and raise 'aspiration'. More than 500 new homes are proposed and 650 social housing properties are to be refurbished. The PFI also plans to build new shops, a day-care centre and other local amenities at a new 'community hub'. A local shopkeeper, who has worked in the area for the past 12 years, said:

A lot of people locally seem to be struggling financially and having to choose between paying bills and buying essentials such as food...these cuts are really affecting people, especially the older people who live alone. Month on month I'm seeing my takings drop, and my stock suppliers are increasing prices forcing me to have to increase my prices. I don't want to do that...it's hard enough for people as it is. They have offered me priority when they build the new shop square along with next door and the chippie, but the rent is ridiculous, its double what I'm paying now... I'm probably going to take what they offer (compensation

payment) and move my business elsewhere (N.H, 2016)

The neighbourhood is dominated by social housing planned on Radburn principles, with extensive pedestrian-only access routes. Economic decline and signs of being 'left behind' are reflected in the area's decay - derelict factories and mills, run-down terraced housing, old-fashioned maisonettes and high-rise flats. Greenwich is also characterized by intensive policing, with antagonism between police and young people evident. This area can be understood as a multicultural, working-class, deprived inner-city estate.

## **Philosophy**

Methodology refers to the paradigm which underpins the research and draws on certain assumptions about the nature of knowledge and truth. From the outset of this research, a Bourdieusian lens was employed to uncover and examine the convoluted relations of social class, through NEET young men's lived experience. Bourdieu's concepts cannot be fully understood without grasping their underlying philosophy and epistemology - the relationship between individual subjectivity and the objective world. Bourdieu sought to take an 'epistemological break' from the traditions of structuralism and phenomenology, reconciling the tension by amalgamating both approaches. For example, Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labour*, focuses primarily to working-class 'lad' culture as the means through which underlying inequality is reproduced; if juxtaposed with a Marxist structuralist approach, both only offer one side of the epistemology necessary to understand the social world. It is precisely this Bourdieu aims to overcome.

Bourdieu does this through the concepts of habitus and field, which represent subjectivism and objectivism respectively. Habitus is the central tool intended to transcend the dichotomies; it is also intended to provide a means of analysis

through empirical investigation. Habitus is the internalization of objective structure, which produces a set of structured dispositions for engaging with the social world, which tend to reproduce the social structure - therefore reconciling social structure and individual agency and how they mutually shape one another. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice has been expressed as [(habitus) + (capital)] + field = practice. This is: "ones practices results from relations between ones disposition and ones position in the field, within the current state of play of that social arena" (Grenfell, 2014, p50). These concepts should be seen as inseparable, mutually constituted and always interpenetrating to produce 'ontological complicity' - the relation he saw between objective structures and internalized structures. This accounts for "not only for how the body is in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body" (Reay, 2004, p432); "the externalization of internality and the internalization of externality" (Bourdieu, 1977, p72).

Bourdieu deconstructs this further, arguing understanding the social world is not about the practices within themselves; it is about the principles underlying and generating those practices. Bourdieu sees all structures, both objective and subjective, as constituted by the same socially-defining principles. Through his concepts, studying structures of organization and practice, and the ways in which they mutually constitute each other, he "attempts to uncover the dynamic of principles, or logic of practice, which gives them their structuring power - a theory of structure as both structured (*opus operatum*) and structuring (*modus operandi*)" (Grenfell, 2014, p45). Bourdieu (1997, p3) calls this "a science of dialectical relations between objective structures and subjective dispositions". "This is a two-way relationship between structure and practices, in which structures tend to produce structured subjective dispositions that produce structured actions, which then tend to reproduce objective structure" (Stahl, 2015, p. 45).

Philosophically, Bourdieu states if he had to characterize his work, it would be structuralist constructivism, or constructivist structuralism (Bourdieu, 1989). By structuralism Bourdieu means that there is objective reality independent of consciousness or individual will, capable of guiding and constraining practices. Bourdieu's ontological stance was neorealist. This provides a worldview in which social phenomena can be ascertained, even although imperfect and probabilistically comprehensible – a perception is a window on to reality, which can be triangulated with other perceptions for a more accurate representation of 'the truth'. Neorealism interprets the world in three domains: firstly, the real domain which consists of the processes that produce events, in which generative mechanisms exist independently. Secondly, the actual domain, in which patterns of events occurs, whether observed or otherwise. Lastly, there is the empirical domain, in which experiences can be obtained by direct observation. Therefore, the goal is the discovery of structures and mechanisms, independent of any events they may generate. By observing the empirical domain, knowledge of the real world can be discovered by describing the generative mechanisms that are in operation; although our conceptualizations are theory laden and therefore, problematic and fallible.

Bourdieu refers to constructivism as “a two-fold social genesis”. “On the one hand of the schemes of perception, thought and action, which are constitutive of what I call habitus, and on the other hand of social structures, what I call fields” (Bourdieu, 1989, p1). In a constructivist epistemology, objective reality is a construction derivative of perception; perceptions are in turn constitutive of habitus, which is shaped by fields and depending on position in social space, based on the configuration of capital, the medium of field maneuvers. Paradoxically this contributes to the construction of objective structures. Construction of reality from subjectivity is constructed under structural constraints - therefore, a construct of constructs, meaning arguably, reality is subjective, acknowledging that each individual interacts, experiences and interprets the world in differing ways based on differing social positions,

configuration of capitals, and habitus. Through field theory, Bourdieu was able to map objective structural relations. However, he also needed to demonstrate how such objectivity was constructed by individual subjectivities, as, although there may be an objective world, it can never be fully proven, because without consciousness, it has no meaning - we construct meaning (Denscombe, 2007). Individuals then, can construct meaning in different ways from subjective perceptions, even in relation to the same phenomena; and even although objective phenomena may exist independently of consciousness - it is only given meaning when a conscious being construes it in an interplay of subjectivity and objectivity. Therefore, a neorealist ontology and constructivist epistemology enmeshes within, and informs Bourdieusian philosophy.

Overcoming the dichotomy of objectivist and subjectivist modes of knowledge is fundamental for Bourdieu (1977), as it represents a struggle over perceptions of the social world, in which the 'truth is at stake'. He argues, firstly, the construction of research objects needs particular attention because constructs are not things within themselves, but rather a set of relations – a product and a process. As mentioned earlier, Bourdieu is critical of accepted language and dominant ways of speaking about the world. Therefore, he argues that concepts should be used as an object of analysis, rather than be seen as an instrument. He advocates a break from the pre-constructed, arguing terms such as social class are secondary and the real focus should be on how differentiation occurs, and why. Nonetheless, for Bourdieu, the word is more important than the phenomenon – what does exist is relations.

In order to overcome the opposition of objectivity and subjectivity, one must break from substantialist thinking for a relational mode of thinking. This would discover and identify the real, not with substance, but with systems of relations in social space - because reality is nothing more than structure and a set of relationships, in which groups and individuals, and activities and preferences can only ever be definable in relation to one another, as we only exist in

relation to others (Grenfell, 2014). Bourdieu sees substantialist thinking as largely reifying data and reducing the actions of individuals to membership of a particular social group, as if it is this membership that is the generator of practice. He argues a researcher's focus should be on the relations of systems beneath the substantialist and the principles upon which they are based. Bourdieu advocates for a praxeological knowledge, seeing human action as purposeful rather than reflexive. To confuse a relational way of thinking for the substantialist, has ramifications for the way the research object is perceived, therefore entailing subsequent errors for the methodology, data collection, analysis, and resulting conclusions drawn (Grenfell, 2014).

Bourdieu's theory of practice has high pertinence to ethnography, as ethnographic methods of data generation - field and participant observation, and qualitative interviewing - enmesh with Bourdieu's concepts in trying to uncover the existential reality through empiricism. Bourdieu sees dispositions as the middle ground between the social and the individual, and argues these should be the object of analysis. Dispositions are both shaped by past events and structures, and shape current practices and structures, and also, condition one's perceptions of these. Dispositions are somewhat public as they perform, enacting a preference. They are a declaration of where one stands and one's allegiances and therefore, to some extent, observable in the empirical domain. Reay (2004) argues that habitus cannot be directly observed in empirical research, but has to be apprehended interpretively – therefore, it shouldn't be applied, but it should be put into practice to show how empirical research can be understood through the concept.

### **Methods and data generation**

The 'art of ethnography' hinges on the researcher's ability to generate rich data using various qualitative methods. It usually involves:

[P]articipating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.3)

Ethnography demands dedication and commitment to a certain degree of time to the research, the setting, and the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The research took place from early January to mid-April 2017 constituting 132 hours, including 58 hours of observation in the field. This included engaging with 37 people, 13 of who became participants (a table of participants can be seen in appendix 1). In total there were 39 planned meetings with participants, 125 phone calls, 52 text message exchanges, and 33 random calls to participants' homes (only a few making successful contact). Also 10 interviews were conducted accounting for a total duration of 3 hours and 48 minutes. This enabled a large quantity of thick descriptive data (129 A4 pages of transcriptions) to be generated.

Sampling is a crucial element in research because it's important that participants adequately reflect the 'research problem' (Denscombe, 2007). In this instance, a purposive sample was used. The sample cohort included 13 young men who were all local residents, aged between 16-24, of white ethnicity, from a working-class background, and currently outside education and employment. These are young men are often described as 'hard to reach', but already having a working relationship through my youth worker role allowed them to be identified as NEET. This ensured the research was relevant and representative of the group in question, at least to some degree. The research aimed to incorporate participants from various major NEET sub groups, and included young offenders, early school leavers, young parents, and some with mental health problems. It is recognized that young people's experiences are diverse; nonetheless, the lives of these individuals arguably reflect many of the challenges encountered by others in similar contexts.

Data was generated through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes – and arguably such methods allow Bourdieu's concepts to be operationalized. For a Bourdieusian approach to data generation, firstly, information about individuals' actions, behaviour and attitudes should be collected primarily through observation, and interviews – these are signifiers of habitus and also illuminate field specific capital (dress, style, language, et cetera). Secondly, information about individual characteristics - previous employment experience, qualification levels, material resources, et cetera – as they can be used as a means of evaluating the individual's capital configuration when juxtaposed with other data on practices and attitudes, making explicit what acts as symbolic capital within the field (Grenfell, 2014).

The observation sites were primarily young people's homes, friends' houses and the estate they 'hang around' with peers. Observation also took place in grocery shops, a barbers, cafeterias, book-makers premises, and fast-food outlets. This enabled a holistic perspective, encapsulating a variety of different actions, behaviours and attitudes enacted within various social and physical contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were used to probe participants' attitudes and opinions – the interview questions can be seen in appendix 2. Denscombe (2007, p.45) argues that interviews “deal with the subtleties and intricacies of complex social situations”; meanwhile, Darlington and Scott (2002, p.48) believe that “interviews take seriously the notion that people are experts on their own experience and so are best able to report how they experience a particular event or phenomenon”. The interviews were conducted, as far as possible, in an informal conversational manner to stimulate dialogue and depth of discussion. In regards to reliability, repeating a semi-structured interview is highly unlikely to elicit identical responses, social life is not repetitive meaning content and phrasing would be different, so research perceptions of it cannot be entirely consistent (Bradford and Cullen, 2012); but whilst this research may not be directly replicatable, it can

nevertheless provide valuable insights. Arguably, it provides a valid picture of a set of individual's lives in and around a certain locality, and although not generalizable for the wider NEET population, the findings parallel those of similar projects in other contexts (See, for example, Simmons et al, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012).

The fieldwork was not without challenges. It was rather naïve of me to assume that because I had existing relationships with some of the participants, that this would grant me instant access to their daily lives. I was, to some extent, already aware that marginalized young people are often uncommunicative, sometimes unwilling to be fully transparent. However, I was surprised to find that many participants needed constant reassurance about the purpose of the research, and how the data would be used. Some participants didn't want to be recorded at all. An example of this would be Gary, who was happy to meet and chat, but did not want to participate in any interviews as he distrusted being recorded. There was also my positionality to consider as an 'insider', which, in at least one particular case, may have been a hindrance to the fieldwork. Matthew who initially agreed to take part in the research but later changed his mind and said that he didn't want to feel like I was making judgments about him.

The most significant challenge was the spontaneous lifestyles of the young men who live quite chaotic and turbulent lifestyles on the margins of society. This meant that the fieldwork was a process of daily negotiation for access, hence the high number of phone-calls, text messages, and knocking on doors to make contact. Even although they had already agreed to participate, actually gaining access to their world was a complicated process; it had to be on their terms - they were the stakeholders in the research process. Another difficulty was due to the diversity of the area itself, which made it problematic to observe white ethnic groups alone. Also when meeting them at their homes, the meeting could come to an abrupt ending as they received phone-calls regarding illicit

activities, or conversely, me choosing to leave earlier than planned due to the room becoming smoky and inducing a sense of dizziness.

## **Data analysis**

A lot of data was generated, so a coding system was used to identify relevant themes. This involved going through the transcripts systematically and robustly, highlighting key topics, then grouping topics together, compare and contrasting key relationships; and finally, abstracting the key themes across participants. The data collected has been re-evaluated and refined over a substantial period of time, with new interpretations emerging.

Bourdieu advocates a three-level field analysis. The first stage of this is the analysis of the position of the field in relation to the wider field of power – this is putting the research site into its socio-historical context in relation to power and resources. The second stage is analysis of the structure of the field under investigation – the individuals within it and the positions they hold based on and expressed through capital configurations and volume. This makes explicit what is the recognized, acknowledged and the legitimated medium of exchange – the defining and generating principles, which incorporate their own logic of practice. Finally, an analysis of individual's habitus – the dispositions they have acquired through engagement with the field – and the relationships between them (Grenfell, 2014). Bourdieu begins with the highest level, the field in relation to fields of power in general, and then moves to structure of the field itself, before dealing with the habitus of individuals. I was initially unaware that I was moving in this direction as my understanding of Bourdieu was developing, but was guided by my supervisor in considering the wider context of power, change, and its relation to the field under investigation before any other analysis. Nonetheless, any analysis should be relational and consider all three tools, and the three-level analysis. This constructs a picture of the dynamic interrelations between structure and agency, providing a valuable

conceptualization of NEET young people, class and marginalization. Bourdieu's concepts embody a dynamic epistemology making them active tools for deployment (Grenfell, 2014).

### **Ethical considerations**

Bourdieu invites us to a reflexive sociology (1992), what he calls participant objectivation. He claims any research reflects the researcher's habitus and position they occupy in the field. Bourdieu is concerned with the orthodoxy of the field site - doxa shapes agents to think in terms of what is acknowledged as legitimate. Therefore, he's calling for the researcher to use his methods of analysis on themselves, whilst considering their experience and interest in relation to the research object.

My higher education experiences have been characterized by a continual identity negotiation, based on a cleft habitus. This is due to considerable cultural disjunctures based on my background. I have, to some extent, already acknowledged my position in this community, and it is no doubt the research interest is derivative from this. The research reflects my own identity and personal interest in this specific topic; being a white male from a working-class background, raised in the same neighbourhood, and attaining the NEET label for a substantial period of time between the ages of 14-21; living on the margins and embarking upon a criminal trajectory involving illicit activities, to working directly with NEET young people as a professional youth worker in the same community for 6 years. Although this research has been an intellectual challenge, this biggest challenge has been personally - recognizing that I'm in possession of a 'middling-learner' identity and now understanding why I 'felt' I've always had one foot in education, and the other out. Before I was introduced to Bourdieu's work, I often had difficulty trying to understand and theorize my life experiences – including the contradictions I've faced throughout my education. Arguably though, such a position enables me a

greater space for reflexivity – I'm caught between two competing fields, two competing classes, and simultaneously conforming to the orthodoxy of a field, while critiquing that field. Nonetheless, I recognize my academic trajectory this far has been one of luck, rather than strategic planning – it's still a process of negotiation as I go along. It would be hazardous for me to stop here. As Bourdieu said:

My main problem is to try to understand what happened to me. My trajectory may be described as miraculous. I suppose – an ascension to a place where I don't belong. And so to be able to live in a world that is not mine I must try to understand both things: what it means to have an academic mind – how such is created – and at the same time what was lost in acquiring it. For that reason, even if my work – my full work – is a sort of autobiography, it is a work for people who have the same sort of trajectory, and the same need to understand (Bourdieu, 1992, p117)

Informed consent was sought from participants before research commenced (appendix 3). Participants were given information regarding the nature of the project, what the research entails, and a clear statement about their right to withdraw at any point (appendix 4). It was also made clear how the data would be used. With this knowledge, participants were then free to decide whether to take part in the research (BERA, 2011).

It is always possible that safeguarding issues can arise with young people, so I made my role and position explicit and highlighted my duty of care to participants. Although some participants appeared to be involved in illicit activities, the research did not directly focus on such matters and I asked them not to incriminate themselves in the briefing before any research took place. As I live in this area, this was challenging and needed to be approached with caution due to the local cultural codes of 'not grassing'. Thankfully, participants appeared to understand my position, which reduced the potential for the fieldwork to be problematic.

Ensuring no harm is brought to participants can be a significant ethical conundrum. This means it is paramount to uphold confidentiality so participants can expect a right to privacy, reducing any risk to them. For this reason, the area and participants have been anonymized. In addition, to adhere to the Data Protection Act, all data collected has been digitalized and kept on a secure device encrypted with passwords that only I have access to. Any written notes have been disposed of appropriately (BERA, 2011). Anonymity for individuals and research sites is viewed as basic ethical procedure for ethnographic research (BERA, 2011). However, the reality is that total confidentiality and anonymity is often unachievable (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Enough information has been given about the background context to ensure the research is given a relevant identity and situated within its proper context, but enough has been withheld to protect participants and the community (BERA, 2011). Confidentiality and anonymity can be problematic; however, the above steps ensure the identity of those who participated in the research are protected as far as possible and reduce any risks they are exposed to. In considering the amount of risk involved, it is believed the research posed minimal risk.

## **Findings**

The data presented and discussed here reflect the themes that were evident across and between all participants. Each theme is interwoven with a discussion of habitus, capitals and field, but also other theory that supplements insight to the analysis and sense making of data. The data is split into three sections - education; employment; and community.

### **Education**

All the young men in this study struggled in education, with some leaving early (both voluntary and formally expelled) and with few qualifications. Participants discussed their own 'bad behaviour' contributing to this, which can be understood as typical 'laddish' or 'bad boy' behaviour. However, they mainly spoke about the disadvantages they faced growing up that adversely affected their schooling:

Growing up there was more important stuff going on. Like how can I do well in school and be good if I'm surrounded by violence, or an alcoholic family, having no breakfast in the mornings, or any clean clothes... I remember waking up on freezing cold winter mornings and not want to get out of bed cos we had no electric or heating, so I just wouldn't go school  
[Michael, interview 09.03.2017]

Generally participants felt that their home environment and family life put them at a disadvantage in education, shaping their expectations and attitudes towards school. They talked about lacking material resources, being exposed to crime, gangs, drugs, violence, fighting, and in extreme cases, grieving for friends who had been murdered. The young men in this study felt like education was not 'for us':

It's a waste of time if you ask me... other people I've spoke to think the same. Education ain't for us [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

Such processes can be understood through the concepts of habitus and field. Habitus, defined as “a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action” (Bourdieu, 2002, p.27), encapsulates the entire set of relations between an individual and society. It implies that a student and their socioeconomic background cannot be divorced, it is embodiment of social structure and therefore, they inevitably bring it to school with them. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the primary habitus is developed in the field of origin - socialization within the family and early experiences in the local environment have considerable weight in shaping habitus, depositing structuring structures in the form of durable and transposable dispositions. Habitus can be linked with what Gordon (1997) referred to as a ‘social haunting’ - the lingering effect of an individual’s background on present thoughts, actions and practices. Habitus also renders the field meaningful through schemes of perception, conception, and action - this is a world of common sense that is self-evident, influencing how individuals perceive certain fields and therefore, determining what is and is not ‘for us’ (Bourdieu, 1990). Participants in this research had internalized their social environment, or the logic of practice of the field of origin, which rendered education as not ‘for us’, as it was contradictory to their life experiences insofar. Habitus is more generalized at societal level, and more complex and specific at the individual level – this includes biographical history, but also constitutes the collective historical relations of family and class:

Those who occupy the same positions have every chance of having the same habitus, at least insofar as the trajectories which have brought them to these positions are themselves similar... The dispositions acquired in the position occupied involve a sense of adjustment to this position (Bourdieu, 1987, p5)

Habitus is constructed with capitals, and accounts for the ways in which individual expectations reflect the objective conditions individuals and groups inhabit, and provides 'a sense of ones place' within the social structure. Therefore by contrast, implying the place of others, who individuals inadvertently classify (Bourdieu argues individuals classify each other) based on their own social position and schemes of perceptions. Based on their sense of place through embodiment of objective local structure, they classified education as not for them; therefore creating distinctions between 'us', and 'them' - which goes further towards explaining why participants felt like education was not 'for us'. This feeling or practical sense rendering education as not being 'for us' encapsulates a collective habitus of those who have experienced similar social environment as Bourdieu suggests.

Arguably, the main reason for the rejection of education is the cultural disjuncture between personal habitus and the field of education. Habitus is simultaneously constructed and constrained by the character of capitals, and represents the internalized objective structure and conditions. This misaligned with the field of education due to rejecting the dominant middle-class cultural capital. This means that working-class students have to operate in social spaces where their culture is misrecognized, therefore devalued in that space. Consequentially, they have to try legitimate themselves as subjects of value, but under neoliberal conceptions of ability and aptitude - they are increasingly judged according to middle class conceptions of success and failure. In this sense, not to aspire to middle-class capitals, becomes seen as resistance as it is a desire to stay in one's social class, resulting in their culture and aspirations being systematically misrecognized and rejected. Bourdieu (2000) addresses this misalignment between the objective structures of the field and the internal structured structures of habitus as a 'dialectical confrontation'. To unpack this further:

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself 'as a fish in water', it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted (Grenfell and James, 1998, p14)

Conversely, when habitus and field are not in sync and there are considerable disjunctures, an individual will feel like a 'fish out of water', experiencing a process of hysteresis. The dialectical confrontation can result in a modified habitus, enabled by a degree of accommodation (Stahl, 2015) - habitus accepts the legitimacy of the new field and is then structured by it. As habitus is constrained by the structuring forces of the field they were originally raised and socialized within, the modified habitus incorporates conflicting elements:

Internalization of new experiences and schemes of perception can lead to the internalization of conflicting dispositions... these struggle for pole position... pulling an individual in different directions... both feeling the weight of the water and uncertainty in how best to swim' (Stahl, 2015, p52)

This is a destabilized habitus dived against itself, torn between two competing worlds, through internalization of divided structures, often generating suffering and torment (Bourdieu, 2000). Bourdieu labels this 'cleft habitus' or 'clivé habitus'. Dean said:

What they were teaching, compared to my environment that I grew up in, it was almost like two opposite things, it just didn't make sense... people I knew were getting arrested, getting raided and things like that, and they're trying to teach me about Macbeth and how to solve equations, and it just wasn't matching up with my life, that's the reality [Dean, Interview 17.01.2017]

This makes explicit the incongruence of structures both internally and externally, resulting in significant habitus disjunctures between two competing fields with different 'logics of practice'. This can result in individuals enacting and interweaving between multiple identities based on a destabilized habitus

that is in continual negotiation with itself due to contradictory and divided structural influences, leading to a double perception of the self (Stahl, 2015). More often than not, this will result in rejection of education due to the durable nature and early weight of the primary habitus epitomized by some of the participant's disengagement. Andy however, who was one of few with GCSEs, appeared to find a 'middling identity' during his time in school:

I didn't want to be there, you know what I mean. It was just something I had to do and go through. Like real life was happening after school [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

This would imply - during his schooling experience - that Andy accepted the legitimacy of the secondary field, however, he gave more weight to his social identity after school. This epitomizes the difficulty white working-class boys face in trying to negotiate an identity as they battle to reconcile competing ideas of class loyalty and social mobility. This can also be understood as a sensitive time full of confusion, with uncertainty in which way best to swim through internalizing two different schemes of perception and dispositions pulling in competing ways, tearing their habitus. The findings here reflect those of Stahl's (2015) boys in trying to combine two different identities – both a learner identity, shaped primarily by neoliberal ideology, and a social identity, shaped primarily by class – he insists this influences how an individual's identity becomes “fixed and fluid, how resistance and conformity is fostered, and how engagement and disengagement occur” (Stahl, 2015, p60). However, some manage to find a 'middling identity' based on an 'egalitarian habitus', such as Andy, who often projected traditional working-class values, which were also evident in his aspirations:

To not even be successful, but just stable and humble and that's it... just a job I like, a family, kids and our own home. I'm not assed about a Ferrari on the drive [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

Participants were resolute in their convictions of just wanting to be stable and not have high ambitions, which is arguably a counter-narrative to neoliberal discourses (Stahl, 2015). However, this was in the present, and during their schooling, some were unable to synthesize both a social and learner identity, therefore, rejecting and disengaging with education. Nonetheless, this can be understood as attempts to protect oneself from a cleft habitus – against any risk of both success and failure, which could bring vulnerability. The ‘embodied history’ of the primary habitus can construct a ‘defense mechanism’, based upon a ‘practical sense’ of a ‘probable upcoming future’ (Bourdieu, 1977), which can be illustrated by Michael:

From young I just knew I wasn’t going to do good in school, I never even tried... I would prefer to hang around on the streets than go school [Michael, Interview 17.04.2017]

This encapsulates not only how Michael had embodied the disadvantages he faced from the objective conditions of the social structure, but also the embodied history of rejection of formal education. Stahl (2015) suggests the embodied history of the working class renders educational success as beyond their grasp and desire. This is a past that survives in the present, and tends to structure actions that perpetuate it into the future based on internalized durable dispositions that create, and recreate the same structures. The individuals embodied history also shapes the horizon of expectations in the present and also a predictable upcoming future – individual’s previous experiences confine them to the parameters of previous social experiences, informing one’s ambition by what is not only realistic, but also probable (Stahl, 2015).

Therefore, the primary habitus could be considered a ‘defense mechanism’ against any risk of success or vulnerability. Inasmuch as Michael has internalized the social structure and altered his expectations, which are congruent with the norms, values, and dispositions of the field of origin. Therefore education, or more specifically, succeeding in education, would take

precedence in the 'habitus tug' (Stahl, 2015) and be hazardous to his social identity, expectations and predicted trajectory based on his structuring structures. These two competing fields results in dispositions competing for pole position, the durable dispositions deposited by early experiences from the field of origin having more weight, caused Michael to disengage and completely reject the logic of the field of education and protect against a cleft habitus.

If Michael's defense mechanism didn't reject the legitimacy of the new field, this would of surely led to a torn habitus which can be painful and tormenting, causing one to feel like a fish out of water in both the primary field of origin, and the secondary field. So based upon a practical sense, he excluded himself because it was unimaginable for him to be successful in education, without even giving it any real effort or conscious assessment. Such a phenomenon is explained in Bourdieusian terms as the 'subjective expectation of the objective probability':

In reality, the dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands (Bourdieu, 1990, P5)

Habitus excludes certain practices and pursuits as unthinkable, largely due to the unfamiliarity of the cultural group to which the individual belongs. The working-class individual is far more likely to make 'a virtue out of necessity' than to try achieving what has already been denied. There is an implicit tendency to act in ways expected of people 'like us', therefore, determining what is and not 'for us'. Those who are inherently disadvantaged in a particular social space adjust their aspirations and often turn to self-elimination without consciously assessing the real chances of success. Working-class students have often reconciled themselves to the limited opportunities that exist for those without much cultural capital (Stahl, 2015). Their level of aspiration is shaped,

at least to a degree, by the probability (based on past experiences) of achieving the desired goal. Although it appears natural, habitus is a product of our background and upbringing. It is an adaptation to objective circumstances that encourages our needs, wants and desires to be in equilibrium with what one is realistically able to achieve. Therefore, habitus is an embodiment of social structure, and based on previous experiences, it generates “things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say, in relation to a probable upcoming future” (Bourdieu 1990 p. 53). What has been internalised then, is the social structure, their position in that field, together with the chance of succeeding, which is determined by the defining capital in that field and the volume and composition of an individual’s own capital.

## **Employment**

It became apparent during the course of the research that all the participants expressed quite mainstream attitudes to employment. Yet none of the participants was actively job searching, and most were engaged in the informal economy, which arguably, is a way of constituting themselves as subjects of value locally (see community section). However, they all claimed to want legitimate employment, although they saw their prospects as poor and expressed feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. All had some form of legitimate work experience, with the exception of Michael. Two participants had mental health problems to overcome before being ready for work, but most participants could be described as discouraged workers (see Eurofound, 2012). Hayden said:

There’s loads of competition. That’s why I give up trying because I just wasn’t getting anywhere and never hearing anything back.... it’s hard to keep trying and trying and getting knocked back all the time. It affects your confidence [Hayden, Interview 27.01.2017]

He spoke about job searching in the past, but as the duration of unemployment rose, his confidence sunk - he found himself sporadically looking at jobs on the internet, but never actually applying:

Well you look for a job; you see some but just don't bother...  
One, you probably won't get it, two, it's a waste of your time,  
three, yeah I won't apply for it [Hayden, Interview 27.01.2017]

He suspected he could not compete in the labour market because he lacked qualifications and experience, so he basically gave up hope of gaining employment: 'Well its just not really part of my plans, its not like part of my day'. Hayden is engaged in the informal economy, which is a form of work, even if illicit – he says this earns him enough to get by and feed his own cannabis habit. He has become content, apathetic, and accepting of his social circumstances; he has developed coping mechanisms to deal with the day-to-day life of poverty and misery - taking drugs such as cannabis as a form of escapism. These situations and responses were also evident amongst other participants:

Matthew said he is sat in most days smoking weed and playing on his games console or usually around at a friends 'chilling out'. He said 'it's the same shit, but just a different day'. I asked if he was still looking for a job and if so, how's it going. He replied with 'oh fuck that shit now, I can't even be assed with it anymore'. He said he did try, but he got fed up of trying and gave up because he wasn't getting anywhere...He told me about his financial difficult living on £100 every two weeks – he said it doesn't go far and means he can't do anything as he's confined to the estate. As a result, he feels like he isn't living, but just existing, and getting by day-by-day scraping together what he can with friends for a bag of weed, essentially as a form of escapism to tackle boredom. He talked about doing 'little grafts' to earn extra money – I thought it was best not to ask him about this [Field notes 19.01.2017]

Most participants also perceived lack of experience as a major barrier, as well as a lack of qualifications. It would seem some young people get stuck in a

‘catch 22’ – a dialectical relationship between needing experience and having no experience. It became evident that those who perceived work experience as a barrier, also felt demotivated, meaning a further barrier manifested. Although not always overtly expressed, a constant theme was a lack of motivation, which derived from repeated failure to find a job. This is a two-way relationship between a lack of experience and motivation, causing participants to become discouraged workers and sometimes to give up all together. After a period of time, some participants became accustomed to living on the margins, just getting by. Social isolation was also apparent across some participants:

He thinks this research might be good for him as it will give him something to do and get him out the flat, as well as connecting and chatting with somebody who wants to listen and talk to him about his life. At this point, after him telling me about his social isolation, I begun to suspect he never had any intention of inviting me in to his flat, as he preferred the opportunity to get out for a while [Field notes 18.01.2017]

Some participants were discouraged workers for other reasons. Jake discussed how he suffered negative experiences in his last job due to disputes with managers about pay, resulting in a tribunal, which he won, and thereafter, it was really awkward for him, so he eventually left. He said “it’s just put me off work, that was my first job and it couldn’t of been a worse experience”. Consequently, Jake’s lost motivation to look for a job:

I think just the motivation to get a job really, to be quite blunt, I can only get a shit job at the bottom end on low pay so it’s not very motivating [Jake, Interview 08.02.2017]

Jake lacked motivation as he knew that he would have to start at the bottom in the ‘secondary labour market’. These types of jobs are unappealing with low pay and insecurity. Jake is also involved in the informal economy, which he described as necessary because “living on benefits is a dire situation”:

Jake said he's not scared of the consequences of being involved in the informal economy because he needs to do what he does to keep his head above water - he doesn't fear going to prison. He said if he gets caught, he will tell the judge straight that he doesn't regret what he does because it's what he has to do to survive, and if the judge was to spend a week in his shoes, he would do the same [Field notes 01.03.2017]

To understand this discouraged worker in Bourdieusian terms - this makes explicit the participants low levels of capital, weak strategy and practical mastery, restricting their capacity to navigate the wider field in *playing the game* of capital accumulation. Those lacking 'legitimate' capitals cannot successfully navigate the wider field due to symbolic violence – this creates symbolic barriers by the dominant that monopolize resources. The field tacitly imposes conditions of entry, not only to debar those who would destroy the game, but shaping new entrants into compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field to create doxa. The field legitimizes the dominant capital and reproduces it, by recognizing and valuing, or misrecognizing and devaluing individuals and groups. This process can be further understood through deconstructing Andy's experiences. Andy spoke about some of his frustrations job searching:

None ever get back to you; your CV has just gone straight in the bin. Like it would be nice to know why you didn't get the job or whatever, but they can't even be bothered just to send you a little email, it pisses me off.... Then it makes me think I'm not good enough and keep checking my CV thinking why am I not good enough [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

Andy felt like he was a failure after constantly being unsuccessful and not getting responses, and thought his CV had gone straight in to the bin. This he linked with postcode stigma, which he thinks disadvantaged him in gaining employment. Andy perceived himself as a devalued subject because he has internalized a devalued social position, based on a stigmatized local environment:

Like people see your CV and your address and they will just bin it. They judge you by what you do and write about your free time and activities. They want to see if you've been in book clubs and shit to see if you've been silver spoon fed... Your school, your GCSEs, your volunteer work, life experience, everything. Shit's getting worse out here, swear down [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

Andy is basically referring to his lack of 'legitimate' cultural capital, through being stereotyped and stigmatized, and the general feeling of not fitting it – a fish out of water. This caused him to believe that he doesn't 'fit' in certain fields due to his habitus and embodied cultural capital:

Everything man, stereotyped, dress, where I live, talk. Its all mad. It's like we're not all human... they don't want to give them (jobs) to people like me. They want to give them to fucking harry potter looking kids... I hate wearing pants and shirt and all that, it's not me. So because I don't wear that I get judged and seen as less. Fuckin'ell its madness [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

Andy recognizes the *rules of the game* to some extent, but is not prepared to try to adopt middle-class dispositions, as he wants to remain authentic and loyal to himself (this theme was also very strong across discussions on education). Identity plays a significant role as it is formed in relation to an individuals' perception of their own embodied cultural capital. Through tastes, practices and embodied styles, social distinctions act as class signifiers, and in this way, misrecognition can be made (Reay, 2004). Those involved in this research constructed class identities based upon appearance from their embodied tastes and styles, involving tracksuits and popular brands synonymous with street-wear of their local cultural code:

He was dressed in a black sports tracksuit, baseball cap, and trainers... Most of the participants dress similarly [Field notes 16.02.2017]

The performance of this class identity has value to working-class young men in their struggle for recognition in the local context and represents a subjective

sense of inclusion (see community) – although this is misrecognised by middle-class culture, which further devalues the working class. Paradoxically, it will reproduce inequalities and other oppressive social relations where the dominant culture is middle class, contributing to keeping them marginalized and disadvantaged. This signifies how working-class people who do not hold particular forms of cultural capital are excluded, but arguably, it is a counternarrative to middle-class culture, which generates certain forms of value in an attempt to resist being misrecognized as valueless. This identity performance, in the context of consumerism, may also go some way towards understanding why the young men would rather leave education as early as possible, and get a job, or if unsuccessful, enter the informal economy - to fund an identity which offers status and value – which the local community warden hinted at:

He thinks its tough for these ‘young ones’ coming up in the area... he said it’s hard for them to get jobs nowadays because there’s just too much competition and there’s not much help or support for them around here... so they sit about all day smoking weed out of boredom because they struggle to get a job, or at least a permanent one... He added that people get desperate for money too, so they’re easily led astray in to a life of crime... he suggested the kids around here need some proper guidance by ‘real men’ and good role models because they’re easily impressed when they see their elders in flashy cars with nice clothes and jewelry on, and want to be like them. Then they get used as drug runners and it’s hard for them to come back from it once they’re in deep enough [Field notes 18.01.2017]

The identity appearance participants invested in created distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Andy referred to ‘Harry Potter looking types’, implicitly ‘othering’ those who don’t fit their appearance as nerds or geeky, therefore, making intellectual labour unattractive and undesirable. Generally, participants were interested in practical manual work rather than jobs that involved reading and/or writing: “I’d rather be outdoors and working with my hands. It’s hard these days cos most jobs want you to read and write” (Jake). Hayden said:

If I was a smart boy, I would have had a job. If I had good qualifications it would be easier to get a job... Like I read the description and think this isn't for me. Plus it asks for experience and qualifications, I can't do sales and offices, I need something with my hands [Hayden, Interview 27.01.2017]

This is indicative of the type of embodied cultural capital found in working-class communities – an expression of masculinity traditionally associated with industrial culture. This has survived in the present through the embodied history of the habitus; therefore, they would feel like a ‘fish out of water’ in an office job because their *feel for the game* would be weak. To protect them from vulnerability, the structuring structures of the habitus renders office work as unthinkable, and manual labour desirable. MacDonald et al (2005) suggest working-class young men encounter extreme difficulty in the transition from youth to adulthood, with the loss of the traditional youth labour market and manual masculine employment associated with working-class men on the whole – they call this ‘displaced masculinities’.

Stahl (2015) suggests that working-class youth often engage in ‘othering’ to protect and reinforce their own identity, which is under consistent institutional attack by middle-class culture and neoliberalism. Stahl (2015) also found, although working-class pride has eroded and can no longer be used as a positive source of identity, the boys in his study often characterized the working class as hard working, decent and ordinary people, and depicted the middle class as snobby with well-paid jobs that earn more for doing less. Similar findings were found in this research when discussing social class with participants. This can be understood as a counternarrative in an attempt to be misrecognized as valueless, but this disidentification and characterization of social classes, can potentially lower aspirations in to such professions reinforcing a dominant social group as the participants reconciled themselves to the objective probability for those with limited capital. This is key in shaping aspirations; it's based on the structures of the habitus providing a sense of one's place, informing what's desirable and/or possible.

Much policy surrounding youth unemployment has focused on a ‘lack of aspirations’ and has an emphasis on a cultural underclass. However, the boys in this study all had aspirations to work, which fundamentally challenges the dominant narratives about NEET young people. Such rhetoric does however have political purpose as it discursively reconstructs youth employment as an individual problem of participation, legitimizing inequality prevalent in society (Simmons et al, 2014). All participants said they had quite traditional aspirations and mainstream values:

Well I do want a job, a career and things, I do want to be working and live a normal life. To be comfortable you know what I mean, just living life... A family, a house, a car, a dog and a job [Dean, Interview 17.01.2017]

Simmons et al (2014) suggest although traditional working-class structures have been shattered by neoliberalism, most working-class youth still have traditional values and particular orientations towards work, family and home-life. This is evident across the data:

We discussed what he'd like in his future, he just wants to be ‘normal’, have a girlfriend, a job he enjoys and a place to call home. He said he gets a lot of anxiety about the future though [Field notes 26.01.2017]

This displays the embodied history and durability of the habitus, and the reproductive mechanism of capitals and field - the same traditional dispositions passed over generations. However, despite having aspirations for a ‘normal life’, these ambitions were hypothetical and idealistic. From their perspective, not many feeling this was very realistic from their current positions – at least in the immediate future. Therefore, suggesting that there is a clear dichotomy, between having aspirations, but low expectations - they see bleak futures as their expected trajectories, and with no clear plan of action, a future of ambiguity, uncertainty and insecurity. As they all had similar aspirations and

expectations, encapsulating a collective class habitus; this renders what is seen as common sense – collective experiences reinforce the sense of naturalness of individual trajectories and is based on sharing similar configurations of capitals. Andy felt there should be alternative selection processes:

Have you ever seen that programme *The Voice*. Where they turn around and can't see anything about you, and judge you by what you can do rather than who you are. That's how jobs should be given, not judging you by where you live, or speak or what you wear or anything [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

Jake also advocated labour market regulation to stop people with more capitals jumping the queue and prioritize those who have been out of work the longest. He mentioned some type of training course for big companies with a guaranteed job at the end once you've proved to the employer you're willing to work hard, instead of:

Picking their friends, or brothers or sister and other people they know and giving them the job... so even if people do know people in the right places or whatever, they shouldn't be jumping ahead of others. It should be a fair selection process [Jake, Interview 08.02.2017]

In contrast, working-class families often lack legitimate social and cultural capital and can no longer really offer help to young people in terms of finding a job, as traditional working-class ways of 'doing things' have largely been rendered redundant by mass deindustrialization (Simmons et al, 2014). For example, handing CVs out at shops, and turning up at building sites or factories may have once been a successful way of finding work, but are now essentially outdated. Shildrick et al (2012) add that informal, word-of-mouth job search can sometimes still help young people get jobs, but will be restricted to the same poor work done by family and friends, creating recurrent poverty. Therefore, social and cultural capital held by the working class may only serve to reproduce poverty and maintain inequality. Dean thinks the whole system is

rigged and designed to create unemployment because it needs unemployed people to keep others employed:

There's not enough jobs for everyone, so some people are going to get a job, and some are going get left, everyone's competing for the jobs that there is.... if everyone had a job, there'd be no one in prison, no one needing to work at the job centre, no prison guards or police. I think the system needs people who are unemployed to keep others employed [Dean, Interview 17.01.2017]

Dean, perhaps unknowingly, has quite a traditional Marxist perspective, inasmuch as he sees capitalism as an exploitative economic system in which some gain at the expense of others. Michael felt doomed from the beginning and never even considered he would get a job:

Jobs weren't for people like me... from young I just knew I wasn't going to get a job... I was set up to fail; there was no point so I'd rather be on the estate with my mates [Michael, Interview 09.03.2017]

Bourdieu argues that “people are not fools; they are much less bizarre or deluded than we would spontaneously believe precisely because they have internalized, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective choices they face” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.130). Therefore, Michael could anticipate a probable upcoming future based on his *feel for the game* derivative from his habitus based upon past experiences.

## **Community**

Greenwick has been paramount in shaping and structuring the participants' expectations about education and work. The participants discussed their experiences growing up in their local community and the impact this had on them. Dean said he always felt the odds were against him:

I knew from a young age that I lived in a rough area, growing up with that mentality, you just grow up different because the odds are against you and most people you know are going to go prison and things like that. It's a constant battle... It's easier not to have ambition and be like everyone else [Dean, Interview 17.01.2017]

Participants explained how growing up they often observed people dropping out of school, drug dealing, drug addicts, people going to prison, gangs, violence, and death. They think this shaped their worldview, and normalized such behaviours:

It's a poor area, that's why people do drugs and crime and shit... Cos that's all you know, its all you see, crime, drugs, police, drink, robbing, fighting, everything [Michael, Interview 17.04.2017]

Such views encapsulated a collective habitus, conditioned by the field – not fully blaming their circumstances, but explaining how it's a contributing factor in influenced their beliefs, attitudes and values:

Well if you're not happy at home and seeing all this shit, you're not going to go school and college and do well when all your friends are selling drugs and going prison. Like if you see everyone else broke and struggling, you've not really got a lot of inspiration. When you look out your window and see a run down estate, that's you expectations, that becomes normal for you [Jake, Interview 08.02.2017]

In Bourdieusian terms, the field conditions them as they internalize the social structures, which, in turn, produces a functional habitus symmetrical with the norms and values of the community. Habitus is an amalgamation of the past and present that mediates current and future engagement with the social world, shaping what is perceived as normal or abnormal, desirable or undesirable, and possible or impossible. It encompasses mind and body, past and present, the collective and individual, inasmuch as it produces ways of thinking that reflect an individuals understanding of what is normal for people 'like me'. Therefore,

growing up in deprived circumstances becomes normal and the expectation, resulting in the participants accepting their social position without ambition to escape; arguably, from their worldview, they do not even perceive it as necessary to try escape. They are the living embodiment of disadvantage; inequality becomes seen as normal and natural - they adjust to what's expected of them. This is the work of the internal organizing mechanism of the habitus – a structure of dispositions for engaging with the social world – generated from social positioning and providing both a sense of the game, and an ability to play the game (Bourdieu, 1990). Individuals do have agency, albeit limited by social constraints of culture, including rules and regulations – habitus shapes, not determines. Therefore, they have internalized negative and devalued social positions and trajectories. Dean recognized how the field and embodied culture served to keep the local population disadvantaged:

I've seen people who are gangsters have sons, and their sons are gangsters, that kid was born in to it, that's all he knows, that's normal [Dean, Interview 17.01.2017]

This raised the question of whether then, it is the environment that is disadvantaged, the culture itself, or an amalgamation of the two. This important question has competing philosophical policy perspectives for understanding and addressing poverty – is it a product of individual agency, or is it structurally based on an unequal distribution of wealth and power. Bourdieu enables us to go past this dichotomy with the concept of habitus that points to the embodiment of structure and enactment of individual subjectivities. Dean said:

I think it's a mix, because they're born into the culture its much easier for them to stay in the culture, because you just lose ambition. Because you know you're from a poor area, because your friends are selling drugs, cos' no one's ever told you, you can be someone, do something, and do good in the world [Dean, Interview 17.01.2017]

Although Dean spoke about being born into a particular culture, he didn't distinguish if this was primary or derivative, inasmuch as if it's a culture of poverty, or a disadvantaged environment. Andy said:

I don't think it's the area, I think it's the people in the area. Like imagine all the Greenwich people went to a nicer place, the same problems would happen there, people would be trying to find shots (drug addicts) to start a phone up (sell drugs), riding motorbikes and all that shit [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

When questioned about cultural factors, Andy said:

I don't know about culture and that shit but it's just the way people are init... it's not the area, it's the people what's made the area like it is today... It's got a bad reputation and it's them who live here that give it that bad name [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

After probing and deconstructing the different ways an area might influence a person's learning, their expectations and opportunities, Andy was able to reframe his own experiences and relate them to the field. He talked about experiencing symbolic violence from authorities which becomes the impetus in reproducing more symbolic violence in a paradoxical perpetual cycle:

Police are scumbags... as soon as they see you they think you've done something just cos' you're in Greenwich... Like if you're pulled over every day and shit and police don't leave you alone, you start to think I might as well be up to shit, or selling drugs or whatever because they already see you like that [Andy, Interview 02.02.2017]

In this sense, the dominated contribute to their own subjugation through symbolic violence - Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p167) say "social agents are knowing agents who, even when they are subjected to determinisms, contribute to producing the efficacy of that which determines them insofar as they structure what determines them". This exemplifies how individuals internalize the social structure and its rules, which influences people to live a

certain way, embody certain attitudes and enact certain behaviours. Bourdieu (1977) suggests the field is primary, and habitus derivative, as habitus functions in relation to, and is dependent on the field. Initially, Andy saw the area as a reasonable place but also recognized that it has a bad reputation and later acknowledged that the field shapes individuals, who recreate the field, which shapes the next generation's habitus. He came to understand this through his own example of symbolic violence based on a devalued position in a misrecognized field; which paradoxically, will influence practices that will result in the reproduction of symbolic violence. It's not that it is a culture of poverty, just that it lacks legitimate capitals, and has played a key role in legitimizing inequality - culture is derivative from the social structure enacted through positions, conditions and dispositions. The common-sense view held by most participants was that individuals are responsible for their own disadvantage. This is based on the embodied history of participant's habitus; they have internalized disadvantage and normalized it as natural disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1990).

Working-class culture is devalued and misrecognized because it has no access to legitimized resources in the wider field of power. This results in working-class communities and culture becoming stigmatized, their social space shrinks and confines them to the disadvantaged field they already occupy; ultimately, producing and reproducing the structures of the field. Although cultural factors are important, as they are shaped and developed by deprivation and disadvantage, they also shape responses to poverty, but more weight should be given to the structures that create poverty. Lewis (1966) discusses the cycle of poverty – the notion that the poor have an oppositional value system and remain in poverty because of their adaptation to poverty. However, Lewis sees a two-way relationship between structure and culture – that structural poverty is primary and that culture adapts to such poverty. In contrast, Murray (1990) argues that primarily the cultural values of the poor create poverty and disregards structural inequality. The working classes have experienced

symbolic violence over different generations, more recently through discourses of ‘the underclass’ associated with the ideas of Murray (1990). However, recent research (Simmons and Thompson 2014; Shildrick et al, 2012) suggests little evidence of a cultural underclass. Participants talked about how the media create stereotypes and demonize certain groups. Jake expressed his opinions on the ‘benefit scrounger’ caricature:

Them ones they’re showing on TV, they’re the most extreme cases. It makes everyone on benefits look bad when they’re saying so and so gets this much and has a big massive TV... People are seeing on these programs one person saying they’re making loads of money off the benefit system and those people who work and pay taxes are thinking everyone on benefits is just scrounging really... If they wanted to show the reality, there’d be shows like ‘struggling on benefits’ that shows how life on them really is. They’re just showing the worse of the worse [Jake, Interview 08.02.2017]

Lewis (1966) is right to understand that working-class practices operate according to their own value systems. By decoding *the game*, the value system can be revealed. Dean said:

I’ve grown up in a deprived area with a lot of black people and culture, or hip-hop culture, or whatever you want to call it. I was listening to street music and gangster films and just mimicked it... Just seeing loads of gang members, people riding past you masked up, so seeing that, you act it out...Everyone in Greenwich was the same. Selling drugs on road, smoking weed and shit, it’s all people knew [Dean, Interview 17.01.2017]

Dean spoke mainly about local understandings of black urban masculinity - stereotypical images often associated with coolness, danger and promiscuity. Being part of a gang, listening and watching popular gangster films and music, certain dress styles and ways of speaking, taking/selling drugs and engaging in crime were all embodied social practices that offered symbolic value and a sense of belonging to the estate. As mentioned earlier, these could often be observed in their appearance - dressed in certain brands with a particular taste

and style:

Matthew was dressed in a black tracksuit with a baseball cap on... He got in my car and began to play with the radio and changed station to one which plays street/urban music [Field notes 19.01.2017]

Their identities are synonymous with street culture. This is also actualized through linguistic codes/local slang and certain forms of salutations:

Just 'trapping'... getting that paper...took chase in a 'ringer'... 'bun a zute'...Kevin uses quite a lot of encrypted slang [Field notes 02.02.2017]

Also encompassing particular food tastes and preference:

Gary suggested we get some food from the local Caribbean shop...We got to food shop and he ordered curried chicken with rice and peas [Field notes 23.01.2017]

These social practices are an embodiment of class and race. Back (1996) studied the relationships between youth, music, ethnic identity and place, and maps how certain images have infiltrated the psyche of the white working class. He suggests that patterns of migration and socioeconomic change have, in some urban locations, resulted in a "fashioning and re-fashioning" of interracial friendships that generates a cultural hybridity (Back 1996, p. 184). He talks of a 'neighbourhood nationalism' that transcends racial boundaries as different ethnic groups grow up together and borrow from each other's culture to create 'local' identities. The exchange of culture between different ethnic groups is vital in understanding how the participants in this research find value for themselves - this is primarily born out of a form of space sharing between different ethnic groups, derivative from having no choice but to exist along side each other. This has led to what Back called a creative process, in which black culture is reconstructed in negotiation with white working-class inhabitants

(Back 1996). This hybrid culture holds value within the estate and white youth could also appropriate this local culture and engage in the local value system. In this context, such cultural capital holds high value, and translated into some form of symbolic ‘street’ capital, and although it holds little exchange value on the outside, it can protect from social exclusion at the local level. However, although it holds high value, it also has negative facets associated with crime, gangs, and violence:

He told me about some gang ‘beef’ that had been happening... Since this, a known gang member, has been looking for them... Andy said he has been keeping out the way and staying ‘low-key’ as the guy is a ‘gunman’ - there had been a few run-ins over the past week where he and his mates had chased a few local guys and apparently pulled out guns. Andy thinks someone will end up getting hurt so he’s been staying out the way so he doesn’t get caught ‘slipping’ [Field notes 02.02.2017]

Illusio of the field gives capitals their meaning – for capitals to be recognized as valuable, a habitus must be developed in relation to them within a particular field (Bourdieu, 1998). The participants’ perceptions of themselves have been shaped by their local structures and deposited in the habitus, providing a sense of ‘one’s place’. Therefore, their habitus had been developed in relation to the resources on offer in this field; they take *the game* seriously and invest heavily in it. What’s on offer from the participant’s perspectives are “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.488). Jake mentioned “it was more normal to sell drugs than get a job, if you didn’t sell drugs, no one would speak to you”. This is because they wouldn’t have been valued as an insider because they didn’t hold the recognized cultural capital - exemplifying how practices are not rational choices but based on particular principles. For practices to become recognized, they must be legitimized through the logic of the field – in the context of the locality, their practices are legitimized, recognized and valued, meaning they hold high capitals right for the game being played in this particular field, resulting in doxa. Dean mentioned “everyone was the same

because its all people know”, which encapsulates the collective habitus.

As a result of embodying misrecognized capitals the research participants become confined to this particular local field and can only play the games offered in that field. This in turn, led to a sense of entrapment and an embodied state of marginalization within shrinking social space. Some explained how hanging around becomes a way of life to pass time. As they become accustomed to living on the margins, they sink further into apathy and hopelessness. Thus, they adjust to the cultural norms and internalize the dominant values of their community. Hayden said:

My mates never had a job, so I didn't ever get a job... before you know it your in a circle... the environment, the same shit everyday, doing nothing, same shit, different day, same circle, same people, same thing [Hayden, Interview 27.01.2017]

Growing up like this makes young people susceptible to dominant local cultural norms. As Dean said, “it's harder not to get involved”. Jake spoke about feeling trapped and forced to participate in the local culture to find value:

When I was young I didn't plan to sell drugs as a career, and I don't like all this violence and shit but I was forced in to it. Obviously I could of just stayed in my house all the time and away from it, but what sort of life is that [Jake, Interview 08.02.2017]

In this understanding, social networks also shape identity and aspirations. Michael discussed how he was associating with people who were having negative influences on him but felt trapped with boredom and depression, which drove him to drink and to smoke weed as a form of escapism: “same depressing shit everyday, then my mental health gets bad again... that's why I give up”. He wasn't happy with his lifestyle, but saw it as the only game he knew of and could play:

Like the influence it has on you, the way you see things and approach things, like work and life... I seen myself as wanting to be a drug dealer and do crime and be someone on the estate [Michael, Interview 09.03.2017]

If one understands what is of value within the community, it highlights what is required for individuals to become a person of value. In this understanding, it would seem the goal was to be successful within the estate according to the local cultural value system - the logic being that being a someone on the estate is better than being a nobody on the outside. Bourdieu (1990) argues individuals do have the freedom to make choices, but they do not choose the principles of these choices. Therefore, practices are not rational choices, but based on principles derivative from embodied structure entwined with social relations of capital. Now, he feels trapped in his marginal position and knows that in order to progress and improve his social position, he would have to cut friends off and dis-identify with the working class:

I'm sort of stuck still. I need to get myself out of it so I can move forward... If they can't help me to get where I want to be, to be successful, so if that's how it's got to be, then that's the way it is [Michael, Interview 09.03.2017]

Michael nevertheless keeps resorting to self-destructive behavior by getting drunk and involved in fights:

He had a big black eye and gash on the side of his face. Asked him what had happened – he said he was on a mad one at weekend and it all kicked off at a house party with some guys he'd only met a few hours before. He said there were 5 of them and only him and 2 mates but they managed to chase them off with a knife [Field notes 20.03.2017]

This was just one of many incidents Michael was involved in. His capacity for self-sabotaging behaviour is evident but may be understood as ramifications of the life choices he made based upon particular principles of what was available to him at that particular point in time and space. Now he wants to improve his

position, but it can be difficult to adopt values and dispositions associated with the middle class, while under the 'classing gaze' of local community; having 'middle-class aspirations' is implicitly positioning the working class as not good enough.

## Conclusion

My research speaks to Bourdieu's theory of human action as a dialectical relationship between subjective agency with objective social structure. Bourdieu (1977) argues that space is structured by various forms of capital and explains inequality through the unequal possession of capital – social, cultural, and economic – which grant privilege and power to their owners. Symbolic capital is a portfolio of all capitals one embodies which determines their place in society, and which can be negotiated and exchanged in different fields and games where capital has different values (Bourdieu, 1990). The more capitals one has, the more power they have to control the field and regulate it for their own benefit. More often than not, the dominant maintain the orthodoxy of a field which naturalizes and justifies their privilege, and in turn, protects their interests by maintaining or increasing their resources.

This understanding of divisions in social space based on capital accumulation highlights how class formation is dynamic, as it's possible for individuals from various backgrounds to acquire and accumulate different forms of capitals. However, those who share similar positions often share similar configurations of capitals, and therefore, are likely to share similar life chances and opportunities. In this way, distinctions can be made, and inequality becomes observable. Individuals' practices reveal capitals and their generating principles, which Bourdieu refers to as a 'logic of practice' for a particular social position in social space, which then becomes embodied in habitus.

Through habitus, Bourdieu entwines both social divisions produced by capitals with the subjective experience of individuals based on social location. This helps uncover complicated practices and explain how and why, in some cases, individuals engage in practices to their detriment. Bourdieu is basically arguing that structural disadvantages are internalized through socialization and produce forms of behavior that reproduce inequality. For example, those from working-

class backgrounds often engage in practices based on misrecognized capitals that contribute to the reproduction of their own disadvantage, based on a durable set of dispositions located in the habitus. This makes explicit inequality as oppressed individuals become the embodiment of disadvantage expressed through their practices - habitus is a product of inequality in social space based on an unequal possession of capitals. The middle class and working class both possess capitals, but these are different, and the distinctions these produce in practices, is made into inequality through symbolic violence. Nonetheless, Bourdieu's tools are not just conceptual, they incorporate a dynamic epistemology which makes them active tools for deployment, and which help us get to grips with the complicated realities of social class relations.

As outlined in the methodology, Bourdieusian tools can be realized through ethnographic research. Ethnography provides the methods for an in depth qualitative investigation to generate rich descriptive data on lived experience. This enables a detailed understanding of culture – when this data is used in conjunction with Bourdieu's methodical tools, this offers an extremely powerful lens in which to understand the experiences of NEET young men on the margins of society.

## **Findings**

The overarching theme across the data presented in this thesis, was of working-class culture and identity disadvantaging the participants, in both education and employment spheres, and thereafter, resulting in NEET status. Exploring the young men's culture through Bourdieusian tools made explicit how it has been misrecognized and subsequently devalued through a concerted institutional attack by hegemonic ideological forces of neoliberalism, often resulting in experiences of symbolic violence. The participants were often presented with a choice, either accept neoliberal discourse or protect their cultural identity - all

the participants rejected neoliberalism because they wanted to protect their identity, resulting in their systematic exclusion.

This was particularly evident in participants' educational experiences. Most engaged in various forms of 'bad behavior' within school, as well dropping out completely - either through self-exclusion, or by being formally expelled. This 'problematic' behavior can be understood as based on cultural disjunctures, and a negotiation of identity filled with confusion, insecurity and uncertainty in which way best to swim. The white working class is often depicted as devoid of aspiration in response to their underachievement and underperformance. However, Bourdieu's tools enable us to understand that working-class culture disadvantaged these young men in education. To succeed in education would require a transformation of their identity and culture to adjust to the dominant middle-class culture found within education. At the individual level, it was an identity negotiation with an institution underpinned by neoliberal ideology and middle-class values, which either serves to reinforce their working-class identity, or encourages them to lose it in accordance with the neoliberal aspiration agenda. One identity performance is detrimental to the other – the young men in this research had to make choices on whether to remain loyal to their working-class identity, or lose it.

This often resulted in rejection and total exclusion as the participants in this study mostly internalized a culture of resistance to education to protect and maintain their working-class identity – all the participants thought that education wasn't for them. What is clear from the data is that there was no middle ground which connected the young men and education – it seemed to have no relevance to their life outside school. They didn't want to participate because they simply didn't value education - their identity had not been shaped in relation to the rewards and resources available within education. Conversely, education couldn't offer any value to their working-class identities – it was a game that wasn't made 'for them' and therefore, that they didn't want to play.

As they wanted to keep their identity, which reflects a desire to stay in their class, this is detrimental to their education usually resulting in low achievement, failure, or total rejection. Essentially, neoliberal aspiration is in conflict with traditional working-class values, undermining its culture, and positioning it as worthless. The argument here is that the working-class young men in this study are left at a serious disadvantage with few qualifications and an educational career characterized by failure and rejection.

The same theme was evident across the participant's experiences of employment and job searching. The young men in this research didn't embody the right form of culture, which misrecognized, devalued and disadvantaged them in the wider field. They were confronted by what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic violence', which caused them to eventually become discouraged workers as they couldn't access, or sustain themselves in the labour market. As traditional working-class employment dwindles, the NEET young men in this research have no place in middle-class employment or social spaces; they were systematically excluded based on their classed identity performances which implicitly reflected that they weren't accepting of dominant neoliberal values. This rejection of their cultural identity, forces them to make a 'virtue out of necessity', such as turning to the informal economy to get by – which then becomes normalized within their culture and breaking the law becomes seen as a small price to pay to live a dignified existence.

Arguably, the most important finding was the contradictory data, inasmuch as the NEET young men had aspirations to work with mainstream attitudes and ambitions, but their behaviour in their local community wouldn't suggest that – they were engaged in informal economy, lived chaotic and turbulent lifestyles involving drugs and violence, and were not actively job searching. Using Bourdieu's tools to deconstruct *the game* being played in this particular context, it enabled an understanding of the complexity of their behaviours that are often misunderstood when taken out of context. What became clear from the data, they redefined their own value system and created counternarratives

in acquiring different forms of resources that are valued on their estate, which offered status through symbolical legitimization. The resources available were born out of a form of culture sharing, in which local black street culture had been remade in negotiation with white working-class young men to create 'local' identities. Within this space, they have abundance of resources, which leads to inclusion in a certain narrow context – this is what Wacquant (1996) refers to as 'advanced marginalization'. These inside resources give value, status, and recognition, which are important resources in the locality, but choosing this path to inclusion, has ramifications in the wider context.

There are usually cultural deficiencies associated with being NEET as they are often demonized through populist stereotypes as lacking work ethic and aspiration. My research challenges such discourses as the participants in this research shared the dominant values of the rest of society, including the positive evaluation of hard work. However, their cultural identity, and the performances that actualize it (dress, tastes, music, speech, style) are crucial. They represent the embodiment of class and race, which is misrecognized within wider society, and which has been reconstructed as resistance or oppositional to mainstream middle-class culture. Arguably, this is because the NEET young men in this research did not want to sacrifice their culture or identity, illustrating a desire to stay in one's social class. Therefore, implicitly rejecting social mobility promoted by dominant discourse – in neoliberal terms, this means they are not 'aspirational' and often came under attack, as neoliberal values are the dominant norms within contemporary society. The ramifications of this, is that NEET young people are being forced to disidentify with their working classness to achieve or progress in life. For a working-class youth to desire a 'normal' working-class life, they have been reconstructed as a problematic group.

On the one hand, these processes can be understood as part of a fragmentation and dilution of traditional white working-class identity, culture, communities

and employment, which have been systematically shattered by neoliberal capitalist forces. On the other hand, this cultural mix, in which the white working class search for new ways to constitute themselves as subjects of value, arguably leads to further devaluation and disadvantages. This is because the values associated with black 'street' culture - crime, sex, gangs, drugs, et cetera - are also viewed negatively within mainstream middle-class society. Due to the embodiment of structural disadvantage, these young men have become marginalized in their local environment, and then adopted the dominant values of their community – as Lewis (1966) suggested, cultures often adapt to the strains of poverty. These values then produce a complexity of practices which paradoxically, although they are a resource locally, will also serve to reproduce their disadvantage. This means the young men in this research are likely to stay NEET in a state of perpetual disadvantage understood as 'advanced marginalization' (Wacquant, 1996).

Although this research is particular for this specific context, other studies (Shildrick et al, 2012) on culture and class across time and space show how working-class culture can result in social space 'shrinking' around the individual. Simmons et al (2014) also suggest class is the biggest factor in contributing to NEET status. They argue that NEET young people need to be seen through a proper perspective of the social and economic changes that have taken place, and the ideological forces against this backdrop to fully understand the process of economic marginalization that has taken place. Nonetheless, this research is not generalizable because culture is relative – for example, this type of culture would not be found in a predominantly white area located in the northeast of England (Shildrick, et al, 2012). However, it has built a valid picture of a set of NEET young men in a particular urban context; offering valuable insight into the processes of marginalization - through the embodiment of class and race - for white young men residing in such social spaces.

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## Appendix 1

<b>Participant</b>	<b><u>A</u></b>	<b><u>B</u></b>	<b><u>Length</u></b>
	<b><u>g</u></b>	<b><u>as</u></b>	<b><u>of</u></b>
	<b><u>e</u></b>	<b><u>ic</u></b>	<b><u>partici</u></b>
		<b><u>de</u></b>	<b><u>pation</u></b>
		<b><u>ta</u></b>	
		<b><u>ils</u></b>	
Dean	2	Own flat.	Who
	1	Mental health problems.	le
		No qualifications.	durat
		Some work experience in football coaching.	ion
Andy	2	Lives with mother (single parent).	Who
	3	Has 5 GCSEs grade C-D's.	le
		Worked	durat
			ion

			in constructi on until made redundant .	
Hayd	2		Lives	11
en	2		between mothers and girlfriend s. No qualificati ons. Some work experienc e in refurbish ment (Summer job). Smokes a lot of weed. Involved in the informal economy.	wee ks
Mich	2		Lives	7
ael	3		with mother. Has spent substantia l periods	wee ks (was in priso

		in prison.	n for
		Suffers	5
		from	wee
		mental	ks)
		health and	
		has drug	
		and	
		alcohol	
		problems.	
		No	
		qualificati	
		ons or	
		work	
		experienc	
		e.	
		Engaged	
		in the	
		informal	
		economy.	
		Has	
		daughter	
		with ex-	
		girlfriend.	
Jake	2	Own flat.	12
	4	Recently	wee
		moved	ks
		back to	
		area.	
		Involved	
		in the	
		informal	
		economy.	
		No	
		qualificati	
		ons.	
		Worked	

		at Tesco for 2 years. Has a son with ex- girlfriend.	
Matt	2	Lives	1
hew	1	with mother (single parent). Michael's cousin. No qualificati ons. Smokes weed and is involved in informal economy.	wee k
Gary	2	Own flat.	9
	3	Has drug problem with cocaine. Has a son with ex- girlfriend. Has few GCSEs and worked in	wee ks

a cleaning  
job for 3  
years  
after  
finishing  
school.

Davi  
d

1  
9

Lives  
with  
father  
(single  
parent).  
Attended  
PRU and  
achieved  
some  
certificate  
s.  
Dropped  
out of  
college.  
Wants to  
set up  
own  
clothing  
brand.  
Worked  
in retail  
for a  
couple of  
months.

2  
wee  
ks

Kane

1  
8

Lives  
with  
mother  
and  
father.

3  
wee  
ks

			Has GCSEs. Worked in retail and nightclub promotions. Has stable girlfriend.	
Dylan	2		Lives with mother and stepfather. Recently out of prison for street robbery. No qualifications. Has worked in laboring. Engages in informal economy.	5 weeks
Kevin	2	1	Lives with mother (single parent). No	4 weeks

		qualifications. Some customer service experience. Engaged in informal economy.	
Kyle	18	Lives with mother. No qualifications – was in a PRU. Involved with young offenders service. Smokes weed.	3 weeks
Jordan	19	Lives with mother and father. Some GCSEs but dropped out of	2 weeks

college.  
Smokes  
weed and  
involved  
in  
informal  
economy.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Interview questions**

#### **1) Tell me a bit about your background**

Prompts: age; residence; family – parental occupations, siblings, etc; experiences of school; any previous experiences of work or post-compulsory education.

#### **2) Why do you think you aren't working or studying at the moment?**

Prompts: individual barriers (human capital – lack of qualifications, skills; personal issues – ill-health, motivation, commitment, family circumstances, caring responsibilities, etc); structural barriers (availability of appropriate education, training, work); ‘situational factors’ (transport, housing, temporary circumstances).

**3) How do you feel about your current situation?**

Prompts: happy; sad; satisfied; frustrated; angry; optimistic; depressed; disappointed.

**4) Would you like to be doing something else at the moment rather than being in your current situation?**

Prompts: paid work; voluntary work; further education; apprenticeship; traveling.

**5) What do you think about the services responsible for supporting you into education and work?**

Prompts: careers advice; Job centre; voluntary bodies; support workers (possible involvement with YOT or LAC teams, or social workers). Should they be doing more? Less? Be doing it differently? What forms of support would you find useful?

**6) What are your long-term hopes or ambitions?**

Prompts: education; work; relationships; family; lifestyle.

**7) Do you think you'll achieve your goals and ambitions?**

Prompts: If so, how, what's the plan? How realistic are they? If not, why not? How do they envisage their life panning out over the next 5-10 years – ideally and in reality?

**8) Is there anything else you would like to say about your situation or your life that you think is relevant to this research?**

Prompts: social class, personal experiences (growing up in community/culture?); political comment

**Appendix 3**

**Participant Consent Form**

**Title of Research Study:** Marginalization and the white working class: an ethnographic study of NEET young men in an inner city

**Name of Researcher:** Danny Connelly

I confirm that I have read and understood the participant Information sheet related to this research, and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.
- I understand that all my responses will be anonymised.
- I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.
- I agree to take part in the above study

**Name of Participant:**

.....

**Signature of Participant:** .....

**Date:** .....

**Name of Researcher:** Danny Connelly

**Signature of Researcher:**

**Date:**

**University of Huddersfield**

*School of Education and Professional Development*

## Appendix 4

### **Participant Information Sheet**

**Research Project Title:** Marginalization and the white working class: an ethnographic study of NEET young men in a northern inner city

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. May I take this opportunity to thank you for taking time to read this.

**What is the purpose of the project?**

The research project is intended to provide the research focus for my dissertation, which forms part of my Masters degree. It will attempt to understand what the causes are to young men in disengaging with education, employment or training, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen on the grounds that you are currently categorized as NEET and may provide valuable insights into the topic under investigation.

**Do I have to take part?**

Participation is entirely voluntary, so please do not feel obliged to take part. Refusal will involve no penalty and you may withdraw from the study at any stage without giving an explanation to the researcher.

**What do I have to do?**

You will be invited to take part in **interviews and observations**.

**Are there any disadvantages to taking part?**

There should be no disadvantages to your participation. If you are unhappy or have further questions at any stage in the process, please address your concerns initially to the researcher if this is appropriate. Alternatively, please contact the research supervisor: **Robin Simmons, Professor of Education, School of Education & Professional Development, University of Huddersfield**.

**Will all my details be kept confidential?**

All information which is collected will be strictly confidential and anonymised before the data is presented in my MA dissertation, in compliance with the Data Protection Act and ethical research guidelines and principles.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of this research will be written up in my MA dissertation and presented for assessment on 18/09/2017. If you would like a copy please contact the researcher.

**Who has reviewed and approved the study, and who can be contacted for further information?**

The research supervisor is **Robin Simmons**. They can be contacted at the University of Huddersfield.

**Name & Contact Details of Researcher: Danny Connelly. Email:**

**[Danny.Connelly@hud.ac.uk](mailto:Danny.Connelly@hud.ac.uk)**

University of Huddersfield

*School of Education and Professional Development*