

Youth attitudes towards their future: the role of resources, agency and individualism in the UK

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INTRODUCTION

- **Not focusing specifically on HE, but at**
 1. youth attitudes towards the future in general
 2. youth mobility aspirations
- **Looking at**
 - Part 1: the role of social structures, attitudes, agency
 - Part 2: the role of geography/ place

PART I

Understanding youth attitudes towards their future: the role of resources, agency and individualism in the UK

Based on:

1. Keating, A., & Melis, G. (2022). [Youth attitudes towards their future: the role of resources, agency and individualism in the UK](#). *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 5(1), 1-18. (free to access)
2. Franceschelli, M. F., & Keating, A. (2018). [Imagining the Future in the Neoliberal Era: Young People's Optimism and Their Faith in Hard Work](#). *Young*. doi:10.1177/1103308817742287

CONTEXT

- Young people in the UK tend to be quite optimistic about the future (even during economic crises)
 - *NB - More optimistic about their own personal future rather than the future of their generation as a whole*
- Optimism = a generalised positive and hopeful belief that the future they aspire to can be achieved
- Important to research optimism because linked to better outcomes in adulthood and can be a psychological resource to draw on, especially during difficult times
 - Can even help young people overcome structural barriers such as social class (see Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019)

WHY ARE YOUNG PEOPLE OPTIMISTIC? SOME THEORIES

1. **Social structures literature – optimism is linked to resources?**

- young people are more likely to be optimistic about their future if they have higher levels of socio-economic and educational resources (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019)

2. **A question of individual agency?** ie: the capacity to be able to make changes within your life

3. HAVING THE “RIGHT” ATTITUDE?

- **For example:**
 - sense of self-efficacy (i.e. the feeling that you can change your circumstances)
 - belief in the power of hard work
 - neoliberal individualism/ self-focus
- **Why is this a problem according to (some) sociologists?**
 - Some of these attitudes reflect a (false) belief in neoliberal meritocracy
 - Obscures the challenges and barriers. What happens if they don't achieve?



DATA FOR THIS PAPER

- **Cross-sectional survey data**
 - Web survey in June/ July 2014 (N = 2025)
 - Nationally representative
 - Young people age 22 – 29
 - England (n= 1003), Scotland (n = 520) and Wales (n = 502)
- **Method of analysis:** Multivariate regression models
 - DV = Optimism factor scores using CFA and 3 optimism items
 - Models run with weighted and unweighted data
 - Stepwise approach

KEY FINDING I:

Both resources and
attitudes matter...

- **Key resources...**
 - Uni students are more likely to have higher levels of optimism (educational resources)
 - BAME young people have higher levels of optimism (*Why? Perhaps immigrant capital?*)
- **Key attitudes/ capacities**
 - YP with higher levels of agency are more likely to have higher levels of optimism
 - Self-efficacy is particularly important (ie the feeling that you can change your circumstances) – the strongest relationship in the results

KEY FINDING 2:

The complex role of neoliberal individualism

(shows how resources & attitudes interact with one another)

- One measure of neoliberal individualism: agreement that *“People should look out for themselves, not for other people”*
- Original hypothesis: a linear relationship
 - those with higher levels of this attitude would be more optimistic
- But this attitude affects youth optimism in different ways, depending on the level of individual-level resources available to the young person.



CONCRETE EXAMPLE I

Optimism is higher among young adults who have high levels of some resources and have high levels of individualism

- still in education (rather than in work) *and* have higher levels of individualism
- living independently (i.e. not with parents) *and* have higher levels of individualism



EXAMPLE 2: Optimism among NEETS *(or lack thereof)*

For individuals with low resources (NEETS) and high individualism, then optimism tends to be **lower**

- i.e. It's not just the status of being NEET that lowers optimism, but rather, the status of being NEET **and** the feeling that *"people should look out for themselves, not for other people"* that lowers optimism
- Why? Optimism about the future, or even planning for the future, is luxury that this group cannot afford
- Instead, this group has so few social, educational, or financial resources that they feel
...largely stuck, at least at present, where they are. At best they may develop approaches to life designed to stave off even worse disasters or to provide some possible relief from their current straits (Anderson et al, 2002: Section 9.6).

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

1. Optimism about the future is important for mental health and other outcomes (present and future)
2. Youth sense of self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of youth optimism
 - *Policy recommendation:* include young adults in decision-making, and providing them with a sense that they can influence the world around them
3. Optimism is shaped by the interaction of your circumstances and your attitudes and individual capacities
 - *Policy recommendation:* increase opportunities for education and independent (and affordable) housing – i.e: resources that enable young people to become independent adults and that are associated with increased optimism

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEETS

- For individuals with low resources (NEETS) and high individualism, then optimism tends to be **lower**
- Pessimism during adolescence is associated with lower earnings, poorer health and wellbeing, and a greater chance of having financial problems in later life (see Hitlin and Johnson, [2015](#))
- This group are missing out on the transformative effect on life chances that optimism provides for others (see Schoon and Heckhausen [2019](#)).
- Will find it even harder to overcome obstacles and achieve positive outcomes
- *Policy recommendation: governments and youth agencies should provide additional targeted support for this group*

PART 2: THE ROLE OF PLACE

Coastal youth:
exploring the impact of
coastal towns on young
people's life chances |



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Photo credit: Dr Rachel Benchekroun (UCL)

CONTEXT

- Coastal towns have some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK
- Limited opportunities for further education or stable, well-paid work
- High levels of youth outmigration – compounding many issues faced by young people that still live in the towns
- Part of our research – trying to understand why some young people leave and why some young people stay

DATA AND SOURCES

RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. [Coastal Youth Life Chances project \(2023-25, funded by ESRC\)](#)
2. Emerging findings from 2 pilot projects between 2021 and 2022 in NE Lincolnshire (Grimsby and Cleethorpes)

See “[Growing up in coastal towns: Intergenerational perspectives from NE Lincolnshire](#)” - By Rachel Benchekroun, Avril Keating, Claire Cameron and Pippa Curtin

FOR THIS PRESENTATION

- Qualitative data
- Young people’s voices
- In-depth interviews, focus groups, walking interviews, life maps, photographs, etc.
- For this paper, draw on data generated with 33 young people aged 16-25
- Asked about their mobility aspirations

MOBILITY ASPIRATIONS OF COASTAL YOUTH

- Defined as “young residents’ hopes and plans to leave (or stay) in their towns to study, work, or make a life for themselves”
- A majority (20/33) of the young people in our pilot studies wanted to leave – moving to cities in the UK (not just London, often to local cities)
- **Why?**
 - Most leaving to attend university and then have a career – not perceived to be an option in NE Lincs
 - Life stage
 - “Cosmopolitan imperative” – move to the bright lights of the big city, access to culture and ‘cool’ things

THE ROLE OF PLACE: FEELING PERIPHERAL AND PUSHED OUT

- Young people in NE Lincolnshire feel that there are not enough things for them to do, or places for them to go.
 - High street shops are closing, green spaces are not safe (drunks and drug needles), seaside amenities are closed or aimed at tourists
- Combined with lack of further education or “career” jobs, means that young people feel there is nothing for them in these towns
- **In any case, staying is stigmatised**, signals a lack of “aspiration”
 - Although some do want to stay (or return, post-uni), largely because of family/ friendship ties but also due to place attachment

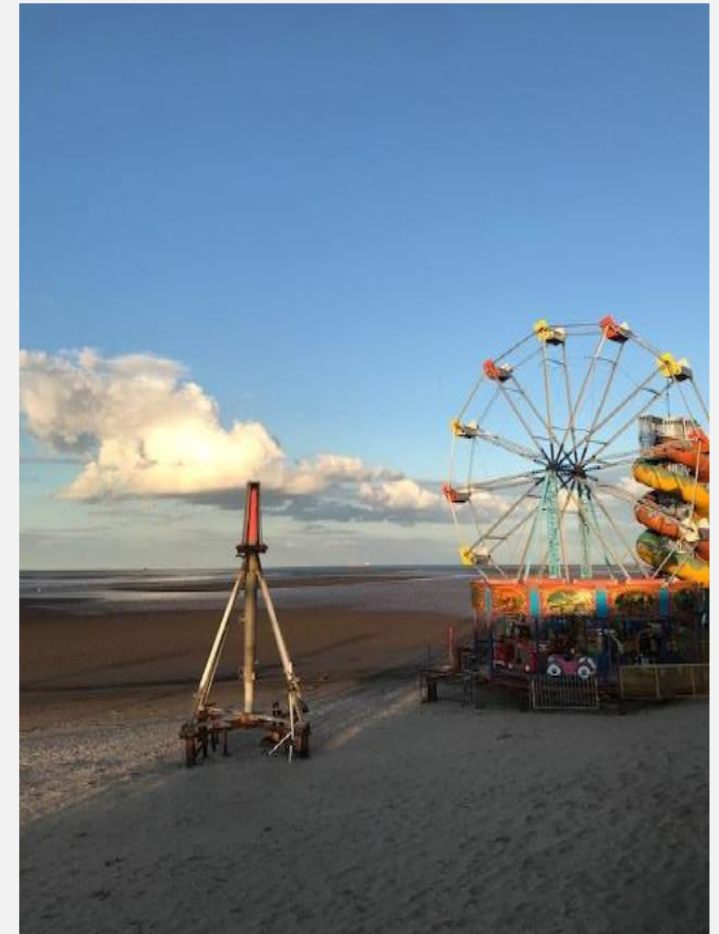


Photo credit: Dr Rachel Benchekroun (UCL)

NO FUTURE FOR THEMSELVES IN
THE TOWN, AND NO FUTURE
FOR THE TOWNS EITHER

- *'it feels like a slow drawn-out death for the area [is taking place]'* (Dan, 23).
- Because of the decline of economic *and* built-environment (empty shops, green spaces damaged)
- Young people feel marginalised in a town that itself is on the margins, culturally, economically, and geographically
- They feel that these towns are at the end of the line and at the end of their life span.



Photo credit: Dr Rachel Benchekroun (UCL)

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS?

- Mobility aspirations not just about social class, or need to access educational/ employment/ cultural opportunities.
- It's also about your relationship to the place you grew up in
- In NE Lincs – marginality seems to play an important role
- But these may be place-specific dynamics that are specific to this place –
 - strong desire to leave NE Lincs, but other coastal towns may make it harder to leave
 - Can be harder to find [the “exit signs”](#) in other towns
- More research required as the role of place is still a new area



FINAL THOUGHTS

- Youth aspirations = shaped by a combination of individual characteristics + attitudes + resources available + place-based characteristics
- Need to consider how the different dimensions interact
- Including youth in decision-making could contribute to reducing sense of marginality and building self-efficacy

SOURCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

YOUTH ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE FUTURE

- Co-authors: Gabriella Melis and Michela Franceschelli
- Keating, A., & Melis, G. (2022). [Youth attitudes towards their future: the role of resources, agency and individualism in the UK](#). *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 5(1), 1-18. (free to access)
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COASTAL TOWNS

- Benchekroun, R., Keating, A., Cameron, C., & Curtin, P. (2022). [Growing up in coastal towns: Intergenerational perspectives from NE Lincolnshire. Emerging findings](#). London: UCL Centre for Global Youth.
- **UCL:** Dr Rachel Benchekroun and Prof Claire Cameron (UCL Social Research Institute & TCRU)
- Pippa Curtin (NE Lincs Youth Action/Young Advisors)
- Young people from Grimsby + Cleethorpes
- Academics from University of Lincoln