Negotiating non-linear transitions – the case of marginalized youth

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Background

In what Furlong et al. (2003) call a "traditional model" of youth transitions, a variety of outcomes can be understood through quantitative analyses of the relationship between external contexts and the personal and familial resource base. An alternative conceptualization of youth transitions locates individual processes of negotiation within the constraints that continue to frame youth transitions, with a dynamic relationship between rational action, the mobilisation of capacities or capabilities in Sen's (2000) sense and the emergence of the outcomes (Furlong et al., 2003). In this paper I aim to present a theoretical model for understanding how marginalized youth – f.i. care leavers, youth from disadvantaged areas, disabled youth, youth abusing drugs, asylum seekers etc. (Osgood et al., 2005) negotiate their transitions to adulthood, with an assumption that these transitions will be non-linear rather than linear. Young people growing up in poverty are typically at risk for encountering a range of obstacles during this transition because they lack the opportunities youth in general have.

Theorizing non-linear transitions

Structural constraints, individualization and time in youth transitions

It is widely asserted that the relation between social structure and the individual's passage through the life course, in terms of a set of prescribed social transitions, is being transformed. It is, however, debated to what extent this means that structural constraints no longer have any significance, or whether individualization, or destabilization and pre-eminence of individual biographies and choice, still take place within such constraints (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Côté & Levine, 2002; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). For marginalized youth, however, it is obvious that structural constraints have great significance. On the other hand, it is well possible for this group as for others that social stratification has become more covert, and that crises are perceived rather as individual shortcomings than as outcomes of processes that are largely outside the control of individuals – or the epistemological fallacy in Furlong and Cartmel's (2007) terms.

In addition the ways in which people conceptualize and experience time are important influences on whether they have a notion of planning for the future. It is argued that, in terms of the way people think about the world, the links between the future, the present and the past are no longer understood as having a linear or chronological relation to each other. This makes predicting and planning for the future less relevant (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002).

Prolonging the present and dealing with one normative transition at a time might be a viable option for young adults who feel they have time, and have confidence in receiving adequate social support whenever necessary. This can be seen in conjunction with an ongoing prolonging of adolescence in Western countries. On the part of marginalized youth, however, the situation can be dramatically different. They often have to cope with several transitions at the same time, at an earlier age and with less social support and personal capabilities than youth in general (Stein, 2004).

A transition implies movement from one state to another, from one situation to another, or from one outcome to another outcome over time. More generally the term is used to describe the developmental processes of young people leaving adolescence and entering adulthood. A non-linear transition (Furlong et al., 2003) will, to a greater or lesser degree, include unpredictable movements between unpredictable situations and outcomes,

independently of whether a young person manages to achieve positive outcomes at a later stage. Negotiating transitions then presupposes agency and individual choice, but within structural constraints that may remain a hindrance to successful transitions, or may be overcome through individual effort.

Thus, two fundamental differences between marginalized youth and youth in general can be hypothesized. First, an extended notion of time and the extension of the present will take place against widely differing structural constraints. Second structural constraints may well lead to more pressure on marginalized youth to negotiate several transitions within a much shorter time frame, with fewer available resources than among youth in general. This implies that variations in how transitions are negotiated will follow different patterns.

Transitions and social exclusion

When studying transition processes among vulnerable youth, the concept of social exclusion is relevant as the processes often have different kinds of exclusion as their outcome. It is a contested term, but a suitable definition for our purposes is that "An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives". This definition recognizes that social exclusion is a relative concept to the time and place in question, as well as referring to participation, which is again widely regarded as central to the concept (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud, 2001:30-31). This definition also ties in with Sen's (2000:4) statement of the value of not being excluded from social relations, making social exclusion part of what he calls capability poverty, which may lead to other deprivations as well.

To be able to achieve successful participation young adults have to negotiate normative transitions in two domains of their lives. The first involves the move from education to the labour market, in which continuing beneficial full-time employment is, for the most, the ultimate goal. This presupposes educational attainment at a level that is compatible with the demands of the labour market. The second is to move from the status of dependent child to establishing independence, including leaving the parental home and frequently becoming a parent themselves (Bynner et al., 2002). According to this way of thinking marginalized young men and women will be at risk for social exclusion because they do not succeed in normative ways, or fail altogether. The term normative refers to the outcome, and does not presuppose that the transition should be of a specific length, that education should come before work, that family formation should take place after employment has been found etc.

As a further specification it is useful to include the terms "linear" or inclusive and "non-linear" or more risky and unpredictable transitions (Furlong et al., 2003). In their study of disadvantaged Scottish youth the more risky routes were followed by many of those who were f.i. less advantaged, those from lower social classes, and with poorer qualifications. More risky routes were frequently associated with early and protracted unemployment and poor housing combined with periods of homelessness.

Thus, we will presuppose that non-linear transitions in the areas of educational attainment, employment and housing, which are more probable among marginalized youth than among youth in general, will make transitions leading to social exclusion more difficult to counteract.

Transitions and social contexts

Negotiating transitions takes place in a series of social contexts potentially offering different kinds of social support. Research on marginalized and vulnerable youth underline the significance of social support, sometimes pointing out that one supportive person in a young person's environment is sufficient to change a negative trajectory. The same story is

sometimes told by young people themselves (Barry, 2001; Stein, 2004, writing about care leavers).

Furlong et al. (2003) focus on familial support in their theoretical model of understanding transitions. To this one will usually add peers and other grown-ups like teachers. However, youth in contact with the helping services might have a wider potential for social support through for instance foster carers, employees in residential units, social workers or therapists. It must also be expected that who young people experience as supportive shift over time. And while all youth need to learn some basic skills in order to master the transition to independent living, like how to pay bills, how to plan personal economy, how to organise your daily life etc., it is to be expected that marginalized and vulnerable need to learn even more. So the question is not only what kind of support the young people have, but what the contents of the support are besides emotional nourishment.

As Pinkerton and Dolan (2007) argue, troubled and troublesome young people are all too often seen as being too difficult to work with and beyond the reach of partnership and participation. This requires attention to the social support systems marginalized youth are already part of and to the relationship between their formal and informal supports. A fuller understanding of available social support is supposed to increase the possibility of engaging the youth in processes that better equip them to cope with their transition into adulthood. The authors use a conceptual model focusing on the connection between the external conditions of young people's lives, their "social capital" and their internal emotional worlds, their "resilience". As such social support network memberships become pivotal, and the quality and direction of these networks even more so (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). So far few studies have focused on the impact of life events on how adolescents' support network influence their own perception of how they are coping (Pinkerton & Dolan, op. cit.).

In this project, *the care leavers' reflections on how different types of social support, and different "pushes and pulls" in different directions influence them will be an important part of understanding how the transitions are negotiated*.

Transitions and individual capabilities

In their reflexive model of transitions, encompassing external contexts as well as familial and personal assets, Furlong et al. (2003) underline the significance of personal credentials (educational and vocational attainments) and abilities (skills and talents). Together with familial resources, which are economic, cultural as well as supportive, they lay the foundation for rational action – so construed if appropriate given the situation faced by an actor and the beliefs that he or she holds. Rational action includes the recognition by the individual that capacities or capabilities must be mobilised in order to secure an outcome. Thus, negotiating transitions will include rational action, as defined by the young people themselves.

Several of the authors who argue that more comprehensive and integrated theoretical thinking is necessary within research on marginalized youth point to resilience theory as a fruitful alternative (f.i. Backe-Hansen, 2008; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007; Stein, 2004, 2005). Modern theorizing about resilience, or positive outcomes in spite of adversity (Borge, 2003; Luthar, 2006) understands resilience as a dynamic process depending on interaction between a person and his or her environment, not as an individual trait. Amongst other things showing resilience means being able to utilize personal and environmental resources to cope with adversity in ways that foster positive outcomes.

In addition using resilience theory is fruitful to the process of understanding how marginalized youth negotiate the transition processes because many concepts that are used to understand and explain transitions derive from this theory. For instance this pertains to how individual risk is understood, and an acknowledgement that what might be conducive to negative outcomes is not necessarily which risk factor a person is exposed to, but how many

risk factors, for how long and with what intensity. Terms like trajectories and critical turning points also derive from resilience theory, and are likewise useful to the understanding of these transitions because they pinpoint the significance of processes over time but also shifts that may make a transition process change character as well as outcome.

A third intake to understanding transition processes at an individual level is the human rights perspective. Most young people negotiating transitions to adulthood are older than 18, thus above the age span encompassed by the UN Children's Rights Convention. But the focus on empowerment, on having a say in which services to receive and how they are organised, on being included, is an integral part of Norwegian State Plans for those receiving services in general. And as Bakketeig (2008) and others point out, many young people for instance leaving care will have had experiences of not being listened to while in care, experiences which may colour later relationships with professionals. The same pertains to other disadvantaged youth groups.

Finally, in accordance with modern thinking about the significance of individual biographies (f.i. Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), negotiating transitions will also include using one's own biography to create meaning and coherence, and also direction.

To sum up, marginalized youth must be seen as rational agents within a set of powerful social constraints. Theorizing about agency will draw on resilience theory, a human rights perspective and the significance of individual biographies.

A pessimistic or a positive view of the transition processes of marginalized youth?

Statistical analyses of outcomes for marginalized youth paint a mixed picture of their life chances, but pessimistic overtones are often predominant – and not unexpected. These pictures are to a certain extent repeated in qualitative studies of care leavers. Both types of research have played important roles in focusing the attention of policy-makers and politicians on the plights of care leaver, and this has, in turn, contributed to changed legislation and increased efforts to improve services in countries like Great Britain and Norway.

On the other hand the picture is not uniformly pessimistic, as results about variations within the group of marginalized youth show. And there is an increasing interest among researchers to use this knowledge as a starting point for a more positive perspective of looking at for instance care leavers (f.i. Chase, Jackson & Simon, 2006). This change ties in with an increased interest in for instance positive psychology, which has also been gaining force during later years. They argue that there is a risk that the poor track record of service provision begins to determine the lot of young people and makes it seem impossible that, having spent time in public care, they can actually achieve anything at all. Thus we risk ignoring and undermining the role they themselves play in determining their own futures, and the resilience and resourcefulness many possess. So while we can not, nor should not ignore research findings illustrating the poor outcomes, there is also a need to balance this picture (Chase, Jackson & Simon, op. cit.).

Analyzing how marginalized and vulnerable youth negotiate their transition processes will create possibilities of balancing the good and the bad, and not in the least develop detailed knowledge about how young people as actors cope with and sometimes transcend their situational constraints.

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