

Book review - Norbert Elias's Lost Research Revisiting the Young Worker Project

DEVANY, Chris

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/28252/>

This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

DEVANY, Chris (2019). Book review - Norbert Elias's Lost Research Revisiting the Young Worker Project. People, Place and Policy Online, 48-50. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Book review

Norbert Elias's Lost Research Revisiting the Young Worker Project

John Goodwin and Henrietta O'Connor

Abingdon: Routledge Rethinking Classical Sociology Series, 2015, 198 pp, £72.99 (Hb), £41.99 (ePub)

ISBN: 978 14 0940 466 8 (Hb) 978 13 1559 850 5 (ePub)

Chris Devany*

Sheffield Hallam University

Few matters spark the interest of social scientists more than the re-discovery of lost research from a bygone age. In this book, Professors John Goodwin and Henrietta O'Connor provide a comprehensive examination of the late Norbert Elias's first and only foray into the world of wide-scale qualitative social research in 1960s Leicester. In doing so, the authors present authoritative evidence detailing how the social and economic experiences of young workers in the original study were inconsistent with the post-war 'golden age' portrayal of youth transitions provided by contemporary Youth Studies scholars. They note how transitions into the labour market for both genders were commonly interspersed with periods of unemployment, feelings of insecurity and frequent changes in job roles. Furthermore, the book provides a fascinating insight into the departmental politics and methodological challenges experienced by the project team by judiciously examining detailed field and meeting notes.

The book centres on the re-discovery of data from the '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*' project carried out by the University of Leicester between 1962 and 1964. The re-discovered dataset consisted of 850 qualitative interviews with school leavers between the ages of 15 and 18, with the original researchers paying particular attention to the roles of identity, youth culture and interactions with the labour market. Despite the challenges posed with condensing such a rich dataset into a succinct publication, the authors demonstrate great proficiency in highlighting the key themes.

The focus of the book could easily have been wholly centred on the empirical findings emanating from the qualitative interviews with young people in Leicester. However, Goodwin and O'Connor also dedicate a sizable chapter to the processes underpinning the research, specifically the contemporary frictions within the project team and the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester. These ultimately resulted in the failure of the project. In analysing the archived materials Goodwin and O'Connor discerned three key disagreements within the group.¹ Firstly, there were disagreements over the 'right to publish': Elias insisted upon withholding the findings until the final report was produced. Secondly, Elias and other researchers held profoundly differing views upon the theoretical framework, with the former wishing to

gather qualitative data to explore the wider context of 'work' in conjunction with relationships and identity formation. Finally, and arguably most fundamentally, a clash of traditions between the 'abstract empiricism' (the common approach in the UK at the time) favoured by the research team was profoundly at odds with the process-oriented sociology adopted by Elias. These factors then combined with Elias's transfer to the University of Ghana after only five months and subsequently the somewhat predictable communication difficulties resulted in a failure to complete the analysis and reporting of the material collected.

Despite these challenges, the rediscovery of the research data and archived material has finally yielded a treasure trove of findings of interest to present-day scholars. The fundamental 'take-away' from this book relate to questions posed concerning what many have framed as the 'golden age' of youth transitions in the 1960's. In comparison to the precarious post-Thatcherite era, the 1960's have often been characterised as a period of plentiful low-skilled employment and short school-to-work transitions (Vickerstaff, 2003). The authors clearly and powerfully contradict this view by providing clear evidence of multiple job moves across differing industries. Furthermore, the qualitative data attests to the disillusionment with the labour market and the associated anxiety felt by the participants in the study. Young workers also experienced individualised youth transitions, thus critiquing the 'individualisation thesis' of post-modern scholars (Beck, 2002) and the 'epistemological fallacy of late modernity' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). However, instead of deconstructing and critiquing past works on the basis of these structural similarities of contemporary and historical youth transitions, the authors reassert their three arguments from an earlier article (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005). Firstly, scholars in the 1960s were not seeking individualised transitions, and thus they did not find them; secondly, re-examining historical narratives is no longer a priority of contemporary sociology; and thirdly, post-modern scholars have created an assumption that individual experiences and the labour market changed dramatically in 'post-modernity', leading to contemporary society and the 1960s being viewed through very different lenses. At this point the authors could have developed a deeper and more discursive discussion upon the validity of post-modernity (although this remains a potential focus for future work).

The second key contribution of this book is the application of Norbert Elias's 'shock hypothesis' to empirical sociology. The 'shock hypothesis' characterises the transition from school-to-work as one intertwined with eight 'shocks' that must be overcome (p.33). These 'shocks' are: first, the prolonged separation of young people from adults; second, the indirect knowledge of the adult world; third, the limited extent of communication between adults and children; fourth, the separate social life of children in the midst of an adult world; fifth, the role of fantasy elements in the social and personal life of the young vis-à-vis the reality of adult life; sixth, the ill-defined and ambiguous nature of young people's social role; seventh, adjusting to the realisation that striving for independence through earning money actually constitutes a new social dependence; and eighth, the prolonging of social childhood beyond biological maturity. Each of these eight 'shocks' is discussed in conjunction with the qualitative data from the project to adeptly bridge the theoretical and empirical elements of the research. This framework has the potential to be successfully applied not only to contemporary studies of youth, but also to research upon other individuals who are experiencing rapid life changes.

The final two chapters of the book focus upon 100 participants from the original study who were re-traced after four decades. Through detailing six vignettes the authors develop timelines that vividly portray the decline of manufacturing industries in Leicester from the 1960s to the early 2000s. Despite the challenges of unemployment in later life and the pressures of providing for their families, the original participants

grew strength from 'critical moments' to reassess their trajectories and to adapt to the challenges of a remoulded labour market.

The book provides a vivid reassessment of what is deemed to be the 1960s 'golden age' of youth transitions and clearly highlights the necessity for contemporary authors to question the accepted knowledge of historical processes. The authors could engage more deeply with the reasons why the 1960s were portrayed in such a way by critiquing previous studies on the subject. In doing so, the deconstruction of perceived wisdom could herald greater knowledge of historical labour market studies. However, the authors state that this book is merely scratching the surface of the re-discovered dataset, suggesting that such a reassessment of history could be provided in future works. On a similar note, at times the book has the feel of a collection of strong articles rather than a distinct monograph; however, such a critique seems somewhat unavoidable due to the number of articles that have been published in connection with the 'Young Worker Project'. Finally, the book pays testament to the significance of Norbert Elias as both a theorist and a researcher. His theory of 'shock adjustment' and wider work around the 'civilising process' are due greater credence in modern sociology, and hopefully this book will mark a renaissance of his work. This publication would be of interest to academics and students in Sociology, specifically Youth Studies, as well as historians and economists seeking to enhance their understanding of the links between the operation of labour markets and wider society.

Notes

1 Other project members include Ilya Neustadt, Sheila Williams, Percy Cohen, Richard Brown and Anthony Giddens.

*Correspondence address: Chris Devany, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus, Sheffield, S1 1WB.
Email: Chris.Devany@shu.ac.uk

References

- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London: Sage.
- Furlong, A., and Cartmel, F. (1997) Risk and uncertainty in the youth transition. *Young*, 5, 1, 3-20.
- Goodwin, J. and O'Connor, H. (2005) Exploring Complex Transitions: Looking Back at the 'Golden Age' of From School to Work. *Sociology*, 39, 2, 201-220.
- Vickerstaff, S. A. (2003) Apprenticeship in the 'Golden Age': Were Youth Transitions Really Smooth and Unproblematic Back Then? *Work, Employment and Society*, 17, 2, 269-287.