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The importance of socio-spatial influences in shaping young people's employment aspirations: case study evidence from three British cities

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The importance of socio-spatial influences in shaping young people's

employment aspirations: case study evidence from three British cities

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Abstract

Over the last two decades a vibrant body of research committed to investigating the complex inter-relationships between 'the social' and 'the spatial' has gathered momentum within sociology and the social sciences more generally. Focusing on young people, this article seeks to develop further insights regarding the sociology of place using the spatial visualisation technique of mental mapping as part of a mixed-methods approach. Its main contribution is to develop a more nuanced understanding of young people's localised cognitive spaces and associated socio-spatial influences in three deprived urban areas in Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton. In this context, the article explores the role of place in shaping young people's social networks, identities and aspirations regarding employment, and highlights the implications of these for future research.

Keywords

geography, employment, mental maps, place, social networks, sociology, young people

Introduction

Over the last two decades a research agenda problematising the geographies of space and place in the context of employment has emerged within sociological studies (e.g. Ward, 2007). Critical nuanced readings of 'the social' and 'the spatial' have uncovered important and challenging findings. One key contribution within this literature has been to develop a clearer understanding of how socio-spatial considerations influence the decisions made by young people concerning future career trajectories (see Green and White, 2007; Ralphs et al, 2009; Escott, 2012; Pickering et al 2012). In many ways, this body of research endorses Lee's (2002: 334) call to recognise that "economies are doubly geographical – in terms of both space and of social relations". Whether gauged from theoretical, methodological and/or practical perspectives a place-sensitive sociology (Gieryn, 2000) has opened up new lines of enquiry for academic and policy-making communities.

However, there remain significant gaps in this inter-disciplinary academic and policy based literature concerning young people and employment and their complex relationships with place and space. As Herod et al (2007: 248-249) note:

(M)uch work has conceived of W&E [work and employment] practices as unfolding upon an empty spatial stage called 'place' without evaluating how that stage is itself constructed and plays a constitutive role in shaping W&E practices. We suggest such a lack of engagement is regrettable, for an appreciation of how economic actors engage with geographical difference…can help us more clearly understand W&E practices.

This article aims to contribute to this evolving evidence base by exploring how the spatiality of young people's lives, their social networks, social capital and attachment to place inform perspectives of possibilities regarding employment, and the causal mechanisms that may exist here.

To this end, findings are presented from a mixed-methods approach applied within three deprived neighbourhoods in Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton. As part of this methodology, the article explores in some detail the innovative use of a mental mapping exercise, which encouraged respondents to represent visually (their) socially constructed attachment to place and spatial horizons. The mental maps are presented alongside other evidence which provides new insights into how and why socio-spatial synergies can influence young people's future employment aspirations; (note the emphasis on aspirations, not outcomes: no direct empirical evidence is presented that suggests cognitive spaces automatically and directly influence employment outcomes). The article explores how localised cognitive spaces are formed and emphasises some of their positive features, which is contrary to a more usual focus solely on negative aspects. Likewise whereas it is often assumed that limited geographical horizons lead to restricted social networks, the paper develops a narrative of uncertainty regarding this direction of causation by indicating that localised social networks can play a key role in shaping cognitive spaces. It is argued that it is the embedded 'subjective' context of an individual which is crucial when seeking to understand, and influence, seemingly 'objective' decisions concerning future aspirations and attitudes toward employment.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature in order to explore the contested meanings and relationships between space and place, as well as social capital and social networks. Secondly, the paper discusses the rationale for harnessing a mixed-methods approach. Here there is particular emphasis on the use

of an innovative spatial visualisation method – mental mapping. Thirdly, the principal findings section discusses the spatial extent of social networks of young people and the importance of bounded horizons in terms of future decisions an aspirations regarding employment. Intra- and inter-urban differences are illustrated by highlighting a selection of young people's mental maps, and integrating these with material from interviews and focus groups. Here the question of how and why some young people seemingly transcend space in their aspirations/ horizons is addressed. This discussion leads to a fourth section which considers key implications for future research.

Sociology, space, place, social capital and social networks

In 2000 Giery (2000: 464) reviewed the sociological literature of place to reveal "the riches of a place-sensitive sociology and propel it forward". More recently Ward (2007: 266) affirmed key inter-disciplinary links (between (economic) geographers and non-geographers) arguing "that the geographical concepts of place, space and scale … illuminate our understandings of the inherently spatial nature of work, employment and society." In particular Ward (2007: 274) sought to underline "the intellectual value added of an economic geographical perspective to analyses of work, employment and society".

At the outset it is important to define the concepts of 'space' and 'place', since these are contested terms. Definitions of space and place are rarely considered in isolation, but are captured as a binary: the definition of one is dependent on the definition of the other. For example Tuan (1977: 6) made the observation:

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value…The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa.

Similarly, Gieryn (2000: 465) places a strong emphasis on the subjective and personal investment (agency) of an individual to create (their) place:

Space is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings, and values are sucked out. Put positively, place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations.

Place, in this way, could also be read as 'humanised' or 'lived space' (Anderson and Jones, 2009). This is important in the context of this article's focus on the detail of urban space as perceived and negotiated by young people (White, 1996), because it foregrounds the (social) mechanics involved in place-making. The article addresses central issues of place-making, by questioning how place is "interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood and imagined" (Gieryn, 2000: 465) from the perspectives of young people.

Deepening these insights into place Cresswell (2004: 11) notes that:

Neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities are easily referred to as places… But *place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world*. When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. (italics added)

For Castree et al (2004: 65), "places are where people live…Place gives meaning to people, and people give meaning to place." Reinforcing the point, Ward (2007: 269) argues:

Not only is place more than context. Places are not given, they are socially constructed, the product of a host of human practices…. Understood in this way, places are both material arenas for the conduct of everyday life and the focus for the development of local identities and loyalties.

Indeed, this article demonstrates that there are important differences within these humanised spaces and young people's attachment to them. Place attachment, as understood here, refers to "the deep emotional bond or connection that people develop toward specific places over time via repeated positive interactions" (Dallago et al 2009: 148).

In seeking to provide a more nuanced understanding of place, this article presents arguments stressing the importance of engaging with the complex, contingent, personal, subjective, and contextual 'worlds of meaning and experience' when exploring young people's cognitive spaces, social networks, social capital and attitudes to place.

Before proceeding further it is also appropriate to explore the concepts of social capital and social networks and how they are linked with place attachment. An individual's social capital has been seen to be influential in a number of domains, including education and employment. Like the contested concepts space and place, a consensus around defining social capital is conspicuous by its absence. Putnam (1996:664-665) for example, defines social capital as: "(F)eatures of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participators to act together more effectively

to pursue shared objectives." However, as a working definition, Holland et al's (2007: 98) approach to social capital is helpful:

> We work with a broad understanding of the concept that encompasses the values that people hold and the resources that they can access. These both result in, and are the result of, collective and socially negotiated ties and relationships.

Specifically in relation to employment, there is a widely held view that social capital can be marshalled to provide additional opportunities in accessing labour markets. Granovetter (1973) highlighted different types of social networks as being important in opening up new opportunities, referring to these as strong ties and weak ties. In the context of employment, the differences between these ties are explained by Matthews et al. (2009: 307):

> Weak ties are infrequent connections that are typically achieved through work, neighbourhood, voluntary organizations, and friends-of-friends. Their primary value comes from broadening access to information, which is particularly important in job searches. Strong ties are important social capital resources as well, but are considered to be less useful in job-finding because strong tie networks are typically smaller and more homogeneous.

However, Matthews et al (ibid) note that this causality may be contested:

> …some scholars have argued that strong ties are important in non-standard or difficult labour markets where obligation and reciprocity play a stronger role."

Ultimately, Matthews et al's (2009: 308) research findings emphasise the point that "'context matters': that the effects of social capital on job-finding (may) differ according to who is using it and under what circumstances.

The questions of causality and influence regarding social capital, social networks, place attachment and cognitive spaces outlined above are pertinent for this article. In drawing attention to the dynamic between 'the social' and 'the spatial' Collinge, (2005: 191) asks:

> To what degree do spatial patterns determine social relations, or passively reflect these relations, or do something between or beyond these extremes? To what extent does spatial language contribute to `spatial fetishism'?

It is clear from the literature on the sociology of place that the importance of the interplay between 'the social' and 'the spatial' is now well established. However, there remain ongoing debates and uncertainties concerning the links between social networks, social capital, place attachment and the production of cognitive spaces. This article aims to contribute to these debates by exploring how the spatiality of young people's lives, their social networks, social capital and attachment to place inform perspectives of possibilities regarding employment, and the causal mechanisms that may exist here. The use of spatial visualisation techniques as one element of a broader approach is innovative and can yield rich insights (as outlined next), but the danger of spatial fetishism - when "geographic features [are] given causal power rather than being seen as the products of social processes" (Flint, 2011: 467) - is an issue to be mindful of when adopting explicitly geographical methodological techniques like mental mapping.

Mixed methods and the power of mental maps

Though the full research design captured perspectives from a range of stakeholders, the research base that underpins the central arguments of this article is predominantly focused on young people - aged between 15-23 years - from three deprived urban neighbourhoods. Some of the young people were still in compulsory education, others were continuing at school post-16, or studying (full or part time) at college. Others were enrolled on training courses with the prospect of work placements, had apprenticeships, or were in part-time or full-time formal employment. A minority of respondents were NEET (not in employment, education, or training). Harnessing such a diversity of "seemingly ordinary and unspectacular" (Roberts, 2011: 34) youths - seen in terms of life experiences and transitions - is a strength of the research reported here. As Roberts (ibid) argues there is a 'missing-middle' in youth transitions studies, with the lives, experiences and transitions of those young people who are neither NEET nor following government-preferred pathways through various post-compulsory educational routes tending be conspicuous by their absence.

Table 1 presents key characteristics of the three case study areas where research was conducted: Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton. These are cities with relatively high levels of unemployment. Within each city the focus was on a specific deprived neighbourhood.

TABLE 1 here

To capture the richness and complexity of attitudes, aspirations and experiences of young people toward employment multi-method research approaches are appropriate and have the advantage of affording the possibility of triangulation of

findings (Bryman, 2003; Morrow, 2010; Cele, 2013). The key methods used in the research reported here included a *young person survey*, which was completed by 60 young people in each of the three case study areas. Across the three case study areas 50 per cent of respondents were in their final year of compulsory schooling or in their first year following compulsory schooling (i.e. aged 15-17 years), a further 30 per cent were aged 18-19 years and 20 per cent were aged 20-24 years. Males slightly outnumbered females amongst respondents. The ethnic profile of respondents varied between the three areas: in Hull and Walsall the overwhelming majority of respondents were White British while in Wolverhampton Asian, Mixed, White British and Black groups were all represented (broadly reflecting the population profile of the neighbourhood). The young person survey provided wider illustrative information about the respondents including: links and attitudes toward their local areas, transport use, future intentions, job search strategies and support, as well as wider background questions

The information generated through the young person survey was enriched by two further in-depth qualitative methods: *one-to-one interviews*, and *focus groups*. The one-to-one interviews explored the extent and type of social networks, attitudes, perceptions, experience and attachment to place. Between eight and twelve individual interviews were conducted in each case study area. Four focus groups were undertaken in Hull, Walsall and Wolverhampton, with between four and eight young people participating in each. Interviewees and focus group participants reflected the full range of survey respondent characteristics. Together these components provided a rich methodology for exploring collectively some of the central issues surrounding attachment to place, knowledge of local opportunities, and employment aspirations as well as wider networks of family, peer groups, and so on.

A renewed commitment to develop new imaginative, creative and participatory methodological approaches within youth studies has been apparent in recent years (Heath and Walker, 2012). This has included the emergence of a range of spatial visualisation techniques such as use of photography (Bagnoli, 2012; Brown and Powell, 2012); video (Schaefer, 2012); time video diaries (Noyes, 2004); qualitative applications of geographical information systems (Dennis, 2006) and mental maps (Green et al, 2005): a technique that was introduced within the focus groups.

Mental or cognitive maps have been utilised in research in the 1960s (Gould and White, 1968) and 1970s (Goodchild, 1974; Gould and White, 1974), but remain an '"innovative' method rather than one which has been routinely integrated in mainstream qualitative social science research. In terms of capturing what a mental map is Downs and Stea (1977: 6) argue:

> … a cognitive map is a cross section representing the world at one instant in time. It reflects the world *as some person believes it to be*; it need not be correct. In fact, distortions are highly likely. It is your understanding of the world, and it may only faintly resemble the world as reflected in cartographic maps…

An implicit urban focus has often been associated with this technique. Goodchild (1974: 157), for example, considered mental mapping as a way of seeing "how people make sense of the vast amount of visual information in a city".

The advantages of using mental maps for the research discussed here included assisting contextualisation and visualisation by allowing young people to be active and creative in the process of making and articulating 'their' maps. These advantages have been recognised in action research in differing geographical

contexts. For example, when using mental maps to develop an understanding of socio-spatial geographies of street children in Kampala Young and Barrett (2001) argued that mental maps had three-fold advantages: first, they were a 'fun' activity; secondly, drawing mental maps takes time and allows for amendments to be made to the finished product, so allowing the truest representation possible; and thirdly, the mental maps were useful tools in eliciting information about daily life and why certain places were important to them (for a more extended discussion see White and Green, 2012) .

While mental mapping can complement and deepen written and oral accounts of attachment to place and bounded spatial horizons, it is important to problematise the method, acknowledge its limits, and seek ways to address these where possible. Soini (2001: 229) provides a summary of the key limitations of mental maps:

The disadvantages of mental mapping… are related to the representation of a three-dimensional landscape in two dimensions on the one hand and to the difficulty of the analysis on the other. Additionally, mental maps may measure more than just spatial understanding of an environment, for example drawing or memory ability or they may suffer from a subject's lack of drawing motivation.

For the researchers, the value of mental mapping as a visual tool of enquiry became apparent very quickly. The mental maps were introduced half-way through the focus groups, which had served to generate opening discussions and responses within the group focusing on a number of key themes. Importantly, this meant that the participants were already engaged when this exercise was introduced. The guidance for the mental mapping exercise was designed to be clear and straightforward: participants were invited to draw a sketch map of Hull/ Wolverhampton/ Walsall, and fill this with as much content (e.g. location of home, school/ college/ workplace, as

well as other notable landmarks, transport routes, and possible locations for employment). From the outset the young people were reassured that there was no 'right' or 'wrong' way to attempt this exercise, and that they were not being judged on their drawing skills.

As the mental maps began to develop, the researchers took the opportunity to go round the group, and talk to the young people on a one-to-one basis about their maps. This level of engagement was particularly rewarding, not only in helping the researchers understand the thought process of the individual, and how they sought to convey this visually (so obviating concerns about spatial fetishism), but also in encouraging individuals to talk more about particular themes that had already been aired in the previous group discussion. Further guidance for the 'content' of the map was then given. Participants were asked to identify areas which they knew particularly well within their mental maps, and areas that they avoided (perhaps because they feared to go there). This could convey areas where the young person would be reluctant to take up (employment) opportunities, and also highlight issues of territoriality and place attachment. Following the completion of the mental mapping exercise, the young people were encouraged to discuss their sketches within the focus group. In all three case study areas individuals were articulate and animated when talking about their maps, why they had approached them in the way they had, what places they knew, etc. There was genuine interest in commenting on, and asking questions about, other people's sketches.

There is no single correct way of analysing mental maps. When all participants in a mapping exercise are asked to draw exactly the same thing (e.g. a street map of a specific estate) it is possible to adopt a quasi-scientific approach of analysing the number of nodes and links identified, whether the relative location and scale of nodes and links on the map is in accordance with reality, etc. In the case of the research

exercise outlined above participants were asked to produce a map that was personal to them and so the quasi-scientific approach was not appropriate. Rather the approach adopted was to examine the content of the maps (noting what the individual chose to include and exclude), their detail, their geographical extent, and associated comments. The maps included in the next section offer an insight into key features of the maps produced.

On reflection, the particular combination of methodology and methods adopted resulted in the uncovering of a rich, pluralistic and multi-layered range of experiences, perceptions, and aspirations. This is important for several reasons. It should be emphasised that the choice of examples and cases (quotes, illustrations) which underpin the key arguments drawn below are not exhaustive, nor necessarily representative. This understanding justifies focusing on a range of generalised findings across and between the case study areas. While aware of the situated nature of the research, it is felt that many of the key messages are likely to have a wider interest and relevance, particularly within other disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. It is toward the task of identifying and exploring these key messages that the article turns its attention.

Mental maps, localised social networks and implications

This section first explores the spatiality of young people's lives and their social networks and attachment to place as revealed by an examination of selected mental maps alongside other evidence from the mixed methods approach. It then goes on to discuss how the spatiality of young people's lives informs perspectives of possibilities regarding employment, and associated implications.

Overall, the collected research findings from each case study area reinforced existing findings in the literature (e.g. Bloch, 2013): young people's attachment to place and the influence of wider social networks appeared important in influencing their employment aspirations. Beyond such a general causality, there were nuances concerning the young person's attachment to place, and how their aspirations were bound up within attitudes shaped by broader social networks, that are interesting and challenging, and need to be considered more fully.

The spatial extent of mental maps and social networks

Four mental maps are discussed here to provide insights into the inter- and intra-urban commonalities and differences in the spatiality of young people's lives, their social networks and attachment to place.

In Wolverhampton, where the neighbourhood study area was located centrally and had good transport links, young people tended to embrace a larger geographical area (Map 1 is a typical example) in their mental maps than did most of the young people in Walsall or Hull. The content of Map 1 shows that the young person knows the city centre "very well", and that it takes "15 minutes to get to work on the bus (or) 20 minutes walking". A sense of attachment to place, and the personal negotiation of spaces within Wolverhampton are reflected strongly. The young person who drew this mental map reveals (as one could expect) a strong association between feelings of safety and the spaces they 'know well'.

MAP 1 here

Consider Map 1 alongside a mental map from Walsall (Map 2). With the same guidance for completing the mental map exercise being given in all case study areas,

this young person's interpretation of the brief resulted in a very different representation of space and place. Here the spatial extent is geographically more constrained and limited than the example from Wolverhampton. This was typical of many mental maps drawn by the young people in this case study area. The attention to detail within the mental map is also more prominent, both in terms of key sites of interest (my house, youth club, the church, the nursery, the secondary school, etc) but also the road networks that connect them.

MAP 2 here

In contrast to relatively limited spatial extent of Map 2, another young person from Walsall produced a rather different map (see Map 3). This map gives greater spatial coverage and information about the wider local area and depicts key transport routes, with directions provided to neighbourhoods that are 'off the map'. Rather than placing 'home' in the centre of the map (in accordance with the norm), this respondent locates 'home' in the bottom right-hand corner of the map and affords greater prominence to the town centre (as a location for jobs) and the bus station (from where connections can be made to elsewhere). The emphasis on a particular sector of the city (i.e. from the neighbourhood to the centre) reflects findings from other studies (Author B et al, 2005).

MAP 3 here

Viewed alongside Maps 1 and 3 the representation of space and place captured in a mental map from Hull (Map 4) is more spatially restricted, but far more nuanced and detailed in its content. This type of approach (showing a relatively constrained spatial horizon) was comparable with the majority of mental maps created in Hull. What is interesting to note in the context of the article is the explicit way that social networks

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influence the composition of the map. The author of the map highlights friends' houses, as key reference points with which to frame and de-limit the boundaries of the map. So one can see towards the top-left, the bottom-left and the bottom-centre of the map named friends' houses. This illustrates the power and significance of friendships in the spatiality of young people's lives. At the centre of the map is the young person's house (in contrast to the 'edge' location in Map 3). Beyond these immediate surrounding streets, the arrows point to 'elsewhere': quite literally emptiness, blank space, about which it can be surmised the individual has either no/limited knowledge or to which they assign no particular importance. So whereas Maps 1 and 3 depict the city/town centre explicitly, in Maps 2 and 4 the town/city centre is not within the confines of the mental map, indicating a more tightly bounded localised space concentrated upon the immediate neighbourhood which is well known.

MAP 4 here

These mental maps emphasise diversity and difference between and within the three case study areas in young people's conception of and attachment to place. The salient point here is that there exists a complex, and competing conceptual and analytical diversity of place within a particular spatial location.

Implications for employment aspirations

In terms of opening up or closing down opportunities for employment, a young person's uneven attachment to, and relationship with, place should be treated seriously. An individual's mental map, their particular way of framing of place, carries with it significant implications for life choices regarding employment. In this context,

crudely put: perspectives and possibilities differ markedly between young people. Thus a comparatively expansive perceptual reading of space (e.g. Map 1 and Map 3) can potentially open up new opportunities for jobs for that young person, which has no equivalence for the young people who demonstrated narrow spatial horizons in Walsall and Hull (Maps 2 and 4). The logical argument is that those young people like the authors of Maps 2 and 4 may effectively limit themselves to a more limited pool of employment opportunities. Certainly, they may face more immediate obstacles to 'seeing' opportunities that lie beyond these (limited) bounded horizons. This is particularly problematic if getting into and advancing in employment requires moving out of, or commuting away from, the local area.

For some young people their sense of identity and place attachment was so strong that they found it difficult to imagine why anybody would want to leave the area, let alone the possibility that they would. Such opinion was often strongly articulated and emphasised not only in the interviews, but also within the focus-group discussions. An example from Hull highlights this fierce sense of commitment to the locality:

I'd never live and work out of Hull. God no! I'd live here till the day I die. I know loads of people round here. (Unemployed male)

Interestingly, some young people demonstrated an ability to maintain a strong identify and attachment to place, but still insisted that they would be willing and able to take advantage of better or different opportunities elsewhere, even if this meant a longer commute/re-locating. One young college student in Wolverhampton for example argued that even though: "the city is growing and developing… I want to see what is happening elsewhere." Likewise, in Hull a school student observed: "I like Hull, but I am not 'tied to it' like some people are. For many people Hull is their comfort zone and they do not want to move on." Such a comment emphasises the

social embeddedness of individuals and leads on to considerations of agency, particularly in relation to why some young people seemingly transcend space in their employment aspirations/horizons. It is to this issue that the article now turns its attention, citing the nature and type of young people's social networks as having a key influence in broadening or narrowing down (spatial) horizons and informing possibilities for employment.

Analyses of interview transcripts and examination of the spatial extent and content of mental maps suggest that indicators such as age, residential and other mobility experience, economic position and, monetary resources appear influential in terms of informing horizons. For example, though not apparent in every case, there was a general tendency for spatial horizons to increase with age, being in employment, and having access to (private) transport. It is salient here that the authors of Maps 1 and 3 were slightly older, and had greater experience of employment (albeit sometimes part-time) than those of Maps 2 and 4, and it was the former two maps that displayed more extensive spatial horizons.

More specifically the research points to two principal factors underpinning the contrasting attitudes toward (transcending) place: personal capital (self-confidence, ambition, high levels of motivations) and social capital (particularly the influence of family and close friendship networks). The variation in the nature of and type of the support that young people drew upon in respect to wider social (kin and non-kin) networks certainly appeared to be a key factor in opening up (or closing down) possibilities. For example, a positive cycle of high confidence, ambition and motivation generally could be seen in those young people who had the full support and encouragement from their social networks comprising people they trusted to provide them with high quality personalised information. One respondent looking for employment said: "I get loads of support from family and friends… It is harder for

people without family." The positive influence and support of family was evident in informing career aspirations and potential future employment trajectories. In Hull, a young male on a training course stated:

My mum used to work for the fire service. And that's what I want to do. I know it means working hard and she's brought me some information that I need to apply.

Given the prominence of family and friends in social networks, it is pertinent to note how localised social networks can play a key role in shaping cognitive spaces, rather than assume - as is often the case - that localised cognitive spaces necessarily lead to restrictive social networks. When talking about Map 3 – which is relatively spatially extensive compared with many other mental maps – the author rehearsed a history of residential mobility within Walsall; the places where close friends lived (Leamore and Beechdale) and how independently travelling frequently between these locations had yielded detailed knowledge and awareness about the main transport networks within Walsall and surrounding areas, and confidence in using public transport, such that employment opportunities beyond the home neighbourhood and Walsall were perceived to be within reach.

Conversely, the negative impact of localised social networks, seen in low aspirations and bounded socio-spatial horizons was also apparent. For example, an unemployed male in Hull argued:

I want to work round here. All my mates work round here - they won't look for work anywhere else.

This experience which was reinforced in a separate interview with another young male in the same case study area:

I have a friend, who wants to get a job, but he's only prepared to look on his own doorstep, otherwise he won't do it.

The evidence suggests that social networks operate in complex ways, both enabling and constraining, with varied intersections of family, friends and community influence. As indicated by the interview quotes above, it was apparent that the type and nature of employment that wider family and friends had experienced was a key factor in shaping attitudes and aspirations toward employment of young people. Indeed for young people who were seen to be successful in finding work, up-skilling through training and/or perhaps gaining higher educational qualifications could create positive feedback loops within their own social networks. As an illustration of this positive influence, a stakeholder interviewed in Hull commented that:

We quite often have parents coming in when their son or daughter comes, asking if we can also help them with their CVs, or application form.

Such a finding is particularly important when viewed in the context of research findings that problematise the dominant myths concerning preferences for a life on benefits rather than working and emphasising individual shortcomings in job seekers' attitudes to work.

In focusing critical attention on the links between young people's cognitive spaces, social networks, social capital and their attachment to place, and how this influences employment aspirations, this article has sought to make a meaningful contribution to the literature on the sociology of place. In particular the key findings have

emphasised the importance of complex, contingent, personal, subjective, and contextual 'worlds of meaning and experience'. The findings reveal significant intra- and inter-urban differences, which provide additional insight into how, and why, socio-spatial synergies can influence a young person's future aspirations. In the analysis the article has drawn attention to the positive aspects of strong local identities, and in doing so provided a rich account of the spatiality of young people's lives.

The article has also offered insights into how mental maps are formed, and articulated. It is particularly important to note how these are often framed in the context of social networks which can extend or limit young people's cognitive spaces and awareness of (employment) opportunities. A specific contribution of this article is to contest such uni-directional causation; rather evidence has been presented that localised social networks can play a role in shaping cognitive spaces. The final section discusses the implications of these research findings, with a particular focus on future research and methods.

Implications and reflections on future research and methods

The findings above have emphasised the uneven nature of social networks and important differences in young people's attachment to place that underpin their employment expectations and aspirations. Policy needs to take into account these variegated differences, and resist imposing 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to help young people to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. In this way it is the subjective, the unique and individual that needs to become more central, and encourage more bespoke polices to help young people to take advantage of opportunities available to them. This will certainly entail more joined up working across policy domains.

Looking ahead, dedicated longitudinal studies focusing on young people's actual lived pathways to employment - and contrasting these with their prior expectations, attitudes and aspirations – would likely be of particular value. Longitudinal studies would also enable the tracing of spatial horizons over time, and would provide insights into factors associated with their expansion and contraction.

Capturing an individual's spatial embeddedness, their spatial imagination and the way in which this influences their representation of the world is a real challenge. Engaging with, and understanding better, the diversity and difference of the experiences, perceptions and aspirations of young people necessarily puts a critical spotlight on deciding what the most appropriate combination of methods are in order to meet these aims. The different strands of the mixed methodology used in the research study drawn upon in this article complemented each other well. Indeed the strength of the multi-pronged approach lies in what each individual element offered. That said, the use of mental mapping within the research methodology was a particular strength of this research, and the visual insights which it brought to the findings added a new depth and dimension to understanding the 'reality' of space and place as seen, and constructed, by the individual. There is a strong case for encouraging greater use of mental maps in similar fields of research. The particular value of mental maps is that they provide visual information on individuals' perceptions. In this regard they are complementary to other visual methods, such as GIS and photography. Also, the use of mental maps across a broader range of respondents, for example those in long-term unemployment compared with short-term, older job seekers compared with younger job seekers, migrant workers compared with resident workers, etc, has the potential to generate findings which could contribute to the existing body of knowledge generally, and deepen the understanding of sociology of place more specifically.

By focusing on young people's social networks and attachment to place, and looking at the ways in which they influence employment aspirations, this article has contributed to the existing knowledge base in three inter-related ways. First, it has further emphasised the contested nature of space and place, and how these are important in influencing how young people see the world, and the possibilities that are open to them. Secondly, in terms of seemingly transcending space, the article has highlighted how place-based social networks of family and friends influence employment aspirations. An appreciation of socio-spatial influences and localised cognitive spaces has the potential to inform the design and implementation of a more nuanced policy approach in domains such as integrating young people into the labour market. Thirdly the article demonstrates that research seeking to contribute to a place sensitive sociology must critically reflect on the methodology and methods used. The mental mapping technique is one way which has potential to be adopted and integrated more fully in future research on young people – especially in research which seeks to capture and address complex socio-economic issues mediated by uneven relationships involving space and place.

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***Table 1: Key characteristics of the case study areas***

Characteristic	Hull	Walsall	Wolverhampton
Location of deprived neighbourhood	East Hull – 3 miles from city centre	Peripheral location – north-west Walsall	Central area – adjacent to city centre
Sub-regional context	Peripheral city – no other major urban/ employment centres close by	Edge of metropolitan area – polycentric urban context	Main city in Black Country
Demographics	Overwhelmingly White population in neighbourhood and city	Overwhelmingly White population in neighbourhood; mixed in Walsall	> 50% non-White – Asian/Asian British (particularly Indian) and Black/Black British; large Sikh population; less mixed in city.
Educational infrastructure context	Few 6th forms in schools FE College in city centre University – west Hull	Academy in neighbourhood Other schools outside neighbourhood FE College in town centre	Local secondary schools FE College and University close by
Participation of young people in post compulsory education	Marked increase in staying on rates in recent years Entry to HE remains much lower than average	Despite increase in staying on rates in recent years these remain lower than average Entry to HE is lower than average	Traditionally relatively high staying on rates - higher than average Entry to HE is much higher than the all neighbourhoods' average

| Occupational profile of residents in employment	Dominated by elementary occupations, followed by operative and skilled trades occupations	Higher than average share in skilled trades and personal service occupations	Bi-modal profile – with greater than average shares in higher level and elementary occupations
Location vis-à-vis job opportunités	Very few jobs in immediate area; jobs mainly in other parts of the city	Job opportunities not in immediate vicinity, but close by and in other parts of the city region	Job opportunities in the NDC area and close by.
Public transport	Reasonable links – especially to city centre	Good bus service to Walsall centre; poor to industrial estates	Good public transport links – bus, metro, rail

Adapted from Green and White (2007: 30-31)

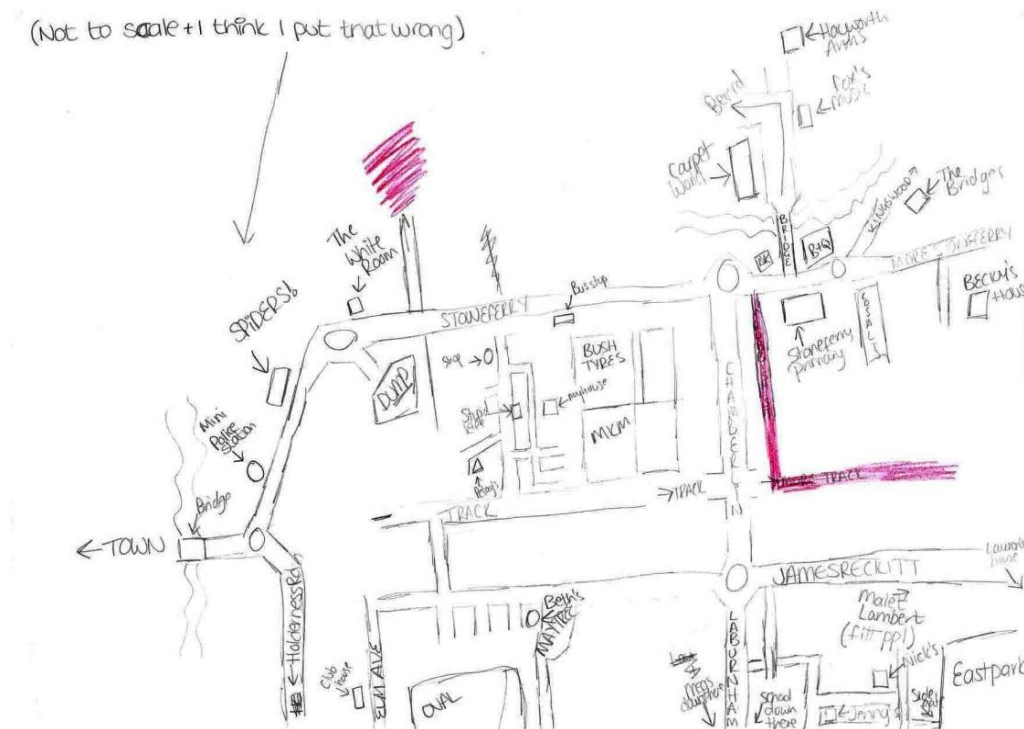**Map 1: Mental Map of Wolverhampton**
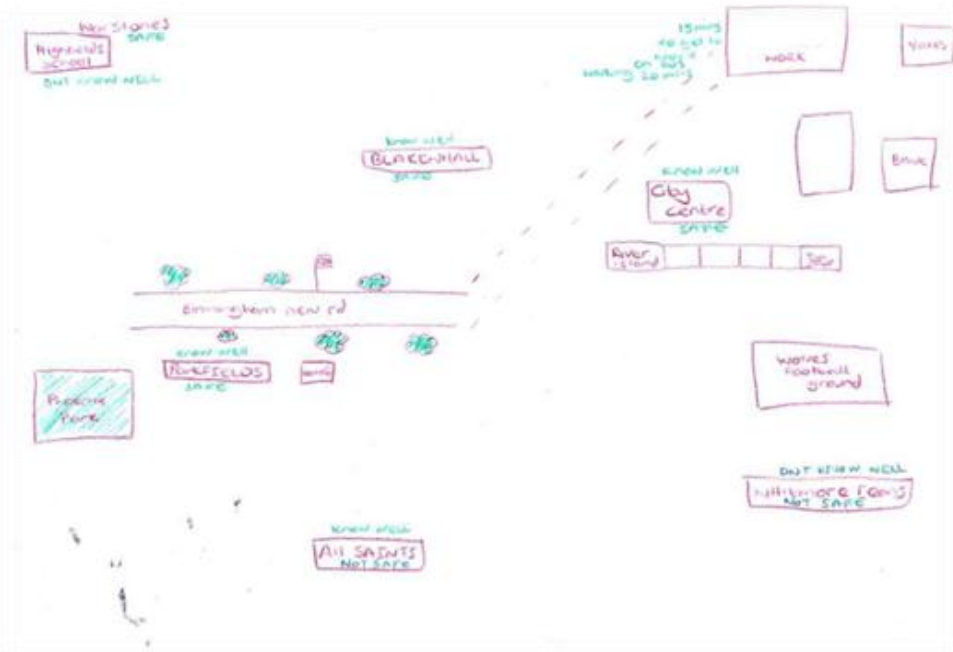
Map 2: Mental Map of Walsall (1)
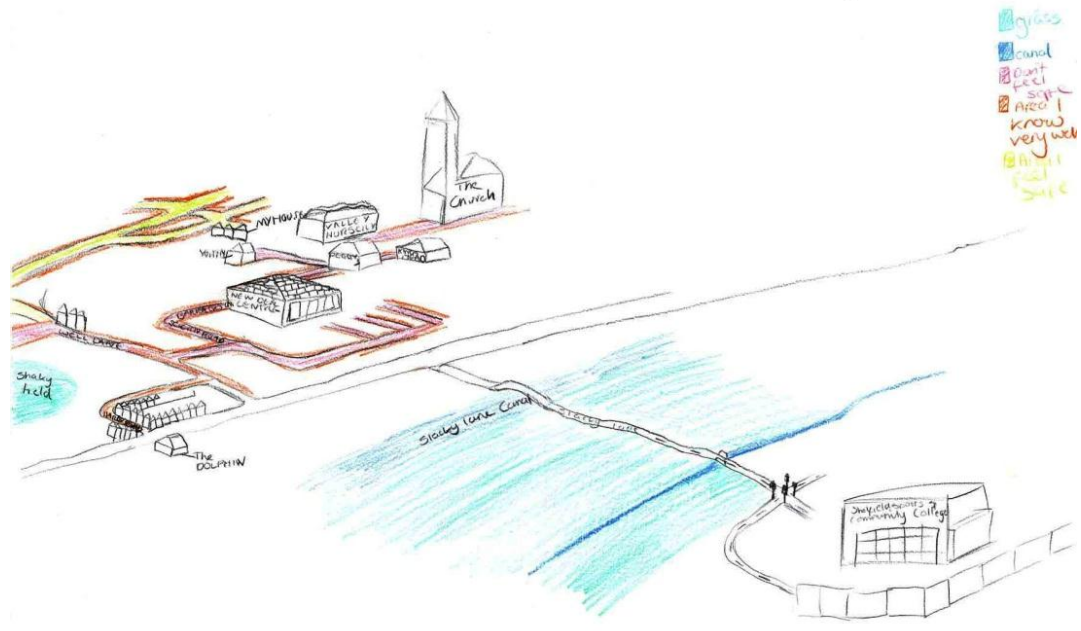
Map 3: Mental Map of Walsall (2)
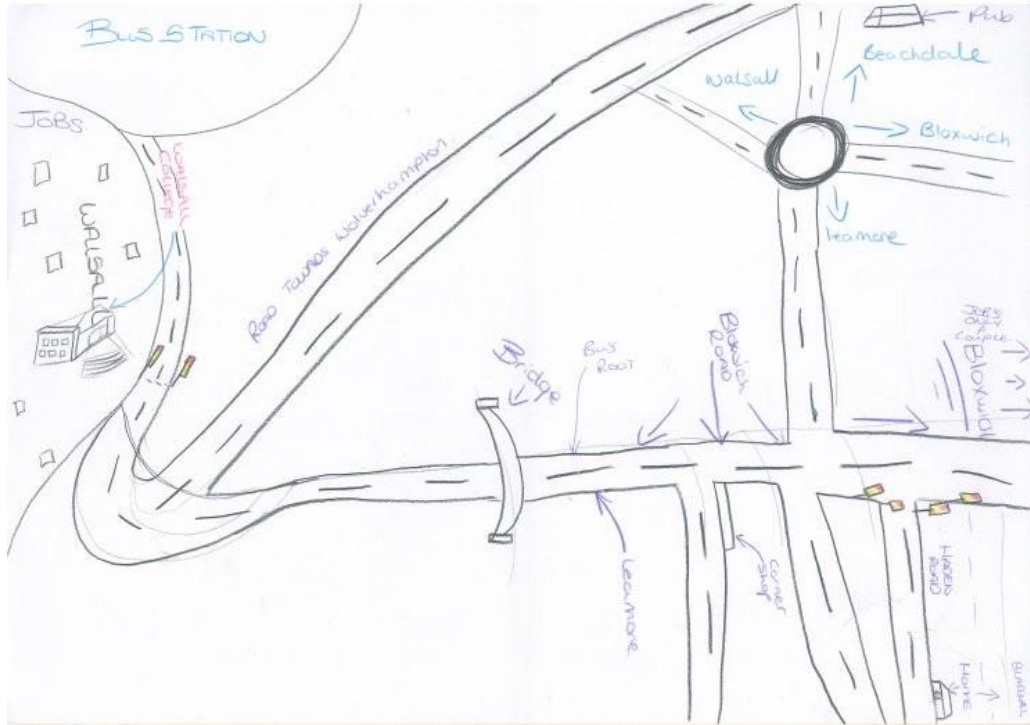
Map 4: Mental map of Hull

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