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The (Normal) Non-Normativity of Youth

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Citation:

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Summary

Youth unnerves us. Awkwardly bridging the space between 'child' and 'adult', we are delivered demonising depictions of young people (hoodies and hooligans), and working out how to deal with these not-quite children but not-quite-adults is high on policy makers' agendas (Slater, 2013b). On the other hand, the non-normativity of 'teenage rebellion' is considered an 'identity forming' rite of passage for young people to cross the border zone between child and adult (Lesko, 2002). We hear, in fact, young people scorned upon for their apolitical, apathetic acceptance of normativity – the youth today a pale reflection of their predecessors (Bennett, 2008). Even our ever-so reasonable politicians tell us that they "[did] things that teenagers do", before they "pulled [themselves] up and headed in the right [direction]" (Cameron in Watt, 2009).

This chapter will explore how, through youth, 'non-normativity' emerges as a place allowed, indeed expected, as a stage of 'normative development'. I will argue, however, that it is a stage only permissible to young people fitting neatly into other culturally privileged positions. Furthermore, it must be played out by meeting other societal expectations ('masculinity' - lads will be lads; first heterosexual encounters, and so on) which set young people on the path to normative adulthood. Commercialised and commodified 'what it is to be young', I argue, is an illustration of the required flexible neoliberal subject; it is okay to be 'non-normative' if 'non-normativity' can be compartmentalised, as a phase to be grown-out of, and later periodically bought into. Drawing on fieldwork with disabled young people alongside other cultural and media representations of 'youth' and 'youth culture', I will argue that perceived 'non-normativity' leaves young people not fitting into other culturally priveledged positions much more precariously positioned.

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Introduction: A Normative Imagination

Susan, Dawn and Linda sit around discussing their children. Dawn, worrying about her teenage daughter, begins:

> "I don't understand her, Susan. She just won't talk to me".
>
> "I wouldn't worry about it", Susan – the voice of experience - replies, "they're all like that as teenagers. God – I remember how my two were"
>
> Linda chips in: "Yeah, I'm dreading our Sarah hitting thirteen!"
>
> Susan ends the conversation, by reassuring the group: "You've just gotta remember they'll grow out of it. There's no *point* trying to understand teenagers! Here, have another biscuit."

That everyday conversation comes from my imagination, based upon things I've heard and seen. Through their claims to not understand 'youth', Susan, Dawn and Linda are reiterating some of the most 'well-known' messages delivered to us about young people: the rational adult mind will never understand the irrationality of the teenage brain and that, in time, the irrational teenage mind would develop into the mind of a rational adult (Payne, 2010). As Susan reassures the others: 'abnormal' teenage behaviour is just a 'normal' part of growing up (Elman, 2014) .

You may or may not be able to picture yourself as part of that conversation: either as a teenager being discussed, or as a concerned parent. You may already feel there are problems within the script. You may be troubled for those implicated within the messages being delivered. On the other hand, you may feel concerned that your past or present self, or your loved ones, are excluded from this particular narrative of youth. This chapter interrogates the kinds of talk about and around youth that may go on over a cup of tea and a biscuit. I do this through a consideration of the strange relationships between categories of 'youth' and concepts of 'normal'. I will contextualise in order to ask where these common-sense knowledges of youth come from, before arguing that they are not inclusive to many young

people's lives. Furthermore, I will wonder, if not inclusive, what purpose do they serve, and are there dangers hidden within them?

The way I approach the above task is by thinking about youth in three different ways. Firstly, I'll think about the discourse projected above: youth as 'abnormals-becoming-normal'. Secondly, I will draw on Lesko (2012) to think about youth border zone between child and adult; and finally I'll consider the relationships between youth, normal and the (commodified) neoliberal subject. I explore each of these (re)conceptualisations separately, using academic literature from critical psychology, youth studies, critical studies of neuroscience, and disability studies, to interrogate popular culture. I conclude that the (sometimes) expected abnormality of youth, can only be safely played out by the most normative and privileged of people.

(Re)-conceptualising Youth (1): Abnormals-becoming-normal

I begin with the discourse of youth as 'abnormals-becoming-normal', depicted by Figure 1. In the bottom left-hand corner of this sketch are the figures of a man, woman and child – a normative representation of the family. The emphasis here is on the child, and these figures are labelled the 'relative stability of childhood' (Wyn & White, 1997). The child stands between the mother and father, the small size represents the narrative and often materiality of childhood dependence upon his/her parents. An arrow then leaves this family, moving towards the top right hand corner, where there is a figure of a single man - the most normative representation of adulthood (Slater, 2015) - labelled 'stable adulthood'. Before reaching adulthood, however, the arrow, representing the person's growth passes through this inbetween, messy and turbulent stage of youth.
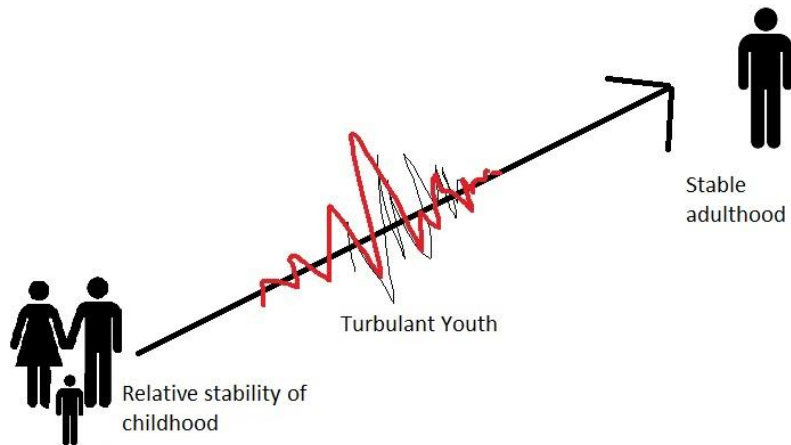
Figure 1 Youth as 'abnormals-becoming-normal'

Teenage Evolution: Bodies and Minds

Susan's account, which began this chapter, fits with this depiction of youth as 'abnormals-becoming-normal'; youth as a time of irrationality, which is grown out of. Interestingly this implicit and over-simplistic account in fact rests upon scientific knowledges, which are in turn reflected and perpetuated through the popular media (Elman, 2014). According to theorists of adolescence working in the early 1900s, youth parallels human evolution from savage to civilised being (G. S. Hall, 1904). There is a presumed progression, aided by a mixture of nature and nurture, from child, through youth, to adult (Burman, 2008). To unpick these supposed scientific 'truths' of youth, Lesko (1996a, 1996b, 2002) traces the beginnings of discourse around youth in the USA. She highlights that this period saw a rise in disciplines such as anthropology, psychology and pedagogy, which paralleled the growth of each individual child with the development of human kind. It was also a time of American colonisation, and if we consider this context, it is not surprising that this theory – known as recapitulation theory - became 'hot stuff'. Worries about America's nationhood and manhood meant studies of adolescence, projected as scientific and neutral, became the rationale for boys' education aiming "to produce young, masculine, Christians" (Lesko, 2002, 183); good

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colonial subjects, well suited for the building, protection and maintenance of Empire. With this, the entwined racism, sexism, dis/ablism and other prejudice of evolutionary theory was transferred to development theory; a threefold parallel developing where animals, 'savages' and children were all presumed as equal. For example, on posture, one author writes:

> "[S]avage races do not stand so erect as civilised races. Country people… tend to bend forward, and the aristocrat is more erect than the plebeian. In this respect women appear to be nearer to the infantile [and apelike] condition than men"

<div align="right">(Serres cited in Lesko, 1996b, pp., 140)</div>

Although these ideas have since been heavily critiqued, we nevertheless see 'youth as evolution' reiterated through the popular media. In one scene of animated film, '*Persepolis'* (Paronnaud & Satrapi, 2008), for example, we see the protagonist, Marjane, 'transform from a girl into a woman overnight'. In the voiceover to the scene (which can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zncsnYFGGQ&feature=youtu.be), Marjane tells us:

> "This was a period of incredible ugliness. First, I grew eight inches taller. Then my face changed: my head got longer, my right eye bigger, and my chin followed. My right hand became enormous. Then my left foot. My nose tripled in size; my breasts inflated like balloons; then my butt expanded, restoring my centre of gravity. And last but not least, an enormous beauty mark provided the finishing touch."

Marjane depicts youth as being about changing bodies, from child, through a gawky teenage stage, to emerge as a young adult. However, as Susan, Dawn and Linda were aware, youth is also about changing minds. Harry Enfield's British sitcom/sketch show '*Kevin the Teenager'* depicts this well. Played by Enfield, Kevin first appeared as an energetic little boy in the show, '*Harry Enfield's Television Programme' (*Enfield, 1990-1992), annoying his elder brother. However, in Enfield's (1994-1998) later shows the sketch progresses as Kevin reaches his thirteenth birthday. From this point onwards the show documents the experiences

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of a family with teenage boy portrayed as awkward, moody and selfish. The popularity of Kevin led to the later production of a feature length teen comedy film, *Kevin and Perry Go Large*. The moment I want to focus on now, however, is perhaps the most memorable of all moments of the Kevin stories; the strike of midnight on his thirteenth birthday; the moment, to his parents despair, that Kevin 'becomes a teenager'.

The clip (which can be viewed here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLuEY6jN6gY) begins with 12-year-old Kevin excitedly and innocently counting down the seconds until the clock turns midnight and marks his birthday. He's constantly distracted by thoughts of ice cream, and the presents he's hoping to receive the next day. Whilst Kevin paces the kitchen, his parents sit on the sofa, reminding him its school the next day, to which he amicably responds 'oh yeah! Duhhh brain!' Oh the strike of midnight, however, the mood changes. As the clock chimes, Kevin throws his hands in the air, shouting 'yeah, I'm thirteen!' and begins singing 'Happy Birthday' to himself. As the clock continues to chime, however, Kevin's animated 'teenage evolution' begins. His movements become slower and more erratic, his posture becomes more bent forwards, and his arms hang down by his sides. As his parents observe the transformation, they observe:

> **Dad:** Darling, he's losing the power of rational thought
>
> **Mum:** …and the use of his arms
>
> **Both:** He's become… a teenager!

As the clip continues, Kevin's mother's 'happy birthday Kevin!' is responded to with an 'Okay – stop going on about it, will you?!' After he searches in the fridge for ice cream ("Why's there no bloody ice cream?!), we hear the first of Kevin's signature catchphrases (to be repeated throughout the series): 'I hate you!, it's so unfair!' The clip ends, however, much like the mothers' conversation over a cuppa earlier: Kevin's father reassures Kevin's mother that Kevin will grow out of the dreaded teenage years.

As Elman (2014) points out, cultural representations of teenagers often work to reproduce and secure developmental theory. In both these clips, like the conversation I started with, youth is as an uncomplicated, instantaneous shift from the innocence of childhood to the irrationality and *crisis* of adolescence (echoing the work of youth psychologist Erik Erikson). Moreover, 'youth' is caricatured into a hollow character to laugh at but not to take seriously as a meaningful subjectivity. The humour in both clips works on the assumption that we all 'know' youth…and the reason we all know it – because we've all been there! Even the current UK, Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron (supposedly one of our most reasonable and responsible adults!), confirms that youth is a place of behaviour that deviates from the norm. Cameron, along with other powerful UK politicians such as Boris Johnson (elected Mayor of London) and George Osborne (Chancellor of the Exchequer), were all members of the Bullingdon Club, "an exclusive society at Oxford University, noted for its grand banquets and boisterous rituals" (Wikipedia, 2013). Questioned about his youthful antics in an interview for *Grazia* magazine in August 2009, Cameron tells us that as a young man he did "things that teenagers do". Yet he also makes it clear that although it is normal to be non-normative in youth, it is not necessary desirable. Cameron soon realised that he was, "in some ways, heading in the wrong direction", so he "pulled [him]self up and headed in the right one" (Cameron in Watt, 2009). In another interview in 2011 Cameron tells us that "we all do stupid things when we're young and we should learn the lessons" (Cameron as quoted in Sparrow, 2011).

Studying the (Normal) Abnormality of Youth

The abnormality of youth, it seems so far, is both normal, yet undesirable. Furthermore, this undesirable normal abnormality continues to be an object of scientific intrigue. The most recent way youth – and the non-normativity we associate with it - has been approached is through neurology (Elman, 2014; Ortega & Choudhury, 2011; Payne, 2010). A BBC News

headline in 2013 read, '*Brain scan study to understand workings of teenage mind*' (Ghosh, 2013a, 2013b). Again, in the report the representation of youth is of a stage that is both humorous, yet undesirable. In an accompanying news clip the reporter tells us:

> "Teenage behaviour has been around since, well, teenagers. But, until recently, nobody has known
> what it comes down to, what they can do about it, or when it might end. […] Now, some may say
> thankfully, *The Welcome Trust* has funded a £5 million project to try and understand how the
> teenage mind works."

To avoid a purely comical account, however, and assert the importance of this £5 million study, a professor explains the significance further (Ghosh, 2013a). He is interested in the study of – to use his words – 'brain development and mental development in *normal* [sic] adolescence' (italics my own). Such as assertion is not unusual, as Elman (2014, 139) points out neurological research has often concentrated on "visualizing and mapping the "normal" brain" and from this making comparisons to the 'abnormal'. Moreover, the 'teenage brain' is almost always envisioned as normally-abnormal, in its 'unfinished' state (Elman, 2014). Ghosh, for example, tells us that as a person grows from child to adult emotional, behavioural and cognitive changes occur which can be attributed to brain restructuring. He wants to understand two elements, which change between child and adult: learning how to control emotions in order to interact with people; and the ability of forward thought. Through this, he hopes to develop games, which could help speed up young people's development of their cognitive control. Like Cameron, the professor feels youth is a stage that should be passed through as quickly as possible.

Elman (2014) explores some of the material consequences of positioning young people as 'unfinished brains'. Perhaps unsurprisingly when we consider the targetted psychologisation of certain populations of people (Goodley & Lawthom, 2005; Mills, 2014; Tosh, 2014), these consequences differ dependent upon socio-cultural positioning. For example, Elman (2014)

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writes that neurological accounts have been used to explain the actions of white youth (particularly young men in relation to American high school shootings), yet for African America and Latino young men they are used to justify screening and intervention. Rather than recognising social-cultural and political context, however, the BBC report portrays neurology as scientific (that is: neutral, objective) knowledge which we could read into Susan and her pals talk around teenagers. Yet, the BBC reporter does admit that these studies are in their early stages. Payne (2010) explains, however, that despite the embryonic nature of neurological studies, they have nevertheless been widely taken up by policy makers, largely because they fit with early and mid-20th century notions of adolescence. The website accompanying the BBC report confirms this when it explains Granville Stanley Hall's evolutionary model of adolescence, not as historical, but as current theory. Proclaiming that:

> "every individual rehearses the evolutionary history of their species"
>
> "…emotions arise from more primitive brain regions and so according to this theory they develop more quickly than higher, more rational brain functions as a person grows up"
>
> "the human brain […is] carrying a lot of evolutionary baggage – which may be at the root of the difficulties of the teenage years"

<div align="right">(Ghosh, 2013a)</div>

We have already seen the prejudice inherent in conversations of recapulation theory (Lesko, 2002; Slater, 2015); the supposed neutrality and possible consequences of neurological investigations therefore also need to come into question. As well as wanting to understand 'normal adolescence', the professor involved in the study tells us that understanding the normal-abnormality of the teenage brain, may help us understand the abnormality of other brains deemed non-normative; those whom have not, or it is assumed will not, grow out of the normal-abnormality of youth as, at this, alarms bells begin to ring.

Fine Lines of Normal and Abnormal Abnormality

That youth is 'risky' is confirmed to us in a best-selling parenting book from 2003, '*Yes, your teen is crazy: loving your kids without losing your mind*'. In the opening chapter psychologist Michael Bradley seems to confirm the normal, yet undesirable, abnormality of youth. He explains to worried parents that although the mood swings of their teenagers may appear "uniquely crazy", they are in fact, just like those demonstrated by all other teenagers. To use his words, all teenagers are "commonly crazy". He tells us that:

> "The good part is that these behaviours are not character flaws or signs of an evil nature. In adolescent children, this maddening behaviour is just the result of mixed-up brain wiring which will straighten out in time if, if, and only if we adults respond not with raging, hurtful punishments, but with carefully crafted responses intended to calmly but firmly teach brain-challenged children to become functional adults"

(Bradley, 2003, 8)

The comparisons made in this text between the teenage brain and those labelled with 'mental health problems' are overt. This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider the similarly loaded discourse youth and mental health share. Crowe (2000) highlights a lack of productivity, unity, moderation and rationality as recurring markers of 'mental disorder' set out by DSM-IV. A similar set of homogenised behaviours is attributed to teenagers: young people are lazy and passive (there is a lack of productivity); they're scorned upon for their pack-like behaviour (identity crisis leading to lack of unity); and they're subject to mood swings (cognitive instability leading to a lack of moderation and irrationality) (Lesko, 1996b). Yet, unlike the temporary abnormality of youth, psychiatric and other brain-related labels stick; not only read as a sign of the individual's past and present, but also 'dominating the future' (Crowe, 2000, 69). Therefore, although on first glance, Bradley appears to be reiterating the discourse we have been continuously delivered thus far: non-normative

behaviour is normal during adolescence. He doesn't assume the 'commonly crazy' time of youth will be grown-out of, but instead instils youth as a time of risk (Kelly, 2003; Ortega & Choudhury, 2011). For Kelly (2003), the next question to ask, is at risk of what…

(Re)-conceptualising Youth (2): Youth as Borderzones

Key to a forgiving albeit pathologizing discourse of youth as abnormals-becoming-normal is an assurance that young people 'grow-up' to meet the normality of adulthood. The risk, then, is that this adulthood normativity - dependent upon racialised, classed, gendered, ableist and hetronormative assumptions of what 'adults' should do and be (Slater, 2015) – will not be met. Youth as abnormal-becoming-normal, in fact, is a discourse which only works through dangerously pathologizing those deemed Other. David Cameron can only justify his actions as 'youthful stupidity' [sic] by marginalising people with labels of 'intellectual impairment'. Similarly Bradley's (2003) reassurance that all teenagers are 'commonly crazy' delivers harmful messages around what is normal and abnormal mental health.

Lesko's (2002) conceptualisation of youth as a border zone can help us see this more clearly. Lesko argues that technologies such as schools, families and youth services work in particular gendered, raced, sexualised, and ability dependent ways, to shape children, through youth, to meet the social, cultural and political adulthood requirements of a particular time and place. *Figure Two* depicts this. Like in the depiction of youth as abnormals-becoming-normal, we see the same normative image of a family on the left – a female, male and child figure represented. A sole male adult figure again represents adulthood on the right hand side. In between, however, labelled 'border zone of youth' is a surveillance tower. There are numerous arrows going between the child and male adult figure. Some pass through the border zone directly, whilst others take a less direct route. Some aren't allowed to pass at all, either dwelling in the border zone, or returning to childhood. Border zones can be dangerous places, and what the next part of the paper will now go on to explore, is why the border zone

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of youth may be more dangerous for some than for others. I turn now to use three stories to illustrate the potential dangers of border zones of youth.
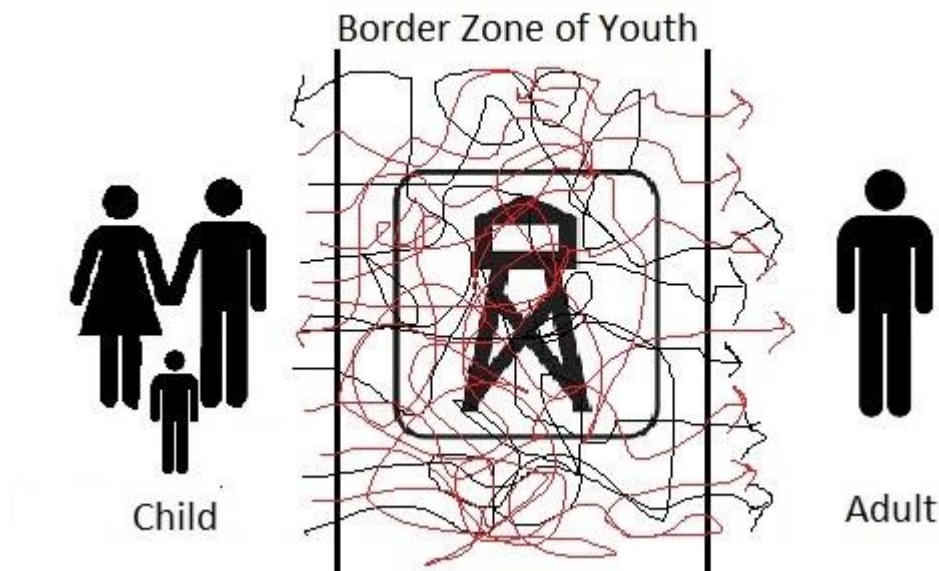

Figure 2: Youth as Border Zones

Space to 'be young'? Border zones of youth as dangerous

The first story emerges from a one year auto/ethnography with young disabled people in the UK and Iceland which interrogated the meanings we associate with "youth", "adult", "disabled" and "able" (Slater, 2013c, 2015). Workshops over one year were spent with two disabled youth groups in England (27 young people with different genders, physical and intellectual impairment labels). Three months was then spent with two young disabled women running Reykjavik's Independent Living Cooperative. Data was collected using creative art-based methods, interviews and fieldwork notes. The term auto/ethnography (with a forward slash) was employed to highlight that although the aim of research was not to tell the author's story, the author's story was significant and tangled amongst the stories of others. The author's telling of stories is thus treated as data in this paper. The research was deemed it ethically sound by a university ethics committee. Following this, all names from

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the fieldwork, except Freyja, who chose to be identified, are pseudonyms. More stories from this research project and details on methodology are told in Slater (2015).

A conversation taking place between a mother of a young man with a label of 'intellectual impairment' and Freyja, one of my participants, went as follows:

Mother: Bjarne was annoyed last night.

Freyja: Oh dear, what about?

Mother: I'm not sure. I kept asking him but never got to the bottom of it.

Freyja: Sometimes we don't really know ourselves.

Mother: Yeah but with Bjarne I constantly want a reason! Without a reason it's easy for other people to call it 'challenging behaviour'. I want to be able to say, "He's pissed off because you didn't let him choose his own dinner, you would be too!"… But he must get annoyed with my constant asking. I never do it with my other kids; they're allowed to just be moody teenagers.

(Based on notes from research diary in Slater, 2013a, 203)

Socio-cultural accounts, backed up by developmental discourse and more recent neurological studies, have already told us about young people's mood swings. Yet, they've also told us not to worry, as young people will grow up into rational adults. Disability, however, is rarely associated with rationality (Slater, 2015). Disabled people's applications to be granted a passport of adulthood and cross border zones of youth, therefore, are likely to meet rejection. Bjarne's mother is aware of this. Rather than pathologised, but forgiven, as a temporary and 'normal' part of adolescence, Bjarne's mother worries that Bjarne's moods will be read as a sign of his impairment. Considered outside of normative developmental discourse, a label of 'challenging behaviour' has the potential to dominate Bjarne's life. Therefore, she felt she needed to argue Bjarne into a discourse of adulthood rationality in order to challenge the pathologisation of his 'bad mood' as an impairment-thing. Yet, Bjarne's mother also worried that her actions she may be denying him the opportunity to 'be' a teenager in a bad mood; to 'live' the non-normativity of youth.

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Furthermore, it is not only disabled young people who may not feel able to dwell in border zones of youth for too long. Bringing together disability and critical race theory, Watts and Erevelles (2004) note the disproportionate number of black and Latino young people given labels associated with 'intellectual impairment' or 'mental health problems'. We have already seen the racist roots of development theory, and we should not write off the racism of developmentalism as only historical. Boom (2014), for example, writes of her struggles to feed her body as a young queer woman of colour. "To be a woman in the Western world", she writes, "is to understand that your worth stems from the ability to be thin, passive, agreeable, servile and beautiful." She goes on to frame becoming-woman as an attempt to become-white:

> "When I was thirteen years old I began starving myself. I did so, in short, because I wanted so desperately to be thin. And by thin, I mainly meant white. I wished to be slimmer, smaller, slighter because that was the beauty I saw beamed at me from the TV shows I so desperately clung to in a bid to escape and from the magazines I pored over, fascinated by the lithe limbs and flawless milky skin of the models within their pages. When I saw these images I felt not just abnormal but abhorrent. An aberration. Furthermore, next to my svelte, slight, white friends I felt monstrous and vast, an expanse of disappointment next to their slim elegance. Their hair fell in straight sheens of silk and their skin shone like snow. My hair was unruly, disobedient and permanently reaching up to the sky. My skin felt dirty and dull pulled over swathes of myself that I wished would disappear. In photos I loomed over them, broader, taller, darker. They seemed to obey the contours of their bodies, but I was spilling out of mine. I desperately tried to occupy less space, to shut my mouth, to flatten my hair with painful relaxers. Dismayed with the fullness of my lips and how I thought they betrayed my ancestry, I used to bite down into my bottom lip hard enough to let blood run, convinced that this would make them smaller. I stayed sullenly in the shade, wore Factor 50 suncream and only ever let myself sunbathe under layers of towels. I did not dare catch the light lest it accentuated my Otherness in the bright unrelenting white of my suburban surroundings."

We see here Boom feeling that an interlinked necessity of becoming-adult is to become-white. Furthermore, Dyson, commenting on the Trayvon Martin tragedy, points out youth the dangers of 'youth' for black boys:

> "The fear for – and, unfortunately, of – our sons of color is paramount. It allows no room for black boys to be kids – to wear hoodies when it rains, to wear jeans that fall in line with the current fashion trends; mothers fear their growth spurts, facial hair, and voice changes."
>
> (Dyson, 2013)

She quotes a mother's comment on an article titled '*I'm Afraid to Raise a Little Black Boy*':

> "My biracial son is 15. I made him cut his hair over the weekend to look less black. This fear you speak of is making me crazy. My own child didn't understand why I insisted on him keeping his hair short now."
>
> (Biddy commenting on Jefferson, 2013)

Whilst Boom's teenage-self felt growing up meant she had to try become-white, for this mother, the only way to keep her son safe is for him to 'pass' as white. We understand this mother's logic when considering the numbers of black young men (and women, non-binary folks and children) incarcerated (A. Y. Davis, 2003) or killed by the police (Black Lives Matter, 2015) . For Elman (2014, 2), the anxieties around youth are clear: youth is "the possibility and peril of a future citizen who may yet be anything [this proto-citizen] may not turn out straight or gender-normative, may not be white, may not be nondisabled, may not be a productive worker who adheres to the economic and cultural values of U.S. capitalism." Young people are 'unfinished projects.' The space and freedom that youthful non-normativity is often presumed to allow, therefore, can only be played out by the most normative of young

people, in the most normative of ways. Furthermore, what is striking about the above stories is the demand for young people and their families to be self-surveying.

Youth and Self-Surveillance

For Giroux (2009) to understand the positioning of young people today we need to note a neoliberal change in attitude towards young people. Although media rhetoric was not wholly positive, the post-war years were met with a desire to make a world 'fit for heroic young soldiers'. Aided by greater Western affluence and the development of the welfare state, this meant young people were instilled with hopes and ideals of a future generation worth protection and investment (France, 2007). It is important to note that such a discourse was neither inclusive of all young people, nor without its own problems of assumed future adulthood normativity. Border zones of youth were rife (Lesko, 2002). Youth considered 'at risk' were subject to intervention from various youth services (Kelly, 2003). Yet, this contrasts with a discourse presented to us today; with massive austerity cut backs in the UK and elsewhere, youth services are under threat (Slater, 2015); the narrative therefore changes from one of protection and nurturing, to one of personal responsibility.

Youth and (Developing) Personal Responsibility: Considering the UK 'Riots'

We see this narrative of personal responsibility if we look at discourse emerging after the so-named UK 'riots' in summer 2011. Many of the people involved were young people of colour from poor neighbourhoods (Smith, 2011). Arguably *because* of this, media reports failed to they see the action as a legitimate form of political resistance. Neither did most reports contextualise young people's actions in the uncertain futures and harsh political climates they were facing. The answer, even after the initial aftermath, wasn't to examine structural inequalities. Rather, a picture was painted of an uncontrollable 'mindless mob' (Cavanagh & Dennis, 2012). News stories read under headlines such as '*Battle for London*' (The

Guardian), '*Rule of the Mob*' (The Telegraph); '*Yob Rule*' (The Daily Mail); and '*Anarchy'* (The Sun). Unable to resist tapping into the neurologically-driven path, *The Daily Mail* ran a story under the headline '*Rioters may have 'lower levels' of brain chemical that keeps impulsive behaviour under control*' (Daily Mail, 2011). Yet, this impulsiveness wasn't attributed to a youthfulness that will be 'naturally' grown out of, but a diagnostic feature of *some* male brains linked to an equally un-contextualised and flippant comparison with 'psychiatric disorders or substance dependence'. Tellingly, a disclaimer was later added as *The Daily Mail* was asked to make clear that the study they were drawing on made no mention of 'rioting'. Nevertheless, this pathologisation of the teenage mind was used take focus away from any meaningful exploration of structural inequality, instead putting the focus on individuals.

Boris Johnson, Mayor of London took to the streets; urging people to join him for a '*Big Society'* clean up. Blame was attributed to 'broken families', a 'lack of male role models', 'moral collapse', and 'social breakdown' (Smith, 2011). A commentary in *The Guardian* was typical in its claim that the riots were a result of "allow[ing] our welfare system to prop up immoral lifestyles." The author claimed that, "[w]e have not taught young people that entitlement culture is wrong" (Bailey, 2011). Rather than given any social or political context, young people were deemed an entitlement generation obsessed with the commodity (Brand, 2011).

Looking historically, this is not the first time that a moral panic has been sparked over the relationship between young people and the markets (Cohen, 2002). Similarly to its 2011 headline, 'Yob Rule', in 1964 the *Daily Mail* reported the Margate Riots under the headline, '*Wild One's 'Beat Up' Margate'*. Although it is not an entirely undisputed notion (see France, 2007), for many the 1950s mark the first time that young people were recognised as consumers in their own right (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 2006; Hodkinson, 2008).

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With this came the rise of certain 'youth subcultures' (France, 2007) and the claim that young people were being corrupted by the markets. A new discipline, youth subcultural studies emerged, with aimed to challenge this, not by concentrating on individual psychologies or neurology, but contextualising young people's actions in social, political and cultural contexts (S. Hall & Jefferson, 2006). Largely this was done by considering relationships between youth, consumerism and the commodity. Young people's non-normativity was argued to be an act of resistance to the status-quo. The argument of youth subcultural theorists, therefore, are at least part of the reason that youth culture is largely projected as an identity-forming rite of passage (Bennett, 2008). For Bennett (2008), in fact, a hangover from the youth subcultural days leads us to another contradictory message delivered around young people today. We're told that young people are an apathetic generation, a pale reflection of our predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s (Bennett, 2008). Young people are just too normal!

Generational Differences: Youth as Not Abnormal Enough

An article appearing in *The Guardian* in July 2013 was typical in this as it juxtaposed teen idol Justin Bieber's conformity with *The Rolling Stone's* rebellion (Hyde, 2013). Commenting on the article, one blogger wrote, "Perhaps these new kids could be given lessons on how to really behave disgracefully? Keith Richards could give them a few pointers at gun point" (comment by blogger, Strummered, on Hyde, 2013). What we're again lacking through the implicit and unthinking talk of youth in this comment is an updated social, political or cultural context. The author fails to point out that there were similarly manufactured bands in the 1960s and 1970s (The Monkees, The Osmonds and The Bay City Rollers, for example). Nor does he note the DIY music scenes that today scatter the country. Furthermore, since the time of the original subcultural work, the discipline has been criticised for focusing exclusively on public displays of white, male – and I'd add, non-disabled - youth (Dorn & South, 1999; McRobbie, 1980, 1990, 2000; Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005; Slater, 2015).

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McRobbie (1982), for example, argued in the 1980s that by focusing only on overtly public displays of young men, researchers excluded the more mundane, albeit just as real identity forming experiences happening behind closed doors. There is no mention in this article of the other, less public ways young people are resisting the paths laid out for them. Perhaps most significantly, however, there is no acknowledgement of the demonising discourse and dangerous positions young people find themselves subject to when they do publicly rebel, such as during the riots. I turn now to another story from the fieldwork with young disabled people outlined above, which illustrates why, for many young people, embracing a youthful non-normativity is not an option.

A discussion with Colin, a young man and active disability activist about his job as a voluntary web designer for a local company went as follows:

> **Colin:** …no matter how ill I am I still struggle on.
>
> **Jenny:** I can imagine! Are you worried people will be like, it's 'cos he's a disabled person …
>
> **Colin:** Yeah. It hacks me off that people go out during the week, get absolutely hammered and then phone in sick the next day when there are people, disabled people out there, wanting to work and we can't get jobs. Recently, Philip Davis, the MP, said disabled people are scroungers … and that all the disability allowances get spent on trying to get things that non-disabled people have to work for - I don't agree.

<div align="right">(Interview with Colin 1st December 2011 cited in Slater, 2013a)</div>

Colin told me that people's low expectations of him meant he was 'sick of' having to prove himself above and beyond his peers, but also fearful of the consequences if he stopped. Reliant on expensive taxis for travel, Colin was more mobile during the week because his workplace subsidised his transport. One very obvious and immediate consequence of not proving himself adult-enough to work would be to be physically restricted to his parental home. The choice was between forced dependency (akin to childhood), or self-disciplining adulthood responsibility – with little in between. Despite neurologists telling us that young

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people's underdeveloped pre-frontal cortex means they have little choice but to 'live in the moment' (Payne, 2010), and sociologists telling us that youth is an 'identity-forming rite of passage', Colin is allowed little freedom to embody the here-and-now non-normativity of youth. Not being to be allowed to pass through the border zone of youth could lead to paternalism and the denial of autonomy continuing into (chronological) adulthood (Baron, Riddell, & Wilson, 1999).

Furthermore, Colin also had structural barriers preventing him taking part in what we may consider 'youthful activities'. Going out for Colin, more than many of his peers, was an expensive feat. He told me stories of shelling out £40 for taxis, only to reach inaccessible venues. Ironically, gaining the 'adult responsibility' of paid work could allow him periodical access to some practices that we might consider youthful, by increasing both his finances and autonomy. Yet, this could only happen on the assurance that the next day he could position himself once again as an adult worker.

Ironically, then, we see that for Colin, only by being accepted as adult, could he be allowed safe access (and periodical) access to youth. Furthermore, this passported access would have to be used carefully; dwell in the space of youthful non-normativity too long – miss a day at work, for example - and his opportunity to return back to adulthood may be denied.

(Re)-Conceptualising Youth (3): Youthful Non-normativity Commodified

Through the stories told so far, our third relationship between youth and adulthood is beginning to emerge. *Figure Three* shows the same figures of a family used in earlier sketches. However, this time the family is repeated multiple around the outside of a circle. Youth is not represented by a figure, but by a pound sign, placed in the centre of this circle, and next to it the words 'non-normative youth commodified'. This time the adult male in the family is the focus – the most normative representation of adulthood. He is circled in each

depiction and an arrow leads him in and then back out of the circle, representing his ability to buy into, but then step back out of a commodified, compartmentalised youthful non-normativity. The youth-adult time binding in different: rather than an assumption that young people will grow out of a youthful non-normativity; there is a profit-driven expectation that young people should be able to display the reasonableness and responsibility of adulthood, whilst periodically buying into, the non-normativity of youth. I turn now to choose a deliberately normative (i.e. white, middle class, normatively-gendered, heterosexist, minority world, ableist) example of the 'student experience' to illustrate the commodified non-normativity of youth further.
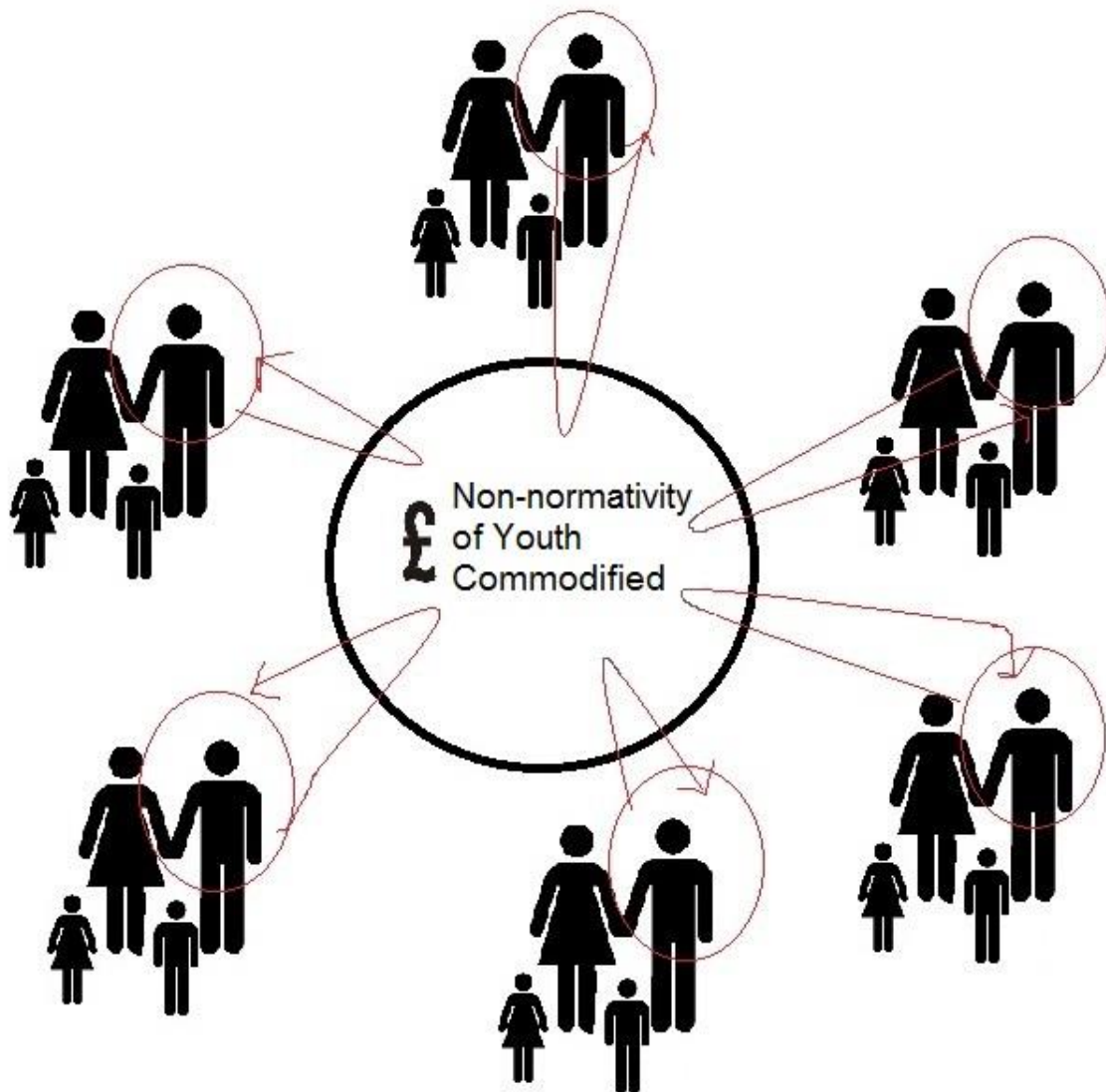
Figure 3: Non-normative Youth Commodified

The 'Student Experience' and Commodified Youthful Non-normativity

Considering the discourse of the student experience can help us understand how the strange

contradiction of commodified and compartmentalised youthful non-normativity may play out

in young people's lives. Prospective students at my own university are told on our website

that they're "expected to study on [their] own much more than [they] might be used to"

(Sheffield Hallam University, 2013). The rhetoric we as a team of lecturers employ on a daily basis is that students are 'responsible' for their own learning, which should gradually become more 'autonomous'. The general message students are delivered is one of adulthood (Price, 2011; Slater, 2013b): you are not children (at school) anymore – you're adults now, and should be able to take care of yourself. Yet, Radcliffe (Chapter ??, this volume) highlights that although there is an expectation of future adulthood productivity, universities also expect (some – the most normative) students to want a *complete* 'university experience'; and with this there is an expectation to be 'social creatures'. Although in the day students must demonstrate themselves as adults, on a night there is an engrained expectation to go out, get drunk, and embrace the identity-forming, non-normativity of youth.

A 'school disco' themed student night local to my university, for example, plays up to its juxtaposition with the (adult) academic environment. Its promotional material reads:

> "The Original Skool Disco, now celebrating over eight years of the finest lubrication of Sheffield's brightest young academic minds.
> Skools out, and it's time to do some serious Music and Biology revision at Sheffield's largest and loudest student night. Three rooms of musical mayhem unleash a massive party whatever your musical taste"

> (Corperation Nightclub, 2013)

There is a call to embrace what is considered the 'natural' state of being which has to be (unnaturally) reigned back during the day. Students are encouraged to 'lubricate' in order to 'unleash' animal instincts. Another student night, '*Hallam Nation*', conveys a similar message of 'survival of the fittest' when it uses the words 'harder… better… faster… stronger' to sell itself (Embrace Nightclub, 2013). This commercialised and commodified discourse of a youthful non-normativity meshes cultural and evolutionary scripts of youth;

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presenting idealised and sexualised images of a youthful femininity to be lived up to, that many young people would not recognise themselves within. For Filipovic (2008, 19), such representation leads to a dangerous 'boys will be boys' discourse where men are "expected to be aggressive sexual actors attempting to "get" sex from passive women who both hold and embody sex itself". We are taken right back to the beginning of this chapter as, despite being portrayed as a space of non-normativity, we once again see that youth is suffocated in dangerously normative rules.

Where are we left?

Lennard Davis (2010, 3) tells us "we live in a world of norms"; everything measured "along some conceptual line from subnormal to above average". In this chapter I have thought about how this claim sits with our perceptions of 'youth'; a time, we are often told, that is anything but normal. My romp through various illustrative representations of youth, however, has left me inclined to agree with Davis. The only way to safely live a youthful non-normativity, it seems, is to fit into various other normative constructions.

This means, ironically, at first being granted an adulthood passport, which will periodically allow you temporary access to a commodified and commercialised, youthful non-normativity. Although for a few (white, non-disabled, heterosexual, North American or Western European, middle-class, cisgendered males) this passport may be an entitlement, for many crossing the border zone of youth becomes a necessarily self-disciplining project. This is at best difficult, and, at worst devastating. Furthermore, the requirement of the neoliberal subject to be fluid and flexible enough to jump painlessly between commodified youthful non-normativity and adulthood responsibility is in itself, youthful (Hughes, Russell, & Paterson, 2005; Slater, 2012).

Beware the trip wires of normalcy criss-crossing the border zone of youth – they can be hard to see.

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