The other side of coastal towns: young men's precarious lives on the margins of England

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Abstract

English coastal resorts are among the most deprived towns in the country, with levels of economic and social deprivation often exceeding those of the inner areas of large cities and former industrial settlements. Their dominant image in the media and other forms of representation, however, is of places of innocent fun and leisure, often associated with their history as holiday destinations for working class families, although the darker side of these towns is not completely ignored. The lives of white working-class, year-round residents in these towns, however, seldom feature in representations or in policy and academic research. Here, we focus on the everyday lives of one group: young white working class men whose employment opportunities have been adversely affected by economic decline, austerity and rising inequality. In places where employment is largely restricted to customer-facing jobs in the holiday trade, the dominant construction of youthful masculinity and the associated rhetorical view of these men as troublesome not only excludes them from the labour market but exacerbates their marginality. Through interviews in four English resort, we explore the causes and consequences of their precarity.

Introduction

The argument here is about what we have termed the other side of coastal towns, focusing on young white men who grew up in working-class families and whose life today is increasingly precarious as they attempt to construct adult lives in towns that are also marginal. Through interviews in four English resorts we explore the representations, common discourses and the structural circumstances that contribute to these men's marginality as they become adults in places that for others are spaces of transitory pleasure. We document the precarious employment of young men and the ways in which they both explain and deal with their marginality in ways that both increase their disadvantage, but also bring some pleasure to their lives.

Seaside images

One of the most enduring images in the English consciousness is that of the seaside. The typical image of a seaside resort is one of sun, sand, family pleasure, frivolity, indulgence or perhaps illicit sexual encounters, a space for rest and recreation, places to seek respite from the cares of everyday life (Shields 1990, Urry and Larsen 2011). These images are common in popular song, in photography Williams and Shepherdson 2018), painting and film (Allen 2008), conveyed by advertising over decades and lingering in the hazy memories and holiday snaps of millions of Britons. Less commonly represented in the iconography of the English seaside town, however, are the people who live on the coast all year round: the declining numbers involved in fishing, owners and workers in hotels and more recently the proprietors of airbnbs, the employees who service visitors in shops, cafes, funfairs and arcades, as well as in art galleries and upmarket bars and restaurants, the teachers, nurses, care workers and doctors who look after the 'locals' from birth to death. This local population is almost absent from popular images of seaside towns and for many of them, their future is uncertain. They

live literally on the margins of the land, and, for growing numbers, on the margins of society as economic change and hard-hitting austerity programmes adversely affect their living standards.

Recently identified as among the most deprived towns in the country (CSJ 2013; Corfe 2017) the majority of English coastal resorts have suffered a long economic decline. Always economically relatively precarious as tourism is a seasonal trade, largely reliant on low-wage labour (Beatty and Fothergill 2004), their economies suffered from the rapid growth of cheap foreign travel from the 1970s (Gale 2005; Rickey 2009; Rickey and Houghton 2009; Shaw and Williams 1997; Walton 2000), although economic change and decline varies by location and time, as specific coastal resorts are differentially affected. Resorts in north Devon, for example, suffered from the closure of branch railway lines in the 1960s, whereas on the north east coast, the closure of the steel works on Teesside in 2015 severely affected resorts already in trouble (Nayak 2019). More generally, low levels of investment, rising poverty, housing problems as large Victorian properties, previously occupied by visitors, need maintenance (Smith 2012, Ward 2015), problems of high rates of drug abuse, community issues connected to recent Government policies of housing refugees and asylum seekers in these towns and outward migration of the more educated population have resulted in the coincidence of high levels social and economic deprivation (House of Lords 2019, Reid and Westergaard 2017).

Numerous efforts have been made to revive the tourist trade by attracting a more elite class of visitors through art-led regeneration (Lees and McKiernan 2012) such as the development of galleries – the Turner in Margate and the Jerwood in Hastings (now renamed Hastings Contemporary after losing its initial sponsor and funding) for example, and art installations – Damien Hurst's statue of Verity (a naked pregnant woman) in Ilfracombe and Anthony Gormley's casts of himself on the beach in Crosby. There have been new investments in piers, roads and other transport links and attempts to attract new industries, but the visible evidence of decline and a cruel underbelly of neglect in both the built environment and the social structures of these coastal resorts remains only too evident, especially in the winter months. Despite regeneration efforts, overall unemployment rates remain above the national average, with young people in a particularly precarious situation. Rates of unemployment for people aged between 18 and 21 living in coastal towns are on average higher than elsewhere (Francis-Devine 2019). Educational opportunities are generally fewer than in other English urban areas and social mobility rates are lower (Social Mobility Commission 2017). Higher education demands out-migration for example, and employment opportunities for young people without qualifications and skills are poor, largely consisting of precarious and casual work, often on a seasonal basis.

Growing up on the coast: white, male and marginal

The specific focus here is on young white men aged between 17 and 24 who live on the English coast in one of four resorts: Hastings, Ilfracombe, Southport and South Shields, where problems of youth unemployment and homelessness are noticeable. These men grew up in working-class families, living in state-owned housing on peripheral local authority estates or in rented accommodation in parts of the town that rank highly on indicators of deprivation. Their parents, if in employment, held poorly paid jobs and in the years of recession and growing inequality, many have found family life difficult. Personal difficulties, low incomes and benefit cuts mean that family support may not be available during periods of unemployment, especially as household incomes have not recovered since the financial crisis of 2008 and significant cuts in local government services have been effected under stringent austerity programmes since 2010, underpinned by an adherence to a version of neoliberal economic and social policies that insist on individual responsibility This neoliberal rhetoric of individualisation has increased the discursive attribution of blame. Individuals are responsible for

their own success, or lack of success. In this 'blame culture' the white working-class are seen as particularly at fault. While the explanation lies in structural changes in the labour market and in social welfare provision, the white working-class are often blamed by commentators on the political right for their own disadvantage, as the two examples below illustrate. The first is particularly relevant here as the population of the case-study towns is almost exclusively white.

The first commentator is Liz Sidwell, a former Schools Commissioner: 'in a monoculture, in particular in seaside areas and coastal areas, they [the white working-class] … haven't come from a culture where they have got to work. They think there's a more limited range of things they can aspire to' (quoted in Vasager 2011). More recently, Philip Johnston (2019), a leader writer in the broadsheet newspaper *The Telegraph*, responded to a Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission report about the domination of a privately educated elite in Britain in 2019. 'If there is a problem [of a dominating elite] it is with one group in particular - the white working-class who live on benefits and appear to have a cultural animus towards improvement through education that is not shared by, say, poorer ethnic communities'.

This class prejudice, defined by Haylett (201: 351) as a form of class racism, constructs the white working-class as backward and abject, undeserving of support because of their own perceived lack of effort. For white working-class young men, this explicit class prejudice is deepened as they are seen through a discursive frame with a long history that constructs them as trouble or troubling, as out of control, a nuisance in the public arena, too loud, too noisy, too visible (Connell 2000; Ilan 2013, 2015; Jones 2011; McDowell 2003; Nayak 2006; Pearson 1983). In the popular media and policy documents these young men are portrayed as a problem to resolve, or as a nuisance to be contained. The explicit aim is to shape them into respectable, or at least manageable, members of society, even as the opportunities offered are changing and for many reducing as austerity bites (O'Hara 2014), and inequality and public squalor, as well as the devastation due to drug taking, become more marked (Alston 2018). In the current climate where a right-wing neoliberal Conservative Government endorses the values of individual effort (Grimshaw and Rubery 2012), blaming the poor for what is seen as their lack of effort, young men without work or in casual and precarious jobs are seen as part of the undeserving underclass, lacking the moral fibre that distinguishes 'strivers' from 'scroungers' (Sayer 2005; Skeggs 2009; Valentine and Harris 2014)

The counter argument is to be found in the long-term restructuring of the labour market with the decline of relatively secure employment and wages, at least for the male working class aristocracy since the 1960s, but accelerated in more recent decades. As Walker and Roberts (2017: 1-2)) note 'working class men represent one group in the workforce whose social position has been visibly transformed by neoliberalism'. The opportunities open to young men differ from those previously available to their fathers, or perhaps, given the long-term trends, their grandfathers, when the hegemonic construction of working class masculinity was through participation in manual labour. As these jobs disappear, young men find the traditional markers of male adulthood – secure employment and a 'bread winner wage' - increasingly elusive. In an economy dominated by the service sector, young, working-class men find it particularly difficult to find decent work. Often disaffected at school, they may leave with few qualifications and in some cases with a reputation as trouble- makers. After leaving full-time education and looking for work, they typically find themselves less eligible for the sorts of customer-facing service employment that dominates these towns as it demands female-coded characteristics such as empathy or persuasion (Farrugia et al 2018; McDowell 2012; Nixon 2009, 2018). The specific version of a working class 'protest masculinity' identified by Connell (2000), based on an aggressive, swaggering street-wise masculinity further restricts their employment prospects. Concurrently, there is evidence of the emergence of a

different version of masculinity, in response to the failure to find employment or value in other areas of everyday life. Here a narrative about failure, resignation and quiet desperation among young men who choose to withdraw from the struggle to find work is more common (Giziatzoglu 2014; Roberts 2013). Indeed, not only are there multiple forms of masculinities, differentiated by age, by class, by ethnicity but for individuals and groups, masculinity is mutable and complex, and sometimes contradictory. Nevertheless, the growing rhetorical dominance of notions of individual responsibility, of 'flexibility' in response to growing uncertainty and ideals of self-improvement in all areas of life position young men with uncertain working lives and low incomes as lacking individual effort in the spheres not only of employment but consumption, leisure and health (Hayward and Mac an Ghaill 2014; Robertson et al 2018).

We now turn to the ways in which white working-class young men in seaside towns live their everyday lives at the intersection of these contradictory discourses about individualisation, class prejudice and troubling masculinity. We illustrate their efforts to find employment in labour markets dominated by casual and precarious work for the less skilled, in an era when the combination of adverse economic circumstances and the decline of welfare and youth support services over the last decade (Hughes et al 2014; Lupton et al 2016) have deepened the disadvantage of young men living on the margins.

Living on the margins: context and methods

Drawing on the belief that an interview is a story told to a non-judgemental audience, we talked to 10 young working class men in each of the four towns. The towns - Hastings on the south east coast, in Sussex, Ilfracombe on the north coast of Devon in the south west of England, Southport on the Lancashire coast in the north west and South Shields in north east England - were chosen to capture something of the regional variety of the English coast but also as places where both fishing and tourism have significantly declined in recent decades. Rates of youth unemployment in each town are two or three percentage points higher (at 11.2% in December 2018) than the national average for young people but also seasonally variable. Poverty and visible youth homelessness are also problems in each town.

The participants were identified in a range of ways, including leaflet drops and posters in colleges and cafes, through charities that aid workless young people, visits to 'hang out spots' where young people congregated and personal contacts as interviewees suggested friends who might participate. All the participants were white – a deliberate choice not only reflecting the population but also because young white working-class men have low levels of participation in post-school education and training - and were aged between 17 and 24, half of them under 21.

The interviews were undertaken between October 2017 and April 2019 in 'neutral' spaces: usually in cafes and coffee shops. We often bought the respondent a drink or a sandwich and paid them all £20 for the exchange which typically lasted between an hour and two hours. As an opening question, we asked 'what is it like growing up around here?'. This was followed up a largely chronological exploration of the key events in their lives including school careers, searching for employment, leaving home (where appropriate) and a more general discussion about their hopes, fears, opportunities and problems, drawing on a broadly biographical method (Merrill and West 2009). The conversations were led by one or other of us, usually alone. We tried neither to be too directive nor to interrupt unnecessarily and we refrained from judgemental comments. Each interaction was recorded at the time, with permission, and later transcribed and analysed using the listening method (Gilligan et al 2003). Each interview and transcript was listened to and read through several times, listening first for the 'I' voice and then for third person comments. We noted gaps

and silences, and recorded hesitations, embarrassment, insistence and anger about particular topics. We used NVivo to draw out the key themes and we also looked again at the notes made after each interaction.

16 of the 40 men were unemployed at the time of the interview. 11 had some form of precarious work, often working for cash in hand. The remainder were enrolled on courses at local colleges or on a Prince's Trust course for unemployed youths. One man was homeless, living rough and a further three were *de facto* homeless, sofa surfing with friends or older independent siblings. 12 men were living in a shelter or hostel as a consequence of family breakdown. Some of them had lived on the streets before being rehoused. The rest still lived in the parental home, but often under difficult circumstances, including living with an alcoholic parent, in large families in cramped conditions or with the children of siblings, with stresses exacerbated by financial problems. Only two men, both in their early twenties, were fathers themselves. One young man lived with foster parents, one man with an unrelated couple in a scheme called Shared Lives and three lived with grandparents. Some of the young men had personal issues, such as dyslexia, epilepsy, autism and unspecified learning difficulties, and several mentioned that they felt depressed.

The apparent stability of attending college and living in the parental home often proved to be a mirage. Their college attendance was often poor, as were largely uninterested in the courses, although a number of the men mentioned success in various vocational courses, including computing and animal care, and two men had a university degree, achieved through commendable effort and perseverance taking post-school exams and in one case an initial year for those without the usual entry requirements. The majority still in education attended sporadically, preferring to hang out during the day, on the local streets or in friends' homes, generally 'causing havoc' in the words of an 18 year old Ilfracombe man. Most of them had truanted at different periods in their earlier school lives, some had been excluded from school or from college and several had been in trouble with the police, including on probation, receiving a suspended sentence, in a young offenders' institution and one man had been in prison. A number of men also had parents who had been imprisoned. Almost all 40 of the men mentioned issues connected with illegal drug taking, as we explore in more detail later.

The men spoke openly and movingly about their hopes and fears and it was evident from the conversations that the potential for many of achieving even a degree of security in the immediate and probably the long-term was limited. The problems of precarious work or unemployment loomed largest, especially the issue of seasonality. Social problems in coastal towns were also a significant issue. Nevertheless, many of the respondents spoke appreciatively about the pleasures of living on the coast, despite clear disadvantages of distance, overcrowding in the season, resentment of holiday makers and, in Ilfracombe, problems of marine pollution.

Through their narratives, we now turn to these topics, focusing in turn on efforts to find employment, the consequences of drug taking and the trials and pleasures of living on the coastal margins of England. These three themes emerged from the analysis as the most significant aspects of the lives of the men in each of the towns. The struggle to find work and yet remain optimistic in the face of uncertainty and precarious contracts, as well as at times, a sense of self-blame is clear. In the second and third of these empirical sections, a different contradiction is evident. Drugs and alcohol, risk taking and a neglect of their own well-being were, for many, a response to the precariousness of their lives, numbing the reality of economic and social exclusion. Substance abuse was also a response for some to the difficulties that many faced in their family and intimate relationships: another of the adverse consequences of neoliberal austerity. Coastal resorts have high rates of arrests for drug and drink offences as well as for violence. And yet, paralleling the optimism

expressed about finding work, many of the young men found pleasure in the landscape, in the changing light, the sea and the scenery. Here the contradiction of these liminal towns as spaces of both despair and pleasure is notable.

Precarious work: waiting, serving and labouring

One of the key markers of the successful achievement of adult masculinity is the transition from education to employment. This, as we outlined above, has become increasingly difficult for young working-class men with few educational credentials or skills. For all 40 respondents, the lack of secure employment was *the* key issue, followed by the precariousness of jobs that were secured. Seasonal employment has long been a problem in coastal towns but insecurity has increased as casual contracts and attachment to the labour force in multiple ways has expanded. In 2019 in the UK 5 million workers were either self-employed or on casual contracts, including zero hours' contracts, not only in the so-called gig economy (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019; Prassl 2018), but in the retail and hospitality sectors that are so significant in coastal towns.

The narratives illustrate the extreme precariousness of these men's attachment to the labour market. They had all experienced periods of unemployment and at the time of the interview what work they had secured was casual, often part-time, poorly paid and with no contract, security or employment rights. Personal contacts were the way in which many men found work, typically in various forms of hospitality, i or in casual labouring jobs. The extracts below reveal the difficulty of finding work and, once found, its insecurity. In each town at least half the men commented on the lack of opportunities for securing decent employment. Indeed, a blunt acceptance of the lack of work for men like them was a common response:

'There's just no jobs around here at all' (Steve, Hastings); 'there's nothing really around here' (Darren, Ilfracombe).

If there is work it is often seasonal:

Round here it is all seasonal, you can't really find a full time job that will pay you the right money and every single day. You won't get it, you won't get it at all round here (Darren, aged 21).

I am not working at the moment [March 2019]. No one will be hiring at the moment because it's so dead. I mean, it looks busy, but it's really not' (Tod, 21, Ilfracombe).

However, Tod also told us he had not worked last summer either: 'I've not [worked] for a year, that's not good'.

Casual work in hotels, bars and cafes was more common in the summer months, but the short-term customer-facing jobs often went to young women or to middle class students during their summer vacations, especially in the more up-market bars and bistros in the gentrifying core of Hastings, for example, where a smart appearance was demanded. The men to whom we talked found that they were restricted to the less prestigious and inexpensive sector of the hospitality industry and, if hired, typically they found themselves doing the less salubrious tasks such as washing up, basic cooking or clearing tables. As Joe (19, South Shields) noted:

I'm actually looking for a job at the minute, but I think it's quite hard looking for a job here. I was thinking about just doing bar work, like collecting glasses in a pub, or just working in café.

Lucas, aged 18 and also living in South Shields, secured just such a job through a personal contact.

> I was just out one night [in a club]. I knew one of me mates worked there . . . his uncle was the manager, so he was a glass collector. But then they needed another glassy and he said 'do you want it?' No interview or anything, I just kind of started the next week.

Other men worked in pubs or in mass-market fast-food outlets, finding themselves ineligible for the limited number of new venues emerging through the emphasis in regeneration policies on the new cultural economy. As Jason (19, South Shields) explains

> Well, I applied for McDonalds first and I didn't get the one at McDonalds, and then I got this in Wetherspoons (a down-market pub chain). I have a contract but only for 4 hours. Ideally I wanted 12 but it was 4. To be honest it never got that low unless I couldn't work a certain day that they wanted.

> The uncertainty of variable hours and being called in at short notice was sometimes a problem, although less so for single and unattached young men without dependents than for people with family or other responsibilities. Jason enjoyed his job: 'I think it's fun. There's like always something to do. … engaging with customers helps with my social skills, so I just like talking to people'.

> A smaller number of men – five in total - had part-time jobs in shops. Ty, aged 22, and one of the two men with a child, had worked at the Co-op grocery store in Ilfracombe for a few months. However, 'I had my kid coming on when I was at the Co-op. I was on a 12 hours' contract and I needed more money. I was going to have to look for another job'. It was not only the need for higher wages that made his decision to leave but the way in which the current UK benefit system works.

> I needed more hours, or I needed a higher contract, because you need a 16 hours contract to get like a work allowance, like a government thing. They fund you [with tax credits] if you work a certain amount of hours, and you've got a kid. But they wouldn't give it to me so I thought 'well, I need to look for another job'.

> Ty found a job packing medical supplies in a firm a few kilometres from his home town. The money was better but the work unsatisfying: 'you thought I want to shoot myself every day because it's so boring, but you know money down there was a lot better there. … I was there for I think it was a year and a bit, and then they pulled me aside and said we don't have the work so they have to let some people go and I was one of those people'.

> Ty's experience was, however, atypical in having, at least for a year, a full-time job. Although Jordan in Southport had had a similar job, his was on a part-time basis and he lasted less than a month: 'I was working in a warehouse in Kirby, doing like, packing up boxes. I didn't like the work, so I just walked out'.

> Working cash in hand for friends and relatives was common, especially in for men doing casual labouring. Tyler in Hastings and Kiernan in Southport both explained how they found work.

> I did scaffolding like labouring with my uncle Dave's business. I did that for a couple of weeks. It was all right . . . but I mean it wasn't really a steady job because it was cash in hand. Cash in hand's not really something you wanna be with for the rest of your life (Tyler, 17).

> I helped do the windows and floors in a new bar. it was only a week job, just jumped on it cos me dad got me it. (Kiernan, 22).

Less commonly, men found labouring work in other ways. Jayden (aged 18), for example, found work in Southport by advertising on Facebook:

> I just put a little status on Facebook, I'm looking for a job vacancy for labourers, anything, looking for anything. Some roofer called me up and wanted me to start working with him. So, I started working with him and then … I kind of lost the job a few months into it.

The job was cash in hand with no contract and security and as Jayden rather ruefully noted 'me life has sort of got a little bit like tits up, sort of thing'.

More formal ways of finding work were less common. Mitchell (23) in South Shields, for example, found a labouring job through an agency:

> But that's just here, there everywhere. They ring you one day, you're in for a day, then you're not in for another two weeks. A day here, a day there, that's not any way to live really, labouring, on sites, aye, cleaning shit up. So, it's pointless.

He combined this casual work with a job with his sister, cleaning flats after tenants moved out, in this case for cash in hand.

> Like the other morning I was in bed, at like half 7 in the morning, she rang my phone 'do you want fifty quid?' 'What for?' 'hoovering a few floors with us'. No problem, straight away. . . . I got fifty quid at the end of it.

Despite the boredom of many jobs and the extreme insecurity of trying to make a living through numerous different short term jobs, many men retained a sense of optimism and hope that something would turn up. Ty, for example, who had been out of work for three months when interviewed in late March 2019 said:

> The sun is coming up so you have to keep your fingers crossed to get through the season, to get a bit of money in through the season. You get a lot of tourists down here, a lot of them. And you get the hotels saying that we need people. I've seen one or two hotels advertising now because they're all starting to open up now. . . . You just gotta keep your fingers crossed for part-time things.

And Scott, also living in Ilfracombe, saw the list of jobs he had already undertaken by the age of 19 in a surprisingly positive light.

> I've worked in a pub. I've done scaffolding. I've done other pub work. I've done work in a warehouse selling phone cases, putting them online and selling them through eBay, packaging them and sending them off. I worked nights for Foodservice, packaging lorries at night, 9 at night until 7 in the morning. I done a bit of painting and decorating for a while . . ., sanding down the doors, doing the skirting work, painting and everything, so I've done a lot. I've been very grateful for amount of jobs that I've been able to have.

Other men, however, bought into the neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility and blamed themselves for lack of effort, especially at school, talking about wasting time, being the class clown or more seriously truanting. Eddie, only 19 years old, in South Shields perhaps spoke for majority, when he said 'I messed me life up, being a divvy [a fool]'.

The extreme precarity of these men's working lives is very different from the older tradition of employment for working-class men. They have little time as they move from job to job to develop workplace-based friendships or the sort of solidaristic relationships that used to distinguish male

work, often dangerous, in primary industries such as fishing, or in the manufacturing sector. These men have few opportunities to develop the disciplinary routines or skills that would help in securing more permanent attachments to the labour market, few though there are for unskilled workers in resorts. While Standing (2011) argues that precarity takes multiple forms – zero hours' contracts, limited hours, lack of security, limited employment rights or protection – he also suggests that there is scope for a new form of cross-class politics that might grow out of alliances between the expanding number of professional, semi-professional and unskilled workers whose insecurity unites them. It seems unlikely, however, that young men such as the 40 here, excluded by their class, youth and sometimes their gender, as well as their appearance and behaviour and their geographical isolation on the coast, will develop common interests with other precarious workers.

As employment took up a relatively small part of the everyday lives of these men, different ways of passing time were necessary. Here drugs and alcohol loomed large in their narratives. Seaside towns rank highly on the index of towns worst afflicted by the devastation that often comes in the wake of addiction to alcohol and illegal drugs. Deaths from heroin overdoses are higher than average in seaside towns and the use of soft drugs such as cannabis and various types of 'legal highs' is widespread. As we explore in the next section getting high was both a way to make a living and to escape the pain and boredom of unemployment and insecurity.

The darker side of town: numbing reality with drugs and alcohol

One of the key policy issues at present in many smaller towns and English coastal resorts is the growth of drug dealing (Cumber and Moyle 2018). A phenomenon termed county lines has been identified as a significant problem in these towns, where children and youths are trapped into selling drugs, supplied to them by dealers from large cities (National Crime Agency 2019). Jason noted that in South Shields 'drugs, they're everywhere. Like on nights out, there's a lot of drug dealers and stuff', adding 'I don't really like that crowd'. Greg (24) in Ilfracombe was one of the men who explained what was happening in coastal towns in the clearest terms. He was both open about his own past involvement and aware of the wider social problems that lead to youth involvement. He was also aware of media interest in the problems of resorts, including a BBC television series in 2017 (*The dark side of the British seaside*).

> I used to partake in smoking a lot of cannabis…., it's a big thing init, the drugs, I think this is a problem, to be honest. I think it's the seaside town problem, and this why I think a lot of people have a lot of interest in these towns at the minute, like the BBC. I think the kids find it easier to go out there and sell weed than to go and get a job. It a horrible thought, but that is the truth.

> I had a year of doing it myself, I have no problem talking about it. I got caught for it. I've been down the court path, so I've experienced not to do it. But, these young lads and that, they don't know that, that don't understand that they're gonna end up going down that route cos it's so easy.

He continued to explain the way in which younger children become involved:

> Like there's so many people, older people that sees opportunities in young kids. They will give them weed and then pressure them to deal for the money, but the kids think it's a good thing cos it blows their ego up, and they feel like they meet new people who are important, because they sell drugs. Honestly, it's a joke.

He also suggested that for some dealing was a way to survive when legal work was difficult to find, rather than to feel 'big'.

> Yes, I did it (dealing). I went through two years of doing it on and off, to pay my rent, not for habit, not for loads of money, … to literally pay my rent and feed myself. . . . And in this town, I'd probably [be able to] write down like 60 different people in the same boat as me who are choosing that alternative lifestyle cos they've never been caught. Me, I've had that slap on the wrist, so I don't do it anymore.

Greg's 'slap on the wrist' was a community service order and a two-year suspended sentence. Mason (aged 20) in Southport was equally open about his own use of drugs. He had started smoking weed when still at school.

> School went downhill cos drugs came involved, like cannabis. I was going out to play football, and all me mates, all there on push bikes, playing footy, all having a good time, and then there was this one person smoking weed. 'Try this'. Before you know it, everyone's tried it in the group… . It happens, doesn't it?

> Now I don't really smoke, I smoke it on the weekends, during the week perhaps, to get a nice sleep, keep on top of things; on the weekend I just have the occasional spliff, just to chill me out and that. …. I smoke the oils now; I don't smoke the weed. Well, oils, they're becoming legal, aren't they, in the pharmacy, aren't they? So yeah.

> For some, drug taking had led to more serious problems. Ryan (aged 20) in Hastings had been evicted from home by his step-father because of his habit and was out of work and homeless when we met him, occasionally staying with an older sister or sofa surfing with friends. His sister and his cousin, however, involved Ryan in drug dealing and he was in serious debt to them. He explained that 'like everyone does crack and heroin, selling that round here because basically everyone like crack-heads round here come up to you like 'oh can you get any light or dark?' But he insisted that 'the only drugs I will touch is weed or sniff. I just smoke weed before bedtime, before I go to sleep'. And like a true neoliberal, Ryan blamed himself for his difficult circumstances:

> Like my life is a bit shit but it's my fault for doing it this way because I could've said no at the beginning but I didn't want to say no because it was my family hit hard. I don't wanna hit rock bottom like my sister did and turn to the worst like the worst drugs.

> Jordan, aged 19, also mentioned parts of Hastings where drugs are a problem, emphasising that it is not just young men like him who are the issue, but older people too.

> I've walked round the corner [in the town centre] a few times and seen people taking drugs and that with like needles on the floor and the public toilet down there's where I usually see it, like 30 homeless people drinking beers every day and you walk around there at night and it's all cans, needles, baggies on the floor. It's horrible.

As Jordan suggests, alcohol is a problem in these towns, both during the summer but also in the off-season. Kieran explains why:

> There's nothing much to do round here [Southport], with it being a seaside town. The biggest thing to do round here is drink. I am trying to stop but it's not going very well. Every time I've ever been arrested, I've been bladdered, three days slashed like, stumbling everywhere. That's the only time everyone seems to see me, when I've been out for like a week drinking and stumbling down the road, and everyone's like 'who's that lad'?

He had lost more than one job by turning up for work drunk or smelling of alcohol.

Others drink for pleasure rather than to distract themselves from difficulties, but nevertheless may regret it later, as Joe in South Shields explains.

> I know loads of people down there [a local club]. When I'm proper drunk I just dance with randomers on the stage and that, and I do karaoke and that… you know when you're drunk you just don't care, do you? And then the next day thinking what the hell was I doing last night.

He continued:

> I used to drink on the streets, yeah, I did. I think everyone did once. … I used to drink when I was 14, you know. And drinking on the beach in the summer. … I was thinking, what was I doing to me life then?

For some men drugs and drink perhaps brought some relief from the difficulties of their lives as many had to cope with issues such family breakdown, depression and other illnesses, as well as their precarious employment situation. However, it too often led to trouble with the police, not only for dealing but also for violence or public disorder and, for some, involvement in theft to support their habits. These misdemeanours are not only reported in the local press but also reinforce the popular image of young working-class men as out of control in public spaces, regarded as a threat to the more respectable population (McDowell and Harris 2018). This discursive construction is hard to escape. As Jordan noted 'people look at you like you're a bad person'. Cory from Southport had a similar view.

> I think a lot of people stereotype young people, but I think only a small minority of young people are actually like that. I think, for example, older people might see a group of three or four lads stood on the street corner and think 'what are they doing? I better not go over there'. But in reality, they're probably just bored and go nothing to do.

As Cory (aged 20) noted 'not all young men are like that' (ie trouble). Indeed, not all the 40 men had been in serious trouble, nor did they all mention drugs and drink, although fewer than four of them made a point of denying experimentation with drugs and even fewer with alcohol. Their lives were also not ones of unalloyed difficulties, despite the continuing struggle to find work. They all mentioned times of pleasure, in some cases support from family and in particular mutual support and care from friends. Some mentioned past-times that they enjoyed, although their lives were severely constrained by lack of money, inhibiting, for example, participation in commercial activities. What was interesting, however, was the pleasure in the landscape that these young men reported.

A different side of town: solace in the landscape

Other than facing the sea, the coastal landscape of each town is different. Hastings has a long pebbled beach, Southport a wide flat expanse of sand, especially when the tide is out. As one of the men in Southport, Cory, commented 'if you can call it a beach, it's more like a field to be honest'. South Shields and Hastings have more spectacular coast-lines with cliffs and small bays. Here climbing the cliffs as well as sitting on the beach was often mentioned. In all four towns it seemed as solace was available, both from childhood recollections and current activities and periods of quiet contemplation on the beach. The landscapes of sea and were often counter-posed to the urban landscape, as problems of decline and delapidation were mentioned. Localities seen as 'rough' (in all four towns areas of social housing) were singled out for opprobrium.

Growing up as a child, it was quite nice round here, there was always a lot to do. Obviously you got the beaches, that's about it really - the beaches and the nature. It was nice when we was kids, to be fair. I still like climbing, up round the beaches. (Greg, Ilfracombe).

Joe (19) in South Shields also mentioned climbing: 'I climb sometimes, where the cliffs are. I don't mean like right next to the sea. The ones a bit further back, near the sands' whereas Rupert was less active, but also appreciated the same scenery; 'It is good, nice location, by the sea. I like the coastline, the beach is nice, when it's not too cold. I like the views really, kind of chilled out. I like to take photos and photography'.

Conor (aged 18) in Hastings was more laconic 'I just like living by the sea' and Craig in Southport, despite Cory's reservation, said, rather joyfully;

I kind of fall in love with it [the beach] again in the summer cos everything feels a lot better. Like you go and sit on dunes and watch the sunset ... I dunno, it's just nice, the environment, everyone just feels happier, and it's a lot more friendly and stuff. In the summer, we'll just get a few beers and go sit on the sand dunes and go and chill out and listen to a bit of music and have a little barbeque or something, something that's nice.

Other men had alternative explanations of what the coast meant to them and others, as Tod explained.

It's quieter than cities, I like how peaceful it is, and if you want to go for a walk along the seaside, you just can. You want to go for a walk up, like Capstone [a local hill and landmark], you can get really good photos up there, especially when the sun sets. Yeah, it's peaceful to say the least. I mean everyone just seems happier than down in the towns. It's less crowded, and less things to do, less things to do but more calmer. (Tod, 21, Ilfracombe)

For many of these young men, their contradictory relationship with the place in which they lived emerged as they positioned the natural landscape in opposition to limited work opportunities and their perception of urban decay. For them, the landscape kept them connected to the town. Ty, for example, who also lived in Ilfracombe, was both lyrical and ambivalent about its advantages.

When I could see the sea through these flats here, it was nice to wake up to, and you know they pull the boats out of the water and put them back in and you'll see them sailing off and it's a nice view. And I used to do a lot of fishing, So, that was obviously nice, but now I think it's overrated. It's bad sea. People have come and tested the water; it is bad. Don't touch or swim in, just don't.

And Darren, in Southport, who loved the beach, nevertheless, saw a parallel in the local council's failure to maintain the beach and the town's economic decline. 'I have a different image of Southport as a kid than I do now; everything is slowly declining. I'd say the beach represents Southport'.

Darren's comparison and Ty's warning might perhaps be a metaphor for the neglect of Ilfracombe, Southport and towns like them. Life in coastal resorts may on the surface look pleasant and their reputation as places for pleasure and relaxation are an essential part of their attraction for visitors. But beneath the surface of these images, economic decline, austerity policies and social problems have circumscribed the opportunities for local working class, including the young men who so openly discussed their lives with us.

Conclusions

Our conclusion is not only to add to arguments for a greater understanding of the lives of young white working-class men but to advocate measures for their inclusion. These men are a group who are often pilloried in policy and in commonly-held assumptions by the police, politicians and the wider society in general. They are regarded as troublesome and, more perniciously, as in need of restraint and control. They are discursively trapped by a long-standing rhetoric that sees them at best as unruly and at worst undeserving of respect, marginal in a society that is increasing judgemental about what are perceived as personal failings of young men who find it hard to find and hold down work, who may drink or do drugs, who are regarded as too visible on the streets of English towns. In a political climate in which citizens are required to work or spend hours searching for work in order to access social benefits, young men who are workless or getting by with casual, insecure and short-term hours are seen as personal failures, despite the violence being done to them by austerity (Cooper and Whyte 2017) and as a consequence of the structural changes in the labour market. These changes magnify the disadvantages of men born into families with have few financial resources to spare to support their sons as they leave education and look for work.

Economic restructuring and neo-liberal austerity policies have a geography. The ways in which dominant discourses and structural circumstances combine to exclude the most marginal members of society vary across the country, affected by the previous economic and social legacies of places, their class composition, the political complexion of the local control, as well as the effects of location and landscape. Geographic distance from the national centre of power in London is clearly related to patterns of financial investment, for example, and at a more local scale, distance and ease of connections, as well as factors such as natural beauty have an impact on economic resilience and the prospects of regeneration. Our contribution here is the focus on the specific social and economic issues facing seaside resorts.

The working class men whose narrative voices are so clear document the consequences of living in some of the most deprived towns in England, where levels of poverty, inequality and substance abuse now match or exceed those of the deindustrialised cities of the UK. In seaside towns, including the four case study towns here, the local population faces the particular problems associated with seasonal employment. These towns too often have poor transport connections to their hinterlands and elsewhere in the country and limited prospects for social mobility, yet they are visible in the national imagination in quite different terms. For the majority population living elsewhere, these towns are spaces of pleasure and leisure, experienced typically in the summer months when the declining housing stock and poverty is partially hidden behind a façade of new hoardings, refreshed paint work, all sorts of attractions to part the crowds from their money, ideally in the haze of pleasure generated by good weather. These resorts still attract a largely working-class clientele, visitors who themselves are the objects of class condescension and who perhaps may regard the poverty and the inequality that they observe when on holiday as little different from their own circumstances. When they return home the lives of the all-year residents fade from their minds.

For the more permanent population living on the coast the discordance of images of pleasure and the reality of insecurity is a continuing backdrop to their lives. For young men, the type of civility and servility deemed an essential part of seducing visitors to spend and to return maps uneasily onto the hegemonic version of working-class masculinity and typically excludes them from many of the customer-facing jobs on offer during the season. When these men do find employment, it is often in demeaning, or boring or manually demanding jobs and, as we have documented, escape through drink or drugs is one response. Their stories might be read as ones that reinforce the discourse that construct them as troublesome and yet, listening to their voices also shows the ways in which they keep looking for work, retain hope for their future and find pleasure in the landscape.

It is important not to continue to exclude these men from the respect of society, nor to deepen their marginality. They must not be written off nor seen as failures or valueless but rather as reacting to the adverse effects of neoliberalism. Instead they deserve respect as they struggle to achieve independent living and the markers of conventional masculinity. As Cox (2015, 8) argued in a different context - a study of the marginal lives of Black girls - 'their lives do not need sanitizing, normalizing, rectifying or translating so that they can be deemed worthy of care and serious consideration'. Young white men on the margins of British society deserve the same consideration. More importantly they deserve financial and social support as well as new policies to challenge their economic exclusion.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest

Orchid

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