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IMAGINATION OF MARGINALISED YOUTH

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‘TO BE ABLE TO SEE A FUTURE’: HOPE AND THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION OF MARGINALISED YOUTH¹

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Abstract

Transition to adulthood in our society is increasingly delayed and risky. It is never more so than for those young people for whom the linear pathways through school to post-school training, work and family formation have always been compromised and tenuous. How then do those young people see their transition to the future? What does social innovation mean in relation to marginalised young people – those young people who have been excluded from mainstream schooling, who may be in contact with the juvenile justice system, who have a family life that differs significantly from the norm, or no family life at all? What innovative approaches can we take to dealing with the complex issues of marginalised young people and their hopes and fears for the future? Can an understanding of hope help us – and them – in looking to the future? In this paper, which draws upon an ongoing research project at the University of South Australia, we argue that we cannot truly bring about effective social innovation for this group unless we have a broad understanding of the complexity of their hopes and fears for the future.

We suggest that the idea of hope may be useful for enriching the field of social innovation with respect to marginalised young people. Social innovation is typically defined as the ‘development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs’ (Mulgan 2007: 9). With respect to marginalised young people there is a strong need to engage or re-engage them with education and learning with the aim that they may enter into economically and socially productive lives. New ideas that help meet this need, we argue, can be developed by an interdisciplinary research methodology that draws from both a social science and creative approach to understanding the hopes of each young person. Through this interdisciplinary theoretical lens we can see that hope is not limited to notions of what we might call ‘the good life’, but is complex and involves for some young people the difficult areas of drugs, crime and experiences that enhance a sense of difference and danger. It is, we argue, often a matter of ‘difficult hope’.

A preferred social future is what social innovation is working towards and this is also the trajectory, whether real or imagined, that inspires a sense of hope. Hopefulness is the feeling

1 This paper stems from the ARC Linkage project ‘Doing social sustainability: the utopian imagination of youth on the margins’ (2006–08) which is examining ways in which young people on the margins of society might contribute to social sustainability knowledge. UniSA researchers in this project are Simon Robb, Alison Mackinnon, Peter Bishop and Patrick O’Leary, and industry partners the Social Inclusion Unit (DPC), DFEEST, the Migration Museum, Bowden Brompton Community School and the Flexi Centre.

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that life is worthwhile, that it is worth living, either now or in the future, and it is this feeling that social innovation practice needs to engage with. The second key term for social innovation is 'the future' and, in particular, a positive and productive future. Given that social innovation must develop ideas about hopefulness and the future when working with marginalised young people, we suggest that this work may be enhanced by a research method that invites young people to explore fully the presence of hope and the future in both their everyday life and their imagination.

Hope and the future

When I think about being hopeful I think about being with my girlfriend and my mum. They bring tranquility and calmness. They make me calmer which makes me hopeful. I don't do the calm thing very well. I'm usually very agro. Hopefully in the future I can see myself being different. (Lindsay)

The word 'hope' means nothing to me. Friends are important too but not as much as family. The future's hard to imagine because there could be lots of different things. Most people think that I'm not going to do anything with my life. I don't know what I'm going to do. In the future there might be everyone in my family, just my family. Maybe a partner, kids, who knows? I don't really have a hopeful place, because my house burnt down a few months ago, and that was the only place that I felt comfortable and everything. I keep wishing that I could go back, I could just go home. (Lisa)

How do young people imagine a hopeful world? What does hopefulness mean to them? These are issues we set out to explore in our partnership with young people 'on the margins'.

Hopefulness is a belief that things can change in a positive way, that there are possibilities for change, that a situation can be different and better than it now is. On the other side of hopefulness is despair, fear and resignation. When dealing with hope we are dealing with the future, or at least another time to this one. The important point is that there is another time to this one, another place, another experience that is available. To live without this belief is to live without hope.

A recent collection on hope edited by Mary Zournazi (2002) features interviews with some of the most compelling thinkers in the contemporary social sciences and humanities. It is worthwhile noting in passing that each sees hope occurring within the framework of understanding that they are committed to. For Julia Kristeva hope emerges through psychoanalysis; for Gassan Hage hope emerges through class analysis. What hope actually is can be arrived at through any system of analysis or, to put it another way, hope emerges in different ways depending on the discourse that produces it. There are many varieties of hope and many discourses can produce equally vivid descriptions of it. There are not just differences here however. There are some common threads that are also worthy of attention. We might observe the idea that there is an emphasis on hope being a process that one is going through. Being hopeful means that one is engaged in a process that is 'on the side of life' and by that we mean that being immersed in hopefulness is very similar to living life to the full, feeling that life is worth living, and feeling joyful. Mouffe and Laclau think of hope as a

process that has no end point but rather finds its pleasures and meanings in process. There is an element here too that the joy of hopefulness is associated with a break with the past rather than a continuation of the same. For Alphonso Lingis hope comes from 'nowhere', or at least its presence can not be predicted from what has preceded it. Hope is a kind of birth, something new coming into the world, which Lingis associates with laughter, the joy of laughing with others when things have gone awry, and with a space for 'something else to begin' (Lingis 2002: 40). Hope is found in those spaces and moments where something new, and hence something partially unknown, appears. It is a break with the past that also does not necessarily have an end point or a destination where it stops. It is in this sense a somewhat timeless experience, freed as it is from the past and the future. It is immersion in an intense sense of the present tense.

Gassan Hage begins his discussion about hope with a description of the way he sees it functioning within modern capitalism. From his perspective hope is not necessarily positive; it can be a 'negation or deferral' both in the sense of a denial of the possibilities of life and in the sense of a deferral of joy, 'which fits in very much with the idea of saving and deferring gratification' (Hage 2002: 151). Hage points out that this is a situation in which the experience of joy is minimised for the sake of a pleasurable future that may never arrive and where that hope has been reduced to the aspiration for upward mobility. In contemporary capitalist societies the inequitable distribution of hope and the deferral of joy are the two principal problems that emerge for Hage. To develop his idea of joy Hage draws on Spinoza's notion of joy as an experience of a change from one condition of being to a 'more efficient one *as it is happening*'. It is the experience of that quantum leap of the body, of the self as it is moving into a higher capacity to act' (Hage 2002: 152). Hage differentiates between an *experience* of things improving and the *expectation yet deferral* of things improving, the first being joy and the second a kind of hope that is (as Nietzsche saw it) 'against life'. There is necessarily, then, a hope that is 'for life' and it must be attached to joy, or the experience of the movement to a better condition.

Hage speaks about joy not just in Spinoza's embodied sense but also in terms of Bourdieu's notion of 'being' and the way in which being is not a constant but a variable capacity to act in the world. People accumulate reasons to live through an accumulation of symbolic capital, or that 'socially specific thing that people accumulate and from which they derive being' (Hage 2002: 153). The more capital one accumulates the likelier one is to be able to function and experience a movement to a better condition. There are people whose expanse of accumulated symbolic capital allows them to have multiple ongoing experiences of enhanced being, or joy, and there are those whose small accumulated symbolic capital allows them minimal experiences of being, or joy. Hage notes that these divisions seem to occur along class lines and can generally be seen in terms of access to the symbolic capital of global capitalism. Ultimately Hage advocates for a 'joyful hope, a hope that emerges from a refusal of the capitalist logic of deferral, and derives joy from that very refusal' (Hage 2002: 171). This idea of a break with the past, of creating something new, is associated with a change in a sense of identity, of bodily feelings and states, and of pleasurable *intensities*. These changes of condition are likely to occur between people when they are open to change, when they are willing to make something new happen or allow something new to happen.

This involves a sociality oriented towards sensitivity to the other and the other's potential and desire to change. This resonates strongly with Derrida's notion of hospitality, which is about inviting the other into the place where the self resides. For Kristeva hope comes not just from mourning but from an 'economy of care', which is a kindness that is shown towards the other (Kristeva 2002: 66). An economy is a system of exchange, so an economy of care would involve an exchange of kindness between people, 'an attentiveness and courtesy' or a reciting of a narrative and a listening to that narrative. In these acts of kindness or care, grief can be traversed, and this is where hope is born.

An understanding of hope inevitably involves a sense of the future. In *Pascalian Meditations* (2000) French theorist Pierre Bourdieu writes of the importance of a sense of 'the forth-coming'. This is a tricky notion to grasp but let us try to pin it down here.

In opposition to the indifference which apprehends the world as devoid of interest and importance, the *illusio* (or interest in the game) is what gives 'sense' (both meaning and direction) to existence by leading one to invest in a game and its forth-coming [*son a venire*], in the *lusiones*, the chances, that it offers to those who are caught up in the game and who expect something from it. (Bourdieu 2000: 207)

Elaborating in relation to the game Bourdieu writes of 'the forth-coming in relation to which he [sic] positions himself is not a possible which may happen or not happen but something which is already there in the configuration of the game and in the present positions and postures of team-mates and opponents' (Bourdieu 2000: 208). Further, he explains, 'habitus is that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forth-coming' (Bourdieu 2000: 210). The things to be done (*pragmata*), which are the correlate of practical knowledge, are defined in the relationship between the structure of hopes or expectations, constitutive of a habitus, and the structure of probabilities, which constitutes social space. *This means that the probabilities are determinant only for an agent endowed with the sense of the game in the form of a capacity to anticipate the forth-coming of the game* (Bourdieu 2000: 211, our italics). In simple terms, it appears, a sense of the game is essential for a consciousness of the forthcoming. But the game of course is not fair but resembles 'a handicap race that has run for generations' where one has 'the cumulated scores of all his [sic] ancestors' (Bourdieu 2000: 215).

School systems too rely on a sense of the forthcoming and of a sense of the game. Another way of putting this is to see this as '*the assumption of futurity*: on the value of children and youth as future workers with particular skills or knowledge, as future parents and citizens', as Johanna Wyn argues (Wyn 2002: 81). In this sense the entire linear pathway through school, indeed through life, is based on an elevator-like sense of inevitable movement towards a future. British educator David Halpin, too, claims that 'hopefulness entails both anticipating future happiness and *trusting in present help to come to it*' (Halpin 2003: para 6, italics original). Imagination is a key aspect of developing a sense of the forthcoming. Fazal Rizvi, in the Radford address at the 2006 AARE conference, developed the idea of the imagination as one of the 'epistemic virtues' (Rizvi 2008). A key element of this ability is the ability to

imagine the future. How then can we best find out how young people 'on the margins' imagine the future? What if they cannot imagine a future at all?

Hope, Phillip Pettit argues, is key to planning (Pettit 2004). He describes hope as the cognitive counterpart of planning. We need then to understand how marginalised young people understand hope and the future and the possibilities in their lives of the forthcoming, such that they can begin to plan for a future.

Researching hope and the future

Our research project originally aimed to expand and enrich ideas about social sustainability by working with the idea of utopias. Social sustainability concerns itself with discovering and strengthening the processes and relationships that will deliver hoped-for social relationships in the future (see for example McKenzie 2004). Social sustainability research begins with consulting community groups and soliciting ideas about what kind of community is desired and how this might be achieved. How these desires might be realised in practice, both in terms of community participation and government policy, constitutes much of the work of social sustainability. Utopias, on the other hand, present ideas to do with hope and the future that are not limited by practicalities or 'positive' change. They allow for a fulsome exploration in that they are not limited to what is possible or even desirable (dystopias are all about an undesirable future). Utopias are that aspect of hope that is left out of social sustainability.

In order to establish the 'utopian imagination of marginalised youth' we entered into a partnership with young people aged between about fourteen and eighteen at two alternative schools, inviting them to become collaborators in working with us to unravel their sense of hope and of the future. We worked with the idea of hope and the future because they functioned as key terms of utopian and social sustainability thinking. The alternative education schools catered for males and females described as 'at risk', who were unable to cope in mainstream education, or who were having problems with violence, substance abuse or with the juvenile justice system. The aims of the schools are primarily to re-engage these young people with their education, to address basic health needs, and to direct them in appropriate vocational education. Many of the young people have spent time in youth 'training centres'.

An important approach was photo elicitation (see for example Epstein et al. 2006; Harper 2002), which seeks to use photos taken by the research subjects to elicit information that would not otherwise be forthcoming. We gave the young people disposable cameras and asked them to take photos of places, people and objects that made them feel hopeful and evoked for them a sense of the future. The young people had the cameras for a period of up to two weeks. They were free to use the cameras wherever they were inclined to. When the photos were developed we returned with them and asked the young people about the significance of the images they had selected. This last stage is important. What may appear at first to be an ordinary photograph can, through discussion with the photographer, emerge to be a moment from a highly significant feeling or life story.

Photo elicitation encourages the research subject to engage creatively with the research project in which they are participating. In this case the research was about their understanding

of hope and the future as they experienced it in their own lives. Photo elicitation allows the research subject a degree of autonomy and creativity that fits well with the entrepreneurial impetus of social innovation. Likewise the autonomy and creativity offered by this research method enhances the pleasure that the young people experience during the research process. Lastly, photography was important because a key outcome of the project was an exhibition at the Migration Museum (South Australia) and visual artefacts were vital to the success of the exhibition.

We also used several other approaches: we interviewed young people, using a technique drawn from narrative therapy that aims to probe the often hidden subtexts beneath the broader narrative offered, and we asked our student collaborators to imagine a museum display about hope and the future and to tell us what they would put in that display. Narrative interviewing techniques attempt to go beyond eliciting a major life story, but to detect, where possible, a subtext, a subtle indication of what a person interviewed might really want or hope for beyond the formalities of telling interviewers the desired 'story'. These varied approaches gave us a rich set of data through which to gain insights into the young people's hopes and fears. In addition to this we asked the young participants to draw pictures of their future. The participants were encouraged to draw the future, which usually meant that they could draw it as others saw it, as they feared it to be, or as they hoped it would be. Finally, and importantly, we interviewed the teachers and staff at the schools and asked them how the idea of hopefulness operated within the school and how it played out in their relationships with, and the ideas of, the students.

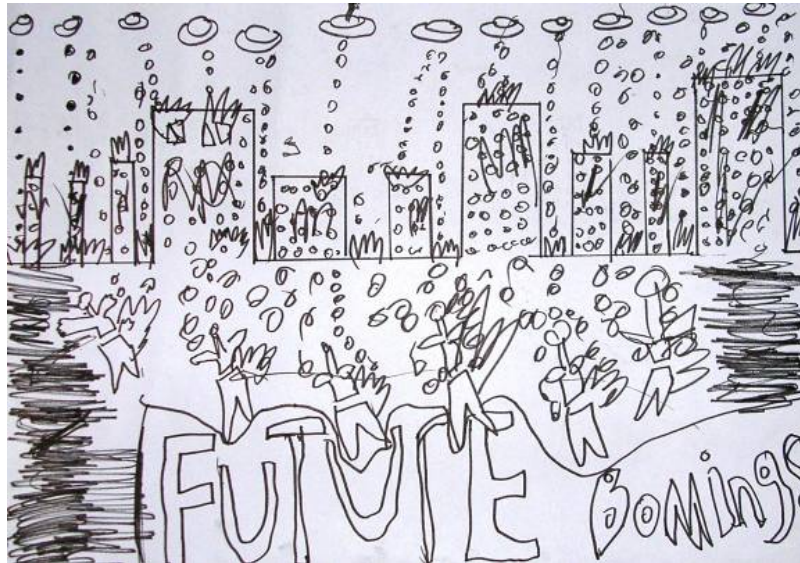
What did we find?

We will return to the quotation that became the title of this paper. One of the teachers we interviewed claimed that he would feel his task had been achieved if he could help students 'to be able to see a future'. This was a common theme in staff interviews. Most struggled to give students a sense of self-esteem, of self-worth, of being able to achieve something for the future, of being able to face another day.

'The future' and 'hopefulness' proved to be difficult concepts for many young people on the margins to grapple with. 'The future' is a term that many feel alienated from. Some of the images from their drawings express that view. As one student said:

I don't reckon the world is going to be around much longer. I can see the changes in the weather. Heaps of new wars will come. My generation's not going take it much more. Not much in Iraq has changed. Or in Afghanistan. I don't think they show you half the stuff that goes on. It makes the future hard to see.

For this young man pleasure required transgression, in particular law breaking.



‘They’ve taken heaps of fun stuff away from kids’, he told us.

There’s no way you can get a rush in life without breaking the law. Speeding in a car gives me the biggest rush. Seeing shit flying past you and you’re holding onto the wheel like you’re making it do it. I need to have a rush.

Graphing is pretty good. You have to be sneaky and there’s always an element of getting caught. I don’t do it on anyone’s home though. That wouldn’t be right.

Peter Bishop, our colleague in this project, wrote:

While carefully looking at the images and texts produced by the young people I began to think that not all of these really showed hope as such. While some could be interpreted in this way, others seemed to express more of a hopefulness for hope. They could be easily read as manifestations of a remembering that hope could be a possibility, perhaps even a desire to hope, an intention to seek hope. Perhaps they revealed some trace, a footprint of a hope yet to be tracked and glimpsed. (Bishop 2008)

But also, sadly, we found that some could not conjure up a sense of the future at all, much less a hopeful one. Some mentioned continuing trouble with the justice system, even the expectation of an early death. Some could only gain a sense of hopefulness through the thrills that came from risk taking, from fast cars, for instance, from dope and brushes with the law. Some young people’s utopias were our dystopias.

‘The future’ and ‘hopefulness’, then, are associated for many young people with a heterogeneous mix of drugs, friendships, family, graffiti art, violence, work and crime.



On the other hand, we also found that most young people aspired to the same goals as the rest of us: a good job, a family, a house and car – perhaps some of the luxuries of life. ‘In twenty years’ time I can see myself with my own house, sitting on the couch and watching TV. Maybe kids. I want a car too. I’d want my kids to be good people. I’d want my kids to be strong and shit so they can stick up for themselves like *I’ve had to stick up for myself*, claimed one of our young people.

‘What’s important to me about the future is my art work’, claimed another.

One day I hope to have a clothes brand of my own so I can compete with the popular brands. Have a real big name. I know I’ve got the right styles for it. Everyone wants the t-shirts I make. It’s always been a goal to get my own brand. Ever since I started drawing I’ve wanted it. There’s no-one really who’s going to help me get there. I’ll do it myself. There’s not really anyone in my life at the moment that I want next to me in the future. My parents haven’t been supportive enough over the last couple of years. I just see myself doing it on my own.

Many of these young people expressed a strong feeling of ‘doing it on their own’, a regret that there was no-one to ‘stand with them’. ‘I’d like my mum to be standing with me’, stated another young man.

‘My mum’s with me all the way’, said another.

I’m not one of those people that need lots of friends. If I was to become rich and famous I’d still keep in contact with my friends. I don’t need other people telling me what hope is. What’s got me through all my struggles is me. On my birthday my mother was supposed to give me \$100 but instead she spent it on alcohol and the pokies. But I didn’t ask her about it because she’d just lost her best friend. He was like my second dad. I didn’t accept what she did but I understood why she did

it. I used to get really angry. Whenever I get angry now I turn it into humour instead.



It is not surprising given these comments that in the alternative school settings which these students inhabit staff see the building of relationships as crucial to giving students hope and a sense of the future. The key to creating a sense of hopefulness (both for staff and students), they told us, is building relationships between staff and students. A hopeful relationship, another expounded, is one where the teacher is genuine, honest, caring and non-judgemental. Signs of hopefulness are small, possibly inconsistent and fragile, but without some signs of hope no staff could remain in their job. In an article titled 'The Art of Good Hope' Victoria McGeer (2004) argues that parental scaffolding is aimed initially at building capabilities in goal-oriented activities. Keeping hope alive, she continues, depends on being with others who support our hopes. Hoping well involves hoping responsively, that is, finding others who support one's hopes and whose hopes one can support in turn. This involves 'peer scaffolding'.

Here perhaps is an explanation for the importance of the relationship building that staff see as so valuable. It is a key part of that scaffolding that enables a sense of the future to be built. A hopeful relationship is one in which positive change occurs and is observed to occur. A student sums up the atmosphere of such a hopeful setting with peer scaffolding thus: 'In normal school I never used to talk and have music playing and never say anything. Now I feel like I can talk a bit more. People will listen to me. It feels like there's possibilities now. I'd try to set up more places like this in the future if I could'.



Conclusion

How then can we nurture hope and a sense of the future in those considered on the margins? We have learnt from this project that we might strive at best for a difficult hope.

‘A difficult hope’, Peter Bishop argues, ‘is one that arises from marginalised circumstances, one where the goal may seem at a far remove, one in which there is the probability of a long struggle to achieve not just “unrealistic” goals but even a sense of being hopeful. In some ways this parallels what Deborah Britzman [1998: 118] has called “difficult knowledge”, the kind of knowledge that acknowledges oppression, guilt, shame, anxiety and fear’ (2008: 3).

The fundamental point about sustainability practice, as Phillip Sutton (2000) points out, is that it is about sustaining *something*. What is being sustained and the worth of that thing, and how it is to be sustained, and if it is sustainable, are important issues for sustainability. We would argue that in the first instance the thing to be sustained is the thing that gives hope. But then another question needs to be asked: what are the consequences of sustaining that thing that gives hope? Sometimes sustaining the thing, as with relationships with families and friends, will lead to largely beneficial consequences, such as a sense of protection, of comfort, pleasure and joy. Sometimes sustaining the thing, again as with family and friends, will lead to unhappiness, abuse, crime and suffering. Perhaps what is being sustained in the idea of social sustainability is society, or social relationships, as we want them to be, as we hope they can be. What is being sustained in the alternative education schools is not just the education of the young people but also social relationships of care, trust and guidance. The implication for the young people is that hopefulness can be sustained in education and relationships of care. It may not be too bold an assertion to say that a need is being met here, a need for social relationships to sustain a positive sense of hopefulness, and a need to believe that they can.



And we might ask another and related question here and that is what needs to be sustained in the process of social innovation? With respect to meeting the needs of marginalised young people we would suggest that a sense of hopefulness needs to be manifest in the relationships between the innovators and the young people, and that this is likewise a difficult kind of hopefulness but one that can be approached through an ‘economy of care’.

It has been argued that the modern world lacks the social infrastructure that nurtures optimism and gives the less privileged the confidence to act on their freedom and ‘planfully pursue their hopes’ (J Braithwaite 2004: 10). In the alternative schools of this project we found some of that infrastructure, a resource both fragile and itself at risk of funding cuts and bureaucratic change. Yet such infrastructure is critical to nurturing a sense of hope.

For social scientists and social activists power and governance are major themes and hope does not usually take a central place (V Braithwaite 2004: 6). Perhaps the most singular innovation this project suggests is that hope as a theme is every bit as important.

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