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978-0-521-66446-2 - Struggles for Subjectivity: Identity, Action and Youth Experience

Kevin McDonald

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This book explores the relationship between new experiences of selfhood and new patterns of social life. It does so through an encounter with young people who confront urgent social and cultural transformations, whose experience of selfhood is unclear, often shaped by social forces that while powerful, appear difficult, if not impossible to name. These young people live in a world where institutions are weakening and identities fragmenting, where socialisation into roles is being replaced by new imperatives of communication and self-esteem. Their world is shaped by new forms of freedom, but also by new forms of social polarisation and conflict. More than other social groups, young people confront the imperative of locating a sense of self and subjectivity, and this book is an account of this struggle in a context of profound social and cultural change. The author draws on the experience of a diverse group of young people – graffiti artists, sufferers of anorexia, the unemployed – all from a broad range of educational and cultural backgrounds. This book renews hands-on fieldwork in the Chicago School tradition; it is one where we meet real people confronting real social situations, while its research agenda is posited within the new French ‘sociology of experience’.

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To Sarah, Lynne and Gabriel – and their struggles

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Acknowledgements

This book is based on three years fieldwork exploring the experience of young people confronting urgent social and cultural questions. Some 150 young people participated in the research, some involved in one or two focus group discussions, others participating in up to 10 research sessions. Many of these young people confront difficult, and at times urgent, social and cultural questions, and their involvement in this research represented a considerable commitment of time and energy. A condition of the research was that participants remain anonymous, so they cannot be named and thanked here. But their determination to explore the meanings of their experience with researchers that they did not know points to the importance of the struggles that this book discusses.

This dialogue and exploration was made possible through the support of many people. Most important are two youth workers who worked with me at different stages of the project: Joanne Freeman in the first period, and Jane Conway in the second. They often formed the young people's contact with this research, and the clear integrity of their commitment encouraged the young people to become involved.

This research was also supported by various organisations working with young people, and owes a great debt to key individuals in them. Despite often very-demanding schedules, they were convinced of the value of social research, and performed key roles in helping us make contacts and explain our project to potential participants. Such fieldwork cannot be undertaken without significant financial support for outreach work, transport, research sessions and transcription. Critical support came from the Australia Research Council, through a Small Grant while I was at RMIT University (*Young People between Social Exclusion and Cultural Innovation*), and a Large Grant through the University of Melbourne (*Action and Identity in Zones of Urban Poverty*).

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x Acknowledgements

Writing up this work and transforming over 60 hours of taped research sessions into a coherent argument relies upon dialogue with many people. While I was at RMIT University the support of Belinda Probert was critical; while at the University of Melbourne Ann Capling and Michael Crozier have been constant partners in dialogue. Bob Wilkinson read large sections of the drafts, and made critical comments. Nor could this book have been written without the support of Lorna, my partner, who also read sections and made important suggestions. Phillipa McGuinness, senior commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, was convinced of the value of the project from its early stages, and her support was crucial in transforming the messiness of fieldwork into a manuscript. Paul Watt and Sharon Mullins carefully steered the manuscript through its production, and helped grapple with a number of important questions regarding how to present material, as also did Adrienne de Kretser who edited the text. The penultimate draft of this book benefited greatly from critical but generous comments made by Professor Jeffrey Alexander and an anonymous reader, who pointed out important ways to transform the manuscript into a more coherent and focused book. I hope I have been able to achieve something of what they suggested.

The opportunity for exchange and debate with colleagues at the Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologiques at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris was critical to both the fieldwork and its interpretation. As readers will see, this book draws heavily on exchanges with François Dubet and Michel Wieviorka. The extent of my intellectual debt to Alain Touraine, who welcomed me as a doctoral student in the 1980s, and as a colleague and co-researcher in the 1990s, is enormous. This book could not exist without his critical and demanding questions and his commitment to construct a sociology based on encounters with social actors. Despite its limits, this book hopes to contribute to that project.

Research participants

Some 150 young people participated in the research that led to this book. Unfortunately, not all the research sessions could be discussed here. Some were not included because they reproduced the patterns of other groups, while others raised questions beyond the scope of this book. Although some of the participants will not see themselves here, I hope they will recognise questions and experiences that we explored together. All participants' names have been changed, and place names have also been changed, where necessary, to avoid identifying anyone.

Research participants: Part I

ALEX	22, unemployed.
ALISON	16, unemployed.
ANGELA	19, unemployed, doing a life-skills course.
BECCY	16, left school at 14 after incident with teacher.
BILL	25, unemployed, lives with partner and three children in mother-in-law's house.
CARSON	19 years old. Expelled from school for violent incident, returned under a contract which spelt out forms of behaviour, but was expelled again. He has a series of convictions for breaking-and-entering (burglary). Currently unemployed.
CINDY	24, unemployed, mother of school student.
DAVE	18, unemployed. Recently returned to Westview after period in youth correction centre. Dropped out of research for reasons connected with a police search for him.
ELSA	18, unemployed, from Egyptian family.

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[More information](#)*xii* Research participants

FORMER MAYOR	Longtime Westview resident, former skilled metal-worker, currently unemployed.
GEORG ZEBRINSKI	Personnel manager at Local Corp.
JIM	18, unemployed, had apprenticeship in metal industry but was laid off.
LES	19, unemployed.
LISA	18, friend of Pam's, came to session to speak to police.
MANDY	20 years old, Koori (Aboriginal). Left school early after punching a teacher, unemployed until the birth of her child. Now a single mother.
MAYOR	Longtime resident, long history in local government.
NICK	25 years old, completed secondary school, has had a series of casual jobs. Currently unemployed.
PAM	18, unemployed, has worked in a florist.
PAUL	23, involved in itinerant work through father. Currently unemployed.
POLICE OFFICER	From the Victoria Police Youth Liaison Unit.
RAELENE	Carson's mother, joined a research group towards the end of the research.
RIMA	18, unemployed, doing a life-skills course, family from Lebanon.
ROB	19, unemployed.
ROYCE	25, left Westview to go interstate for an apprenticeship. Returned; is father of Mandy's child. Currently unemployed.
RYAN	18, had apprenticeship in metalwork, but was laid off.
SAM RAMSDEN	Local youth campaigner.
SERGE	19 years old, unemployed, has worked casually in local factories. His family is well known in Westview for its involvement in crime. Other people who participated in the research might not have met Serge, but most knew of his family.
TANIA	19, returned to school after leaving, now in her last year of study. Hopes to go to university.
TIM	18, unemployed, has had short-term casual work, is a paint sniffer.

Research participants: chapter 7

ABEL	22, Maori, squatting, member of 31119.
ANNA	18, unemployed, former gang member, wants to return to school.

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MONIE	20, Lebanese background, member of 31119, squatting with Trisha and Abel.
TINA	Leader of a provincial gang made up of largely homeless young people. Has come to Melbourne because of problems with police.
TRISHA	24, unemployed and squatting, leader of 31119.

Research participants: chapter 8

AART	21, recently received a two-year suspended gaol sentence for graffiti bombing 42 railway carriages.
ACE	19, unemployed, graffiti writer.
BUMBLE	22, graffiti writer and apprentice gardener.
PRPA	21, unemployed, graffiti writer.
RPB	16, marginally attached to school, graffiti writer and bomber.
SPACER	23, casual worker, graffiti writer.
TDK	21, student in graphic arts, graffiti writer.
ZEP	16, marginally attached to school, graffiti writer and bomber.
ZERO	18, in final year of school. Awaiting trial on graffiti charges. Could receive a custodial sentence because of prior convictions.
ZONE	17, marginally attached to school, graffiti bomber.

Research participants: chapter 9

ANDREA	19, at university training to be a secondary teacher.
BETH	19, third-year Arts student at a large university.
RENATA	26, degree in social sciences and graduate qualification, works in a gym and as a consultant on recreation programs.

Research participants: chapter 10

AMY	22, Cambodian, living in supported accommodation, studying.
ANNE	18, first-year university student.
ARCHIE	Koori, 19, unemployed.
KATH	Koori, 21, working in Aboriginal traineeship program.
KENNY	Koori, 18, unemployed.
LAY LEE	19, Chinese, first-year university student.

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LEI LING	19, born in Hong Kong, first-year university student.
MALCOLM	Koori, 20, working in Aboriginal traineeship program.
MARGO	Koori, 19, working in Aboriginal traineeship program.
MARYAN	21, Somalian origin, third-year social work university student.
NGUYEN	22, has not worked since migrating to Australia five years ago. Has no family in Australia.
PHON	24, unemployed and homeless, seriously injured at work. Has no family in Australia.
TAN	21, Cambodian, living in supported accommodation, studying.
TRAN	17, left school two years ago, recently found work in a metal factory.