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Working-class girls and youth social action: 'hope labour'?

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Abstract

This working paper draws on findings from an intersectional, ethnographic study with 17 sixth-form girls living in some of the poorest boroughs of London. Research indicates that regular participation in social action among 10-20 year olds is substantial at 42%, yet there are socioeconomic and gender differences in participation, with girls from low-income backgrounds participating less than more affluent girls (Cabinet Office and Ipsos MORI, 2016). The reasons for these differences are not well understood; I aim to make an original contribution to this field by understanding the social action experiences of girls from low-income backgrounds.

In this paper I discuss one of the emerging themes from my data – youth social action as 'hope labour'; that is, 'un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). I suggest, building on Clare Holdsworth's work on the 'cult of experience' (Holdsworth, 2017), that certain types of social action are framed as a form of hope labour, and discuss how the girls' views and experiences of social action interact with this.

Keywords

Volunteering, youth social action, girls, young people, employability, hope labour.

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Introduction

Youth social action can be defined as young people 'working alone and working together, often in attempts to benefit themselves and society' (Snyder and Omoto, 2007, p. 955). According to the #iwill campaign – a collective impact campaign designed to increase participation in social action among 10-20 year olds by 2020 – social action encompasses activities such as volunteering, fundraising and campaigning (#iwill, 2017). The term 'social action' is often used interchangeably with volunteering. Following New Labour's establishment of the 2005 Russell Commission, which recommended a new national framework to 'deliver a step change in the diversity, quality and quantity of young people's volunteering' (Russell, 2005, p. 5), and the Conservative government's independent review into youth social action in the UK in 2012 (Cleverdon and Jordan, 2012), support for youth social action has increased significantly. This has taken the form of bipartisan political support for the #iwill campaign and substantial government funding. It is argued that participation in social action can benefit young people as well as those they are helping, particularly in terms of skills development (Kirkman *et al.*, 2016), and therefore that social action opportunities should be accessible to all young people.

In 2015, data from the National Youth Social Action survey indicated that regular participation in social action among 10-20 year olds in the UK is substantial at 42%, yet there are socioeconomic and gender differences in participation, with girls from low-income backgrounds participating less than their more affluent female peers – 38% versus 51% respectively (Cabinet Office and Ipsos MORI, 2016). The reasons for these differences are not well understood and may not simply be a question of socioeconomic resources. This paper is part of a PhD aiming to understand the social action experiences of girls from low-income backgrounds, situating those experiences within the rich fabric of the girls' lives.

Defining hope labour

Neoliberalism, characterised broadly as a shift away from collectivism towards individualism, has had a particular effect on volunteering. As Jon Dean (2015, p. 139) cautions, the application of marketing reasoning to civil society and volunteering has resulted in a more instrumental approach to volunteering which 'focus[es] on the benefit volunteering can bring to an individual (such as increasing their economic or human capital) over the potential altruistic benefits that arise from donating one's time to help others'. For girls, neoliberalism has produced new discourses around successful girls (Ringrose, 2007) and

additional pressures, in recent years, not only to have the potential to exercise (girl) power, but to be 'fully self-actualized neo-liberal subjects' (Gonick et al., 2009, p. 2).

Related to this neoliberal shift is 'hope labour', a concept introduced by Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan in relation to online media production. It refers to 'un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), and has since been applied to work in a range of media industries. Criticisms of hope labour in the media sector revolve around who benefits – usually, corporates – from the free labour provided by writers aspiring to be paid for their work. Questions of value are different for social action, in that it is not commercial firms who benefit but a range of beneficiaries. However, I argue that participation in certain kinds of social action creates value for the state, in terms of developing the right kind of citizen, as Sarah Mills, Catherine Waite and others have discussed in relation to the National Citizen Service (Mills and Waite, 2016, 2018). This is also echoed in Theresa May's 'great meritocracy' speech of 2016, and the figure she evokes of the 'ordinary working class' citizen who works, pays taxes, raises a family, and helps their communities 'without complaint' (May, 9 September 2016).

Most literature related to youth social action focuses on volunteering, which is often positioned as a form of labour (Wilson and Musick, 1997). In reconceptualising unpaid activity such as caring, domestic labour, and volunteering as 'work', feminists such as Cora Baldock have helped to highlight the importance of these activities, traditionally carried out by women, alongside more formal, paid employment (Baldock, 1998). As Rebecca Taylor (2004, p. 38) explains, 'work' is characterised by the service provided to others, not about the money earnt. The term 'hope labour', when applied to youth social action, places it in the category of work as opposed to leisure, though there are overlaps with Robert Stebbins' leisure perspective on volunteering (Stebbins, 2013). Framing youth social action as 'hope labour' also extends Stebbins' work on 'marginal volunteering' (Stebbins, 2001, p. 1), in which choice over involvement is guided by 'extrinsic interests or pressures' outside the individual's control. However, the examples of marginal volunteering given by Stebbins do not cover the forms of participation in which the girls in my study are engaged, so 'hope labour' is a more suitable term to explain these girls' participation in certain activities.

A key emerging finding from my study is that certain social action experiences are framed, by the girls, their schools, and the youth social action programmes in which they participate, as 'hope labour'. This theme of hope labour is not necessarily specific to girls, but their experiences are the focus of my study.

Methodology

This study involves 16-18-year-old girls from low-income backgrounds in London, considered at risk of marginalisation because of their potential inability to 'participate in social, economic, political and cultural life and their relationships with others' (Mack, 21 January 2016) owing to their age, gender, and socioeconomic status. I employ an ethnographic approach to understanding these girls' social action experiences. Since most young people involved in social action got involved through their school or college (Cabinet Office and Ipsos MORI, 2016), and since schools can 'provid[e] access to a fairly representative sample of children in a particular locality' (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001, p. 350), I recruited the girls for my study through three schools[1]: Brownswood Academy, a mixed school which is part of an academy chain; Eburne School, a mixed state school; and Park School for Boys, a boys' state school which has girls in sixth form.

I selected these three schools based on the proportion of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), generally considered a good proxy for young people's socioeconomic status. Sampling through schools on the basis of the proportion of their pupils who are eligible for FSM is a practice that has previously been used in social research (see David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001). London has the highest proportion of secondary school students on FSM in the country: the national average of students who are known to be eligible for and claiming FSM is 13.2%; this rises to an average of 27.2% in inner London (Department for Education, 2016, Table 8b). The schools involved in this study are in boroughs with an average or above-average proportion of students on FSM, compared to the rest of inner London; the schools themselves have a proportion of students on FSM which is the same as or above the borough average (see Table 1).[2]

School	Borough average of students eligible for and claiming Free School Meals
Brownswood Academy	28.8%
Eburne School	41.6%
Park School for Boys	33.6%

Table 1: Data taken from Table 8b, State-funded secondary schools (1)(2): Number of pupils eligible for and claiming Free School Meals (Department for Education, 2016).

The girls involved in this study are from these three schools. I recruited them by giving presentations at each of the schools and inviting girls to take a questionnaire to collect data

[1] All participants' names and school names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
[2] The average proportion of students eligible for FSM at each school is not reported, since this is identifiable data and may compromise the anonymity of the schools involved.

on their name, age, ethnicity, eligibility for FSM, and participation in social action. All girls who had been eligible for FSM in the past 6 years were invited to participate in my study; 17 responded positively. These 17 girls were aged 16-18, studying a mix of International Baccalaureate, A Levels, and BTECs, predominantly from BAME backgrounds, and they had a range of social action experiences, with some currently participating and others not.

Name[3]	Age	Ethnicity	Religion (practising)	Studying	School
Olivia	17	Asian	None	A Levels	Brownswood Academy
Esther	17	Black	Christian	BTEC	
Ayo	17	Black	Christian	A Levels	
Idrissa	17	Black	Muslim	A Levels	
Catherine	17	Mixed	None	A Levels	
Alexa	17	White	None	A Levels	
Shannon	17	White	None	BTEC	
Nazreen	*17*	*Asian*	*Muslim*	*IB*	Eburne School
Maryam	17	Black	Muslim	IB	
Ali	17	Asian	Muslim	IB	
Sophie	18	White	None	IB	
Helah	*17*	*Black*	*Muslim*	*IB*	
Sasha	*16*	*Mixed*	*None*	*A Levels*	Park School for Boys
Alesha	18	Black	Muslim	A Levels	
Amira	*17*	*Asian*	*Muslim*	*A Levels*	
Karen	16	Asian	Christian	A Levels	
Gabriela	17	Latin American	None	A Levels	

Table 2: Main participants in study

Conducted over a period of between 3-12 months, the research involved up to three interviews with each of the girls, an interview with some of their parents, interviews with their teachers, and interviews with social action providers. This resulted in a total of 46 interviews. I also conducted observations at all three schools and in some social action-related contexts. The interviews with the girls focused on their experiences of participation, and the barriers and enablers to their participation, as well as the place of social action in their lives. Unlike the #iwill campaign definition of social action, I sought the girls' views on and experiences of party-political involvement, including voting, and the care work in which they were involved. The girls only discussed some of these activities in terms of what I identify as 'hope labour', and it is these experiences on which I focus in this paper.

[3] The names in italics are girls who have only been interviewed once, having dropped out of the study after the first interview.

Findings

The dominant narrative emerging from my research relates to hope labour. The girls in my study talk about certain social action experiences as being helpful for their future university applications and careers. These tend to be structured activities, such as volunteering at a primary school or care home, or improving a community garden, offered through school or programmes such as National Citizen Service (NCS) or Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Both of these programmes are generally framed by the girls as opportunities to enhance their CVs. Gabriela says she did Duke of Edinburgh's Award because "it's just, you know, trying to put as much things on my CV, cos … that's gonna help me in the future"; Idrissa describes how NCS is marketed to young people as something that will "help them out in the future … they tell us like, if you wanna apply for jobs … that it looks good on your CV that you've done it". This also extends to other formal kinds of social action, as Shannon's example below highlights. When asked about whether she had done any enrichment – the term her school gives to extra-curricular activities – Shannon describes how:

> I used to go to the primary school cos I wanna be a primary school teacher yeah, so, I used to work in erm 3 different age group classes and I done that for like a year one day a week … I wanted to do like work experience sorta thing and when I done it for like the first week I knew like that's what I wanted to do, I had like a inkling before but obviously you don't know until you actually go into it, so I done it and I was like yeah, this is for me!

Volunteering at the primary school was Shannon's way of working out whether she wanted to pursue a career in teaching, and both Shannon and her mum use the term 'work experience' interchangeably with volunteering to describe her role at the primary school. This experience forms the basis of her UCAS personal statement in her application to study Primary Education.

The girls' views of some types of social action as work experience, and what I suggest can be considered hope labour, are also reflected by UCAS. In its online guidance, UCAS groups volunteering into work-related activities, recommending that students 'include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work' in their personal statements (UCAS, 2018). For Karen at Park School for Boys, who wants to apply for medicine at university, this message is more explicit: she tells me that the universities she wants to apply to say "it would be really good if you […] did volunteering somewhere for, um certain amount of time, probably a minimum of sixth months, and they said it would be useful and […] it will probably get you into a better university". It is for this reason, Karen says, that she decides to volunteer at a hospital. By encouraging participation, both UCAS and universities promote

the idea that social action can help young people get into university; the girls in my study primarily get involved in certain activities in the hope that it does.

Social action is connected to UCAS applications and employability more explicitly for the girls at Eburne School, who are studying the International Baccalaureate (the IB). In the IB students are awarded points rather than grades for their academic work, and can gain extra points if they spend 150 hours engaged in CAS activities – Creativity, Action and Service. Sophie talks about how her friends volunteer "because they have to as part of their course … you need 150 CAS hours". There are a huge range of activities counted as 'service', from accompanying younger students on a trip to the Christmas markets in Lille, to running an enrichment club for other students, to volunteering at a library. At Park School, social action is framed in a similar way by Alice, a form tutor, who tells me in relation to social action activities on offer at school:

> I think what we're very good at is showing the importance of post-education you know, going into university careers things like that um, and also, it's not just about your grades it's about the whole person so I think students who are – even the ones who are more reluctant, if they're told or if they know, doing this is gonna help you get into university […] then they'll be more, more willing to do it.

Alice describes how social action is positioned by the schools as a way for the students to get into university, even for those students who aren't interested in participating. Annette Lareau's concepts of 'concerted cultivation' and 'accomplishment of natural growth' (Lareau, 2011) parenting strategies are at play here. Concerted cultivation describes the way in which, in middle-class families, children's time is often controlled by their parents and dominated by organised activities; working-class parents, on the other hand, tend to adopt the more hands-off 'accomplishment of natural growth' style of parenting in which children have more control over how they spend their spare time. For the girls in my study, concerted cultivation is the approach taken not by their parents but by their schools and by youth social action providers. The girls' parents' approach tends to involve generally (though not always) supporting activities that their daughters tell them about and in which they want to participate. Alexa's mum, Lynette, talks about how Alexa told her about NCS and wanted to take part: "I was apprehensive at first cos I'm not familiar with it but she brought up the website and we went through it together and I said she could do it."

The concept of hope labour is also used by the girls to persuade others of the value of social action. Ali needs permission from her parents in order to participate in anything that doesn't

take place during school hours, but she was allowed to become a Cadet for St John Ambulance because “it’s going to help me become a nurse”. The way Ali and some of the girls discussed above talk about social action as hope labour is definitive – it *will* help the girls in their future, rather than might. This confidence is echoed in the National Youth Social Action survey figures, which show that 62% of 10-20 year olds think social action will help them to secure a job in the future (Cabinet Office and Ipsos MORI, 2016).

This is also how programmes such as NCS are framed: NCS invites young people to ‘Change your future: Don't miss your chance to do NCS this Autumn! In just 10 days, you’ll live away from home, develop skills to boost your CV, and meet great people you'll never forget’ (NCS, 2017). While there is some evidence to show that NCS participants appear to have a higher acceptance rate to higher education than non-NCS participants, especially in areas where there is low participation in higher education, this evidence doesn’t prove that it is NCS that has led to those increased rates (NCS and Jump Simetrica, 2017).

Discussion

The girls in my study are taught that in order to get on in life you need to be different – but not too different. To be successful, these girls are told, they need to get good grades, go to the right university, do the right degree, and come out with a job at the end of it.[4] Their post-school plans reflect this – all are hoping either to go to university or get an apprenticeship when they finish school.

But, as the Head of Year 13 at Brownswood Academy put it in an assembly, this is also what everyone else is doing: he told the students “there are 320,000 graduate jobs available, and 500,000 graduates”. So, what young people also need to do, they’re told, is stand out from the crowd ‘in a good way’ (UCAS, 2014), accumulating ‘experiences’, like social action, which will improve their prospects in an increasingly competitive market. This results in what Clare Holdsworth calls the ‘cult of experience’, in which ‘the point is to have done things, to record them and to accumulate these experiences’ (Holdsworth, 2017, p. 298). While such experiences might be framed as optional, Holdsworth argues, in reality, most young people ‘do not have a choice about taking up an internship, acquiring work experience or undertaking volunteering activities – if they do not, then their futures are even more uncertain’ (Ibid. p. 299).

[4] This contradicts the girls’ own ideas about what success means to them, not explored in this paper, which is more focused around happiness than it is around what job they’ll have or how much they’ll earn.

The dilemma these girls face is that too much time spent on standing out from the crowd risks jeopardising their academic success, while not enough time means that all their hard work studying may not get them to where they want to be. Crucially, however, none of this can guarantee success. Instead, it can more accurately be described as 'hope labour': the girls hope that their academic success, and all these experiences they accumulate, will help get them to university, which in turn will help them to get a job. Social action has become another experience for young people to accumulate in the form of hope labour, while young people's futures are ever more precarious. Following Julia Cook, 'hope' in this context is 'not opposed to truth … [but] instead appears to flourish in the absence of complete certainty' (Cook, 2018, p. 110).

The argument for children as 'beings' rather than 'becomings' has long been made in childhood studies (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998), but my research suggests that a preoccupation with young people's futures, and potentiality, remains. Harris (2004, p. 5) describes how the conditions of late modernity together with

> the requirement of individuals to now "make themselves" in order to survive and perhaps even flourish have demonstrated considerable anxiety about the future of youth, who are imagined as the inheritors of this somewhat frightening world … Young people … must try to forge their futures by mastering the anxieties, uncertainties and insecurities conjured up by unpredictable times.

She goes on to argue that girls have become a focus for the creation of 'an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible', because of the 'new possibilities for young women' afforded by changes to women's role in the economy, and because of the ways in which neoliberal ideologies 'dovetail with some broad feminist notions about opportunities for young women' (Harris, 2004, p. 5). The question here is whether hope labour is only for those who are already self-made, or for those who are in the process of becoming self-made, and also what the successful self looks like – hope labour works towards a particular model of success centred on a school to university to employment pipeline.

Hope labour is problematic because it implies that young people are wholly in control of, and responsible for, their own futures in a way that disregards any structural inequalities which might affect them. For example, these girls may experience the university admissions system or the job market differently because of their gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. At Brownswood Academy, the Head of Year 12 told me that "we help these young people to overcome any disadvantages that they've got". Quotations posted around Brownswood's

school walls reinforce this message: ‘Strength and growth come only through continuous effort and struggle’; and ‘The future depends on what you do today’. Yet young people who have previously been eligible for FSM achieve, on average, A Level results which are one grade lower than those who were not (Boliver *et al.*, 2017), and those from ethnic minorities are less likely to be accepted at highly selective universities (Boliver, 2015). What this could mean is that a failure to achieve the right kind of success may be considered the responsibility of the young person themselves. A school may be able to level the playing field within its own environment to a certain extent, but it can do little to replicate this in wider society; nor can it be guaranteed that social action, framed as hope labour, will achieve the same objective.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to show how certain social action activities are framed as helping young people to get into university and achieve future career success, but that since these outcomes are not guaranteed, this framing can be conceptualised as ‘hope labour’: social action carried out in the hope that it will result in a successful future. If certain types of social action are framed instrumentally in this way, what does that mean for the way that these girls will think about social action in future, when it is no longer considered useful for their career success? And how does that affect the importance the girls place on other forms of social action which are not framed in that way?

Importantly, hope labour is not the only discourse in and with which these girls engage. Other forms of social action, such as the unpaid care work for family members and the informal acts of helping in which many of the girls are involved, are positioned differently by the girls and by others. These activities tend not to be conceptualised by the girls, their teachers, or universities as hope labour. Those other discourses give greater credit to the girls’ agency in their decision-making processes, whereas theories of hope labour, as they are currently developed, imply a certain passivity and outsider-ness. A way into analysing this tension is by focusing on the way the girls themselves challenge this preoccupation with their futures. Establishing the grounds on which the girls and the people and institutions around them discriminate between activities that can be described as ‘hope labour’ and ‘not hope labour’ can help us theorise the interpellation of neoliberal ideas.

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