Stigma, class, and recognition: Young people's articulation and management of place in a post-industrial estate in south Wales

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Abstract

Using data from two studies in an economically under-resourced, post-industrial estate in the south Wales valleys, we explore the ways in which young people articulate and negotiate the place in which they live. Taken together, both studies provide observational, interview, and visual data on how young people manage, and resist, dominant media and policy-oriented representations whilst living in a place bearing the wounds and the scars of economic neglect. Here, young people face double discrimination: living in a place externally portrayed as 'abject', and representing a demographic perceived locally and elsewhere as the embodiment of apathy, trouble, and disorder. Using creative methods, we show how young people reimagined their futures and engaged in forms of activism to resist stigmatising depictions and to realise *recognition* and a desire for change. Dissecting the micro-processes through which stigma is embodied and confronted, we highlight the opportunities of confronting, disrupting, and rewriting entrenched macro-political narratives in a neo-liberal age. However, we also identify the limitations of this, specifically the misalignment between *recognition* (i.e. of what young people call 'respect') and *resources* (i.e. of confronting structural inequalities). We conclude by sketching out the potential of young people to become more active agents of change.

Keywords: Class; place; post-industrial; stigma; youth.

Introduction

Fraser (2017) recently rearticulated her thesis that non–redistributive economic policies, increasing inequalities, and their association with an established acceptance of

identity politics has contributed to processes of stigma and shaming in places where austerity and anti-welfare policies bite (Fraser, 2003). Reflecting on changes to the political landscape in the US and UK, Fraser argues that what is happening is a disruption of the 'progressive' neo-liberal hegemony (which held back the forms of 'reactionary' neo-liberalism), creating a destabilising vacuum which has yet to be consolidated (Fraser, 2017). In the US, the free-market economics of Reagan were fused by Clinton, whilst Thatcher's legacy was, to a certain extent, extended by Blair. In the UK, this resulted in a neo-liberal consensus, defining neo-liberal here in terms of Klein's (2007) oft-cited policy trinity 'the elimination of the public sphere, total liberation for corporations, and skeletal social spending'. Whilst a progressive identity politics flourished in enabling forms of inclusion in public, political, and economic life to be recognised, and to an extent rectified, this emerged at the expense of explaining and challenging the macro socio-economic structures which generate class (and associated race and gender) divisions and inequalities in the first place.

Equality in the neo-liberal consensus is equated with meritocracy (Fraser, 2017), with recognition and encouragement given to people belonging to marginalised groups who succeed in rising to the top. It, therefore, fails to challenge an essentially individualistic and moral narrative of social mobility, rather than accounting for exclusion in terms of 'subjugating structures'. Fraser contends that 'this identity model is deeply problematic'; by 'construing misrecognition as damaged identity, it emphasises psychic structure over social institutions and social interaction' (Fraser, 2003). Simultaneously, it fuels a narrative of failure and what Tyler (2013) and Shildrick (2018) perceive as consent for punitive policies directed at those living at the bottom of the class structure. Both see stigmatisation not just as the *impact* of such policies, but as a driving force for legitimising neo-liberal governmentality. For Wacquant (2008), what is important to recognise is that, what he calls 'territorial stigma', is not a characteristic of neighbourhoods themselves, but is emblematic of advanced marginality associated with modern capitalism. A recent monograph on rethinking the sociology of stigma (Slater and Tyler, 2018) extends this by contextualising the micro-processes of behaviours and interactions within the macro-structures that enable them to function as forms of power and which, in turn, shape the forms of enacted stigma in everyday contexts and encounters.

In this paper, we discuss two major projects funded through the ten-year Arts and Humanities (AHRC) led Connected Communities programme on the changing nature of communities. Using data from these studies in an economically under-resourced, post-industrial, and highly-stigmatised estate in the south Wales valleys, we employ a place-based lens through which to explore young people's understandings of where they live. The adhesive negative discourse attaching itself to young people in poor places is commonly moulded by notions of apathy. Young people are configured as a group who trouble policies which stress the value of individual social mobility. Indicators of success imply wanting to leave, and having ambitions that take them, as individuals, away from the environments that hold them back (Folkes, 2019). This creates an impossible situation for young people who wish to have access to the supportive structures which enable them to thrive within the contexts of home – of where they live. Moreover, the young people occupy an area which, in media and policy profiles, is depicted as a 'failed' and 'flawed' community. The use of place as a vehicle for portraying welfare-dependent, economically-inactive, low-aspirant people reinforces notions of the 'undeserving poor' (Crossley, 2017). The representation of people in these places, such as in 'poverty porn' – described as cultural outlets (e.g. television programmes) promoting scornful classed discourses of welfare-dependency, ennui, and territorial stigma (Skeggs and Wood, 2008) which incubate 'anti-welfare common-sense' (Jensen, 2014) – rob people living in these places of their sense of

dignity and any recognition of their potential agency and contribution. Exhortations to leave if employment options are unavailable, and to discipline behaviours in order to live a healthy life (Popay et al., 2003), fails to understand the ways in which places, and the resources they afford, shape opportunities and practices – together with obscuring details of how places are made liveable, that is, how residents 'get by' (Mckenzie, 2015).

In our projects, we found young people addressed stigma by developing a counter-narrative of place, one which spoke back to perceived 'outsiders' who 'misrecognise' *their place*. At the same time, they were keen to show themselves as place-makers and framers to an older local generation who often blamed young people for being a 'blight' on their communities. Young people wanted to change the story to one reflecting positively upon the people and the place; forms of activism and public action described in this paper were seen as one way of attempting to complicate this narrative. What was silenced, however, was any explicit talk of poverty as the problem – even if its impact was implicit in the narratives. As such, we argue that stigmatisation works in a causative circle by shaming, blaming (Scambler, 2018), and silencing (Shildrick, 2018) people. In concluding the paper, we discuss how we might confront this.

Merthyr Tydfil

Both studies took place in Merthyr Tydfil, a post-industrial town in South Wales with a population of around 58,000 people. In the nineteenth century, the town was heralded as the iron capital of the world. It is also known for a radical history, most famously the Merthyr Rising in which thousands of workers united to take control of the town in a protest against poor wages and conditions, an event widely seen as pivotal in developing the trade unions and worker rights movements. Over the decades, wealth shifted to the new international shipping port of Cardiff (the capital city of Wales). This regional economic injustice, flowing from the industrially-productive valleys' towns down to the metropolitan centre, has intensified with subsequent waves of economic shocks increasing and intensifying poverty/inequality in comparison to non-post-industrial localities. Merthyr is now one of the poorest areas in the UK with poor outcomes in health, life expectancy, education, and employment (StatsWales, 2019). The prospects of social mobility in Merthyr are limited owing to the comparatively high cost of housing elsewhere and a low wage and precarious labour market within Merthyr. Whilst the movement of people is static, many civil society institutions and public services/facilities have departed the town. Moreover, Merthyr – and particularly the housing estate, Llanmerin (pseudonym) in which both studies were largely conducted – has been widely derided and subjected to narratives which focus on the 'failings of the individual residents' whilst side-lining the 'systemic and structural forces that create social and economic disadvantage in the residents' lives' (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015). Resembling the common and deplorable framing of council estates (Slater, 2018), residents in Llanmerin are both 'blamed and shamed' (Scambler, 2018) for the prevalence and concentration of social ills, the estate becoming a metonym for disorder and welfare-dependency. Whilst our main involvement was in Llanmerin, both studies covered people living in other areas of Merthyr identified as part of Wales' anti-poverty programme (Communities First). For a discussion of Merthyr's stigmatisation, see (Byrne et al., 2015, 2016; Renold et al., 2020; Thomas, 2016; Thomas et al., 2018).

Two Studies

The two studies in Merthyr were possible due to long term university/community relationships based on research and various funded community programmes over nearly two decades. A local community organisation ensured that community workers and residents were partners in the research progress and design. The first project – *Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement* – was a five-year research programme involving academic researchers and community organisations focusing upon how regulatory processes might be redesigned to unleash the creativity and knowledge of people living at the margins of power and decision-making. This included introducing a forum so that the seven participating projects could be co-produced by participating community organisations with university researchers on matters of concern to the communities themselves.

The project used a range of diverse methods (e.g. interviews; walking-tours; photos/videos; soundscapes) with young people. In this paper, we discuss data from 56 audio-recorded interviews with young people (aged 14-15) based in two high schools in Merthyr. We used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping technology in interviews to allow participants to produce delineations of a location's boundaries and explore multiple meanings and identities attached to place/s. The aim was to enable young people to articulate their experiences of wellbeing and safety in Merthyr, and to focus on the assets of place in the context of the place-based pathologizing practices to which young people were habitually accustomed. The intended outcome was to inform an action to enable young people to counter what were felt to be stigmatising representations and to be involved within neighbourhood improvements that they saw as important. For a further discussion of the method, see [Thomas, 2016; Thomas et al., 2018].

The second project, *Representing Communities: Developing the Creative Power of People to Improve Health and Wellbeing*, included five place-based case studies in Wales, Scotland and England. The focus was on communities perceived to be 'misrecognised' through health data which, as a consequence, provided unhelpful and, in some ways, harmful recommendations for health improvement. Data on 'indexes of multiple deprivation', for instance, ranks 'places' in terms of 'how poorly the people in communities are faring in relation to health, education, employment and other key indicators' (Byrne et al., 2016). Whilst such statistical representations are designed to highlight areas of need and to guide policy development and government investment, they simultaneously create 'geographies of lack' (Rose, 2006) which frames residents as passive, trapped, and disengaged.

The conviction was that engagement with arts-based resources of engagement, data collection, and dissemination provided new forms of knowledge and understanding that could provide alternative meanings of localised health experiences for changing political and policy health-improvement strategies. Art was seen as a potentially transformative practice, engaging with the affective and creative turn in the social sciences in which arts-based research methodologies are used to interrogate, and reveal, the multi-sensory 'qualitative multiplicity' of everyday life (Braidotti, 2010). The project also emphasised co-production as a vehicle for knowledge production and action. Methods for engagement and data collection*, in Representing Merthyr,* were identified as the researcher moved between different groups and settings. Data collection with young people was largely facilitated in local primary schools and a high school, and methods included photovoice, making memory jars, storytelling, and song-writing. It ended with a performance called 'The People's Platform' (National Theatre Wales, 2016) using data to scaffold a play by local people with professional actors to spell out how local

people may best support public policy and service development. Alongside this, young people, with assistance from a theatre director, made a film in response the new Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (Representing Communities, 2016). They worked separately to local adults to create their own scenes and to embed images of the film onto the stage. In this paper, we focus upon photovoice and The People's Platform. For an extensive discussion of the methods, see (Byrne et al., 2015, 2016). Both projects received ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

In what follows, we present an analysis of data from both studies (brought together) collected with young people about Llanmerin before describing follow-on actions and policy engagements. We begin by sketching out young people's (multiple) narratives of place and, particularly, their efforts to 'revolt' (Tyler, 2013) against pejorative, offensive, and inaccurate stereotypes of *them* and *their* place. Young people offer images of their place that both counter wider negative configurations and, yet, still recognise some negative aspects of the locality. In what follows, we outline young people's public actions and activisms in response to this. Pseudonyms are provided for all young people in both studies.

(Multiple) Narratives of Place

In both studies, young people were keen to counter/dismantle the 'blemish of place' (Wacquant, 2008). We were aware that our research may have impelled young people to collude in describing the place's flaws and failures, further fuelling the stigma machine (Tyler, 2020) that keeps them 'in their place' (Crossley, 2017). However, by explicitly recognising this, we endeavoured to ensure that we did not focus on 'deficits' but, instead, on the community's social and environmental assets according to participants. In interviews, accordingly, young people identified Llanmerin, and Merthyr more broadly, as a convivial place in which people support one another. They widened the boundaries of the estate to celebrate a sense of local, collective belonging in Merthyr as a collective. While young people mostly revelled in the 'friendliness' and density of the estate, they also highlighted the geographical proximity and solace of rural locations; for instance, the nearby mountain and reservoir offer opportunities for peace-and-quiet. Moreover, they highlighted the hallmarks of the town's history, often identifying a nearby castle housing a museum of Merthyr's industrial past as a source of pride.

Nonetheless, young people were aware of the ways Llanmerin is (mis)represented. During the studies, the television programme Skint – described by Channel 4 as offering 'intimate stories of people living with the devastating effects of long-term unemployment', but charged elsewhere as one example of class exploitation at the heart of 'poverty porn' (Thomas, 2016) – was filmed in Merthyr, with its focus largely on the Llanmerin estate. Gethin sensed the programme would be used to further energise a damaging image:

> *There's people video recording us in the street. […] It might have been for a good reason, but the picture you get anyway is for a bad reason because so many people are trying to video record Merthyr and it's really not a bad place. So that's the first thing that comes into your head, like. […] Around bonfire night, we were just sitting round, like typical bonfire night, watching. […] But obviously when you see some of it, [I think] are they going to put us on TV? And me and my friend asked them, "What are you doing?" They said it's going to be on TV so the first thing that we thought, are they going*

to put us on TV now and going to make us look like fools and stuff? […] I don't know whether it's like this is what people do on bonfire night or are they just trying to […] We know there's nothing bad. Just a normal bonfire night.

Echoing the views of other participants, Gethin worried that the programme would animate hurtful representations, with a convivial situation (bonfire night) recast as a symbol of disorder and primitiveness. This departs from studies showing how young people invest value in an estate's alleged notoriety (e.g. Kirkness, 2014). In this study, most young people during interviews acknowledged the estate's poor reputation, yet instead identified the estate's value (Mckenzie, 2015). Carys brushed off its external reputation, believing that its assets should be better recognised by outsiders:

Some people say "oh Merthyr's a rough area, you shouldn't live there, there's like a lot of [drug users]". But, like, there's a lot of positives about it. There's really nice places to go.

Likewise, Rhian suggested that while local challenges/difficulties are a reality, these are only *one* aspect to life in Merthyr:

There can be a bit of violence, there can be drugs, there can be everything, really bad things going on. But it all gets sorted out, and, well, it's alright again then, and they just give Merthyr a bad name really.

The tone of many interviews was matter of fact: this is a convivial, strong community in which matters are under control and that the concerns of external others need not be a concern for them. Moreover, young people frequently use the term 'respect' as a principled mode of seeing and acting. It is a place, they said, where people respect each other and 'get on' (Carla). Respect was communicated in explicit forms of help (e.g. assistance) and kindness (e.g. buying presents, hosting events) but, most commonly, via everyday micro-interactions. Andrea claims:

[Llanmerin is] not as bad as they think really. It's quite a nice place to live. Everyone looks out for each other and it might be some gangs of kids round, but they're not going to mug you or anything like. They've all got respect.

Similar to Andrea, young people recognised how simply saying hello, engaging in friendly small talk (e.g. 'asking how you are'), and/or waving to one another – even if that person is not particularly familiar to the young person – not only 'cheers you up' (Maggie), but becomes a sign of respect. Candice also indicated how this was a marker of 'safety' within the community. Attending to others is a form of *civil attention* – a departure from Goffman's (2008 [1963]) description of 'civil inattention' – as the process in which people in close proximity show an awareness of one another without imposing upon them via a sustained interaction. Martin said:

People have conversations from across the street, like, they just leave their doors open and go and see someone else. People have consideration for other people and respect in all ways, but like, it's the odd one or two like that can't be trusted. […] People say that Merthyr is bad. […] People do have consideration, respect and are faithful and then others like help like, work with others. But, like, there's people who do drugs and alcohol that you can't trust like. But it's not all bad.

Here, Martin recognises that while the community is largely 'respectful', there are others who fracture this conviviality. Instances of disrespect – noise, litter, broken glass, public drug/alcohol use, vandalised playgrounds, not considering others (particularly 'the older generation') in broad terms – were widely condemned. Equally, there was a perception that outsiders did not 'respect' them. During a walking tour with young people, they not only cited litter as the product of 'lazy' residents who 'do not care' and who are 'not respecting their community', but they said that 'respect' is important because 'we're usually in the news' being 'put down' and they wanted to show people outside Merthyr 'we're not really like that'. The young people managed disrespect by avoiding streets where they perceived anti-social behaviour takes place or where there was evidence of environmental disrepair (litter, broken glass, vandalism, etc.). These were labelled by young people as problematic, reluctant as they were not to stigmatise certain locations. They talked carefully about places they 'avoided', indicating a sense of boundaries external to Llanmerin and its surrounding area (Thomas, 2016).

Interestingly, whilst talk about 'place' indicated how young people negotiated everyday encounters and place-based identities in the face of perceived hostility, no-one articulated local troubles in terms of poverty or inequality. The overwhelming concern, instead, was with recognition, of being *respected*. We revisit this idea later in the paper.

Images of Place

Using the GIS methodology for carrying out interviews with young people can be criticised for regulating the ways in which talk about place could be articulated (Thomas et al., 2018). Nonetheless, *Representing Merthyr* intended to place ways of framing place in the hands of local people. An example of this was the use of photography with a class of arts students (aged 14-15) to explore, apprehend, and portray social, environmental, and affective local landscapes. 'Photovoice' was used for this. Photovoice is rooted within Freire's notion of praxis (2000) and has been widely used as a visual participatory research method to facilitate community and social action (Wang and Burris, 1997). Set in a local high school, the intentions of its use were pedagogic value and of learning photographical theory and techniques to generate non-verbal forms of knowledge and understanding (in this case, about the local landscape). A photographer trained the young people in using and applying photographic techniques which became the basis of discussions on the aesthetics of the images and their associated meanings.

Young people explicitly demonstrated an awareness of negative tropes and stereotypes perpetuated in media, political, and policy rhetoric. They generated images which resisted and/or contradicted the negativity they felt blinded people to important and precious aspects of the locality for individual and collective wellbeing. Through learned and developed non-textual language, they created photographs that reflected their own perceptions of Llanmerin. Young people often photographed the landscapes surrounding Llanmerin, and a series of photographs of local shops – often shown as tired, grey, and dilapidated on internet sites – gave life to those serving within them (Image 1). They interviewed the shopkeepers they knew and took pictures of them smiling in their shops. Young people were keen to demonstrate these were spaces of conviviality, in which shop-owners/workers had enduring relationships with their local customers.

Image 1: Shopkeeper

The method also provided a safe space in which to voice concerns about some negative aspects of the locality. One picture shows a woodland walk ruined by litter and bottle of, what most believed, was urine (Images 2 and 3). The sense in which place was disrespected expressed a response that wove itself through different research encounters. Environmental degradation appeared to symbolise the internal and collective impacts of stigmatising processes which made them feel that they had been abandoned, that they did not matter. Yet the images were thought to be powerful and made it possible to speak of the negative aspects of place without colluding in the weaponizing processes of shame and blame (Scambler, 2018). Nonetheless, visual representations of topics – such as drug-dealing/taking and violence – identified as 'problems' in Llanmerin were ruled out. This may have been due to the young people feeling awkward about representing such issues within a school context, concerns of deepening harmful and hurtful experiences, anticipating hostility when photographing 'problems', and anxieties about colluding in the stigmatisation of Merthyr. Nonetheless, young people were still keen – through photographs – to resist dominant media and policy-oriented representations of their place, and them, as abject. Here, we understand *resistance* both as politically-organised protestation and as enacted via more discreet, symbolic, and tactical strategies, such as cultivating a positive place-based identity.

Image 2: Litter

Image 3: 'Urine'

Action, Resistance, and (Re)Imagination

Young people were keen to engage in public actions and forms of activism to confront many of their concerns raised in both projects – i.e. around external pejorative popular representations. However, this endeavour is not without its challenges. Specifically, the historic memory of outsiders (including University researchers) paying an interest in Merthyr, and particularly Llanmerin, is of being watched, scrutinised, and left. For example, at one community meeting about possible ongoing community and university relationships, one resident described being looked at 'as if in a goldfish bowl', whilst injuries of economic degradation persisted and deepened. As such, this project intended to create time and space for meaningful action. For instance, two researchers who were part of the *Productive Margins* project responded directly to gender-based humiliation and violence which were implicit in the accounts of some female interviewees. This produced material for healthy relationships teaching across Wales and led to the project's first co-produced action that successfully influenced the 'Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Bill' progressing in Welsh Government at the time. This was an unexpected line of research, yet the project made it possible for young people to take action (Renold, 2017, Renold et al., 2020).

Other public actions and forms of activism were carried out too. One thing that was powerfully present in the data was the anger of how Llanmerin was represented, and the keenness to articulate the need for it to be 'respected'. Furthermore, it was as young people that they made these claims, in the face of felt anxiety that they, as young people, are the root problem. As such, in the *Productive Margins* project, 'action' took the form of a neighbourhood leadership project where young people negotiated specific environmental changes that they felt would make Llanmerin safer and more

connected. In *Representing Merthyr*, action took the form of arts-based exhibitions and performances where they could 'speak to power'. We describe both below.

Respectful Action (Productive Margins)

As a follow-up to the interviews, eleven young people were invited by the research team and Citizens Cymru Wales – a charity building diverse alliances using community organising to 'organise for power, social justice, and the common good' – to develop leadership skills and identify an action to change their area. Seven group sessions were organised to discuss what action they wanted to take (if any) and to identify 'people in power' they could work with. One high school was unable to participate due to a pending school inspection, but one school did. Members of the local youth club later joined these sessions. An early session with school students involved a youth-led tour in Llanmerin in which young people – using iPads, audio-recorders, and cameras – mapped the area and identified concerns that people in power may be in a position to address and that would unite residents, young people included.

During the tour, young people identified environmental degradation (e.g. litter, glass, loud noise, public drug and alcohol use) as a 'lack of respect' by the local council and certain residents (drug users were often cited in this way). They told stories of smashed windows, fires, suicide, and public drug-use, with contested explanations as to why these may have happened (but such explanations were never grounded in systemic/structural factors). Their talk was concurrently peppered with a clear heralding of, and enthusiasm for, the community's collectivity – made explicit in its micro-interactions. During the tour, for instance, one of the young people said hello to a woman across the road and then whispered 'what a wonderful person' she was, performing the micro-sociality that they lived every day (Walkerdine, 2016). Yet in their talk as the tour progressed, as well as noting how the light highlighted the beauty of the scenery, the dwindling light prompted a concern among the young people that dim/broken streetlights made it feel unsafe to walk in evenings and at night. In follow-up sessions, young people discussed a grassy area opposite a youth club and by a local hospital, and how the path in this area was difficult to navigate owing to poor lighting. Moreover, the road outside the youth centre and hospital was busy, with the only 'safe' route being a narrow, low, cold, and cluttered underpass.

In subsequent discussion and planning sessions, young people identified a 'winnable' action which also harnessed the interest and support of the surrounding community. This led to a public campaign on three matters: more/better streetlights on the poorly-lit path; closing the underpass, and; installing a zebra crossing. The young people invited local politicians and senior police officers to take a tour of the area to outline their plan. During the tour, young people dressed as zebras to draw visual attention to the request for a zebra crossing. They led their visitors around the area, explaining how they felt when navigating this space. Following positive media coverage in local and national newspapers, and further meetings with local politicians, planners, and police (as 'people in power'), the local council advised the young people that if they obtained match-funding, they could implement their three-point plan (they received this two months after the final group session). Three months later, the underpass was filled, the crossing was installed, and streetlight installation was underway. Their campaigning was recognised in one local and one national award.

All three concerns revolved around generating (safe) connections in Llanmerin. As argued elsewhere (Thomas et al., 2018), the action can be perceived as a mode of 'care' for reconnecting the community. Place is used for making and expressing their

identity, yet negative framings of the environment was viewed as an infrastructural disregard of, and lack of respect for, their place which is intensified by 'discourses of vilification' (Wacquant 2008) circulating in media, political, and policy rhetoric. In a context where their place was sensed through feelings of disrespect, the action was felt to make visible, and credible, the transformative powers the young people could have in making a difference to local landscapes.

Counter Representations of Place (Representing Communities)

In the *Representing Merthyr* case study, whilst young people appeared to embrace an opportunity to produce images, objects, films, and performances based on art, the challenge was how they might bring their wants and needs – as part of their counter representations of community – into the making and realization of policy. Two key opportunities for this were: 1) an arts exhibition held in Merthyr in 2015 showing artefacts from both research projects, including the Photovoice project; and 2) a performance, 'The People's Platform', staged at a local social club in 2016 to generate discussion with policymakers and people in public services about how communities can engage with opportunities for wider policy and public services change.

The art exhibition involved all people who participated in both projects, yet it was the space for young people's visual art that dominated subsequent discussions. Local political representatives, people from local bodies, and local media were present (arguably affording it a sense of legitimacy and importance), and the Photovoice pictures covered one wall (other work produced by young people filled the rest of the space). While not explicitly an 'action', the exhibition offered young people an opportunity to author and voice alternative images of place, and make visible the resources that they felt shaped their collective social lives. Engagement with these different modes of 'making' were able to unlock the 'intangible' assets that connected them to place (Burnell, 2012), for instance, notions of sociability not easily captured by technocratic measurements and metrics of place. Furthermore, it was a mechanism for young people to occupy a separate space not dominated by 'older adult' views that may have either silenced or disparaged them. Following the exhibition, the young people requested more opportunities to use photography. This was granted, although there was no exhibition at the end. Whilst this exercise was largely successful, some young people visited the exhibition later on the final weekend only to find their outputs strewn on a single table whilst the venue hosted a 'wedding fair'. This incident could be perceived as another instance of disrespect, together with revealing the difficulties involved in turning passionate analysis into action which is taken seriously.

Supported by National Theatre Wales the theatre performance in 2016 was created and staged from the data collected through the duration of the research. The idea was to create a dialogical and sensory space for 'locational narratives' (Paton, 2013), where performance would be interspersed with conversation between community members and people working for public bodies, including local and national government. Working with Common Wealth theatre company and community members (including a community arts project 'POSSIB: Voices in Art'), the research team provided data from interviews, group discussions, workshops, and creative outputs (often produced/led by community members themselves) that generated several monologues focusing upon the micro-sociality of everyday life. The intention was to connect these micro-fragments to wider policy debates, and particularly the new Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, a piece of legislation calling upon all public bodies to

consider seven wellbeing goals as well has finding ways of involving publics in their plans.

During the development of the performance, it was soon evident that young people felt uncomfortable in devising a performance with older residents, particularly as some older adults in an initial workshop had apportioned blame for local troubles on 'youths'. As a result, the research team commissioned another director to establish the 'Young Company' with pupils from a high school in Merthyr. After watching and deriding an animation commissioned by Welsh Government describing the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, namely owing to using inaccessible language and images of individual trajectories they did not recognise, the young people developed their own film – *Dal Ati* (Welsh for 'keep at it') – that anchored their own aspirations in relation to their connections to place. Two young women, part of the Young Company, also devised a sketch to directly challenge the notion that young people are apathetic. They created a texting dialogue which expressed their desire for more agency in their lives, perhaps highlighting that action can also take place within social media interactions. For more details of the progress and the performances, see (Byrne et al., 2016).

The role of the wider team in cultivating spaces of conviviality and dialogue were important for young people's participation in engaging with policy audiences. The setting for the performance was a social club, a space widely viewed as conveying hospitality, friendship, and community. Policy audiences were invited to join community members on tables during two discussions embedded in the performances. They were asked to discuss two questions: 1) 'What makes the community strong?' (directly linked to the wellbeing goals of the 'Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015' visually displayed on the table); 2) 'How can we be involved in making decisions about that the things that matter to us?' (responding to the requirement that implementation requires the involvement of citizens). Where possible, each table had a mix of local residents and stakeholders representing public bodies, including local and Welsh Government representatives. Each table also had a community facilitator who had been trained in active listening and facilitation skills. Five young people also undertook the training and led discussions on their own tables, again demonstrating how, with support, young people can take on active roles in articulating local concerns and managing perceptions of local capabilities. Young people, here, were on the frontline for developing place-based narratives of strength, resourcefulness, and opportunity.

We must, though, contextualise this event within wider structures of change. In the week following the performance, the UK voted to leave the European Union. Support for Brexit locally was strong, despite the area being a major recipient of European grants. It could be argued the People's Platform articulated the very sense of the need to *take back control*. Whilst this may be an indication of residents' need for *recognition*, this fails to attend to the redistribution of *resources* also required for structural change. We flesh out this observation more in what follows.

Discussion

In this paper, we have explored the ways in which young people articulate and negotiate the place in which they live, how they perceive powerful (negative) representations of a place bearing the wounds and scars of economic neglect, and how public actions allowed them to counter stigmatising depictions of their place (and them as young people) and reimagine their current and future lives. In both projects, young

people developed new collective knowledge and understanding about their own connections to place and change, as well as showing a capacity to participate in policy arenas. It was also clear that place was a foundational motivation for action. Whilst the dominant narrative is that young people are the source of disorder and disrespect in the community, those taking part in these projects were concerned with what they felt was the desecration of place and, therefore, a violation of their place-based identities. This suggests there are opportunities for solidaristic social action which could harness young peoples' concern for the possibility of social mobility *within* the places they live and not simply as a route out, and which *draws on*, not disparages, their place-based affective identities.

Yet whilst there are opportunities for confronting, disturbing and rewriting entrenched macro-political narratives in a hyper neo-liberal age, such opportunities are currently limited. The positive perceptions of place, and subsequent actions to generate counter representations and make fundamental changes in the community, can be heralded as a success. Yet we could also say that the projects were a failure for young people living in Llanmerin. Stories of triumph and local action, which marked out Llanmerin as a 'proper place to live' (Popay et al., 2003), arguably fails to surface the devastating effect of inequality and poverty on residents. Moreover, it is difficult to determine whether young people's position in the community resulted in long-term change.

Here, we can dissect the notions of 'recognition' (seen by young people as 'respect') and 'resources'. Both projects show the difficulties and dilemmas young people in highly stigmatised communities find themselves navigating. The young people not only recognised a stigmatising narrative of place energised outside the community, but also felt and lamented the 'disrespect' of some community members and powerful outside agents. The resultant actions, therefore, were scaffolded in terms of social status and esteem or of being respected. However, a focus on recognition arguably emerges without the solidaristic language of working-class pride and without access to institutions which legitimate class-based claims and actions. To speak of poverty and inequality is viewed, in the absence of solidaristic institutions and associations which provide a mechanism to confront structural injustices, as colluding in the shaming and blaming processes that they resist. Put simply, young peoples' situation is not framed in terms of (class-fuelled) injustice and inequality by the young people themselves. Narratives of collective poverty were hidden, and whilst young people acknowledged the social and environmental scars of poverty, they did not articulate their everyday experiences in relation to the unjust structures reproducing inequality. Recognition, and claims to social status, were more evident in their narratives than addressing unfair, and avoidable, social and economic inequalities. Such impacts were silenced and there was little recognition of linking (mal)recognition to (mal)distribution. In short, offering recognition and a 'voice' to young people falls short when not located this within endemic structural inequalities which suppress them.

We argue that this is symptomatic of a society which has normalised poverty, reduced opportunities to address structural inequalities, and continues to (re)produce stigmatising narratives and ignite 'struggles against classification' (Tyler, 2015). Whilst there is now plenty of empirical data describing the scale of inequality in the UK and beyond, there is far less about what is to be done, and how knowledge of the everyday injuries of class can transform into imagining and realising alternative futures. We need, then, to find ways of developing focused points of resistance, or what Unger (2004), following the Romantic poet John Keats, defines as 'negative capability' to subvert the power of neo-liberalism within localities and move beyond what he calls the 'dictatorship of no alternatives' (Unger, 2009).

One possibility, in Wales at least (although parallel drivers may evolve elsewhere), is the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. While this is not the salvation for all young people and for addressing the affront of chronic poverty, it focuses on sustainable development as well as on involvement as one of the drivers for implementation. This does offer some source of hope. Grassroots community organisations, if recognised as legitimate collective actors and separate from the state, may provide a mechanism for collective action by connecting local experience and knowledge to demands for policy and, ultimately political and structural, change. The involvement of local organisations is key to this. The participation of young people in both projects outlined in this study was based upon the goodwill, sensitivities, and localised knowledge and expertise of community members and gatekeepers (e.g. in schools and youth centre) – each with their own logics, affordances, and limitations. It is through joint action, perhaps, between young people and what we call grassroots community anchor organisations that possibilities of collective action can be realised. It is imperative that young people are involved as active agents of change here. They need to be centre-stage for the Act – and related policies and initiatives – to be credible, as it, with environmental change, will be through their eyes that the future will be seen.

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