

Institution: Teesside University
Unit of Assessment: 22 Social Work and Social Policy
Title of case study: Influencing thinking and shaping practice about worklessness and poverty
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Funded by JRF and ESRC, a long-term series of qualitative studies with residents of very deprived neighbourhoods in Teesside has reached important conclusions about the realities of worklessness and poverty. Many of these run counter to prevailing thinking amongst politicians, policy makers and practitioners. Thus, the research has been used to influence the thinking and the practices of organisations (nationally and regionally) that seek to tackle problems of poverty and worklessness. The research has informed political debate in the UK and EU and has been used nationally and regionally to improve the way that problems of worklessness, poverty and ‘the low-pay cycle’ are understood and responded to. Impact has come about as a consequence of the academic profile and reputation of the underpinning research and a subsequent planned and concerted set of dissemination, public engagement and knowledge exchange activities.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The key researchers here are Robert MacDonald (appointed at Teesside in 1992 as Lecturer, conferred as Professor in 2002) and Tracy Shildrick (who was a Professor at Teesside 2010-October 2013, after appointment to a Lectureship in 1997). Sharing first authorship across research teams in the Social Futures Institute, between them they have led a series of five studies funded by JRF and ESRC (from 1998 to 2012). Each has been won competitively (e.g. the 5th study was one of only 5 funded by JRF from over 630 applications) and each has produced numerous outputs as well as the main report or monograph (e.g. see publications under section 3).</p> <p>Studies 1, 2 and 3 – published as <i>Snakes and Ladders</i> (Johnston, 2000), <i>Disconnected Youth?</i> (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) and <i>Poor Transitions</i> (Webster, 2004) – provided a long-term, broad-ranging and longitudinal analysis of youth transitions and social exclusion in some of England’s most deprived neighbourhoods. This work has been referred to as ‘the most intensive example of youth transitions research in the UK’ (Gunter and Watt, 2009: 516). Studies 4 and 5 have extended analysis from young people to adults and have had a stronger focus on poverty and worklessness. <i>Poverty and Insecurity</i> (Shildrick et al, 2012a) examined the dynamics of ‘recurrent poverty’ over working lives and explored how not just young people but adults too can become trapped in ‘churning’ between unemployment and low paid, insecure employment. The 5th study - <i>Are ‘cultures of worklessness’ passed down the generations?</i> (Shildrick et al, 2012b) - provided a critical case study of influential but controversial claims that worklessness can be explained by families encouraging and passing on ‘welfare dependency’. Main conclusions from this body of work include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people in deprived neighbourhoods face multiple pressures and ‘critical moments’ that disrupt transitions to adulthood. Orthodox ‘risk factor’ approaches to social exclusion are unable to capture the flux, complexity and variation of these transitions [outputs 1, 2, and 3]. • Insecure ‘poor work’ remains relatively abundant and is critical in shaping work histories of recurrent poverty and entrapment in the ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ [outputs 1 and 5]. • ‘Positive’ motivations towards work persist even under conditions of long-term, high unemployment; this is evident across generations and genders [outputs 5 and 6]. • Paradoxically, people living in poverty can deny ‘poverty’ as a label for themselves and reiterate negative stereotypes about ‘poor people’ [output 4].

Impact case study (REF3b)

- Influential ideas about ‘three generations of families who have never worked’ and intergenerational ‘cultures of worklessness’ do not adequately explain worklessness in the UK [output 6].
- Low-paid, insecure employment does not protect against poverty therefore government policy needs to be much more concerned with not only increasing the quantity of jobs but also with increasing their quality [publications 5 & 6].

3. References to the research

1. MacDonald, R., and Marsh, J. (2005) *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (Palgrave). [This research monograph is from [Study 2](#)].
2. MacDonald, R., Shildrick, T., Webster, C., and Simpson, D. (2005) ‘Growing up in Poor Neighbourhoods’, in *Sociology*, 39, 5: 873-891 [This draws on [Studies 1, 2 and 3](#)].
3. MacDonald, R., and Shildrick, T. (2013) ‘Youth and wellbeing: experiencing bereavement and ill health in marginalised young people’s transitions’ *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 35, 1: 147-61. [This draws on [Studies 1, 2 and 3](#)].
4. Shildrick, T. and MacDonald, R. (2013) ‘Poverty Talk: how people experiencing poverty deny their poverty and why they blame the poor’ *The Sociological Review* 61, 2: 285-303. [This is based on [Study 4](#)].
5. Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R., Webster, C., and Garthwaite, K. (2012) *Poverty and Insecurity: life in low-pay, no-pay Britain*, Bristol: Policy Press. [This monograph is based on [Study 4](#)].
6. MacDonald, R., Shildrick, T. and Furlong, A. (2013) ‘In search of “intergenerational cultures of worklessness”: hunting Yetis and shooting Zombies’, *Critical Social Policy*, published on-line on 26/9/13 as doi:10.1177/0261018313501825 [This is based on [Study 5](#)].

All items have undergone rigorous peer review. The articles are published in some of the leading journals in sociology and social policy, with high impact factors and wide citation, e.g. output 2 has 173 citations on Google scholar (13/11/2013). The research monographs have been well reviewed and widely influential. For instance, output 1 has become a standard reference internationally and has 239 Google scholar citations (13/11/2013) and output 5 won the biennial 2013 British Academy/Policy Press *Peter Townsend Prize*.

4. Details of the impact

As a pathway to achieving impact, MacDonald and Shildrick have disseminated their findings widely to different audiences, engaging with politicians, policy makers, practitioners and the public (e.g. they have made over 50 *invited* presentations on this research since 2008). This dissemination, and the reputation of the research, has led to them being invited to join the advisory committees of charities (e.g. JRF, Work Foundation, NE Child Poverty Commission), which has in turn enabled the researchers’ findings to be more effectively communicated to these bodies and through their user networks. MacDonald and Shildrick have worked closely with the University’s Press Office, research funders and research users so as to maximise the reach, accessibility, timeliness and policy/ practice relevance of the research ‘messages’.

For reasons of space, some ***examples of how impact has been achieved*** are given here in respect of only the most recent study: *Are ‘cultures of worklessness’ passed down the generations?* (Study 5). The University Press Office helped the researchers to gain widespread newspaper coverage (e.g. *Financial Times*, *The Independent*, *The Observer*, *Daily Record*, *The Herald*). Their comment piece in *The Guardian* received 500+ posted replies within 24 hours. Social media was also used to generate wide dissemination and debate beyond academia. An ‘infographic’ from this study reached over 1 million Twitter users (according to JRF calculations). There were over 5k hits in one month on MacDonald’s blog about this research (the most successful JRF blog in 2012). Alongside Studies 1 to 4, Study 5 also featured in MacDonald and

Shildrick's **Knowledge Exchange Project (KEP)**, funded by the Institute for Local Governance (ILG) and Middlesbrough Council (MC). During 2011-12, nearly 400 people from over 100 different North East statutory, voluntary and private sector organisations attended at least one of seven KEP events in which the research was used to 'bust myths' about poverty and worklessness and where participants were challenged about how they might use it to help tackle these problems.

The following are **examples of the impact on thinking and practice that have been achieved:**

1. Extensive, staged and separate evaluations of the impact of the **KEP** have been undertaken by the researchers and by ILG [see evidence 1 and 2 in respect of all examples, below, related to this KEP]. ILG presented this KEP to a 2012 seminar of the ESRC's Knowledge Exchange Division as an 'excellent' and 'innovative example' of how to foster productive engagement between local governance institutions and universities. ILG concluded that it had led to:
 - (a) '**conceptual**' impact that 'reframed debates' (e.g. one community organisation commented: 'it gave front line organisations, unemployed people themselves and movers and shakers many questions as well as potential answers...without any doubt at all the MacDonald/ Shildrick work has become a catalyst for exploding many of the myths surrounding worklessness');
 - (b) '**changing state**' impact: three-quarters of evaluation respondents said that the research was 'useful or very useful in supporting their work' and were 'now thinking and/ or acting differently' as a consequence. For instance, it energised social housing, youth work and community organisations, welfare to work providers, Job Centre Plus and several council departments towards tackling poverty and 'the low-pay, no-pay cycle' and creating new opportunities and networks to do this. For example, Job Centre Plus reported that they were now more closely attuned to the needs of the *short-term* unemployed, MC ran a very successful benefit take-up campaign in one of the research neighbourhoods and one FE college reflected on their 'curriculum...and reformed support services for students', all as a result of hearing about the research.
 - (c) and '**instrumental**' impact. Organisations used the KEP to inform strategic planning, priority setting or decision-making. The Chief Executive of MC said the research had 'major impact on our understanding of the needs of local citizens' and would 'influence the delivery of services from a number of agencies in the future'.
2. The research has influenced campaigns to tackle poverty and for a Living Wage in the North East. Because of the reputation and impact of the research, in 2012 MacDonald was invited by **Northern TUC** to be a key note speaker (alongside the General Secretary of Unison) at a conference to educate Trade Union activists (around 70 participated) about 'in-work poverty' and the Living Wage. The Conference Chair ensured that research findings were then distributed to all participants and the TUC Regional Secretary has drawn on the research in several articles he has written for newspapers. Consequently, the research had a 'very direct influence' on Northern TUC's 2013 'Public services campaign strategy' which had 'a stronger element on supporting economically excluded and vulnerable workers', the 'evidence and thinking' here being 'informed directly' by the research [evidence 3]. In 2013 the MP for Middlesbrough launched the '**Make Middlesbrough a Living Wage Town**' campaign, directly using MacDonald and Shildrick's research in his opening speech. They were then invited to speak at the inaugural meeting, to chief executives of local companies. The campaign team regards the research as a 'vital component in shaping public policy', arguing that it 'has helped make a case...to campaign for secure, properly paid jobs with decent terms and conditions' [evidence 4].
3. The research has also had impact on practice nationally. MacDonald was invited to join the JRF advisory group as an academic expert on the *Future of the UK Labour Market* (2010-13). From this in 2011 he was asked by the employment and skills provider, **Reed in Partnership**, to provide expert 'insight and constructive challenge' for their tender to the DWP to help

'families with multiple needs'. Their bid was successful. MacDonald's input was acknowledged as 'really helpful and valuable' in 'develop[ing] credible and appropriate proposals' to help families towards employment and, subsequently, in helping Reed in Partnership's approach to 'the delivery [model] of the programme' [evidence 5].

4. Also in respect of practice with 'families with multiple needs', Shildrick and MacDonald were asked by the **Children's Workforce Development Council** (CWDC) to collaborate in the production of a training manual for practitioners. This followed a 2011 research presentation given by Shildrick at the Child Poverty Unit/ DWP. New case study material from Study 4 (about 'the low-pay, no-pay cycle') was produced for the manual. CWDC commented that 'it is only as a result of this inclusion that the resource is of such a high quality, supporting practitioners in their work with families' [evidence 6].
5. The research has also informed political debates at UK and EU level: in 2010 MacDonald was an academic expert witness to a **House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee Inquiry into 'Young People not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET)'** with his research evidence considered by the outgoing Labour government and the incoming Coalition [evidence 7]. In 2012, Shildrick was invited to present research to a **House of Commons All-party Working Group on 'In-work Poverty'**. Subsequently, findings about the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' and disputing the idea of 'cultures of worklessness' have been referred to directly in **debates in both Houses of Parliament** [evidence 8]. Baroness Lister commented: 'This evidence is going to be invaluable in fighting the pernicious cut in benefits... it challenges the conventional wisdom that only those in work are 'strivers' and that all those out of work on benefit are 'skivers' [evidence 9]. On the basis of her active membership of the North East Child Poverty Commission and the reputation of the research, Shildrick acted as academic advisor to an 'Opinion' piece for the EU's Committee of the Regions that was adopted as an **EU Recommendation on Communication on Child Poverty** in 2012 [evidence 10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[1] *Making Knowledge Exchange Work in Middlesbrough*, ILG evaluation, ILG: Durham, 2012.

[2] *Exchanging Knowledge, Building Relationships and Influencing Ways of Working: Middlesbrough's Knowledge Exchange Project* (2012), Middlesbrough Partnership.

<http://www.middlesbroughpartnership.org.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=9278&p=0>

[3] Email correspondence, Regional Secretary Northern TUC, 19/11/12.

[4] Email correspondence, Communications Manager for Andy McDonald MP, 3/6/13.

[5] Email correspondence, Policy & Research Manager, Reed in Partnership, 17/10/11 & 18/09/13.

[6] CWDC Training manual for use with families with multiple needs

<http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/poverty-and-disadvantage/child-poverty-learner-resource>

[7] House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, *Young people not in education, employment or training*, 8th Report of Session 2009–10, Volume I, 316-I

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/316/316i.pdf>

[8] 'Opposition Day' debate on *Jobs and Social Security*, House of Commons, 28th November 2012. <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2012-11-28a.292.0&s=University+of+Teesside#g325.2>

and 'Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill — Second Reading', House of Lords, 11th February 2013, <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2013-02-11a.513.6&s=%28JRF%29+speaker%3A25058#g538.0>

[9] see <http://northeastchildpoverty.wordpress.com/2012/12/13/intergenerational-cultures-of-worklessness/>

[10] see <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:113:0034:0039:en:PDF>