

# Imagining the future in the neoliberal era: young people's optimism and their faith in *hard work*



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## Different stories and different optimisms

### Freya

I'm quite optimistic because I'm in a good situation... I mean, **I'm optimistic because I think I have the chance to manipulate the situation for my better** (...). I'm in, like, the smallest group of lucky people, I think. I really feel that way. That I shouldn't complain about it basically.

### Michael

[Am I optimistic about the future?] It depends what time of the day you ask me really, to be honest! Like **sometimes I tell you 'no, I have no hope' and then sometimes I'll tell you 'yeah I'll get sorted'. But on the whole, yeah [I'm optimistic].**

## Aims of the paper

- *Exploring* - young people's views of the future (optimism) while accounting for their experiences in education and work (actuality)
- *Understanding* - what lies behind these views
- *Think* about the wider implications of these views (also for young people's views of 'others')
- How can we make sense of young people's continued optimism in the face of adverse social and structural conditions? How do these views of the future affect young people's views of others?

## Views of the future as ..

- Control over life
- Perceptions of material constraints
- Individual representations of society (Leccardi 2008)
- Agency and structure

# Attitudes toward the future: trends amongst young people



- The European Youth Futures survey found that 75% of 16-29-year-olds in Britain were satisfied with their life as a whole
- 74% agreed that their own future looked bright

## **What shapes these different views of the future? Possible explanations.....**

- Arnett: psychological development & life stage
- Silva: changing selfhood and neoliberal ideas
- Beck: individualisation and choice biography

# Optimism versus actuality

- *Epistemological fallacy* how the complexity of the social world is often reduced to individual terms (Furlong and Cartmel 1997)
- *'Cruel optimism'* as the tendency to hold on to beliefs in 'the fantasy of the good life (...) mass upward mobility and meritocracy (Berlant 2006)
- *Cognitive dissonance* How do people make sense of the divergence—or fallacy—between their cognitions (i.e. their body of knowledge, beliefs and opinions) and their actual experiences (Festinger 1962)

# The Research

## Quantitative Surveys

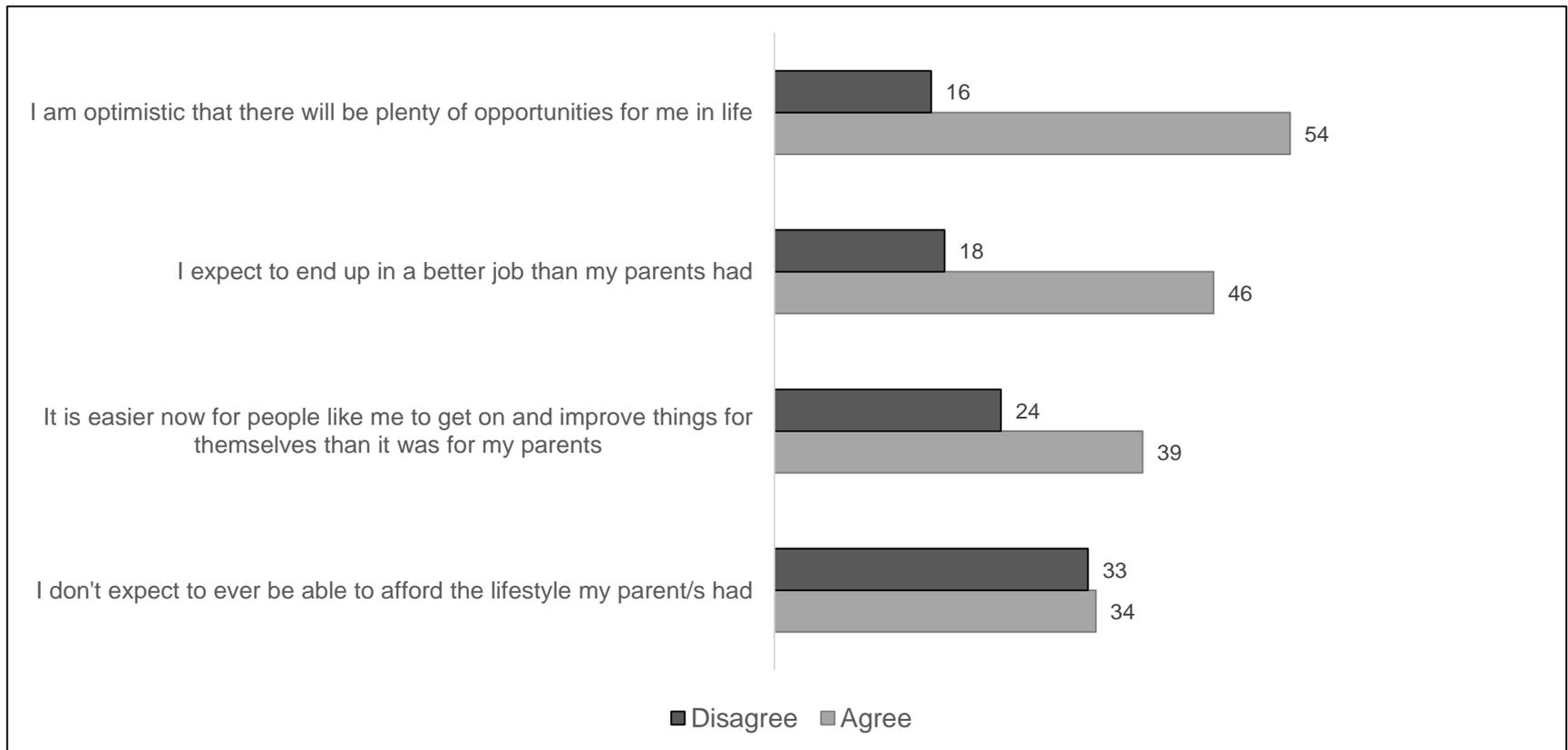
- **Cross-sectional**
  - Web survey in June/ July 2014 (N = 2025)
  - Young people age 22 - 29
  - England (n= 1003), Scotland (n = 520) and Wales (n = 502)
- **Longitudinal data**
  - Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) of young people in England
  - 6 waves (aged 12, 14, 16, 20, 23)
  - In Wave 6, n = 945

## Qualitative Interviews

- 101 semi-structured interviews with 18-26 years old in England
- 84 from CELS + Snowballing + **participatory approach with 5 Young Advisers (14 interviews)**
- **Interview:** opportunities in education, work and housing & civic values views of society

# Optimism

## Youth attitudes towards their opportunities in life



**Source:** CELS web survey 2014, England only data (n = 1003)

## Widespread and deep-seated ...

**So I'm buzzing. Love life. (...) God! I'd say optimistic at the minute because I've just got my degree, I'm just young and fresh, I'm just ready to get out there in the big world, I just want to try and move, I just want to do everything in life, do you know what I mean? So I'd say I was very optimistic to be honest. Obviously I've just finished with my girlfriend, that's a bit of downer, but I'm sure I'll move on. I'm sure life will go on so...you're only young once aren't you, I suppose. I've never been on a lad's ,and I'm dying to go on one of those – that's next year as well.**

(Jamie, White British)

## **A divided future: macro and micro perspectives**

For my **personal future**...I feel optimistic. For **general mankind** I feel more pessimistic, yes...I open a newspaper and I just think...I spend more time thinking “what world do we live in?” than “oh that’s nice”...I think people are becoming more insular, becoming more detached from other people, becoming more selfish, and I think that doesn’t add up to a good thing, I think that’s not a good combination and contribution.

(Anna, White British)

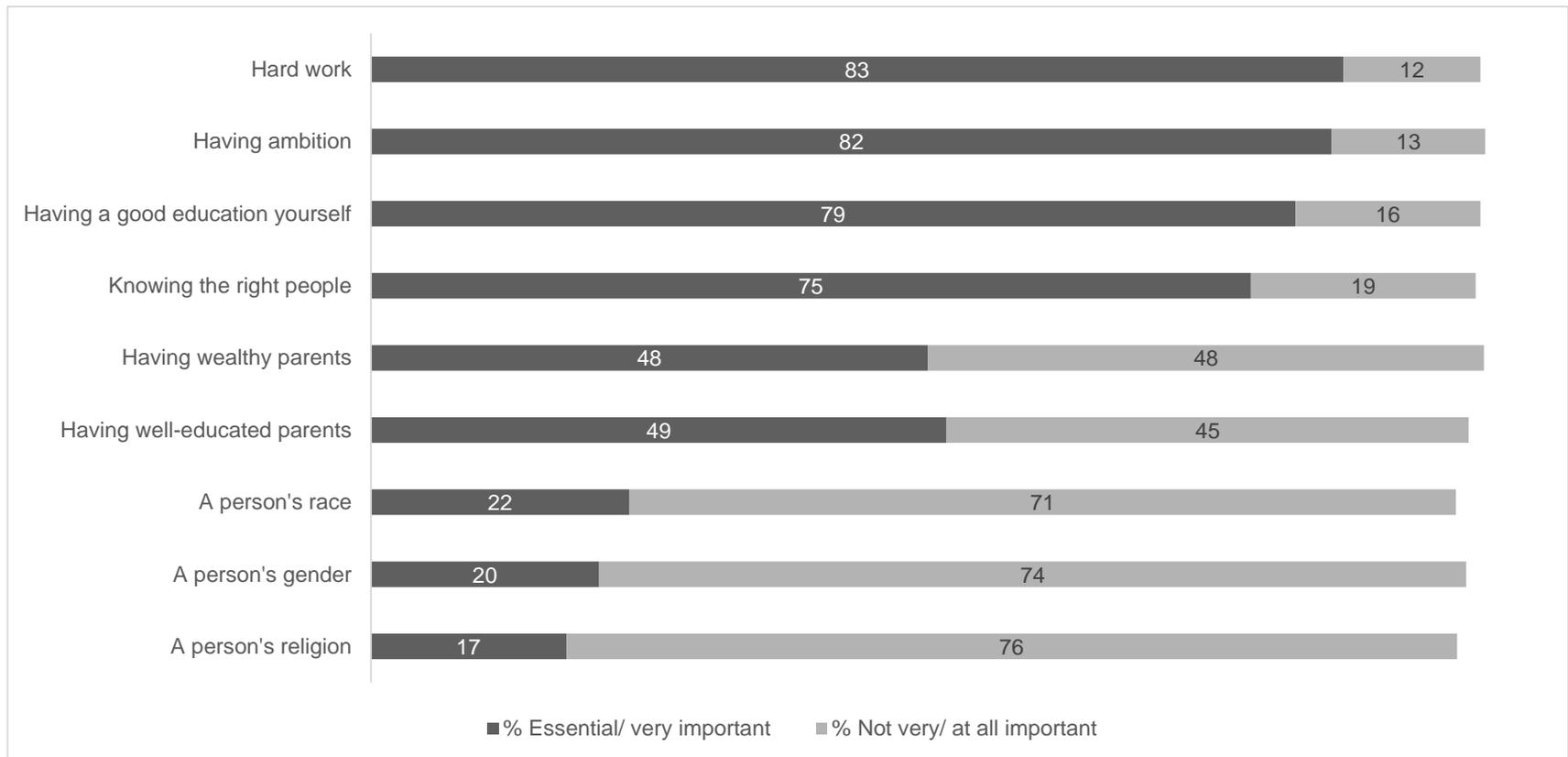
# What is behind young people optimism?

When it comes to the future, because it's not certain, you can always **change it**, yeah, you know what I mean?

(Jeff, Black British African)

# The faith in hard work

## Youth perceptions of what it takes to get ahead in life



**Source:** CELS web survey 2014, England only data (n = 1003)

## Everything is possible if you make it possible

...In my personal opinion, if you're determined and you *work hard*, nothing should hold you back. I don't see why any young person here should not all be able to achieve the same thing if they have the same drive.

(Sarah, Black British African)

If I work hard enough I can achieve everything I want to achieve.

(Rashid British Pakistani)

## Cruel optimism

I think they're optimistic [due to] the fact that they're not educated enough to see what it actually takes. And if they do see that, I think it will depress them even more. So I think it's very good that they're just not educated enough at the moment and they're optimistic and they're motivated to carry on and try.

(Hashim, British Pakistani)

## **Does the faith in the power of individual's *hard work* require a turn away from others?**

I'm content with how I am now. I'm not content with how the world is now, because personally *I haven't got to worry about the rest of the world, they have to worry about themselves*. I have to worry about myself...I know what I'm capable of doing and so I'm happy with doing what I...just carry on doing what I'm doing.

(Stephen, White British)

## Perceptions of the *social structure*

- Optimism shaped by underestimating the role of social structure in favour of individual agency
- What is social class for young people? How do they speak about it?

## Do you think young people in England have the same opportunities? Young people speaking about social class....

- ‘I think social class is something that you define yourself (...) the politicians almost want to uphold it (...) So it’s (class) more of a concept to hold people down I’d say’ (Male, White British)
- ‘Social class was more seen back in the day, but not today. Today it depends. I think the schools play a big factor’. (Female, British Asian Indian)

## Conclusion: the cruel optimism and the faith in *hard work*

- Widespread *optimism* and *faith in hard work* whose meaning varied according to young people circumstances and background
- But this optimism is often *cruel* reflecting *a fallacy* between young people's actual circumstances and the positive views of the future they professed to feel
- Demonization of disadvantaged groups & threats to the social welfare structures that are supposed to support them