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Envisioning Social Justice With Criminalized Young Adults

Beth Weaver*, Trish McCulloch and Nina Vaswani

*B. Weaver, School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, Level 6 Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0LT, UK; email: beth.weaver@strath.ac.uk; T. McCulloch, School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, University of Dundee, Old Medical School, Dundee DD1 4HN, UK; N. Vaswani, Children and Young People's Centre for Justice, University of Strathclyde, Level 6 Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0LT, UK

Rather than attending to the social harms underpinning youth offending, justice responses tend to amplify and entrench them. While perhaps less noticeable, inequalities further reside in the systematic disparities in criminalized young adults' opportunities to influence policy and practice and to have control of the choices concerning their present and their future. Resultantly, perhaps, there is a significant disconnect between policy and practice directed towards this group, their lived realities and developmentally specific needs. This article reports on a design-led, participatory study involving 12 criminalized young adults, aged 18–25, oriented to listening to, and learning from, their experiences and visions of social justice in order to influence more socially just responses to offending than we have at present.

KEY WORDS: social justice, young adults, utopia, epistemic justice, participatory design

INTRODUCTION

There is a well-documented relationship between economic deprivation, social marginality and offending but, rather than attending to these social harms and their enduring effects, justice policy and practice responses have the effect of amplifying and entrenching pre-existing inequalities for criminalized young adults. Moreover, while there has been increasing attention to the participatory rights of children and young people (e.g. Haines and Case 2015; Smithson and Jones 2021), the voices of criminalized young adults remain marginalized and their experiences elided in shaping policy and practice responses. Resultantly, perhaps, there is a significant disconnect between policy and practice directed towards criminalized young adults, their lived realities and developmentally specific needs. In response to this epistemic lacuna, this article reports on a design-led, participatory study involving 12 young adults, aged 18–25, in conflict with the law in Scotland. The study aimed to listen to and learn from their experiences and shed light on their visions of social justice in order to influence more socially just responses from our welfare and justice institutions than we have at present. The significance of this work, we

suggest, resides as much in our findings on what social justice would look and feel like to our participants, as in our emphasis on the need for, and value of, deliberative participation if we are to collectively 'generate justice' (Fraser 2005) through penal and social reform. We argue that this cannot be realized in the absence of mechanisms that can facilitate and embed the 'epistemic participation' (Schmidt 2019) of this group in justice policy and practice contexts more broadly.

Informed by Schmidt's (2019) theory of epistemic participation, Levitas (2013) and Wright's (2010, 2013) Utopian social theory, alongside Fraser's (2005) tripartite political philosophical theory of social justice, we sought to practice 'Utopia as Method' (Levitas 2013) as a mechanism to understand the challenges participants faced, how they experienced those challenges and what a socially just alternative would look like. In relation to the former, participants relayed a range of social disparities and challenges framing their existing situational contexts, social environments and personal circumstances that, as we acknowledge below, resonates with preceding research. In relation to the latter, a socially just place involved having a safe and secure home; experiencing inclusion and belonging; fair and equal opportunities; and personalized social support, rooted in understanding and empathy. Our analysis leads us to conclude that our capacity to generate (social) justice on these terms depends on our willingness to attend to the deep realities of young adults' material and social lives, before and beyond the criminal justice system and to the implications of this emancipatory methodology for how we 'do' justice, and in that, whose voices are invited to shape penal and social policy and practice. This means recognizing that social harms are not inevitable (Levitas 2013) but generated by social structures and institutions (Wright 2010, 2013), and committing therefore to penal and social policies and practices that are democratic and inclusive in approach and transformative in aims, vision and effect, underpinned by a politics of recognition, redistribution and representation (Fraser 2005).

MARGINALIZATION, MISRECOGNITION AND MISREPRESENTATION

Young adults are disproportionately affected by changing social, political and economic forces and environments and widening inequality (Barry 2016; Nugent 2017). Social and economic changes in the United Kingdom, and across Europe, including the rising cost of living, rising rents and lack of housing, and the shift into precarious work as an outcome of the neo-liberal flexibilization of labour markets (Sheppard and Ricciardelli 2020; Gray and Smith 2021) mean that the related social and economic markers of adulthood are delayed. These socio-economic shifts have led some to refer to young adults as the precariat (Standing 2011), the consequences of which are amplified for those already multiply marginalized young adults who come into conflict with the law (McAra and McVie 2022). There is a well-documented and significant inter-relationship between offending, justice-involvement and poverty in adolescence and early adulthood, which endures into adulthood, with all its attendant outcomes (McAra and McVie 2022). Criminalized young adults are further burdened by a criminal justice system which imposes and exacerbates stigma and, in so doing, constrains opportunities and reduces life chances (McAra and McVie 2022)—while doing little to address the harms engendered by structural issues such as poverty, inadequate housing, an absence of secure employment opportunities (Webber 2022), and the ongoing violence of deindustrialization felt by many Scottish communities (Fraser and Clark 2021). Subsequently, young adults, and particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are overrepresented in the justice system, experience poorer outcomes and are more likely to be reconvicted (House of Commons Justice Committee 2016).

The associated stigmatization and misrepresentation of criminalized young adults are keenly felt by those affected. In Harragan *et al.*'s (2018: 47) study 'the majority of young people felt they

were labelled as troublemakers simply for being a young person in their local area, indicating the stigma and moral judgement that surrounds young people from impoverished neighbourhoods', many of whom reported being intentionally targeted by the police (see also McAra and McVie 2010). Inevitably, this results in disproportionate and repeated criminalization, and labelling of marginalized youth (McAra and McVie 2015), leading to more punitive, exclusionary and repressive responses that exacerbate their marginality (Harragan *et al.* 2018), erode trust in authorities and aggravate social divisions (Kennelly 2011). Rather than ameliorating the social adversities and harms underpinning much offending, young adults are then subjected to state-led individualistic and responsibilizing interventions (Phoenix 2019; Gray and Smith 2021), resonating with MacDonald *et al.*'s (2019: 14) observation that 'individual behavior trumps structural inequalities' in both policy explanations of, and 'remedies' for, poverty and its effects.

Meanwhile, the voices, insights and experiences of young adults, whether directed towards their precarity or social marginality (Bladt and Percy-Smith 2021), or in shaping justice policy and practice (Case *et al.* 2020), have also been marginalized and elided. Consequently, 'what emerges is a frequent disconnect between public policy and service systems and the lifeworlds of marginalized young people, with the result that the core issues in young people's lives remain unchanged' (Bladt and Percy-Smith 2021: 278). While socio-economic deprivation and social marginality might be a more noticeable form of inequality, inequalities further reside in the 'systematic disparities in an individuals or groups abilities: to receive recognition; to influence others' behaviours in order to produce advantages for themselves and the groups they belong to; and to have control of the choices concerning their present and their future' (Bruselius-Jensen *et al.* 2021: 5–6).

This prejudicial disregard of their experiential knowledge coheres with notions of epistemic injustice which is a type of injustice suffered by an individual in their 'capacity as knower' (Fricker 2007) due to their social position and association with a certain social group. Fricker identifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person's testimony or knowledge is dismissed or discredited because they belong to a particular social group. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when an individual's social experience or interpretation of a phenomenon is misunderstood or misrepresented because of their group's unequal participation in, or exclusion from, the construction of collective understandings of phenomena (Fricker 2007). The effects of such injustices can be identified in the disjuncture between young adults' experiences and developmentally specific needs and the nature of policy and practice responses to them, partly because this group are denied the opportunity to influence those understandings. Importantly, while such epistemic injustices materialize in and through interpersonal interactions, they also operate at systemic and institutional levels resulting in the collective epistemic marginalization of groups based on their subjugated status or social location (Schmidt 2019). Epistemic marginalization in Schmidt's formulation is a form of oppression and denotes exclusion from social epistemic practices, or dialogic exchange, because of discrimination and prejudice associated with, and attributed to, their group membership. Recognizing this, we argue, creates a normative mandate for participation if we accept that criminalized young adults are an oppressed group, not only by virtue of their experiences of social disadvantage and the inequalities and inequities underpinning much offending, but also as an outcome of the collateral consequences of criminalization and contact with the justice system, and the stigma and prejudice that ensues.

SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE REAL UTOPIA

Building on this analysis, our theoretical framework, brings Fraser's (2005) tripartite theory of social justice, consisting of economic redistribution, cultural recognition and political

representation, into dialogue with a utopian imagination (Wright 2010, 2013; Levitas 2013). Consistent with notions of epistemic participation, for Fraser (2005) justice requires parity of participation, which means dismantling the institutionalized obstacles that impede this.

> On the one hand, people can be impeded from full participation by economic structures that deny them the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers; in that case they suffer from distributive injustice or maldistribution. On the other hand, people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition (Fraser 2005: 92).

While maldistribution and misrecognition limit people's access to civic and political participation, for Fraser (2005: 94) representation is 'a matter of social belonging; what is at issue here is inclusion in, or exclusion from, the community of those entitled to make justice claims on one another'. Only by inclusive actions and policies, she argues, can justice be generated. 'Focused not only on the "what" of justice, but also on the "who" and the "how", it enables us to evaluate the justice of alternative principles and alternative processes of frame-setting' (Fraser 2005: 105), that are more equitable, democratic and inclusive in approach, and transformative in aims and vision. However, as Dussel qualifies, 'the excluded should not be merely *included* in the old system – as this would be to introduce the Other into the Same but rather ought to participate as equals in a new *institutional moment* … This is not a struggle for *inclusion*, but for *transformation* (Dussel 2008): 89 emphases in original)' (quoted by Bell and Scott 2016: 67).

This line of reasoning resonates with Wright's (2010) 'real utopias', which is a framework (or method (Levitas 2013)), rooted in social empowerment, for the critical examination of dominant social structures, institutions and practices; the development of viable alternatives in response to that critique; and the enactment of a plan for realizing those alternatives, towards emancipatory, transformational social change. Wright (2013) advances three moral principles through which lens, he argues, existing institutions, structures and practices may be critiqued, the elaboration of alternatives developed, and the tasks of transformational social change delineated. These principles are equality, democracy and sustainability. On equality, Wright (2013) proposes that a socially just society would involve equitable access to the kinds of social and material conditions that enable human flourishing. Material conditions refer to the economic resources required to meet human needs, and imply—in the context of inequality of access to the conditions to lead a flourishing life—the need for redistribution mechanisms (e.g. Fraser 2005). However, he argues, consistent with Fraser's notion of 'recognition', that socially just conditions include experiencing 'social respect, community, solidarity and trust' (Wright 2013: 10), suggesting that issues of stigma and social exclusion should equally inform any critique of existing social institutions, structures and practices.

Wright's definition of democracy coheres with notions of epistemic participation and Fraser's (2005) concept of 'representation'. He emphasizes the need for equal opportunities for citizens to make choices and participate in decisions about matters which affect their lives as individuals and as members of a community (Wright 2013). Where Wright's equality principle is focussed on the here and now, his principle of sustainability is necessarily focussed on futures. Following this process of critique, utopian thinking requires the development of alternatives, which Wright (2013) suggests should be evaluated both in terms of their desirability *and* achievability. Resonating further with Fraser (2005); Wright (2013) differentiates between ameliorative (in Fraser's (2005) terms, affirmative) and transformative alternatives.

However, contemporary reform efforts might, at best, be construed as ameliorative, insofar as they tend to focus on slowly modifying existing arrangements, rather than pursuing radical

structural and transformative social change (Malloch 2016). As observed, there is an overwhelming policy focus on within-individual responses to young adults in conflict with the law, eliding reflection on how existing social structures and institutions impose harms through processes of criminalization, and contact with the justice system, alongside broader social inequalities. Malloch (2016: 162) cautions that alternatives 'suggested as significant innovations *within* the system are often absorbed in to it in a way that softens them yet, at the same time deflects the initial critiques within which they originated' (italics added). Envisioning viable alternatives requires looking beyond justice institutions, processes and practices and turning our diagnosis and critique of the issues outwith, though sometimes caused by, the justice system; otherwise people's circumstances implicated in contact with the system are unlikely to change (Malloch 2016).

> We therefore have a responsibility when developing non-penal responses to social harm to work in common with all those affected in a common endeavor to develop a just response in opposition to the often unjust responses of the state. It is an opportunity to create a counter-revolution in response to these exclusionary responses by proposing a non-penal rationality that is genuinely transformative (Bell and Scott 2016: 68).

METHOD

In creating change then, and in supporting epistemic justice, a utopian approach requires that those affected participate in a communicative space where they can freely share their experiences, hold others to account, and have their ideas and experiences taken seriously as epistemic agents (Schmidt 2019). However, we also recognized that 'for participation to be meaningful, it needs to be relevant to young people's immediate realities' (Bladt and Percy-Smith 2021: 277).

To realize these aims, we adopted a participatory design-led methodology to explore and understand young adults' experiences of social (in)justice and to provide a space for them to envision a socially just place wherein these experiences might be transformed and innovation might occur. Participatory design is a dynamic process that uses design practices to identify and explore problems and solutions and that can begin the process of democratizing social innovation (Björgvinsson *et al.* 2010). Design research comprises diverse methods and approaches, but is underpinned by participatory practices and ethics, and the use of design processes to create and integrate knowledge and shared understandings, driven by lived experience (Kleinsmann and Valkenburg 2008; Steen 2013). Design methods are typically visual or creative, and are therefore accessible to a diverse group of participants and conducive to building something new (Burkett 2012). The process of design was, therefore particularly appropriate to the specific developmental stage and marginalized status of our young adult participants. Its inclusive approach seeks to redistribute the balance of power, has the potential to promote engagement with marginalized groups who are normally excluded from knowledge production and policy-making (Pain and Francis 2003; Porche *et al.* 2022) and helps generate solutions that are culturally relevant and trusted (Evans and Terrey 2016).

The methodology was approved by the University Ethics Committee. A purposive sample of three groups of young adults was recruited from third sector or social work organizations located in the West of Scotland. Twelve young adults (three women, nine men) aged between 18 and 25 participated, among whom eight were care experienced, eight had been in prison (either on remand or sentenced), and three were in employment. While justice experience was a prerequisite for participation, the research was not concerned with individuals' offending behaviour but rather their conception, experience and vision of social justice in its broadest sense. The groups of young adults each participated in two 90-min workshops, held one week apart, supported by two facilitators and one note-taker. Workshops were hybrid[1] due to COVID-19 restrictions in

place at the time, and were video recorded and the audio transcribed verbatim, with the exception of Group 1 workshops, in which an observer took handwritten notes.

Prior to the workshops, participants were issued with a 'workshop in a box' which contained the offline materials necessary for the workshops, including snacks and mobile data. Workshop one encouraged participants to reflect on their social, physical and institutional environments through the use of a game board (loosely based upon the game of *Monopoly* and the associated risks and opportunities offered by the game cards 'chance' and 'community chest'). This reflexive activity supported participants to engage in a process of 'diagnosis and critique' (Wright 2013), to identify and understand their experiences of social (in)justice, and their understandings of the causes and consequences of those experiences. Using creative activities with *Lego*, workshop two focussed on envisioning a socially just place that would prevent or address the injustices identified in workshop one. The methods adopted thus facilitated a process of Utopian inquiry (Bell and Pahl 2018), and epistemic inclusion, by supporting participants' critical reflections on the social structures, institutions and practices that shaped their lives, and encouraging the envisioning of alternatives.

Visual assets produced through the workshops, such as drawings or *Lego* models, were photographed and collated in an online exhibition located on a Miro board. Textual data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data were analysed deductively, using codes drawn from the workshop questions (i.e. what challenges do young adults face? What does a socially just place look like?), and inductively, from codes arising from the data (i.e. the polis, the street, family, drink and drugs). Data were then analysed in detail, focussing on specific themes, and examining similarities and differences across accounts. Data analysis was conducted alongside group discussions between the researchers and initial findings were discussed with a self-selecting group of four participants. These processes enabled us to interrogate each other's understanding of the data and refine our analysis accordingly (Siltanen *et al.* 2008).

However, participatory forms of research are, of course, not themselves sufficient to realize social justice. Being short lived, such projects fall short of the enduring practices required to facilitate the meaningful epistemic participation of marginalized social groups. Moreover, while participatory research can enable voice, it can also fall short of achieving social change and meaningful impact (Pain and Francis 2003). This, however, is the focus of our current follow-up project—to collectively envision and enact one of the alternatives imagined by the participants below, bringing differently situated actors together to collectively 'create the conditions for implementing alternatives in the future and … mobilize the necessary social forces to support the alternative when those conditions occur' (Wright 2010).

FINDINGS

In keeping with a Utopian lens of diagnosis and critique and an envisioning of viable alternatives (Wright 2010), we report on participants' responses to two questions explored across the workshops:

1. What challenges do young adults in conflict with the law face?
2. What does a socially just place look like for young adults?

We share participants' engagement with each question in turn however, it is noteworthy that participants' accounts were not bounded in this way. Participants regularly reframed the direction of the discussion, moving across questions and issues as relevant to them. For example, participants

1 While the first group was held entirely online, the remaining two were hybrid in that participants were in the same physical space for the workshops, while the researchers engaged by virtual means.

often responded to utopian-oriented questions by returning to discussion of the challenges they faced (diagnosis and critique), an observation we return to below. Relatedly, accounts of these challenges were rarely presented simply, as problems to be re/solved. For many, they came with a call to understand; to suspend our normal logics and rush to solutions, and to see, hear and feel the world from these alternate, marginalized, often misunderstood and misrepresented positions. The call to understand deeply, is common across research with oppressed groups and resonates with Ginwright's (2022) assertion that social justice is not advanced by transactional approaches to 'fixing' social problems, but by transformative relationships that enable individual and social connection, reflection and healing. This finding also resonates with our utopian, participatory approach. As Scott (2013: 100) observes, 'people seem to change not when we hurt them, but when we provide positive support and encouragement and invest in them as fellow humans'.

While there were clear commonalities across our findings, and those of others, there was also significant diversity. This reflected the unique experience and positionality of the participants, the temporal and situated nature of many of the issues and experiences discussed, and the particular dynamics of each group, workshop and exchange. For example, while resonating with findings in existing research (e.g. McAra and McVie 2010; Fraser 2015) in that most participants touched on significant experiences of childhood and family adversity, life on 'the street' and in 'the schemes' and so on, the ways our participants spoke about this, and the emphasis given, varied greatly between individuals and groups. In these ways and others, the findings presented below privilege the *particular* voices and views of our participants, and underline the partial, situated and emergent nature of both knowledge and knowledge production. The findings thus give further impetus to the need to embed participatory and deliberative processes into policy-making and practice settings. In this respect, we reject the tyranny of absolute ways of knowing and instead assert the need for more inclusive, democratic and plural approaches to knowing and doing—and for this to become more ordinary than utopian.

HOW DO YOUNG ADULTS FRAME THE PROBLEM?

Across groups, participants described experiencing a range of challenges as a consequence of the social disparities and conditions framing their situational contexts, socio-geographical environments and personal circumstances. Those discussed most frequently were: interactions with the police (the polis); life on 'the street' or in the 'schemes' and encounters with territorial violence; experiences of family adversity; perceptions of stigma, discrimination and exclusion; and the causes and consequences of mental ill-health, alcohol and drugs. Poverty, homelessness and lack of access to support and perceptions of a depersonalized justice system also characterized responses.

Our focus is on the first three of these challenges, which were discussed most frequently. However, there were considerable intersections across the challenges discussed. For example, the challenge of 'The Polis' intersected with the challenge of 'the street' and with participants' wider experiences of stigma, stereotyping and discrimination. Similarly, the challenges of 'the street' were linked to challenges of family adversity, lack of supports, mental ill-health, drug and alcohol use and territorial violence. A key message, one which resonates with existing research, is that young adults in conflict with the law face multiple and intersecting challenges. Further, participants reported limited access to, or inadequate, support in response to the myriad socio-structural challenges they faced and, critically, had even more limited chances to hold 'power-holders' to account for, or to seek redress from, the machinery of inequality (Tyler 2020) that pervaded their lives.

The 'Polis'

All participants discussed their relationship with 'The Polis' as an enduring challenge, framed in terms of routine stereotyping, targeting, harassment and unwarranted discrimination and

mistreatment (see also McAra and McVie 2010). Many described the 'constant' humiliating, othering practice of being stopped, searched, antagonized and/or shamed by the police:

> Just anywhere I am and they see me. Like if I'm walking down the street going to the shop, they'll stop and they'll say, 'where are you going? What you been dae'in?' (David; G2)

> Police just stopping and searching you, that's right. … all they have to say is we've got a suspicion you guys are drinking in the woods … (Cam; G1)

> … get pulled over on a Sunday morning. Every week, going to football … you always get breathalysed, even … (Pete; G1)

For most, the challenge of the police was enmeshed with the challenge of 'the street' and associated issues of discredited identity, subjugated status and social stigma. Groups 2 and 3 discussed the street as a 'risky' and 'unsafe' place, with a key risk identified as being arrested by the police.

Some also recounted experiences of police brutality and violence—in cells, in police vans and on the street. Below, Grant (G3) describes a brutal and degrading experience of being stopped and searched following discharge from hospital for treatment of a knife wound:

> I had thirty-six staples in my belly, man; I got oot a car an' I was standing an' the polis was like that, 'Why are you holding your belly?' I'm like that, 'whit's… whit's it got tae dae wi' you?' He was like that, 'Whit the fuck you dae'in holding your belly?' an' I'm like that, 'Man, fuck oot o' here'. He's like that, he actual come over an' when he lifted up my t-shirt man I had bandages on, obviously like I had tubes an' that coming oot me, man, so I've got three holes on us so like wan o' the bandages that was there, man, when he tried tae like… he looked doon my troosers an' a', without even asking, … like didnae say nothing. Pulled my boxers oot, looked doon there an' then wi' that lifted up my tap, man, an' my bandage came right aff. I only had a big hole like fae where a tube was in it. An' then he was like that, 'You need tae go an' get a bandage,' walk doon tae the chemist. An' I was like that, seriously?

Participants offered various reasons as to why they felt they were treated this way. Many reasoned that being targeted by the police followed becoming known to them, believing that experiences of stigma, targeting, discrimination and mistreatment were a consequence of being in conflict with the law:

> I think obviously … they all ken like all the faces an' that, … if you're known to the police like that way, they'll just target you a' the time. (Alex; G2)

> Once you managed tae get pult by the polis they start tae know you an' then you want tae avoid them 'cause you don't want pult up again. (Callum; G3)

Participants also discussed intersections of stigma, prejudice and discrimination, associated with stereotypes surrounding their poverty, dress, being part of a group and being care experienced:

> They'd pull you 'cause whit type o' clothing you're wearing or something. … Cause you're wearing a tracksuit they think you're gonnae go an' dae something bad… (Callum; G3)

> All assumptions, knowing you from your past, knowing you're care experienced. They just assume your gonna have knives on you and aw that. (Cam; G1)

Some also described experiences which they felt were intended to antagonize, get a reaction or degrade and humiliate:

> I could be standing wi' a couple o' my pals, or even my family, they'd just come up and antagonise me tae, 'cause they know [they'd] get a reaction. So they used to just target me all the time. (David; G2)

For some, the gulf between their experienced status 'under the law' and that ascribed to the police 'as the law' was so great it appeared to shut down hope and confidence in their capacity to address and overcome this challenge, exacerbating their sense of precarity, marginality and powerlessness. As the participants in Group 3 reflect:

> Naw, there's nothing you can dae wi' the justice system noo, man, like, you get put in a cell an' you get battered aff the polis, man, an' you go up an' say the next day, "Oh I got battered aff them." It's no' gonnae go very far, man, so you're better… it's just … grassing the polis, know what I mean? (Grant)
>
> 'Cause it's oor word against theirs (Stephen).
>
> They're always gonna win (Callum)

Together, these extracts convey something of their collective sense of powerlessness to challenge the oppressive and dehumanizing treatment to which they are subject, with limited, if any, recourse to opportunities to make demands for due redress, equality and justice, resulting in the internalization of a sense of bounded agency (Evans 2007) yet, as we elaborate below, also of individual responsibility for altering their social conditions. In this we find resonance with Tyler's (2020: 270) argument that the intentional mobilization of stigma as the exercise of power against marginalized groups must be reconceptualized 'in ways that explicate its function as a dehumanising praxis of subjugation', expressed through, and embedded in, wider strategies of control that enmesh some people in circuits of inclusion, and others in circuits of exclusion (Rose 2020) generated by neo-liberalist policies and practices. The sustainability of such policies and practices does, however, beg the question that Little (2019) poses as to why as a society we are so inert in response to the systematic dehumanization of individuals to the extent that their present and future participation in society is, for the most part, forfeited.

The street

Young adults discussed 'the street' and the housing 'schemes' they had grown up in as dangerous and unsafe places where: 'you can seriously hurt someone or get hurt yourself' (John: G3). A key difficulty was the risk of territorial violence associated with group membership (see esp. Fraser 2015; Weaver 2015). Numerous studies discuss the relationship between persons, place and group violence, many of which privilege rational actors models of analysis, eliding socio-structural and cultural influences (Weaver and Fraser 2022). We recognize, however, that the challenges young adults face in this area are both underpinned and sustained by a range of intersecting material, cultural and socio-structural inequalities.

Indeed, participants discussed the tight spatial layout within the schemes they moved in and the relative poverty and associated social problems they experienced therein including the absence of activities and resources, and the territorialism that develops within spaces of scarcity, contributing, as Grant (G3) explains, to an environment where 'everybody's a' jumped up, in it for their self, … trying tae get wan over each other'. In turn, participants discussed the ways in which group membership and violence can meet, at least at first, and in the absence of other

avenues, human needs of belonging, identity, stimulus and social recognition (see also Fraser 2015; Weaver and Fraser 2022).

Participants also discussed the interactions of 'fucked up' home lives, mental ill-health and alcohol and drugs with this and other challenges. They spoke about the ways in which alcohol and drug use, layered over significant experiences of poverty, neglect, family adversity, mental ill-health, violence and trauma and the neglect and depersonalization of their interactions with welfare and justice systems, each playing their part in contributing to the adversities that shape their lives. As Grant explained:

> Well my problems, man, I drink … A' these feelings that I've already got, man, you deal wi' it like obviously in your ain heid an' that an' try an' deal wi' it your ain way, man. You drink an' you just end up …just depends what you've been through an' a' that, know what I mean? (Grant; G3).

Later, when invited to reflect on why young adults from more affluent parts of the city might not be involved in territorial violence, the participants identified similar issues, including having 'stuff tae dae', being 'brought up different', being 'protected' and the shielding effects of money:

> They've got stuff tae dae. … if they're staying places like that, innit? … They've been brought up different (John; G3).
>
> Aye (Callum; G3).
>
> They're just… they've obviously been like … been protected fae it. They've got money an' shit an' that to be shielded fae all that, know what I mean? My mum tried tae take me fae a' that shit when I grew up but … (Grant; G3).
>
> And it's when you live in it, man, … obviously you eventually realise, man, like you're no' gonnae get away fae it, so obviously you join it, innit? (John; G3).

Family/homelife

The adversities that participants' shared with upbringing and family life are difficult to do justice to. Partly, this is because these challenges were rarely discussed directly, and often not in response to prompts regarding the challenges they experienced. Rather, these experiences tended to be reported in passing, or as an explanatory detail to accounts of other issues and challenges, in the spaces between what was said and unsaid, as some participants struggled with conflicting emotions of love, loyalty, betrayal and compassion for family members, alongside the sometimes associated enduring hurts or harms. These experiences were rarely expressed in stand-alone ways but were again, often situated in complex, multi-generational accounts of poverty, inequality, drug and alcohol use, mental ill-health, community violence, loss, bereavement and trauma. Layered over these experiences, were experiences of welfare and justice systems which also frequently emerged as forms of neglect, structural violence and trauma.

Most participants identified family (or absence of family) and difficult childhood experiences as an enduring challenge. Pete (G1) discussed this in the context of the role set by family members:

> If your family are in conflict with the law then [that] sets a role for you, that it's ok, that's what I should do.

Others discussed this under the frame of 'the past' and 'what's happened to us'. Here, discussion focussed again on the stigma, stereotyping and discrimination some face because of their status

of being 'care experienced', and the challenge of not having access to help and support from family. Grant (G3), in particular, described his experience of finding his mother dead, a murder attempt on his life, and losing everything and everyone, in response to a question about what helped him get control of his substance use:

> Finding my maw deid an' then getting attempt murdered. Efter it made me think that it's … it fucked my mental health up that much I was going tae the doctors an' I couldnae sleep. Don't know why I was thinking these mad thoughts. Like if somebody can sit doon an' tell me …

Grant returned to this experience in response to a question about court experiences.

> I was on a tag, mate, an' I was like that, 'Right, I'm gonnae go hame, man, I'm fucked,' went an' got a bit o' hash, went hame, mate, an' my ma was lying in my bed, know? And I done that, 'man, ma?' … An' I started trying tae dae CPR an' nothing happened, man, an' I was like, 'whit the fuck?' An' then see when the polis came, polis came in, man, an' my maw was lying there deid an' I'm like that, 'whit …?' See 'cause I was trying tae gie her CPR, a' her sick ended up a' over us, mate, … it had all built up in her. An' I was like that, I'm staunin' there covered in sick, man, the polis went and ragdolled us aboot, … I was like that, 'Fucking just let us in.'
>
> I'm still going through it now, know? I only found ma maw last year, that's the only person I had an' a' man. I only had my maw, I didnae have any cunt else in my life, man, found my maw deid an' then I lost my childhood home I stayed in for fucking seventeen year. Lost my maw, my hoose. On the streets.

John shared similarly traumatic experiences, offered in recognition of Grant's reflection that doing 'weekenders' in the cells in the aftermath of these kinds of experiences 'fries your nut'. Beyond underscoring the multiple and intersecting challenges young adults face, these exchanges also functioned, briefly, as opportunities for connection, recognition and empathy between participants, processes which Ginwright (2022) and others identify as important for individual and social healing.

HOW DO YOUNG ADULTS FRAME SOCIALLY JUST ALTERNATIVES?

Our final workshops culminated in a design activity to help generate ideas about what a socially just place might look like for young adults, consistent with envisioning viable alternatives (Wright 2013). To make substantial change, we need to be able to move beyond critique of what is, to imagine what is not yet (Levitas 2013) though, as we discovered, this is very challenging when we are embedded and enmeshed within existing systems and structures. Though participants could describe the multiple challenges they experienced, some struggled to envision an alternative socially just future. This struggle manifested in different ways and appeared to reflect participants' experiences of social (in)justice to date, and as part of that, perhaps also reflected their epistemic marginalization and being unaccustomed to being asked such questions and engage with such ideas, as we clarify later.

Sometimes participants struggled to understand the question, others simply declined, deflected or reframed the task by choosing to return to discussion of challenges or by engaging in elements of the task perceived as more relevant to them. As Allan and Alex (G2) explain, when asked to tell us how their *Lego* construction connected to an envisioned alternative:

> I didnae try and solve any problems, I just want tae make something. (Allan; G2)

> I just kinda wrote down the stuff like what kinda helped me oot a bit, and like stopped me fae offending again. (Alex; G2)

Some participants struggled to look beyond themselves in imagining a socially just future. Grant (G3), for example, consistently located responsibility for change with himself and struggled to envision beyond this:

> … Naw, I… I've took it as like… like whit could *you* dae tae actual stop yourself fae getting intae trouble an' this, that. That's the way I take the question. That's what I thought you meant.

It is tempting to speak for these participants, via deficit-based analyses or by privileging the voices of participants who provided more direct answers to our questions. However, the struggle expressed here is salient and potentially exemplifies the epistemic marginalization, and responsibilizing discourses of contemporary justice institutions that they are accustomed to. Indeed, Levitas (2013: xvii) similarly observes, that 'our institutional arrangements affect both the imagination and the reality of human flourishing through the values, skills, capabilities, experiences and relationships they encourage or suppress' (Levitas 2013: Xviii).

Nonetheless, all young adults were able to make use of the dialogic and creative space provided to 'play', think and talk through the question of what a socially just future might look like. Each design was unique and merits attention in its own right, however, our findings also revealed similarities in respect of what a socially just future involved for participants, and where we might begin to position their viable alternatives.

For many participants, a socially just place involved 'a collection of things' that pertained to addressing the material, status and social inequalities that they faced. Most frequently, it was described as involving: a safe and secure home; an experience of inclusion and belonging, within families, friendships, communities and society; fair and equal opportunities, or 'path[s] through life' and life transitions; and personalized social support, rooted in understanding and empathy. While discussions extended, sometimes, into particular elements of penal systems, i.e. 'no custody before 18', mostly participants focussed on universal, humanitarian and social needs and supports. This reinforced to us the need for policy-makers to look beyond the parameters and purview of penal policy and practice, to re-envision how social justice can be generated before and beyond this space, including how this may be understood and in turn enacted.

A secure and safe home featured in almost all participants' accounts as a foundation for building a flourishing or 'simple life', though this appeared to be aspirational for many:

> This is my Lego: that was supposed to be my wee house, it's no very good. I've put a safe environment, a good home. (Pete; G1)

> 'Made a hoose wi' a big front garden', 'my ain hoose, a bought hoose. That's what I want in the future' (Grant; G3)

> I've … drawn a door, you need to have stability, a solid place to come home to. And paths … a flat, then upgrading to a house with a side door or, what's it called, a conservatory, or something. Then I've got a building like an office building, and upgrading to a bigger (Anita; G1).

Consistent with Wrights' (2013) principle of material equality, participants envisioned social justice as involving fair, equitable and targeted opportunities for *all*, with emphasis placed on access to work or study.

> I've wrote: for better and fair opportunities, do not judge their past, their criminal record. If they've not had work – don't ask for a reason; make it open to all skills, and experience, to not

> judge one or the other, like that you have to have a qualification to get in. To have a good age range; some apprenticeships and internships are for set ages. (Anita; G1)

> More opportunities in areas that are disadvantaged, like schools. More opportunities for young people. To get help and support to even apply for things. To have a fund to help travel to get there, or whatever you might need. Or help with first uniform or accommodation… (Anita; G1)

Housing, education and employment are core 'means and markers' of social integration (Agar and Strang 2004: 3). However, beyond these fundamental needs, many spoke to the need for social connections, which, as Agar and Strang (2004: 4) note, are critical to 'both the definition and achievement of integration'. Many participants spoke of a need for acceptance, recognition, inclusion and belonging, extending across family, friendships, communities and society, but in ways that go beyond the *presence* of social connections (e.g. Agar and Strang 2004) to elaborate on the *nature* of those connections, resonating closely with concepts of solidarity and social justice, and therefore social recognition (Fraser 2005) and social equality (Wright 2013). Sarah (G1) speaks to some of this below, describing her 'lego wall' made up of all 'different' and 'interlock[ing]' bricks. She tentatively describes a vision of social justice where all people are accepted, helped and included, without 'discrimination', and thus *are able* to enjoy 'fun, family, friends, housing and opportunities'.

> Mine is a collection of things … I built a wall and there's bits missing from the wall. I don't really know what I was trying to do with that. These are aw the different Lego bricks, everyone is different but when you put it down they all balance. I've drew loads of different puzzle pieces but all interlock together. Everyone's different but sometimes we need to help that person to fit in. I've drawn … fun, family, friends, housing and opportunities. If you categorise someone in a box … and that stops them having the opportunities outside of the box. Like the red brick might say, I don't want to be red I want to be… And it's like you can't be yellow you need to be red. And the brown piece says: I was once red, I got help to change. The final thing was … discrimination. Discrimination stops us from taking steps to improve our life. Discrimination needs to stop.

Participants spoke of the importance of local and accessible opportunities for young adults and their families in their communities. Dylan (G2), for example, made:

> a mad wee place that folk could go tae' in the community. … It's like a kinda youth supporters place. That you could go to if you needed help with stuff.

John (G3) made a zoo, 'like' the zoo 'basically across the road' but 'bigger and… mair attractive … mair colourful … cause it's just pure dull … naebody ever goes'. This represented better things for families to do in communities; things that were not there for him and his family when he was growing up.

Running across many creations was a vision of individualized help and support, as distinct from services that appear to be 'in it for themselves'. David and Darren described this directly, focussed on improvement to existing justice and welfare systems:

> Right, so this is obviously my little guy Richard, who is in the centre…; so that is everybody that is to dae wi' the justice system working the gither, for the best interests of myself. (David; G2)

> I didnae build nothing, I just… (laughs) I just drew wee arrows coming out o' my Lego guy. … It's just stuff that could be in place in the future for like jails and things, like coming out. Support workers, housing officers, family, college courses, all the folk there that can help you. I have Action for Children, Barnardo's, all that kind of stuff. (Darren; G2)

Others expressed this as 'support, understanding and empathy'. For Pete (G1), support in these terms was the key to moving from his current 'complicated [life] like the law and that' to his imagined 'simple life'. He added: 'even just one supportive person can stop you going through all of that'.

Ultimately, our participants differed in the extent to which they were willing or able to imagine a way through the multiple difficulties they described. Notwithstanding, each expressed a need for people, communities, welfare and justice professionals to see and understand the enduring impacts of the challenges they encountered in every aspect of their lives. Differences in their engagement with viable alternatives appeared to be linked to their varied experiences of social (in)justice and the processes of conscientization that can accompany that (Freire 2000). For example, while Grant (G3) struggled to imagine beyond his individual experience and resource, expressed in his repeated assertion that: 'it's all on me', Cam (G1) was able to express bold, solidary expectations of others in a socially just future, enabled partly by his recent experiences of epistemic inclusion and socially just relationships and opportunities:

> For communities to open up their doors and take people in and support them, no matter what they've done. Somebody to go, 'come and live with me, come and stay with me, I'll support you'. And no age limit on that, come live with me if you are 26; I can show you how to use a washing machine, how to do your taxes, how to set up your own business'

Indeed, those who expressed clear expectations of themselves and/or others in an alternative future were typically those who described recent and positive experiences of social and epistemic justice, specifically, through 'user-' led relationships, support and communities which supported social and political participation. Experiences of social and epistemic participation *and* what these experiences come to mean to individuals, appears then to be associated not only with young adults' capacity for healing, growth and change, but with their capacity for hope that is, the capacity to believe that healing, growth and change is possible.

The nature of the lives of criminalized young adults means that what they need and seek are the kinds of things that for them are critical to any semblance of social justice, but for others are a norm, and so what is envisioned by the participants may appear modest. They want a secure home; they want to be accepted and belong within families, communities and society; they want access to fair and equal opportunities through life and to not be excluded from these opportunities and paths because of their past or their present; and they want access to good quality, personalized support, that is, relationships that recognize and respond to their lived experiences and that can help them secure the things they need to enjoy even a 'simple life'. The challenge is that realizing these fundamental markers of human and social wellbeing continues to escape our welfare and justice systems. Perhaps one of the reasons for this resides in Bammer's (1991: 47) observation that 'even as our radical theories and politics push to extend the boundaries of the possible and unimaginable, we are always bound by and to the very structures we are trying to escape' (quoted in Malloch 2016: 164). As Malloch (2016) continues, 'in this respect, Utopia is not "no place" but that place which is blocked from being realised by the power of established society'.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

We have argued, and illustrated, that young adults' experiences of marginalization, misrecognition and misrepresentation, and the cycles of exclusion these experiences engender, significantly impedes our capacity to 'generate justice' (Fraser 2005). Specifically, the interactive effects of economic, cultural and epistemic injustice on criminalized young adults impedes their capacity to live a good and flourishing life; it impedes our collective capacity to contribute meaningfully to inclusive understandings of social justice and injustice; and it impedes our collective capacity to imagine and enact just futures, including the enactment of epistemic justice as a participatory endeavour.

Indeed, as we have acknowledged, that our participants' experiences continue to reflect and resonate with those of others reported across the decades (e.g. McAra and McVie 2010) accentuates the failure of top-down, neo-liberalist policies to adequately tackle the social inequalities that underpin much crime, criminalization and victimization, and their persistence in spite of the increasing evidence challenging such approaches (Scott-Samuel and Smith 2015). Relatedly, we have argued that while socio-economic deprivation and social marginality might be a more noticeable form of inequality, inequalities further reside in, and are extended through, the systematic, epistemic exclusion of stigmatized and marginalized individuals and groups from participation in policy debates and practice innovations.

Our central argument, then, is in attending not only to the 'what' of justice, but also to the 'who' and the 'how' (Fraser 2005), it is possible to begin to generate justice. This must include making space for alternative ways of knowing, being and doing that are more egalitarian, democratic and inclusive in approach. Moreover, we suggest that it is only through an active, embodied and sustained democratization of justice knowledge, knowledge production and practice that we can move from what Ginwright (2022) describes as transactional justice relationships to transformative ones. Indeed Ginwright (2022) has argued that making space for deep, honest and reflective diagnosis and critique is integral to individual and social healing.

However, we also found that, like many of us, participants struggled to imagine beyond the boundaries of their immediate lived experience and consciousness. Relatedly, some struggled to locate the hope, in themselves and others, required to believe that an alternative future is possible. Wright himself recognizes that:

> It is hard to imagine some dramatically better workable alternative and … how to successfully challenge existing institutions of power and privilege in order to create the alternative. Thus even if one accepts the diagnosis and critique of existing institutions, the most natural response for most people is probably a fatalistic sense that there is not much that could be done to really change things (Wright 2010: 16).

Indeed, while it is possible to interpret our participants' utopias as underwhelming, they are, in principle, both achievable and desirable, and if realized, would be transformative in effect (Wright 2013). Critically, however, that these fundamental human and social provisions emerge for participants as alternative, imaginary and utopian, underlines the profound disconnect between existing policy and service systems and the life-worlds of the multiply marginalized young adults these systems are imagined to serve. Moreover, participants' focus on these particular provisions, which sit firmly outside of our penal systems, provides an important alternative perspective regarding the foundations of a real, relevant and just utopia. In contrast to a persisting focus on individual, responsibilizing and 'within system' responses to young adults in conflict with the law, and on rational-managerial approaches to reform, the keys to justice with young adults in conflict with the law do not reside in new or improved penal structures,

processes and practices; they reside outside of penal systems, in the provision of human and social welfare policies, actions and outcomes rooted in justice principles of equality, democracy and sustainability (Wright 2013). In this respect our findings accord with Webb's (2006) work which argues that the generation of emancipatory justice in neo-liberal societies is unlikely to be achieved through the application of managerial logic but requires instead 'a practice of value', which has become 'far more radical than it seems in a society that is permeated with calculative reason, material self-interest and mass consumption' (Webb 2006: 33).

What we are suggesting here, then, is that researchers, policymakers and professionals concerned with remedying social injustices and inequalities need to imagine, articulate and act on radical alternatives (Levitas 2013) through which social justice might be achieved. This requires the epistemic inclusion and participation of those individuals, groups and communities most affected to co-create solutions precisely because Utopia, as an emancipatory social scientific method, suggests a core normative element to the production of knowledge (Levitas 2013)—which is not solely about redistribution but about recognition and representation (Fraser 2005), nor is it solely about the elimination of oppression and transformation and of more equitable and sustainable social and material conditions, but about deliberative and participatory forms of democracy (Wright 2013) and, within that, about identifying whose voice is allowed to participate and be heard in the process (Schmidt 2019), who contributes to that knowledge making, and whose voices and experiences are absent.

Our point in closing is not to distract from the narratives and experiences of our participants, it is to recognize the unfinished and provisional nature of all efforts to generate justice through short-term, stand-alone, participatory initiatives (ours included), and to assert the need for value-based, holistic, participatory and sustainable social action that generates economic, cultural and epistemic justice for all. Indeed, as our participants' utopias implied, in seeking to transform society, to facilitate meaningful and sustainable social change, at the very least, this requires a baseline of citizenship below which no individual can descend (Higgins 2011 cited in Levitas 2013) and this means ensuring at least the right to shelter, food, education and freedom from fear and insecurity (Levitas 2013). In this regard, as Fraser (2005) has argued, redistribution, recognition and representation are, by necessity, interconnected and interdependent, and form the cornerstones of a socially just society.

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