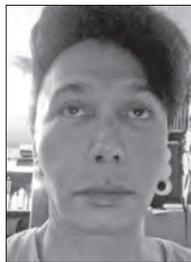# IV

Social Character Case Studies

Revisiting Fromm's Concept of Social Character and Social Change: An Example from De-Industrialized Working Class Communities in the UK

Luis Jimenez

Abstract: This paper highlights the relevance of Erich Fromm's concepts of social character and social change to offer a more nuanced understanding of the neo-liberal inter-generational traumatic legacy of loss of stable work, changing worker gendered identity, disrupted affect, community engagement and historical memory within a global context of insecure labour and emerging neoliberal forms of social character in the aftermath of massive redundancies and unemployment experienced recently in some post-industrial working class communities in the UK.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, social character, social change, neoliberalism, identity, post-industrial work, community, psychosocial research.

Introduction

In this paper, I use Erich Fromm's concepts of social character and social change (Fromm 1932a, 1941a, 1947a, 1955a) as key conceptual framework to reflect

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and further understand the psychosocial significance of recent global processes of chronic job insecurity, massive redundancies and unemployment endured by entire working class de-industrialized ex-steel communities in the UK.

I then also connect these Frommian notions to other contemporary explanations and debates about the neoliberal subject of work and neoliberal mode of production and its relevance to understand new/emerging forms of social character, the workings of identity in relation to changes in the labor market and practices of community regeneration in the context of globalization and the forthcoming UK exit from the European Union.

To do this, I have drawn on and re-read (secondary analysis) research data generated from two previous research projects (Jimenez & Walkerdine 2011; Jimenez & Walkerdine 2012; Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012; Jimenez 2014) aimed at exploring the impact for regeneration of the closure of a number steel works that have been taking place since 2002 up until 2016 in various locations in South Wales, UK. Our research also explored similar work-related changes on worker identity and subjectivity using a comparative sample in New South Wales, Australia.

The research context

In particular, we were interested not only about what had happened to the redundant ex-steelworkers (all male workers), but also to their families and others within the community, after the closure of the major local employer, the steelworks in South Wales.

The aim of the study was to understand what role forced identity changes played in the issues affecting the town. Most regeneration issues focus on bringing services and jobs to areas, but of course we know that major events such as the closure of a town's major employer has massive (often traumatic) long-term effects on people's senses of themselves, on their ways of coping, on family relationships and on children.

Our key research questions about responses to socio-economic changes in ex-steel communities were:
- How do people construct their senses of identity these days?
- What are the consequences of the identity paths people choose?
- How do identity choices intensify or ease social conflict?
- What is it like to build an identity in situations of social exclusion?

Our main research findings were about the impacts on people's identities after redundancies, and how a community changes in response to them.

In summary, some of what we learned from our interviews with over 20 ex-steel workers and their families was:

▶ Differences in responses to the redundancies are markedly age related.

▶ The younger workers are more able to let go and learn from their previous work experiences: they see the redundancies as a challenge and an opportunity to further retrain, reorient and find other ways of developing their careers.

▶ The older workers seem to have less motivation and interest in mobilizing their personal and social resources to face the redundancies in the way the younger men do. By contrast, they become much more cautious and sometimes skeptical about the uncertain job options that are offered to them.

Use of Transferable Skills in New Employment				
Age Group	Transferable		Non Transferable	
	N	%	N	%
30 – 34	2	10	3	15
40 – 44	1	5	2	10
45 – 49	1	5	1	5
50 – 54	0	0	9	45
55 – 59	0	0	1	5

One of the most important aspects of the work was to think about how a community based around one employer changes from a relatively homogeneous to a heterogeneous community.

For example, the importance of the patterns of interaction and sense of belonging built up by the patterns of work and family life imposed not only by the steel works, but by geography and the history of the area, meant that many people experienced their ex-steel communities as being a kind of family itself. The community gave many people a very deep sense of being and belonging which sustained the inhabitants emotionally as well as socially (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012).

This was expressed by many people; it also manifested as a fear that other communities would only look after their own, so that it would be better to stay put than to move somewhere else for work.

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Main Coping Strategies to Deal with Redundancies	
Age Group	**Coping Strategies**
30 – 34	positive attitude, further education, new career path
40 – 44	resignation, stoicism, indifference, feeling that there is no time to waste, isolation, alcoholism, job seeking
45 – 49	stress, isolation, indifference, sick leave
50 – 54	resignation, isolation, indifference, resentment, vulnerability, job seeking, prepared to leave working life
55 – 59	indifference, resentment

Peter (37) reflected on the importance of his family in his decision not to re-locate to find work after he was made redundant:

>There was no way on earth I was going to leave my family and go down there to work […] I think a lot more of my family than I do of steel corporations.«

A major trend in the research interviews was for most people over 23, and some under 23, to have a very strong sense that children and parents had to be cared for, that the best way forward was to re-organize the family unit (for example, to have the wife take on more work to compensate for the drop in the husband's wages), rather than to move for a better life.

Kate (37) reflects on her own and her partner's work patterns and how they as a couple still have to accommodate these in order to have a family life together:

>You know, if you want things, I mean, because obviously, it's all to do with material things isn't it, you know, you've got bills to pay or if you want to go on holidays and all that sort of thing, most people would say that two of you have to work to give yourselves a better standard of liv-ing and I think that just comes, that could be any two people, you know whether they've worked in the steelworks or not. It depends on what you want, as to what sacrifices you're prepared to make and you know, if it means that one of you has got to work shifts so it means that per-haps you haven't got quite as much time together, that's what you do, you know, that's just something that you've got to be prepared to do.«

Given that the ex-steel Welsh community is one that gives its members a deep

sense of meaning, we often wondered, how can it transform itself after the loss of the employer? Could it survive a major shift in which people no longer go out and come home at the same time? We also wondered, how would local people adapt to doing different kinds of work outside of the town, in which patterns of the gendered division of labor change fundamentally, and in which young people can no longer find work?

The role of the trade unions

The local trade unions had a key role in making the transition from steel work to new forms of work easier than it would otherwise have been. It could be argued that the unions prepared the workforce for a neo-liberal workplace. Their strategy was to encourage workers to think about building their new careers out of their leisure interests. One worker, for example, turned an interest in music and guitars into a job as a guitar maker, with training paid for by the union. Two others turned an interest in young people into a career in youth and community work. Again, it was the Welsh study that allowed us to see the central importance of this for the working lives of the participants.

By contrast, we saw in the Sydney data that workers experienced redundancy alone and were most likely to feel that they bore some responsibility for it. They felt that they had to work on themselves to become appropriate workers for the new labor market. This attitude was almost nonexistent for the redundant Welsh workers (though it was more noticeable in young people). The Welsh workers experienced redundancy as a collective thing overall and certainly with no intimation that it was their responsibility.

Some responses from young people

Overall, the young men and women were much more caught up in neo-liberal discourse and the need to develop skills than older workers (see Silva 2014). This is realistic but does pose a challenge to sustaining a community for older and younger inhabitants.

While some young people were willing to move for jobs, others, like older workers, wanted to stay in the community. This posed significant difficulties for a minority of young men. These young men found the idea of available work, particularly work in the local supermarket, embarrassing.

On exploring this further it became clear that this embarrassment was common amongst young men; it was associated with work that had the appearance

of femininity. Young men were embarrassed to be seen working in a »feminine«
role, rather than in heavy industry.

Some responses from women

We strongly gained the viewpoint that women are the bedrock of the commu-
nity. They are the ones who express most strongly the idea that their commu-
nities are like a »family,« and just as they are often the emotional bedrock of
the family, so too are they the bedrock of the community.

Martha (66) who is a local resident says that women are the ones who help
to hold the community together. She sums up what the collective process of
dealing with steel redundancies looks like for her so far:

> »People are starting to come back together. I think it was the point
> of them saying—right the steelworks are gone now we've got to go
> forward or we've go to get something else here. […] Now let's stand
> together, shoulder to shoulder. They've put us down we might be down
> but we're not out…And like the phoenix we will rise from the ashes…
> So the attitude of people in the community is fantastic we're like one
> big family. It's sort of we're all belonging to one another. I mean our
> families have been here for generations, except the people that have
> come in the last few years and, if they don't like our ways, well there's
> nothing we can do about that.«

Some responses from older men

For many of the older men, the consequence of neo-liberalism and changes in
the labor market is a sense of disillusion. They felt there is no political commit-
ment to them and that the unions cannot in the end do anything. This means
they feel the need to be pragmatic, have a different sense of life—e.g. take
holidays, spend quality time with family—and take whatever they can find.

Impact on Health After Redundancies			
Age Group	Type of Impact		
	N	%	
30 – 34 (n = 5)	0	–	–
40 – 44 (n = 3)	2	10	stress, anxiety, psoriasis, arthritis
45 – 49 (n = 2)	2	10	depression, alcoholism
50 – 54 (n = 9)	5	25	depression, high blood pressure
55 – 59 (n = 1)	1	5	depression

Older men do not geel that they have the necessary skills to feel fully engaged with an entrepreneurial narrative, and they remain local for the most part.

Overall, for both older and younger men, the importance of work in shaping their masculine identity is much less central. There is an awareness of the importance of quality time, flexibility, being at home and some limited gender flexibility. This signals the end of a strong work identity as a central characteristic of masculinity. We think this is an important aspect to consider in policy terms.

This also emerges from a daily realization that they are trapped geographically, that there is only so much they can do to retrain, and that their community is shrinking. They had pride in the steel works and they felt that they were good at what they did—this keeps them going. Suffering was there in the past, with exploited steel workers working in dangerous conditions, but now they are earning half of their previous wages (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012).

Family responses to redundancies and change

Many participants talked about their ex-steel communities as a kind of family. This showed the way that they think about community ties and its significance to the continuity of their sense of of being. In fact, there were no people living alone in the study. The decision not to move away from their community meant that accommodation had to be made within the family. The man may take work he does not like, and the woman may take more of the burden of wage earning; meanwhile, domestic tasks and childcare may begin to be shared. In other words, the relationship accommodates the redundancy by making changes that will allow for continuity.

This could also mirror how we might think of a community's ability to accommodate some changes while being able to feel the same. The Welsh Valleys were among the areas most in favor of Brexit.

Male coping with the new labor market

The average income of the Welsh ex-steel workers is now half of their previous wage (only £12—13,000 per annum). However, in many ways, they do not miss the steel works. These men are now able to talk about how hard, dangerous and exploitative the work was, which they would not return to were it not for the money.

However, the steelworks did provide a center-point to the community, and its loss is as much about that as it is about the work. The inhabitants struggle to bring a life-giving focus back to the community when the steel works is gone.

Coping with unemployment in both samples (Welsh & Australian)

In both samples (Wales -UK and New South Wales- Australia) there was an age-related response to redundancy; older workers showed a great similarity in their desire to get out of the house and the fixity of their relationship to domestic labor.

However, there were important differences. The Sydney narratives conformed to shifts more theoretically expected, that is, a shift to particular kinds of neo-liberal narratives of the self [e.g., seeing oneself as responsible for developing an appropriate demeanor for the new forms of work]. This was not the case for the redundant steelworkers in Wales. The Welsh narratives showed a marked absence of this attitude and a total absence of aspirational discourse.

As for the young men, there were similar aspirations within this group, but while young Sydney men might have to cope with poorly paid work, they were noticeably better off and had higher aspirations than their Welsh peers, for whom poverty was much more conspicuous.

Community breakdown and community cohesion

»Affective practices« (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012) is a term we developed to understand the historically developed practices for the production and maintenance of community, and the related processes of social change. These practices can also be understood as defenses. These practices have been developed

in specific historical circumstances and are central to preserving community relations.

Certain things cannot be spoken in particular contexts, e.g., workers agree never to talk about families at work, and families agree never to discuss personal problems outside the family. We mapped relational approaches to change both within the whole community and in families, including the mobilization of fantasy, to explore the ways in which groupings changed one aspect of their relationship in order to preserve a sense of continuity of being.

Affective responses to neo-liberal work-life changes and intergenerational affective and traumatic transmission of collective lived experience

Our research tried to bring an awareness of the affective social processes by which chronic traumatic experiences of loss and insecurity pass from one generation to another, often in unspoken ways and through unspoken affective accommodations, in these ex-steel communities (see Jimenez 2014).

Drawing on Eshter Bick's (1968) notions of skin ego and skin envelope, we also then devised the concepts of »affective communities« and »affective relatedness.« In particular we then used Davoine & Gaudilliere (2004) notions of »resonance« and the »historical link« as a way to provide a space for reflection, dialogue and sharing in the community that aims to recuperate, re-value and re-moralize the idea of vulnerability in a deeper humanistic sense, and not merely within a neoliberal agenda. In this way, we highlighted the importance of inter-dependence and cooperation in personal and social relationships (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012).

However, we could also connect these same efforts within a Frommian idea of »courage« and »center-to-center relatedness« (Funk 1982, 2013), as both approaches are not mutually exclusive, but actually contribute to each other. More than a theoretical debate, this has important implications for policy in relation to the way communities cope with change and loss.

If we pay attention to the affective aspects of regeneration, we consider that which, while it may feel more ephemeral than the introduction of new jobs to the town, is central to the sense of well-being and belonging of the inhabitants.

In this sense, Fromm's notions of social character and social change do help us develop a framework to further understand the particular ways in which local people make sense of and engage with their current lives and work projects. Fromm's (1932a, 1941a, 1947a, 1955a) theories and research on social character and processes of social change have much to offer to debates about community breakdown and cohesion.

Intergenerational trauma and defensive affective survival

Using a psychosocial approach to look at our data, we have argued that what some sociological theory (Mc Kenzie 2007) sees as »class collectivism« is actually affective practices and affective community, honed through specific historical circumstances and forms of work. Rather than seeing these community responses as a bastion of working class resistance of collectivism, we could understand how these practices work to allow the inhabitants to have a sense of belonging and being.

We speculated that such practices of speaking and silence, the said and the unsayable, could be part of a necessary defensive process that allows for the possibility of social cohesion, the ability to cope without burdening others, and the maintenance of feelings of support and solidarity, which were necessary for survival (Jimenez & Walkerdine 2012; Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012; Jimenez 2014). All of these responses bind the community in patterns of affective organization, which allow it to survive and which defend against anxieties which might threaten the breakdown of the community.

Some implications of the research

Our psychosocial research (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012) brought up issues of affect and fantasy not normally considered in identity research on community regeneration. Fantasy/phantasy and imagination were initially central to helping workers start facing both the loss of the past and their fear of the future. This has untapped implications for policy, as government retraining support packages often only address the skills needed to transform a worker into a neoliberal working self, which was still alien to the Welsh workers, since their whole sense of being and belonging was still tied into an industrial work ethos. Some of these issues included the effects of social trauma and social catastrophe, which often manifested as conscious and unconscious resistance to such neoliberal policies that focused mostly on re-training and new work skills needed. These policies seem to assume all individuals are standard recyclable units to be retrained with new sets of skills and work-skills packages needed in the service sector.

Similarly, we found the so called »crisis in masculinity« thesis (Payne 1985, Nixon 2009) is too general, since our research shows that these men were eventually able to adapt and change.

The cross-cultural comparison (UK-Australia) also revealed the importance of location and the need to understand more clearly how neoliberalism and globalization were experienced by different workers.

Understanding identity as something that is produced relationally allows us to think about the relational practices and affective relations through which this is accomplished. We (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012) devised the concepts of »communities of affect« and »affective practices« to allow us to potentially understand how affective relations are central both to community development, cohesion and breakdown, and to the move from homogeneity to heterogeneity.

Some young men had difficulties with work they saw as »embarrassing and feminine.« This is related both to complex peer pressure and to gender-segregated family relathions. It is also a way of coping with the previous generation's loss. (Jimenez & Walkerdine 2011)

We also found Foucaultian explanations of governmentality are insufficient to understand processes of social change and resistance to that change, as these do not pay attention to issues of »ambivalence of neo-liberal self sufficiency and subjectification,« which is often understood as mere social practice (Barnett et al. 2008).

This is also connected to other critiques of the governmentality approach to neoliberal ideology in what Paul Hoggett (2012) and others have called the »affective turn« in the social sciences.

Erich Fromm's basic tenets on dynamics of social character and their relevance to neoliberal processes of social change

The following Frommian quotes (1941a, pp. 276–287) capture, in our understanding, Fromm's key notions of how he understood and developed his concept of social character and its relationship to processes of social change:

> »The essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group is such which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group. […] Ideas can become powerful forces, but only to the extent to which they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character. […]

> The subjective function of character for the normal person is to lead him to act according to what is necessary for him from a practical standpoint and also to give him satisfaction from his activity psychologically. […]

> The social character internalizes external necessities and thus harnesses human energy for the task of a given economic and social system. […]

> Although character development is shaped by the basic conditions of life and although there is no biologically fixed human nature, human nature has a dynamism of its own that constitutes an active factor in the evolution of the social process.«

From these quotes, we get an idea of how Fromm's notion of social character can also be used to reflect further on how social change and personal identity changes can take place within neoliberal ideology and practice.

Indeed, Fromm (1941a) had already argued that the new freedom of early capitalist society generated feelings of immense insecurity, powerlessness and anxiety in individuals. These same feelings were also clearly reflected in our own research data, particularly in the coping responses to redundancies within the South Wales (UK) research sample, as they clearly capture a sense of insecurity, powerlessness and anxiety in trying to deal with the transition from industrial to post-industrial work.

Similarly, Fromm had already noted how the ideas and doctrines of the Reformation period did not mitigate or lessen the individual's fear and insecurity; they were instead, intensified. Fromm also showed how post-reformation capitalist society made productive use of the individual's insecurities by channeling the psychic energy generated by new socioeconomic conditions into the »compulsion to work,« and the readiness/willingness to make one's life a tool for the purposes of an extra-personal power.

This process, in which a social character can be stabilized by making productive use of psychic suffering, is indispensable for understanding the affective attachment to neoliberal social arrangements.

Further implications of Fromm's work for our psychosocial research

We also soon realized how governmentality discourse does not quite acknowledge the individuals' emotional investment in the identities and commitments fashioned by neoliberal discourse and its associated work practices.

Within a Frommian approach, the ways in which social relations productively shape social order and change is explained as a highly spirited process, rather than as mere logic of submission to neoliberal norms and demands. Fromm claims that ideas can become powerful forces »only to the extent that they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character« (1941a, p. 79).

I have shown above how these same responses were also evident in our own psychosocial interview-based research data, since these community responses—discussed earlier in this paper—clearly capture how most of our Welsh

respondents made all sorts of arrangements in order to preserve a sense of continuity of being which also often involved resistance to neoliberal changes (Walkerdine & Jimenez, 2012).

It is the psychodynamic basis of Fromm's account that distinguishes it from sociological accounts of social integration like that of Talcott Parsons, and which also makes Fromm's theory suitable for challenging the affective deficit of current theorizing about the ideological mechanisms of neoliberal society.

Some central assumptions of neoliberal ideology, including self-reliance, personal responsibility and individual risk, have become part of the »common sense« fabric of everyday life. As Foster (2017) has argued:

> »What is significant about Fromm's notion of social character, is that it manages to unify ›top-down‹ approaches like governmentality focused on ideas and policy, with ›bottom-up‹ approaches focused on how the insights of day to day experience are mediated through culture.«

One implication of this would be to adapt Fromm's social character to theories about neoliberalism, in such a way that the »common sense« nature of neoliberalism, and the lack of a reckoning for its massive economic failure (as evidenced by the 2007 Great Recession [Konings 2015]), are explicable through the formation of a »neoliberal social character,« by means of which experiential processes align with cultural meanings and, subsequently, fuse with social expectations. For Fromm, these sorts of psychic accommodations engendered by changing social conditions are central to making sense of how social values transform themselves into individual motivation.

In Fromm & Maccoby's *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b), social character is given a far more materialist grounding. The authors describe social character as »a syndrome of character traits which has developed as an adaptation to the social, economic and cultural conditions common to that group« (ibid., p. 16) and where the most important conditioning factor in the creation of social character, the context in which it is shaped, is the mode of production.

> »A serf, a free peasant, an industrial worker […] an independent entrepreneur of the 19th century and an industrial manager of the 20th century have different functions to fulfil…the industrial worker has to be disciplined and punctual, whereas the 19th century bourgeois had to be parsimonious, individualistic and self-reliant.« (Ibid., p. 17.)

Neoliberal discourse and Fromm's views on social change

Other current contemporary competing theoretical explanations of the role of neoliberal mode of production and processes of social change e.g., top down governmentality, neoliberalism as therapeutic fantasy, still do not fully capture nor pay attention to Fromm's idea of the power of the »emotional matrix,« understood as the strong affective dynamism of ideas and its effectiveness in processes of change and resistance to social change.

This includes the psychic consequences of wounded attachments, not only in post-Reformation era of European Capitalism but also in contemporary neoliberal times.

The spirit of neoliberalism has also been seen as a predominantly therapeutic fantasy. Dartington (2012) depicts vulnerable people as self-managing and self-sufficient units rather than people engaged in meaningful interpersonal relations. The therapeutic disdain for relationships is part of its attack on dependency whereby responsibility for others, which is often messy, unpredictable, and time-consuming, is often seen as a threat to the capacity of the therapeutic self to efficiently manage its own resources.

Other recent neoliberal developments have also emphasized the rather anti-social neoliberal notion of »self-reliance« within a therapeutic ethos of a »therapeutic self.« An example of this is the growing influence of positive psychology with its known impatience with the depth of psychological investigation of relationships that keeps individuals close to socio-cultural and environmental influences and social relations.

Similarly, self-help techniques (Rimke 2000) and self-help cultural narratives and related management consumption products, e.g., self-help books and coaching techniques have also capitalized and embodied neoliberal ideologies by promoting a hyper-individual notion of subjectivity in which the individual is meant to develop internal control techniques of self-governance thus giving the illusion of mastery, self-reliance and self-actualization in which social dependency on others and vulnerabilities are demonized and occluded for sharing and discussion with others.

In this context, the neoliberal aim of positive psychology, which often claims to allegedly »liberate« the individual by stopping and dismantling a whole range of relationship habits, deep-seated beliefs and negative thoughts that keep individuals tied to dependence and routine, in order to develop a neoliberal way of mediating with others in a more instrumental way, still needs critical revision in light of Fromm's work. This would involve challenging the limitations of the neoliberal managerial framework of the self, as this has led to a devaluing of the notion of the »relational self« which is no longer seen as

encompassing obligations and deep emotional connections with others, since these »others« are meant to be experienced as mere instrumental resources in the project of personal and private »happiness,« whatever this might mean (Blinkley 2011, 2014). In this neoliberal context, the main aims of such mental health practitioners is to act as mere »happiness officers,« »chief happiness image consultants« etc., the whole happiness industry (Davies 2016, 2017).

Fromm's contributions to reframe neoliberal subjectivity

Fromm's theoretical and research contributions on social character and social change have had a clear impact on contemporary debates about the emergence of neoliberal forms of social character, particularly in the context of complex ongoing global changes in the relationships between work and subjectivity. Lynne Layton's (2008, 2010, 2014) psychoanalytic critique of neoliberal subjectivity has close affinities with a Frommian perspective, as it reminds us of the importance of further understanding the psycho-social processes by which subjectivities, in their resistance to oppressive social norms, at the same time often simultaneously implicitly collude in sustaining these normative neoliberal values, discourses and practices.

This includes the emergence of a range of backlash movements which are central in some neoliberal societies (US, UK, Europe) where the common attacks on women, the poor, gays, people of color or anyone who is read as culturally »different« transform the extreme vulnerability stemming from the decline of social care and containment into fantasies of invulnerability and forms of attack on demonized others.

In this sense, as Layton argues, vulnerability and insecurity is harnessed in a way that disavows painful experiences, thereby preventing awareness of the traumatic nature of individual life within neoliberal society (e.g., the forthcoming UK exit of the European Union will also be a social scenario to further explore the impacts of these recent neoliberal arrangements on emerging neoliberal forms of subjectivity, social change and social character (Funk 2013, 2014). It is precisely these Frommian insights that are needed today, as these can still help us to better understand and challenge current narrow neoliberal explanations of how social change is experienced and explained.

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