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Fractured Transitions: Young Adults' Pathways into Contemporary Labour Markets

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ABSTRACT

This article uses qualitative data from a study of young adults aged 20–34 in Bristol to explore the labour market transitions considered typical of contemporary advanced economies. The main objective of the article is to develop a typology of labour market pathways that illuminates the complexity and variability of lengthened youth transitions. In addition to this typology we explore the economic consequences of these pathways for young adults, showing that they are vulnerable to job change, unemployment and low pay. Finally, we explore the attitudes of young adults to their situation. We found that they were surprisingly undismayed by these labour market vicissitudes: many of them displayed a 'structure of feeling' we refer to as 'internalized flexibility', which helps them to maintain optimism and anticipate change in a challenging economic environment.

KEY WORDS

flexibility / labour markets / transitions / young adults

Introduction: Changing Transitions

It has become a truism within contemporary sociology that we inhabit a new economic era marked by flexibility and insecurity, and that this is having drastic consequences for people's lives. However, there is surprisingly little hard empirical evidence of these effects of change. This article uses a study of young adults' employment experiences to explore these propositions. We ask three questions:

- 1 What are the pathways by which young adults enter into the labour market and progress within it?
- 2 What are the economic consequences of these pathways for young adults?
- 3 How are young adults responding to the challenges posed by these labour market conditions?

The study of transitions from school to work has long been a major focus within the British sociology of youth. A useful starting point for discussion is Ashton and Field's influential 1976 text, *Young Workers*. Ashton and Field set out a typology of three different pathways into employment: the 'extended careers' of those entering higher education prior to competing in the professional and managerial arena; 'short-term' careers available to lower-middle and upper working-class youths, such as banking, clerical work or craft apprenticeships; and 'careerless' routes involving entry to unskilled or semi-skilled jobs.

Clearly the context has changed since the 1970s, with consequent effects on youth transitions. The globalization of work, the de-industrialization of western economies, the spread of ICT, the rise of long-term unemployment, the increase in female employment and employers' adoption of flexible strategies (Skorstad, 2005) have all had an impact. The *lengthened* nature of youth transitions has been highlighted by many commentators (for example, Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Wallace and Kovatcheva, 1998). This is partly caused by the expansion in Britain of both higher and further education but is also due to the longer time it takes young people of all backgrounds to settle down into a steady 'career path'. For example, on completing undergraduate degrees many students take temporary low-skilled employment in bars, restaurants and call centres, sometimes to make money for travel or further study, sometimes to test themselves within the world of employment before settling to a more 'serious' career trajectory. Secondly, it is claimed that transitions have become more *precarious* and more *complex* (Anderson et al., 2002; Roberts, 1995). Young people are more vulnerable to job loss and unemployment. Their individual trajectories often take the form of movements between various work statuses: study, temporary employment, unemployment, training, self-employment, part-time or full-time employment, 'fiddly jobs' in the black economy (Macdonald, 1994; Wallace 1987). They may undertake several of these at once. There is no simple linear route to adult employment and economic independence. Du Bois-Reymond and Blasco (2003) speak of 'yo-yo' transitions and a switch from linear to risk autobiographies. Thirdly, transitions are described as more *differentiated* and *individualized*. Roberts (1995) describes how young people no longer experience collective transitions into employment due to the pluralization of options in education and the labour market. This has led some commentators to question whether the metaphor of 'transition' is any longer an appropriate one (Fergusson et al., 2000). Others, including Coles (1995) and Jones (1995, 2002), speak of multiple transitions, notably from education to employment, from the parental home into separate accommodation and from family of origin to formation of a new independent household. However, little of this literature explores different pathways of transition, as did Ashton and Field.

Moreover, most of the work just cited focused on the 16–19 or 16–25 age groups. To capture the lengthened transition we chose to study an extended age cohort of young adults, aged 20–34. The study was carried out in Bristol, a prosperous, post-industrial city in the south of England, and explored the employment pathways¹ of young adults in relation to their individual biographies and family circumstances. This study collected both quantitative and qualitative data and some of the quantitative aspects have been discussed elsewhere (Fenton and Dermott, 2006). This article uses the qualitative material to develop a typology of labour market pathways. We also highlight key details of the young adults' economic circumstances. Finally, the attitudes of young adults to the world in which they find themselves are discussed: many of them display – in Raymond Williams' terms – a 'structure of feeling' that we refer to as 'internalized flexibility', which helps them to handle change in a challenging economic environment.

Williams defines *structure of feeling* as 'a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives a sense of a generation or a period' (1977: 131). 'Internalized flexibility' encapsulates a tacit feature of this generation of young adults' orientations to employment. Using this concept, we emphasize the adaptability of young workers yet emphasize that their choices are constrained by social hierarchies – class, gender and ethnicity – and by the limitations of local opportunities.

Transitions and Flexibility

The precarious nature of youth transitions has been related to broader processes of change in global economic relations occurring since the 1970s. Sennett (1998) has described the new economic paradigm as 'flexible capitalism'. Among its characteristics are increased competition, often leading to closures, takeovers or mergers, with consequent shedding of labour (increased redundancy and unemployment); volatility of markets, requiring adaptability of workers to adjust to new skills needed to provide new products and services ('functional flexibility'); and more efficient use of labour to reflect fluctuating patterns of demand, involving increased use of temporary and other forms of non-standard labour ('numerical flexibility'). Commentators such as Bauman (1998), Sennett (1998) and Beck (2000) argue that this brings many negative consequences for employees: insecurity, instability, loss of occupational identity and traditional craft skills.

However, this sort of writing is rather speculative and not based on systematic empirical study. Other researchers argue that the change has been much less drastic, with employees, especially those who have higher qualifications, still able to obtain stable and secure employment *should they so wish* (Doogan, 2001; Gallie, 1998; Heery and Salmon, 2000). Moynagh and Worsley (2005) contest the idea of the end of jobs for life (although this popular idea is endorsed by most of our respondents). In contrast, Gregg et al. (2000) suggest that recent increases in job instability *have* been experienced by some three-quarters of the

workforce, but that negative effects have been highest for older male workers and childless women (in effect those groups most likely in the past to hold stable jobs). Burchell et al. (1999) found that professionals had the strongest perception of declining job security, since their employment situations were becoming more similar to those of unskilled manual workers whose jobs have historically been less protected. This underlines how different groups of employees are differentially affected by changes. However, these studies tend to have neglected the position of young people.

One study exploring this was by Goodwin and O'Connor (2005), who re-analysed data from a 1960s Leicester study to show that young workers, aged 16 to 19 years old, have long moved between jobs. We acknowledge that this younger age-group tends to experience job shifting in the early phases of their employment career: what is new, our study suggests, is that this shifting may now continue into people's early thirties.

There is no simple answer regarding the putative spread of insecurity and flexibility. The long-term impacts of socio-economic change are only just making themselves felt, and as yet are imperfectly manifested in aggregated data, since many older workers continue to work in the jobs they have long held. However, if Gregg et al. are correct that instability *has* recently increased, this will affect the fortunes of the new generation of workers. The Bristol study throws light on this prediction.

The Research Framework

The research, entitled 'Winners and Losers',² was funded by the ESRC. Fieldwork was carried out in four zones of Bristol with contrasting socio-demographic characteristics. These zones were selected to contain people of different class backgrounds who were likely to experience different labour market transitions. These groups were:

- affluent middle class
- settled white working class and lower middle class
- deprived working-class communities vulnerable to unemployment
- inner-city populations with ethnic minority residents and a transient white contingent.

Data were collected by mixed methods. An initial set of qualitative interviews was carried out with 42 young adults identified for us by employers, agencies and through personal acquaintances. Findings from these primary interviews helped inform a household-based survey of 1103 young adults. This was carried out by NOP in the four selected zones using CAPI (computer-aided personal interviews). The respondents were selected by a quota-sampling strategy using census district addresses to cover gender, ethnicity, age and employment

status. NOP were instructed to over-sample for ethnic minority respondents to generate a feasible sample for analysis. While not constructed as a representative sample of the city as a whole, through the choice of zones it incorporated a wide and sufficiently disparate range of young adults, enabling us to identify a range of labour market pathways. Finally, we drew a sub-sample of 78 young adults from the survey for follow-up interviews; this was a random sample stratified by zone, gender and level of education.

Bristol is a thriving city, with a labour market that could be seen as 'typical' of an advanced post-industrial economy. There is a wide range of jobs on offer, but the labour market is very segmented, as is the city (hence our zone-based sampling strategy).

Stickers and Shifters: A Typology of Pathways

Using the qualitative interviews we have developed a typology of young adults' labour market pathways. Each interview was analysed and four patterns of employment trajectory were identified. We categorized as *shifters* people who had made many moves between employment statuses; such people moved rapidly between jobs, sometimes within but often between occupational categories, also experiencing spells of unemployment, domestic labour, further training or travel. Shifting may involve agency but the degree to which young adults were able to *actively make choices* rather than *reactively respond* to labour market conditions was variable and often related to class background and level of education. This distinction resonates with Wallace's (1987) terms, 'swimmers' and 'sinkers'. Her analysis of the effects of 'irregular' employment patterns upon young people in the 1980s reveals that while some (swimmers) developed 'survival strategies' to organize their time when unemployed or in insecure jobs, others (sinkers) did not.

The key characteristic of shifters was that *they had still not found a job or career to which they were committed in the long term*. We categorized as *stickers* people who *had identified a career objective immediately or very soon after leaving full-time education* and who had stayed within a single firm or occupation, beginning to move up the job ladder. They may have had a couple of jobs before settling into their current occupation but no more. By *stickers* we do not necessarily mean people who were 'stuck' in dead-end jobs but those who have 'stuck at it', pursuing a career path both diligently and strategically. Thus, *stickers* and *shifters* include both those who appropriated opportunities to *fit with their own agendas*, and were explicit about this, and those whose accounts emphasize externalities and constraints, for whom sticking or shifting was rather a default position. The majority of the 78 people interviewed could be classified as either *shifters* or *stickers*.

The next largest group we labelled *settlers*. These were people who after leaving school or college entered a shifting pathway but told us of making a *conscious choice* at some stage to settle down and devote themselves to a new

Table 1 Profile of secondary interview set in terms of labour market pathways (N = 78)*

	Stickers	Shifters	Switchers	Settlers
All	26	29	3	15
Men	11	9	1	9
Women	16	20	1	6
Minority ethnic	4	8	0	2
Majority ethnic	23	21	2	13
Married	19	10	0	10
Higher education	15	12	1	7
Aged 20–24	3	5	0	2
Aged 25–29	9	6	2	6
Aged 30–34	15	18	0	7

*Five full-time students in sample omitted from table

job or career. This might be attributed to the desire to establish stability for a family, to a lucky break or simply to ‘growing up’. The fourth group was a small number of people who had started on a pathway as a sticker but had *consciously made a major decision to change their lives*, perhaps to travel, to study or to embark on a new occupation: we categorize these as *switchers*.

Before giving examples, we present a profile of the 78 interviews in Table 1. As the table shows, around three-quarters of the young adults fell into the categories of shifters or stickers. Only three switchers were identified from the interviews but nevertheless we see this as a distinct pathway since survey data reveal that a high proportion of young adults were *anticipating* a major change of direction in the near future. When asked about future expectations, 14 percent of respondents stated that they expected to make a major occupational switch in the future, while another 21 percent said they expected to retrain or study for a new occupation.

In terms of gender, women are more likely to be shifters than men, reflecting women’s traditional pattern of less stable labour market involvement and, where they are partnered, arguably more freedom to ‘choose’ to shift. There is a link between having children and sticking or settling. For men, shifting is associated with being single, and marriage and children with settling down. The situation for women is more complicated as many women with children are shifters. Minority ethnic young adults are more likely to be shifters though the numbers are too small to be reliable. The most interesting finding, however, is the proportion of people with higher education who are categorizable as shifters.

Within our two main groups we can distinguish sub-categories on the base of level of education: higher or not. What we call ‘*hi-ed*’ stickers tend to be found in well-established professions: engineers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, managers. They have very often taken vocationally oriented degrees and gone straight into an organization after their degree. ‘*Lo-ed*’ stickers have left school and gone into what were traditionally seen as ‘jobs for life’ for those without

degrees (nursing, banking, the civil service). This category also contains another group of people who have moved around from job to job but always within the same occupation, gradually achieving promotion; for example, in retail or office work. These stickers are therefore following the pathways traced by Ashton and Field. This supports the contention of the insecurity scenario sceptics that 'jobs for life' are still to be found.

Shifters also come in different types, though all share common characteristics of movement between many sorts of jobs and employment statuses: in the words of one male shifter, 'college, unemployment, job, unemployment, job, unemployment, job – black hole in the CV'. Many shifters are '*lo-ed*' young men who leave school and try various sorts of unskilled jobs interspersed with spells of unemployment and bits of training. Some of them subsequently become settlers. Young women '*lo-ed*' shifters are similar, but having children and family responsibilities strongly affects their progress. A number are single parents. The range of unskilled jobs available to them is more restricted and attempts to get training, albeit with limited results, are common. '*Hi-ed*' shifters are less differentiated by gender but display a number of patterns. Some young adults deliberately choose some 'time out' after graduation, often doing temping (bar work, call centres, fast food), and mixing this with further training (part-time Masters degrees, for example) and periods travelling. This may be seen as temporary until they 'sort out' what they 'want to do with their lives'. Others have unhappy university experiences, choosing the wrong degree, getting poor results, even dropping out, and then follow the pattern of the '*lo-ed*' shifters. Another group are engaged in occupations often characterized as part of the 'knowledge-based economy': media, creative industries, IT, consultancy and research. These characteristically offer temporary or insecure though coveted jobs (sometimes unpaid internships). Finally, there is a group (perhaps specific to the south west) who espouse 'alternative' or New Age lifestyles: involvement with art, music, therapies, and the creative side of IT such as website design. This group, of mixed-class backgrounds and both sexes, tend to hold anti-materialist values and are prepared to 'get by' on benefits when paid work is not forthcoming.

Thus, among those whom Ashton and Field characterized as 'careerless' – people in jobs with limited prospects – there are people from a variety of class situations, not just the low-skilled. This is an important finding, suggesting a new kind of insecurity for the more highly educated, and is supported by recent HESA statistics on graduate destinations. HESA found that a substantial proportion of new graduates were working in what they called 'non-graduate employment' (38% of those entering work in 2003). Even more significantly, only 12 percent were in what they called 'traditional' graduate jobs (medicine, science, teaching, professions).

Our qualitative analysis reveals some of the ways in which labour market pathways can be disrupted, for example because of illness (physical or mental), disability or accident. Indeed, we could define among the shifters and settlers a further subcategory of *derailed careers*. These are people who started off in education or training and then suffered some incident or illness that threw them

off course. For example, Bruce joined the army but injured his foot and moved into electronics. Tara had settled into a restaurant job but found it affected her health; she was diagnosed as asthmatic and resigned. Derailment may push people into unemployment, benefit dependency or chronic shifting, though some manage to re-establish a strong trajectory on another track.

Differentiated Pathways

Fenton and Dermott (2006) use the survey data to explore the ‘fragmentation’ of working lives, taking the number of jobs in work histories as a proxy for job shifting. However, this approach does not capture the multiple transitions, or shifting, *between* employment statuses – including unemployment, education, travel and breaks for motherhood – which now characterize early adulthood. Through analysis of personal narratives from the in-depth interviews, we can explore how young adult pathways encompass episodes *in* and *out of* employment and thereby address processes often neglected in conventional employment research. The following discussion draws on these narratives to illustrate how our typology of pathways, summarized below, is borne out in young adult biographies.³

Shifters

Gillon and Kara are shifters, lo-ed and hi-ed respectively. Their frequent shifts between employment, education, travel and unemployment illustrate the fractured trajectories typical of this category of young adults. Gillon, from a lower-middle-class background, displays a tendency to drift and to espouse alternative values: his dream is to be a writer. He made several starts at FE and HE courses and dropped out. He has held numerous ‘crappy jobs’, mainly in shops or offices, often gained through agencies. Altogether he has spent two and a half years on the dole. His most positive experience so far has been a creative writing course, but at 23 he has just left a job in retail and is unemployed; he shows little sign of settling down.

By contrast, Kara (aged 33) is from a more affluent middle-class Indian background. In the following quotation she describes a part of her life history including several moves into and out of employment:

So I was doing nannying for 3 days a week and working as a supervisor at [shop] most of the weekend and the rest of the time, to save for India. And then I went to India for 3 or 4 months. And came back and didn’t do anything really. Signed on for a bit. And decided that I was going to do a Masters in something I think and opted for fashion ... Didn’t get in, got completely disillusioned by it and completely broke down and stuff like that. So just little bits of childcare stuff, and what else? I became a florist. Then I went to India for 6 months. Came back, signed on for a bit, went back to the floristry for 3 years ... then I did a Masters degree ... Anything creative, that’s what I’ve done.

Table 2 Summary of pathways

Pathway	Characterized by
Shifting	No chosen career, but a number of changes between employment statuses and jobs
Sticking	Pursuit of a single type of employment or career
Switching	After some time in a particular occupation, making a conscious choice of a major change of direction
Settling	After a period of shifting, making a conscious choice to pursue a single occupation or career

Thus her story displays a combination of directionless drifting, choices and chance events.

Stickers

Andrew and Cindy are contrasting examples of stickers. Andrew (aged 24) comes from Malaysia and is a good example of a hi-ed sticker. Andrew gave the impression that everything in his life was carefully planned. He was sent to an English public school and developed a keen interest in aeroplanes from an early age. He chose his A-level subjects, degree course and university to fulfil his ambitions to work in aerospace, acquiring sponsorship and securing a placement in the process. His next step is to pass his exams to become a chartered engineer. He is strongly focused on these objectives and speaks of leaving his company in the next five years if it has not given him the opportunities he 'deserves' to progress.

Cindy reported that she 'messed about' at school. She left early and started a Youth Training Scheme as an apprentice engineer. It looked as if she might become a typical shifter, since she left the scheme when she became pregnant and did 'little' part-time cleaning jobs. But she struck lucky with a job as a chambermaid with a hotel chain. She became committed to the hotel business, moving into customer services and thence to management, acquiring City and Guilds training.

Cindy rose in the company until she met her current partner. Wanting a job that allowed her to spend more time with him, she reduced her hotel work to part time, spending the rest of her week working in customer services for an IT company. She has aspirations to be on the Board of Directors of this company, or perhaps to set up her own. Cindy (aged 33), therefore, can be seen as moving towards being a switcher.

Like many stickers, Cindy describes herself as having 'always worked'. There is a strong sense of work ethic: 'I've just got a thing about Social Security ... So I was always adamant that, you know, if I had to graft then so be it, which I did.'

Settlers

Many settlers came from working-class backgrounds, such as Danny, Gary and Diane. Danny is 34, living with his mother, and offers a prime example of a *lengthened and fractured transition*. He left school early, did a YTS training course in engineering but dropped out to start earning. He has held jobs in warehousing, tool and machinery repairing, telecommunications and driving. Periods of travelling and short episodes of unemployment were interspersed with 'little jobs' such as bar and catering work and plastering; it is interesting that he used the self-derogatory term as married women often do. He also trained to be a personal trainer, supporting himself by working part time in a leisure centre. Finally, a hospital job kindled an interest in physiotherapy and when interviewed he was starting a degree. He anticipated finding what he described as his 'destiny' in occupational terms.

Gary left school, got an apprenticeship but was made redundant. He drifted into unskilled jobs of various kinds: bar work, building, warehousing. This was interspersed with periods travelling round Europe, America and Australia. Finally he met his partner, whose father helped Gary get a job in the port. The couple have a son and Gary at 29 professes himself happy with his new stability.

Diane also left school early and had a series of seasonal jobs in the leisure industry and as a tour rep. Using her own phrase, much of her energy was devoted to 'partying' and 'having fun'; she stated: 'it's alright if you've just left school and you've got no prospects'. But at 25 she decided that the time had come to settle. She began working at a department store and intends to work her way up its hierarchy.

Switchers

Our examples of young adults changing direction after some time in a career include Anita and Jayne from the primary interviews. Anita, a young Indian woman, was a 'hi-ed' switcher. After her PhD she had entered the competitive male world of consultancy and gained several promotions. She was one of the most affluent young adults we interviewed, but was nonetheless dissatisfied with her career and at 29 contemplated a *switch* either into academia or teaching. Jayne was a teacher who had run into difficulties when she had her first child. She felt she had been the victim of discrimination and decided to quit and retrain. Now 31, she was studying for a Masters degree and deliberately maintaining her work record by taking part-time work while rearing her children. She aspired to more flexible employment, perhaps running her own media business.

It may be more common for women to make such a switch, given that their careers are often interrupted by child-rearing. But men, too, may feel the need for change. Duncan grew up in a 'tough' area and at 16 joined a bank, which he saw as an 'easy job' compatible with his great passion, playing basketball. He stayed there for seven years, but felt increasingly unsatisfied. He wished to

serve the community and applied to the police force. Because of a medical problem he was rejected for active service but was offered work in the police support service, and at 33, he is settled in this new career.

The Impact of Flexibility and Fractured Transitions

We have contributed to the discussion on lengthened and fragmented transitions by setting out these four characteristic pathways taken through the labour market, and giving some account of which groups of people are likely to follow which pathway. We now want to touch on the economic consequences of these pathways, especially for the shifters and switchers (almost half of our interviewees). Earlier we discussed how youth transitions might be negatively affected by flexibility and the increased instability identified by Gregg et al. Does this mean that younger generations are facing a deteriorating economic situation? We will discuss this, drawing on some data from the survey.⁴

We have seen that job shifting is common among our interviewees. We also have quantitative indications on the frequency of job shifting. Thirty-nine percent of survey respondents had 5+ jobs since leaving school (42% of men and 36% of women). Those who leave school early display higher levels of job shifting than those who stay on to further and higher education. Forty-five percent of early leavers had held 5+ jobs, as compared to 34 percent of those with FE/HE experience (see Fenton and Dermott, 2006).

As stated earlier, we know that young people have always changed jobs a great deal, especially on immediately leaving school. However, what we suspect is different about this generation is the 'yo-yo' effect as described in some stories above: movements between full-time, part-time and temporary work; periods of study or training; self-employment or voluntary work; unemployment and travel. As an indicator, the experience of unemployment was widespread. Over half the respondents had experienced some unemployment and there was no sign of diminution with age. About 10 percent had experienced a period of unemployment of 3 or more years; and there was no decline in the experience of unemployment among the youngest age group, despite the economic up-turn in the UK at the time when they were entering the labour market.

The experience of unemployment is a key negative factor. But the starkest aspect is the low level of reported earnings as shown in Table 3. Income level is a crucial marker of labour market success and financial independence. Although self-reported data on earnings should clearly be regarded with some caution, the negative picture offered is in line with the analyses of national data carried out by De Freitas and Duffy (2004) and Ryan (2005). These demonstrated a notable deterioration in youth wages compared to adults in both Britain and the USA. Similarly, 59 percent of our survey respondents estimated income levels of less than £12,000 per year, and only 21 percent earned over £18,000 ($N = 1103$).

Table 3 Income levels of employed survey respondents by age group (*N* = 631)

<i>Income level</i>	<i>Percentage within age-group</i>		
	<i>20–24</i>	<i>25–29</i>	<i>30–34</i>
Low (less than £9,999)	47.2	20.9	25.2
Medium (£10,000–£19,999)	45.1	49.7	36.3
High (£20,000–28,999)	3.5	16.6	18.5
Very high (over £29,000)	1.4	7.3	11.4
No answer	2.8	5.5	8.6
<i>N</i>	142	235	254

Seventeen percent of respondents were students, and this will depress overall wage levels. However, if we break down income groups by age and exclude those who are not in employment, we find that even in the oldest group (30–34) over half the respondents are in the bottom two brackets (Table 3). Only a minority earn anything which could be considered equivalent to a ‘family wage’. This is strong evidence that this generation of young adults is part of a low-wage labour force. Those in the top group of earners are mainly male ‘hired’ stickers, for example, engineers, lawyers and doctors.

Given these facts, it is apparent that young adults will find it difficult to purchase housing, a widespread ambition reported in other studies of young people (Allatt and Dixon, 2001; McDowell, 2003). It is surprising, then, that the vast majority of survey respondents (78%) claimed to be financially independent of their parents. However, it is not clear what they mean by ‘independence’. From the interviews we get a rather different picture of families providing ‘help’ in the form of loans, payment of tuition fees, gifts of cars, furniture and household goods, employing young adults in family businesses, providing free childcare or ‘do-it-yourself’ assistance with accommodation (see also Holdsworth, 2004). There is in fact a high degree of ‘interdependence’ visible in the interviewees’ accounts of their relations with their families. One indication of this is that 43 percent of men and 36 percent of women report returning to live in the parental home since leaving it. A quarter of the men say they have done so several times. Overall we suggest that fractured trajectories and low earnings have made this generation of young adults more dependent on either their families or the state than was the case with previous generations (see also Jones, 2002). This bodes ill for the future in terms of adequate retirement provision.

Internalized Flexibility: Handling the Transition

We propose that the flexibilization of the labour market has indeed created a precarious economic environment, which hampers people’s prospects of achieving the conventional markers of full adult status: financial and housing independence

and stable employment. Although the earliest years of people's working lives have long been marked by turbulence and low pay, these conditions now linger on into the early thirties. Clearly these economic developments will also have long-term implications in terms of savings, pensions and retirement. How are young adults coping with these precarious transitions and uncertain futures?

The young adults were asked to rank themselves on a 10-point scale in terms of their satisfaction with their lives so far. We were surprised that the mean score was 8.1 and the median 7. Indeed, when asked to use the scale in relation to how they expected to be in five years' time, an extraordinary optimism was evinced, with a mean score of 9.5 and median of 9!

Measures of subjective well-being are thought to reflect the balance between people's aspirations and their situations (Inglehart, 1990). Our findings thus reveal how this generation is adapting to living with insecurity: anticipating instability over their lifetimes, their general framework of expectations is very different from that of their parents. We asked our follow-up sample if they thought there were still 'jobs for life'. Bill's answer was typical:

I think, say I was doing one job now, when I get to 40 or so, I don't know whether I'd want to actually be doing the same job as I'm doing. 'Cos, say you're doing the same thing every day, it does get monotonous, so then you wouldn't want that job for life. (Bill, 22, warehouseman)

Some jobs remain, especially in the professions, which offer more stability; many stickers occupied such jobs:

They're still available providing you choose the right career ... there's such a huge shortage of nurses. (Sheila, 34, nurse)

However, even here we can observe people's behaviour and motivation changing. A particularly revealing account comes from George, a doctor, aged 32:

Certainly in medicine, once you've got a consultant post then *you used to just stay in the same hospital for you know 30 years probably until you retired*. But now more and more people are moving around even once they've got those jobs. At the moment we're thinking about ... working in medicine for another 10, 15 years and then maybe retiring early and doing something different.

While research has shown that older workers are unhappy with and resist the growth of job insecurity and flexibility (Anderson et al., 2002; Beynon et al., 1994), these younger folk appear to accept them calmly and many view these developments as positive:

The way society is nowadays people don't want a job for life very much. They want to be continually moving on, adapting and changing. Even if you work for the same company you want to be moving within that company. (Ailsa, 31, school dinners)

The idea of a job for life scares me ... Oh, I can't handle that. (Fay, 28, engineer)

Our research indicates a distinctive mentality among this generation (which is not to say that every young adult shares it or that older attitudes do not persist). We call this structure of feeling 'internalized flexibility' and it was displayed

by many young adults. They accept the necessity for change and adapt themselves to cope with it; some positively embrace it. When survey respondents were asked whether they expected to stay in their current occupations, only 36 percent expected to do so. Even apparent stickers anticipated eventual changes in occupation, employer or location:

After the next five years, I think things may start to change again. I might suddenly say, 'I want to get out of Bristol'; I might want to try something – keep with the nursing – but maybe try a different area of the country, or somewhere else completely different. (Alf, 30, nurse)

I like a bit more excitement. I'm quite willing to take a job you know that I can see that's secure for six months or a year. I mean, these days that's pretty good ... And then see what happens after that. (Rod, 33, electronics)

An acceptance of the value of training is a crucial aspect of internalized flexibility as is revealed in many of the above accounts. A number had returned to education to do degrees and diplomas (23% of survey respondents) or vocational courses and NVQs (16%). Even more had experience of in-house training (33%) which was highly valued and considered by some to be more helpful than formal qualifications. In general, the interviewees were eager to gain qualifications and open to the idea of retraining if necessary:

There isn't necessarily a job for life, because you are having to re-skill, retrain and do this and do that ... I'd like to get a lot of qualifications under my wing, so I can apply for multiple jobs and not be sort of tied down to one. (Anshu, 26, training agency worker)

Conclusion: The Adaptable Generation?

In this article we have set out a four-fold typology of young adults' labour market pathways, which shows that clusters of individuals share common patterns of mobility or immobility through employment statuses. This typology is not linked to a binary model of social development (from security to insecurity, from linearity to risk) but acknowledges difference and complexity. Thus, we do not side either with the theorists of flexible capitalism or with the sceptics; rather, we discern both continuities and changes. We have noted that a sizeable group of 'stickers' follow conventional pathways. In gender terms, women (especially mothers) and single men were more likely to be shifters. There is some continuity with the gendered patterns of past decades, with men more likely to have a linear trajectory. But we also note patterns of shifting, settling and switching which are displayed by large numbers of young adults, not only early school leavers and those from manual backgrounds. Even people currently on apparently secure pathways may contemplate changes of direction in the future.

Secondly, we have shown that among our sample many face negative economic conditions; many experience spells of unemployment; more than half the respondents fall into the categories of shifters or switchers, involving movement in

and out of the labour market and between jobs, many of which are temporary, low-paid and low-status. This shifting may be *voluntary*, indicative of young adults' desire for change and excitement, or *involuntary*, the result of employers' desire for flexibility, but it certainly leads to most young adults being low earners.

Finally, we considered whether young adults were downcast by these manifestations of labour market change. We suggest that an important shift in mentality is occurring among this generation. Most faced their futures with equanimity and resourcefulness; conditions that cause concern to their elders leave them undaunted. Whether or not there has *actually* been a decrease in the availability of jobs for life, these young adults have accepted and internalized the rhetoric of adaptability and life-long learning. The interviews show examples of this 'internalized flexibility' across boundaries of class, gender and ethnicity. As Fergusson et al. (2000) put it, dislocation has become normalized. Nonetheless, this process of normalization must be *situated*. As a prosperous, post-industrial city, Bristol seems to foster a 'structure of feeling' of buoyancy, entrepreneurialism and creativity – embodied by young adults through their willingness to engage with available opportunities – rather than exhibiting the disillusionment which might arise in areas characterized by economic decline.

Roberts, writing about youth employment in 1995, also describes the 'normalization of uncertainty'. He asserts that young people were responding with stoical acceptance: 'uncertain futures and risk-taking are becoming just parts of life for today's youth' (1995: 122). He linked this to processes of individualization, emphasizing the need for individuals to take responsibility for their fate. The difference, more than a decade on, is that our respondents positively embraced this new ethos. Thus we coin the term '*the adaptable generation*' to describe the mentality of these young adults, Thatcher's children, who are pitting themselves against insecurity and precarious pathways, drawing on a range of resources to work towards independence and adulthood. It remains to be seen whether their optimism will be retained in ten years' time, in view of the structural constraints (dependence on parents or state, risk of unemployment, low pay) which they are currently encountering and are likely to encounter in the future.

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Notes

- 1 We use 'pathway' as a term to describe the progress of our respondents as the commonly used alternative 'trajectory' has connotations of linearity and

- impetus: pathways, by contrast, can meander, fork or peter out! Our other term ‘fractured trajectory’ has a similar meaning.
- 2 ESRC Grant no. R000238315. Research team: Harriet Bradley, Steve Fenton, Will Guy, Jackie West and Ranji Devadason, all of the Department of Sociology, University of Bristol. Additional interviewing by Jonathan Baxter, Matthew Cole, Lucy Collins, Teresa Dibble, Glynn Everett, Emma Head, Judy Kidger, Lorna Henry, Shirley Patterson and Hugh Ortega Breton.
 - 3 Pseudonyms are used here. Unless otherwise specified (as in the cases of Kara, Andrew and Anita), the young adults referred to here are ethnic majority, white British.
 - 4 Figures presented in Fenton and Dermott (2006) are slightly different since students are excluded from their analysis. In this article students are included because of our contention that there is no longer a linear pathway from school to further study to labour market: people drop in and out of study as they do other employment statuses.

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