Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Constructing Coherence? Young Adults' Pursuit of Meaning through Multiple Transitions between Work, Education and Unemployment

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In The Corrosion of Character *Richard Sennett contends that the storied nature of human experience is stunted by 'conditions of the new economy'. He argues that individuals are unable to develop 'coherent life narratives' in the absence of job security. Thus, continuous employment somehow provides coherence: at least, enduring relationships with a single employer—which were possible under the auspices of organised capitalism—facilitate continuity in adult life more broadly. This paper draws on Linde's typology of 'coherence strategies' and in-depth interviews with young adult workers to demonstrate that young Europeans construct coherence by piecing together episodes of employment, unemployment and education in their biographies. Thus, the unfolding of the narrative is perhaps less likely to be enhanced by a sustained relationship with a single employer than discontinuous episodes of employment as part of the reflexive 'project of the self'. Nonetheless, the degree to which young adults reflexively engage in life as a project is structured by their position within social hierarchies. This paper puts forward contrasting reflexive strategies, which are discursively appropriated by young adults depending—in part—on their labour market experience, in order to construct coherence.*

Introduction

> How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments? The conditions of the new economy feed instead on experience which drifts in time, from place to place, from job to job . . . (Sennett 1998, p. 26)

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In *The Corrosion of Character* Richard Sennett argues that individuals are unable to develop 'coherent life narratives' in the absence of secure conditions of employment. Sennett's polemical attack on the contemporary world of work governed by 'flexible capitalism' is one of many pessimistic accounts regarding labour market change in recent years. These accounts accompany dramatic changes in the international division of labour and the resultant shift from industrial to post-industrial employment in advanced capitalist economies of Western Europe and North America.

These macro-economic developments are thought to have particularly marked effects upon young entrants to the labour market. The transformation of European labour markets is widely associated with a delaying of the transition to adulthood and has caused some researchers to question whether new forms of adulthood are being created in the post-industrial era. Adulthood has traditionally been conceived as the culmination of a set of three interlinked transitions: education to employment, household, and family formation (Jones 2000). Yet this emphasis upon standardised, collective transitions is challenged by theories of individualisation which suggest the de-linking of specific events or transitions from specific stages or ages in the life course. These processes of individualisation resonate with Giddens' (1991) concept of the 'reflexive project of the self'. Young people's transitions to adulthood *require reflexivity* to a degree that previous generations' transitions to employment, independent households and relationships did not (Furlong & Cartmel 1997).

Giddens argues that the individualisation of the life course in late-modern society causes individuals to embark on a 'project of the self' within which they experience 'fateful moments' (Giddens 1991, p. 113). Fateful moments are not simply the standard transitions towards adulthood that govern the direction of the life course, but any number of events of biographical significance which have lasting implications for an individual's identity as well as their circumstances. Thus, processes of individualisation require actors to reflexively construct their own biographies—the 'do-it-yourself biography' in Beck's (1994, p. 14) terms—in order to reflect their unique *individual* identities. However, Giddens and Beck have been criticised for misrepresenting the 'methods of the middle class' as universal experience (Skeggs 2004, pp. 52–54, 124). This paper explores the degree to which young adults—in different labour market situations—are able to embrace the 'project of the self' through analysis of their narrative strategies. The very production of life narratives requires reflexivity, yet not necessarily the reflexive engagement with life as a project described by Giddens. As Linde (1993) notes, the act of narrating automatically separates the narrator from the 'I' in the story—a context is created for evaluation and reflection—so life narratives provide an ideal medium for research into reflexive processes. Yet Giddens' account of the 'project of the self' glosses over distinctions between reflexivity *at* decisive moments and reflexive reasoning *after* the event. These processes require delineation because the reflexive strategies actors discursively appropriate reflect, to varying degrees, their differential positions within social hierarchies.

This paper addresses the relationship between the narrative strategies that actors appropriate, social structures and life outcomes. In doing so it constitutes an empirical examination of *habitus* illustrating the complex interplay between cultural repertoire and resources, and opportunities and constraints in the labour market, through analysis of the ways in which young adults talk about their lives. Sennett (1998) contends that employees are unable to develop coherent narratives of identity under the conditions of 'flexible capitalism', but I argue that young adults construct coherence by piecing together episodes of employment, unemployment and education in their biographies. Thus, narratives of identity are shaped through a number of critical events and turning points in the life history, some of which involve employment while others do not. The analysis presented here focuses on the ways in which times of transition are framed in young adult life narratives and identifies the discourses deployed to account for multiple transitions between employment, education and unemployment. It reveals that an ethos of individualism is integral to both the form and content of young adult biographies since collective 'conveyer belt' transitions are critiqued in hindsight, whereas 'choices' which are perceived to reflect individual, personal identity are endorsed. This implies an internalisation of the social obligation to *actively* shape one's *own* biography. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that young adults cannot be caricatured as naïvely individualistic and, therefore, blind to the role of social structures in shaping their lives (see Devadason 2006a).

The Study

The research explores the experiences of a new generation of young adult workers in two 'globalising' urban labour markets, Bristol and Gothenburg. The focus is upon young adults (aged 20–35) who are in-between the conventional landmarks of transition, having completed compulsory education and being prior to (or in the early stages of) family formation. Forty-eight biographical interviews were carried out with employed young adults, 24 in each city. This study extends work initially conducted for an ESRC-funded project investigating young adult employment trajectories in new urban labour markets [1]. For that project, exploratory biographical interviews were used to inform its main focus, namely a household survey of 1100 young adults in Bristol and follow-up interviews. Yet these biographical interviews provided a far richer data source than was originally anticipated; from the Bristol data a subset of 24 qualitative interviews was selected with *employed* young adults for further analysis. The subsequent doctoral fieldwork provided the opportunity for a fuller analysis of this material and the collection of an equivalent data-set in Gothenburg [2]. Here the focus is this material with an exclusive focus on biographical interviews with employed young adults in both cities. Young adults in Gothenburg were sampled to create a comparable subset that effectively matched the Bristol interviews; thus, interviewees were selected from low-wage, intermediate and high-income jobs (see Table 1). Equal numbers of women

Table 1 The distribution of young adults by type of employment.

	Bristol	Gothenburg
Professional/managerial	Andrew, aerospace engineer, 24 Anita, management consultant, 29 Clyde, IT marketing, 35 Jez, IT entrepreneur, 25 Nadia, solicitor, 26 Rob, film producer, 31 Tom, IT sales, 27	Annika, interior designer, 35 Bengt, real estate agent, 31 Emil, electrical engineer, 29 Jenni, human resources officer, 27 Lars, lawyer, 32 Monica, IT systems manager, 27 Rolf, IT systems manager, 33
Intermediate	Anshu, agency worker, 26 Helen, nurse, 34 Henry, studio technician, 35 Janet, agency worker, 35 Jayne, teacher, 31 Lee, web designer, 26 Lucy, DJs' agent, 26 Luther, bank accounts' manager, 23 Karen, administrator, 28 Katrina, youth worker/ student, 25 Tim, apprentice engineer, 20	Anna, teacher, 32 Helian, medical researcher, 31 Johan, oil refinery engineer, 35 Nadine, researcher, 32 Rebecca, city council worker, 23 Paulo, youth worker, 25 Stefan, agency worker, 27
Routine service/manual	Dan, hairstylist, 22 Diane, retail assistant, 26 Jack, call-centre worker, 31 Joe, coffee bar manager, 24 Michael, fork-lift truck driver, 20 Sabina, call-centre worker/ theatre-set designer, 33	Anders, retail assistant, 26 Åsa, hairstylist, 22 Camilio, janitor, 21 Carlos, car factory worker, 22 Christina, croupier/student, 23 Hassan, car factory worker, 33 Lena, bank clerk, 27 Maria, retail assistant, 23 Sara, call-centre worker/ student, 27 Per, grocery store assistant/ artist, 33

Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym.

and men were interviewed and 16 out of the 48 young adults sampled were of ethnic minority descent. A semi-structured interview guide was used which elicited rich life-history accounts, with a particular focus on experiences in education, training, employment and unemployment. The interviews also explored the role of family relationships and other key influences upon young adults' transitions.

One of the aims of this cross-national, two-city study was to explore how the specificities of state and place—namely, welfare regimes, political cultures and social divisions—shaped the employment histories and discourses of young adults (see e.g. Devadason 2006b). However, the narrative approach adopted here revealed analytical distinctions pertaining to structural hierarchies in urban labour markets in both cities, rather than country-specific factors, and it is these structural dimensions and

commonalities in the ways in which young adults describe their experience that are the focus here.

Creating Coherence

In this article, Linde's (1993) concept of 'coherence strategies' is adopted to arrive at an understanding of adulthood which reflects contemporary labour market encounters and the 'normalisation of uncertainty' (Roberts 1995, p. 121). Rather than perpetuating outdated notions of the 'job for life', as providing identity and stability, Linde asserts:

> In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story. (1993, p. 1)

The concept of 'strategy' bridges the gap between the dispositions of *habitus*— in Bourdieu's terms—and constraints and opportunities within a given social field. The term is not invoked to accentuate rational calculative thought; instead, Linde's concept of 'coherence strategies' is useful because it reveals both how taken-for-granted discursive practice produces socially competent accounts and the different ways in which reflexivity shapes narratives of transition.

In narrative theory, *coherence* is defined as the representation of events and actions to reveal *causal connections* (Goldie 2004, p. 157). More specifically, Linde elaborates on the process of creating coherence as

> [a] social obligation that must be fulfilled in order for the participants to appear as competent members of their culture. In the case of narratives that form part of a life story this demand amounts to an obligation to provide coherence—usually in the form of a chain of causality that is neither too thick nor too thin. (1993, p. 1)

Thus, in Linde's terms, coherent 'chains of causality' must neither be 'too thin' (i.e. suggest that the teller's life was entirely shaped by accident and chance) nor be 'too thick', thus inferring a degree of determinism or fatalism which is not generally accepted (1993, p. 128). Linde's framework thus facilitates what Goldie (2004, p. 162) describes as the 'double interpretive task' required by autobiographical narratives: the distinction between the interpretation of narrative content (represented by 'types of causality') and the interpretation of the act of narration ('coherence strategies').

The emphasis upon 'coherence', and the application of textual definitions of coherence to analyse narratives has been strongly criticised (Mishler 1999; Hollway & Jefferson 2000). Certainly, despite Linde's assertions that she adopts a linguistic analysis of life narratives, her typology of coherence strategies rests on intuitive and culture-specific assumptions about landmark events and what constitutes adequate or inadequate reasoning. For Linde, 'culturally defined landmark events' include: entering a particular occupation, commencing a course of study or forming a long-term relationship. The observation that narratives highlighting the personal

agency of the narrator are more effective in establishing 'adequate causality' than those which deploy accident or chance as the primary instigators of change is somewhat tautological. Linde's argument reinforces her—and arguably North American or 'western', middle-class—values about what constitutes coherence. However, in the Northern European context of the study drawn on here, her model provides a valid conceptual framework for the analysis of reflexivity in life stories, and facilitates interrogation of Sennett's propositions regarding the role of employment in individual's lives.

Linde identifies three strategies for establishing *adequate causality*, which are 'specifically maintained and exchanged through language' (1993, p. 100):

a. Temporal continuity of the self;
b. Reflexivity of the self;
c. Relation of the self to others.

There is also, I argue, on the basis of the data here. a fourth strategy which I call

d. Retrospective reasoning.

The coherence strategies identified by Linde (a, b and c) and myself (d) are used below as analytical tools to explore how young adults construct 'adequate causality', in their personal narratives, with a particular focus on their transitions between jobs, into and out of education, and unemployment.

From a close reading of the interview transcripts, I identified the main 'types of causality' invoked by young adults, and explored how these corresponded with Linde's typology of coherence strategies. In order to examine the effect of type of employment, education and income levels upon these types of causality, interviewees were divided into the following three categories: professional and managerial high-income earners; intermediate, typically public sector and middle-income earners; and routine service and manual low-income workers. Of the 24 young adults interviewed in each city, roughly one third falls into each of these income groups.

Five main types of causality were used in these young adult accounts to explain their transitions:

i.   Climbing the career ladder;
ii. Personal development;
iii. Avoiding monotony and boredom;
iv. At square one;
v.   Setback stories.

In the following section, young adult accounts are used to illustrate the relationship between employment outcomes and the types of causality invoked. Where appropriate, narratives are included which counter the most prevalent trends.

Causality Discourses

Career ladder reasoning, as one might expect, is particularly associated with high-income professionals and managers. Emil's and Andrew's instrumental approaches to fateful junctures in their education–employment trajectories exemplify this type of causality. As an electrical and an aerospace engineer, respectively, their transitions are calculated to move *onwards* and *upwards* in their chosen occupations, and not get held back. Andrew's account of his five-year plan illustrates this:

> **Interviewer:** Do you see this [current job] as a long-term thing, or do you think in a couple of years you might look for something else?
> **Andrew:** Well that all *depends on how I progress within the next 5 years*. I've given myself 5 years to work very hard within the company and see where I get to. *If I'm not given the opportunity that I think I deserve* after all the hard work—and the qualifications education-wise behind me and all the proactive tests that I've done like going on courses … *if I'm still not getting the opportunity which I think I deserve then I might have to go elsewhere to find better things to do.*

> **Emil:** I think I have the end goal of what I want to do. Who knows if I can get there, but I would like to be the president of a company … Maybe not [current employer] but at least something with a lot of people, at least hundreds of people. That is my goal, who knows if I get there … There are different things that are important to arrive there: one thing is to work abroad, one thing is to have experience from sales, to have a background in business education, so most of these things that I have been doing the reason that I've been doing them is 'cos of that direction.

Anna, Jayne, Jenni, Nadia, Rebecca and Tim also describe their early transitions as reflecting crucial strategic—and typically middle-class—decisions. The straightforward, pragmatic ease with which this choice is made exemplifies the transitions of the high-income, professional young adults in Bristol and Gothenburg. In addition, however, ambitious low-income workers like Dan and Joe, a hair-stylist and a coffee-kiosk manager, also demonstrate strategic thinking underpinning their transitions:

> **Interviewer:** What's important to you in your life just now, what's going on?
> **Joe:** Well, what's important to me at the moment, is basically trying to further my career. I started from the bottom as working in the cappuccino bar over Easter and then gradually worked my way up, went to a supervisor then I became assistant manager and now I actually run the cappuccino bar which was one of my big achievements, but I do hope to go further.

Having started out working in restaurants and hotels, in a range of unskilled jobs, Joe has committed himself to furthering his career in the catering industry and aspires to becoming a regional manager of the chain of coffee bars he works for.

Other young adults embark on careers for which linear entry-routes do not exist and thus require individual initiative and drive to carve out their own niches in the labour market. Stefan described the range of jobs he has had—both those involving skilled and unskilled, service work—as positively contributing to his experience and

feeding into his future career. He decided he wanted to enter local politics at a young age and realised that he needed experience to enhance his credentials; he gained this through working as a supply teacher (*vikariat*) in a school, a job which does not require teacher training in Sweden.

> When I was 20 I thought that it was very interesting to get all this experience, because the politics taught me that you need more experience 'cos I was so young when I started with the politics, so in that case the school became an opportunity for me to get the experience and actually I was there for six years with the school . . . I felt very good when I left. (Stefan, agency worker)

This illustrates the more experimental approach some young adults adopt in pursuing their careers. Young adults with entrepreneurial ambitions or who pursue careers in creative occupations for which there are no straightforward entry-routes also describe transitions in goal-rational terms, yet for them this involves carving out individual niches in the labour market.

The second type of reasoning—*personal development*—was particularly recurrent in the accounts of this latter group of young adults for whom less established career paths exist. Jez, an Information Technology (IT) entrepreneur, sums up his orientation to life as follows:

> . . . *I am so driven not by material items* [but] by *furthering the person* as opposed to the material items, because material items come and go whereas *what you learn as a person, they never leave you*, unless you get Alzheimer's or whatever. So that's something that I'm keen to develop, I want to learn a second language, as soon as I can . . . (Jez, IT entrepreneur)

The discourse of personal development is implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—connected with the desire for change, and thus connected with the third discourse—the *avoidance of monotony and boredom*. Lee emphasises the importance of change, and developing different aspects of *himself* through his work history.

> I'm not motivated by money, I'm motivated by fun and enjoyment real-ly . . . *Because I don't like staying in one specific thing*. I was a musician for quite a while and then, well I was an artist first, then a musician, then a scientist, and then an IT person and that's been four or five years each time, with the exception of guitar and art, which has been most of my life really, but the hardcore interest is about four or five years. (Lee, web designer)

Several of the young adults who describe their transitions in these terms of personal development de-emphasise money and extrinsic career goals. The goal is not to arrive, but to be. Monica and Clyde, who are both successfully employed in IT, renounce specific career-goals, Monica states 'I'm not . . . heading for CEO or anything like that'. A key statement in Clyde's account encapsulating his approach to life/work is revealing: 'you might as well be dead if you stop learning'. Thus

movement onwards and upwards in their careers is framed with respect to the ultimate goal of self-actualisation.

The causality discourses of the career ladder and personal development are more likely to be appropriated by high-income and intermediate-income young adults who perceive themselves as having a career, rather than just a job. The third discourse is prevalent throughout the sample regardless of position in the labour market. It seems that *avoiding monotony and boredom* is legitimate cause for changing one's job regardless of the individual's type of job or employment history. Helian left her job at Burger King because 'it was so bloody boring' and this experience inspired her to continue her education. Sabina, a call-centre worker, explains her preference for part-time work with the potential for variety it entails:

> . . . I do like to do different things, you know, I get bored from just doing the same thing day in day out. With the job that I've got at the moment, it is flexible so I could fit in theatre and work around that, and that would be really good. (Sabina, call-centre worker/theatre-set designer)

> I have a basic rule of myself that *I don't do anything that I don't think is fun*. I don't stay at jobs that I don't find fun any longer. So *the moment this job gets boring I will probably start looking for something else* . . . I enjoy working here at the moment but the minute that changes, I will be on my way. (Monica, IT systems manager)

Anders, a retail worker, describes here how he regrets staying in repetitive work for so long:

> **Interviewer:** Just looking back on your life and some of the things you've told me about—is there anything you would have liked to have done differently?
> **Anders:** Yes, maybe when I was working at customer service I should have worked harder to have another level. I think it was *four and a half years that I just do the same things, everyday, everyday*. [But] for the last year it was new deals everyday.
> **Interviewer:** Right, so you think you should have tried to change the work?
> **Anders:** Yes . . . to not be doing the same work everyday.
> **Interviewer:** Was it a bit boring?
> **Anders:** Yes, its fun and its education for a year, two years but *if you don't find education in the work everyday— there's something wrong*. I think so.

Thus, there is a marked distinction between those who instigate job change and those who remain in relatively unskilled repetitive jobs. The latter, like Anders, may question their choices in hindsight. Some young adults counter the prevalent discourse of avoiding monotony by acknowledging that they enjoy their jobs because of friendships at work rather than the jobs themselves. Diane, a retail worker, illustrates the repetitiveness of her job with the comment: 'Usually most asked question is the way out, so "Straight to the top, turn right" is usually what I do all day'. Yet she reiterated at several points during the interview how much she loved her job, explaining: 'basically what I most enjoy about the job is the people that I work with, I mean they're all so nice, all so friendly'.

Remaining in boring or monotonous employment can also be explained with the fourth discourse, *square one* causality; that is, a lack of alternatives. *Square one* transitions relate to pragmatic instrumental choices which characterise young people's labour-market entry, when choices are limited and pragmatic—with an emphasis on available opportunities rather than individual goals. The term 'square one' is derived from Sennett's description of the position of low-skilled workers in the contemporary era of 'flexible capitalism':

> 'Never getting anywhere', 'always at square one', confronted by seemingly mean-ingless success or the impossibility of reward for effort: in all these emotional states, time seems to grind to a halt; the person in these toils becomes prisoner of the present, fixated on its dilemmas. (Sennett 1998, p. 91)

Young women who became mothers relatively early, Janet, Karen and Katrina, and other young adults who left school with few qualifications found themselves in jobs which were not desired. Describing the series of poorly paid jobs she took after leaving school, Katrina states: 'I was doing everything for everyone else but I wasn't doing anything for me, I wasn't making me happy, and I really, really resented that'. For other young adults, particularly those who made the transition to higher education, the square one phase is even shorter. Short-term jobs with no prospects are held for a period during studies or immediately afterwards, yet these young adults had no intention of getting stuck in them. For example, Helian spent a year working in Burger King after leaving school before going to university, Lucy and Luther worked in call-centres immediately after leaving university, Jenni worked in a fish shop and Åsa worked as a cleaner during their courses, and Nadine as a receptionist in-between courses. These episodes seem to have left no enduring mark on the labour market trajectories of these young adults. They were expected and transitory phases, defined in instrumental terms 'just to earn money' yet not imbued with any longer-term significance within their life stories. What is markedly more disturbing for young adults is finding themselves 'at square one' *after* completing their studies, or deciding on a career, stood at the bottom of a ladder and unsure whether they will be able to climb up. These young adults find their lack of options more problematic and look to other reasons to explain the situation they find themselves in. The final type of reasoning—*setback stories*—resonates with the biographies of these young adults who have remained at 'square one' for extended periods and, thus, have been less able to climb career ladders or pursue personal goals.

I call this causality discourse *setback stories* to reflect the often quite elaborate accounts young adults use to establish causality for why they have not succeeded in pursuing their ambitions. In these stories, young adults tend to refer to a lack of encouragement, confidence or the 'right networks' to fulfil their aspirations. This type of causality is often associated with specific events such as episodes of unemployment, not getting a job one has applied for, or not gaining entry to a desired occupation. Rob attributes his lack of confidence to his class

background—being from a working-class background and trying to establish a career in the (upper) middle-class arena of the media industry. Rob had multiple transitions between jobs since leaving university. He explains the various transitions with reference to the nature of media work, which is renowned for short-term contracts. The first major setback in Rob's account is a six-month period of unemployment straight after graduating from university.

> ... I thought OK I've got a Cambridge degree now—I'm on easy street ... so I thought I'd get a job in television, but I had *no contacts*, *no family members* who'd done that, no understanding, no experience of what it all meant and after kind of sending out 20 applications, letters whatever, and getting just rejection after rejection I just had a massive kind of *crisis of confidence* ... One thing which I strongly believe in as a *working-class, white man* from a family with no experience of middle-class working places, no money to enable me to do things like pay for me to go on a journalism course. I'd go to an interview and there'd be levels of discrimination ... [and] I couldn't make up for the fact that I couldn't afford to go onto like journalism courses, that was a level of disadvantage I had I think, but its not a recognised by anybody anywhere. (Rob, film producer)

It seems that this initial setback in his career prompted Rob to reflect at length as to why he should find it so difficult to get a job in the media. Lena's reasoning resonates with Rob's as it links factors *beyond her control*—in this case the structural disadvantage she faces as a woman—to her lack of progress. Lena works as a bank clerk on a fixed-term contract—covering a maternity leave—and had recently been by-passed for promotion. Her insecure position leads her to question why things have not worked out and whether sexism in the bank has played a part:

> Well as a woman you have a disadvantage in your career I think because well, where I work now—I don't know really—its like, well, one guy who started before me, he only started working there 2 months before me and I think in some ways *when he started there they had already made plans for him to move on to higher*—so they had already made plans for him while when they hired me: 'Well lets see where it ends' ... And maybe, men are not that shy either, so you know they really tell them 'I'm good at this, and I can do that' rather than 'I'm not as good at this but you know'—but the women don't want to lie.

Lena links to her lack of confidence and her tendency to 'think less' of herself and put herself down to her gender. This is exacerbated by her employer's seeming tendency to overlook women and favour men. Lena's reasoning resonates with Rob's as it links factors beyond her control—in this case the structural disadvantage she faces as a woman—to her lack of progress. Others who narrate setback stories cite a lack of encouragement from parents (Sara, Sabina), a resultant lack of confidence (Sabina) and racism (Anshu, Henry, Nadine and Paulo) among the factors beyond their control that have constrained them in pursuing their goals.

Coherence Strategies

In this section I focus on the correspondence between the types of causality and the coherence strategies introduced. Do young adults construct coherence out of discontinuous, non-linear employment histories? Or, in the process of the extended transition to adulthood, does a state of flux, restlessness and uncertainty become the norm? The types of causality young adults use serve to illustrate prevailing cultural repertoires about legitimate or illegitimate courses of action in the labour market. In particular, the first three, *climbing the career ladder*, *personal development* and *avoiding boredom and monotony*, thus reflect not only how young adults *describe* their lives, with hindsight, but their motivations and behaviour *at* fateful moments. Reflexive engagement with the 'project of the self' is—to varying degrees—implicit within these narratives of transition. However, *square one* causality and *setback stories* relate to how structural and other constraints, as distinct from possibilities, have inhibited the active pursuit of personal goals and thus involve reflexive reasoning *after* the events narrated.

   The *temporal continuity of the self* is by far the most prominent strategy that recurs in these young adult accounts. Linde describes this as one of 'the most basic forms of coherence we can create' (1993, p. 107). Temporal sequence is an integral feature of narrative, the sequence of events as they are told in the narrative is presumed to reflect the order in which they happened and infer interconnections if not direct causality. In order to construct narrative coherence and establish adequate causality—for what might otherwise appear to be a disparate set of events in the life story—the essential continuity of the self is emphasised. For Andrew, Anshu, Dan, Emil and Joe it is the longitudinal consistency of their career goals that structures their narratives. They highlight the *temporal continuity of the self* as they link their aspirations to personal characteristics and preferences. Thus, in accordance with Linde's framework, young adults use references to character, aptitudes and disposition—which remain consistent over time despite changing circumstances—to establish temporal depth and create coherence from disjointed and discontinuous episodes of employment. In contrast, Clyde, Jez, Monica and Stefan describe a range of employment encounters as part of a trajectory of continual personal development and learning. Their desire to occupy managerial positions—so that they can influence work-practices in their organisations—emerges in their narratives as the out-working of their aspirations to be challenged continually (through employment) rather than specific career goals. These young adults construct coherence by embracing the project of the self, to which different episodes of employment, education and even unemployment contribute. Thus, the coherence of the narrative is grounded in continual development of the self rather than continuous employment with a single employer. Moreover, the striking feature of those who use the discourses of the career ladder or personal development to explain their transitions is that even those who have been stable in their careers—employed in a single occupation or organisation for an extended period—highlight the importance of diversity and

change. The third discourse avoiding monotony and boredom is a mantra which recurs as a personality trait in several accounts regardless of status in the labour market, and, therefore, also exemplifies the coherence strategy of temporal continuity.

Square one reasoning is typically associated with episodes of employment in undesired, unskilled work and is therefore not used to establish temporal depth or coherence. However, as discussed, some young adults have remained 'at square one' for extended periods and thus construct a sense of self which alludes to continuity of personhood. Sara, a call-centre worker who has struggled to enter the music industry for a number of years, states 'I haven't been so focused', implicitly connecting this with her personality, rather than external conditions. Similarly, Sabina, also describes a lack of focus and motivation and long-established problems, stemming from her lack of confidence, having hindered her progression. Thus, while square one transitions in themselves hinder the development of a coherent career trajectory, they tend to emerge as elaborate *setback stories* through which young adults underline the temporal continuity of the self. Rob is an interesting example in this respect. Despite the setbacks he has had in his career, he concludes his interview with a strong statement that links his working-class background to the drive, motivation and independence that have enabled him to pursue a career in the media industry. Thus, although at one level Rob attributes the difficulties he has had in his career to his class background and his resultant lack of confidence, he closes with a narrative suggesting it is his background and character that has *enabled* him to succeed in the end:

> Yeah I think *coming from the background I have*, *I have a lot of independence*, a lot of *self-drive*, I haven't had people nurturing or expecting or pushing me along from one stage to the next: O-levels to A-levels to university; its all been as a result of my own determination and drive, for example when I finished Cambridge . . . *I had the drive and the independence* to think well I can now try and get a job in broadcasting . . . I had the determination to do that, to be innovative, not just go onto the next thing which was easily attainable, otherwise I probably would have become a teacher.

Through this narrative Rob establishes *temporal continuity* and thereby effectively *constructs coherence* from the sequence of events in his life history. Thus, as well as demonstrating continuity of the self—namely, his personal ambition and drive from a young age—his account exemplifies *retrospective reasoning*. The hurdles and setbacks that he has overcome have ultimately strengthened his determination and facilitated his success *in the end.* Temporal continuity and retrospective reasoning are intertwined to create a complex, yet coherent, life narrative.

Retrospective reasoning is exemplified by the use of the phrase 'everything worked out in the end', whereby discontinuities or seeming deviations from the main plot of the life story or career goals, such as unemployment or other setbacks, are framed as crucial development phases that ultimately contributed to attaining the desired outcome. Thus, this strategy is associated with learning lessons which one cannot learn from straightforward or smooth transitions. This presentation of detours and

setbacks from an established linear career route as positively enhancing the life history is a recurrent feature of a particular subset of young adults' narratives. Ambitious young adults who are aware of being at a structural disadvantage in the labour market, particularly from working-class and/or ethnic minority backgrounds, emphasise how the constraints facing them have inspired and motivated them. Nadine is a highly educated researcher from a working-class, 'immigrant' [3] background in Gothenburg. She states:

> . . . being aware of class differences or whatever I called it then made me want something more. And *that was like the ultimate drive to do something with my life*, even though I couldn't figure out what it meant . . . I didn't graduate with any particular grades there either and a part of that—I mean—now I can look back and think that it probably had something to do with my background and my immigrant background because there weren't many immigrant kids going there. (Nadine, researcher)

Yet upward social mobility—in education and/or employment—appears to be crucial to being able to avail of these coherence strategies effectively. Notably, gender disadvantage does not appear to have the same motivating effect upon young women, as only Jayne referred to her indignation at being referred to as a 'classic return-to-work mother' by her headteacher, inspiring her to prove him wrong. This apparent lack of gendered consciousness could be a reflection of 'post-feminism' in the contemporary era (McRobbie 2004), but it is also likely to be due to the fact that only a quarter of the women in this study were mothers.

Whereas the coherence strategies *temporal continuity* and *retrospective reasoning* structure the accounts of young adults who are succeeding in pursuing their goals to a degree, *reflexive distancing* and the *relation of the self to others* in Linde's typology are utilised more by those who regret earlier choices at times of transition. The reflexivity of the self or the treatment of the self as 'other' is described as another integral feature of personal narratives. Reflexivity is implicit in the act of speaking 'since, a distance in time and standpoint necessarily separates the action being narrated from the act of narration' (Linde 1993, p. 122). Thus, personal narratives enable the speaker to distance themselves from their own actions and—through the act of telling—uphold their moral standing through demonstrating their awareness of the inadequacy of earlier action or inaction. Many young adults, particularly low-income workers 'at square one', reflexively distance themselves from a decision that they now perceive to be misguided: leaving school at 16.

> *If I knew then what I know now* then I would have liked to gone to uni, but then I wouldn't have wanted to do it at such a young age . . .

> . . . thinking back now—looking back rather—I should have went on and done [A-levels] . . . But as I say when you are 15, 16 years old you don't want to do that do you? You just want to get out and make some money!

Here Diane and Karen distance themselves from the decision of leaving school prematurely, whereas Sara and Sabina express regret at not pursuing their post-compulsory education:

> . . . maybe that I stayed too long working, or stayed too long off my studies, 4 years or something, I could question that: why I was so, so long?

> I've been a bit all over the place, I haven't been that focused . . . maybe I should have taken more risks and done more courses.

Others describe how their *relation to others* shaped their transitions, and generalise their experiences to a wider group. In doing so they imply that *anyone* would have acted in the same way given their circumstances. Linde asserts, in the process of narrating, tacit or explicit agreement must be established between teller and addressee for the types of causality and coherence strategies used. In other words: 'a narrative that does not immediately bear on its addressees' situation must be framed as a *story of Everyman*—how any reasonable person would behave' (Linde 1993, p. 113; my emphasis). Diane exemplifies this strategy when she describes the careers advice they received at school in dismissive terms:

> I mean we had a careers adviser in there but this was just before we took our exams, [and] *we had to know by 15 what we wanted to do for the rest of our life*. I mean I couldn't tell you that now . . . well I probably could now, but at 15 when you are taking your exams who knows what they want to do for the rest of their life?

Here Diane expresses her view that the education system is flawed in expecting so much of teenagers. This strategy serves to downplay her direct responsibility for the decision to leave school and shift the focus from herself to a wider critique of the system. Rob adopts a similar approach when he explains his initial lack of success in employment. In doing so what begins as a personal narrative is generalised to apply to anyone in a similar situation; that is, being a man from a working-class background entering a middle-class profession. Presenting setbacks as a 'story of Everyman' demonstrates an awareness of the self as socially situated and—in effect—lessens personal responsibility for life outcomes.

Discussion

From this analysis the frequency of transitions between jobs, education and unemployment in young adult lives does not appear to be the crucial variable underpinning the creation of coherent narratives. Rather, it is the young adults themselves who create *temporal depth* in their life narratives with reference to the *temporal continuity of the self* and *long-established* goals—towards which they have made progress—who are able therefore to achieve coherence. These goals include: getting an education, job stability, 'making it' in a competitive field and—for some—self-actualisation through otherwise disparate events in their biographies. Yet

progression towards these goals in the life course need not be linear. In fact it is often the detours and deviations from 'standard routes' in the labour market that emerge as elaborate life narratives. Indeed, it is those who demonstrate the *temporal continuity of the self* through discontinuities or use *retrospective reasoning*—narrating their lives as progressive stories drawing on negative and positive events—that tend to have the strongest claims to coherence. Reconciling personal goals with available opportunities in education and employment emerges as critical to the construction of coherence.

Moreover, these young adult accounts demonstrate an inversion of the values that Sennett so earnestly defends. The notion of a working life that is linear and cumulative is downplayed in favour of a life characterised by *new experiences*, *challenges* and *continual personal development*. Changing jobs, moving on, and avoiding monotony require less explanation, in these young adult narratives, than job stability and continuity. Thus, those who have experienced continuous employment, feel obliged to demonstrate causality for staying in the same place; pursuing a linear career trajectory with one employer is not sufficient to create a coherent life story. This reflects engagement with the 'project of the self' since standard transitions that do not reflect the young adults' current priorities or outlook are critiqued in hindsight as though the goal of realising the self at a fateful moment in the life history has been by-passed. The 'conveyer belt' is a useful metaphor—adopted by Sabina—for describing these standard, collective transitions, particularly the critical choice of whether to leave school or not at 16. Several young adults reflexively distance themselves from this earlier 'choice' because of the short-term considerations informing it that are now deemed inadequate.

Not all young adults are equally capable of creating coherence from the disparate events in their life histories. What makes the difference between those who are able to create coherence out of potentially disjointed episodes of education, employment and unemployment and those who are not? Processes of individualisation, of which the multiplying of options open to school-leavers are part, mean that the number of transitions in young adult biographies have increased, and make it more difficult for some to pursue their own agenda in the labour market. This can foster a 'lack of focus' such that discontinuous episodes in employment and education emerge in the life story as reactive responses to immediate difficulties rather than reflecting engagement with the project of the self. Young adults whose stories lack a coherent overarching storyline tend to invoke the strategies of *reflexive distancing* and create *stories of Everyman* to account for a lack of progress towards their goals. From their discontinuous episodes of employment it is more difficult to establish *temporal continuity*, yet this is seemingly not due to a lack of long-term aspirations but to the apparent lack of movement towards them that gives their life narratives a disjointed quality. Giddens' account of the project of the self acknowledges that reflexivity involves retrospection, the reflexive legitimation of previous events. However, it does not make the critical distinction between acting reflexively *at* fateful moments and reflexivity *after* the event. Young adult capacity to enact the former is structured by their cultural—often particularly material—resources, whereas the latter is more

widely available and thus particularly appropriated by those who are materially disadvantaged. This conforms with Bandura's (1997) psychological theory of 'self efficacy'—as those who believe themselves able to effect life outcomes not only exhibit a sense of well-being but are more likely to achieve. Coherence strategies which invoke the *temporal continuity of the self*, and to some extent *retrospective reasoning*, reflect a belief in 'self-efficacy', whereas *relation of the self to others* and *reflexive distancing* accentuate factors outside the individual's control. Thus, although reflexivity in hindsight produces a 'coherent life narrative', it is in the form of an 'apologetic' rather than reflecting reflexive engagement with the project of the self. Thus, the ways in which reflexivity is experienced and narrated is partly contingent upon social structures and labour market experience.

Those who are able to demonstrate adequate causality are those who have been able to manage their transitions to serve their own purposes. High-income professionals are able to embrace the project of the self through engagement with their careers, actively pursuing new experiences and challenges. Thus, it seems that type of employment plays an important role in determining the type of strategy a young adult is able to pursue. Whereas certain routine service workers typify this sense of 'never getting anywhere, always at square one' (Sennett 1998, p. 91). Although class and type of employment are inextricably linked with the process of creating coherence—as those in the low-income routine service jobs struggle to create coherence relative to intermediate-income workers and the high-income professionals—this does not provide the whole picture. For those whose ambitions have not been fulfilled—notably, often those whose aspirations are artistic, creative and/or in highly competitive fields—the extent to which they are able to create a coherent story can be compromised. Yet the narratives of those who have overridden structural hurdles, in pursuit of their individual goals, epitomise coherence. Ambitious young adults who accentuate their *personal* ambition and drive, as enabling them to overcome barriers, contrast with others who—despite being structurally advantaged—point to their lack of focus and self-confidence as undermining their life chances. Young adults for whom established career paths do not exist, and who lack the conviction to carve out their own niches in the labour market, can lose sight of their own itineraries as they are repeatedly confronted with factors *beyond their control*. The attribution of events to uncontrollable causes is linked to a weak sense of 'self-efficacy' and is thought to reproduce negative life outcomes (Bandura 1997, pp. 21–22). Thus, confidence emerges as one of the crucial factors underpinning coherent narratives as the accounts of those who are succeeding in pursuing their goals exhibit a striking degree of individualism and self-belief. The emphasis upon *temporal continuity of the self* and use of *retrospective reasoning* in life stories provide individuals with a narrative thread and coherence through discontinuity. Heightened individualism is perhaps unsurprising in this context, as the self becomes *the* constant amidst otherwise shifting relations in employment.

Du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco (2003, p. 25) note that young adults seek to reconcile available opportunities—in education and employment—with the 'project

of the self', and in doing so many reject 'instrumental measures of labour market integration' as indicative of their progress. For those who exercise agency to extricate themselves from immediate difficulties, short-term goals remain sharply in focus (Lewis *et al.* 1999). Yet the stories told by Andrew, Clyde, Emil, Jez, Monica, Nadine, Joe and Rob, among others, demonstrate that as each episode or transition fits within an employment history, which *makes sense to them* within their biographies, their temporal continuity remains intact. Thus, despite the discontinuities associated with episodic encounters in the labour market, it is engagement with the long term (past and future) that enables young Bristolians and *Göteborgare* to construct coherence.

Notes

[1]   Harriet Bradley, Steve Fenton, Will Guy, Jackie West and R Devadason, all of the Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, formed the research team for the '*Winners' and 'Losers'* project (ESRC number R000238215).

[2]   As part of the preliminary fieldwork in Bristol, contacts with local employers and training and employment agencies were made in order to contact interviewees as well as to identify trends. This process was replicated in Gothenburg. This second stage of the study took place between August 2002 and September 2003. During this time I was hosted as a guest researcher at the Department of Sociology, Gothenburg University, where I received practical and academic support in carrying out the Swedish fieldwork. Many thanks to Bengt Furåker, Jan Carle and many others at the Department of Sociology, Gothenburg University for their assistance during this period.

[3]   In Sweden the term *invandrare* has the literal translation 'immigrant' yet is used to describe citizens of foreign countries and Swedish-born people with one or two parents born outside Sweden. Although attempts have been made to counter this idiomatic use of the word, the taken-for-granted ascription of *invandrare* particularly to so-called 'black-haired people' persists, hence the salience of the term in Nadine's narrative.

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