

Class, ethnicity and individualisation: young adult narratives of transition in two European cities

Ranji Devadason*

University of Bristol, UK

Some commentators suggest that the individualisation of life stories reflects a discursive shift in the ways people talk about their lives rather than a substantive change in life patterns. However, elsewhere it is argued the individualisation of life experiences is one of the defining features of the contemporary era. This paper draws on biographical interviews carried out with 48 young adults (aged 20–35) living in Bristol and Gothenburg in 2000/3 to address these claims. The analysis explores whether transitions are framed as a consequence of personal choice and individuality or whether collectivities—specifically class and/or ethnicity—are acknowledged as structuring available opportunities and shaping choices. The material presented is situated within a broader study into young adult orientations to work and the changing nature of adulthood in post-industrial, European cities at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Since the 1970s higher youth unemployment, due to a decline in the numbers of entry-level manufacturing jobs, and the subsequent lengthening of the transition from school to work are thought to diminish young people's engagement with the labour market, and weaken 'work identities' (Roberts, 1995; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Young adult lives become characterised by episodes of education, employment and unemployment, the sequence of which increasingly reflects *individual* experience rather than following standard routes and *collective transitions* experienced by previous generations of school-leavers (Roberts, 1995; Russell & O'Connell, 2001). Increasingly individualised employment trajectories are thought to exacerbate the trend towards a weakening engagement with employment as the collective nature of work-based identities is undermined.

*Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, 12 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UQ, UK.
Email: ranji.devadason@bristol.ac.uk

The individualisation of life experiences is defined as one of the distinguishing features of the contemporary era (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1994). Late modernity is defined as the era of reflexive modernisation, characterised by an onus on individuals to purposively shape their own biographies. Proponents of theories of individualisation suggest that there has been a shift away from collective social forms, which lend themselves to social cohesion, towards a heightened emphasis on the individual as ‘actor, designer, juggler and stage-director of his or her own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions’ (Beck, 1994, p. 14). Indeed, the pluralisation of options in education and the labour market place a greater emphasis on personal planning and lends itself to an emphasis on the *uniqueness and individuality* of people rather than collective aspirations, as Mythen (2005) has stated. None the less, Mythen regards this emphasis as illusory. He convincingly contends there is a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate Beck’s claims regarding the individualised distribution of employment risks, as class, gender, ethnicity and place continue to structure labour market outcomes: ‘Contra Beck, it is likely that the range, intensity and quality of individualization will be mediated by embedded forms of stratification’ (Mythen, 2005, p. 138). Mythen’s critical analysis of Beck’s theoretical claims concludes with a call for a broad programme of cross-cultural research in order to determine the ‘ways in which individualization is experienced through the filters of class, age, gender and place’ (2005, p. 144). This analysis of 48 interviews with young adults carried out between 2000 and 2003 in the post-industrial cities of Bristol and Gothenburg aims to address how processes of individualisation are mediated by these filters, specifically class, ethnicity and place.

Narrative, individualisation and young adult identities

Polkinghorne (1991) asserts that the stories, which are woven out of a series of diverse events in the life history, constitute identity:

individuals construct private and personal stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes. These are stories about self. They are the basis of personal identity and they provide answers to the question ‘Who am I?’ (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 136)

Being able to reconcile events into an integrated and coherent whole is defined as critical to adult identity construction (Erikson, 1979). Linde (1993) defines entering employment and choosing an occupation as ‘culturally defined landmark events’, which prompt narratives accounting for their occurrence. Yet for young adults given delayed labour market entry, short-term employment, extended periods of education and episodes of unemployment the degree to which employment persists in being a central determinant of life stories is questionable. Discontinuous employment may cause young adults to adopt an alternative cultural repertoire that de-emphasises employment as the primary source of social identity and instead priorities other everyday activities or identity markers, such as ethnicity, gender, class or sexuality. How events are woven into the plot of the life story will provide clues as to the centrality of employment to these processes of identity construction. Although Polkinghorne

alludes to the universality of the narrative form, he acknowledges the specificity of time and place in providing a 'cultural stock of narratives which are embedded in and constructed out of a person's particular cultural environment' (Scheibe, 1986, cited in Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 144). Polkinghorne (1991) draws on the work of May to explain how a 'stock of narratives' gives meaning to the *disruptions*, which could otherwise inhibit narrative integration. The range of discourses used to account for multiple transitions in biographies approximate to what May (1969) describes as the 'myths and symbols' of narrative. These form the 'core plots of the self-narrative' yet are not constructed by the individual from scratch, but are 'adaptations from a cultural repertoire'. These myths are often adopted unconsciously and are imbued with the values of the culture and thus reflect an internalisation or unquestioning acceptance of these values. Applying this to the 'myth' of individualisation, the degree to which individual agency is emphasised in life stories, in part, depends on the 'stock of narratives' that are available in the narrator's 'cultural repertoire'.

In *The individualized society*, Bauman argues that the narrative form of the life story is weighted towards this misrepresentation of social reality in the current era. He suggests that individualisation is particularly pronounced in the contemporary form of the life story:

In our 'society of individuals' all the messes into which one can get are assumed to be self-made and all the hot water into which one can fall is proclaimed to have been boiled by the hapless failures who have fallen into it. For the good and bad that fill one's life a person has only himself or herself to thank or to blame. And the way the 'whole life story' is told raises this assumption to the rank of an axiom. (Bauman, 2001, p. 9)

Thus, for Bauman, personal responsibility is an integral feature of the contemporary life story. As such, these stories do not adequately represent contemporary social life:

The distinctive feature of the stories told in our times is that they articulate individual lives in a way that excludes or suppresses (prevents from articulation) the possibility of tracking down the links connecting individual fate to the ways and means by which society as a whole operates. (2001, p. 9)

Furlong and Cartmel (1997, p. 4) describe this as the 'epistemological fallacy' of late modernity; they assert: 'People's life chances remain highly structured at the same time as they increasingly seek solutions on an individual rather than a collective basis.' Other theorists argue that the cultural repertoire of talking about the self is only accessible to those who occupy a privileged position in terms of class, gender, ethnicity or place. The view of the self as a unique, individual agent is thought by some to represent 'white male experience' and leave women and 'marginalized groups of all kinds without a self or with a self that is deficient when compared to the normative self' (Linde, 1993, p. 103). Skeggs (2004, p. 119; emphasis added) focuses on class inequalities and argues that 'it is the methods for *telling and knowing* that make the self and produce class difference'; moreover, she contends that self-authorisation in narrative requires access to the *resources of the middle class*. Skeggs draws on literature, religious confessional practice and legislation from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to demonstrate the historical basis of this narrative bias. The bourgeois

status which enabled the narration of the self also presumed to narrate others' stories to fit within a middle-class perspective on the social world; thus, the working class were *proscribed* and *transcribed* in ways that supported the middle classes' construction of themselves (2004, p. 124; emphasis added). In a study of working-class women, she found that some women could not deploy the 'narrative tropes' of agency and narrative within their accounts. Skeggs critiques proponents of reflexive modernisation and the individualisation thesis, Beck (2004) and Giddens (1991), for their misrepresentation of the 'methods of the middle class' as universal experience (Beck, 2004, p. 126). However, I contend that the expansion of the middle class in the post-war period has meant the methods and resources Skeggs describes are available to a wider population. To reify class distinctions in such binary terms in the contemporary era may underestimate the extent to which the construction of narrative self is no longer confined to the domain of the middle classes. Furthermore, as Savage argues, in socially mobile societies the production of class cultures and class identities is not a static or linear process, but rather works 'biographically through the individual' (Savage, 2000, p. 73).

What do methods of talking about the self tell us about processes of individualisation? This paper explores the concept of individualisation and whether it represents a discursive or a substantive shift in young adults' experience. It examines whether young adults' labour market encounters and transitions are framed as consequences of *personal choice* and *individuality*, or whether consciousness of *collectivities*—specifically, class and/or ethnicity—enhancing or constraining opportunities pervades their accounts. The latter may be revealed through explicit reference to the social patterning of life chances or by way of reference to how parents, peers or siblings influence labour market outcomes. In practice, this is operationalised with a focus on the factors young adults discursively acknowledge (or ignore) when describing transitions between episodes of education, employment, unemployment and travel.

The study

This research explores the experiences of a new generation of young adult workers in two urban labour markets. Bristol and Gothenburg were chosen as sites for this study into young adults' employment because they exhibit many of the features which are thought to characterise 'globalising' cities in post-industrial economies at the beginning of the twenty-first century (see Marcuse & van Kempen, 2000). 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. The fieldwork for this study was carried out in two stages. The Bristol data was collated between March 2000 and November 2001 for the ESRC-funded 'Winners and losers' project, a study of young adults' trajectories in contemporary labour markets.¹ The Bristol project comprised of three phases: (i) ethnographic; (ii) a household survey of 1100 young adults and follow-up interviews; and (iii) data analysis and dissemination. The ethnographic phase involved meetings with a number of key local actors, including local employers, teachers, trainers and

employment agencies, and a set of 50 exploratory interviews with young adults. The latter were purposively sampled, using a snowballing approach drawing on local contacts. Male and female interviewees were selected from different zones of the city and ethnic groups, with both successful and less successful employment trajectories represented. The material from phase 1 of the study was used to inform the project's main focus, the household survey and follow-up interviews. However, it was found that material from the 50 exploratory interviews provided a far richer source of data than was originally anticipated. The subsequent doctoral fieldwork provided the opportunity for a fuller analysis of this material and the collection of an equivalent data set in Gothenburg. This second stage of the study took place between August 2002 and September 2003.²

From the Bristol project a subset of 24 qualitative interviews was selected with employed young adults for further analysis. In addition, a comparative set of 24 interviews with young adults in Gothenburg was conducted. These 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. Equal numbers of women and men were interviewed and 16 out of the 48 young adults sampled were of ethnic minority descent.

Operationalising the concept of individualisation

The semi-structured format of the interview guide in this study invited a chronological account of growing up, school experiences, transitions from school to post-compulsory education, labour market entry and employment history. In several cases, this included returns to further or higher education, periods travelling and, for some, episodes of unemployment. The subsequent sections of the guide revisited this life story by asking the interviewee to consider the influences and circumstances which shaped these transitional choices. In many cases, reference to parents, peers, teachers or other influences were mentioned in the initial chronological account; however, this subsequent section provided a useful analytical check—within the guide—for those who had not disclosed the factors influencing them earlier in the interview. Thus, if the narrative form of the life story precludes the linking of resources and constraints to events and encourages an overemphasis upon the 'I' as the protagonist, the proceeding sections provide a subjective check through direct questions prompting further reflection.

From a close reading of the chronological accounts, transitions were classified according to whether the interviewee only mentioned *themselves*, as the protagonist making choices and initiating change, other *influences* such as close relationships or role models (e.g. parents, teachers or peers) or whether the *social context* was mentioned as affecting the course of events (e.g. neighbourhood, class or social milieu). Accordingly, 'transitions' described in the interview (from school to post-compulsory education, education to work, unemployment and between jobs) were annotated in each of the transcripts, and through subsequent readings particular attention was paid to language use at these times of transition, in order to explore

whether the young adults highlighted personal responsibility for life outcomes or not. Thus, whether transitions were framed in passive or active terms was central to this approach (see Simpson, 1993). A pro forma was completed for each interviewee including basic demographic variables, listing transitions, noting discontinuities or setbacks in their biographies, as well as self-identified critical moments and future plans.

This analysis focuses upon a subset of 12 interviews conducted with young adults in Bristol and Gothenburg. In order to explore the effects of class advantage/disadvantage and ethnic majority/minority status upon narratives, interviewees were classified into the following categories: middle-class, ethnic majority, working-class ethnic majority and working-class ethnic minority. Class was defined with reference to their parent/parents' job(s): young adults with professional or managerial parents were categorised as 'middle-class', whereas those with parents in manual or routine service jobs were categorised as 'working class'. Young adults whose parents had migrated to Britain or Sweden were classified as 'ethnic minority'. In this sample, interviewees belong to the prominent ethnic minority groups in Britain and Sweden.³ The absence of a fourth category 'middle-class, ethnic minority' was not a design feature of this study, as ethnic minority young adults were sampled in both high-income and low-income jobs. However, it does reflect the pronounced upward mobility among the children of immigrants in both countries. In each category, a young adult was selected who was *succeeding* in pursuing their goals to some extent (Emil, Jez, Helian, Rob, Nadine and Anshu) and one who was *struggling* to do so (Lena, Tom, Per, Diane, Paulo and Henry). This binary division is not clear-cut; none the less, it does correspond with the distinction between those who were ambitious from an early age and have been successful in pursuing their goals, and those who delayed the decision-making process. The analysis reveals that young adults draw on different cultural repertoires of individualised responsibility or structural constraint depending on their class, ethnic and national identities and their relative success in pursuing their aspirations.

It might be noted that having classified the young adults on the basis of class and ethnic position, yet not by gender, I have ignored a significant structural division and, in this respect, neglected to highlight different discursive tendencies in women's and men's methods of talking about themselves. Some feminist theorists argue that the articulation of the self in a manner that demonstrates autonomy and independence is a device that men tend to exercise to a greater degree than women (Stanley, 1992; Fine, 1998). However, as the following analysis does not support the view that the narration of an individual and autonomous self is gender-specific—at least among the young women and men in this study—gender differences are not foregrounded here (see Table I).

Middle-class, ethnic majority narratives

Many of the middle-class, ethnic majority young adults describe their transitions, from school to university to employment, in terms, which emphasise *personal*

Table I. Young adults, by class, ethnic majority/minority status and occupation

Social class and ethnic status	Bristol	Gothenburg
<i>Middle class, majority</i>	Jez IT Entrepreneur, 25 Tom IT Marketing, 27	Emil Electrical engineer, 29 Rebecca City council trainee, 24
<i>Working class, majority</i>	Rob Film producer, 31 Diane Retail assistant, 26	Helian Medical researcher, 31 Per Artist/retail assistant, 33
<i>Working class, minority</i>	Anshu Project worker, 26 Henry Studio technician, 31	Nadine Research consultant, 32 Paulo Youth worker, 25

aptitudes and interests, which developed from an early age and they took steps to pursue in adult life. Thus, there is an emphasis on ‘explanatory primitives’, that is reference to a priori factors which require no further explanation (Linde, 1993).

Emil is a Swedish young man with clear class advantages. He chose to study the most academic natural sciences programme at gymnasium.⁴ Emil describes his gymnasium as almost exclusively middle class:

I think most of the children had parents who were educated in university ... [there were] few working people’s children there ... It was middle class, higher middle class.

He later goes on to expand on how this middle-class environment influenced his choices:

I think when I went to gymnasium ... I was helped in my decision to go to engineering school because a lot of my friends did ... I think my friends were all ambitious and discussed a lot about the future, some wanted to be doctors, some wanted to study engineering—we discussed, of course, a lot—because *everyone that goes to this programme they have big plans for the future.* (Emil, electrical engineer)

Here he describes how choosing a programme of study for post-16 education often plays a critical role in determining future choices. Emil narrates most of his transitions since leaving gymnasium in individualised terms, based on his own ambitions alone with limited reference to others, yet in the latter section of the interview acknowledges the tacit influence of his father upon his employment and his approach to his career:

My father ... he is very ambitious, very ambitious, but still humble—he’s a little bit Lutheran—that you should work hard but not really ask a lot in return and that you have an obligation to work hard ... they haven’t really influenced me in discussing which jobs I should apply for. But I think that *my father’s way of thinking has influenced me in how I select jobs and how I plan things.* (Emil)

Jez, like Emil, exhibits a profound awareness of the influences of his father and social network upon the opportunities which were available to him. Since leaving university he has established his own thriving business as an IT entrepreneur, yet frequently refers to how his father’s business know-how has helped in crucial ways. He also refers to having a well-connected network, predominantly arising from friendships at school helping him to secure contracts:

I've found with the business stuff it's so much *who you know*—its unbelievable! The network stuff it just comes back, time and time again, which is interesting. (Jez, IT entrepreneur)

These successful young adults, who were advantaged—in terms of class and ethnicity—are extremely conscious of how having the right network has positively influenced their choices and provided them with invaluable contacts at the outset of their careers. Although when describing many of their transitions there is a tendency to foreground the self, over and above other contributory factors, the role models of their fathers are regarded as very significant for both Jez and Emil.

Rebecca's account has parallels with Jez and Emil's, yet she is more reluctant to acknowledge influences. She refers to 'planning' several times in her interview, and describes planning her trip to the USA to work as au pair for years prior to going. Her account exhibits a strong sense of herself as independent and autonomous, in making decisions, although in the latter section of the interview she acknowledges that she has probably been more influenced by her parents than she recognises:

[Did your [parents] have much influence on your choices about your studies or your work?] No. I hope they don't, but I know they have—sorry—they do. I think so. It's probably why I always know that I was going to study at the university, because they never told me, it's just been there. (Rebecca)

Rebecca works for the city council and her parents were both senior civil servants; thus, she goes on to comment: 'I think my parents influenced me more than I actually think they do.' Notably, in her chronological account, Rebecca describes her transitions and the process of making decisions that preceded them without reference to her parents or peers. She later mentions in passing that her mother sent her the job advertisement which she applied for on leaving university, thus suggesting her mother played a greater role in her choices than she initially implied. Rebecca's and Emil's references to parents' *tacit* influences, which are internalised, rather than *explicit* transmission of careers guidance, is typical of the middle-class interviewees. This is particularly the case for the young adults from Gothenburg, perhaps due to the emphasis upon independence and self-sufficiency in Swedish culture (Daun, 1996). As the admission of parental influence could be seen to undermine individual autonomy and independence, it tends to be acknowledged in the latter sections of the interview rather than in the initial chronological narrative. In contrast, many of the middle-class young adults in Bristol acknowledge critical junctures in their life histories when their parents' advice has encouraged them in a particular direction.

Some middle-class young adults, like Tom in Bristol, have not pursued a linear career trajectory, and instead have changed jobs and career path a number of times. Tom expresses an explicit resistance to the standard collective transitions from public school to university to professional job. He explains how he did 'not want to be piped into the conduit of professional life', implying pathways which some of his fellow school-leavers eagerly pursued. His labour market entry was, in part, characterised by an avoidance of making decisions and resistance to conventionally prescribed career paths. He, thus, spent time travelling and working overseas, held factory jobs and

worked in bars while studying. He then worked in the public sector for a number of years, before deciding to pursue a more lucrative career in IT. No straightforward trajectory of progression is apparent from Tom's account, or explicit link between his jobs and class advantage:

I haven't been snobby about the things I've done, I haven't been 'Because I've been educated in such and such a place I demand this type of [job]', you know, that's never been an issue, but for a lot of people I've met it has been. (Tom)

Bucking convention is a recurrent theme within Tom's account; a political awareness and discomfort with the persistence of social structures might account for the tone of Tom's account, as he expresses some uneasiness about the ethnic and class advantage he enjoys:

being aware that being a white male in their twenties who's confident is like, you know, in a very cynical sort of way—it's a very useful thing; And being aware of something doesn't mean you can't use it to your advantage, you know? And yeah, sometimes it is a little bit distasteful perhaps because I am 'Mr Average', you know?—in terms of the sort of mainstream corporate lifestyle—and that's why possibly some things are easier for me that might be harder for somebody else. (Tom)

Despite the marked differences between Tom's account and those of the other middle-class young adults cited here, it illustrates his capacity to *make choices* and *exercise agency*, within the context of a supportive family, although his family is not framed as the decisive factor in his biography.

Working-class, ethnic majority narratives

Young adults from working-class majority backgrounds make the most strident claims to being independent, 'self-made' individuals; in particular, those who have been upwardly mobile—relative to their parents' jobs—emphasise their independence and lack of influences. Financial independence from an early age and a lack of role models are recurring themes within these interviews.

because no one in my family had ever got an O-level, I was the first person to get an O-level. It was just my own personal momentum, and I was very much the driving force behind my own academic achievement. (Rob, film producer)

I've learnt from my family to be responsible and living with a single mum—taking quite a lot of responsibility for myself from a young age—I guess that makes you working maybe in another way than other people do. (Helian, medical researcher)

Helian in Gothenburg and Rob in Bristol are both conscious of their working-class backgrounds and aware of 'breaking the mould' in their families. Rob's account, in particular, is punctuated with references to how his class background has shaped his experience:

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 on to, like,

journalism courses, that was a level of disadvantage I had I think, but it's not recognised by anybody anywhere. (Rob)

Rob attributes his initial lack of success in employment to his working-class background and consequent lack of contacts in the media industry. Later in the interview he refers to his failure to get a 'proper' job at the BBC with reference to class: he explains how his inability to use 'middle-class linguistic devices' disadvantaged him in job interviews. Although interestingly, the use of the phrase itself, in this context, suggests that he has since developed the linguistic competence which he previously lacked. On the whole, Rob's account is extremely individualised as he attributes his labour market choices to his own personality and drive, rather than extrinsic influences. None the less, he ultimately concludes that the independence and determination he developed through the *process of overriding class boundaries* has enabled him to carve his own niche in the highly competitive broadcasting industry. Rob's account illustrates the complex 'intermeshing' of class and processes of individualisation (Mythen, 2005).

Helian's account of her education and career is highly individualised and lacks references to influences or the social context shaping her transitions. Yet interestingly, she defines herself as 'lower-middle class' towards the end of the interview and comments:

maybe if I had a more academic background, academic family, I would have tried shooting higher, if you know what I mean, maybe I wouldn't have gone to nursing school, maybe I would have gone to be a doctor or something, or it might have been not easier but *självklat* [inevitable], having a more theoretical job or doing an academic career or something. (Helian)

Thus, Helian, insightfully acknowledges how her aspirations have been shaped by the context in which she was brought up. Nevertheless, there is a marked lack of references to her background or parental influences throughout the rest of her interview.

Per and Diane work in conventional working-class, unskilled jobs, and thus, in contrast to Rob and Helian, have not been upwardly mobile. However, both are extremely content with their employment situations and consider themselves to be advantaged rather than disadvantaged. Neither do they demonstrate a consciousness of class expectations or milieu influencing their choices. Even so, they are both aware of how the social context framed and influenced the choices they made:

At gymnasium [college] you decide what sort of people you want to socialise with, you become friends with certain types of people. We played in a band and were into creative things, whereas some people studied and pursued another direction—they would become lawyers, and the like. You probably chose a direction and are formed as adults already at gymnasium; you are already on the path to somewhere. (Per, artist/shop assistant)

Diane left school at 16 and expresses some regret about her decision to do so, yet explains that she and her friends wanted to leave school and earn money. She goes on to explain that her parents encouraged her to 'be happy' but not to pursue specific career/educational goals, and cites this as a factor contributing to her lack of ambition at that age. Yet although both Per and Diane describe these periods of their lives as

critical turning-points or crossroads, neither deploys the discourse of class aspirations or constraints denying them opportunities that were open to others. Instead their narratives express a high degree of contentment. Even though Per talks about his family being poor, he later explains that he has not had any disadvantages in his life only advantages:⁵

So in one way I've had the big advantage that I grew up in a secure and good environment, good family, you know. And I've had the advantage that I haven't needed to work that much, and do jobs that other people have needed to do ... I've been lucky—I haven't worked for so long to afford [to live like this], that's a big advantage for me. (Per)

Per and Diane, like many of the working-class, ethnic majority young adults, refer to parents being *supportive*, but not giving *specific guidance* regarding employment or career choices.

Working-class, ethnic minority narratives

Young adults who are advantaged in the labour market in terms of class and ethnicity tend to refer to their social context at discrete junctures in their interviews when prompted. In contrast, visible ethnic minority status has a profound influence on the *narratives* of young adults; this becomes apparent from their accounts of childhood. Thus, a theme that recurs in these narratives is an awareness of the context in which they grew up being significant in shaping their early lives. This is revealed in the detail with which they describe their neighbourhoods. The pattern is particularly pronounced in the Swedish interviews, perhaps a reflection of these 'immigrant' neighbourhoods being particularly stigmatised in Sweden (Andersson, 1998).

The ethnic minority interviewees in Bristol exhibit a striking degree of individualism, and their accounts reveal a strong emphasis upon themselves as the primary agents shaping their biographies. The responses to the question: 'What people do you think have had the most influence on your life so far?', are particularly revealing in this respect:

Myself! God. Nobody specific man, nobody specific. I think I just take my bits and pieces from everybody, you know what I mean? ... [because] my family don't see my progression or anything else really apart from what I tell them. And because I'm so busy we don't speak that often ... So I just think that I just govern myself really ... I think I've been given the capability to do that. (Henry, studio technician)

Anshu and Henry have rejected their parents' examples, or modes of adulthood, and therefore cast them as negative role models in their biographies. Anshu emphasises her personal determination in her biography:

And you know, where I am now, I've basically done it on my own achievement—I've never asked for anyone to help me. So in a way I should be really proud, but it seems like I've got such a long way to go yet ... I've never gone back to my family and said 'I need money for this, I need money for that', *I don't think they have contributed towards anything really; I've always made my own decisions and been in charge and that.* (Anshu, training agency worker)

Arguably, a positive repercussion of the influence of the repertoire of individualism is the self-belief it engenders and the drive and motivation it can inspire. This is exemplified by Anshu's narrative. She repeatedly emphasises her independence and drive to achieve her goals. She describes herself as 'not like other Asians', and at several points in the interview, uses the phrase: 'that's when I realised that I was different.' Anshu draws repeatedly on the cultural repertoire of the individual, autonomous self and makes extremely limited, and usually negative, reference to the place of parents, peers and siblings in her account of transitions. It appears her belief in herself provides a powerful driving force in her life. It enables her to achieve and pursue goals, which might not otherwise be readily accessible to her. Despite her assertion that as an Asian she had less chance of getting a job with her organisation and a limited chance of getting promoted, she did get the job and was promoted. Thus, in the face of adversity her self-belief has enabled her to overcome potential barriers. Furthermore, her individualized account implies a greater identity-investment in employment, than if family, peer group or background had led naturally into her current occupation.

Anshu has been successful, thus far, in pursuing her goals. Nadine, a research consultant in Sweden had similar determination and drive, yet being in insecure employment (a fixed-term contract) and following an unsuccessful job search she begins to wonder if racism is actually hindering her progress. Nadine questions whether her gender, ethnic background and surname have played a part in her not getting asked to interviews. Both Nadine and Anshu, however, suggest that their marginalised position in some way inspired them, and gave them the drive and determination to succeed despite set backs. Nadine's account illustrates the close intertwining of class disadvantage and 'immigrant' status which are often conflated in the Swedish context. Nadine describes being confronted with class differences when she went from a predominantly working-class neighbourhood school to a middle-class gymnasium:

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 came in contact with upper-class kids and that made an impact more than anything, and 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)

Anshu and Nadine are examples of young adults of ethnic minority descent who, to some degree, have been successful in overriding class and ethnic penalties in their careers. In stark contrast, Henry and Paulo are young adults whose life histories and experiences in education and the labour market are clearly influenced by the negative consequences of ethnic marginalisation: stereotyping in school, leaving school with few qualifications and, as a result, being restricted in the employment and further education opportunities they could pursue. Paulo has had what is perceived as a typical 'immigrant' experience in Sweden. He described how the neighbourhood he grew up in affected his teenage years, as he got involved with gangs, crime and drug-taking

from a young age. Lack of encouragement and discrimination in school fostered a sense of alienation and ambivalence about his future prospects:

I didn't have a clue, then I stopped *högstadiet!*⁶ I didn't know what to do and I didn't care about nothing, I didn't care about nothing you know? (Paulo)

Yet having had negative experiences and been in and out of prison, Paulo decided not to follow the direction of many of his peers and is now employed as a youth worker, helping young people who have had similar experiences to himself. Paulo also describes how the experience of being marginalised fosters a determination to override hindrances and he has ultimately grown and developed through the challenges of street life.

Henry's initial years in the labour market appear to be guided by opportunity, and his father's advice, rather than active decisions pursuing his own aspirations. As boys both Henry and Paulo had extremely negative experiences in school, which made them profoundly aware of their ethnic minority/immigrant status and how ethnic majority teachers and others viewed them:

white teachers, European teachers, I don't know—they just seem to find it difficult to deal with of-colour kids and I don't know where it stems from, I don't know whether it stems from you know the brain, electronic impulses in their brain, their vision you know, when they see that difference, that colour, that you know—I feel it does because it you know, it just changes their attitude immediately you know? ... I've learned so much about white people, man—their intricate ways, you know? And I suppose some people think I'm paranoid, but I'm not paranoid, I just know their ways and I know how they try and make you feel sometimes. (Henry, studio technician)

I think being an immigrant is a disadvantage, a big disadvantage, you know, because I cannot say Bolivia is my home, you know? I am from there, because my passport says so, but I go there and I don't feel at home, no way, it's far away from home. And here in Sweden, I cannot say that I'm home too, I cannot say that I'm home because this is not my country, you know? *I don't look like them and people can see I don't look like them, and it's always this undercover racism always around, you know?* So at the end of it, my home is my home, it's gonna be here you know—out here [the 'immigrant' suburb outside Gothenburg] the situation is like it is and it's not really home too because all the things happen, you know ... Not knowing where you are from, not knowing where you are going, not knowing who you are or why or all these stuff, you know, and having this thought all the time, since the first day I came to this country, *they don't want me here*. That thought always grows in the back of the mind, maybe it doesn't show but it's there: *they don't like me here and they don't want me here*. (Paulo, youth worker)

It was only when they were about 25 that both Henry and Paulo came to critical junctures, when they began to make decisions about their lives and aspirations. Paulo describes a point when he was involved in criminal activity and ended up in prison. This gave him time to reflect on his life and brought him to a point of realisation:

at the time I realised that, all my friends I hanged with and all my friends I did things with, all my old gang ... *nothing happened with them—nobody successfully came out of it*, you know, so it started to be clear to me, I stay there I'm gonna end up the same way they do. If I didn't have the music or a talent or something to hold on, I would do that other way,

because I was like ‘I don’t have nothing to lose’ ... So it was like, I can do better than this, you know. (Paulo)

After a period travelling, Henry describes how he came back ‘pretty inspired’:

decided what I wanted to do, what made me happy, but obviously, I wanted to get paid to do it, you know what I mean? So I did music and I love my music, I’m a DJ, been DJ-ing for like 15 years, got into the production side of it. Did the music technology course. *I think once I took control of my own life, I was starting to feel better, and you know, more focused about what I wanted to do.* (Henry)

The experience of racism and underachievement has profoundly affected Henry and Paulo’s early experiences in the labour market. As a result, the social milieu, in which Henry and Paulo grew up, dominates their early life narratives, whereas an emphasis on themselves as individual agents emerges from accounts of their later transitions as adults.

Individualisation and common biographies

In all accounts a sense of self and acting as autonomous agents is expressed, yet some young adults have been confronted with class and ethnic boundaries making them aware how structural constraints have limited the opportunities open to them, and if not closed doors, made doors a little harder to push open. This analysis demonstrates that young adults from all classes and ethnic backgrounds are aware of how, to a degree, the social context shapes their opportunities, influences, networks and aspirations. Those who have had obvious advantages or disadvantages describe these in elaborate narratives. There is a clear correlation between people with supportive families who have been encouraged ‘to do what they want’ and a degree of class advantage. Within middle- and working-class families encouragement, support and advice have played a crucial role in supporting young adults’ pathways into the labour market. However, young adults from middle-class families describe how they have benefited from *specific advice* and *financial support* during extended periods of education and the lengthened transition into employment.

Many who have benefited from clear class privileges do not use this to structure their narrative; parents, teachers and siblings appear in supporting roles in their biographies rather than being central to the main plot. Thus, reference to these advantages is expressed at discrete junctures in their interviews, in response to prompts rather than being an integral feature of their narratives. These differences are starkly expressed in the comparison of Rob’s and Jez’s accounts. Notably the distinction between middle-class and working-class narratives is less pronounced in the Gothenburg interviews; the ethnic majority interviewees, in this context, do not express an awareness of working-class disadvantage.

Individuals from working-class and/or ethnic minority backgrounds who have been upwardly mobile—relative to their parents—are acutely aware of the disadvantages they have faced. In the case of Rob, Helian, Nadine and Anshu, upward mobility involved them being the first person in their family to go to university. From their

study of social networks and lifestyles among the middle class in Manchester, Savage *et al.* (2000) found that people with a university education more readily reflected upon and acknowledged class difference. On the other hand, young adults who have stayed within a working-class milieu are less likely to articulate disadvantage, as social mobility has not exposed them to unfamiliar class cultures. A consequence of this is that young adults who have not been upwardly mobile, like Diane and Per, do not express an awareness of structural inequality.

This confirms Savage *et al.*'s (2000) findings that there is 'ambiguity' surrounding class identities in Britain. They conclude that social class is not a collectivity that inspires solidarity or a cohesive group identity. People were hesitant when responding to direct questions concerning class in their study, preferring to discuss it in generalised rather than personal terms. My analysis suggests young adults derive a strong sense of identity from innate character traits, aptitudes, personal drive and ambition which enables them to overcome the hurdles of structural constraints and carve out their own niches in the labour market. Those who have experienced structural constraints (Rob, Anshu, Henry, Nadine and Paulo) are fully aware of their starting position relative to others and how this can constrain them. The pronounced influence of racism and ethnic marginalisation on the narratives of young adults, combined with class disadvantage, as it was for this sample, is striking. Yet in many cases, the awareness of structural constraints, ethnic or class penalties, for those who are to some degree overcoming them, has been a source of inspiration in the pursuit of their goals. Despite setbacks, a lack of resources/encouragement, and experiences of ethnic/class exclusionism, these young adults claim to possess the determination, competencies and skills to override these hurdles and barriers-to-entry. They utilise what Skeggs (2004) calls the 'methods of the middle class' in articulating themselves and draw on setbacks as a resource in the construction of coherent life stories:

Only from the position of, and with access to the *resources of the middle class*, can a presumption be made that there is a possibility first, to tell a story, second to assume the power to re-define and third, to assume a significance to the story. (Skeggs, 2004, p. 126; emphasis added)

In articulating accounts of class disadvantage and racism, against the ubiquitous—arguably, middle-class—discourse of individualisation, these young adults who have been successful in surmounting hurdles narrate life stories of empowerment rather than describing themselves as victims of circumstance.

From this analysis the young adults with a strongest sense of themselves as individual agents are those who have *overcome* class boundaries. Thus, arguably, it is such exposure that endows them with middle-class resources in the first place. This confirms Savage's (2000, pp. 101–20) perspective on class identities. He challenges aspects of Bourdieu's analysis of class to argue that there is a cultural kudos associated with the 'ordinariness' of working-class culture in Britain, which has positive connotations. Thus, those who see themselves as 'normal' and not beneficiaries of particular privileges, nor the recipients of particular disadvantages in life, could have a greater

legitimacy and moral authority in their narratives within popular British culture that those at either extreme of the class spectrum. In addition, conforming to the norm has been identified as a particularly Swedish trait by ethnologists of Swedish culture (Daun, 1996). Thus, being *vanligt svensk* [an ordinary Swede] is seen as the normative ideal for many young adults in a society where obtruding from this norm—or pursuing high status—is seen as inappropriate (Kugelberg, 2000; Johansson Robinowitz & Werner Carr, 2001).

Critics of the theories of individualisation point to the persistence of class, gender and ethnic stratification in the labour market (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Skeggs, 2004; Mythen, 2005). Yet the series of crossroads and choices that must be made in the individual's labour market trajectory are said to obscure the relationship between social structures and life outcomes such that young people are unable to 'link their fates to the ways in which society as a whole operates' (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p. 4). Accordingly, in the era of late modernity people praise themselves for their successes and blame themselves for failures. Further, the axiomatic emphasis upon the 'I' in life stories precludes actors from making connections between themselves and social structures (Bauman, 2001). However, this analysis of young adults' narratives rather reveals a dialectical relationship between recognition of influences and social milieu combined with a strong emphasis on the self. This confirms Mythen's contention that patterns of individualisation and the persistence of structure *can* co-exist: 'there is no sociological obligation to make an either/or choice between cohesive collective networks or individualized identities (Mythen, 2005, p. 143).

Thus, it is unsurprising that these young adults, many of whom are the first person in their families to go to university, and have not followed in their parents' footsteps, articulate their lives in individualised terms. Intergenerational mobility in both Sweden and Britain is relatively high (Blanden *et al.*, 2005). The sense of being an independent, autonomous individual who is responsible for one's life outcomes is understandable in the post-war era and post-industrial societies, which are characterised by a high degree of social mobility. Although embedded forms of stratification persist, for socially mobile young adults in both countries, the explicit connections between social context, class and outcomes can appear faint.

Notes

1. Steve Fenton, Harriet Bradley, Jackie West, Will Guy and Ranji Devadason, all of the Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, formed the research team for this project (ESRC number: R000238215).
2. 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, Lennart Svensson, Tomas Berglund and many others at the Department of Sociology, Gothenburg University, for their assistance during this period.
3. Anshu is of Indian descent, Henry Black Caribbean, Nadine Croatian and Paulo Bolivian. With the exception of Paulo whose parents migrated when he was 5, they were all born in Britain/Sweden.

4. Gymnasium is the standard institution for upper-secondary education in Sweden; 95% of 15–16-year-olds went directly to gymnasium after compulsory schooling in 1999 (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2001).
5. As an artist, Per works in his studio during the week, living on unemployment insurance and his part-time ‘extra’ (illegal) shop job. As long as he is able to maintain his insurance status, with temporary episodes of full-time employment, social insurance enables him to spend time on art.
6. Middle school, 13–16 years.

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