Understanding the experiences of long-term unemployed young adults (aged 18 – 24) in the South West of England

Submitted by Rachel Lesley Hogden, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, April 2016.

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

(Signature)
Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the experiences of an under-researched group of long-term unemployed young adults aged 18 – 24 years old. The research was undertaken in the South West of England between July 2010 and January 2013; a period of economic uncertainty and social instability in the UK. The initial sample comprised nineteen young adults, chosen to represent the diversity of those who were unemployed at that time. The longitudinal approach allowed for an exploration of their changing attitudes and self-understandings over a two year period. Whilst the interviewees shared much in common with their younger counterparts whose experiences have been the focus of previous research, there were also some significant differences. Not only did their priorities differ as they approached their mid-twenties, but they also held the capacity to project themselves further into the future; contemplating what life might be like in five years’ time.

The findings revealed a tension between culturally embedded ideas that continue to support the primacy of paid work, and the ways in which some of the young adults were able to (re)define their lives. The importance of experiences outside of paid employment emerged as significant, suggesting the need for a broader understanding of what constitutes ‘work’. Whilst some of the young adults seemed to have adopted late-modern perspectives, engaged in a form of reflexive life management, others appeared to be struggling to reconcile the opportunities available with their expectations.

In part, some of the differences between the participants were linked to gendered subjectivities; with the young men finding it more challenging to make sense of their lives beyond the world of paid work. However, the young adults’ experiences could not be divided by gender alone, nor could gender be disembedded from the broader context of their lives: their family backgrounds; their historical contexts; their educations; the discourses that influence their lives; their location. These structural factors were continuously at play in the lives of the participants, but did not preclude the possibility of them exercising their agentic abilities. When considering the findings as a whole it was the young adults’ ability to experience a sense of agency, combined with a feeling of belonging, which emerged as significant.
Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the support, advice and encouragement I have received from a number of people.

It would not have been possible to complete the research without the supervision and guidance offered by Rob Lawy. His genuine enthusiasm and interest in the research has always acted as a motivator. I have also appreciated his honest feedback and the interesting discussions we have had.

Keith Postlethwaite has offered valuable critique at key points in the research. I always found it useful to try and articulate my ideas to him; challenging me to explain my thoughts clearly.

I am grateful to the University of Exeter for the funding that enabled me to undertake the research.

My friends, family and colleagues have been extremely supportive; taking the trouble to enquire about progress; offering encouraging words and practical support. Special thanks must go to my family, my good friend Kate Ellis and to James Young. All of whom have shown unwavering confidence that I would manage to complete the research.

I want to acknowledge the two organisations that facilitated access to the research participants; they took an interest in the aims of the research and made me feel welcome.

Finally, it is important to recognise the vital contribution of the young adults who participated in the research. They generously and freely gave up their time to speak with me, providing a rich source of data that I felt privileged to have access to.
Table of Contents

Statement 1
Abstract 2
Acknowledgements 3
Contents 4

Chapter one – Introduction 7

1.1 Rationale – my motivation 8
1.2 A timely and relevant study 12
1.3 Why 18 – 24 year olds? 13

Chapter two – Context 17

2.1 Keynesian economic policy in the ‘golden age’ of employment 18
2.2 Trade and technological change 20
2.2.1 Expansion of global markets 21
2.3 Changing social attitudes 23
2.4 Redefining the role of the state – reconfiguring unemployment 28
2.5 Education and training 31
2.5.1 Youth training schemes 32
2.5.2 New perspectives: learning or investing? 33
2.6 Setting the scene – the global financial crisis 36

Chapter three – Literature Review 40

3.1 Definitions 41
3.2 Official definitions 46
3.3 The ‘human need’ for employment 49
3.4 Social exclusion 54
3.4.1 Not in education, employment or training (NEET) 55
3.4.2 Jobs without training (JWT) 60
3.5 Transition 64
3.5.1 Transition in the post-Second World War period 65
3.5.2 Change 70
3.5.3 Choice and individualisation 71
3.5.4 Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson – Horizons for action 73
3.5.5 du Bois-Reymond – ‘choice biographies’ 75
3.5.6 New approaches 78
3.5.7 The Teeside studies 80
3.5.8 Henderson et al. – Inventing adulthoods 84
Chapter four – Methodology and Methods

4.1 Research aims
4.2 An interpretative approach
4.3 Theoretical framework
4.4 Longitudinal study
4.5 Rationale for undertaking interviews
4.6 Methods
4.6.1 Summary
4.6.2 The participants
4.6.3 Interview schedules and interviewing
4.6.4 Analysis
  4.6.4.1 Using NVivo
  4.6.4.2 Theorising
4.6.5 Ethical considerations
  4.6.5.1 The participants
  4.6.5.2 Informed consent
  4.6.5.3 Confidentiality and anonymity
  4.6.5.4 Detriment caused to the research participants or others

Chapter five – Findings: Part I

5.1 Overview
5.1.1 Bourdieusian concepts
5.1.2 Social exclusion
5.2 Life on the margins
  5.2.1 At a ‘turning point’ – Nicola
  5.2.2 Chaotic lives and precarious work – Nick and Luke
    5.2.2.1 ‘Real’ work or filling in time?
5.2.3 Implications
5.3 Tensions between the old and the new: culturally embedded ideas and new understandings
  5.3.1 Identity
5.4 Gendered career identities – Tom and Becky
  5.4.1 Tom
  5.4.2 Becky
  5.4.3 Implications
5.5 Expectations of a ‘normal’ life – Greg and Andy

Chapter six – Findings: Part II – Twenty-first Century Living

6.1 Defining life in new ways
  6.1.1 Giddens – the reflexive project of the self
  6.1.2 Côté – pilots of their own destinies?
6.2 Housing careers – Libby and Anna
  6.2.1 Libby – looking for escape and searching for meaning
  6.2.2 Anna – attempting to secure the future
6.3 Compensatory career identities – Greg and Simon
6.4 Alternative occupations – Andy and Nicola
6.4.1 Andy – ‘being able to do everything myself’ 246
6.4.2 Nicola – finding a sense of meaning through giving back to others 257
6.5 Summary of findings 263

Chapter seven – Discussion and Conclusions 269

7.1 Reflections on the research questions 270
7.2 Structure and agency 271
7.3 A feeling of belonging 275
7.4 Grasping the opportunities – a gendered response to the twenty-first century? 278
7.5 Contribution to knowledge 285
7.6 Policy implications 288
7.7 Limitations and suggestions for extending the research 293
7.8 Personal change 297
7.9 Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose? 298

Appendices 302

I – First round interview schedule 302
II – Example of a third round interview schedule 304
III – Examples of reflections written after interviews 307

References 309
Chapter one
1. Introduction

At the time of writing (October 2015) the unemployment rate in the UK is 5.4% (Office for National Statistics, 2015). It has been heralded by the current Conservative Government (2015 to present date) as at a seven-year low and portrayed as indicative of the UK’s economic recovery. Yet the unemployment rate for 18 - 24 year olds remains stubbornly high. At 13.3% some 544,000 young adults are unemployed (McGuiness, 2015: 2). 18 – 24 year olds are almost three times more likely to be unemployed than the overall population. With a further 1.67 million young adults defined as economically inactive (not in work and not looking for work) (McGuiness, 2015: 2) it is clear that the relationship between young adults and the UK labour market warrants exploration. Whilst there is widespread agreement that youth unemployment is a ‘problem’, the reasons that it is considered a problem vary significantly. It can be approached from a multitude of angles including concerns about the economic implications of unemployment on national wealth; the perceived failure of current systems to produce a suitably skilled and competitive work force; the narrative that immigration has led to job shortages for UK workers; the effect of unemployment on communities and the impact of unemployment on mental health and self esteem. However, there is surprisingly little research that attempts to further understanding of unemployed people, and even less that ‘explore[s] it from the perspective of the unemployed’ (Cullen and Hodgetts, 2001: 46).

This thesis, then, seeks to place the unemployed person at the heart of furthering understanding of their experiences. It focuses on the stories of nineteen 18 – 24 year olds, and considers what insights might be gained by listening to these young adults as they attempt to make sense of their lives. Data was gathered by undertaking up to three semi-structured interviews with each young adult over a two-year period. Undertaking a longitudinal study enabled me to follow the twists and turns of the young adults’ lives as they negotiated the labour market during a period of economic instability. The
research was undertaken in the South West of England, a diverse region in terms of the settings the young adults lived in offering access to rural, semi-rural and inner city locales. Whilst not a region automatically associated with high youth unemployment, Plymouth and parts of West Devon have higher than average rates of youth unemployment (Crowley and Cominetti, 2014: 6). Furthermore, the region as a whole has a notable lack of industry and a heavy reliance on the service sector and tourism.

1.1 Rationale - my motivation

I have always had a probing and critical approach to both study and work, along with a reluctance to accept the world around me unquestioningly. These attitudes predisposed me to research; to hold a desire to ‘dig deeper’ and to ask questions that others have not previously asked. Most of my employment has involved working with young people and young adults. The roles have been varied, but they have each involved speaking to young adults on a one-to-one basis, often at times when they are grappling with pivotal decisions about their future: i.e. choices about Further and Higher Education, training or employment. I have always been interested in the complex and diverse factors that affect their lives and their decision making. For these reasons I was drawn to undertaking research that focused in-depth on the lives of a small group of young adults.

Though I do not consider myself to be particularly political, I have a longstanding interest in questions of equity, in particular equality of opportunity. Yet I recognise how difficult this can be to achieve and believe that, though the divisions in society may be less clearly defined than in previous generations, they continue to persist. d’Ancona (2013) writes about background and its continued capacity to both empower and restrict:

The simple tripartite class system is indeed no more, swept away by deindustrialisation, the end of the old deference-paternalism equation
and the dramatic expansion of the middle class. But the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ of background are still mightily powerful.
(d’Ancona, 2013)

The control that a person is able to exert over their own life is one of the fundamental questions that I find it essential to consider. Whilst I recognise the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ of background’ exist, I find it disturbing to accept that individuals are unable to exert influence over their own lives. Coming from working-class routes, where both my parents left education by the age of 15, I might be seen as ‘manacled’ to a particular background. However, as d’Ancona acknowledged, the boundaries are much more blurred than previously with the notion of ‘class’ a more contested and complex arena. For me, education has been a vehicle via which I have gained different opportunities and engaged with new ideas and concepts. Therefore equity of access to education is something that I feel particularly strongly about. Yet I know that there are certain educational institutions that remain the reserve of the privileged, and that membership to these institutions exerts a long-term influence over the occupations that its members access. Equally, the educational experiences of some will restrict their access to, or even consideration of, particular occupations. This tension between the power of background and the ability of an individual to take control of their life is one that surfaced repeatedly throughout my research. It is of particular pertinence when considering issues of employment and unemployment, opportunity and possibility.

My motivation to undertake research with unemployed 18 – 24 year olds stemmed from my working practice. In 2007, when I first considered undertaking research, I worked for a major provider of welfare-to-work services, delivering contracts on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This included
working on mandatory\textsuperscript{1} ‘New Deal’ programmes with long-term unemployed Job Seekers (claimants of Job Seeker’s Allowance). It was whilst working with 18 – 24 year olds on the New Deal for Young People (NDYP)\textsuperscript{2} that I first became really interested in the lives of unemployed young adults. NDYP involved supporting young adults for a period of up to one year, and therefore enabled me to gain some insight into the lives of those I worked with. At the time the economy was relatively buoyant and the Labour Party (then in government 1997 - 2010) had made the claim that, under their leadership, ‘long-term youth claimant unemployment [was] virtually abolished’ (DWP, 2008: 11). In 2007, official statistics revealed that ‘just 6,900 young people aged 18 – 24 … been unemployed for a year or more, compared to more than 300,000 at the peak in the mid-1980s’ (DWP, 2007: 7). However, despite the fact long-term unemployed young adults were relatively few in number; they were nevertheless portrayed as a ‘problem’ group.

Described primarily in negative, homogenous terms, the implication was that those who found themselves unemployed either lacked the skills or the inclination to find and secure work. Indeed, James Purnell (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, January 2008 – June 2009) insisted ‘there are jobs for everyone who wants one, and it is the responsibility of the unemployed to ensure they have the skills they need to secure work’ (Purnell, theguardian.com, 2008). Purnell’s words were in keeping with the Labour Government’s ‘tougher’ stance on welfare, with the ethos of ‘reforming welfare to reward responsibility’ (DWP, 2008: 2). Gordon Brown (then Prime Minister 2007 - 2010) planned to,

\textsuperscript{1} Programmes referred to as mandatory were those where referrals were made from Jobcentre Plus. Sanctions were in place (i.e. cuts to benefits) if the individual failed to attend or to participate.

\textsuperscript{2} The New Deal for Young People (NDYP) was introduced in January 1998 to provide support for all people aged 18–24 who have been claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (or National Insurance credits) for six months or more. The aim was to reduce dependence on benefits: ‘every young person claiming JSA [Jobseeker’s Allowance] over a long period had to participate in meaningful activity designed to improve their chances of getting a job’ (DWP 2008, 4). In June 2011 the Conservative and Liberal Democratic coalition rebranded the NDYP as ‘the Work Programme’ (DWP 2012) with a more explicit focus on payment for results.
...build that fairer Britain [through] ... the overhaul of our welfare system, ensuring that everyone on out-of-work benefits are subject to an active regime that offers more support but expects more in return. (DWP, 2008: 5)

The Government, then, placed the responsibility for unemployment firmly with the unemployed person (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion). In doing so, they created an easy scapegoat; a lazy feckless group to point the finger at. Unsurprisingly, then, the long-term unemployed were frequently described in the media as the ‘hardcore unemployed’ who were portrayed as ‘work-shy’ and part of the ‘can work, won’t work culture’ (www.dailymail.co.uk, 2007).

Working directly with long-term unemployed young adults in the South West of England, I became acutely aware of how the neat generalisations and negative stereotypes (discussed above), hid the complexity and diversity contained within this group. Indeed, at that time I was working at both a city centre location and a small market town in a rural locale, and noted that the backgrounds, needs and interests of the young adults I worked with were broad and varied. To simply blame the young adults for their unemployment was at best a naïve simplification, and at worst an attempt to deliberately shift the attention away from deep-seated structural problems. It was clear that other experiences and issues affected the young adults. For example: access to public transport; levels of functional literacy and numeracy; holding a criminal record; funding for Further and Higher Education; experience of school; confidence travelling to different localities; relationships with family, friends and partners; expectations of others; reputation within the local community; levels of confidence and self-esteem; being a carer; access to a stable home environment and homelessness. Sitting within the web of their lives, it was unsurprising that the young adults’ experiences of unemployment, and attitudes towards it, varied significantly. Not only this, but their lives were often complex and sometimes difficult. It was these complex and difficult realities that I became interested in as an area for research.
1.2 A timely and relevant study

During the planning stage of my research, the global financial crisis and subsequent recession hit. This had a significant impact on youth unemployment rates in the UK, which reached their peak in September 2011; where it was ‘recorded as 22.1 per cent, the highest ever recorded level’ (European Union Committee, 2014: 18). At the time of writing it is 2015, and the effects are still being felt with youth unemployment remaining at ‘historically high levels’ (European Union Committee, 2014: 18). The recession and the resultant steep rise in youth unemployment rates significantly changed the cohort with whom I undertook my research. No longer a small yet problematic group; around one in five young people were now affected by unemployment. Unemployment, then, became a reality for a wave of young adults who, prior to 2008, would have fared better in the labour market. Unsurprisingly, this steep rise in youth unemployment heightened the attention that was paid to this group by politicians, The Media and also researchers (see for example, Scarpetta et al., 2010; Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Wilson, 2013; Crowley et al., 2013). It also led to claims that the UK was in danger of producing a new ‘lost generation’ (Ainley and Allen, 2010) of young adults, whose early experiences in the labour market had the potential to ‘scar’ them in the future – even after the economic situation started to improve.

As unemployment reached its peak and concerns about young people mounted, an unanticipated turn of events highlighted a range of complex social tensions. In the summer of 2011, the police shot and killed Mark Duggan, a black 29 year old from Tottenham in London. The event sparked protest and unrest, initially in Tottenham, but which quickly spread across ‘most of London’s boroughs and spread to parts of Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Liverpool and Gloucester’ (LSE, 2011). The ‘official response to the riots [was …] to view them as merely acts of looting and criminality, the actions of feral children, or the work of criminal gangs within the urban underclass’ (Cooper and Nicholls, 2011). This narrative seemed an attempt to
deflect attention from the dissatisfaction and unrest expressed through the riots; avoiding a more thorough exploration of the rioters’ motivations. However, the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Guardian called for a considered response and a proper investigation, suggesting the:

… causal factors are complex, representing a tinderbox of economic and social tensions whose explosion was almost inevitable. (Cooper and Nicholls, 2011)

The riots, then, emphasise the social instability and feelings of unrest that formed the backdrop to my research. Further, the events seemed highly relevant since the majority of rioters were young people: 80% of those interviewed as part of the Reading the Riots study were under 25 years of age, and of those not in education 59% were unemployed. The researchers observed that though the causes of the riots were varied ‘… at heart what the rioters talked about was a pervasive sense of injustice’ (LSE and the Guardian, 2011: 24). Further, they concluded that the rioters were a ‘group who felt dislocated from the opportunities they saw as available to others’ (LSE and the Guardian, 2011: 25). The riots, then, raised questions about how young people were experiencing (and responding to) the uncertain times they found themselves in. Occurring at the midpoint of my data collection, the events also brought home the timeliness and relevance of my research.

1.3 Why 18 – 24 year olds?

I deliberately chose the term ‘young adults’ to refer to the participants in my research. This distinguishes them from the younger cohort of 16 – 18 year olds who have been the focus of much previous research (see for example Bynner and Parsons, 2002 and Yates and Payne, 2006). Whilst there is much crossover between the two age groups and they are often affected by similar issues, there are also differences. For example, those over 18 years old are recognised as adults by the law. They are able to vote; if they commit a crime they will be treated as adults; they can legally buy cigarettes, tobacco and
alcohol; they can enter a marriage or civil partnership without parental consent. Their legal status as adults has the potential to impact on the lives of the young adults in a variety of ways, but may also influence their perspectives. Consider, for example, whether being able to legally buy alcohol in a bar changes the meaning of drinking alcohol for a young adult. Though the activity remains the same, does the change of status mean drinking no longer seems as risky or rebellious? Referring to 18 – 24 year olds as young adults highlights their status as adults, but also acts as a reminder that they are an older cohort. It was important to consider whether their age made a difference to how they made sense of their lives; did they have priorities and perspectives that contrasted with those in the 16 – 18 age range?

There were specific reasons why I chose to focus on the 18 – 24 year old age range, not least because they seemed relatively neglected in previous research. Whilst several studies had been undertaken with those termed as NEET (not in education, employment or training), they often focused on activity in the 16 - 18 year old age range. This was perhaps unsurprising, given the importance placed on pursuing Further Education for 16 – 19 year olds. However, there is a growing recognition that the ‘emphasis on 16 – 19 and the concentration of guidance at this time is too narrow’ (Quinn, Lawy and Diment, 2008: 10). The need to broaden the scope of research to include those in the 18 – 24 year old age range relates, at least in part, to the changing nature of transition in the UK (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). More protracted and extended than in previous generations, it has become increasingly important to consider those in the 18 – 24 year old age range in order to get a fuller view of the complex transitions experienced by young adults in the early twenty-first century.

During the mid to late 2000s there was much debate about the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in England. It seemed that this would become a critical issue in the lives of both 16 – 18 year olds and 18 – 24 year olds, and the focus of much future research. *The Education and Skills Bill* (2008) introduced legislation to raise the compulsory participation age to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015. 18 – 24 year olds were set to become (at least in theory) the
first age group with the potential to be disengaged and inactive. However, the legislation was passed at the start of the recession and, as youth unemployment rocketed, there was a shift in emphasis away from RPA. Further, with the change from a Labour Government (1997 - 2010) to a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition (2010 – 2015) the way in which the legislation was implemented was notably different than initially proposed. Described as a ‘watered down’ (Stephen Twigg, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, 2011 – 2013) version, the duty ‘to comply for both young people and employers [was removed] in a bid to avoid sanctions on young people, reduce costs and reassure employers’ (Foley, 2014). This has led some to argue that what remains is essentially a ‘voluntary system’ which depends on ‘the attractiveness of the options available and the support and guidance offered to help young people access them’ (Foley, 2014).

Prior to RPA just fewer than 90% of 17 year olds were already participating in some form of post-compulsory education or training – with 73.5% remaining in full-time education (ONS, 2013). With these already high levels of participation, it is possible to question whether the legislation has made much impact. However, perhaps the significance of RPA lies not in its outcomes, but rather in the reasons for which it was implemented. It was the first time since the early 1970s that the age of compulsory participation was raised, indicating that successive governments sought to address a number of perceived issues. Firstly, the need to increase the skill levels of young people in the UK so that they meet the needs of employers in the 21st century. Secondly, and related to the first, to further increase the numbers engaging in education and training beyond the age of 16. This was seen as important because the ‘proportion of young people staying in education past 16 [was] below the OECD [The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] average’ (Leitch, 2006: 4); in an ever more globalised work market, being able to compete internationally is viewed as being of increasing significance. Thirdly, legislating to raise the participation age was seen as a possible panacea to the ‘problem’ of NEET 16 – 18 year olds which, despite a range of interventions, had remained consistently at around 9 – 10% of the cohort for a number of years (Department for Education, 2014: 3).
RPA, then, was based on the premise that increased skill levels would lead to success in the labour market and economic prosperity. However, the recession and subsequent steep rise in unemployment from 2008 onwards challenged this supposition. Young workers were disproportionately affected, and workers of all ages were more likely to be ‘underemployed’; they either could not get the number of hours of work that they desired, or were employed in occupations that they were over-qualified for (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011). RPA was overshadowed by more pressing concerns as unemployment became the critical issue for 18 – 24 year olds. My research, then, was particularly timely with data collection undertaken at the peak of the recession (from July 2010 to January 2013). Though I had not initially anticipated undertaking my research during a period of economic crisis, it quickly became clear that this added a new and important dimension to my work. Set against a backdrop of economic insecurity and social instability, it was a fascinating time during which to listen to unemployed young adults as they attempted to make sense of their lives.

In this chapter I detailed the rationale for my research, with a particular focus on my motivation to undertake research with 18 – 24 year olds. My aim in Chapter 2 is to expand on some of the ideas introduced, providing a deeper understanding of the external economic, social and political factors that are relevant to research with unemployed young adults.
Chapter two

2. Context

My aim in this chapter is to locate my work within broader economic, social and political factors that are relevant to research with unemployed young adults. In order to do this I have focused on the post-war period from the 1950s to the present day.

Since the Second World War the UK labour market has altered significantly, affecting the opportunities available to workers of all ages. In order to fully understand the way in which the labour market has been transformed, broader economic, social and political factors need to be taken into consideration. Of key importance is the way in which policy has shifted; moving away from the notion that the state held responsibility for its citizens, and towards an emphasis on individual responsibility. In terms of employment and unemployment, the implications of this have been far reaching. The narrative surrounding unemployment has changed, allowing the state to abdicate its responsibility for providing employment for all. Instead, unemployment has become understood as a ‘supply-side’ issue. The implication being that the jobs exist, but that some lack the skills or the inclination to secure them. This powerful narrative, located in the tenets of neoliberal economic policy, did not emerge from a vacuum. Rather, economic and social changes are interconnected with policy; each shaping the other and exerting a powerful influence on the lives of individuals.

I begin this chapter by considering the conditions of ‘full employment’ experienced during the 1950s and 1960s, during which time the social liberal rationale of Keynesianism influenced economic policy. In the second section I discuss the impact of global markets and deindustrialisation which contributed to rising unemployment from the 1970s onwards. Changing social attitudes are considered in the third section, focusing on the role of women and their relationship with paid work. In the fourth section I explore policy responses, explaining the shift in economic policy from Keynesianism to neoliberalism. This redefined the role of the state and reconfigured unemployment as an
individualised problem. The penultimate section of this chapter discusses the ways in which education, and attitudes towards education, have changed since the 1970s. I outline the reasons young people started to remain in education for longer, and consider the consequences of this.

In the final section of this chapter I consider the recent past from the global financial crisis of 2008 until the present date. This sets the scene for my research and highlights the circumstances of economic uncertainty and social instability that formed the backdrop to my data collection.

2.1 Keynesian economic policy in the ‘golden age’ of employment

During the period leading up to and beyond the Second World War, it was Keynesianism that dominated economic policy; the state held responsibility for welfare and ‘social justice required decreasing inequality through social programs and a redistribution of resources and power’ (Levitas, 1996: 14 paraphrased in Hursh, 2005: 4). Government policy was committed to ‘maintaining full employment’ (Matthews, 1968: 556) and the state accepted responsibility for unemployment. Successive Labour and Conservative governments from Atlee (1945 - 1951) through to Callaghan (1976 - 1979) routinely utilised fiscal policy to offset market distortions. Their aim was to maintain full employment and promote economic growth. The period from the 1950s up until the 1970s has been read by many as a ‘golden age’ for employment. Indeed, the labour market was buoyant and there was a,

[...] high demand for labour in general, with young people also in demand [...] the economy was booming and there were plenty of jobs for those who wanted them. (Pollock, 1997: 616)

In the immediate post-war years there was a high demand for workers in ‘post-war reconstruction [which] ensured that there were jobs for virtually all who wanted them’ (Hunt, 1988: 15). Indeed, there was a public and private
‘investment boom of unusual proportions’ (Matthews, 1968: 561) which contributed to economic growth and helped to generate labour market opportunities. At the same time there was also a boost in international trade, which was reflected in the growth of the UK’s export markets (Matthews, 1968: 563). For example, between 1950 and 1953 the UK exported some 26.5% of world manufacturing exports (Booth, 2003: 24). From the mid-1950s onwards manufacturing also benefitted from a growing appetite amongst British consumers for labour-saving domestic products such as washing machines, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, along with luxury items such as televisions, music systems and cars (Jackson). A number of factors, then, combined to result in a ‘long boom’ (Callaghan, 2002: 440) which young workers benefited from along with their older counterparts.

During the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s ‘school-leavers were an integral part of the labour market’ (Simmons, 2009: 141). The ‘vast majority of young people left school at the earliest opportunity’ (Cregan, 2001: 126) aged 15 years. Furthermore, they left with ‘no qualifications’ (Roberts, 2009: 358) yet were still able to secure full-time employment with relative ease. Pollock (1997) maintained that ‘labour market uncertainty had all but disappeared and young people could look forward to stable transitions into secure jobs’ (Pollock, 1997: 616). Yet this did not mean a full array of labour market opportunities was available to all. School-leavers primarily entered semi-skilled and unskilled work; skilled manual trades (via apprenticeships); technical occupations and clerical work (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007: 557) with factors such as location and family background acting as pre-determinants for the majority (Roberts, 2009). The labour market was highly segregated; therefore plentiful employment did not necessarily mean great choice. Nevertheless, most were prepared to expect (and accept) their occupational ‘niche’ (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Though outcomes were far from equal, ‘family backgrounds and education aligned most young people’s aims and expectations with the kinds of jobs that they found waiting’ (Roberts, 2004: 203).
2.2 Trade and technological change

By the mid-1970s the ‘long boom’ (Callaghan, 2002: 440) was over and unemployment had started to rise steeply. Technological advances, deindustrialisation and the decline of the UK manufacturing sector are often read as responsible for this shift. Matthews (2007) notes that UK manufacturing output between 1953 and 1973 ‘grew slower than almost all her competitors’ (Matthews, 2007: 775) and that the UK share of world manufacturing exports had shrunk to 9.9% by 1973 (Matthews, 2007: 764). Britain had not adopted the mass production techniques and technology used by competitors in North America and Germany. This left manufacturers dependent on high levels of ‘manual labour, assisted by general purpose machinery, some of it quite old’ (Offer, 2008: 538). As labour costs rose, these production processes became increasingly inefficient. Neither, however, had British organisations made the same investment in skills as some of their European counterparts who had a ‘deep pool of human capital in the form of state-regulated apprenticeships, demanding and high-status tertiary engineering degrees, and good intermediate technical training and qualification’ (Offer, 2008: 539). As a result they were ‘less productive [and had] shortfalls in management and higher technical skills’ (Offer, 2008: 539).

Even prior to the OPEC oil crises (1973 and 1979/80) the manufacturing sector in the UK faced difficulties. Nevertheless, the oil crises undoubtedly acted as a catalyst for its decline as energy costs soared: with an increase of 46% between 1973 and 1981 (Georgellis, 1994: 827). Manufacturers were left struggling to operate efficiently and competitively and what followed was ‘the loss of substantial parts of Britain’s manufacturing base and further employment losses in those industries where plants survived’ (Frost and Spence, 1991: 81). Between 1981 and 1987 Britain lost ‘almost one million jobs’ in manufacturing and ‘three in every four of these losses were for males working full-time’ (Frost and Spence, 1991: 135 - 136). This had a particular impact on the youth labour market since manufacturing had, over the
preceding decades, offered entry level opportunities to many un-skilled school leavers.

### 2.2.1 Expansion of global markets

There were specific reasons why the UK was unable to cope with the expansion of global markets and the competition this introduced. Since the 1970s ‘the influence of global markets’ (Ashton, 2007: 2) has extended significantly. This has been made possible by the loosening of ‘traditional tariff barriers protecting national economies’ (Ashton, 2007: 2), along with technological advances:

... knowledge, information and finance are able to flow across the world quickly and efficiently via global communication networks. (Simmons, 2010: 367)

As a result ‘China, India and other ‘emerging economies’ ’ (Simmons, 2010: 372) have been able to enter the global market, providing new competition for developed economies. Crucially, this has not only expanded international trade in finished products, but has also made it possible to produce goods in new ways. Indeed, it is ‘increased trade [through] the ‘fragmentation’ of the production process’ (Dluhosch, 2008: 133) that has had a significant impact on the UK labour market. Previously, organisations were forced to operate within ‘the confines of national economies [and] the costs of labour were more or less fixed’ (Ashton, 2007: 3). Through fragmentation (also known as modularisation), production changed dramatically since ‘different parts or functions of the production process can be carried out anywhere in the world’ (Ashton, 2007: 3). Consequently, companies are now able to:

... locate production anywhere in the networked world in order to take advantage of low cost labour or areas of a plentiful supply of skilled labour. (Ashton, 2007: 3)
This has presented a ‘significant competitive advantage’ for organisations that are able to locate parts of their production in ‘low labour cost countries’ (Ashton, 2007: 3). However, the obvious corollary of this is that developed countries (such as the UK), with relatively high labour costs, are left struggling to produce goods competitively.

Developed countries responded to competition from global markets by placing a ‘growing emphasis upon the importance of the knowledge economy’ (Simmons, 2010: 371). This was premised on the argument that developed countries no longer require high numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled labour, since parts of the production process are undertaken in countries with lower labour costs. Instead, it is maintained, developed countries require high-skilled, knowledge based roles. This optimistic interpretation suggests a ‘rebalancing’ of the labour market in the UK, away from un-skilled labour and towards high-skilled work. However, whilst it is possible to maintain there has been ‘a general upward shift in skill distribution overall’ (Green, 2006: 36), there is little evidence to suggest that the UK is becoming a knowledge economy. Whilst the ‘fastest job growth [over the decade 1997 – 2007 was] in the higher paid jobs, the second fastest rate of growth has been in the lowest paid sector’ (Ashton, 2007: 5). It is therefore more accurate to discuss ‘job polarization’ (Goos and Manning, 2007: 118) in relation to the UK labour market. Though some workers secure high-skilled, well paid employment, for many the reality is ‘low-skilled work, usually poorly paid and often transitory in nature’ (Simmons, 2008: 430).

Competition from international trade is a key factor that has affected the nature of work in the UK and made an impact on the youth labour market in particular. Though young people are able to enter high-skilled work, these roles are generally taken by graduates who have invested a considerable amount of time (and money) in their education. However, with high numbers of young people now participating in Higher Education, Brown and Hesketh (2004) note that ‘40 per cent of graduates are not actually using their university-acquired skills in their work’ (Brown and Hesketh, 2004: 63). Further, it is important to recognise that Higher Education has also expanded
in developing countries and there is now ‘an abundant supply of graduate labour in China and India [which] may lead to the relocation of some knowledge intensive activities’ (Ashton, 2007: 7). This may have a growing impact on the outcomes for UK graduates; with ‘knock-on’ implications for young people with lower level qualifications. Moreover, it highlights that global markets are constantly evolving in ways that impact on the UK labour market. The expanding influence of the global economy can no longer be understood purely in terms of the relocation of low-skill or manual labour to countries with low labour costs.

Avis (2007) points out that the rhetoric of requiring high-skill to compete in a global economy ‘plays down the presence of un-skilled and semi-skilled jobs, which nevertheless remain central to the economy and to many people’s working lives’ (Avis, 2007: 23). It is important to acknowledge that the reality for many young people entering the UK labour market is that the roles available are ‘to do things like cleaning streets and offices, packing and delivering boxes, staffing call centres, or operating supermarket checkouts’ (Wolf, 2002: 49).

### 2.3 Changing social attitudes

One of the greatest changes in the UK over the past 50 years has been the transformation of attitudes towards men and women and their roles within the workforce. During the 1950s and 1960s employment (and unemployment) was generally understood in terms of male experiences, with the literature focusing on boys and their entry to the labour market (see for example Carter, 1966; Willis, 1977). Boys and girls had very different experiences, grounded in cultural attitudes that perceived the role of men and women in contrasting ways. Boys were ‘regarded primarily as workers’ (Holloway, 2005: 201), whereas there was an underlying notion that ‘a woman’s place was primarily in the home’ (Holloway, 2005: 202). In some ways these attitudes were surprising, given that the Second World War had provided women with the ‘opportunity to experience different types of lives than they had lived before
the war’ (Holloway, 2005: 193). Moreover, it was their experience of paid work that was fundamental to this difference. Women were conscripted for the first time and those with young children were also encouraged to work through ‘the provision of nurseries for the care of very young children’ (Hunt, 1988: 10). Following the war, however, many women ‘returned to domestic life’ (Crompton, 1997: 1) and the ‘primacy of women’s role as homemaker and mother’ (Holloway, 2005: 193) was sustained.

There was no immediate transformation of cultural attitudes following the Second World War, with ‘normative assumptions about women’s role in society’ (Holloway, 2005: 193) appearing firmly embedded. Yet set against these ideas were the economic conditions that resulted in labour shortages and created a demand for women workers. Therefore many women ‘continued in employment [and …] the numbers of women going ‘out to work’ carried on rising’ (Crompton, 1997: 1). Tension existed between the need for women to engage in paid work, versus deep rooted ideas about their role within society. These contradictions were evident in the Government’s approach to women and the labour market. Women were encouraged by the Labour Government (1945 – 1951) to take up work in ‘employment sectors suffering from labour shortages’ (Holloway, 2005: 185). However, they were not offered equal pay as an incentive; with the argument made that the work they undertook was ‘women’s work’ and ‘consequently worth less pay’ (Holloway, 2005: 190). Women were treated as a ‘reserve army of labour’ (Anthias, 1980: 50), with the underlying assumption being that they would return to domestic life if demand dwindled. Furthermore, married women’s wages were often seen as supplementary to the male breadwinner’s, rather than as essential to the household income.

From the 1950s onwards domestic products such as washing machines, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners started to become more affordable. Some researchers maintain that this reduced the amount of hours spent on domestic labour, making it easier for women to participate in paid work. Indeed, Gershuny and Robinson (1988) suggested that:
... women in the 1980s do substantially less housework than those in equivalent circumstances in the 1960s, and that men do a little more than they did (although still much less than women). (Gershuny and Robinson, 1988: 537)

Yet other researchers contest this view, maintaining that technology has not reduced the amount of domestic labour undertaken by women (see for example Wajcman, 2010). Further, it is suggested that domestic technologies may have helped to reaffirm the traditional role of women; ‘household appliances may have been substituted for a more equal allocation of labour’ (Wajcman, 2010: 275).

There were a number of differences between the work undertaken by women, and that undertaken by men. Over the life-cycle, men tended to have ‘only one (continuous) employment spell, albeit in different jobs’ (Main, 1988: 28). Women, by contrast, were likely to have ‘working lives punctuated by periods of non-labour market activity’ (Main, 1988: 28). These gaps in paid work were primarily caused by raising children, following which full-time employment was likely to be replaced with ‘part-time work and home and family care’ (Bynner et al., 1997: 68). This is described as a ‘double-peaked employment profile’ (Crompton, 1997: 29) for women. Though women returned to paid employment and remained attached to the labour market, part-time roles were often of lower status and pay. This led to ‘a sizeable amount of downward occupational mobility across the break from work for childbirth’ (Dex et al., 2008: 54). The part-time roles that women entered in the 1950s and 1960s were often specifically ‘created by employers to fit around women’s domestic responsibilities’ (Crompton, 1997: 30). However, as service sector work in areas such as retail and care expanded, there was a growing requirement for part-time workers and a more flexible workforce.

Not only were there differences between the number of hours worked, but there were also differences between the types of roles undertaken by men and women. Crompton (1997) described these differences as the ‘sex-typing’ of jobs and occupations [which] reflected prevailing notions of manhood and
womanhood, masculinity and femininity’ (Crompton, 1997: 41). It is this ‘sex-typing’ that is described as a major factor contributing to occupational segregation:

[…] occupational segregation by gender exists when men and women do different kinds of work, so that one can speak of two separate labour forces, one male and one female, which are not in competition with each other for the same jobs. (Hakim, 1979: 1)

Crompton (1997) maintained that though complete occupational segregation was rare, it was not difficult to find roles within traditional occupations that were undertaken entirely by men or women. Further, there were some occupations that were dominated by one or the other gender. The worrying aspect about occupational segregation was that ‘jobs in which women are concentrated tend to be those which are poorly paid [and] “difference” seems to be, almost inevitably, associated with hierarchy’ (Crompton, 1997: 43). Women either worked in occupations that were less well paid or, where they did engage in the same occupations as men, they were in lower status jobs.

From the mid-1960s onwards ‘second-wave’ feminism (Friedan, 1963) argued for a,

…real equality with men which included equal access to all areas of employment and political life as well as the unpacking and transformation of stereotypical ideas governing relations between men and women. (Crompon, 1997: 1)

Much debate centred round paid employment and equality of access to it, which was unsurprising given that ‘paid employment is the means to an independent life’ (Crompton, 1997: 1). The Equal Pay Act (1970) and subsequently the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) ‘obliged employers to recruit, train and promote employees based on their qualifications and qualities rather than by gender’ (Holloway, 2005: 213). Whilst there are continued debates about the ‘glass ceiling’ (Scott et al., 2008: 10), there are now more
opportunities for women to ‘reach the top of the occupational ladder’ 
(Holloway, 2005: 217). Certainly over successive decades ‘the pay gap has 
narrowed; notions that a woman’s place is in the home have eroded further; 
women have overtaken men in numbers pursuing higher education and 
women have made inroads into some previously male-dominated sectors’ 
(Scott et al., 2008: 1). Yet many inequalities persist, for example:

[... ] wages remain low in many occupations dominated by women and 
there is still a gap in mean hourly earnings between men and women 
[... ] women still experience ‘sticky floors’ meaning they get stuck on the 
bottom of employment ladder clustered in low-paid jobs. [ ... ] Women 
also still experience ‘glass ceilings’.
(Scott et al., 2008: 9 – 10)

An interesting aspect of my findings (addressed in Chapter 5) was that many 
of the young adults continued to hold ideas of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ work. 
These were culturally embedded and influenced the type of gender specific 
roles they deemed suitable. Further, they remained attached to these 
perceptions even when they recognised the local labour market presented 
limited opportunities in the sectors they were interested in. I discuss these 
gendered career identities in more detail and expand on some of the issues 
raised above. However, it is important to recognise that the nature of work in 
the UK has changed for both men and women. Whilst the discussion above 
has focused on women’s changing relationship with the labour market, men 
have also had to adapt to significant changes in the work available in the UK. 
This has not only had an impact on the types of role undertaken, but has also 
changed the way people are employed (consider for example the increased 
number of part-time roles or ‘zero hours’ contracts):

What has been called ‘the feminization of male labour’ means that 
more and more men are coming to share the conditions of part-time, 
intermittent working that most women were long used to. In fact, with 
the decline of heavy industry and the rise of the service-based 
economy, the sexual division of labour is no longer anchored to
material differences in the work process or to the musculatures of the labouring body. In this context, the persistence of the distinction between so-called ‘men’s and women’s work’ is now open to question along with the whole social construction of gender. (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 83)

2.4 Redefining the role of the state - reconfiguring unemployment

Rising unemployment posed a particular challenge to Keynesian economic policy and its commitment to a ‘protected market used to sustain relatively high wages and the welfare state’ (Avis, 2007: 16). Piecemeal changes such as the devaluation of the pound sterling under Labour Prime Minister Wilson (1964 - 1970) in 1967 only provided a short term fix. Though the stated intention was to ‘be able to sell more goods abroad on a competitive basis’ (Wilson, 1967 quoted by the BBC online), the problems were more deep rooted. Indeed, the Labour Government’s attempts to boost economic activity and curb unemployment had actually increased ‘imports, thereby worsening the trade balance, and seemed to lead to unacceptable rises in inflation’ (Kavanagh, 2011). In 1976, following a ‘sharp slide in the value of sterling’ (Kavanagh, 2011), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreed to ‘rescue’ the British Government through offering a loan ‘in return for spending cuts and continued anti-inflation policies’ (Kavanagh, 2011). Faith in Keynesian economic policy was shaken, which paved the way for a new discourse to emerge. By the late 1970s, in stark contrast to the Keynesian model of the welfare state, it was neoliberalism that started to influence economic policy.

Thatcher’s Conservative Government (1979 – 1990) introduced a whole new paradigm into British politics. Economic growth and full employment were no longer given centre stage. Instead, market forces, competition and profit were now the key economic drivers:

... the privatization of the public provision of goods and services – moving their provision from the public sector to the private – along with
deregulating how private producers can behave, giving greater scope
to the single-minded pursuit of profit and showing significantly less
regard for the need to limit social costs or for redistribution based on
nonmarket criteria. The aim of neoliberalism is to put into question all
collective structures capable of obstructing the logic of the pure market.
(Tabb, 2002: 7)

Neoliberalism reduced the role of the state and ‘allowed a shift in the rhetoric
from social responsibility where the state was accountable for ensuring full
employment, to individual responsibility. Under this schema social
responsibility became “nannying” as each individual was ‘empowered’ to
make their own decisions and choices’ (Lawy, 2010: 430). The state was able
to abdicate its previous responsibility for employment, in favour of providing
the necessary market conditions for growth.

It was the *individual* who was now constructed as responsible for accessing
the opportunities available to them. Indeed, it was claimed that:

... the necessary opportunities were there – stepping stones towards,
even if young people could not step immediately into the jobs that they
wanted. The problem, as then constructed by policy-makers, was to
persuade young people to use the available opportunities. (Roberts,
2009: 363)

Unemployment was reconfigured as an individualised problem; experienced
by those who lacked the skills or the inclination to pursue the opportunities
available to them. Similarly, inequality became constructed as the ‘result of
individuals’ inadequacy, which is to be remedied not by increasing
dependency through social welfare, but by requiring that individuals strive to
become productive members of the workforce’ (Hursh, 2005: 4).

A new language of ‘employability’ emerged; which holds each individual
responsible for developing the skills required to enter the workforce. By
shifting the emphasis to employability, the ‘demand for employment is taken
for granted, effectively economic risk is individualised; employability becomes a supply-side issue where workers are required to adapt to new economic ‘realities’ ’ (Simmons, 2009, 143). At one end of the spectrum workers are expected to develop the high level skills necessary to compete in the ‘knowledge economy’ (discussed above). Indeed, the argument is made that ‘efficiency and justice depend on people acquiring the knowledge, skills and capabilities that employers need in an increasingly knowledge-driven economy’ (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003: 107). However, those at the other end of the spectrum are also held responsible for their outcomes. The expectation here is that they will develop basic skills (in literacy, numeracy and IT) alongside the personal and transferable skills deemed necessary to enter the workforce.

The narrative of individual responsibility has influenced the response to unemployment, not just in the UK but across Europe. For example, it underpinned the European Commission’s (EC) ‘activation’ policies which were designed to:

… encourage certain unemployed individuals to step up their job search after an initial spell of unemployment […] Eventually, the activation principle makes receipt of benefits conditional on participation in programmes, in the process shifting the balance between rights and obligations of the unemployed.

(European Commission 2006: 136)

The language used is not of supporting the unemployed person, but of obligating them to take responsibility for their unemployment. In the UK these ideas became embodied in the ‘workfare’ programmes, ‘which have made receipt of benefit conditional upon participation in work-based programmes’ (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013: 161). Whilst the ostensible aim of these programmes is to facilitate a quick return to employment, they have faced criticism on a number of grounds. Concerns have been raised related to ‘the poor quality of training’ (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013: 161). Further, it is claimed that the routes they provide often lead to low quality work: reinforcing
inequality through ‘an impoverished form of employability’ (Simmons, 2009: 137).

The notion of ‘employability’ has put a particular spin on the relationship between education, training and employment. Qualifications and skills have become construed as the credentials through which individuals are able to enter the workforce at various levels. It is possible to see how this narrative might encourage increased participation in Further and Higher Education. However, the transformation that has occurred in attitudes to education needs to be located in broader economic and social changes. Crucially, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the prospects of school leavers have altered over the past 45 years. This provides the context, through which it is possible to understand how new ideas about education emerged.

2.5 Education and training

Until the late 1970s the vast majority of young people progressed straight from school-to-work, with most leaving school at the earliest opportunity:

Until the later years of the 1970s, fewer than one in five 16 years olds in Britain stayed on in full-time education (Cregan, 2001: 126).

It was apprenticeships that provided a key route through which many school leavers (particularly young men) entered employment, and were the ‘main formal method of manual worker skill formation’ (Gospel, 1994: 505). However, from the mid-1970s onwards unemployment (not just youth unemployment) started to rise. This led to surpluses of labour which included skilled men and ‘skills became more readily available in the external market’ (Gospel, 1995: 41). Employers were therefore able to acquire skilled workers with ease and were less incentivised to invest in lengthy and costly apprenticeship training. The sharp decline in UK manufacturing (as outlined above) meant that a ‘million jobs in manufacturing disappeared’ (Haxby and Parkes, 1989: 169). As a consequence, a ‘training tradition [apprenticeships]
that had served the country for four centuries was decimated in four years’ (Haxby and Parkes, 1989: 169).

As the 1970s progressed and unemployment continued to rise, the prospects of young people changed significantly and they could no longer anticipate an unrestricted entry into the labour market. Therefore ‘lack of job availability was the context’ (Cregan, 2001: 126) in which young people started to remain in education for longer. In the school year 1972 to 1973, at the end of a period of sustained economic stability, the Raising of the School Leaving Age (ROSLA) was implemented. Though ROSLA can be understood as a political response to increased youth unemployment, the stated goal was to remove inequalities in the system by providing a free general education for all up until the age of 16. From the outset, however, tension existed between the notion of equality for all versus the ‘reality of preparing pupils for radically different futures in life’ (Woodin, McCulloch and Cowan, 2012: 12). This stimulated much debate about curriculum reform, with a ‘widespread concern not simply to add ‘an extra year’ but rather to rethink the nature of education in the face of considerable social and economic changes’ (Woodin, McCulloch and Cowan, 2012: 12). At the heart of this dilemma were the ‘working class boys’ (Moore, 2000: 18, emphasis in original) who were no longer able to progress straight from school to work. In an attempt to make education seem more relevant to a broader group of young people, the ‘ ‘world of work’ [was introduced] into the curriculum’ (Moore, 2000: 18). This ‘stimulated experiments in vocational education [which] gathered pace’ (Woodin, McCulloch and Cowan, 2012: 13) from the mid-1970s onwards as unemployment continued to rise.

2.5.1 Youth training schemes

It was during the high unemployment of the late 1970s and early 1980s that youth training schemes also emerged. The Manpower Services Commission (MSC) was established in 1973, with the aim of providing the ‘central organization needed to coordinate training across industrial sectors' (Finegold and Soskice, 1991: 227). There was an ‘agenda of improving the
competitiveness of British Industry’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996:10) through improving the quality of vocational education and training (VET). However, the MSC soon became focused on the ‘immediate problem of growing youth unemployment [and …] supervised the first substantial injection of government funds into training’ (Finegold and Soskice, 1991: 227).

From the outset government funded training initiatives moved through many different guises, including YOP (Youth Opportunities Scheme), YTS (Youth Training Scheme) and later YT (Youth Training) (see Finegold and Soskice, 1991: 227). These early programmes were focused on supporting those who left school at age 16 and struggled to secure employment. The aim was to ‘break the trap of lacking experience due to inability to find a job, and being unable to obtain a job due to lack of experience’ (Roberts, 2009: 356). However, youth training initiatives also removed young people from official unemployment figures. They have therefore been open to criticism as an attempt to mask the full extent of youth unemployment. Further, the success of such schemes measured in terms of providing a route to secure employment, was at best questionable:

Successive youth training initiatives have been discredited because before long they all have hit the ‘brick wall’ of insufficient employers being able and willing to offer training leading to decent jobs. So surplus trainees have either felt exploited as temporary ‘slave labour’ or have been ‘warehoused’ on community projects and in workshops where there has been no prospect of retention. (Roberts, 2009: 361)

Whilst it is important to consider the broader benefits of participating in such schemes, they certainly did not offer a guaranteed route into the labour market.

2.5.2 New perspectives: learning or investing?

The 1980s proved to be a pivotal period in terms of attitudes to education. Whilst many initially remained in education because of a lack of alternative
options, a shift occurred over this decade during which ‘new norms emerged, most 16 year olds expected to stay in education’ (Cregan, 2001: 132). Post-compulsory education and training became normalised and it seemed young people were increasingly willing to ‘invest in their careers’ (Cregan, 2001: 132). Unemployment created the conditions under which young people were left with little choice other than to remain in education. However, the ways in which attitudes to education changed were fostered by a discourse that had emerged from the 1970s onwards. Constructed as the key to economic success in the labour market, education was also portrayed as the solution to unemployment: improve the skills of the nation and they would be better prepared to meet the demands of the modern workplace. It was this notion that underpinned ROSLA and was echoed in 1976 by James Callaghan (Labour Prime Minister 1976 – 1979). Faced with deindustrialisation and high levels of unemployment, Callaghan expressed the view that the education system was failing to provide a suitably skilled workforce and was unable to meet the needs of the economy (Furlong and Phillips, 2001: 6). Callaghan’s argument was based on the premise that the jobs available demanded higher levels of skill than previously:

In today’s world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill.

(Callaghan, 1976)

This line of argument shifted the ‘blame for increasing economic inequality away from the decisions made by corporations and politicians and on to the educational system’ (Hursh, 2005: 5). Though the Government had not entirely reneged on its social responsibility, this became couched in the terms of providing education and training that was fit for purpose. Crucially, this shifted the problem of unemployment away from being perceived as a ‘demand-side’ issue, towards the understanding that the ‘supply-side’ was to blame.

Under a neoliberal approach to the economy, education and training have been constructed as key ‘supply-side’ issues, with the individual held
responsible for investing in the skills required by the labour market. The language of ‘employability’ (discussed above) has legitimated this narrative. Hursh (2005) suggests the notion of ‘employability’ has also had a profound effect on education:

\[\ldots\] employability and economic productivity become central, education becomes less concerned with developing the well-rounded liberally educated person and more concerned with developing the skills required for a person to become an economically productive member of society. (Hursh, 2005: 5)

Thus education (and more specifically qualifications), become the credentials through which individuals are able to enter the workforce at various levels. Young people are pushed into ‘investing in the credentialism offered by new examinations’ (Cregan, 2001) since failing to do so would leave them struggling to compete. However, it is important to note that the ‘pace at which young people have improved their qualifications has raced ahead of occupational upgrading’ and as a result ‘qualifications at all levels have been devalued in terms of the labour market returns that their holders can expect’ (Roberts, 2009: 359). Cregan (1999) described this as ‘running just to stand still’ (Cregan, 1999: 195). Yet young people seemingly have no choice, since to opt out of the system equates to a ‘race to the bottom’ of the occupational hierarchy. Moreover, those who ‘fail’ to invest in their education have become problematised and treated as a ‘stigmatised rump’ possessing a ‘poverty of ambition’ (Roberts, 2009: 358).

Whilst individuals are imbued with a sense of responsibility for making the most of the opportunities available to them, there is an underlying belief that they should do this not only for their own benefit, but also for the economic wellbeing of the nation. It is easy to understand how this notion has evolved from the ideas expressed by James Callaghan in 1976 (discussed above). Yet it seems surprising that this has led to the ‘largely unchallenged assumption of a direct correlation between an educated population and economic renewal’ (Lawy, 2010: 430). Indeed, this schema is accepted to such an extent that
increasing skill levels is understood as ‘the sole pathway to competitive advantage for many UK firms’ (Keep, 1997: 462). This conviction pervades policy development, even though there is ‘little evidence to suggest a relationship between education and economic growth’ (Simmons, 2009: 141); see also Wolf (2002) and Avis (2003).

2.6 Setting the scene - the global financial crisis

In 2008 the UK was rocked by the global financial crisis, caused by a ‘subprime mortgage problem, and the complex financial products based on these mortgages’ (Kickert, 2012: 171). What originated as a crisis of the financial sector was followed swiftly ‘by a ‘real’ economic crisis. Economies stagnated, companies downsized or closed, and workers were dismissed’ (Kickert, 2012: 171). By 2009 the unemployment rate in the UK had increased significantly, with youth unemployment disproportionately affected. Indeed, the youth unemployment rate stood at 18.9% and had ‘reached levels not experienced since the early 1980s’ (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011: 245). Unemployment, then, became a reality for a wave of young people who might not otherwise have experienced it. Statistics released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency in 2009 revealed that 1 in 9 graduates who graduated in the summer of 2008 had failed to secure a job of any kind 6 months after graduation. Further, of those who did secure employment more ‘were working as bar staff, labourers, shelf stackers, parking attendants and cleaners’ (Paton, 2009). The corollary of this was that those with lower levels of qualification or little experience were left struggling to compete, with many pushed from the labour market altogether.

With the data collection phase of my research undertaken between July 2010 and January 2013, I was conscious that the interviews took place against a backdrop of cuts, high rates of unemployment and economic uncertainty. It was also a period of social instability; as emphasised through the 2011 riots (discussed in Chapter 1). These economic and social tensions were the undercurrents that ran through the conversations with the young adults; an
important part of the contextual background to my research. However, since the 1990s unemployment had been understood as a ‘supply-side’ issue couched in the language of ‘employability’ (as described above). I was interested in the extent to which the global financial crisis and its consequences would challenge these ideas. Would the situation highlight the inadequacy of understanding unemployment purely through the ‘supply-side’ of the equation? After all, an individual’s employability must surely be relative to the opportunities available:

... when jobs are in short supply, even those with skills, qualifications and experience may find themselves without work. It is quite possible to be employable and not in employment. (Simmons, 2009: 143)

Above I highlighted the difficulties of understanding the problems of unemployment through the ‘knowledge economy myth’ (Coffield, 2000: 241). Nevertheless, there has been a tendency ‘in policy circles, and among some academics’ (MacDonald, 2011: 434) to explain youth unemployment through the lens of needing to ‘up-skill’ the nation. It is argued that there is an increased need for ‘higher-skilled workers, such as graduates, in the coming ‘high-skill, information economy’ ’ (MacDonald, 2011: 434). The global financial crisis and subsequent recession posed a challenge to this understanding, since graduates and those with higher-levels of skill were also affected. Whilst some struggled to find work of any kind, others were employed in roles that they were over-qualified for, or alternatively were only able to secure part-time or casual work. Though unemployment seemed to be the primary concern of policy makers, ‘underemployment’ has also emerged as a serious issue. Whilst the financial crisis might have highlighted ‘underemployment’, MacDonald (2011) suggests that ‘we will continue to see an over-supply of well-qualified workers relative to demand for them from employers’ (MacDonald, 2011: 235). Further, Roberts (2009) maintains that ‘underemployment is the 21st century global normality for youth in the labour market’ (Roberts, 2009: 4).
Though the narrative of ‘underemployment’ is a compelling one, it is important to recognise that unemployment continues to be construed by UK policymakers as a ‘supply-side’ issue. There seemed to be a brief respite at the peak of the economic crisis with Gordon Brown (Labour Prime Minister 2007 – 2010) acknowledging the ‘demand-side’ of the equation:

> When the markets and private sector fail, and cannot invest properly in the economy, the only person that can is us, the government … We are investing in the economy so that we can actually build up the economic activity, keep people in jobs, create more jobs and of course stop people being repossessed in their homes. (Brown, 2009 quoted in Prince, 2009)

Yet even during this period Ministers continued to promote the notion that the best defence against unemployment was improving skills:

> It's very important that people struggling the most to find work will get extra support to improve their skills to help them gain employment.

> We know that people whose skills are up to date are more likely to find a good job, and that employers with well trained staff do better than those that don't invest in the skills of their workforce. (John Denham, Secretary of State for Skills, 2009 quoted in DWP, 2009)

The UK has since clawed its way out of recession and the economy has made a tentative recovery. Though youth unemployment has remained stubbornly high (as detailed in Chapter 1), it continues to be portrayed as a ‘supply-side’ issue – the responsibility of the individual. The Coalition (2010 – 2015) and current Conservative Government (2015 – present date) have failed to configure unemployment in new ways.

This chapter has considered the way in which unemployment has been reconfigured since the period following the Second World War. It has traced how the state has been absolved of its responsibility for providing employment for all, shifting the emphasis towards individual responsibility. These shifts in
rhetoric and policy have been located within the interconnected economic and social changes that have occurred over this period. Economic changes such as the expansion of global markets and deindustrialisation were discussed, alongside changes in attitudes to education. I also considered how social attitudes have altered since the 1950s, redefining the role of women and their relationship to paid employment.

In Chapter 3 I expand on some of the themes introduced above through a review of the relevant literature. The chapter starts by considering the difficulties of defining terms such as employment and unemployment, work and worklessness. I then introduce Jahoda et al.'s seminal study of the 1930s which sets out the claim that paid employment satisfies ‘human needs.’ The perceived social value of employment is then discussed, exploring how ‘paid work is seen as the main vehicle of inclusion or integration’ (Levitas, 2005: 35). A key focus of the literature review is research relating to transition. Rather than a narrow focus on school to work transitions, a range of approaches is considered. The discussion incorporates the ways in which ‘individualisation’ has manifested itself in the lives of young people, and influenced the way they understand their lives.
Chapter three

3. Literature Review

In the first chapter I explained the rationale for the research, with particular emphasis on my personal motivation which stemmed from my working practice. I also detailed my reasons for focusing on 18 – 24 year olds, who have previously been relatively neglected in the literature. This should not be taken to imply that there is a lack of literature relevant to undertaking research with long-term unemployed young adults. Indeed, since unemployment might be understood as a multidimensional issue, there were a number of fields from which pertinent literature might be drawn: economics; health; psychology; education; sociology; policy studies; youth transition studies or youth cultural studies, to name a few. However, much of the literature I read differed from mine in either its methodological approach (discussed in Chapter 4), or its focus. Notwithstanding this observation, it was essential that I was able to position the research and locate it in relation to other studies. This was equally important as the preceding chapter, in which I situated the research within broader economic, social and political factors. In many ways the review of the literature and the context chapter (Chapter 2) informed each other. They are interrelated insofar as some of the important issues already discussed above, also (re)surfaced in the literature.

In Chapter 2 I discussed the ways in which unemployment has been reconfigured as an individualised problem; with the state reneging on its responsibility to provide employment for all. The language of ‘employability’ has reified this shift in the rhetoric; with individuals expected to equip themselves with the right skills (and attitude) to secure employment. Similarly, I explained how inequality has become constructed as the ‘result of individuals’ inadequacy, which is to be remedied not by increasing dependency through social welfare, but by requiring that individuals strive to become productive members of the workforce’ (Hursh, 2005: 4). These ideas percolate through the literature review in a number of different ways. The ways in which the rhetoric about work has shifted is reflected in section one. I
begin by considering the difficulties of defining terms such as employment and unemployment, work and worklessness. Definitions are found to be fluid and contested, rather than fixed and rigid; understood as ‘created, challenged, altered and sustained through […] contending discourses’ (Grint, 1991: 9). Whilst acknowledging that paid employment occupies an elevated position in the UK, the value of broader definitions is also considered. In the next section I consider the ways in which research might play into particular constructions of paid work. Focusing on Jahoda et al.’s seminal study of the 1930s, I explore the (contested) claim that individuals possess a ‘human need’ (Jahoda, 1982: 98) for paid employment.

In the third section of the literature review my focus is on how work has become construed as having a social value; of benefit not only to the individual but to society as a whole. I consider the way in which work has been portrayed as the best way of avoiding social exclusion and as the key to a cohesive society. This section resonates with the narrative of individual responsibility, discussed in Chapter 2; expanding on some of the ideas introduced. It explores the literature relating to two key policy terms: NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and JWT (Jobs without Training). In the final section of the literature review I focus on ‘transition’; exploring literature ranging from post-Second World War theorisations, to contemporary ideas. In this way it traces the same time period covered by Chapter 2; revisiting some of the points raised about changes in behaviour (and attitudes) towards education. However, the discussion has a much broader focus than school-to-work transitions; reviewing literature that takes a holistic approach to understanding the lives of young adults.

3.1 Definitions

Terms such as employment and unemployment, work and worklessness warrant careful consideration. They are often used interchangeably in the literature, blurring boundaries and defying clear definition. Keith Grint (1991) explores why terms such as ‘work’ and ‘employment’ are so challenging to
define. He maintains that words such as ‘work’ do not hold some form of intrinsic meaning, but rather their meaning is ‘created, challenged, altered and sustained through [...] contending discourses’ (Grint, 1991: 9). We should not, therefore, be surprised that there are a multitude of meanings, since there are a multitude of perspectives. According to Grint, each perspective will have been borne out of the competing discourses dominant in that time and location. Definitions, then, are historically and socially contingent and we should not fall into the trap of ‘assuming that what we think of as work is objective’ (Grint, 1991: 9). Grint warns that the ‘conventional model of work as paid employment should not be taken as ‘normal’ ’ (Grint, 1991: 9). Instead we should recognise that ‘the language and discourse of work are symbolic representations through which meanings and social interests are constructed, mediated and deployed’ (Grint, 1991: 9).

Taylor (2004), drawing on the work of researchers such as Glucksmann (1995, 2000); Pahl (1988) and Hakim (1996), maintains that ‘for most of the 20th century the concept of work within sociological definitions and empirical studies has been synonymous with paid employment’ (Taylor, 2004: 31). This echoes the ideas of Raymond Williams (1976) who explored how ‘our understandings of ‘work’ had shifted; from the notion of general productive activity which might include work around the garden or house’ (Williams, 1976, paraphrased in Henderson et al. 2007: 47 – 48) to a ‘narrowing specialization of work [...] which belongs to our ‘paid time’ ’ (Williams, 1976: 336). Taylor argues that this shift was the result of industrialisation through which clear and gendered divisions were made between the public and private spheres:

The public sphere was defined as the site of economically productive industrial labour and as a specifically male domain, whilst the private domestic sphere came to be seen as non-economic – the site of family and reproduction activities assigned to women.

(Taylor, 2004: 31)
This dichotomy, Taylor suggests, was legitimated through the field of economics which ‘hijacked the notion of work by defining it as wage labour and thus part of the economic system, so that understanding work became an economic question of the ‘monetarization’ and ‘quantification’ of labour’ (Taylor 2004: 31). According to Taylor this ‘excluded all work that was not exchanged for a wage’ (Taylor, 2004: 31). Glucksmann has also maintained this ‘rendered impossible analysis of the interconnections and interdependencies between the different spheres in which work was actually performed’ (Glucksmann, 1995: 66).

These arguments illustrate Grint’s point that definitions of work are historically and socially contingent and built upon dominant discourses. Over the past 60 years new discourses have emerged that challenge the view that ‘work’ must always constitute waged labour. For example, in the late 1960s feminists sought to challenge the view that women’s domestic labour in the home did not constitute work. It has been argued that ‘a major theoretical breakthrough involved the recognition that housework, the “labour of love” performed by women in the home, was a form of work’ (Beechey, 1987: 126). However, though this broadened the definition of what constituted work, the two domains remained dichotomous and unrelated. Further, by creating this dichotomy the possibility of unwaged labour in the public sphere (for example volunteering) is excluded, along with the possibility of paid labour in the private sphere (i.e. paying family members to undertake household chores or childminding). It would therefore seem that a broader understanding of what constitutes work is required. Rather than focus on simple binaries such as ‘paid’ or ‘unpaid’, ‘public’ or ‘private’, ‘formal’ or ‘informal’, we must recognise that work ‘occurs along a continuum rather than being situated in either one or another clearly marked category’ (Grint, 1991: 10).

Taylor (2004) built a framework that she maintained encompasses all forms of work and through which she sought to emphasise the interconnectedness between different forms. Again, Taylor built upon Glucksmann’s (1995, 2000) ‘assertion that there is no simple correspondence between pay and work; instead […] work is embedded and defined by the social relations within which
it is located’ (Taylor, 2004: 31). Rather than create a dichotomous model, all forms of work can be mapped onto a framework with six different zones (see Figure 1 below, re-created from Taylor, 2004: 39).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAID</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal paid employment in public, private or voluntary sector</td>
<td>Informal economic activity</td>
<td>Household / family work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. paid accountant or care assistant</td>
<td>e.g. babysitting for friends or neighbours</td>
<td>e.g. babysitting within the family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PUBLIC/ | PUBLIC/ | PRIVATE/
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FORMAL</td>
<td>INFORMAL</td>
<td>INFORMAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. unpaid accountant or care assistant</td>
<td>e.g. unpaid care for sick or elderly neighbour</td>
<td>e.g. unpaid care for sick or elderly relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal unpaid work in public, private or voluntary sector</td>
<td>Informal unpaid work</td>
<td>Private domestic labour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1**: Framework showing the organisation of labour

The six zones defined by Taylor are ‘paid employment, formal voluntary work, informal unpaid work, informal economic activity, paid labour within the family and unpaid domestic labour’ (Taylor, 2004: 39). Within this framework work activities are understood by the ‘context and relations within which they are embedded’ (Taylor, 2004: 39). For example, activities such as ironing or gardening might exist in any of the six zones but would have a different context and meaning in each. The zones are therefore interconnected rather than rigidly separated. Further, it is important to recognise that any one individual might undertake a broad range of work activities that might fall across a number of different zones.

Henderson et al. (2007) express similar ideas to Taylor and Glucksmann, suggesting that there may be a return to a ‘broader focus’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 48) of what constitutes work, brought about by factors such as de-industrialisation, increases in the service sector and globalisation. These factors necessitate a flexible approach to a new economy that is more ‘virtual,
reflexive [...] and networked’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 48). Henderson et al. also suggest that a blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres has occurred, brought about, at least in part, by increased female engagement with the labour market. Flexibilisation and the disintegration of boundaries between ‘different forms of work: public and private, paid and unpaid, formal and informal’ necessitate a new approach that takes into account the ‘changing meaning of work’ (Henderson et al. 2007: 48). In terms of undertaking research with young people, they maintain that these blurred boundaries mean that young people might best be understood through a ‘biographical approach that does not fragment [...] their] lives’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 47 - 49). Focusing narrowly on a young person’s relationship with paid work imposes false divisions. Furthermore, it risks missing the way in which work might be understood in the broader context of their lives. This is a growing view amongst researchers concerned with the transitions of young people (discussed in detail below); with the argument made for a holistic approach and a ‘more rounded view of youth’ (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2007: 599).

These broader definitions of work seem to have much to offer my research, which centres on the experiences of unemployed young adults. Rather than focus narrowly on their relationship with paid employment, other forms of work activities (and the meanings assigned to them) need to be taken into consideration. However, it is important to recognise that the dominant discourse of the industrial era continues to pervade common understandings of work in the UK. That is to say, that despite the alternatives outlined above, the primacy of formal paid work continues to be reinforced through a range of mediums: for example through government, the Media and also through research. A good example of this is the ‘informal’ economy; also known as the ‘shadow’, ‘hidden’ or ‘submerged’ economy. In Taylor’s framework, this would be defined as ‘informal economic activity’ incorporating a broad range of activities; from illegal activities such as drug dealing or prostitution, to being paid for undertaking childminding for a friend. The vast majority written about the informal economy is based on the assumption that it is bad in ‘monetarist economic’ (Pahl, 1987: 38) terms. It is portrayed as problematic because it is
a means of tax evasion (Neck et al., 2012; Gomis-Porqueras et al., 2014). Interestingly, the phrase ‘tax morale’ - meaning an ‘intrinsic willingness to pay taxes’ (Alm and Torgler, 2006) - has also emerged; portrayed as having a negative correlation with the informal or shadow economy. It is therefore implied that this type of work activity is not only bad for the economy, but that those who engage in it are part of a moral underclass.

The treatment of the informal economy is interesting. It not only marginalises those who engage in it, but also suppresses more useful discussions about the meaning these types of work activities hold for those who participate in them: What do individuals feel they gain from engaging in informal work activity? Why do they participate in it in the first place? How do they perceive their own actions? It is questions such as these that help us understand how individuals make sense of the full range of work activities they engage in. Broader definitions of ‘work’ such as those suggested by Taylor, Glucksmann and Henderson (discussed above) are crucial to developing an understanding of the full range of work activities individuals might participate in. However, it would be foolish to ignore the extent to which formal paid work continues to occupy an elevated position. Its hold over us must surely exert an influence over the way in which other forms of work activity are understood?

3.2 Official definitions

Official definitions of employment and unemployment are used by governments to help them understand the labour market and categorise individuals as either economically active or inactive. However, such definitions do not move us towards understanding the experiences of the individuals hidden behind such labels. Neither are official definitions as clear cut as might be supposed. The Office for National Statistics uses the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition of employment and unemployment. Internationally agreed guidelines are offered by the ILO and are applied to all people aged over 16. The ILO define the unemployed as anybody who is without work, available for work and seeking work (ONS, Unemployment and
the claimant count, 2013: 1). The UK applies this definition to anybody who ‘has actively sought work in the last 4 weeks and is available to start work in the next 2 weeks, or has found a job and is waiting to start in the next 2 weeks’ (ONS, Unemployment and the claimant count, 2013: 1).

Though the ILO provides a definition, different countries apply this in different ways making international comparisons challenging. In the UK, unemployment is measured by the Labour Force Survey (LFS) based upon a sample of around 80,000 people aged over 16 in each three month period. It is the results of the survey that are used to calculate the unemployment rate: expressed as a proportion of economically active people who are unemployed, as opposed to a proportion of the whole population. Therefore it is important to be aware that the unemployment rate, as measured through the LFS is ‘only an estimate of the true level of unemployment’ (ONS, Unemployment and the claimant count, 2013: 1) since it is based on a sample survey. The ONS indicate that they can only ever say, to a 95% confidence level, that the true unemployment rate lies between a range of values (ONS, Unemployment and the claimant count, 2013: 1).

There is another measure often quoted in relation to unemployment in the UK: the Claimant Count. This is the ‘number of people who are receiving benefits principally for the reason of being unemployed’ (ONS, Unemployment and the claimant count, 2013: 2 - 3). Whilst there is considerable overlap between the unemployment rate and the Claimant Count, it is important to note that there are also areas of divergence. For example, some people will be considered unemployed by the LFS but not appear in the Claimant Count. These are primarily people who choose not to claim, or are ineligible for, unemployment benefits i.e. 16 and 17 year-olds who are unable to claim; full-time students looking for work or people of State Pension Age who are looking for work. It is also possible for some people to be included in the Claimant Count, but not be considered as unemployed through the LFS. These are people on low incomes for part-time work who are still entitled to unemployment benefits but would not be included in the unemployment rate. The relationship between these two key measures is further blurred by the fact the LFS, as discussed
above, uses a survey sample, whereas the Claimant Count is based upon administrative records. It is therefore difficult to distinguish whether divergence between the two is caused by genuine changes in the labour market (i.e. more full-time students looking for work) or by variability caused by sampling.

It is pertinent to question the consistency of the actual measures used. The Claimant Count might be portrayed as reliable because of its base in administrative records. However, the Count can be skewed by a range of factors, for example moving people deliberately onto ‘inactive’ health benefits that are not included in the Claimant Count. It is now well recognised that, under the New Labour government (1997 – 2010), the Claimant Count fell significantly between 1997 and 2003, reaching a 30-year low of just 2.6%. Yet it is now also acknowledged that, during the same period, the numbers on incapacity benefit (for health reasons) continued to rise, reaching a high of 2.7 million (see Moore, 2005). Whilst the Claimant Count decreased, this did not necessarily have anything to do with returning people to work or improvements in the labour market.

Another factor which can influence the Claimant Count is the shifting of goalposts: specifically making it more difficult or complicated to claim unemployment benefits. In April 2014 the Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition government introduced the Help to Work programme. Those who have failed to find lasting employment after two years of participating in the Work Programme (the government’s flagship welfare-to-work programme) are referred to Help to Work. Participation is mandatory, with individuals referred to one of three options: attending the Jobcentre every day; participating in a full-time community placement for 6 months or receiving intensive Jobcentre support. Sanctions for failed attendance or participation are tough: 4 weeks loss of benefits for the first instance and 13 weeks for a subsequent failure. The Programme, particularly the 6 month community placement, has been criticised for its punitive nature. Furthermore, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) maintains that the tougher rules could discourage people from making, or continuing, to claim:
Making the JSA rules tougher and tougher will put people off claiming the benefits they need without doing much to help them get jobs.

(Frances O’Grady, TUC General Secretary, 2014, quoted by the BBC)

Changes to Programmes, then, might improve official statistics, but do not necessarily support people to return to work. These examples are introduced here to illustrate the importance of treating official definitions with caution. They simply do not offer an objective measure, since they are manipulated and altered in a variety of ways. Neither, however, should official definitions be dismissed altogether. They can set parameters through which to observe changes in the labour market, which, despite the difficulties outlined above, can still be useful. More importantly, however, these ‘official definitions’ form part of the discourse through which young adults make sense of their own experiences of employment and unemployment. The welfare-to-work programmes, to which they are subject, will also affect how they perceive themselves, and how they feel they are perceived by others.

**3.3 The ‘human need’ for employment**

In the UK in the early twenty-first century, there is an undeniable tendency to position work, specifically paid work, as the norm. Such assumptions are complex constructions, made and re-made through narrative, discourse and policy. It is useful to consider how research has contributed to the narratives that have been created around the primacy of paid work. In doing so, it is impossible to ignore the research of Jahoda et al. whose work is considered as a seminal study in relation to employment and unemployment. The research was conducted in the early 1930s during the depression and explored the experiences of mass unemployment in the Austrian town of Marienthal. Heavily dependent on one textiles factory and its subsidiaries, its closure in 1929 resulted in almost full unemployment for the town. The researchers embedded themselves within the community and sought to present a ‘comprehensive picture of life in Marienthal’ (Jahoda et al. 2002: ix). Existing statistics such as election results; population statistics; library
records; subscriptions to newspapers and membership figures of clubs were analysed in order to observe the changes in the community's behaviour when affected by unemployment. The researchers made it a:

…consistent point of policy that none of our researchers should be in Marienthal as a mere reporter or outside observer. Everyone was to fit naturally into the communal life by participating in some activity generally useful to the community. (Jahoda et al. 2002: xiv – xv)

This led to initiatives such as a girls’ gymnastics course, a pattern design course and a clothing project through which the researchers undertook participant observations as a member, albeit a new member, of the community. Whilst the researchers did not conduct formal interviews, the conversations they had with members of the community are central to the study. Indeed, their sociography gave a voice to the individuals of Marienthal ‘quoting ordinary people at some length’ something which ‘occurred only seldom in scholarly publications at this time in Central Europe’ (Fleck, C. in Jahoda et al. 2002: vii).

Jahoda et al. described in detail how the unemployed community of Marienthal struggled to fill their time, became apathetic and seemed to lack a sense of purpose. They drew upon their observations to theorise that employment satisfies key needs of human nature:

… it imposes a time structure on the waking day; it enlarges the scope of social relations … ; by virtue of the division of labour it demonstrates that the purposes and achievements of a collectivity transcend those for which an individual can aim; it assigns social status and clarifies personal identity; it requires regular activity (Jahoda, 1982: 83).

Paid employment, then, is portrayed as occupying a privileged position. It is not simply a means through which collective goals might be achieved, and social relations built. Rather, employment is placed as essential to assigning status and developing personal identity. By defining employment in this way,
unemployment is forced into a negative or ‘deficit [position] in relation to a set of ‘enduring human needs’ that are provided by paid work’ (Cole, 2007: 1134). The success of the unemployed person is gauged solely by the extent to which they manage to fulfil these needs through means other than paid employment.

Despite the fact Jahoda et al.’s research was undertaken in the 1930s, it is seen by many as highly influential. Cole suggests that the theories drawn from Jahoda et al.’s research are so deeply ingrained that they are often accepted unquestioningly as ‘social scientific common sense’ (Cole, 2007: 1135). He maintains that most subsequent research into employment and unemployment either explicitly acknowledges the influence of Jahoda et al.’s study, or implicitly does so ‘through investigating one or more of the five ‘human needs’ ’ (Cole, 2007: 1135). It is in the field of psychology where the influence of Jahoda et al.’s research is most notable, with a raft of psychological studies which specifically set out to investigate whether Jahoda’s latent deprivation model has stood the test of time (see for example Creed and Reynolds, 2001; Paul and Batinic, 2010).

Cole (2007) suggests that a major weakness in Jahoda et al.’s work is their failure to acknowledge that employment and unemployment are ‘outcomes of an historically-contingent construction of (male) identities’ (Cole, 2007: 1135). They ignore the ‘social context’ and make the mistake of accepting the ‘conventional model of work as paid employment … as ‘normal’ (Grint, 1991: 9). According to both Cole (2007) and Grint (1991), paid employment should be understood as a construction, contingent on the dominant discourse of a particular time and space. This calls into question the theory that there are ‘enduring human needs’ that can only be satisfied by paid employment; there is nothing inherent about our relationship with paid employment, but rather it has been constructed in such a way that its absence is felt keenly.

Jahoda repeatedly re-visited the initial research and compared it with more recent studies. The purpose of this was to consider ‘given major social changes in the last half-century including a generally improved standard of
living, is the psychological response to unemployment now different from what it was in the thirties?’ (Jahoda, 1982: 58). In some ways, therefore, it would seem that Jahoda acknowledged that experiences of employment and unemployment are socially (and economically) contingent. However, Jahoda maintained that whilst financial hardship and unemployment remain intertwined, unemployed people did not experience severe deprivation in the 1980s compared with the 1930s. The fact that unemployed people still found the experience negative, Jahoda has suggested, only strengthens the argument that the consequences of unemployment are much further reaching than their financial implications:

… current psychological responses to unemployment can with somewhat greater confidence than in the past be attributed to the absence of a job not just to restricted finances. (Jahoda, 1982: 58)

This did not lead Jahoda to a fresh exploration of the experiences of unemployment in the 1980s. Instead, she returned unquestioningly to the latent deprivation model which maintains there are ‘enduring human needs’ that can only be satisfied by paid employment.

Fryer and Fagan (2003) suggest that one of the flaws in Jahoda et al.’s work is that they underestimated the impact financial deprivation has on the unemployed. They claim that whilst unemployed people frequently maintain that poverty is the major difficulty associated with being unemployed, this was only paid ‘lip service’ by researchers such as Jahoda:

… the self-report methods popular with orthodox researchers were insensitive (in every sense of the word) to the complex and stigmatizing factors involved in the experience of unemployed poverty.

(Fryer and Fagan, 2003: 91)

By focusing on the latent deprivation caused by unemployment, Jahoda et al. have neglected the manifest impact caused through poverty.
Jahoda claimed that it is extremely difficult for individuals to meet the ‘human needs’ provided through paid employment by engaging with other types of activities. Further, she claimed it would require:

... a degree of personal initiative that is rare among all strata of the population, but perhaps particularly so among those who form the bulk of the unemployed - the unskilled and the young.' (Jahoda, 1982: 94)

This approach is completely opposed to Fryer’s model of understanding unemployment: the agency model. Fryer understands human beings as,

... active, initiating, future oriented agent[s], striving to make sense of, and influence events. (Fryer, 1990: 167)

According to Fryer, rather than accept unemployment in a passive way, unemployed people, as ‘future oriented agents’, are able to cope and make sense of their situations in a variety of ways. They are able to be ‘proactive’ and in being so ‘initiate, intervene in or reperceive situations in a way which allows the person (agent) to act in valued directions rather than respond passively to imposed change’ (Fryer and Payne, 1984: 273). As such, unemployment does not, according to Fryer and Payne, necessarily lead to psychological distress. Further, Fryer and Payne’s (1984) study of 11 particularly proactive unemployed adults demonstrated that some people are able to ‘distinguish work [and] purposeful activity from employment, the social institution’ (Fryer and Payne, 1984: 285). Therefore unpaid activity such as voluntary work or involvement with community activity becomes equally rewarding and important as paid employment. It is important to note, however, that the 11 participants were chosen specifically because they were proactive. They were also ‘generally well educated or had substantial work experience and were typically older (with ages ranging from late twenties to mid fifties)’ (Ball and Orford, 2002: 379). It is possible to question whether all unemployed people, particularly young adults with limited experience, are able to draw on personal resources to respond in such a proactive way.
3.4 Social exclusion

Jahoda et al.’s research introduced the concept that there is a ‘human need’ for work and this principle has influenced much subsequent research into employment and unemployment. However, Jahoda’s theories also resonate with policies that have constructed a narrative about the social value of work. The formation of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in 1998 and the subsequent publication of the influential Bridging the Gap: New opportunities for 16 – 18 year olds not in education, employment or training (1999) led to the articulation of the powerful message that:

The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience. (Blair, SEU, 1999: 6)

According to this view, employment is vital to being included in society as an active member. Further, Tony Blair (then Prime Minister 1997 – 2007) presented an alluring ‘double dividend’:

A better life for young people themselves, saving them from the prospect of a lifetime of dead-end jobs, unemployment, poverty, ill-health and other kinds of exclusion. A better deal for society as a whole that has to pay a very high price in terms of welfare bills and crime for failing to help people make the transition to becoming independent adults. (Blair, SEU, 1999: 6)

Employment, then, is portrayed as the remedy to poverty, ill-health and social exclusion, with young people required to make successful transitions, not only for the sake of themselves, but for the good of ‘society as a whole.’

Within this framework, the biggest threat to achieving social inclusion and cohesion are those who fail to capitalise on education and training opportunities and are unable to progress to desirable employment outcomes.
Unsurprisingly, then, a renewed focus on these ‘unsuccessful’ young people emerged, and with it new policy terms and concepts. Below I discuss two of these policy terms: Not in education, employment or training (NEET) and young people in jobs without training (JWT).

3.4.1 Not in education, employment or training (NEET)

The term NEET replaced ‘Status Zer0’ which had been used to describe young people not in employment, education or training since the early 1990s (see for example Istance et al., 1994; Rees et al., 1996; Williamson, 1997). Though the intention was to introduce a term that ‘draws attention to the heterogeneous nature of the category and avoids the negative connotations of one that highlights lack of status’ (Furlong, 2006: 554), a number of researchers have since questioned the application of the term and the assumptions that underpin it. Yates and Payne (2006) suggest that initial discussions did consider the ‘diversity of different groups making up the NEET population, and the key focus was on the varying obstacles and difficulties that young people face that may be associated with exclusion and disengagement’ (Yates and Payne, 2006: 330). However, this holistic approach, which emphasised heterogeneity, soon became replaced with a different rhetoric where:

... being NEET has become viewed inherently in a bluntly negative manner in policy terms - as reflective of a raft of risks, problems and negative orientations on the part of young people. (Yates and Payne, 2006: 330)

NEET then, like ‘Status Zer0’, has become a deficit term, which defines young people by what they have not achieved, and which often carries with it a range of negative assumptions about the young people subsumed by the label.

A common criticism of the NEET term is that it gathers together a range of very different young people under the one label. Furlong (2006) describes
these as ‘discrete categories of experience (unemployment, caring, travelling, sick, resting, learning)’ which have been aggregated into ‘one all embracing category (NEET)’ (Furlong, 2006: 554). NEET therefore combines those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged with those who come from a background of privilege who are exercising choice (for example by going travelling, or taking time-out) and who need very little support to return to education, training or employment. According to Furlong, though the UK government sets ‘a target for reducing the numbers of people who are NEET’ (Furlong, 2006: 555) it is difficult to distinguish whether policies genuinely support those who are disadvantaged, or whether they are only really ‘effective in reaching the more privileged’ (Furlong, 2006: 555). Furlong, therefore, argues that it is necessary to *disaggregate* the categories in order to ‘understand or to effectively target policies’ (Furlong, 2006: 554). There have, indeed, been several attempts to separate the NEET population into different sub-groups in order to better understand them and to target policies appropriately (for example Spielhofer et al., 2009; Yates and Payne, 2006 [discussed below]). Yet Finlay et al. (2010) warn that this approach can be ‘unhelpful’. Though young people in sub-groups might share certain characteristics, it is wrong to assume they are homogenous, with shared needs and circumstances. Instead, Finlay et al. stress the importance of responding to NEET young people as individuals, recognising ‘their particular range of difficulties’ (Finlay et al., 2010: 862).

Yates and Payne (2006) draw on data from the *Connexions Impact Study* (2004) which comprised semi-structured interviews with 444 Connexions Personal Advisers and other adult workers; along with some 855 interviews with young people aged 12 – 23 years (though a notable majority of the interviews, over two thirds, were with 12 – 16 year olds). The interviews focused on a broad range of aspects of the young people’s lives, using a holistic approach to illustrate that the ‘‘NEET’ classification subsumes a very heterogeneous mix of young people [with] very different characteristics, facing very different challenges, risks and transitions in their lives, and with very different potential needs for intervention’ (Yates and Payne, 2006: 334). In order to demonstrate the diversity of NEET young people, those interviewed
in the Study are ‘disaggregated’ into three ‘broad but fairly distinct sub-
groups’:

…those who were in temporary transitional states that involve a period
of being NEET; young parents who make a conscious decision to be
NEET for a time to look after their children; and young people who are
NEET and who also exhibit a number of complications or ‘risks’ in their
lives. (Yates and Payne, 2006: 334)

Yates and Payne acknowledge that the three sub-groups cannot be said
‘exhaustively or unproblematically to represent all young people in the UK’
(Yates and Payne, 2006: 334). Nevertheless, the interview data from the
different sub-groups is explored effectively to challenge a number of the
assumptions that are commonly held about NEET young people.

Yates and Payne demonstrate that it is problematic to presume that all young
people with NEET status are necessarily at ‘risk’ or in danger of becoming
socially excluded. Those with parenting responsibilities, for example,
sometimes make a conscious decision to be NEET, focusing on caring for
young children rather than pursuing education, training or employ-
ment. Though some young parents did face ‘troublesome issues’ (Yates and Payne,
2006: 335), some 50 per cent of the young parents in the Connexions Impact
Study ‘did not show any significant risks in their lives that might be thought of
as accounting for their NEET status’ (Yates and Payne, 2006: 335). NEET
status, therefore, should not automatically be viewed as problematic or
negative. This is not to say that young parents do not require support. Indeed,
it is recognised that they can sometimes lead ‘very isolated lives’ which could
lead to them ‘becoming disengaged’ (Yates and Payne, 2006: 336, emphasis
in original). Rather, it is argued that interventions which focus on young
people’s NEET status alone can be inadequate at offering the type of support
that is actually required.

A number of the young people interviewed did exhibit a range of ‘risk factors’
such as ‘being looked after or homeless, offending behaviour, emotional or
behavioural problems, academic underachievement, and school resistance’ (Yates and Payne, 2006: 337). Though they might be considered as at risk of social exclusion and its associated ills, Yates and Payne suggest that understanding these young people in terms of their NEET status is unlikely to be the most ‘salient or useful fact for professional services to know about them’ (Yates and Payne, 2006: 338). The challenges faced in relation to other ‘risk factors’ may well be more significant than the fact they are not in education, employment and training. Indeed, one of the research participants recognised and articulated this; appreciating the support he had received from his Connexions Personal Adviser to address other areas:

YP: I have agreed that I am going to try and sort out my housing and my drugs before I try and sort out a job [...] we both agreed that it was more important to sort my life out than to have money in my pocket. (Yates and Payne, 2006: 337)

This further adds weight to the argument that it is inappropriate to target interventions for young people based on their NEET status alone. A narrow approach which focuses solely on ‘moving young people across a boundary between participation and non-participation’ (Thompson, 2011: 785) can restrict access to the types of provision that address the broader issues faced by young people. Further, it can disguise inequalities between different forms of participation as ‘inequalities within education and employment’ (Thompson, 2011: 785) remain unaddressed. This critique of the way NEET status has been applied and understood is particularly relevant to the research aims of this thesis. My goal is not to focus on the movement of young adults between one status (non-participation) and another (participation). Rather, this thesis seeks to further understanding of the lived experiences of long-term unemployed young adults. In so doing, it is important to take a holistic approach to achieve this; one which does not focus on narrow policy concepts. Yet it is, nevertheless, necessary to be aware of how long-term unemployed young adults have been conceptualised.
Russell, Simmons and Thompson undertook a ‘3-year ethnography of NEET young people in the North of England’ (Russell et al., 2011: 89) which focused on the lives of 23 young people who were aged 15 – 19 when the research commenced in 2010 (Russell et al., 2011: 95). Whilst recognising the challenges associated with undertaking research with ‘hard-to-reach’ young people, by undertaking a longitudinal study with an ‘extended timescale and prolonged engagement’ they sought to overcome the initial distrust expressed by some of the participants and ‘build the trust and familiarity so important in ethnographic research’ (Russell et al., 2011: 95). A series of articles have been published both individually and collaboratively, through which the researchers draw on the data (and broader research) to challenge and question how NEET young people are portrayed and understood. Through this body of work there is one area of discussion that emerges as of key significance; the balance between structural inequalities which, it is argued, continue to exert an influence on our lives - and the power of the individual (in this case NEET young people) to exercise agency and control.

Thompson (2011) examines the way in which NEET young people are understood ‘in the light of more general conceptualisations of social exclusion and the individualisation of social risk’ (Thompson, 2011: 785). It is argued that the New Labour construction of social exclusion was a ‘weak’ version, ‘which views social exclusion as arising mainly from unemployment, which it attributes to deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of individuals’ (Thompson, 2011: 786). Thus it is easy to see how policies emerged which focused on moving NEET young people towards the forms of ‘social participation such as paid work, formal education and accredited training’ (Thompson, 2011: 791) deemed as useful to achieving social inclusion. Furthermore, New Labour’s version of social exclusion expounded a ‘moral underclass discourse’ (Levitas, 2006: 125) through which ‘disconnection from education, work and society is assumed to derive from a cultural malaise within families and communities’ (Thompson, 2011: 795). However, Thompson draws on the existing research evidence (for example Roberts, 2004; Maguire, 2008; Byrne, 2005) to illustrate that ‘individualised approaches based on personal and cultural characteristics are inadequate to understand
this group and frame policy’ (Thompson, 2011: 785). Instead, Thompson argues for a 'strong' conceptualisation of social exclusion which recognises the structural inequalities which continue to influence the outcomes of young people. This is not to say that young people are unable to exercise choice and 'agency' but rather that there are 'limits of agency in navigating the options available to working-class young people’ (Thompson, 2011: 799) which leave them consigned to poor quality education and training which neither offer them ‘labour market advantage or educational progression’ (Thompson, 2011: 799).

Researchers are keen to argue that ‘much of the old determinacy remains: Individualization is still bounded by class, gender, and ethnicity … The concentrations of disadvantage identified with location in the social structure continue to be reproduced from one generation to the next’ (Bynner and Parsons, 2002: 290). Yet policy rhetoric suggests that little heed has been paid to their warnings. As Ferguson (2013) demonstrated effectively, non-participation under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010 – 2015) was reconceptualised as ‘disengagement.’ Even more so than social exclusion, this places young people as ‘individualised authors of their own (mis)fortunes in given environments which will improve only at the initiative of their inhabitants’ (Ferguson, 2013: 20). Ironically, this construct emerged as 'young people’s employment prospects have declined' (Ferguson, 2013: 12). Therefore young people are positioned as responsible for their own prospects at a time when they, arguably, have least control over them. NEET young people, then, despite challenging labour market conditions, are portrayed as wilfully ‘disengaging’ from education and employment.

3.4.2 Jobs without training (JWT)

JWT poses a particular problem for policy makers in that, though these young people have managed to secure employment, they are not engaged with accredited education or training to Level 2 or above. They are therefore perceived as vulnerable to slipping into the NEET category or of ‘churning’ (Maguire, 2010: 328) between the categories of NEET and JWT. These
perceptions are formed by the ‘assumed nature and content of the employment available to young people in JWT’ (Maguire, 2010: 328) along with assumptions about the young people themselves: their prior levels of qualifications; their aspirations; their disposition to re-engaging with education or training. Whilst not attracting the same level of attention as those who are NEET, there is nevertheless a small body of research which challenges the assumptions made about young people in JWT. Such research seeks to further understanding of the characteristics of those in JWT, and often does so from the perspective of the young people themselves.

Though the four studies discussed below (Anderson et al., 2006; Quinn et al., 2008; Maguire et al., 2008; Spielhofer et al., 2009) adopted different rationale to select their sample, and applied different methodologies, there were also a number of similarities. In all cases researchers worked with Connexions staff and data to identify and reach their participants; in each study, interviews were undertaken directly with young people in JWT in order to gather at least part of the data analysed. Despite working directly with the services that were designed to support young people, all researchers experienced difficulties in identifying and reaching those in JWT. For example, Anderson et al. (2006) report that in order to complete 68 interviews, they had attempted to contact some 647 young people thought to be in JWT. Similarly, Maguire et al. (2008) made 950 telephone calls in order to conduct 36 interviews. Incorrect contact details, difficulties in making contact and a lack of willingness to participate all played their part. However, the challenges faced in contacting young people in JWT also highlighted the fluidity of the group, since many young people had moved out of this status before they were contacted for research purposes (see Maguire, 2010: 322). Quinn et al. (2008) whose study was longitudinal, were able to observe this movement in and out of JWT. Whilst ‘young people moved almost routinely into and out of employment’ (Lawy et al., 2009: 751) offering some evidence of the ‘churn’ between JWT and NEET, 18% (from a total turnover of 35%) moved into formalised training. Therefore, whilst the difficulties the researchers faced certainly illustrate that young people in JWT are challenging to identify and contact, it should not be assumed that they are necessarily at risk of becoming NEET.
All four studies found evidence that young people in JWT should not be understood as a homogenous group. Instead, in the same way as NEET young people, they should be viewed as a ‘heterogeneous mix’ (Yates and Payne, 2006: 334) with different backgrounds, motivations, needs and aspirations. Spielhofer et al. (2009) attempt to categorise young people in JWT into three distinct segments: ‘sustained in a JWT’; ‘at risk of becoming NEET’ and ‘transitional in a JWT.’ Similarly, Maguire et al. (2008) developed a typology to explain the motivations of young people entering JWT, which align closely to Spielhofer et al.’s three segments: ‘making a career’; ‘doing odd jobs’ and ‘taking a year out’ (Maguire, 2010: 324). It is plain to see why this type of sub-categorisation was useful to Spielhofer et al. whose research was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to make recommendations about how to re-engage young people with education and training. Indeed, clear recommendations were put forward based on each of the three JWT segments (see Spielhofer et al., 2009: 93 – 94). However, it is important to treat the creation of sub-categories with caution. Sorting young people in JWT into segments may well prevent them from being treated homogenously, yet it simultaneously creates a whole new set of assumptions about the young people in each of the three segments. The individual needs, interests and aspirations of the young people are once again subsumed as they are perceived homogenously within each sub-category. Quinn et al. (2008) resist sub-categorising young people in JWT and instead analyse interviews thematically, focusing on individual stories to illustrate their findings. Whilst they are still able to make recommendations, they do so whilst maintaining a sense of the diversity and range of experiences of young people in JWT.

Like NEET, JWT is a deficit term which defines young people by what they have not achieved or accomplished. With it comes a host of negative assumptions that imply young people in JWT lack ‘aspirations and prospects […] have low levels of functional literacy and numeracy skills, and a deficit of life and vocational skills and are feckless and lazy’ (Lawy et al., 2009: 742). Perhaps the most significant outcome of research undertaken with young
people in JWT is to provide a body of evidence that challenges the very use and conceptualisation of the term. Maguire (2010) provides compelling data that demonstrates many young people in JWT do not ‘consider early labour market entry as a second rate destination, nor do they align themselves closely with the NEET group, in terms of failing to make ‘successful’ post-16 transitions’ (Maguire, 2010: 330). In this instance, the ‘failure’ of young people in JWT has nothing to do with the experiences of the young people themselves, but rather is the result of a narrative created and sustained by policy makers. This narrative ‘enshrine[s] a neo-liberal view that work is the key to identity, but only certain kinds of ‘respectable’ work’ (Lawy et al., 2009: 752). Whilst Jahoda argued that there is a ‘human need’ for work that is crucial to our identity and sense of status (Jahoda, 1982), it would appear that in the early 21st century only certain types of work are portrayed as fit for creating meaning and capable of satisfying these needs.

Above, then, the policy terms NEET and JWT have been explored, with a particular focus on how they have been conceptualised. Whilst researchers recognise that the NEET categorisation has been effective at keeping ‘the issue of youth unemployment on the political agenda’ (Russell et al., 2011: 91), it is evident that the way the category has been constructed also has the potential to further marginalise young people. Similarly, the research relating to young people in JWT illustrates how certain types of participation are privileged over others. It demonstrates how easily some young people, though succeeding in their own terms, are nevertheless construed as ‘failures’ by policy makers focused on particular forms of attainment and benchmarks of achievement. Understanding how NEET and JWT young people have been conceptualised is essential to undertaking research with long-term unemployed young adults. Some will have passed through NEET and JWT status previously, and the construction of these categories may well influence the way young adults make sense of their experiences. Further, unemployment is an aspect or ‘sub-category’ of being NEET; many of the assumptions made about NEET young people are therefore also made about those who are unemployed. Notably, however, much of the research undertaken has been with those in the 16 – 18 age range, leaving those aged
18 – 24 relatively neglected. It is clear that through the recent raising of the participation age (RPA) policy makers have sought to address the perceived problem of NEET and JWT young people aged 16 – 18 years. Researchers in the field (for example Simmons, 2008; Maguire, 2010) have questioned how successful this is likely to be. Nevertheless, RPA does necessitate a shift in focus to pay more attention to those in the 18 – 24 year old age range. In principle, at least, these young people will be the first who have the possibility of being NEET or in JWT.

3.5 Transition

Exploring the lives of young adults (aged 18 – 24 years), specifically focusing on their experiences of unemployment, it was evident from the outset that the body of literature about transition would have particular significance. However, the very concept of transition is ‘hotly contested’ (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2007: 589) resulting in a great deal of variation in the approaches researchers have taken, the focus of their research and the theories generated. Transition, in general terms, is defined as ‘the process of changing from one state or stage to another’ (Collins English Dictionary, 2008). Whilst change occurs across the life course, Stokes and Wyn (2007) suggest that the term transition has become ‘inextricably interwoven with the concept of youth’; a ‘transitional stage of life between childhood and adulthood’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 496).

Further, they suggest the process of transition has been reduced to a ‘descriptive schema of four ‘thresholds’ that define and pattern the progress of transition into adulthood: completing education, entry into employment, leaving home and forming a couple’ (Bagnall 2005, cited in Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 496).

Stokes and Wyn are amongst a body of researchers who have expressed dissatisfaction with the concept of transition, suggesting that it offers ‘a limited and outmoded conceptual frame for understanding young people’s engagement with work and learning’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007, 495). Both they, and Cohen and Ainley (2000) suggest that the transition approach ‘implies a
linear teleological model of psychosocial development’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 80). Significantly, Cohen and Ainley also emphasise the ‘economism’ of the transition approach, maintaining that it is ‘premised upon the availability of waged labour as the ‘ultimate goal’ ’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 80). Therefore adult status infers ‘vocational maturity’ as well as a ‘completed state of psychological identity’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 81). They suggest this approach was suitable for understanding transition in the post-Second World War era, where ‘future prospects were predicated upon guaranteed full-time male employment from 15 to 65’ and where, consequently, ‘predictable patterns of the lifecourse’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 82) existed. This, they maintain, contrasts with the experiences of both young (and older) people today, where we have been ‘catapulted into conditions of post-industrial insecurity’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 83).

Whilst some researchers reject the concept of transition altogether, others call for fresh understandings of the concept that feel more relevant to our ‘post-industrial’ lives. Before exploring in more detail how new theories of transition have emerged, it is first necessary to consider how transition in the post-Second World War period is understood. As Stokes and Wyn point out, the transitions of young people today are often compared with the transitions of the ‘Baby Boomer generation, who came of age during the late 1960s and 1970s’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 497). The experience of the Baby Boomers is accepted, often unquestioningly, as normative; ‘providing the basis for various, mainly negative, assessments of contemporary youth transitions’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 497). What was it about the post-war era that has left the impression that it was a ‘golden age’ (Vickerstaff, 2003: 270) of transition? Were the transitions of young people in the post-war period really so different than those experienced today? If so, does this mean that theories of transition no longer have currency when applied to young people in the early 21st century, or are there contemporary conceptualisations that can help further our understanding?

3.5.1 Transition in the post-Second World War period
There is general agreement that the experience of transition is now very different than it was in the post-war years of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. Studies undertaken in the post-war decades emphasise the buoyant youth labour market: ‘Labour market uncertainty had all but disappeared and young people could look forward to stable transitions into secure jobs’ (Pollock, 1997: 616). Transitions during this period are depicted as largely ‘homogenous determined by gender, class, family background and educational attainment’ (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007: 556 – 557). As such, the language of ‘niches’ (Evans and Furlong, 1997) emerged, with young people portrayed as following ‘clear routes’ (Furlong, 2009: 343) to vocations that matched their backgrounds. Young people’s transitions were understood as a ‘developmental project which resulted in the establishment of a vocational identity’ (Furlong, 2009: 343). This sense of identity, it is suggested, enabled them to find their place within the adult community and afforded them a sense of belonging.

By examining some of the key studies from the post-war period, it is possible to observe how the perceptions of transition during the era have emerged. Ashton and Field (1976) reviewed relevant empirical literature (for example Carter, 1962; Maizels, 1970) and used their findings to argue that, contrary to the prevailing view, ‘most young people do not experience the transition from school to work as a period of particular stress or as involving them in traumatic problems of adjustment to their new position in the adult community’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 12). Rather, it is maintained that for the majority their prior experiences of ‘home, school and peer group prepares them well to fit in or adjust to the demands imposed upon them on starting work’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 12). Of course, not all young people progressed to the same kind of work, and Ashton and Field identified three main types of young workers: the careerless, those with short-term careers and those with extended careers (Ashton and Field, 1976: 17). The careerless are described as progressing from ‘the lower streams of the state schools into semi-skilled and unskilled work’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 36). They are portrayed as coming from large families with ‘limited resources stretched to the extreme’ (Ashton and Field,
1976: 36) whose parents were also employed in insecure careerless work. Such families, it is argued, were primarily concerned with the ‘immediate day-to-day problems of existence’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 37); low incomes, vulnerable to fluctuation, made it difficult to plan ahead.

According to Ashton and Field, the values of the family had a strong influence on the children and influenced their perspective. The families of the careerless, grounded in the present rather than future oriented, placed little value on formal education. As such, these young people experienced a ‘considerable clash between the culture of the home and that of the school’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 52). Unsurprisingly they therefore frequently ended up in the lower-streams of school, and came to accept the ‘image of themselves as having very limited ability’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 52). Focused on the present rather than the future, along with their keenness to escape negative school experiences, predisposed these young people to accept unskilled or semi-skilled work that required little training. Their early experiences of work, therefore, only served to ‘reinforce the self-image and orientation to work acquired at home and school’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 53). This is not to say that work was unimportant to these young people, but rather that it was valued for what it could offer in the immediate present and the extent to which it could provide the ‘resources necessary to enjoy non-work activities’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 53).

Ashton and Field provide a neat explanation of why some young people, namely those of the lower- and middle-working class, were happy to enter ‘dead-end jobs’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 12) that most young people would avoid. They proceed to offer a rationalisation of how young people who moved into short-term careers and extended careers were similarly prepared to do so through a combination of their family background, the perspective this instilled, and their subsequent relationship with the education system. Those who move into extended careers, for example, were encouraged to see themselves by both their families and teachers ‘as ‘bright’, of superior ability, and capable of considerable self-development’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 90). They were therefore willing to invest in training and forego the ‘immediate
gratification’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 91) that leaving school early and entering employment would bring. Instead, they aspired to, and pursued, the types of careers that demanded investment in terms of training, but which offered long-term financial rewards and security.

Examining Ashton and Field’s study of Young Workers, it is possible to see how the perception of transitions in the post-war period as ‘smooth, linear and uncomplicated’ (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007: 557) emerged. Indeed, there is a sense that young people progressed along a pre-determined trajectory to enter a ‘niche’ (Evans and Furlong, 1997) that they were willing to accept and adjusted to easily. Carter (1966), reflecting on the Sheffield based Home, School and Work study (1962), reported similar findings. Though focusing only on secondary modern school leavers, he identified three different types of families: the home-centred, aspiring; traditional respectable and the rough, deprived or underprivileged. Like Ashton and Field, Carter proposed that it is the family that heavily influenced the young person’s ‘approach to life – to education and to employment – embedded in a pattern of values, beliefs, prejudices and predilections’ (Carter, 1966: 59 – 60). Though the majority of young people in Carter’s study made ‘smooth’ (Carter, 1966: 112) transitions to work and adjusted easily, this was primarily because they got ‘the sort of work which they consider to be about right for them’ (Carter, 1966: 112). Whilst some held high aspirations (at least by secondary modern standards) and found work that met with these, the majority ‘do not expect much from school and do not expect a great deal from work’ (Carter, 1966: 113). Carter described this situation as less than ‘satisfactory’ (Carter, 1966: 113), expressing consternation that ‘work thus finishes off the process of deadening the curiosity and imagination that is often begun in an adverse home environment and continued in school’ (Carter, 1966: 167).

When reflecting on the work of Carter (1962; 1966) and Ashton and Field (1976) it is interesting to consider that the post-war period is often perceived as a ‘golden age’ (Vickerstaff, 2003: 270) of transition. Though largely smooth and uncomplicated, it is also evident that the transitions of the post-war period created and re-created social inequalities. Vickerstaff (2003) and Goodwin
and O’Connor (2005; 2007) warn against the nostalgic and oversimplified view of the era that is often portrayed. Whilst acknowledging that the youth labour market was more buoyant, they suggest this did not necessarily afford young people choice, nor did it free them ‘from individual risks and dilemmas’ (Vickerstaff, 2003: 272). Vickerstaff also questions the much lauded view that entering the world of work enabled young people to reach the other markers of adult life: living independently and starting a family. It is commonly held that in the 1950s and 1960s,

Leaving school at the earliest opportunity and going straight into full-time work has the obvious advantage that a young person can quickly become financially independent. (Pollock, 1997: 625)

However, Vickerstaff provides evidence from her interview data that for most young adults, particularly those in apprenticeships, the ‘pay was very low and rarely afforded the opportunity to set up an independent household, so at least one third of young men, even in a buoyant labour market, were taking some time to become financially independent’ (Vickerstaff, 2003: 271). Instead, they remained with their family of origin, often paying all of their wages to their parents and receiving an allowance in return. Similarly, Goodwin and O’Connor provide evidence from Norbert Elias’s ‘lost study’ of young workers in Leicester that questions the notion of a simple ‘one-step’ transition; several of the young people experienced transitions which included ‘changes of direction and reversals with some changing jobs as many as seven times in the first year of employment’ (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007: 563).

Goodwin and O’Connor (2005) and Furlong (2009) suggest that the perception of smooth and uncomplicated transitions in the post-war period is created, at least in part, by the different methodological and theoretical perspectives researchers held during this time. They suggest that researchers ‘tended to seek out simple stratified routes within their data and made sense of any apparent complexity by constructing typologies that highlighted the commonality of class-based experiences rather than focus on individualised
There is some evidence within the literature to support this argument. Carter, for example, acknowledged that the three main types of family background he described ‘necessarily involved much over simplification and perhaps some exaggeration and even caricaturing’ (Carter, 1966: 60). Similarly, Ashton and Field explain that they deliberately selected case studies that ‘illustrate particularly well some of the main points we have made with regard to each of the perspectives’ (Ashton and Field, 1976: 161). Researchers in the post war era, then, were focused on ‘exploring the impact of social structure […] not looking for the individualized, subjective, complex transitional experience’ (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2005: 217). This contrasting focus has contributed to an over-simplified perception of transitions in the post-war decades. Further, it inevitably highlights difference over similarity; feeding the impression that the transitions of young people today have little in common with those in the post-war period.

3.5.2 Change

Whilst, for the reasons outlined above, it is important to be cautious about emphasising difference over similarity, there are nevertheless undeniable contrasts between the transitions of today and those of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. It is irrefutable that ‘young people are remaining in education for longer and, as a result, entering the labour market later’ (Furlong, 2009: 345). Furthermore, ‘the labour market has changed; the industries which traditionally soaked up unskilled male youth labour and provided others with apprenticeship opportunities have declined’ (Vickerstaff, 2003: 282) to be replaced by ‘jobs in the service sector that require very different skill sets’ (Furlong, 2009: 345).

A number of researchers (for example te Riele and Wyn, 2005; Stokes and Wyn, 2007; Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007) claim that from the mid-1970s to early 1980s, a renewed interest in youth (and youth transitions in particular) emerged. This was triggered by the collapse of the youth labour market ‘when youth unemployment and decreasing employment opportunities for young people became issues’ (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007: 555). Governments
responded to the changing economic situation by introducing ‘a range of initiatives in financial and labour market programmes’ (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000: 147). In the UK, from the 1980s onwards, the government ‘accepted that youth labour market problems would be solved only by providing new opportunities (jobs, training and education) to replace the jobs that had gone for good as Britain became post-industrial’ (Roberts, 2009: 363). They therefore sought to re-build the bridge from education to work; introducing a spectrum of opportunities and providing young people with a multiplicity of options. According to Wyn and Dwyer, this has,

…confronted young people with a new set of choices which on the one hand place increased emphasis on the economic importance of educational qualifications and yet on the other raise uncertainty about the predictability and security of outcomes. It has given rise to new patterns of transition, and has placed an onus on young people to increase their agency over their own lives. (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000:147).

Rather than progress in a uniform way to a set of predictable outcomes that were ‘determined by gender, class, family background and educational attainment’ (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007: 556 – 557), young people in the 21st century are expected to exercise choice and agency to negotiate complex transitions to uncertain outcomes.

3.5.3 Choice and individualisation

The concept of ‘choice’, however, is not a simple one. How free are young people to choose from the full array of options available to them? To what extent do young people continue to be constrained by structural influences? It is questions such as these that percolate throughout transition studies and often divide the opinion of scholars who attach ‘different levels of significance to the inputs and influences of human agency’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11). Work which attributes ‘maximal individual input to the shaping of life chances’ (Evans et al., 2000:11) often draws upon Beck’s concept of ‘individualisation’
This starts from the notion of a new type of a society, referred to as a *risk society* (Beck, 1992), which is ‘based upon ‘reflexive modernization’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11). According to Evans et al., this concept of the ‘risk society’ has been applied to the ‘uncertain and fragmented transitions’ (Evans et al, 2000: 11) experienced by young people. Individualisation has occurred as a result of the erosion of the ‘traditional parameters of industrial society, including class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles’ (Evans et al, 2000: 11). This has made it necessary for the individual to ‘become the agent of his or her own identity making and livelihood’ (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002: 202). The individual must ‘conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography’ (Beck, 1992: 135). As such, ‘individualisation is a process whereby agency takes precedence and structures assume a secondary, and much reduced, position’ (Furlong, 2009: 348). This is not to say that social inequalities cease to exist, but that they ‘operate at the level of the individual rather than the group or social class’ (Evans et al., 2000: 12).

Beck’s concepts, however, are challenged by other researchers and theorists who maintain that structural influences continue to play a significant role in the lives of young (and older) people. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) take a holistic approach to considering the transition process, examining social change across a range of areas significant to young people: education, dependency, labour markets, crime and insecurity, leisure and lifestyle and health. They suggest that ‘as the duration of the transition has lengthened and the apparent alternative routes increased in number, the process has seemed to become more hazardous and uncertain’ (Warde, 1997 in Furlong and Cartmel: vii). This multiplicity of choice leaves young people with a heightened sense that the ‘responsibility for success or failure [has become] even more a personal and individual matter’ (Warde, 1997 in Furlong and Cartmel: vii). Significantly, they maintain that this increased sense of individual responsibility can leave young people with a sense of risk and anxiety. Furlong and Cartmel, then, echo some of ‘the key themes introduced by Beck’ (Furlong, 2009: 349). However, they reach very different conclusions, suggesting that whilst young people strive to find individual solutions to the
challenges they face, they continue to be constrained by structural influences including class and gender. This is what Furlong and Cartmel refer to as the ‘fallacy of late modernity’ (1997: 113):

Blind to the existence of the powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure. (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 114)

Furlong and Cartmel do not dismiss the possibility of individual agency, but rather seek to emphasise the interdependency of social structures and individual action. Failing to do this, they suggest, is the cause of the feelings of vulnerability and risk that some young people experience.

Below, I have chosen to further explore the concepts discussed above through the research of Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) and du Bois-Reymond (1998).

3.5.4 Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson – *Horizons for action*

Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) undertook research in the early 1990s with 10 participants who left school at age 16 or 17 and attempted to use the (then) new Training Credits system to secure training that was, at least in part, work-based. Through the lives of the young participants, the researchers explore the broader implications for Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy and paradigm. The young people’s voices remain central to the research undertaken, creating an engaging narrative which follows the twists and turns of the trainees’ relationship with the Training Credits system over an 18 month period.

The Training Credits system was premised on the fact that young people did have the necessary opportunities available to them - ‘the problem, as then constructed by policy-makers, was to persuade young people to use the available opportunities’ (Roberts, 2009: 363). By issuing young people with
Training Credits – essentially a voucher - and the freedom to choose both the work placement and the training provider, policy makers hoped to create a competitive training market that forced up VET standards. Furthermore, the ‘idea was to persuade young people to accept personal responsibility for investing in their own training and education, thereby achieving employability’ (Roberts, 2009: 363). Young people were supposedly empowered through having the choice to select the training options that best met their needs. However, the researchers demonstrate that amongst their participants there was ‘little sense of such customer power’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 69). Further, where they were able to exercise choice, this did not necessarily lead to training that was satisfactory (for a detailed discussion see Elaine and Alison’s story in Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: Chapter 5). Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson therefore question the fact that the ‘rhetoric of the new policy approach was of empowerment’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 2). This, they maintain, was problematic, given that the ‘life chances in Britain are unequal, and structured by factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and geographical location’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 2). Rather than accept that inequalities lead automatically to a form of determinism and ‘social reproduction’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 7) the researchers instead sought to explore the space between such ‘broad structural patterns of inequality and the individualist idealism of current policy approaches’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 2).

Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson drew on the evidence from their research to suggest that the ‘concept of pragmatically rational choices’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 123) best made sense of their findings. The career decision making the researchers observed was ‘grounded in the culture and identities of the young people [and …] bounded by horizons for action’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 123). Horizons for action, according to the researchers, are created through the relationship between the ‘external job or educational opportunities’ available to an individual, and their ‘personal perceptions of what was possible, desirable or appropriate […] derived from their culture and life histories’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and
Young people do make different choices because ‘the detail of their life histories and the social situations in which they are located differ’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 155). However, this does not equate to having ‘free individual choice’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 155), unrestrained by structural factors. Yet the policies of the 1990s emphasised market forces and individual choice. As such, the researchers argue that this masked the inequalities young people continued to be subject to and underestimated the difficulties of exercising choice; ignoring ‘issues of status, power and struggle’ (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996: 124).

### 3.5.5 du Bois-Reymond – ‘choice biographies’

Du Bois-Reymond questioned the notion that the life-course is made up of a series of phases of development through which an individual passes: ‘small child, school child, adolescent, adulthood’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 63). Whilst previous generations developed in a linear way through the stages from childhood to adulthood, ‘today’s generation experience youth less as a status between childhood and adulthood (i.e. a transitional status), but rather as an autonomous phase’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 64) which has become sub-divided; creating new categories such as ‘early adolescence, late adolescence, post adolescence, young adulthood, ‘overaged young adults’ ’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 64). du Bois-Reymond focused on post-adolescents, describing them as ‘young people with prolonged experiences in education and training and with high demands on the standards of their future occupation and private life’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 65). They are the ‘cultural elite’ whom du Bois-Reymond described as ‘young ‘trendsetters’ ’ (1998: 64).

It is these post-adolescents that are able to exercise ‘choice biographies’ (Beck, 1992; du Bois-Reymond, 1998), made possible through ‘new concepts of life’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 65). For example, ‘post-materialist life values such as self-actualization and communication’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998:65) are important to these young people and there is often a blending between
the ‘public and private spheres’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 65). Further, an ‘unpredictable job market and university courses which ignore the requirements of the job market’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998:65) mean that young people are sustained in a post-adolescent lifestyle, with returns to the family home common even after a period of living independently. du Bois-Reymond, drawing on the work of Beck, suggests that ‘the dominant norms of values of social institutions such as the church(es), family traditions and neighbourhood cultures, have become individualized concepts’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 65). Yet she is quick to point out that this does not mean that ‘choice biographies’ are ‘purely based on freedom and own choice’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66). Rather, they are based on the ‘tension between option/freedom and legitimation/coercion’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66) resulting from the variety of choices young people are expected to choose from, whilst at the same time being expected to justify and evaluate their choices; often feeling forced into making decisions before they are ready.

Many young people, however, do not aspire to a ‘choice biography’; rather they seek a ‘modernized ‘normal biography’’, aiming for ‘a clearly defined profession and employment at an early stage and enter fixed relationships in order to start a family’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66). According to du Bois-Reymond, these young people are largely the ‘descendants of those members of the upper working and middle classes’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66) who progressed straight from school to work ‘with either no prior training or just a brief period of training’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66), yet were still able to reach financial independence and support a family. Unlike the ‘young trendsetters’ the less advantaged are unable to ‘re-define the constraints created by flexibilization and rationalization of the labour market and the requirements of lifelong learning’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 67). For them, the spheres of leisure and work remain separate, with leisure time being used to ‘compensate for the frustration caused by badly paid, boring, often uncertain jobs’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 67 – 68).

du Bois-Reymond draws on data from The Youth, Parents and Work Project, a ‘longitudinal intergenerational study’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 68) based on
biographical interviews with 120 young people and their parents from Leiden in the Netherlands. She focuses on the last interviews with four ‘young trendsetters’ to identify five major ‘part projects’ in the lives of those with ‘post-adolescent paths and choice biographical life concepts: […] gaining time-variety of options; a profession, in connection with developing one’s own personality; a professional future, being flexible; partnership, family and job; growing up later or never’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 69). The participants, Klaas, Piete, Marga and Lotte are portrayed as being able to proactively delay decision making through prolonging their education. Further, they perceive the decisions they do make as reversible, avoiding commitment to a fixed pathway. In the lives of these post-adolescents, ‘work is supposed to promote self-development, searching for meanings’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 70) and, as such, the development of personality and character are interwoven with career development. Whilst post-adolescents are able to plan ahead, they are able to ‘keep the path open and prepare for flexibility’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 71). They do not appear to be concerned by the prospect of unemployment, viewing it as ‘extra time for learning and living during which they can continue their education and development’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998:71). However, du Bois-Reymond suggests that this lack of concern about an uncertain future is brought about, at least in part, by their ‘social origin: they know that they are backed up by their parents’ financial and cultural resources’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 71).

For du Bois-Reymond, then, the human life-course can best be perceived as a biographical ‘project’, where ‘project’ is understood as a,

... draft for a desirable future, a future which clearly will never become reality in the way it was planned. The 'project' therefore has to be constantly adapted to changing circumstances or abandoned in favour of a new one. (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 63)

Those with ‘choice biographies’ are able to navigate through their biographical ‘project’, maintaining a flexible approach which allows them to respond to change. However, du Bois-Reymond does not discuss the consequences for
those who attempt to pursue a ‘normal biography’, but who might face challenges and setbacks in achieving this. Is the ability to negotiate one’s biography the reserve of the ‘cultural elite’, or are the less advantaged also able to respond flexibly to change? Without this ability, surely they are reduced to the level of simple dupes, entirely controlled by structural forces?

The work of Hodkinson Sparkes and Hodkinson and du Bois Reymond, though now outdated, raises questions about the extent to which young people are able to exercise choice and respond flexibly to change. In terms of my research, it is interesting to consider how young people experience unemployment and their responses to it. I undertook my research at a time when young people from a range of backgrounds were vulnerable to unemployment. Will I find evidence of ‘young trendsetters’ who are able to view the experience as an opportunity for learning and development? To what extent will their experience vary from the less advantaged whose horizons for action, according to Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, present them with a different range of options and resources?

3.5.6 New approaches

Above then, I began by outlining the concept of transition and discussed some of the issues researchers have raised with traditional, linear models of transition (Cohen and Ainley, 2000 and Stokes and Wyn, 2007). Whilst these seemed appropriate when applied to immediate post-Second World War transitions, the collapse of the youth labour market and the consequent expansion of education and training options have led to transitions that are described by researchers as ‘long’, ‘broken’, ‘extended’, ‘protracted’, ‘uneasy’ and ‘fractured’ (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2007: 590). However, this does not simply mean that young people are taking longer to reach the ‘markers of the transition to adulthood – leaving home, marriage and family’ (Henderson et al, 2007; 46); rather, their transitions include reversals and changes of direction, leading them to be referred to as ‘yo-yo transitions’ (du Bois-Reymond and Lopez Blasco, 2003). The ‘markers of adulthood’ are called into question as it has become increasingly challenging for young people to live independently.
and it can no longer be presumed that they will ‘necessarily follow the model of finishing school, completing professional training, getting engaged to be married, and then beginning an active sex life’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66). Researchers, then, have sought to find new approaches that better make sense of modern transitions.

In the past, transition studies focused primarily on ‘school-to-work careers’ (the move from full-time education into the labour market)’ (MacDonald et al., 2005: 875). However, for several years researchers have suggested that the emphasis on ‘educational and employment encounters’ (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007: 589) is too narrow. Whilst these areas are still recognised as important to young people, it is argued that affording them significance over and above other aspects of young people’s lives is a mistake. Further, it is suggested that decisions about work should not be falsely segregated from the other decisions young people make, but rather that they are interconnected:

... transition to work is linked with all the other decisions they take, or want to take: for example, where to live and with whom, what kind of work corresponds to their capacities and interests, and how they might continue with education while working. (du Bois-Reymond and Lopez Blasco, 2003: 24 – 25)

Failing to recognise this, it is argued, leads to concepts of youth transition that are economically driven and assume ‘a linear life-course model in which social integration is equivalent to labour market integration’ (du Bois-Reymond and Lopez Blasco, 2003: 19). This has the potential to ‘(re) produce social exclusion’ (du Bois-Reymond and Lopez Blasco, 2003: 19) since being part of the labour market is promoted as the only means through which young people might achieve social integration.

Recognising the need to take a ‘more rounded view of youth’ (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007: 599) researchers have moved beyond ‘school-to-work careers’ to consider other aspects that play an important role in the lives of
young people. These include a focus on diverse areas such as leisure (Feinstein, Bynner and Duckworth, 2006; Merino, 2007) and leisure careers (Johnston et al., 2000); ‘family careers’ and ‘housing careers’ (Coles, 1995); drug-using (MacDonald and Marsh, 2002, 2005; Measham, 2002); criminal careers (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007) and health and bereavement (Webster et al., 2004). A number of researchers also focus on the importance of ‘place’, locality and ‘space’ when considering the transitions of young people (Rees et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 2014; Kinetra et al., 2015; MacDonald et al., 2005).

3.5.7 The Teeside studies

The Teeside studies, in many ways, capture the importance of taking a holistic approach in order to understand complex transitional experiences. Questions relating to ‘inequality, social mobility, class reproduction and individualization’ (MacDonald, 2011: 428) remain central to much of the work undertaken. Therefore it is unsurprising that the researchers maintain ‘young people’s engagement with economic life remains pivotal to much else’ (Roberts, 2003 paraphrased in MacDonald, 2011: 428). However, they emphasise that the relationship people have with the labour market ‘cannot be understood in isolation from the wider domains of young people’s lives, including how youth cultural identities shape and are shaped by the transitions people make’ (MacDonald, 2011: 438). This broad approach has enabled their work to move beyond the ‘narrow empiricism’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 79) that youth transition research has sometimes been criticised for. Diverse areas such as the domestic sphere, leisure, drug-using, informal economic activity and criminality are considered in terms of the ways they affect young people’s school-to-labour market transitions. Further, they are also recognised as important in their own right, since it is through these spheres that some young people make sense of their lives and engage with ‘careers’ (i.e. domestic and home-centred careers or criminal careers) that are beyond the ‘economic mainstream’ (for a full discussion see Johnston et al., 2000: 5).
The *Teeside studies* commenced in the 1990s and have spanned a period of over twenty years; allowing the researchers to adopt a qualitative, longitudinal approach to studying transition. The researchers, from the outset, have emphasised that transitions should be studied over the *longer-term* (Johnston et al., 2000: 21); maintaining that those which fail to look beyond the late teenage years do not fully capture complex, ‘extended’ transitions. Whilst initial studies followed participants into their mid-twenties, later studies have re-interviewed participants as they experienced ‘mid- to later working life’ (Shildrick et al., 2010: 5). All of the research was undertaken in the same two neighbourhoods in Middlesborough, both of which had high rates of worklessness and were in the ‘top 150 most deprived wards out of 7,094 in England, i.e. in the top 3 per cent most deprived in the country’ (Shildrick et al., 2010: 10). The research, then, was undertaken against a backdrop of disadvantage and unsurprisingly *locality* emerged as of key importance in the lives of the research participants; their biographies cannot be ‘properly understood in isolation from the local socioeconomic and cultural context from which they evolved’ (Johnston et al., 2000: 22).

The young people’s opportunities were shaped by the locality in which they lived, yet the researchers also acknowledged that these opportunities (or lack thereof) were not evenly distributed:

…”while an area might share all the problems and show all the prime indicators of social exclusion, these problems are not shared equally by an area’s young residents. (Johnston et al., 2000: 22).

This, according to the researchers, emphasised the diversity of the young people’s lives and their ability to negotiate different transitions, even when sharing a locus of disadvantage. The influence of *locality*, and the participants’ relationship with it was complex and made up of a number of factors. For example, the young people’s ‘sociogeographic frames of reference were highly localised’ (Johnston et al., 2000: 22) and they rarely travelled outside of their immediate locale, turning down educational and work opportunities that were deemed out of reach when just one or two miles away. This highly
localised outlook meant that they also distinguished *between* different areas of the same neighbourhood, perceiving some areas as much rougher than others. The reputation of the estates in which the young people lived was also demonstrated as being influential, shaping the opinions of others as well as the perceptions of the young people themselves. Despite the challenges faced by young people growing up on the estates in the *Teeside studies*, many of them remained positive about living there. This is explained by the researchers in terms of ‘the value they placed on their local networks and knowledge [...] for socialising and support, in searching for jobs, decent training schemes and suitable accommodation, and in coping with crime’ (Johnston et al., 2000: 23). These networks provided them with very real resources and afforded them a sense of belonging and connectedness. The young people experienced ‘local ‘social inclusion’ ’ (Johnston et al., 2000: 23) whilst at the same time living in area that was defined by outsiders as socially excluded – its very separateness working to bond its residents closer together.

For the reasons discussed above, many of the participants in the *Teeside studies* remained in the locality long-term. This provided the researchers with the possibility of examining the residents’ relationship with the labour market over the course of their working life. Despite the fact the majority of the people had ‘strong, resilient work motivation and [...] had repeatedly engaged with work’ (Shildrick et al., 2010: 7), this did not have the capacity to lift them out of poverty. Rather, the ‘poor work’ (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007: 597) that typified young people’s early transitions into the labour market remained the norm, with the majority ‘churning between insecure low-paid jobs, poor quality training schemes and unemployment’ (MacDonald, 2011: 432). This evidence of the ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ (Shildrick et al., 2010) throws into question the policy rhetoric (discussed above) that the silver bullet for social exclusion is employment. Those in the *Teeside studies* maintained a ‘hyper conventional attitude to work’ (MacDonald et al., 2005: 882), which led them to accept almost any work when it was available, but which rarely moved them far from the poverty line.
The *Teeside studies* are interesting for a number of reasons, not least because the age-range which they have focused on has shifted over time; extending the scope of their research to consider experiences of employment and unemployment as the participants move through the life course. Taking a holistic approach to transition, the *Teeside studies* are representative of contemporary approaches which look beyond ‘school-to-labour market’ transitions. In many ways, this type of research brings the youth transition approach closer to youth cultural studies. Indeed, there are a growing number of researchers who suggest there is a convergence between the two perspectives, brought about by the ‘emergence of new ways of managing life contexts which frequently involve the blending of contexts, the search for new meanings and a changing sense of self in time’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 355). Whilst emphasising the importance of locating the study of youth and young adulthood within the ‘structured processes of reproduction’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 357), Furlong, Woodman and Wyn also emphasise the importance of studying youth cultures:

> It is through the study of youth cultures that we build an awareness of the ways young people interpret, construct and shape their lives within a given set of circumstances, and can even give new insights into the nature of these circumstances. (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 357)

The researchers make the case for a new approach that seeks to understand ‘change (or transition) at both the social and personal level’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 360). It is the ‘social generation’ approach, which they suggest can most usefully achieve this. This approach leaves space for individual biography, but also recognises that these biographies are ‘shaped by their socio-historical location’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361). It is an approach which requires consideration of the ‘economic, political and social conditions impacting on young people’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361) but which also recognises that ‘new and distinctive forms of consciousness are produced by changing social conditions’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361). Thus ‘the role of culture and subjectivities as
forces for social change’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361) is recognised, creating a framework that brings together youth transition and youth cultural perspectives.

Rob MacDonald (2011) suggests that one way in which youth transition and youth culture perspectives might be brought closer together is through a focus on the ‘missing middle’ or the ‘ordinary kids’ (Brown, 1987); broadening research beyond ‘spectacular subcultures’ [or …] a preoccupying concern with the most disadvantaged young people’ (MacDonald, 2011: 437) to include a much wider socio-demographic spectrum. MacDonald also maintains that both youth cultural and youth transition perspectives must be broadened if ‘we are to seriously interrogate how youth cultures interact with youth transitions (and vice versa)’ (MacDonald, 2011: 438). The questions asked by youth transition must search beyond ‘school-to-labour market’ transitions, whilst we must also ‘interpret and define youth culture more broadly (e.g. than post-subcultural studies’ focus on music and dance-oriented styles and identities)’ (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007 cited in MacDonald, 2011: 438). MacDonald effectively uses the research of Archer et al. (2007) to illustrate how an interest in both youth transition and youth culture might better be pursued. Archer et al.’s research focuses on ‘working-class young people’s transitions through London secondary schools and their active rejection of university with a close, qualitative exposure of the tastes and performative, embodied styles that defined these young people as ‘who they were’ and might be (and, critically for their transitions, who they were not and would not be)’ (MacDonald, 2011: 439). Thus ‘deeply class-imbued personal styles and identities’ (MacDonald, 2011: 439) were demonstrated as highly influential to the paths young people would pursue or even consider.

3.5.8 Henderson et al. – Inventing adulthoods

Henderson et al.’s (2007) publication draws together the work of three consecutive studies which spanned a period of 10 years from 1996 – 2006. The research commenced with the Youth Values study undertaken with participants aged 11 – 17 years. Subsequently, the Inventing Adulthoods
study and *Youth Transitions* study were undertaken with the same participants who were then aged 14 – 23 years and 17 – 26 years respectively. This research offers a useful means of observing how approaches to studying transition have changed; drawing together some of the points raised by Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011) and MacDonald (2011), discussed above. Unlike the *Teeside Studies, Inventing Adulthoods* shifts its focus beyond the most disadvantaged. Whilst still recognising the importance of locality in the lives of young people, the research was deliberately undertaken with young people from a range of localities which ‘reflect the very different kinds of environment in which people in the UK grow up: north and south, urban as well as rural, diverse as well as homogenous, affluent as well as disadvantaged, ‘local’ as well as ‘cosmopolitan’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 4). The research therefore pays attention to the ‘missing middle’ alongside the experiences of both privileged and disadvantaged young people. Adopting a ‘biographical approach’, which the researchers describe as ‘holistic’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 13), they were ‘interested in every aspect of young people’s lives and how these fit together and interact’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 13). This approach leaves space to consider both youth transition and youth culture, with both understood in their broadest terms. Their consideration of culture, for example, included leisure and consumption, ‘chemical cultures’ of drug-taking, illegal or criminal activity and the way in which mobile technology and ICT create new forms of ‘sociality’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 152). These elements of culture are not viewed separately from the transitions the young people make, but rather as part of a biographical whole.

Like Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011), Henderson et al. recognise the significance of the ‘generational approach’; acknowledging that young people are shaped ‘historically by the time of their birth and the events, values and opportunities that shape their world’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 18). Yet they are quick to caution that this approach could lead to young people becoming a ‘caricature of a historical period’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 18). For Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, the ‘social generation’ approach does not preclude individual biography. Rather, the very fact that ‘young people today are
growing up in a world that is significantly different, and is experienced as
different, from the world in which their parents grew up’ (Furlong, Woodman
and Wyn, 2011: 361) means that there is no ‘road map’ (Furlong, Woodman
and Wyn, 2011: 362) for the way in which they might live their lives. As such,
they must ‘renegotiate core values in ways that promote reflexive life
management and the framing of life as an ongoing project largely devoid of
explicit markers’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 362). The concept of
‘inventing adulthoods’ appears to sit comfortably within this framework.
Indeed, Henderson at al. drew heavily on Giddens’ (1991) notion of the
‘reflexive project of the self’, viewing the biographical interviews they
undertook with their participants as the ‘telling of narratives of the self’
(Henderson et al., 2007: 20). It is through these narratives that the
researchers were able to see ‘processes of change and continuity, and at
each interview to capture the version of self that individuals were themselves
forging’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 20). Significantly, it is through ‘the reflexive
ordering of self narratives’ (Giddens, 1991: 244) that Giddens maintained
identity is formed. The approach adopted by Henderson et al., therefore,
moves transition beyond a journey through phases of development. The
process of ‘inventing adulthoods’ instead becomes an iterative one, through
which self-identity is developed.

In this review I have not attempted to cover all of the literature relevant to
research with unemployed young adults. I do not feel this would have been
possible (or even desirable) within the confines of this thesis. Instead, I have
focused on discussing key areas and explored how they relate to my
research. I began by considering the difficulties of defining terms such as
employment and unemployment, work and worklessness. Such words were
found not to hold some kind of intrinsic meaning, but rather to be
‘representations through which meanings and social interests are constructed,
mediated and deployed’ (Grint, 1991: 9). I also considered the work of
researchers who call for a ‘broader focus’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 48) of what
constitutes work; challenging the primacy of paid work. By contrast, the next
section considered the claims of researchers such as Jahoda et al., who have
consistently maintained that paid work satisfies particular human needs; with
the implication being that humans should work for the benefit of their psychological wellbeing.

In the third section I considered the ways in which work has been portrayed as the route to social cohesion; of social value to both the individual and society. I considered the way in which this has constructed young people without work (or in JWT) in particular ways; defining them in deficit terms by what they have failed to achieve. The final section focused on ‘transition’; beginning with a discussion of studies in the post-Second World War period that have contributed to the perception that transitions (from school-to-work) were previously smooth and uncomplicated. This might have been, at least in part, the result of different methodological and theoretical perspectives held at the time (see Furlong, 2009: 345). Nevertheless, a number of researchers now suggest that if we are to use the term transition at all, it requires a fresh understanding. No longer does a focus on the movement of young people from school-to-work fully capture the ways in which young people make sense of their lives (if it ever did). Rather than a linear model of transition, youth cultures are also understood as important; shedding light on ‘new and distinctive forms of consciousness [that] are produced by changing social conditions’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361).

The literature discussed above might be understood as that which I anticipated might be relevant to my research. I introduce further literature in Chapters 5 and 6, locating it with the findings to which it is relevant. In this way I feel it is reflective of the process I followed, where the findings of the research were not known from the outset. Instead, as new ideas emerged, I often sought literature that might help deepen my understanding. I also refer back to the literature discussed above; demonstrating where the research builds upon, or challenges, existing ideas.

To some extent the literature reviewed and the language used indicates my methodological approach. It is this that I discuss in the next chapter, where I outline the methodology and methods used.
Chapter four

4. Methodology and Methods

This chapter is split into two sections. In the first section I begin by explaining my research questions and the aims of my research. I then consider the methodological implications of these aims, along with the ontological and epistemological questions that arise from my chosen approach. In the final part of this section I describe the theoretical framework I adopted that underpinned the research undertaken. The second section of the chapter describes the methods I employed, outlines the challenges I encountered and explains how I sought to address these. It concludes by discussing the ethical considerations that informed my research practice.

4.1 Research aims

As indicated in Chapter 1, I was motivated to undertake research by my experience of working with long-term unemployed young adults. In the workplace I met with young adults on a daily basis and became interested in the complex and sometimes difficult stories that I glimpsed through my interactions with them. I started to question what type of research had been undertaken with long-term unemployed 18 – 24 year olds, and how this had been used to inform policy and practice. In the workplace I was constantly presented with statistics and datasets that reflected the local and regional labour market and claimant count. However, these failed to capture anything of the complexity of the lives of the young adults I worked with. I felt there was much to be gained from speaking directly to those affected by unemployment; to find out what was important to them and their ‘thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives’ (Wellington, 2000: 71). Further, in order to gain insight into the twists and turns their lives took, I was interested in the possibility of undertaking a longitudinal study which paid attention to ‘processes of change and continuity’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 19).
I was conscious that 18 – 24 year olds, who had previously been relatively neglected in research, were becoming of increasing political importance. As discussed in Chapter 1, Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) has necessitated a shift in focus away from 16 – 18 year olds who had previously dominated both research and policy initiatives. Though the interest in this broader age range is arguably long overdue, the timing seemed right to undertake research that focused on the lives of 18 – 24 year olds.

The following research questions were formulated to address the research aims outlined above:

1. What are the experiences and interests of long-term unemployed 18 – 24 year olds in the South West of England?

2. How do these experiences change over time?

3. What might be learnt from deepening our understanding of these experiences?

Having formulated these questions it became clear that the range of options available to me to achieve my goals was limited. Moreover, that they were underwritten by a set of ontological assumptions relating to ‘the nature of reality and the nature of things’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 3), along with epistemological assumptions relating to ‘the nature of knowledge’ (Hamlyn, 1995: 242) and axiological assumptions relating to the ‘role of values’ (Creswell, 2007: 16). Though I was not aware of these assumptions when I initially considered undertaking research, it soon became clear that I did understand the world in a particular way. Further, that the approach adopted predicated the claims I could make about the nature of meaning and knowledge.

I was interested in the experiences of my participants and in the possibility of furthering understanding. These aims preclude the possibility that there is some kind of external reality that exists independently of the knower.
Furthermore, the possibility that meanings are ‘fixed’ or constant was continuously challenged in terms of the way the participants experienced and made sense of their worlds:

*All knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.*

(Crotty, 2003: 42, italicised in original)

This definition emphasises how knowledge is constructed by the interaction between human beings and their world; ‘it is in and out of this interplay that meaning is born’ (Crotty, 2003: 45). This is notably different from claiming that human beings *create* meaning independently from the world they interact with. Meaning, therefore, cannot be described as entirely subjective, since the meaning constructed is always related to the world human beings inhabit. Neither, however, is meaning objective since there are many different possible ways in which the world, or any given aspect of it, might be understood.

If we are to follow Crotty, social phenomema such as employment or unemployment are ‘real’ only insofar as we have imbued them with meaning and named them. This does not, however, imply that their importance is somehow diminished. The social world, or more accurately our experience of it, is immediate and vivid to us. Further, the majority of people have a ‘non-technical everyday understanding of experience’ (Pring, 2005: 230) which, for them, is the ‘world of real life’ or the ‘world of common sense’ (Ryle, 1954: 68). It is their lived experiences that are important to them, regardless of how these are theorised or understood.

**4.2 An interpretative approach**
Given the discussion above, it should be unsurprising that I chose to undertake an interpretative study. Max Weber, whose thoughts are often associated with interpretivism suggested that ‘in the human sciences we are concerned with Verstehen (understanding)’ (Crotty, 2003: 67). More specifically, Weber maintained that ‘social phenomena […] are identified […] by their dependence on meaning and meaning conferring activity’ (Morrison, 1990: 99 – 100). It is through the actions and interactions of human beings that meaning is conferred:

Interpretative sociology considers the individual and his action as the basic unit, as its ‘atom’ […] In this approach the individual is also the upper limit and the sole carrier of meaningful conduct. (Weber, 1970: 55)

According to Weber, if we are to understand social phenomena we must ‘reduce these concepts to ‘understandable’ action, that is without exception, to the actions of participating men [sic]’ (Weber, 1970: 55). Weber has, perhaps, been so firmly associated with interpretative approaches because of his assertion that interpretation is crucial to the way in which individuals act and interact. They do not simply observe what the other person does, but instead they assign meaning to ‘each other’s acts’ (Morrison, 1990: 100) and this meaning ‘regulates what they do’ (Morrison, 1990: 100):

The ‘essence’ of what happens is constituted by the meaning which the two parties ascribe to their observable behaviour, a meaning which regulates the course of their future conduct. Without this meaning, we are inclined to say, an exchange is neither empirically possible nor conceptually imaginable. (Weber, 1977: 109)

Verstehen (understanding), then, ‘is the name Weber gives to the general program in theory which attempts to capture the processes individuals use to assign meaning to their acts and the acts of others’ (Morrison, 1990: 100). This must, necessarily, be an iterative process since the meanings ascribed will be both influenced by the past, and future oriented. That is to say the
assigned meanings will be a product of our past actions and interactions (and the meanings ascribed to them); in turn, these new interpretations will influence our future actions and interactions.

My interest in the participants’ own stories meant that an interpretative approach was appropriate since it is,

... an understanding of lived experience derived from participants themselves that is important to interpretative studies. This carries its own theoretical schemata based on assumptions about the subject-person, the life-world and the validity of making sense of lived experience through participants’ stories. (Garrick, 1999: 147 – 148)

Interpretative approaches, then, are ‘characterized by a concern for the individual [...] to retain the integrity of the phenomena being investigated, efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 17). However, this notion of understanding phenomena through the experiences of participants is not a simple one. Individuals do not exist in a void, but rather their experiences are historically and culturally situated. For some researchers this is not problematic, since what is presented is an interpretation of the lived experience of the individual(s); there are no claims to an objective reality and knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed. From this perspective, getting to ‘the phenomena being investigated’ will inevitably imply getting to a construction of the phenomena – one which is situated within particular historical and social frameworks.

If we are to accept then, that it is possible to ‘make sense of lived experience through participants’ stories’ (Garrick, 1999: 147 – 148) and that ‘individuals’ interpretations of the world around them has to come from the inside, not the outside’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 15), how does this position the researcher? Certainly their position is very different than that of the researcher undertaking positivistic research, where a ‘good’ researcher is an ‘objective, detached value-free knower’ (Wellington, 2000: 15) in pursuit of knowledge
that is ‘deemed to be objective, value-free, generalizable and replicable’ (Wellington, 2000: 15). However, how is the interpretative researcher to ‘explain and demystify knowledge through the eyes of the participants’? (Beck, 1979 cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 15) This seems to imply that the researcher is somehow able to leave their own social and historical context behind, and come to know the world in the same way their participants do. This is not something which I believe to be possible, or at least not something which I feel I am able to do. Therefore, I recognise that ‘the observer makes a difference to the observed’ (Wellington, 2000: 16) and that my research findings will inevitably be my own interpretation. It is important to note, however, that this is not the same as stating that I can impose any interpretation on the experiences of the participants. There must be evidence in the data for the interpretation I offer, and this must be an interpretation which makes sense to others, including the participants.

I recognise the importance of reflecting on my own preconceptions and background and considering the effect these may have on my research. I am aware that, coming into the research process, I had substantial experience of working with long-term unemployed young adults and inevitably held opinions about the area I was researching. Yet I came to realise that undertaking research with a group is very different than working with them, since I had different aims and objectives. In the role I worked in, my purpose was ultimately to support young adults to return to work or training. However, when undertaking research I wanted to find out more about the experiences of the young adults, which I found led to different types of conversations. By paying attention to these conversations I was open to new ideas and possibilities that challenged my preconceptions. Whilst recognising how important it is for the researcher to enter into a reflexive process, I did not want this to become the focus of my research. To do so, I felt, would be to distract from the ‘lived experience derived from participants themselves’ (Garrick, 1999: 147). This is not to say that the data was treated as indicating a naïve form of realism, but rather that I wanted to ‘focus on the substance of findings … so that the researcher leads the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the experience under study’ (Janesick, 2003: 215). It is the use of the words
meaning and understanding which make this claim plausible, since they indicate that it is an interpretation that is presented; one constructed collectively by the participants, the researcher and the reader.

4.3 Theoretical framework

When developing the theoretical framework for my research, I drew on grounded theory as I was attracted to this approach in terms of how it might help me to make sense of my data. This is not to say that I undertook a grounded theory study, adopting the methodology and methods rigidly from start to finish. Rather, I drew on aspects of grounded theory and adapted it to suit my aims of undertaking an interpretative study.

Grounded theory finds its roots in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, ‘inherited largely from John Dewey and George Mead’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 2). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meanings human beings place on things, and the way in which this influences how they act and interact:

... human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them [...] the meaning of such things is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. (Blumer, 1969: 2)

It is through the ‘existence of symbols, like language’ that human beings are able to ‘give meanings to objects’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 20). Symbolic interactionists propose that it is through these symbols that a person can ‘become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent’ (Crotty, 2003: 75 – 76). Clearly, then, these ideas lend themselves to an interpretative study and resonate with the language of Weber’s theories (discussed above). Further, it suggests that interviews are an appropriate means of generating data since language is one of the symbols through which we might come to know the ‘perceptions,
feelings and attitudes’ (Crotty, 2003: 75) of others. However, some symbolic interactionists suggest that it is the ‘putting of oneself in the place of the other’ (Crotty, 2003: 75) that is important. Whilst I would agree that it is the ‘actor’s view of actions, objects and societies that has to be studied seriously’ (Psathas, 1973: 6 – 7), I am cautious about the extent to which it is possible for the observer to take the ‘role of the actor in the situation […] in order to see the social world from his perspective’ (Psathas, 1973: 6 – 7). This does not quite fit with an interpretative approach, since it removes the construction of meaning which the observer (or the researcher) engages in. Whilst we might come to know the perspective of the actor through the symbols they use, this is not the same as saying that we might see phenomena through their eyes. The interpretation of the symbols used has somehow been removed, leaving a ‘relatively naïve set of assumptions about how we come to know social phenomena’ (Mitchell, 1977: 115 – 116). Instead, I prefer the recognition of complexity and an acknowledgement of the challenges presented in coming to know the ‘actors’ perspectives’ (Strauss, 1993 cited in Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 7). Indeed since their perspectives and interactions are contingent on ‘their memberships in social worlds and subworlds’ (Strauss, 1993 cited in Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 7) it is important to recognise that these are ‘complex, overlapping, contrasting, conflicting, and not always apparent to other interactants’ (Strauss, 1993 cited in Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 7).

Grounded theory has taken many different forms since it was first ‘discovered’ by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Whist there are notable differences between each version, there are also commonalities. Strauss and Corbin (1994) describe grounded theory as a ‘general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 273). All versions of grounded theory tend to agree that ‘theory is emergent from data rather than predefined and tested’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 598). There is no hypothesis that is tested through the data, but rather it is through the data that theory emerges. However, what exactly is meant by theory and how is one to go about generating it? Hage (1972) defines theory as a ‘set of well-developed categories (themes, concepts) that
are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some phenomenon' (Hage, 1972: 34 paraphrased in Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 55). The first part of this definition is relatively unproblematic and most grounded theorists seek to build themes and concepts from their data, linking them to build a theoretical framework. However, not all researchers would maintain that the end result 'explains some phenomenon.' Some would maintain that the end result is one possible explanation, whereas others would question whether an interpretative study should ever claim to be explanatory. My aims were of furthering understanding of the experiences of the participants. As such, any concepts or theories developed were in relation to the experiences of the participants. I did not set out to explain the phenomena of being long-term unemployed. Nevertheless, through gaining an understanding of the participants’ experiences, I was open to the possibility that their interpretation of their experiences might offer fresh insights.

I was conscious that I wanted my research to be robust analytically since it is only through proper analysis of the data that new insights might be gained. Further, I was aware that there are many researchers who apply the methods of grounded theory but end up with description rather than theory. Clearly this is problematic if they claim to have developed theory but only present description. Silverman (2000) critiques the work of researchers that ‘describe their data in terms of sets of categories which either reproduced participants’ categories or put a common-sense gloss upon them’ (Silverman, 2000: 288). For Silverman, such research lacks ‘analytic depth’ (Silverman, 2000: 288) and fails to ‘build useful social theories’ (Silverman, 2000: 288). Silverman suggests that it is the theoretical framework employed, along with ‘imagination’ (Silverman, 2000: 252) that prevents the researcher from using ‘common-sense interpretations’ (Silverman, 2000: 289). Yet it was clear to me from the outset how challenging it is to develop theory from data, especially if we are to accept that the grounded theorist embarks upon their research without knowing what they are going to find. Further, the use of the word ‘emerge’ in relation to theory is somewhat misleading, since it suggests that
the data will somehow offer up its meaning to the researcher, presenting a coherent theory which they might articulate.

Grounded theory is both methodology and method, and there are a number of guidelines, or techniques, which grounded theorists follow to aid them to tease meaning from data. These methods relate to both the way in which data is gathered and analysed. Grounded theorists use an approach known as theoretical sampling which ensures that ‘data are collected on an ongoing, iterative basis, and the researcher keeps on adding to the sample until she has enough data to describe what is going on in the context or situation under study’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 599). They do not, therefore, have a particular sample size in mind from the outset and neither do they know exactly what data they are going to gather. It is clear that this approach lends itself to a longitudinal study, such as the one undertaken in this research. Whilst theoretical sampling does not necessarily require multiple interactions with the same participants, meeting participants on more than one occasion certainly presented the opportunity to test out emerging themes and concepts. Further, in the case of this research, it encouraged me to analyse early in order that further sampling could be ‘responsive to the data’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 144). This meant that my analysis guided me to explore particular themes with participants, to return to ideas raised in previous interviews and to check my understandings with them. It also meant that I paid close attention to my own practice as a researcher, refining my interview technique and gaining an understanding of the importance of reflecting on each interaction.

I was initially drawn to grounded theory as I thought it might protect me from presupposition. Having worked with long-term unemployed 18 – 24 year olds, I was aware that I held pre-existing ideas and opinions. I was concerned about prejudice in my interpretations, or that I might end up looking for what I expected to be there. Grounded theory requires that the ‘matching of theory against data should be rigorously carried out’ (Corbin and Strauss, 1994: 273). This therefore seemed reassuring; perhaps it would prevent me from drawing conclusions, or suggesting theories, that did not have a solid
grounding in the data gathered. Over time, however, I came to realise that these intentions were somewhat naïve. Further, these aims seemed to imply that I could come to know the experiences of my participants in some kind of objective way. This did not fit with the aims of my study, and I realised that there was a danger that I could fail to position myself in relation to the research undertaken.

In addition to grounded theory, I was also influenced by ideas related to constructionism since it allows for the possibility that ‘meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views’ (Creswell, 2007: 20). I found social constructionism of particular interest, with its emphasis on ‘the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world’ (Crotty, 2003: 58). Meaning, according to the social constructionist, is ‘negotiated socially and historically [it is formed …] through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives’ (Creswell, 2007: 21). This is in some ways reassuring since it offers a framework for the way in which meaning is constructed; it limits the otherwise infinite possible meanings that might be forged by the individual mind. However, it is also potentially restrictive since the individual must, necessarily, be constrained by their own culture. This has implications for the researcher since the meanings they construct will inevitably be socially and historically situated within their own culture. What if this culture is different from that of their participants? Does it matter that social constructionism has the potential to create multiple layers of meaning? It is through the constructivist grounded theory of Kathy Charmaz that I feel these questions are addressed effectively.

Charmaz’s grounded theory takes a ‘reflexive stance on modes of knowing and representing studied life’ (Charmaz, 2005: 509). It moves grounded theory away from Glaser’s version of grounded theory which Charmaz (2005) suggests had an ‘objectivist cast with its emphases in logic, analytical procedures, comparative methods […] and assumptions of an external but discernible world, unbiased observer and discovered theory’ (Charmaz, 2005: 509). Constructivist grounded theory, by contrast, gives ‘close attention to
empirical realities and our collective renderings of them – and locating oneself in these realities’ (Charmaz, 2005: 509). It does not assume that ‘impartial observers enter the research scene without an interpretative frame of reference’ (Charmaz, 2009: 509). This does not mean that as a researcher our findings are entirely dictated by our own position. If this was the case, there would be little value in gaining empirical evidence. I would therefore agree that ‘what we know shapes, but does not necessarily determine, what we ‘find’ ’ (Charmaz, 2005: 511). Crucially, constructivist grounded theorists also make different assumptions about the nature of data, recognising that it does not ‘simply await discovery’ (Charmaz, 2009: 509) but rather that ‘we share in constructing what we define as data [and that our...] conceptual categories arise through our interpretations of data rather than emanating from them’ (Charmaz, 2005: 509). From this perspective, ‘our theoretical analyses are interpretative renderings of a reality, not objective reportings of it’ (Charmaz, 2005: 510).

4.4 Longitudinal study

From the outset I was keen to undertake a longitudinal study as I was interested in the ‘processes of change and continuity’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 19) experienced by the young adults. I wanted to capture something of the complexity of their lives and the twists and turns they experienced. Therefore I felt that a ‘one-off’ retrospective interview was unlikely to elicit the type of data required to answer my second research question: ‘How do these experiences change over time?’ Instead, I planned to return to ‘interviewees to measure and explore changes which occur over time and the processes associated with these changes’ (Farrall, 2006: 2).

I was interested in the capacity for longitudinal qualitative research to be both retrospective and prospective. This is something which is expressed very clearly by Henderson et al. (2007), already discussed in the literature review. For them, the repeat interview method enabled them,
at each interview to capture the version of self that individuals were themselves forging. Biographies are told backwards (retrospectively) and each time we met with the young people they retold us their story from a new position, yet the study also followed young people forwards (prospectively) by asking them about their hopes, fears and expectations for the future. (Henderson et al., 2007: 19)

Criticisms levied against retrospective longitudinal studies include the fact that they ‘rely on the memories of the participants. These may be faulty, and the further back one’s memory reaches, the greater is the danger of distortion or inability to recall … [they] look at past events through the lens of hindsight and subsequent events’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 268 – 269). Whilst it is clear to see the basis for such concerns, Henderson et al.’s explanation of their approach offers a means of dealing with such criticisms. Their work is not simply retrospective since it explores ‘participants’ present, prospective and retrospective sense of self and of what kind of person they were’ (McLeod, 2003: 204). Each interview is situated in the present, but includes reflections on the past and projections into the future. Henderson et al. recognise that each time they met, the participants’ stories were told from a ‘new position’; revealing a version of themselves that the participants were ‘forging’. They did not seek an accurate rendering of past events, but instead sought to gain insight through the way participants made sense of (or reflected on) those events, and how they integrated them into their biographies.

Another question often discussed in relation to longitudinal studies is whether repeated interventions over time can actually change the behaviour of the participants:

We recognized that it is not a normal part of young people’s lives to be invited to participate in regular in-depth interviews by researchers from a university, and that impact of the research process would have to be addressed in the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. (Thomson and Holland, 2003: 239)
For example, might the very fact individuals are going to be re-interviewed act as a factor that motivates them to change? Further, as in all research, it is possible that participants might say or do things to please the researcher, something which might be exacerbated by an extended relationship between researcher and participant. For me these elements of ‘bias’ are, perhaps, inevitable - it being more important for the researcher to be aware of them, rather than to attempt to eradicate them.

Given the aims of my study, a longitudinal research design offered the best possibility of gaining the insights I sought. Whilst the accounts my participants offered were personal accounts of continuity and change, I was also interested in how ‘changing properties of individuals fit together into changing properties of social systems as a whole’ (Diener and Crandall, 1978, cited in Cohen and Manion, 1994: 69). This is not to claim that I could generalise from my study, but rather that individual accounts might reflect broader changes to the social systems that affect their lives. Undertaking my research during a period of flux and instability in the UK, this was something I was particularly conscious of.

4.5 Rationale for undertaking interviews

It was the individual stories of the young adults I worked with that first motivated me to undertake research. Therefore interviews felt like an obvious choice when it came to considering the methods I would use to generate data. Having worked with young adults in a range of roles I felt comfortable talking to this age group, though I recognised that meeting with young adults for the purposes of research was notably different from working with them. In undertaking research interviews I brought a different agenda than speaking to young adults in a work role. At work I sought to motivate and support them to return to work or training, since ultimately that was what I was being paid to do. Through research I hoped to gain an understanding of their lives, their interests and motivations. In both situations I recognised the importance of taking a holistic approach instead of focusing narrowly on the areas of work
and study. In research, as well as in the workplace, it was crucial to recognise that the relationship young adults have with employment (and unemployment) sits within the complex web of their lives. As such, I was aware from the outset that the interviews would need to be sufficiently broad-ranging to enable young adults to talk about the things that were important to them.

Whilst I was drawn to undertaking interviews, it was also essential that this was appropriate to the aims of my study and the most effective means of generating data. Further, it was necessary to decide what type of interviews to conduct and consider how I would go about interpreting them. Interviewing, according to Holstein and Gubrium (2003), ‘provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003: 3). However, it is important to recognise that,

...interviewing includes a wide variety of forms and a multiplicity of uses [...] It can be structured, semistructured or unstructured. (Fontana and Frey, 2005: 698)

In order to undertake an interpretative study, I knew I would need rich qualitative data to interpret. Therefore I decided that semi-structured or unstructured interviews would be the best way of generating data. I was aware of other possible choices, including participant observation. Whilst observation would give me access to participants’ behaviour, I was also interested in things that cannot be observed; I hoped that through interviewing I would be able to,

... probe an interviewee’s thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives. We can also elicit their version of their account of situations which they may have lived [...] through: his – or her – story. (Wellington, 2000, 71)

As mentioned above, I was also interested in the potential of a longitudinal study that was both retrospective and prospective, something which I felt difficult to achieve through observation as each observation is located in the
present. Further, I was unsure as the study progressed whether it would be feasible or practical to observe the young adults as they would not necessarily be part of a particular setting or group, or in observable situations.

Fontana and Frey (2005) describe interviewing as ‘one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans’ (Fontana and Frey, 2005: 697 – 698). However, there is much debate about the nature of the understanding or knowledge generated. Silverman (2000) suggests that many researchers ‘treat respondents’ answers as describing some external reality (e.g. facts, events) or internal experience (e.g. feelings, meanings)’ (Silverman, 2000: 122). This approach Silverman describes as ‘realist’ – ‘in the sense of the literary genre whose aim is to describe the ‘gritty’ reality of people’s lives’ (Silverman, 2000: 122). It assumes a relatively uncomplicated relationship between what people say and their behaviour or feelings. An alternative approach, however, treats,

... interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed [this] means that the interview is more than a simple information-gathering operation; it's a site of, and occasion for, producing knowledge itself. (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003: 4)

From this perspective, the interview is a ‘social encounter’ through which knowledge is constructed via the interactions of the interviewee and the interviewer:

Both parties to the interview are necessarily and unavoidably involved in the process. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and socially assembled in the interview encounter.’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003: 4)

Clearly this approach is a better fit with social constructionism and with the perspectives that underpin symbolic interactionism. When considered carefully, it is also evident that the interviewer must necessarily play a part in the ‘meaning’ that is constructed through the interview process. For example,
the interviewee is always ‘acting’ in relation to the interviewer (and vice versa). Factors such as age, gender or background may affect this interaction, along with the body language and tone of voice of both parties. Not only does the interviewer consciously select the areas to be discussed, the questions asked and when to delve deeper, but the very fact the interview is taking place and the interaction occurring is at the instigation of the interviewer.

When viewed as a construction, interviews become complex and multi-layered. We can no longer view ‘respondents’ accounts as potentially ‘true’ pictures of ‘reality’ (Silverman, 2000: 122). Instead, we must acknowledge that:

People do things with words, and they do things with narratives. They use biographical accounts to perform social actions. Through them they construct their own lives and those of others.
(Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003: 117)

Further, the interview occurs within a context and should be considered in relation to the ‘cultural resources people use to construct them’ (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003: 117). This not only includes ‘shared frames of reference’ (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003: 117) but might include discourses that influence participants; social, historical and political factors; personal background or events.

Given what has been said above, how is it possible for the researcher to say anything meaningful about the interview data that is constructed? Silverman (2000) uses an example from Glaser and Loughlin’s (1987) research to illustrate how it is possible to maintain a focus on ‘seeing the world from the perspective of our subjects’ (Glaser and Loughlin, 1987: 37), yet at the same time be attentive to the ‘narrative forms from which perspectives arise’ (Silverman, 2000: 125). Fontana and Frey (2005) describe this process as follows:
We need to proceed by looking at the substantive concerns of the members of society while simultaneously examining the constructive activities used to produce order in everyday life and, all along, remaining reflexive about how interviews are accomplished. (Fontana and Frey, 2005: 719)

This prevents us from assuming ‘absolute relativism’ (Fontana and Frey, 2005: 719) and enables researchers to interpret the content of interviews as reflective of the ‘substantive concerns’ of their interviewees. Yet it also reminds us to be conscious of how these narratives have been constructed; to consider their context and how they are situated, and to be reflexive about the actual interview process.
4.6 Methods

4.6.1 Summary

The research undertaken comprised a longitudinal, interpretative study with 19 long-term unemployed young adults from the South-West of England. Participants were interviewed up to a maximum of three times between July 2010 and January 2013. Interviews, therefore, were undertaken following a period of recession in the UK, against a backdrop of social instability and uncertainty. The sample can best be described as opportunistic, with the majority of participants accessed through services designed to support young adults (the Future Jobs Fund3 and the Prince’s Trust Team Course4). However, I also sought diversity amongst the participants to reflect the broad range of young adults affected by unemployment during an economic downturn. It was also important to me to capture the experiences of young adults from urban, rural and semi-rural locales reflective of the region where the study was undertaken.

Interviews were semi-structured, though second and third-round interviews tended to be much less structured than initial interviews. Each interview lasted between 25 minutes and 70 minutes and all were recorded digitally and fully transcribed. In total, 19 first-round interviews were undertaken. It was possible to undertake seven second-round interviews and the same seven participants were interviewed a third and final time. The interviews were analysed as soon as possible after they were undertaken, so that ideas and concepts could be discussed in forthcoming interviews. Coding was used to build up themes and concepts related to interviews at both an individual level, but also as a whole. This allowed me to ‘draw out emergent themes and to explore areas of commonality and difference’ (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013: 164). Whilst NVivo was used as a tool to organise my ideas in relation to the data and to aid

---

3 See section 5.2.2 for a full definition and discussion of the Future Jobs Fund
4 The Prince’s Trust is a youth charity that works with young people and adults in the 13–30 age range who are disengaged or marginalised. Participants in the research were accessed via the Team Course (also known as the Team Programme) a 12-week course targeted at unemployed 16- to 25-year-olds who benefit from the experience of work and of working together.
analysis, it is important to emphasise that it was through careful thought and
immersing myself in the data that connections and themes were constructed. I
also returned repeatedly to the transcripts and audio recordings, keen to re-
examine extracts in their original context to question my own interpretations.

Below, I discuss the methods employed in more detail, focusing specifically
on the participants; interview schedules and interviewing; analysis and ethical
considerations. I explain the challenges and issues that arose and discuss
how I addressed these.

4.6.2 The participants

The government currently defines the long-term unemployed as those who
have been claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance (JSA) for 12 months or more with
a continuous claim. However, for the purposes of this study I chose to seek
participants who identified themselves as having been unemployed for at least
six months. I felt that by restricting my research to those who had claimed one
specific benefit continuously for at least 12 months risked excluding those
who chose not to claim benefits, along with those who claimed different
benefits (such as health-related benefits or income support) but who still
considered themselves unemployed. Further, I was concerned not to exclude
those who had ‘experienced significant periods of worklessness but who were
part of the ‘churn’ moving into and out of employment, work programmes and
even in some cases education’ (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013: 163). This was
something I was particularly aware of given the high incidence of short-term
seasonal work in the South-West of England, a result of the contribution
tourism and agriculture make to the economy. At the time the research was
planned, six months was also the referral point for the New Deal for Young
People (NDYP), the programme designed to offer additional support to 18 –
24 year olds to assist them into employment. This therefore seemed to imply
that the six month period denoted a time past which 18 – 24 year olds were
less likely to secure employment without assistance. It therefore provided a
logical minimum period of time to use for the purposes of this research.
I initially anticipated accessing the majority of my participants via the mandatory welfare-to-work programme that 18–24 year old benefit claimants were referred to. By the point of data collection NDYP had been replaced by the Work Programme, which offered tailored support to benefit claimants of all ages. Unlike NDYP the Work Programme offered support to those claiming health benefits (but deemed capable of returning to work) and claimants of income support, along with claimants of JSA. The Programme therefore seemed to present the opportunity to speak to a wide variety of participants and, since it was a mandatory programme for most participants, the possibility of accessing those hardest to reach. However, negotiating access proved extremely challenging. Whilst it was relatively easy to agree access with local managers of the Programme (many of whom I knew from my previous work), when they checked with senior national managers, access was refused. It became clear that they were nervous about the prospect of an independent study being carried out with participants on the Government’s new flagship welfare-to-work programme. This was perhaps unsurprising given that the Programme was delivered by a range of regional providers who had been awarded the right to deliver the Programme through a bidding process. Despite my assurances that the focus of my research was the experiences of the participants, rather than the Work Programme, their reservations could not be overcome.

I had good knowledge of the different types of support available to long-term unemployed young adults. Therefore I was undeterred by this initial setback and instead pursued access to participants via services that could be engaged with on a voluntary basis. As a result the majority of the participants were accessed via the Prince’s Trust and a local provider of the Future Jobs Fund. The participants claimed a range of benefits, with some being entitled to benefits but choosing not to claim. From this perspective they were a diverse mix, yet it is important to acknowledge that the very fact they had accessed voluntary services made them slightly ‘easier to reach’ than if participants had been accessed through a mandatory programme. All of the participants were volunteers and were reminded frequently that they could opt out of the research process at any stage. They were given pseudonyms to
protect their anonymity, as were any people they named during the interviews. The research process and aims were also made clear from the outset, something which I felt was important in order to encourage engagement with the study. This elicited a range of questions from the participants who wanted to know, for example, who would read the research; how their interviews would be written up; how many participants I had spoken to in total and where they came from.

The sample was largely opportunistic, though 'variety and diversity amongst the participants was achieved so that they included disadvantaged and marginalised young adults, those living in poorer urban and inner-city areas as well as young adults from more privileged backgrounds that would not normally be associated with long-term unemployment' (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013: 164). As was described in Chapter 1, the data collection was undertaken during an economic downturn with high levels of unemployment. As such, a much broader group of young adults was affected by long-term unemployment than might otherwise have been the case. It was important to me that this situation was reflected in my research, and also that participants came from a range of urban, rural and semi-rural locales, representative of the region in which the research was undertaken. The sample comprised of a total of 19 young adults aged 18 – 24 years and ‘deliberately included young adults aged 18+ […] to ensure that all of the 18–24 cohort were represented in the data. [I] felt this was important given that young adults can claim Jobseeker’s Allowance from the age of 18’ (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013: 164).

4.6.3 Interview schedules and interviewing

Aware of the constraints of undertaking the research as a doctoral study, I decided that a two year timeframe was appropriate for my aims and that I would attempt to meet with participants up to a maximum of three times over this period. There were slight variations between the amount of time between interviews for each participant, caused primarily by practical issues (i.e. sometimes individuals needed to reschedule an interview, or were unavailable for a short period of time). Though I tried to ensure interviews with each
participant spanned no more than two years, the total amount of time spent on
data collection was slightly longer than this. All of the interviews were
undertaken between July 2010 and January 2013. Of the 19 participants I
initially interviewed, it was possible to undertake second-round interviews with
seven of these participants. The same seven remained engaged with the
study throughout and I also undertook third-round interviews with them.

It is well documented that attrition is one of the main challenges associated
with longitudinal qualitative research (see for example Lawy et al., 2009; 744).
As such I had anticipated the difficulties of keeping all of the participants
engaged throughout the study – something which was compounded by the
fact some of the participants were ‘hard to reach’ young adults. Though I
ensured I had multiple contact details (telephone and, where possible, email)
for all of the participants, including those of a friend or family member, some
were nevertheless impossible to contact in order to arrange second-round
interviews. Further, though I had initially accessed many of the participants
through services for unemployed young adults, when it came to follow-up
interviews these had to be negotiated on an individual basis and carried out in
a range of venues. Though the venues were mutually agreed and as local to
their home as possible, it meant that the young adults often had to make a
short journey to meet me, giving up their own time to do so. I felt this extra
barrier proved too much to overcome for some of the participants. When
attempting to arrange second and third-round interviews, I was also acutely
aware of ethical considerations (discussed below). It was important to me that
participants did not feel pressurised to agree to meet. As such, I decided that
if a participant cancelled arranged meetings (or failed to turn up) three times,
then I would not pursue them further.

The interviews with those I met with only once formed an important part of the
data collected and analysed. However, I would agree that ‘longitudinal studies
have considerable potential for yielding rich data that can trace changes over
time’ (Gorard, 2001: 86). An important aspect of undertaking longitudinal
qualitative research is the ability to build rapport with participants and gain
their trust, leading to more in-depth interviews and richer data. This was
certainly something that I experienced, with prolonged engagement perhaps convincing participants of my genuine interest in what they had to say. The participants who stayed engaged over a two-year period seemed to genuinely enjoy the opportunity to discuss their lives, with some expressing regret at the end of our last meeting.

I was aware that there would be limited time to build rapport with participants prior to undertaking my initial interviews with them. Therefore I rejected the possibility of undertaking completely unstructured interviews as I was cautious that some participants might find this difficult to engage with. Instead, I set about building a semi-structured interview schedule for my first round interviews that covered a range of areas or issues. I wanted these to be sufficiently broad so as to enable the participants to talk about the things that were important to them, but hoped that this would also help me to cover similar ground with all participants. Each first-round interview began by asking for some background information from the participants. I found this useful as some participants went into a lot of detail, revealing something of their priorities and interests by what they chose to focus on. Others would simply offer their name, age and where they lived. This was also helpful as it alerted me to the fact I was likely to have to work harder to build rapport and draw out the rich data I was interested in.

The following key areas were discussed with all participants: background information (for example, how old they were and where they grew up); leisure interests; family; friendships; aspirations; living arrangements and locality; opinions of self and self esteem; school/college; work. Under each area I devised several open-ended questions that could be used flexibly, depending on how forthcoming the interviewee was. I tried to keep the questions, as concrete as possible. For example, asking questions such as ‘What did you do at the weekend?’; ‘How did you spend the day yesterday?’; ‘Who do you spend most of your time with?’ allowed the participants to be descriptive, talking about things they had done. These questions had the potential to reveal things about their leisure interests, friendships and families but were relatively easy for participants to respond to (see Appendix I for a first-round
interview schedule). When undertaking the interviews I varied the order in which the different areas or issues were discussed in order to maintain the ‘flow’ of the conversation. However, I generally kept the ‘harder’ areas to discuss for the end of the interview, in order to give the participants the opportunity to relax before answering them. Prompts such as ‘tell me more …’; ‘can you describe that in more detail?’; ‘can you give me an example?’; ‘that’s interesting …’ were used to encourage the participants to expand their responses. I also took the opportunity to probe further if an interesting or unexpected area was raised, or if the participants seemed keen to discuss a particular area or issue. Notably, it was not always successes and achievements that the participants chose to focus on. Instead they sometimes reflected in some detail on a difficult or challenging time they had experienced. These were often the most interesting parts of the interview, yielding rich and complex data.

The first six interviews undertaken were treated as a pilot phase, the purpose of which was to enable me to edit or eliminate any questions that seemed particularly unsuccessful. Through this process I realised that questions that were too abstract were difficult for participants to answer. For example, I initially asked ‘What are your best qualities?’ as one of the questions related to opinions of self/self esteem. However, the participants found this impossible to answer. This was changed to ‘How would you describe your personality?’ but again the participants seemed awkward when faced with this question. I quickly noticed how comfortable the participants were talking about friends and friendships, so I changed the question to ‘How would your friends describe you?’ All of the participants were able to respond to this question with ease, despite the fact they were still essentially describing their own personality or character. One of the areas I was interested in was the participants’ hopes, aspirations and expectation of the future. Aware this had the potential to be challenging to consider and articulate, I put a lot of thought into this area from the outset. The questions ‘Where do you see yourself in a year’s time?’ / ‘Where do you see yourself in five years’ time?’ proved the best way of opening up a conversation in relation to this area. It was sufficiently broad to allow participants to talk about hopes and fears across a range of
aspects: relationships; children; work; housing; study; friendships; mobility etc. Some participants, in answering this question, would also distinguish between what they *hoped* and what they *expected*. This made for an interesting, if not always comfortable discussion, with participants identifying perceived barriers and sometimes expressing frustration.

The pilot phase also enabled me to reflect on my interview style and question whether, when I listened back to each interview, I felt there were any missed opportunities. This practice I adopted throughout the research process, something which I found relatively easy as I transcribed all of my own interviews as soon as possible after each interview. I found this a crucial part of the analysis (discussed below) but also a means through which I continuously revised and improved my interview style. The key improvement I made was developing my ability to manage silence within the interviews. In the first few interviews I undertook, I noticed how quickly I moved on or prompted the participants if they seemed to be struggling to answer a question. I became aware that some people needed more time to process a question or to consider their answer. It also made me realise that I am uncomfortable with silence, and assumed others were too. By learning to accept pauses and silences within conversations I became more effective at interviewing, something which was particularly noticeable with less forthcoming participants. Through this process of reflection, I also questioned the possibility that my interview schedule might miss something that was important to the participants. Therefore at the end of each interview I started asking the participants if there was anything else they wanted to tell me. Generally there wasn't, but occasionally this would elicit some really interesting comments. For example, one participant wanted to talk about his perceptions of migrant workers and discuss the impact on the local labour market. This had not been raised in any of our other conversations, but it was clearly something he thought was important and relevant.

When preparing for second and third round interviews I took a slightly different approach. Each interview contained the same three open questions: ‘Tell me about your life over the past [9] months’; ‘Tell me about your life at the
moment’; ‘In what ways has your life changed?’ Some participants required very few additional questions and talked in detail with just a few prompts. Generally the participants seemed more comfortable during second and third-round interviews. As a result these interviews tended to be less structured, though I still devised a schedule based on key areas I wanted to cover: education; work; leisure time; benefits; locality; aspirations; opinion of self/self esteem; society. When preparing for second and third-round interviews I also read through the transcripts from the previous interview(s) I had undertaken with that participant and considered my analysis to-date. This enabled me to identify any areas or ideas I wanted to pick up on or clarify, or concepts I wanted to explore further. Under each area I added prompt questions that were relevant to the individual, therefore ending up with a personalised interview schedule for each participant (see Appendix II for an example of a third-round interview schedule). Referencing things we had discussed in previous interviews also helped me to re-establish and build rapport.

### 4.6.4 Analysis

Undertaking analysis was the most enjoyable, but also the most challenging aspect of the research process. I soon recognised there was no simple ‘road map’ to follow that would guide me through the analysis process and produce a neat set of findings. Instead I realised the need to apply the framework and techniques that I hoped would help me make sense of the data, but to do so in a flexible way. As mentioned, I was influenced by grounded theory and believed a number of the methods associated with the approach would aid the analysis of the interview data. For example, I was keen to undertake analysis as soon as possible after completion of each interview and hoped this would guide me with decisions about future data collection and allow me to test out emerging ideas and concepts; I was also drawn to coding data as it seemed to offer a way of making sense of individual interviews, but also presented a means of comparing interviews and identifying commonality and difference. By building up higher level themes and concepts through these codes (and finding connections between them), I hoped to be able to say something
useful about the data that moved beyond ‘common-sense interpretations’ (Silverman, 2000: 289).

There were aspects of grounded theory which, from the outset, I was unsure if it would be possible or even desirable to pursue. I felt very uncertain as to whether it would be possible to identify a central or core category that all of the ‘other concepts will be related to’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 104). If I pursued this aim, I was concerned that I might end up excluding something important from my findings, or that I would force my other concepts to ‘fit’ with the core category. Instead, I decided that I would aim to identify connections between concepts and consider whether there were any overarching categories that a number of concepts could be related to. Rather than aim for one theory, I instead sought to theorise my findings and explore carefully the different ideas that arose.

Analysing the interviews was a process that commenced immediately after my first interview was undertaken. I found it useful to reflect upon the interview as soon as possible after it, making notes about the impression I got of the participant, a summary of the points discussed and any ideas I had in relation to the contents of the interview (see Appendix III for examples of these reflections). The interview was digitally recorded and I made the decision that I was going to fully transcribe each interview. Whilst I was aware of the possibility of paying somebody else to undertake transcription work, I soon realised how useful this process was in terms of analysis. It was often whilst transcribing the data that ideas occurred to me and it also meant that I came to know the data well. Once I had completed this first transcription I read through it and undertook some initial manual coding. The codes used were a mixture of descriptive codes which summarised key points related to a section of data; in-vivo codes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 82) which used the participant’s own words to capture a concept – ‘fresh start’ is an example of one of the in-vivo codes from my first interview with Evan; and codes which captured an idea or concept – ‘uncertainty about the future’ is an example of one of these codes.
4.6.4.1 Using NVivo

It was at this stage in the process of analysis that I started to pre-empt the volume of data I was likely to generate. I was concerned with how I would organise and make sense of this amount of data in a way that would allow me to be logical, but also enable me to have the freedom to explore the data flexibly. Prior to commencing data collection I had considered whether using a computer program would assist me with my analysis. Originally I considered ATLAS.ti as another doctoral student was using this program and was able to offer a basic demonstration. However, I eventually chose NVivo as it seemed to fulfil all the functions I required and the software was easily available via the University. I optimistically hoped that my supervisors would be able to offer me guidance on using the software. Whilst encouraging me to use it, neither of them had worked with this software before and at the time there was no instruction offered by the University. Undeterred, I found the online tutorials related to the program, and set about learning how to use it. The tutorials with their visual demonstrations were extremely clear and it was relatively easy to import my transcribed interview documents and start coding them.

For each interview undertaken I followed the same process: I wrote a short reflection after the interview (as described above), following which I fully transcribed the data. The transcription was then imported into NVivo and codes (referred to as ‘nodes’ in NVivo) were attached to the data. Whilst each interview was treated separately, coding in NVivo also enabled me to make comparisons with ease. For example, having defined a set of codes related to my first interview with Evan, when I coded the second interview I considered each section of data to see if it fitted with one of the codes already identified. If it did, then I would use one of the existing codes, if not I created a new one or renamed the original code. In this way, as each interview was added common themes and concepts were constructed. However, it was also possible to identify areas of diversity and individuality in this way. On a regular basis I would consider whether the codes created related to each other and whether this relationship was hierarchical. Sometimes this would result in a
new code being created which seemed to offer an overarching concept for a number of lower level codes. NVivo refers to this construction of coding hierarchies as ‘Tree Nodes’ and this is illustrated in Screenshot 1. Screenshot 1 captures a small section of ‘Tree Nodes’ with top level nodes listed alphabetically and lower level nodes branching beneath. In Screenshot 1 an example of a top level node is ‘Response to set backs’ with the nodes ‘Frustration’ and ‘Resilience’ branching off of this. NVivo enabled me to create as many different levels of nodes as required and it was very easy to merge codes or to change their position within the ‘Tree.’ This was achieved simply by ‘dragging and dropping’ to a new position.

Screenshot 1: An example of ‘Tree Nodes’ in NVivo:

![Screenshot 1: An example of ‘Tree Nodes’ in NVivo](image)

NVivo, then, offered a dynamic way of working with the data and developing my analysis. However, after following this process for several interviews I felt that the codes I was developing were interesting, but was unsure that they
were moving me towards the type of insights I hoped for. When considering the reasons for this I decided that some of the codes I had used were too literal, offering more of a summary of a section of data. They had not reached the level of abstraction required to really be referred to as a concept, though some of the codes certainly achieved this. Despite this I still recognised the value of the work undertaken since codes that were literal, for example ‘vocational courses,’ had still helped me to organise my data; by double-clicking on the code ‘vocational courses’ every extract of data that referred to vocational courses across all interviews was displayed. I could then re-examine this and consider whether more abstract concepts might be attached to the data.

Working with the data as described above also made me realise two key things about undertaking analysis. Firstly, that no matter how good the computer program used to aid analysis is, it will not ‘think’ for you. There is still a lot of mental work that needs to be done and sometimes this is best achieved away from the computer screen. Sometimes I would take the codes or concepts which NVivo had helped me construct and hand-draw mind maps. This helped me find connections between concepts, encouraged me to ask questions such as ‘what does that mean?’, ‘is it important?’, ‘is it similar to …?’ and sometimes revealed new avenues to explore. Secondly, and related to the first, it made me realise the importance of memos. For me, a memo is simply an articulation of an idea or thought relating to the research. This might relate to a section of data, a whole interview, a participant or group of participants, to a code or concept or the connection between concepts. It was often through writing memos that my ideas would develop and sometimes this could even lead to what Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe as an ‘“ahah!” experience’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 109). I prefer the term ‘light-bulb moment’ which for me stands for that sudden dawning of an idea that is important conceptually. Of course, sometimes these would turn out to be ‘dead-ends’ or ‘false starts’ and I would always check whether there was evidence in the data to support my ideas. One of the useful functions in NVivo in relation to this was the ability to run ‘Queries’ across all data and memos. For example, I felt there was something important about one participant’s
discussion about his expectations for a ‘normal life.’ Through NVivo it was possible to search for every instance where the words ‘normal’, ‘average’ or ‘regular’ were used. The results were then displayed with a variety of formats options: as a summary; a specific reference; within the context they originally occurred or as a ‘Word Tree.’ Screenshot 2 below shows the results displayed as a ‘Word Tree’ with the other options displayed down the right hand side.

Screenshot 2: Example of a ‘Text Search Query’ displayed as a ‘Word Tree’:

Using techniques such as this in NVivo allowed me to quickly assess whether ideas were worth pursuing. They also helped me to reassess or develop my initial ideas.

4.6.4.2 Theorising

Using the analytical processes described above I was able to develop a number of themes that I felt were important and identified connections between some of them. However, it was incredibly difficult to move from this stage to constructing the overarching categories that would make my analysis feel coherent and connected. There was not a simple process that I followed to achieve this and it took several months. I spent a lot of time asking myself questions about the analysis to-date; revisited the audio files and full transcriptions as I was concerned that in deconstructing the interviews
through coding I might have lost something important; drew mind-maps of the themes and tried to find connections. Eventually I started writing about three of the themes I knew I wanted to include. Articulating my ideas in writing helped me develop my thinking and through this some overarching categories started to emerge. Writing, then, was very much part of the process of analysis, as was articulating my ideas verbally to others. This enabled me to see connections I had not previously recognised and to dismiss some themes as insignificant. This stage of the analysis was where I sought to theorise my findings. The words of Janice M. Morse (1994) capture my experience of it:

*Theorisizing* is the constant development of malleable theoretical schemes until the “best” theoretical scheme is developed. It is a process of speculation and conjecture, of falsification and verification, of selecting, revising and discarding. [...] It is a way of revealing the obvious, the implicit, the unrecognized and the unknown. It is a way of discovering the insufficiency of the significant and significance of the insignificant. (Morse, 1994: 32)

I was conscious that the way in which I theorised the data presented one possible interpretation. It was crucial to me, though, that this ‘fitted’ the data and somehow captured the essence of my conversations with the young adults.

4.6.5 Ethical considerations

Though the British Educational Research Association (BERA) offers a useful set of guidelines for undertaking educational research, I was aware from the outset that ethical issues can be more complex than simply following guidelines. It was important to me that I considered ethical issues carefully, rather than just paying ‘lip service’ (Levinson, 2010: 193) to them. I had to demonstrate to the University’s ethics committee that I had thoroughly considered ethical issues prior to embarking on the fieldwork part of the study. However, I was aware that this did not guarantee that I proceeded in an ethical manner. Instead I would agree that it is the ‘researcher’s personal
moral responsibility towards the participants in the research and the research setting’ (Paoletti, 2014: 274) that has the greatest influence on the manner in which research is undertaken.

4.6.5.1 The participants

My research was undertaken with adults, none of whom were ‘vulnerable’ in the sense described by BERA guidelines (2011: 6 – 7). Nevertheless, I was aware that some of the young adults might be considered vulnerable for other reasons: for example because of basic skills needs and poor levels of literacy; as care leavers; having low socio-economic status; being at risk of homelessness. This did not apply to all of my participants, but the fact it applied to some of them encouraged me to consider carefully issues of informed consent and their right to withdraw from the study.

4.6.5.2 Informed consent

Informed consent had to be agreed on a number of levels since, prior to meeting any potential participants, I had to gain the consent of the settings through which I accessed them. As mentioned above, it was not possible to negotiate access to settings where unemployed young adults received support services on a mandatory basis. On reflection, this may have been a positive outcome since I had concerns that young adults in mandatory settings would feel obliged to participate. Since the consequences of non-compliance in mandatory settings are benefit sanctions, I felt uncomfortable that some young adults might talk to me out of fear of financial repercussions (even though I was not connected to the organisation). Accessing young adults via mandatory providers might also have influenced what they were willing to discuss, particularly relating to undeclared or unofficial work. Whilst this is not in itself an ethical issue, the feelings of anxiety which might arise when discussing certain topics, is.

The approach that I took to accessing participants via services they could use on a voluntary basis was to initially make telephone contact with the
organisation. In most cases it was possible to speak directly with the decision maker and I was able to give an explanation of my research, what I hoped to achieve and the participants I hoped to have access to. The organisation that ran the Future Jobs Fund was then happy for me to arrange some dates to visit. After an initial conversation with the organisation delivering work on behalf of the Prince’s Trust, I was asked to put my request in writing summarising my research and my request for access. This was then forwarded to the individual staff members who were due to facilitate forthcoming ‘Team’ courses. It was their decision whether they thought it was appropriate for me to visit their group and to suggest suitable dates. I was impressed with this approach as it meant that facilitators were not pressurised to grant me access. They could also consider whether my presence would be detrimental to their group and dictate when in the course I visited. In total three different facilitators from the Prince’s Trust contacted me and arranged for me to visit.

Prior to visiting any settings, I prepared a statement in plain English that summarised my research, explained the type of things that I anticipated we would discuss, gave timescales for the research and indicated how long each interview would last. The statement also detailed how and with whom the data gathered would be shared. Mindful of BERA guidelines (2011: 6) in relation to openness and disclosure I was careful that the statement was an accurate reflection of my planned research. However, I was cautious not to give too much detail as I did not want the statement to restrict or influence our discussions. I was aware of debates around the issue of gaining informed consent for qualitative research that is emergent:

> The inductive, emergent nature of qualitative research precludes researchers being able to predict where the study will take them. (Malone, 2003: 800)

Whilst I felt that my research might lead me in directions I had not anticipated, I believed it unlikely that this would significantly change how I would describe my research for the purposes of informed consent. Rather the ‘new directions’
were likely to be of more interest to me, the researcher, rather than to the participants.

I was concerned to ensure that the informed consent I received was ‘voluntary’ (BERA, 2011: 5). That is to say that the young adults did not feel pressurised to participate either by me, the organisation I accessed them through or by their peers. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) have written an interesting reflection on the BERA guidelines, problematising ethical issues of which the idea of voluntary or ‘free’ consent is one:

The idea of ‘free consent’ refers to the extent to which a person might be, or could feel under pressure to consent or for that matter to refuse consent. [...] they may feel that their hand is forced to agree or disagree by someone who is an institutional position above them, or by their peer group, or by consideration for people for whom they feel a responsibility. (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012: 9)

Though I planned the approach I would take, I was aware that the organisations I was accessing the participants through would also influence how this was handled. When visiting the Prince’s Trust each of the facilitators took the same approach, asking me to arrive during a break in the course when all the participants were sitting and relaxing. They introduced me and I then explained verbally to the group who I was, the aims of my research and who I hoped to talk to. I invited the group to ask questions and then anyone who was interested gave me their first name. The facilitators all reiterated to the group that participation was voluntary and that it was unconnected to the course they were participating in. It was useful that a person whom they had built rapport with and whom they might view as being in authority emphasised the voluntary nature of participation. However, I was mindful that peer pressure might incentivise or discourage participation, but could not see a way of avoiding this. Instead, as I met with each participant individually to undertake the interview I talked through the statement I had written about my research whilst they read it. I then offered the chance for individual questions and talked through the consent form. This way I felt all participants had the
opportunity to change their minds and withdraw, and that those with poor levels of literacy understood what they were consenting to.

The approach taken by the provider of the Future Jobs Fund was notably different. The Manager had identified which young adults were eligible in terms of age and length of unemployment, and had let them know about the research. When I arrived, she let me know who they were and left me to talk to them on a one-to-one basis. I followed the steps described above to gain their consent to participate, feeling confident that they were properly informed and given the opportunity to withdraw at this stage. However, I was mindful that I did not know how the Manager had described the research, or whether they felt pressurised to participate. For some of them it was their first day in a government funded work placement and I was wary that they might feel obliged to participate, or that the interview might add to the pressure of being in a new setting. On reflection, though, I did not feel that this was the case since the participants seemed relaxed speaking to me and the initial interviews generally lasted longer than with the Prince’s Trust participants.

Undertaking a longitudinal study, informed consent and the right to withdraw were areas that had to be renegotiated throughout the research process. However, I felt that there was far less pressure on participants to participate in second and third-round interviews. This is since I contacted them via telephone or email to arrange meeting with them, making it easier for them to not respond or to refuse to meet. I also decided that if a participant failed to show up or cancelled three times then I would not pursue them further. To do so, I felt, would seem like harassing them when clearly there was a reason they were not meeting me. For those who did agree to meet, I felt confident that they had done so ‘freely’ since it took a small amount of effort for them to meet with me. Though all venues were as close to the participants’ homes as possible, if travel expenses were incurred I had agreed in advance to pay them. I also made sure I met somewhere I could buy the participants refreshments, such as a snack or drink, but decided against paying a cash incentive for participation. Several of those who participated in second and third-round interviews took an interest in the research, wanting to know who
would read it, how many other participants there were and where they came from, what I thought so far, whether I was paid to do the research etc. Part of keeping them informed, I felt, was to answer these questions honestly and encourage their interest.

4.6.5.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

All participants were afforded a pseudonym to help protect their anonymity. Whilst participants were offered the opportunity to choose their own, all were happy to allow me to choose one for them. I also used pseudonyms for any people referred to in interviews and changed the names of any locations referred to: i.e. school or college names; training providers; places of work and towns. The exception to this was the use of the city names Exeter and Plymouth. I felt these locations were sufficiently large enough so as not to compromise the anonymity of the participants. Despite these steps, the high level of detail offered in some of the narratives meant participants might still be identifiable, at least to those who knew them best. Given the nature of the research, this seemed an inevitable possibility, though the likelihood of their friends and family reading the research seemed quite small. Nevertheless, it was important to be clear about how the information they provided would be stored and shared. By doing so participants were able to make informed decisions about what they chose to share with me. Because I transcribed the interviews myself, no third parties listened to the participants’ voices and data was anonymised before being included in any writing.

Prior to undertaking the research, I had considered the possibility that a participant might disclose to me something that had the potential to cause harm to them or to others, or that they might discuss illegal behaviour. I was aware of BERA guidelines in relation to this and responsibilities around considering disclosure to the authorities:

Researchers who judge that the effect of the agreements they have made with participants, on confidentiality and anonymity, will allow the continuation of illegal behaviour, which has come to light in the course
of the research, must carefully consider making disclosure to the appropriate authorities. If the behaviour is likely to be harmful to the participants or to others, the researchers must also consider disclosure. (BERA, 2011: 8)

I decided that if a participant seemed likely to disclose something of a level of seriousness that would oblige me to report it, I would stop the recording and remind them of my responsibilities. In practice, however, though participants disclosed both illegal and potentially harmful behaviour, I did not feel this was of a level of seriousness that would warrant breaching confidentiality and anonymity. The type of things they spoke about were taking drugs for leisure use; addiction to alcohol; working cash-in-hand whilst claiming benefits and driving friends’ cars without a licence.

One of the issues related to confidentiality and anonymity arose during the research process. During the writing up period in 2015 I decided to use online sources to follow-up on the young adults whom I had interviewed only once. Over the period of the research I became increasingly aware of the ‘digital footprint’ individuals leave, often through their use of social media accounts. This generates different forms of data, available in the public domain. However, it also raises ethical questions about whether, or how, it is appropriate to incorporate the data. Generally, the type of data this offered access to was not detailed. For example, one of the participants I had met with had spoken about their aim to join the navy, his work status (available publically via social media) confirmed that this was what he had done. However, for one of the participants, ‘Nicola’ (discussed in sections 5.2.1 and 6.4.2), the online data available was substantial. Further, the data challenged assumptions that might otherwise have been made about Nicola and the way in which her life unfolded after my interview with her.

The use of online data in a ‘stand alone’ separate study, using only online sources, would have been relatively unproblematic. Indeed, all the information was accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Further, Nicola had expressly sought to share her story via her Twitter account and by making a
film and posting it online. However, the ethical issues become more ‘thorny’ when considering the interview data I also had access to. It was the connection between the two types of data that was problematic. I was conscious that Nicola understood she would be afforded a pseudonym prior to undertaking the interview in 2010. It was possible, therefore, that she discussed things she would not have wanted connected to her real identity. By contrast, the film and her Twitter account used her full, real name.

I considered carefully whether it was appropriate to include this unanticipated data. Whilst it might have been easier (and less ‘messy’ ethically) to ignore them in my analysis, this would have meant misrepresenting my interpretation of Nicola’s narrative. To have ignored the data I had access to, and to present an interpretation that I did not feel was authentic, would have raised other ethical questions. Nevertheless, I recognised the importance of ensuring the participant’s anonymity was protected. As such, I did not link directly to the film that Nicola had made or to her Twitter account. Whilst I have included some direct quotes in section 6.4.2, their traceability has been tested using both internet search engines and Twitter’s internal search function.

4.6.5.4 Detriment caused to research participants or others

I did not anticipate that the planned research would cause significant detriment to participants. However, I was aware that undertaking interviews might cause participants to consider aspects of their lives that were distressing or upsetting. Indeed, during the course of the interviews participants spoke about loss and bereavement; negative memories from school; alcohol addiction; issues related to their health; bullying in the workplace; negative relationships with partners and housing difficulties. It was important to handle these situations sensitively, something which I felt able to do since I was experienced working with young adults. I always adopted a non-judgemental approach, listening carefully to what they had to say rather than offering advice and guidance. It was important to know when it was and was not appropriate to probe further. For example, one participant told me they dropped out of college for ‘personal reasons’ and it was clear from their
body language that they did not want to discuss this further. Though this was potentially an interesting area, I moved the conversation onto an issue they were more comfortable with. I interviewed this participant three times in total, and in later interviews they talked in some detail about their feelings related to other issues. Not only did I feel I had made the right decision in the first interview on ethical grounds, but my awareness of their discomfort seemed to make them more at ease in future interactions; confident that they would not be pressed to discuss something they were uncomfortable with.

Participating in the interviews also had the potential to be a positive experience for the participants for a variety of reasons. For some, the fact that somebody wanted to listen to what they had to say was perceived positively. This was expressed by some participants prior to and during the interviews, mostly in terms of wanting people to see them as individuals and not as part of a group of unemployed ‘scroungers’ (Anna, Interview 1, July 2010). At times it seemed to have a ‘cathartic effect, helping them to express and resolve emotions as well to clarify their feelings and ideas about the future’ (Thomson and Holland, 2003: 239), though it is important to note that this was not the intended outcome of the interviews. Others seemed to recognise their own achievements through the interview process; the interview schedule offered them the opportunity to talk about things they had done well and their own interests, often leading to enthusiastic, animated conversations. I was aware that participation in the interviews also had the potential to influence the behaviour of the participants in ways that could be either positive or negative. However, when I considered the influence of the research compared with all the other factors in their life I decided the impact was likely to be relatively insignificant:

... much of the time this research has very little significance for the people being studied, compared with all the other things going on in their lives. (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012: 11)

Indeed, since meetings were spread over a two-year period and generally lasted around an hour each time, this was hardly likely to have the same
impact as other regular interactions in their busy lives: for example with friends, family, course providers, employers or other professionals.

The potential for research to be detrimental extends beyond those who are directly involved as participants. In this study, I was particularly conscious of staff at the settings who had generously allowed me access. It was possible that their services, or indeed individual staff, could be criticised by the participants. Both settings, however, were organisations that delivered services on behalf of other organisations: the Future Jobs Fund and The Prince’s Trust. Further, they were one of a number of organisations that delivered the services in the region. This made it much harder to identify the specific organisation or individuals within it, though of course those working directly at a setting would be able to identify themselves and possibly colleagues. Despite the challenges of identifying the specific organisation, it was nevertheless a possibility that reputational damage could be afforded to the Prince’s Trust or the Future Jobs Fund if participants were particularly negative. However, I was clear from the outset that the focus of my research was not an assessment of the services accessed by young adults. Neither was my objective to instigate change in relation to these services. I did not, therefore, feel obliged to offer feedback or recommendations based upon the discussions I had with participants. No questions were asked specifically about the settings through which I accessed the participants. If they were mentioned at all, it was because the young adults discussed them in response to another question raised.

Both settings were discussed by the participants and, where relevant, extracts were included in the research findings. In some instances the conversations about the services they received were essential to understanding the lives of the young adults. Therefore to exclude them because of any concerns about impact on the setting would have been to misrepresent the participants and their opinions. Though there were some negative comments about the services received, these were not significant and were certainly counterbalanced by a good deal of praise for both services and staff. This was perhaps unsurprising given that both services were accessed on a voluntary
basis. I was not, therefore, faced with a serious dilemma in terms of the potential negative impact of my research on the settings and people associated with them. Nevertheless, this example serves to illustrate the tensions involved in undertaking research and the importance of considering ethical issues carefully. Very few research projects are carried out with just one participant. Therefore there are inevitably competing interests and priorities which will surface throughout the research process. It is important that, as a researcher, I took time to consider ethical issues prior to undertaking research. However, it was equally important that I continued to reflect on ethical issues throughout the research process, making judgements that not only met with guidelines but which satisfied my sense of ‘moral responsibility towards the participants in the research and the research setting’ (Paoletti, 2014: 274, emphasis added).
Chapter five
5. Findings: Part I

5.1 Overview

In the next two chapters I reveal the findings from my research. One of the greatest challenges of any research is to decide how to present the findings in a manner that offers both a logical structure, but which does not mask the complexity of the human condition. I was keen to ensure that the findings did not appear as an unrelated collection of ideas or themes, but that equally the framework was not forced and was indicative of what the young adults were saying and doing. In order to achieve this I have focused largely, but not exclusively, on a small number of cases. These are presented as pairs of comparable cases, chosen for the way in which they exemplify a particular theme. This allowed for the development of a strong and authentic narrative flow, rather than ‘snippets’ of data or ‘sound bites’ used in support of a particular theme or concept. Maintaining the individual narratives of the young adults did not preclude the possibility of finding connections between themes. Rather, it enabled the representation of change over time and the possibility of exploring commonality and difference within and between the cases.

The findings are split into two chapters. In this chapter I begin by exploring the Bourdieuian framework and issues of structure and agency. The first section of the chapter focuses on social exclusion and the ways in which some of the young adults seemed to live life on the margins. Though they often seemed ‘shut out’ (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8) from society, I consider the extent to which their marginality was constructed by others. The second section of the chapter is more concerned with the ‘agentic’ dimension of the young adults’ self-understanding. It explores how they sought to ‘establish and maintain a sense of identity and agency in times of profound social and economic change’ (Thompson et al., 2014: 68). Whilst some of the young adults were finding new ways to understand their lives, others seemed bound to culturally embedded ideas.
In Chapter 6 I move away from a discussion of issues of structure and agency to consider broader questions of identity. I discuss how the young adults (re)defined themselves: through *housing careers, compensatory career identities* and *alternative occupations*. They were making sense of their lives in new ways, seeming to adapt to rapid social and economic change. This may sound as if I have endowed the young adults with too much agency; that I have neglected to consider the structural constraints at play. This was not my intention and I was conscious from the outset of the multiple factors outside the young adults’ control. Since they came from markedly different backgrounds, it was impossible to ignore the extent to which the young adults had access to contrasting resources across multiple areas of their life. These resources were continuously at play in complex and subtle ways, shaping the young adults’ lives and the opportunities available to them.

### 5.1.1 Bourdieusian concepts

The young adults who participated in the research came from a broad range of backgrounds, which was unsurprising given the high levels of unemployment at the time the research was undertaken. Whilst some came from inner-city areas that were recognised as deprived, others came from ‘more privileged backgrounds and would not normally be associated with long-term unemployment’ (Lawy and Wheeler, 2013: 164). Their educational backgrounds were also diverse, ranging from those with no qualifications who had left school at age 15, to recent graduates. Access to transport varied, with some owning their own cars whilst others were reliant on public transport. Given the unequal resources to which the young adults had access, Bourdieu’s theories in relation to capital were pertinent to the research since the ‘idea of capital is extended to all forms of valued resources’ (Navarro, 2006: 16).

Bourdieu distinguished between three different types of capital: *economic, cultural* and *social*. According to Bourdieu, *economic capital* presents itself in...
the form of material resources and is ‘immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 47). Cultural capital might be embodied ‘in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 47), objectified ‘in the form of cultural goods’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 47) ‘such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 50) or institutionalised as ‘academic qualifications’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 50). For Bourdieu, social capital refers to those resources based on membership of groups and networks, it is:

… the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition.

(Bourdieu, 1986: 51)

Bourdieu also referred to symbolic capital which is not understood as a particular type of capital, but rather ‘what every form of capital becomes when it obtains an explicit or practical recognition’ (Bourdieu, 1997: 242). It is the carrier of prestige since it is the legitimated form of other types of capital.

Throughout my findings there is evidence of different forms of capital at play, particularly so in the sections on expectations of a ‘normal’ life and housing careers. Whilst Navarro’s description of capital as a ‘valued resource’ (Navarro, 2016: 16) implies something inherently positive, the reality was found to be more complex than this. Social capital, for example, incorporated membership of peer groups and networks. Though these were sometimes supportive and might offer a link to new opportunities, they could also act to constrain or restrict. Access to economic capital, though generally advantageous, sometimes emerged as a disadvantage. It had the power to contribute to high expectations against which the young adults sometimes judged themselves harshly.

Since I was interested in the way the young adults made sense of their lives, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus was also relevant to my research. Wacquant (2005) described habitus as:
... a mediating notion that revokes the common sense duality between the individual and the social [...] the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act in determinate ways, which then guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu.

(Wacquant 2005: 316)

This implies that the interplay between the individual and the social creates a person’s capacity to respond in a particular way. Though *habitus* is ‘not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period’ (Navarro 2006: 16), Wacquant suggests it has a ‘built-in-inertia’ (Wacquant, 2005: 317). This is since it:

... tends to produce practices patterned after the social structures that spawned them, and because each of its layers operates as a prism through which later experiences are filtered and subsequent strata of dispositions overlaid.

(Wacquant, 2005: 317)

Since my findings discuss both culturally embedded ideas and new ways of defining the self, an awareness of Bourdieusian concepts is important to their reading. This is not to say that I focus solely on these concepts in one particular section, but rather that I critically engage with these ideas throughout my findings.

5.1.2 Social exclusion

Earlier in this thesis (Chapter 3) I discussed the perceived connection between unemployment and social exclusion. Since the late 1990s, politicians have maintained that:
The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience.


Employment, then, is construed as a ‘silver bullet’ for other forms of social exclusion: i.e. poverty and ill-health. It is portrayed as the route to social cohesion, which individuals must pursue not only for their own benefit, but for the good of society as a whole. The implications of this are far reaching, reflected in policy responses to both unemployment and non-participation. It has also constructed a powerful narrative about unemployed people that has filtered into the national psyche, helped along by the way in which the unemployed are represented in the Media (as discussed in Chapter 1). However, researchers (for example Furlong, 2006; Yates and Payne, 2006; Levitas, 2006; Fergusson, 2013) have sought to highlight some of the problematic assumptions that underpin this ‘version’ (Thompson, 2011: 786) of social exclusion.

Thompson (2011) (drawing on the work of Byrne, 2005 and Levitas 2005) described New Labour’s discourse of social exclusion as a ‘weak version’ (Thompson, 2011: 793). Through this version of the discourse, social exclusion is portrayed as ‘arising mainly from unemployment, which it attributes to deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of individuals’ (Thompson, 2011: 786). This, Thompson asserts, diverts attention from the ‘inequalities within education and employment’ that cannot be explained by ‘individualised approaches based on personal and cultural characteristics’ (Thompson, 2011: 785). A ‘stronger form’ of social exclusion is called for that ‘emphasise[s] the role of those who are doing the excluding, and therefore aim[s] for solutions which reduce the powers of exclusion’ (Veit-Wilson, 1998: 45). This moves social exclusion away from being a problem caused by individual deficiencies, and instead recognises that it is a ‘dynamic process of being shut out’ (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8).
The young adults involved in my research were socially excluded, at least as understood by policymakers. They were the workless young adults who had ‘failed’ to capitalise on education and training opportunities. Their lives, at least as constructed by successive UK governments from New Labour onwards, might also be understood through a ‘moral underclass discourse’ (Levitas, 2006: 125). This discourse of social exclusion focuses on the ‘imputed behaviour or moral deficiencies of ‘problem’ groups’ (Levitas, 2006: 125). Thus ‘disconnection from education, work and society is assumed to derive from a cultural malaise within families and communities’ (Thompson, 2011: 795). These were the truants; the school excludees; the drug and alcohol users; the young adults whose parents were perceived to possess a ‘poverty of ambition’ (Roberts, 2009: 358). Yet this, of course, is the way in which the young adults might be understood from the outside looking in. I was interested in the ways in which they made sense of their own lives; the things to which they ascribed meaning and their individual self-understanding. This did not mean that ideas about social exclusion were unimportant; indeed being ‘shut out’ (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8) was an apt way of describing the experiences of some of the young adults. However, it was important to be aware of contending discourses and ‘versions’ of social exclusion. This allowed me to resist a narrow understanding that connected their social exclusion with their lack of work and ‘deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of individuals’ (Thompson, 2011: 786). It pushed me towards considering the ‘dynamic process’ (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8) of social exclusion; to question how social exclusion is constructed and by whom. The first section of my findings, *life on the margins*, explores social exclusion through the narratives of Nicola, Luke and Nick.
5.2 Life on the margins

*Marginalise 3. trans.* To render or treat as marginal; to remove from the centre or mainstream; to force (an individual, minority group, etc.) to the periphery of a dominant social group; (*gen.*) to belittle, depreciate, discount, or dismiss. (Oxford English Dictionary online)

In this first section of my findings I discuss how several of the young adults seemed to live *life on the margins*. Whilst exclusion from the labour market was one way in which they might occupy a deficit position, it was by no means the only way. It was quite possible for the young adults to be in employment yet remain on the periphery; paid work was certainly no guarantee of social inclusion. Further, their marginality could not be understood purely through a narrow focus on their relationship with the labour market. Other factors such as levels of literacy; relationships with family; self-esteem; drug and alcohol use; background; locality and criminality were all at play. So too were the ways in which their lives were construed by others. This included the way in which they were portrayed in the Media or understood by policymakers. However, equally important were the opinions of friends, family members and neighbours; holding the power to construct an individual in a particular way and contribute to their marginalisation.

5.2.1 At a ‘turning point’ – Nicola

Nicola (aged 23 at our first meeting) lived in Plymouth in an area ranked 10th most deprived of a total of 39 neighbourhoods (Plymouth City Council, 2014). On the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD2010) the incidence of crime and social disorder were particularly high. When I first met Nicola in July 2010 she was approaching the end of the 12-week Prince’s Trust Team Course. She lived with her father who worked in a paint shop, her mother, and her twin sister who was attending college whilst working part-time. Nicola’s appearance was different from the other young women I interviewed: she wore sportswear and trainers and her hair was closely cropped. Though she had a serious expression throughout our interview and rarely made eye
contact, she was able to articulate her thoughts clearly and had a frank way of expressing herself. Unlike some of the other participants I interviewed, who seemed to almost craft a narrative of their experiences, my interview with Nicola felt ‘raw.’ Her emotions appeared close to the surface and it seemed she responded without considering the impression she made. My conversation with Nicola was based on the same areas I covered with the other participants. However, the narrative that emerged was notably different. It centred round Nicola’s struggles with alcohol addiction and her attempts to build a new life for herself.

Nicola did not go into a lot of detail about how her alcoholism had developed, but she attributed it to experiences from her past:

[… ] it’s a lot in my past that I’ve got to deal with, as a child. And obviously the Army, I got declined […] Yeah, the Army, I did want to join up. I did want to join the police but unfortunately that’s not possible anymore.

(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

It seemed that being declined from the Army had been a significant disappointment for Nicola. She had studied Public Services at College and had enjoyed the course, hoping to enter the Army upon its completion. When she got declined Nicola managed to find alternative employment, first at MacDonald’s and then with the local council working on the bins. Though far from her original aspirations, Nicola nevertheless was willing to work and seemed to enjoy the role with the council. Though she was the only female worker on the bins, it seemed that she got on well with her colleagues:

The bins, they weren’t too bad. They were quite nice people down there. Nice, friendly, I could talk to them and have quite a laugh.

(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

Whilst working on the bins Nicola recognised her drinking had become problematic. As she explained, she left,
Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

Nicola had worked in different roles, trying to put the disappointment at being declined from the Army behind her. However, her drinking had spiralled out of control and she had not only spent time in rehabilitation, but had also got into trouble with the police. As a result of her behaviour whilst drunk Nicola had been charged for a number of offences and spent time in prison:

I was arrested and gone to jail [...] assault, criminal damage ... it’s all drink related.
(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

In total, Nicola had spent around two years segregated from society, first in prison and then in rehabilitation. Though her physical separation from the community was now over it was clear that Nicola continued to feel ‘shut out’ of mainstream society.

Nicola, unlike the other young adults I interviewed, had not managed to undertake a work placement as part of the Prince’s Trust Course. She felt that it was her criminal record that had held her back:

Interviewer: Have you done a work placement as part of the Team Course?

Nicola: No, I didn’t unfortunately.

Interviewer: Was that just because you didn’t find one?

Nicola: No, I think myself it was because of my criminal record.

(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)
It seemed she was acutely aware of some of the difficulties she faced and was sensitive to the opinions of others. Whilst some of Nicola’s family were supportive, others (including her twin sister) sustained a negative opinion of her past behaviour and she felt judged by them:

\[
\text{[...] my other family do judge me. [...] cousins, aunties, uncles, my Mum’s grandparents [...] My sister ’as voiced a few of her opinions, obviously. At the end of the day it’s none of your business. Don’t give me stick. She should keep out of it, leave me alone. I’m on benefits because of medical reasons. That’s why I’m not allowed to work, so she shuts up. If she tries to carry it on, it’s like no, shut up, and like family have to get involved and say no, it’s none of your business.} \\
\text{(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)}
\]

Though Nicola wanted to move forwards with her life and was attempting to integrate herself back into the community, she was constrained by the way in which she was constructed by others. This not only had the power to restrict the opportunities available to her, but also left her feeling judged.

Since coming out of rehabilitation in September 2009 Nicola had been trying to live her life ‘clean’ (Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010). Despite the challenges Nicola faced, she was attempting to rebuild her life with a new focus. She had completed a Level 2 Outdoor Leadership qualification whilst in rehabilitation and hoped to build a career in the related area of Youth Work. It was her aim to start an Access to Higher Education course in the September following our interview. She hoped to go on to study an undergraduate degree in Youth and Community Work at the local University. In order to gain some relevant experience, Nicola had been volunteering with a local youth football team:

\[
\text{[...] I work with young people. I do ‘Kicks’ and that, volunteer down there to get to know how it all works ’cause I’m going into that side of Youth Work. [...] Yeah, football coaching and Youth Work.} \\
\text{(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)}
\]
Her volunteering work seemed important to Nicola’s motivation to stay ‘clean’, perhaps because it offered her a way of occupying her time and the opportunity to meet new people. It was also clear that Nicola, despite spending over two years away from the community, had maintained a strong motivation to work. Indeed, having work-related goals seemed integral to her recovery.

Nicola was proud of the fact that, through her volunteering, she had been nominated for an award by her mentor. The award was a ‘Turning Point Award’ which recognised Nicola’s attempts to turn her life around. The title of the award seemed to capture what Nicola was trying to do, but also made me consider the fact that she was at a pivotal point in her life. It seemed she was trying to leave one lifestyle behind, but had not yet fully established an alternative. This seemed to be something that Nicola recognised when she spoke about the award:

*Interviewer: What would you consider to be an achievement of yours?*

*Nicola: Well being in the paper and getting an award. [...] A ‘Turning Point Award.’ For my life. I’m like trying to turn my life around. That was in June this year. [...] I was doing volunteer work with [the football club] and my mentor put me forward for the award. So I got that award and it was pretty good. [...] It’s good ’cause I’ve got the award up like in my living room, so I look at that every day. To see that I’ve got this so I’ve got to carry on living life as normal.*

(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

Nicola described how she looked at the award every day for motivation, illustrating how challenging she was finding the process of turning her life around. Her use of the phrase ‘to carry on living life as normal’ also struck me as significant. This made it clear that she viewed her previous behaviour and experiences as somehow abnormal. Nicola was attempting to integrate herself back into what she considered to be a normal way of life, free from
alcohol. Part of this process for Nicola was adjusting to life back in the family home, living in the community where her drinking had become out of control and she had got into trouble with the police. Having spent around two years away from society, first in prison and then rehabilitation, this must have been challenging for Nicola. I felt that she was somehow teetering between two lives, the life of the addict that she was trying to leave behind and the new life she hoped to build for herself. At the time of our interview it seemed she did not fully belong to either and the image of being at a ‘turning point’ seemed apt.

It was perhaps unsurprising that Nicola had struggled to stay clean once living back in the community. She explained to me how, around a month prior to our interview she had started drinking again. After two weeks of drinking heavily she had somehow managed to stop and at the time of our interview had been clean for two weeks. However, during the period when she was drinking heavily she had got into trouble with the police:

_I had been back on the drink for 2 weeks. I’ve been dry for 2 weeks now. I’ve stopped drinking again now. […] I tend to stay in out the way at the moment because I’ve just been done again in court. In two years that is, two and a half years, I kept clean and had a blip, and obviously they know I’m on a conditional discharge, so I’m just trying to stay away from the police. Because they’re going to be on my back all the time, so I stay out of their way, they keep out of my way. So I tend to stay in, play on the X-Box, read the papers or read a book, do a crossword._

(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

Nicola felt that because of her past she had a bad reputation. She chose to stay in not only to avoid getting into trouble with the police, but also because she had been accused of something that she maintained she had no involvement with:
I've had to stay away. Recently I've had to stay in, because I've been accused of something I haven't done and I've been stigmatised for that now and it wasn't even me that did it. So now I've got to stay out the way.

(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

Her use of the word ‘stigmatised’ in the above extract emphasised how keenly she felt the opinions of others and drew attention to her sense of isolation and alienation. To avoid trouble she stayed in, occupying herself with solitary activities such as playing the X-Box and reading, which must have further contributed to her isolation. In many ways it seemed that, despite her efforts to ‘turn her life around’, Nicola was being punished for her addiction multiple times over: through her continued struggles with alcoholism; through her criminal record; through the opinions of others including her family; through the way in which she felt stigmatised and isolated. Quite apart from her addiction, there were a number of obstacles that Nicola would need to overcome if she was to ‘turn her life around.’ Some of these obstacles were created by the way in which her behaviour was constructed by others. She continued to be constrained by the negative opinions others had of her, and felt vilified by some of her own family members.

When Nicola looked to the future she tried to visualise a positive outcome for herself and attempted to be optimistic. These were her closing comments from our interview:

[…] I know where I want to be. I know what I want to do now. If I hadn’t been on this [the Prince’s Trust Programme] when I did, I don’t think I’d know where I want to be now. Think I’d be a down and out, wouldn’t I, most probably? I’m optimistic about where I want to be in 10 years, what I want to do. Getting there, forward slowly.

(Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010)

However, I felt it was notable that Nicola stated that she was ‘optimistic about where I want to be in 10 years.’ Her focus on the long-term perhaps revealed
that she knew the immediate future was going to be challenging; her closing words ‘forward slowly’ also seemed to indicate this. I wondered whether she realised that her criminal record might impact on her ambitions to study Youth and Community Work. Certainly she seemed to recognise that this had restricted her ability to find a work placement. Given the setbacks she had already experienced since leaving rehabilitation, it was of course possible that she simply felt it would be difficult to fulfil her aims of ‘living life as normal.’

When I tried to arrange to meet with Nicola for a second interview she agreed to meet and we set a time and date. The evening before she contacted me via text and asked to rearrange the meeting, which we did. However, on the morning of the new date, she phoned me and spoke to me briefly on the phone, sounding anxious and stating she was with her social worker and couldn’t meet. I tried once more to meet with Nicola, but she again cancelled via text just before the time of the meeting. At this stage I decided I would not pursue meeting any further. It seemed clear that Nicola, though willing to meet, was still facing challenges in her life and I felt it would have been unfair to continue to contact her.

Nicola’s narrative held within it a number of factors associated with social exclusion: addiction; antisocial behaviour; unemployment and criminality. Further, she came from a locality that had particularly high incidence of crime and anti-social behaviour. It is easy to see, therefore, how her narrative could be manipulated to fit a ‘moral underclass discourse’ (Levitas, 2006: 125) of social exclusion. Indeed, a focus on the ‘imputed behaviour or moral deficiencies of ‘problem’ groups’ (Levitas, 2006: 125) might be utilised to explain her position of marginality. However, this is not the way in which Nicola’s narrative is interpreted. Instead, her story is understood as that of a young woman who was subject to a ‘dynamic process of being shut out’ (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8). Though she seemed to occupy a ‘position of inferiority in relation to centres of power, resources and prevailing values’ (Estivill, 2003: 19) this was not a situation entirely of her own making. Certainly Nicola had engaged in behaviour in the past that had isolated her from the community. As was outlined above she had spent two years in
rehabilitation and prison. However, that she continued to experience life on the margins was not the direct result of her past behaviour or experiences. Rather, it was the way in which that behaviour was constructed and understood that was found to be significant. Not only did this have the power to create obstacles (for example through the implications of having a criminal record), but it also influenced how Nicola perceived her own life. She felt judged by others and discussed how she felt ‘stigmatised.’ Nicola responded by staying in and engaging in solitary activities to keep out of trouble. Yet it is clear that this would have further contributed to her sense of isolation.

Nicola’s life, for a number of reasons, had been chaotic in the years preceding my interview with her. Moving between prison, rehabilitation and her family home, it seemed she did not yet feel she belonged back in the community and was struggling to find her ‘place.’ In the next section I continue to consider the impact of chaotic lives through the experiences of Nick and Luke.

5.2.2 Chaotic lives and precarious work – Nick and Luke

Through the narratives of Nick and Luke, I now consider the marginal position the young adults occupied within the labour market. Their experiences are placed within the broader context of their lives in order to try and understand their precarious relationship with employment. I also discuss their experience of participating in the Future Jobs Fund programme, considering the effectiveness of government attempts to ameliorate the impact of unemployment. To what extent could their engagement with the Future Jobs Fund move them towards a more secure position in the labour market? Further, what would their experiences of the programme reveal about their hopes and expectations in relation to work.

Seven of the young adults I interviewed were participating in the Future Jobs Fund programme at the time of our first interview. Though the programme is not the focus of my research, the young adults inevitably spoke about their experiences of it. Therefore it is useful to briefly offer an overview in order place their experiences in context.
The Future Jobs Fund was a key aspect of ‘The Young Person’s Guarantee’; introduced by the Labour Government (1997 – 2010) in October 2009. In response to rising levels of youth unemployment following the global financial crisis of 2008, ‘all 18 to 24 year olds reaching six months unemployment were guaranteed an offer of a job, training or work experience’ (DWP/BIS, 2011: 1). Though the Guarantee had four distinct strands only the Future Jobs Fund attempted to generate additional or new opportunities. With a ‘budget of £1 billion which was intended to create up to 100,000 new jobs for young people’ (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011: 255), the Future Jobs Fund was aimed at 18 – 24 year olds who had been unemployed for six months or more. It seemed that the Government had acknowledged the ‘demand-side’ of the equation; attempting to create new roles for those that needed them. However, it is important to note that each role was funded for a maximum of six months and the minimum number of hours was set at 25 per week. Though the roles allowed young adults to ‘sign off’ their benefits and removed them from the unemployment figures, they were effectively on a government funded work placement.

By May 2011 all four strands of the ‘Young Person’s Guarantee’ had been brought to an end early by the Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition (2010 – 2015); with spend on the Future Jobs Fund reduced to £320 million (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011: 255). In April 2012 the coalition launched the £1 Billion Youth Contract, which was its offer to unemployed 16 – 24 year olds. Though similar to the ‘Young Person’s Guarantee’, the work experience offered was unpaid and there was a renewed focus on providing opportunities via apprenticeships. The withdrawal of funding for the Future Jobs Fund had an impact on the organisation I accessed the participants through. It was a well established local charity whose activities had previously focused on delivering training for adults who claimed a range of benefits. The organisation had applied to be a provider of the Future Jobs Fund with the vision of setting up a social enterprise. It was the organisation’s aim that the initiatives they started would eventually become self-sustaining; generating an income that would enable them to employ young adults without having to rely
on external funding. However, the organisation did not manage to fulfil its aims and the social enterprise ceased to operate shortly after the Future Jobs Fund ended.

At the age of 23, Nick and Luke were two of the older and more experienced participants I interviewed. They had both held a range of different job roles since leaving education, interspersed with periods of unemployment. Prior to starting their roles with the Future Jobs Fund, they had both been unemployed and claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance (JSA) for around 10 months. Unlike some of the other participants I met via the Future Jobs Fund, their situation cannot be understood purely in terms of the high levels of unemployment experienced at the time. They had both been part of the labour market for several years, yet their relationship with it was at best precarious. Their work experience consisted largely of temporary or casual work, often part-time and sometimes beneath the national minimum wage. It is interesting to consider Nick and Luke’s persistent vulnerability within the labour market. Why were the opportunities available to them ‘usually poorly paid and often transitory in nature’ (Simmons, 2008: 430)? Moreover, what made them willing to accept these opportunities?

In my interview with Nick, he spoke in some detail about his experiences of school. He explained that he ‘hated’ secondary school; something which he felt was due to the lack of support he received for his dyslexia:

Nick: I hated it.

Interviewer: What was it that you hated about it?

Nick: I’m dyslexic. I can’t read or write very good […] [Chapel] High School is the worst, is the worst school I could have went to, because most of my mates never got … it wasn’t that I was messing around it was just the teachers never dedicated their time to you. So it just seemed that they pushed you out […] It was just wrong really.

(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)
Nick’s levels of literacy were very poor, something which was evident when he struggled to fill out his contact details on the consent paperwork. It was also something that the manager of the Future Jobs Fund programmes commented on, describing Nick as ‘illiterate.’

By the age of fifteen, Nick told me he was regularly bunking off school in order to work part-time in a casual role as a gamekeeper. It was work that his older brother had helped him to secure:

[…] when I was fifteen I was working out [Clancy] Estate as a gamekeeper. But I was obviously, when I was fifteen I wasn’t going to school so much, so I went there and done a little bit of work, got some money and went back. Because like I say, school wasn’t for me really. […] Well my brother used to work there, and he sort of said, oh we need a spare hand. So I said I’ll work down there, and that was it really. (Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

Frustrated with his experiences of school, it seemed Nick had jumped at the opportunity to start work. At the age of fifteen he had been unconcerned by the casual nature of the job, describing himself as ‘a spare hand.’ However, the work did not last and Nick soon returned to education. Having left school with no qualifications, he was nevertheless accepted on a vocational course to train to be a mechanic.

Nick told me he preferred college to school, that ‘it was much more better really’ and that the tutors ‘just relaxed a bit more’ (Nick, Interview 1, October 2010). Yet he only remained on the course for around two months, explaining that he left after they sent him on his first work placement. The auto repairs centre where Nick was placed offered him a full-time job and Nick accepted, even though it meant forgoing his training:

Nick: I went to college, but that was only mechanics but I never followed it through.
Interviewer: How long did you stay there for?

Nick: About a month, maybe two months. Then I had to go to a work placement and I went down [Auto Repairs], when I was in a work placement that sort of got me ready …

Interviewer: So did you go straight into work off the back of your work placement?

Nick: Yeah. […] I had full-time and I didn’t think I’d meet the grades for going to college anyway.
(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

Nick had chosen the immediate rewards of work over a longer-term investment in training. It seemed he lacked confidence in his ability to pass the college course and was pleased to accept the offer of full-time work.

Nick’s experiences of school, combined with his early encounters with the labour market seemed to have locked him into a pattern of low-skilled, insecure employment. With low levels of functional literacy and no qualifications, the options open to him were limited. He had undertaken a range of roles including cleaning and labouring on building sites, he had also worked as a roofer for just £100 per week:

Nick: I went with [ABC] Roofing […] Umm, it was pretty good, but they only paid me something like £100, so that wasn’t no good really […] No, it was just like you work for me and I’ll pay you cash and pay you your National thingy

Interviewer: Your National Insurance Stamp?

Nick: Yeah and your tax.
(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)
Like the participants in the *Teeside Studies* (discussed in detail in Chapter 3), Nick had a ‘strong, resilient work motivation and […] had] repeatedly engaged with work’ (Shildrick et al., 2010: 7). However, rather than help him to progress, this led Nick to accept almost any work that he was offered. At age 23 he had already spent seven years cycling between various low-paid roles and unemployment and occupied a marginal position in the labour market. It was difficult to see how Nick could break this pattern, especially given that he seemed to lack confidence in his ability to learn.

It is now useful to compare Nick’s experiences with those of Luke, considering both the similarities and the differences. Like Nick, Luke’s experiences of education had been disrupted. However, unlike Nick who struggled with his literacy, Luke maintained that he found school too easy and got bored:

> The thing with school was that it was just so boring. It was mind numbingly boring. You know, I’d … I did do the work but I would just ignore it because it was just pointless. […] I had usually completed the work, the fastest one, before, you know, the class was finished. It was just too easy, I just got very bored.

(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

Luke told me that when he was bored he misbehaved, which led to him being permanently excluded twice:

[…] when I was 14, I wasn’t the best behaved person in the world, I didn’t get on very well with my mother, so I moved out, because I kind of got kicked out of school, and I moved in with my father back in Dorset. He lived in [Shillingham] still and I attended [Shillingham] Comprehensive, which was supposedly quite a good school, and, um, that was fine, that was great, and year 11 came and I got expelled from [Shillingham] Comprehensive School.

(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)
School exclusion is associated with other disadvantages; viewed not only as a ‘problem’ for the excludee (or sometimes with the excludee), but also for broader society. Macrae et al. (2003) described it as a ‘multidimensional problem’ for government; it is intimately connected with issues of law and order, criminality and social control. It connects with aspects of fiscal policy for, in human capital terms, an undereducated workforce will be less productive’ (Macrae et al., 2003: 91). I was interested in the way in which Luke perceived his school exclusion, and whether he associated it with the other challenges he had faced.

Luke seemed keen to impress upon me that being excluded from school had not had a detrimental effect on his education or his prospects. This was particularly evident when he spoke about his qualifications. Though he had missed all of his coursework, he maintained he had been able to sit his GCSEs at another school in Dorset:

[…] so I did my exams in [Aylesford] in the end, and obviously it was just paper exams, not coursework. Um, and obviously a heavy, heavy amount of coursework for most of it, and I didn’t have any coursework. I ended up, I think, I got a B in Maths, ’cause Maths is like 20 per cent [coursework …] Just pure exam. And I think I got a C in English, I’m not sure […] So I ended up doing alright, so it wasn’t really an issue. I did science as well. I think I got double, I don’t know, because it was so long ago.

(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

Luke stated ‘I ended up doing alright, so it wasn’t really an issue’ and seemed to be trying to brush aside the consequences of his school exclusion. Yet he was vague about his GCSE results and claimed he couldn’t remember all of them. When he later spoke about his experience of attending college, he was again vague about the qualifications he gained. This ‘mystification’ (Lawy et al., 2010: 344) of qualifications has been found in other research with young people, and it has been suggested that ‘they are aware of their social positioning and use obfuscation to hide their lack of normatively defined
‘success’ criteria’ (Lawy et al., 2010: 344). This seemed to fit with the way in which Luke reflected on the past. I felt that he wanted me to know about his school exclusion, yet was reluctant to acknowledge the negative consequences of it. It seemed he was trying to manage the way he presented his life, and was controlling his narrative to create a positive impression.

It was clear that Luke’s life as a teenager had been chaotic. Not only had he been excluded from school, but he had moved frequently between his mother’s home in Exeter and his father’s house in Dorset. At the age of 16 he had lived with his girlfriend’s family for a few months whilst working in ‘a crappy box factory’ (Luke, Interview 1, October 2010). When this didn’t work out, he returned to live with his mother in Exeter. By this time Luke had got into ‘a little bit of trouble here and there’ (Luke, Interview 1, October 2010) and was working with the Youth Offending Team:

I came back to live with my mother, and didn’t get on very well with her, so 8 months down the line she told me to sling my hook. At the time I was working with, what are they called, the Youth Offending Team or something, because I’d been, I’d got in a little bit of trouble here and there, but in the end it worked out OK because I didn't get any convictions, cause I got it all whacked off […] Yeah, I got it all with this referral, so this referral was basically if I didn’t do it [the referral] then I would get convicted, so that was fine. So that happened, and then they got me this um, placement in a bedsit.

(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

In the same way as Luke tried to downplay his school exclusion, he attempted to make light of his involvement with the Youth Offending Team. Though he was clear about their name he states ‘what are they called, the Youth Offending Team or something.’ He seemed keen to create the impression that their role within his life was not that significant. Further, Luke emphasised that he had not been convicted as he had complied with the terms of his referral. His use of the phrases ‘whacked off’ and a ‘little bit of trouble here and there’, seemed an attempt to trivialise his experiences; to make them sound less
serious. Yet it was clear that Luke’s life had been unstable and uncertain, combining school exclusion with difficult family relationships and involvement with the criminal justice system (see McCrystal et al., 2007 for similar findings). Further, his chaotic past seemed reflected in his precarious relationship with the labour market.

Luke had worked primarily in temporary and part-time roles, sometimes on a commission only basis. In contrast to Nick, Luke had worked in administration, bar work and sales. Yet he had also struggled to progress and for around five years had been moving between various roles and occasional spells of unemployment:

> So I worked in a factory like I told you to begin with. That was crap. Then I think I went to, um, I think I was canvassing. And then after canvassing I worked in the [Bar] for about four weeks, maybe five weeks. […] That would have been when I was about 19, 20. So I did that for about one to two months, and I left that in a heartbeat because that was absolutely awful. Um, can’t think what I did after that …

(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

Both Nick and Luke seemed to face particular disadvantages in the labour market. Though their educations had been disrupted for different reasons, in both cases their disengagement seemed to have had long-term implications. Nick’s opportunities were restricted by his poor levels of literacy, but also by his lack of confidence in his capacity to learn. As a result he had come to expect and accept low-skilled, low-paid manual work. Luke’s school exclusion seemed intertwined with his difficult relationship with his family. As a result his teenage years had been chaotic and he had also been involved with the criminal justice system. Though he was keen to portray the impression that his difficulties were behind him, he continued to occupy a marginal position in the labour market. Further, when unemployment rose, both young men were squeezed from the labour market altogether. It was after 10 months claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance that they applied for roles with the Future Jobs Fund.
5.2.2.1 ‘Real’ work or filling time?

I now focus on Nick and Luke’s experiences of the Future Jobs Fund, questioning the extent to which it had the capacity to address their marginal position in the labour market.

Nick worked in a gardening role for the social enterprise, which was the division that had been established the longest. Though all the roles were funded by the government, it was clear that Nick considered his as a ‘real’ job. This was evident when he spoke about coming off his benefits to undertake the work:

No you get paid a different amount. You sign off. You’re not allowed to sign on whilst you’re working. You sign on while you’re working, you get done or something like that.
(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

Nick was very positive about his experience to-date, and spoke with enthusiasm about the work and its impact on his confidence:

It’s built my confidence a bit. I’ve learnt a lot of skills from it whereas before I was … didn’t learn and was a bit quiet. But now I’ve learnt some stuff. I’ve got health and safety certificates, I’ve got manual handling. I’ve got hedge [meaning hedge trimming] … I’ve got like a few of them. Basically it’s done me the world of good, rather than just sitting in all day.
(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

Notably, Nick focused on the things that he had learnt since being in the role. He stated that in the past he ‘didn’t learn and was a bit quiet’, which seemed consistent with his previous lack of confidence in relation to education and training. However, through the course he had gained some ‘certificates’ in health and safety and manual handling, along with hedge trimming. These were the first qualifications of any kind that Nick had obtained, and it seemed
to have instilled in him a confidence in his ability to learn. Since starting with the Future Jobs Fund he had also begun to study for his driving theory test:

Well, I’m doing my theory at the moment, so hopefully in a year’s time I will be driving.

(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

This change in Nick’s perceptions of himself as someone capable of learning was significant. I felt it had the potential to open up new possibilities for him in relation to education and training.

Nick recognised the broader benefits of engaging in the Future Jobs Fund, stating that it had done him ‘the world of good’ and acknowledging the impact on his confidence. However, he also appreciated the increase in his income. Whilst claiming benefits, Nick was still expected to pay rent to his mother whom he lived with:

It was a bit when you were on the dole, ’cause you get a hundred pounds [a fortnight], fifty pounds a week. Time you pay where you live, rent, ’cause you don’t get no help from that. That cost us, what, fifty pounds a week. […] I still had to pay my way, living with my Mum.

(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

Nick worked for 25 hours per week at the Future Jobs Fund at the minimum wage and it would have been difficult for him to live independently on that salary. Nevertheless, it represented a significant increase in income for Nick and he felt the additional money had improved his living situation:

I’m still living there at the moment, but it’s a lot better now. […] I mean I’ve bought me tele, I’ve done all of me room, most of me mother’s house up with the money from here …

(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)
Whilst his salary was modest, it is important not to underestimate the difference it made. Nick perceived his quality of life had improved and took pride in being able to do something of benefit to his mother.

In many ways, Nick’s experience of the Future Jobs Fund was a positive one. Certainly it had restored his confidence, and for the first time it seemed he believed he was capable of learning. Yet it seemed that Nick had doubts that it would help him find a secure place within the labour market. When I asked him what work he anticipated doing in a year’s time, he replied:

Well either gardening, or, I’ve got a few certificates. Like I said, I’ve done roofing before. I could quite easily go back to that. Once you’ve learnt it once it’s like riding a bike, you know what to do. So, I think, I’m quite … like I could do job to job to job, do you know what I mean?
(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

Nick speculated that he would still be going ‘job to job to job’ and did not seem to anticipate building a career in a specific sector; casual employment was the norm for Nick and something he appeared to have come to expect. His experiences with the Future Jobs Fund did not seem to have changed this outlook and Nick seemed unable to contemplate a role where he could progress.

After interviewing Nick, I spoke to Jackie who was the woman who ran the social enterprise. She spent some time explaining the charity’s vision for a social enterprise that could offer longer-term opportunities to those that needed them. Jackie explained that they hoped to be able to afford to employ Nick after his government funding ran out; recognising that his poor literacy posed particular challenges. She had recently met with Nick to discuss his future plans, and she told me that when he realised his funding was coming to an end he had cried. This was consistent with the end of my interview with Nick, where he made it clear that he wanted to stay in his gardening job and feared looking for work and being on the dole again:
[...] I don’t want to go back on the dole again or start searching for another job. [...] Yeah, the main job is just keep your head down and keep your wage coming in.
(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

The Future Jobs Fund had provided Nick with a positive opportunity and had considerably improved his self-esteem. However, it was clear that he still lacked confidence in his ability to find and sustain work independently, and was unable to contemplate entering a role that offered him progression.

Luke’s self-esteem, similarly to Nick’s, had also been affected by unemployment. Though he tried to put a positive spin on events that had happened several years previously (for example his school exclusion), when he spoke about the immediate past he was candid about how difficult he had found it being unemployed.

It’s just pretty, it’s pretty hard to take. You get into a system where it’s constantly, just constant rejections. [...] It’s quite hard to keep the motivation going and keep applying. [...] I’ve had a bad, about like the last 18 months haven’t been the best, just literally kind of dark hole I guess you could say.
(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

Similarly to Nick, Luke felt his confidence had increased since participating in the Future Jobs Fund:

Um, I’m getting my confidence back. I used to be extremely confident, but er, I feel it’s just coming back. I think it’s one of those things where obviously I spent like a year just not doing anything …
(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

However, in all other respects Luke’s experience of the Future Jobs Fund was very different from Nick’s.
When I interviewed him, Luke had been at the social enterprise for just over a month and was working three days per week in the office where the other services were coordinated from. Luke was ostensibly the finance officer, which fitted with his previous experience. However, it was clear that there was not really enough work to justify the title as he only received around one invoice per day:

*Luke: Well, at the moment I'm like kind of finance guy, admin, finance support. I don't know what they're calling me. I think I'm called Finance Officer and then there's admin support. If there's something needed to do, I generally just get on and do it, or ask if there's something to do ... just one invoice we get each day [laughs].*

*Interviewer: How does it compare with other jobs you've done before?*

*Luke: At the end of the day it's one of those things. You need money and so you have to work, whether you enjoy it or not, you've still got to carry on and do it. I'm not saying I don't enjoy it. I mean obviously it's, it's nice to be out and doing working ...*  

(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

Most of Luke’s time was spent supporting the other administrative staff and it seemed he was often in the position of asking if there were any tasks he could do. Even though he was pleased to be ‘out and doing working’ and acknowledged that his confidence had increased, he did not seem to have a clearly defined role or enough work to fully occupy him. Luke’s experience was echoed by several of the other young adults. Indeed, Libby (discussed in Chapter 6) questioned whether the role had been created for her, stating she felt ‘they more hired me because they had this government um [...] the Future Jobs Fund scheme’ (Libby, Interview 2, November 2011).

Having spent time speaking to Jackie who ran the Future Jobs Fund programme, I did not feel that the organisation had deliberately or cynically ‘created’ work for the young adults. They were a charity with considerable
experience of delivering training for people on benefits, but who were attempting to establish a social enterprise in challenging economic times. Where the organisation had generated enough work in the gardening service to keep the employees fully occupied, the experience seemed a positive one. However, where they were still in the process of setting up a service, the experience for the young adults was frustrating and demoralising. The young adults were eager to work and did not want to be paid to bide their time, yet this seemed to be the experience for several of them. Neither were they satisfied with scratching around for tasks to do; they wanted a clearly defined role and the satisfaction that came with fulfilling it.

As was outlined in Chapter 2, previous attempts to ameliorate the impact of unemployment have often met with criticism. Questions have been raised about whether the various initiatives actually provide a route to ‘decent jobs’ (Roberts, 2009: 361). Further, researchers such as Roberts (2009) have questioned whether participants are ‘warehoused’ on community projects and in workshops where there has been no prospect of retention (Roberts, 2009: 361). This implies that whilst government schemes might remove people from the unemployment figures, they often do little more than fill their time. Though there were positive aspects of Nick and Luke’s experiences of the Future Jobs Fund, it seemed the programme was unlikely to alter their marginal position in the labour market. Though it might support them to re-enter the labour market, it was difficult to see how it would help them escape the precarious work that had become the norm. In the case of Nick, the social enterprise manager recognised the need for additional support, particularly in relation to his literacy, but was constrained by the short-term funding they were able to access. Though the Future Jobs Fund had made a positive impact and improved Nick’s self-esteem, he was not yet confident in his capacity to secure unsubsidised work, let alone sustain it.

There is a growing concern that the, ‘work-first’ nature [of welfare to work support …] means that claimants are often hastily directed towards the low-paid jobs that are most
readily accessible to them, at the expense of their long-term skills and personal development and ultimately their chances of sustainable transitions into work and of career progression.
(Lindsay et al., 2007 paraphrased in McCollum, 2013: 1754)

Support for unemployed young adults needs to extend beyond simply returning them to employment, and consider how it might support them to find ‘sustainable’ (McCollum, 2012: 216) work. Yet the experiences of Nick and Luke support the findings of Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) who suggest that the ‘young and disadvantaged now face a series of revolving doors; unstable, non-progressive youth transitions in which chronologically arranged, government labour market programmes are central components’ (Shidrick and MacDonald, 2007: 597, emphasis in original).

5.2.3 Implications

Nick and Luke’s experiences demonstrate that occupying a marginal position within the labour market extends beyond the risk of unemployment. Though they had both demonstrated a strong attachment to work over a number of years, both young men had failed to escape insecure employment. This emphasises the importance of considering,

… not only whether people are able to secure a job, but also the types of jobs they move into, whether they pay enough to live on, the stability of those jobs, and whether workers are able to progress to higher pay or better working conditions.
(Ben Galim et al., 2011: 3)

Though Nick and Luke had both faced particular disadvantages within the labour market, their experiences were not exceptional. The Teeside Studies, for example, illustrated that for many people work no longer guarantees a route out of poverty. Nick and Luke, like the participants in the Teeside Studies, sustained ‘Hyper-conventional’ […] orientations to employment […]
even when these motivations resulted only in low paid, low skill, insecure ‘poor work’ (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007: 589).

Nick and Luke were not unusual amongst the participants I interviewed. Low-paid, low-skill work interspersed with periods of unemployment emerged as the norm. Whilst some struggled to find any purchase in the labour market, for most they were eventually able to find work of some kind. However, it was often insecure or part-time and they returned repeatedly to claiming benefits (for similar findings see Ben Galim et al., 2011; McKnight, 2009). Whilst I was initially interested in the young adults’ experiences of long-term unemployment, cyclical unemployment and the presence of insecure work were clearly just as significant. At age 18, some of the young adults were pleased with any work they could get. However, as they moved towards their mid-twenties it was clear that some were questioning if they could ever expect more.

Through the narratives of Nicola, Luke and Nick social exclusion was revealed to be a complex and multidimensional issue. It cannot be understood purely through a focus on employment, nor can it be viewed as a result of the ‘deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of individuals’ (Thompson, 2011: 786). To understand social exclusion through this ‘weak’ version of the discourse only serves to further marginalise those without work. Further, it also implies that moving individuals into work will address their social exclusion. Nick and Luke’s narratives make it clear that it is quite possible to be in work, yet still occupy a marginal position. My findings therefore suggest that the discourse of social exclusion not only forms part of the ‘dynamic process of being shut out’ (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8), but also sustains particular ideas about paid work as a vehicle to ‘inclusion.’

By placing the young adults’ labour market experiences within the broader context of their lives, it was possible to gain a better understanding of the ways in which they were excluded. A simple reading might suggest that there are multiple factors that contribute to their exclusion: difficult family relationships; school exclusion and truanting; holding a criminal record;
alcoholism. However, this does not move the discussion away from being about the deficiencies of the individual. To move beyond this, it is necessary to consider how these factors continued to exert a hold over the young adults’ lives. For example, the ways in which they had the power to restrict their opportunities, or influenced how the young adults were perceived by others. When considered in this way, it is clear that an individual’s social exclusion is, at least in part, constructed by others. That this is possible rests upon shared understandings of what it means to be part of mainstream society; and what it means to be outside of it.
5.3 Tensions between the old and new: culturally embedded ideas and new understandings

The young adults I interviewed were experiencing life in the UK differently from members of previous generations; they lacked a ‘road map’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 362) for the way in which they might live their lives. As was described earlier in this thesis (Chapter 3), the majority of young people from the end of the Second World War until the mid-1970s followed ‘clear routes’ (Furlong, 2009: 1) to vocations that matched their backgrounds. Though their outcomes were far from equal, there was nevertheless a trajectory that they were able to follow. The social and economic changes (described in detail in Chapter 2) have eroded these pathways to adulthood. As such, young adults are faced with different opportunities than their predecessors. Their experiences, however, cannot be understood purely through how they have responded to the ‘effects of external factors and influences’ (Lawy, 2003: 332). Instead, it is necessary to also consider the ‘changing nature and shape of individual self-understanding’ (Lawy, 2003: 332). As Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011) suggest, there is a need to explore ‘change (or transition) at both the social and personal level’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 360). These ideas (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) call for new approaches that consider the ‘economic, political and social conditions impacting on young people’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361) but which also recognise that ‘new and distinctive forms of consciousness are produced by changing social conditions’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361).

5.3.1 Identity

Identity, then, was an important concept in relation to my research. As has already been discussed, I was interested in how the young adults made sense of their lives. This related to how they assigned meaning to the world around them, but also to their ‘individual self-understanding’ (Lawy, 2003: 332). Hall (2000) maintained that:
Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. (Hall, 2000: 17)

This draws attention to the ‘multiple terrains’ (Dubet, 1994) of meaning in an individual’s life, adding weight to the need for a ‘holistic’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 13; see also MacDonald 2011) approach. Hall’s ideas also suggest a temporal element, stating that identities are ‘constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies’ (Hall, 2000: 17). This highlights the importance of the context in which identities are constructed; emphasising the need to consider economic and social change (as outlined above).

In Chapter 3, I discussed Beck’s concepts of ‘individualisation’ (Beck, 1992) and the risk society. These ideas highlight the erosion of the ‘traditional parameters of industrial society, including class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11). This does not mean that inequalities cease to exist, but rather that they are remade in new forms (Skeggs, 2004). In terms of identity, these ideas imply that identity development has become disconnected from collective ‘parameters,’ and must instead be negotiated on an individual level. Hall’s description of ‘fragmented and fractured’ (Hall, 2000: 17) identities fits with Beck’s concepts, as does the idea that individuals will construct their identities in different ways dependent on ‘historical and institutional sites’ (Hall, 2000: 17). My findings reveal diversity in the ways in which the young adults constructed their identities. However, they also indicate that ‘traditional parameters’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11) continued to influence many of them. This was not purely in terms of the opportunities available, but also in the ways in which they understood their lives. In this section of my findings, and through the following chapter, I explore the different ways in which the young adults constructed a
sense of identity. I focus in this section on the relationship between paid work and identity. The following chapter discusses how the young adults defined themselves in new ways; through means other than paid work.

The two sections that follow (gendered career identities and expectations of a 'normal' life) reveal the young adults struggling to make sense of their lives. At times some of the participants seemed to be developing ‘new and distinctive forms of consciousness’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361) and self-understanding. However, by contrast others seemed to cling to outdated ideas about what life should offer. They hankered after a transition to adulthood that no longer exists (if it ever did): one where an individual moved in a linear way from school to work (sometimes via further education and training), and where the accompanying ‘markers of the transition to adulthood - leaving home, marriage and family – followed soon after’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 46). Though researchers suggest young adults have been ‘catapulted into the conditions of post-industrial insecurity’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 83), some seemed to long for the relative security of the industrial era. When they struggled to achieve these traditional markers of adulthood, some of the young adults blamed themselves and their own perceived deficiencies.

It was not simply that the young adults held expectations that were different from the realities they encountered, but rather that their identities seemed linked to the ideas they held. For example Tom, discussed below in gendered career identities, seemed locked into fixed ideas about his future identity that were tied to the way in which he understood himself as a ‘manual’ or ‘masculine’ worker. As Henderson et al. (2007) observed, ‘full time permanent ‘employment’ that marked the destination for the transitions to adulthood for young men, [has] slid increasingly out of reach’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 47). Yet the ‘lost youth labour market can still exert a powerful hold on their own (and their parents’) imaginations’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 47). Greg, discussed below in expectations of a ‘normal’ life was in some ways similar to Tom. However, his self-understanding was linked to a different set of culturally embedded ideas. Greg’s identity seemed connected to his ideas about what a ‘normal’ life should be; modelled on the achievements of his parents who
were in a comfortable financial position and held professional job roles and owned their own home. Like Tom, Greg was trying to make sense of his life in relation to expectations that have become increasingly difficult to achieve.

The experiences of Tom and Greg are juxtaposed with those of Becky and Andy, who seemed better able to negotiate the ‘conditions of post-industrial insecurity’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 83). It seemed the ways in which they made sense of their lives contrasted with those of Tom and Greg. However, it is important to acknowledge that it was not just between cases that the ‘changing nature and shape of individual self-understanding’ (Lawy, 2003: 332) was apparent. Rather, it was also evident within individual narratives. The longitudinal nature of my research meant that not only did the young adults’ circumstances change, but so too did the ways in which they understood their lives. I do not simply mean that different ‘terrains’ within their lives assumed a new importance, but rather that the process through which their identities were dynamically constructed was also subject to change. This is a concept that I introduce in this chapter, but expand in Chapter 6.
5.4 Gendered career identities – Tom and Becky

In Chapter 2 I discussed how social attitudes have changed since the Second World War, particularly in relation to the role of men and women. The notion that a woman’s place is in the home has eroded over the past 40 years, and their relationship with paid work has been transformed. However, the changing nature of work in the UK has also impacted on men; with more now engaged in part-time and flexible work. Britain’s economy has become post-industrial following the decline in UK manufacturing, and there has been a considerable growth in service sector work. Cohen and Ainley (2000) suggested that, as a result, the roles of men and women are less clearly defined than previously. Further, that gender is no longer socially constructed through the lens of paid work:

In fact, with the decline of heavy industry and the rise of the service-based economy, the sexual division of labour is no longer anchored to material differences in the work process or to the musculatures of the labouring body. In this context, the persistence of the distinction between so-called ‘men’s and women’s work’ is now open to question along with the whole social construction of gender.
(Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 83)

This section of my findings explores how two of the participants, Tom and Becky, responded to the opportunities available in their local labour market. I discuss how the changing nature of work in the UK presented them with different challenges. Not only did these challenges relate to the types of opportunities available to them, but also to the ways in which they understood their lives in relation to paid work. Their stories are discussed through the theme of gendered career identities since both Tom and Becky held career aspirations that would be considered traditionally ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine.’ However, the discussion extends beyond considering the types of role they felt were suitable. Rather, Tom and Becky’s ideas were found to be located in their ‘career identities’; which seemed to develop in contrasting ways.
As has already been briefly outlined above, Tom held fixed ideas about his future identity that were connected to his self-understanding as a ‘manual’ or ‘masculine’ worker. He held culturally embedded ideas about what it meant to be a man, particularly in relation to paid work. This prevented Tom from considering other possibilities and he seemed invested in a career identity that was inflexible and rigid. Tom’s career identity seemed resonant of the way in which Marcia (1980) theorised vocational direction in relation to identity achievement:

The dependence of identity achievement on a sense of industry results from the importance of vocational commitment in identity formation. A successful outcome of the industry period leaves one with a set of specific skills and confidence in one’s capacity for worthwhile work. It is this generally positive attitude toward work and the secure possession of skills that form the basis of vocational direction.

(Marcia, 1980: 160)

Marcia’s ideas about acquiring ‘specific skills’ and ‘achievement’ of identity seem out of step with the lives of young adults in the 21st century. There are few ‘jobs for life’ and the concept of arriving at a vocational direction seems outmoded. Yet Tom did seem to understand his life in this way, at least over the two-year period during which I met with him. Whilst Becky initially seemed to make sense of her life in a similar way to Tom, over the course of our three interviews her career identity emerged as altogether different. She demonstrated a flexible and adaptable sense of identity and the capacity to view ‘career as a personal journey’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 502).

I first interviewed Tom and Becky during July 2010. They were both participating in the Prince’s Trust Team Course, but were not in the same group and did not know each other. Both Tom and Becky lived in Plymouth and had grown up there. They lived in different areas of the city, though the areas were similar in that they were neither amongst the most affluent nor the most deprived (SRRU, 2005). Tom (aged 19 at our first meeting) and Becky
(aged 18) both lived at home with their parents and siblings. Becky’s parents both worked at a call centre for a mobile phone network and had been employed by the same company for over five years. Tom’s mother did not work and, from Tom’s comments, seemed to occupy a domestic role centred round the home. His father worked in a construction related role. Tom and Becky had both attended comprehensive schools and Tom consistently maintained he had gained C grades in his GCSEs, despite the fact he claimed he had not attended regularly:

*Getting straight Cs at GCSE. That was quite good going, considering I didn’t go to school much. That weren’t too bad.*

(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

Becky had left school with no qualifications and, as she explained, had missed a lot of school in Years 10 and 11:

*I went to most of my lessons, but when, like, I got like, well my anger was bad in Year 11. Just everything went down hill in Year 10 and 11 for me. So, like, I kind of missed a lot of school.*

(Becky, Interview 1, July 2010)

Though Becky never went into a lot of detail, the key reason for feeling angry seemed to be her relationship with her brother:

*Well probably once my brother had left, I was in Year 10, and he had left and like he was then doing sixth form […] Every time we seen each other then we’d like argue in school and everything and that would just wind me up for the day and then I just wouldn’t go to my lessons.*

(Becky, Interview 1, July 2010)

There were a number of similarities, then, as well as differences in Tom and Becky’s backgrounds. However, as I met with them over the following two years their stories developed in contrasting ways.
5.4.1 Tom

When I spoke to Tom’s Prince’s Trust group and explained a little about my research, he was the first to volunteer to speak with me. In front of the rest of the group he stated ‘I’ve got a story to tell.’ However, throughout our first interview he perfected an air of being bored or disinterested. At times he would slump forward onto the table that was next to him, resting his head on his arm. Yet Tom was fully engaged with the interview and was able to articulate himself clearly when he wanted to. Further, he met with me a total of three times over a two-year period. Unlike some of the other participants he never cancelled and always turned up on time. He therefore seemed keen to participate in the research, despite his efforts to appear otherwise. When interviewing Tom, it was notable that for some of my questions Tom only offered one or two-word answers. When this occurred prompts would not draw out any further information. Other areas, however, elicited a detailed response that required no prompts at all. In his first interview, when Tom was asked about lasting memories from school, he chose examples that portrayed him as a prankster; a cheeky trouble maker:

*The riot. Don’t know if you heard about that? […] Well, it didn’t really affect our year group, but we thought why not? […] they were doing that tower tutor group thing where the year sevens are in the same tutor group as year 11s. And all the year 10s and that didn’t want it to happen and so we had a little riot, a protest. It was quite a chuckle […] Broke all the year sevens out the Drama studio. Just silly things like that, it was quite a chuckle.*

(Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)

When I asked him how his friends would describe him he responded ‘loud mouthed fuck’ (Tom, Interview 1, July 2010), an answer which seemed designed to shock. Through responses such as these, it seemed that Tom was attempting to manage the image he presented. He recounted some of his
narrative with an air of bravado\textsuperscript{5}, often swearing and choosing incidents that highlighted his rebelliousness. Yet Tom’s story is not interpreted as one of the confident prankster. Rather, as Tom’s story unfolded he appeared to be ‘lost’ in some ways; struggling to locate himself in the world around him. The way in which he attempted to manage his image served to highlight rather than mask this struggle.

In Tom’s first interview he claimed that it had been his ambition from a young age to go into the Royal Marines. He maintained that he was unable to pursue this goal because of ongoing medical conditions:

\begin{quote}
Well, my whole way growing up I wanted to be a Marine, but I can’t do that because of my medical [...] dyslexic, dyspraxic, ADHD and I also have blackouts. Fits, I have blackouts and sometimes full blown fits. (Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)
\end{quote}

At the age of 16 Tom had not left education, but had studied a bricklaying course with a local vocational training provider. However, he left without completing the course or gaining the qualification he was training for. The reasons he gave for leaving were contradictory. At first he claimed he had left the course for medical reasons:

\begin{quote}
I did a bricklaying course for two years. And then I decided it probably wasn’t good me doing a bricklaying course, ’cause say I had a fit at the top of the scaffolding or something, that’s going to hurt. So I decided to stop that after two years. [...] I got most of it. I got half the degree because I didn’t do the practical bit of it. I did the workshop, but on the bricklaying you’ve got to go out on site and I thought it was a bit dangerous me going out on placement, to be honest. ’Cause say I had a fit on the top of the scaffolding, that’s going to hurt. (Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} bravado \textit{n} an outward display of self-confidence [Spanish bravado] (Collins English Dictionary, 2008: 96)
However, at a later point in the same interview he spoke in some detail about the fact he found the course boring, suggesting that this was the reason he had left:

*The classroom was very similar to school, but not in some ways. It reminds you of it, but it doesn’t remind you of it if you know what I mean. I just got bored of it. […] It was semi more laid back and half of it was practical. It wasn’t too bad and then the practical side of it got boring as well. […] you were just building the same thing each day in the same workshop. Building similar things, it just dragged on and on and on. Made the course feel longer. It just dragged and dragged and dragged.*

(Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)

These types of contradictions were a feature of Tom’s narrative. This should not be read to imply that he was deliberately trying to mislead, but rather that as he constructed his narrative retrospectively different versions emerged. In this instance it was possible that both reasons had been a factor in his decision making. However, somehow the language used in the account of finding the course boring seemed more convincing. The first account seemed to fit with a narrative in which Tom portrayed himself as someone willing to work and study, but whose plans had so far been thwarted. Yet the repetition of that’s ‘going to hurt’ and the use of the phrase ‘to be honest’, seemed to suggest that Tom was rationalising his actions retrospectively. In this account, Tom also repeated that he ‘decided’ to leave, allowing him to appear in control of the situation. This was perhaps more comfortable than stating he had found the course boring and dropped out.

At the time of his first interview, Tom had been on health-related benefits for over a year since leaving the bricklaying course. He nevertheless considered himself as seeking employment and capable of working, though there were certain roles he felt unable to consider because of his health. However, prior
to starting the Prince’s Trust Team Course Tom explained he had become bored and listless:

> Like before I was doing this course I would just stay in bed all day, or go out on my bike all day and then just sleep. [...] Given me something to do, during the day, because I was getting quite bored.

(Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)

It was his mother who had found out about the Prince’s Trust Team Course and persuaded him to apply. Though Tom claimed ‘I’d done it all before, with different groups and that. I’d done most of it before’ (Tom, Interview 1, July 2010) he was pleased that it was giving him ‘something to do’ and seemed to be enjoying the course. However, Tom was not optimistic about the future and finding the type of employment he was interested in:

> I’m quite a manual person. I can’t stand offices and stuff like that. I’d rather be outside or in an open area, but no, we just don’t get a chance. There’s no chances opening up at all, what with the recession and jobs shutting down and all that. It’s ridiculous.

(Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)

Though he was not specific about the type of work he wanted, he knew he would prefer to be outdoors and that he would like manual rather than office work. Tom was aware that the recession was having an impact on his employment prospects, yet only seemed willing to consider certain types of work and held clear ideas about what was suitable for him.

When I met Tom in July 2011, a year after our initial interview, he was still claiming health-related benefits. However, he had managed to find a part-time job. Tom worked for around 15 hours per week as a Sales Assistant for a local branch of a supermarket chain. He was undertaking the role as ‘permitted work’ – a scheme where individuals on health-related benefits are able to work up to 16 hours per week for a maximum of one year whilst
continuing to claim benefits. The fact he had secured work was the first thing he mentioned in the interview:

*Not a lot’s happened really. But I got a job, somehow.*

(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

It therefore seemed that Tom was proud of finding work and keen to share this news. However, he was quick to then emphasise how boring he found the work and explained that he could not imagine progressing with the company. The only reason he thought he would stay in the role was because of the money:

*Sales Assistant, and serving customers on till and stacking the shelves. It’s very, very boring. [...] Yeah, I find it absolutely mind numbing. [...] Turn up, clock in. Um, stack a load of shelves. Put the cages out, put the cages back downstairs, serve people on tills and stuff like that. [...] It’s not that challenging a job. [...] I wouldn’t want to work my way up through [the supermarket] to be honest. It’s crap. But it is £6.10 an hour which isn’t bad, ’cause most people are on like £4.50 an hour or something crap like that. [...] Just money really. Money and money only really in this job. Nothing else.*

(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

Tom hoped that he would be able to learn to drive in the future and thought that this would open up more prospects for him:

*Well, I’m waiting to see if I’m allowed my driving licence. Get that and I’ll apply for jobs like further away. ’Cause at the moment I’ve got to stick on bus routes to get to work and that.*

(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

He remained interested in manual work and in factory work in particular, though he had no experience in this type of role.
Interviewer: So if you could get to anywhere that you wanted to, what type of things would you be interested in?

Tom: Probably factory work [...] like, assembly line.

Tom, then, continued to hold clear ideas about the type of work he thought was suitable for him. Further, when he had attended a welfare-to-work provider prior finding work with the supermarket he had resisted their attempts to interest him in other sectors or to encourage him to consider volunteering:

Tom: They'd help me look for jobs that they thought were suitable [...] but I didn't bother applying for any of them, I'm not going to lie. I only applied for a couple whilst I was there, and that's about it really.

Interviewer: What kind of things did they suggest?

Tom: Like helping disabled people and stuff just generally, and volunteering. I didn't want to volunteer because I'm not going to work for free 'cause they'll never end up, they'll never offer you a job when you're paid, if you're willing to volunteer [...] if they can have you as a volunteer and not have to pay you, they're obviously going to keep you as that. It's happened to a few of my friends before, like they volunteered, worked for nothing for like ages, and not been offered paid work. Just being kept as a volunteer, I think it's quite pointless.

(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

For Tom, work meant paid work and he was wary of becoming trapped in a volunteering role. The type of roles that were suggested to him by the welfare-to-work provider did not appeal to him; again suggesting fixed ideas about what he thought was suitable. Though he had been willing to take the Sales Assistant role in the supermarket, he did not find the work challenging or rewarding and had no aims to build a career in that sector.
By the time of Tom’s third and final interview he had finished working as a Sales Assistant. His period of permitted work had come to an end after a year. The supermarket was unable to offer him more than 15 hours per week and he therefore decided to continue to claim health-related benefits whilst looking for alternative full-time work. As in the first two interviews, he remained focused on manual work:

\[
\text{Warehouse and driving, along those lines, or building sites and shit.}
\]

(Tom, Interview 3, April 2012)

However, he knew that this type of work was going to be difficult to secure and that there were more opportunities in the retail or service sector:

\[
\text{There’s no businesses or anything in it. It’s all chain work. Most of it’s like supermarket work and shit like that. Anything building wise is just snapped up within seconds, or anything like that. It’s just all commercial, like there’s no factories or anything. So … you just can’t really do anything.}
\]

(Tom, Interview 3, April 2012)

Tom, then, was not someone who was ignorant about the local labour market and the type of sectors that held the most realistic chance of finding employment. Yet he struggled to match the ideas he had about himself with the type of work that was available to him. Though he tolerated his job as a Sales Assistant, remaining in the role for a year, there was nothing about it that he felt related to his own ‘motivation, interests and competencies’ (Meijers, 1998: 200). Tom did not actually have any experience in the type of roles he maintained that he wanted, yet he felt they were better suited to him and the way in which he understood himself as a ‘manual person’ (Tom, Interview 1, July 2010). Notably, Tom felt he was well suited to the type of roles that have traditionally been considered ‘masculine’ jobs; they were the unskilled or semi-skilled roles that would, in the past, have been more readily available to young men (as discussed in Chapter 2). Unable to secure this type of work, Tom was willing to try work in the retail sector. Yet it afforded
Tom no sense of satisfaction and there appeared to be a mismatch between the work he was undertaking and the ‘meaning the individual gives to himself and the world around him’ (Meijers, 1998: 200).

Though Tom could sometimes present an air of bravado and there were contradictions in his narrative, at the heart of Tom’s story seemed to be a young man who was trying to find a sense of belonging; seeking to locate the ideas he had about himself in the opportunities that were available locally. He viewed himself in a certain way, and for these reasons considered some types of work suitable and others unsuitable. Unfortunately for Tom the roles he was attracted to were in short supply and he seemed to find it difficult to consider other possibilities. Tom might be understood as a young man who was locked into a fixed idea about his future identity. There seemed to be rigidity about his self-understanding, which reflected Marcia’s ideas about vocational direction. Yet it is important to recognise that Tom was struggling; his narrative indicated that his self-understanding was at odds with the conditions of the 21st century. Hall (2000) maintained that:

... identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self that remain always-already ‘the same.’

(Hall 2000: 17)

Tom, however, seemed to hold an understanding that there was something ‘essential’ about his identity, defining him as a ‘manual person’ suited to masculine roles. Though this made life uncomfortable, he was not yet able to perceive himself in a different way.

5.4.2 Becky

It is now useful to compare Tom’s experiences to those of Becky who, as was outlined above, came from a similar but not identical background. Throughout our first two interviews, Becky seemed focused on the prospect of becoming a hairdresser. Like Tom, she appeared to hold particular (gendered) ideas
about herself and her future. However, in our final interview Becky demonstrated an adaptable approach which enabled her to reassess her choices based on her understanding of the local labour market. This did not simply signal that she was able to respond and adapt to the opportunities available. Rather, it seemed Becky was developing a sense of identity in a different way from Tom. She was not locked into a fixed idea about her future self, but rather seemed able to engage in a continual process of actively constructing her identity.

Unlike Tom who often spoke with an air of bravado and who liked to play the role of a cheeky prankster, Becky was open about the fact she had lacked confidence in the past. When I first met her she was nearing the end of a 12-week course with the Prince’s Trust and was very positive about the impact the course had made:

*Becky: My confidence really, because it was really bad when I started, like and everything. Like you wouldn’t have seen me doing caving before I started here, and I’ve done caving and I want to do it again.*

*Interviewer: Could you say why you lost your confidence in the first place?*

*Becky: Not really, I’ve like never been a confident person. So it’s like building up now, which is a good thing.*

(Becky, Interview 1, July 2010)

Prior to starting the course, Becky had been unemployed for a year since completing her NVQ1 in hairdressing. She had left school at 16 with no qualifications, but had chosen to undertake a vocational course with a local training provider. Becky felt that she had been well supported by her school to consider the range of options available:

*Well, we had, like, obviously we got taken to like a [vocational course] Open Day, an Apprenticeship Open Day and all that, through when we*
were in Year 11. Which was then when I thought, well I’ve always wanted to do hairdressing. So I thought well let’s see what hairdressing courses they’ve got going and obviously they’ve got adverts for [vocational courses].

(Becky, Interview 1, July 2010)

Though she successfully completed her NVQ 1 in hairdressing Becky was not allowed to progress to a Level 2 course. She explained the reason for this was ‘because my Maths and English was so poor’ (Becky, Interview 1, July 2010). Becky was giggling as she told me this, but I quickly realised that this was something she did when she felt embarrassed or self-conscious. She went on to explain that she had spent the last year looking for work whilst trying to improve her numeracy and literacy through part-time courses.

The Prince’s Trust course, coming at the end of a year when Becky had failed to secure paid work of any kind, seemed to have helped boost Becky’s confidence. Though she enjoyed many aspects of the course including the opportunity to participate in activities she hadn’t done before, it was the two-week work placement that she valued the most:

*Probably the last two weeks when we’ve done work placements. [...] [Top Notch] hairdressers, ’cause I work there on a Saturday. Well, it’s not really work, I just go in there voluntarily really, but they calls it work. I always go in there on a Saturday and she said she’d take me on for two weeks. It was all fun. Blow dry client’s hair, set ’em and shampoo them and make drinks.*

(Becky, Interview 1, July 2010)

[Top Notch] hairdressers had been Becky’s placement one day a week whilst she was studying for her NVQ 1. When the course came to an end Becky had volunteered with them every Saturday, explaining that the staff called it work, even though it was unpaid. Unlike Tom, Becky did not seem concerned about being trapped in an unpaid role and valued the opportunity to spend time at the salon and practise her skills. Becky seemed to have a good relationship
with the staff at the salon and spoke positively about them, feeling they understood the difficulties she had with her brother:

*They’re lovely, like the boss, she’s funny. Obviously she’s had like the past few weeks, what’s happened with family and everything, but yeah, she’s fine.*

(Becky, Interview 1, July 2010)

The salon seemed to be a place where Becky felt comfortable, as demonstrated by her keenness to undertake her placement there. By continuing to work voluntarily a day per-week, Becky was able to maintain her link with a community of hairdressers. It seemed that she still felt she ‘belonged’ to the profession even though she had interrupted her training. Indeed, in this first interview Becky seemed committed to pursuing a career in hairdressing, even speaking about how she might like to open her own salon in the future.

By the time of our second interview, a year after our first meeting, Becky had successfully completed her Level 2 qualification in hairdressing. She told me how she had enjoyed the training and felt that the group she was in, with a broad mix of backgrounds, had helped with her motivation:

*[…] you like meet like, loads of different people, it’s not just like people I would normally hang out with. It’s like you’ve got, I can’t really describe it, it’s like all different. Like me personally I’m one of those people that go out, cause trouble […] So the group I got put in, it was more like who would knuckle down, and they’ve all got like the right inspir, inspiration kind of thingy.*

(Becky, Interview 2, July 2011)

This was not the first time that Becky had hinted at getting into trouble in the past, she talked about ‘mitching’ (a local word for truanting) from school and the anger she felt towards her brother. Later in the same interview she went
into more detail, and it became clear that she attributed changes in her attitude and behaviour to her focus on gaining her hairdressing qualifications:

Just like, in like the last year I’ve changed completely. Like, I’m not like the one now who would always go out causing trouble a lot like I used to. Like now it’s like, I need to crack on with like what I’m, with what’s in front of me. Focus on what’s in front of me than going out causing trouble and getting like arrested and everything. [...] Well, yeah, I’m not like, now, I won’t go out and cause like trouble. Like now I’ll be like if you’re going out and causing trouble, don’t involve me in it. I can’t afford to like get in trouble as well. It’s like everything that’s going on, and like college. I’m like if I get into trouble, it’s going to ruin my opportunity of finishing my Level 3.

(Becky, Interview 2, July 2011)

Becky described the type of trouble she used to get into as ‘silly things and stupid things’ (Becky, Interview 2, July 2011), hinting at rowdiness and out of control pranks rather than serious criminal behaviour. However, she saw continuing to behave in this way as a risk to her future prospects.

Becky saw the chance to progress to Level 3 qualifications as an opportunity, and did not want to jeopardise it. Having left school with no qualifications, it was not something she had always thought was a possibility:

I don’t know, obviously back then I was just like well, why, why, do this? ’Cause obviously I did my Level 1, and well I wanted to do my Level 2, but I didn’t think I’d ever do my Level 3.

(Becky, Interview 3, May 2012)

However, the encouragement of her college tutor seemed to have helped Becky believe that she could train to an advanced level:

I don’t know, I think it was a bit, it was mainly the college because my tutor from last year was like you’ve got like potential [Becky is unsure if
she has got the right word, and says ‘potential’ with a question in her voice] I think it is, so much of that, and you’ve made progress ... and that’s what really like kicked it off that I could do my Level 3.

(Becky, Interview 3, May 2012)

Becky, then, seemed to grow in confidence over the two-year period I met with her. She continued to maintain that it was the Prince’s Trust course that had given her an initial boost, but the training she was participating in seemed to be making a significant contribution. Becky talked with assurance about the skills she was gaining and expressed clear preferences for some aspects of hairdressing over others:

[…] like the best bit is probably cutting. Like, for most of them it’s like cutting and colours, but for me it’s like setting and colouring. I can’t stand perming. […] towards like the end we had to get clients in, and when like people had finished, they could come back in, when they finished the course. They could be clients for us, so it wasn’t like too difficult.

(Becky, Interview 2, July 2011)

In some ways, then, it seemed that Becky was developing a vocational direction that matched with Marcia’s theories. She had gained ‘a set of specific skills and confidence in one’s capacity for worthwhile work’ (Marcia, 1980: 160). Becky seemed fully focused on a career in hairdressing and keen to embark on her Level 3 qualification. She now received payment for working on a Saturday with [Top Notch] hairdressers, her former placement. They also offered her additional paid hours over the summer months.

When I met Becky for the third and final time it was almost two years after our initial interview. She was approaching the end of her Level 3 training and spoke positively about the advanced skills she was gaining:

[…] this year it’s like I’ve learnt a lot more with cutting and that. With cutting I’ve learnt different things I never thought I would be able to do.
And with colour correction I never thought I would be able to do, but it’s something I learnt that’s going to stick with me.

(Becky, Interview 3, May 2012)

However, when Becky talked about the immediate future she did not envisage that she would go straight into hairdressing work. Instead, she was considering undertaking work or training in the field of care:

I’m thinking I want to go into care work [laughs …] I think it’s because obviously, my Nan’s in like a care home, so obviously I went to see my Nan and it’s like, I’d like to do that. Not just, I like, because obviously I’ve been brought up with my Nan’s illness and that, and I know everything there is to know about like Huntington’s, whatever. […] it’s just something that’s like recently like popped up, and like yeah, I really fancy doing it.

(Becky, Interview 3, May 2012)

After Becky’s commitment to her training and focus on hairdressing as a career, this was surprising. However, as she spoke in more detail it seemed that she had carefully considered the local labour market and was weighing up her options in relation to this:

Yeah. It’s like hairdressing is a dying trade. And like obviously care work is, but you can always go to like … I don’t know, you get like new people go in. Like in the hairdressing you do, but they don’t always come back. So it’s like, dying trade. […] basically there’s like loads of hairdressers, like you could go into town and there’s what, 7 or 8. And there’s like not many care people around […] There’s too much of it [hairdressing]. Yeah, right, I’m still going to finish my course because it’s something I can do mobile. […] now they’re trying to get us to go find jobs and that. And it’s not like that easy. It’s like a dying trade and they don’t like the fact that I speak my mind.

(Becky, Interview 3, May 2012)
Becky referred to hairdressing as a ‘dying trade,’ observing that there was a lot of competition for clients and that it was challenging to find work. By contrast she felt it would be easier to find care work and seemed to have thought carefully about whether this was work she would be suited to. Though she had seemed committed to a particular vocational direction, Becky demonstrated how a ‘well-argued choice, too, can lose its significance […] which means that the individual will have to start exploring afresh’ (Meijers, 1998: 198). Becky was able to consider whether her ‘motivation, interests and competencies’ (Meijers, 1998, 200) matched with care work; demonstrating a level of adaptability that enabled her to weigh up her options and consider new possibilities. Whilst she valued developing ‘specific skills’ related to hairdressing, her career identity was not tied to using these skills. Rather than lock her into a specific vocational direction (as Marcia suggested), Becky’s achievements through her training seemed to have given her the confidence in her capacity to make choices and decisions about her future. She appeared to be developing a flexible sense of identity that enabled her to assess her broader ‘motivations, interests and competencies’ (Meijers, 1998: 200) against the options available.

Becky was not only flexible about the type of work she would consider, but was also open to the possibility of undertaking ‘non-standard’ work. She had contemplated combining different part-time roles and had also considered self-employment:

*Well, probably working, and then maybe thinking about going, well maybe doing like care work, and then continue like with my hairdressing career. So like two different things combined. […] Yeah, it’s like we’ve done a self-employment course this year as well which has really helped us out. Well, helped me out. And it’s like, if I do go self-employed then I can do that [hairdressing] alongside whatever else I decide.*

(Becky, Interview 3, May 2012)
In expressing these ideas, Becky revealed that she had an awareness of the changing nature of work in the UK and that she was open to the possibility of a ‘portfolio career.’ This is whereby an individual eschews full-time work (out of necessity or choice) for multiple part-time roles which might include self-employment or freelance work. Though Becky probably only considered the possibility in relation to her own circumstances, she again demonstrated adaptability. In contrast to Tom, who seemed locked into fixed ideas about his future identity, Becky was able to consider and assess different possibilities. By doing so Becky was able to project herself into the future in new ways, signalling her capacity to engage in a ‘continuous process of transformation’ (Lawy, 2003: 342).

5.4.3 Implications

There are clear differences, then, between Becky and Tom and it is interesting to explore these in terms of gendered career identities. There are obvious contrasts between the types of roles that Becky and Tom considered. Tom, as mentioned above, was interested in roles that have traditionally been considered as ‘masculine’ whereas Becky was drawn to hairdressing, a service sector role dominated by women. When she weighed up other possibilities, it was the care sector that she considered, another service-related profession associated with qualities viewed as ‘feminine’. It was, in many ways, unsurprising that Tom struggled to find work that met with his goals. As was discussed in Chapter 2 the manufacturing roles that soaked up ‘the lads’ of Willis’ (1977) study, have all but disappeared. They have been replaced with service sector roles in areas such as retail, waitressing, clerical work and care; something which both Becky and Tom were well aware of. Whilst Becky was able to visualise herself in these types of role, to Tom they held no appeal.

McDowell (2000) discussed the ‘crisis of masculinity’ in relation to education and employment, and suggested that service work is:
‘interactive work’ in which the service and the service provider are inseparable. Thus the appearance and personal attitude of workers is marketed as an integral part of the product. For many young men the attitudes and servility demanded in the performance of these menial service occupations are regarded as unmasculine and demeaning. (McDowell, 2000: 205)

Certainly Tom acknowledged that he felt frustrated and impatient when serving people, especially ‘foreigners’ (as Tom described them):

*Because it’s annoying, because you’ve got to go, do you want, do you have a membership card? And they’re like that … two minutes later, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, no. Would you like a bag? Uhhhhh, five minutes later, no. Then you get to the end of the transaction and they’re like that, bag. They ask for a bag, and I’m like, I offered you a bag at the start of the transaction, what you doing? Just say yes at the start. Then it takes another five minutes to answer if they want a receipt.*

(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

Further, the bravado with which he told his story; the swearing and the tales of rebellious behaviour, seemed to assert ‘older forms of acceptable ‘macho’ behaviour’ (McDowell, 2000: 206). Whilst these might once have been acceptable in the workplace they are now ‘a positive disadvantage in the labour market’ (McDowell, 2000: 206).

Nayak (2006) discussed the idea of ‘displaced masculinities’ in relation to young men living in Newcastle. Like Tom, they are described struggling to adjust to a post-industrial city that no longer presented opportunities to undertake the ‘masculine’ work they aspired to. Though the city had gone through regeneration and offered new opportunities, Nayak suggested some young men were:
... guilty of treating part-time work, customer relations and servicing in a disparaging manner as it does not resonate with the historical portrayal of masculine work. (Nayak, 2006: 817)

It is possible to interpret Tom’s refusal to apply for care work or volunteering in this way. Certainly he was also critical of the part-time Sales Assistant role he undertook. Unable to associate the opportunities available with his identity as a ‘masculine’ worker, ‘the relationships between employment and the social construction of gendered identities’ (McDowell, 2004: 47) are called into question. Nayak (2006) suggested that, as a result, young men have had to rethink ‘what it is to be a ‘man’ beyond the world of industrial paid employment’ (Nayak, 2006: 813).

Nayak (2006) suggested that the masculinities of the young men from Newcastle had become displaced into their leisure and lifestyle choices, described as ‘textured ‘going out’ experiences’ (Nayak, 2006: 813). These observations are particularly pertinent to Tom’s narrative, who spoke about going out and drinking with his (male) friends during each of our three interviews. He explained how he got ‘blitherently drunk’ (Tom, Interview 1, July 2010) and how he ‘got absolutely wrecked out of my face on drink’ (Tom, Interview 2, July 2011). In some ways drinking seemed to offer Tom an escape from the mundane day-to-day and the frustrations he felt with his work situation:

Because I like going out at the weekend. It’s like the one thing that I look forward to during the week. Not much else.  
(Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)

Tom’s descriptions of his nights out were very similar to those used by Nayak’s Real Geordies, with talk of ‘going out and pulling [women]’ (Tom, Interview 1, July 2010) and boasts of how much money he would spend: ‘I’ll still end up spending like 100 quid’ (Tom, Interview 2, July 2011). It is therefore possible to understand Tom’s drinking with his group as an
expression of his masculinity; an attempt to assert ‘masculine prowess beyond the workplace’ (Nayak, 2006: 820).

Like the Real Geordies Tom seemed locked into an extended and elongated transition towards an ‘uncertain future’ (Nayak, 2006: 826). He was dependent on his family and had no plans to move out of the family home:


(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

Though Tom gave the impression that he was happy with his situation and the domestic support he received, Tom also maintained he would need an unrealistically high wage in order to live independently from his family:

> Probably about 2 grand a month. Including my drinking, to cover my expenses. Yeah. I’d probably need about 2 grand a month, a little more. Purely and simply because of my drinking expenses.

(Tom, Interview 2, July 2011)

This was said with Tom’s typical air of bravado. However, naming such an unrealistic wage offered Tom protection from addressing the difficulties he would face trying to live independently. By maintaining his drinking expenses prevented him from moving forwards he was able to save face and present his situation as a lifestyle choice. Nevertheless, it was clear that Tom did feel supported by his family and felt no pressure to move out. Like Nayak’s Real Geordies he was ‘assured in the knowledge that [he] could continue to live at home […] and maintain a commitment to “birds, booze and a fuckin’ nite oot once in a while! (Jason)” ’ (Nayak, 2006: 826).

Tom discussed how his social life had become focused on going out and drinking. Further, his friend Watson (whom he brought along to our second interview) said of Tom:
**Watson:** Just live for the weekend, you do.
(Watson, Interview 2, July 2011)

However, it is important to resist a narrow understanding of Tom’s behaviour as being a display of ‘masculine prowess beyond the workplace’ (Nayak, 2006: 820). As was asserted earlier, at the heart of Tom’s story seemed to be a young man struggling to locate himself in the world around him; looking for a sense of belonging. His drinking, it seemed, allowed him to feel part of a group and experience the male camaraderie that he was otherwise lacking. Indeed, he always went drinking with the same group of male friends that he had known since school and seemed to value the social aspects of a night out. As younger teenagers, Tom and his friends had spent a lot of time ‘up at the skate park’ (Tom, Interview 1, July, 2010) and they shared an interest in skateboarding and BMXing. It seemed that through his leisure interests, Tom had felt he belonged to a group and had an identifiable style as an ‘old BMXer’ (Watson describing Tom, Interview 2, July 2011). Tom explained how the spaces the group liked to use had gradually diminished:

*Well, up at Croft Park they had a skate park and they thought it would be good to destroy it, when in the summer there’d be a minimum of at least 50 people up there each day. They destroyed it, and then the police arrest you if you ride a bike in town.*
(Tom, Interview 1, July 2010)

As they got older, the group therefore seemed to have replaced the skateboarding and BMXing with going out and drinking. Whilst Tom described his nights out with his typical air of bravado, it is problematic to understand them purely as masculine displays. If they offered Tom some kind of compensation for the lost ‘masculine’ roles of the industrial era, it was through the male camaraderie and sense of belonging he experienced. It was this that I felt Tom really valued, as was evidenced by his opinion of the Prince’s Trust course. Whilst Becky talked about how it boosted her confidence through new opportunities, for Tom the best part was simply:
It seemed that Tom felt dislocated from a labour market that he perceived offered him few suitable opportunities. Unable to find where he ‘belonged’ in relation to work, he sought to create this feeling of belonging through his nights out, which also enabled his to assert his ‘masculine prowess’ (Nayak, 2006: 820).

In many ways it seemed that Becky was somehow making a more successful transition than Tom. Though she had previously lacked confidence, got into ‘trouble’ and left school with no qualifications, she seemed to have overcome these challenges and developed a belief in her own competencies. As was discussed above, she emerged as someone who was adaptable and able to respond flexibly to the changing nature of work in the UK. Rather than hold a fixed career identity that was locked into specific ideas about the future, she seemed to view ‘career as a personal journey that involved particular personal qualities rather than a position or pathway within an occupation or organisation’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 502). Whilst her experience was still individualised, Becky seemed to be developing an identity that could cope with the choices she faced. As Beck (1992) described, she was able to ‘conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography’ (Beck, 1992: 135). It is this capacity that Kelly (2006) described as the ‘entrepreneurial Self’ meaning that an individual might view ‘themselves as an enterprise, in an ongoing, neverending project of self reflection and self actualisation’ (Kelly, 2006: 25). It seemed Becky was willing and able to engage in this process, and as such was coping with the 21st century labour market in a way that Tom was not.

Whilst Becky seemed more ‘successful’ than Tom, there are two key points that I would make in relation to understanding their narratives in this way. Firstly, it is important to recognise that from the outset Becky’s aspirations were more closely aligned with the opportunities available. Unlike Tom, who struggled to link his interests and motivations with service sector work, Becky
was able to visualise herself working in personal services. Though she was flexible enough to reassess her choices in relation to the local labour market, there are similarities between the qualities needed to undertake care work and hairdressing. It is possible to question, therefore, whether she would have been capable of considering a broader range of choices if the labour market demanded it. Would Becky, for example, have been able to link her interests and motivations with being an engineer or working in construction? This is the type of leap that Tom was being forced to make, and it is perhaps unsurprising that he found it so difficult. I would argue that there is nothing inherently ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ about different types of work. Indeed, during the First and Second World War women undertook roles that were previously understood as ‘men’s work’. Moreover, as manufacturing work has declined, many ‘men have taken up catering, cleaning and other personal service occupations, as well as professional and related jobs in education, welfare and health’ (Crompton, 1997: 139). Yet Tom’s story illustrates that there remain culturally embedded ideas of what constitutes ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ work which continue to exert a powerful influence over individuals.

My second point is that ‘success’ is a relative measure. Though Becky seemed successful when compared with Tom, other young adults from different backgrounds might not consider hairdressing or care work as suitable or desirable outcomes. Further, though she was able to reassess her choices, it is possible to argue that she did this within a particular framework that imposed limits on the scope of her options. As McDowell (2000) pointed out, ‘although young women from working-class backgrounds may have greater educational opportunities than their mothers, in comparison to middle-class boys their future opportunities are still limited’ (McDowell, 2000: 203). If we are to talk of gendered career identities we must place these within the broader context of the young adults’ lives; taking into account the influence of other important factors such as class, location and ethnicity:

… the real question is not whether girls as a group or boys as a group are more disadvantaged but which girls and which boys.

(Teese et al., 1995: 109, my emphasis).
In the next section I consider some of these broader factors by exploring the participants’ hopes of a ‘normal life.’ Greg and Andy, unlike Tom and Becky, came from very different backgrounds. I was interested in whether this would have an impact on their expectations and experiences, but also on the ways in which they made sense of their lives.
5.5 Expectations of a ‘normal’ life – Greg and Andy

‘I just want a normal house, normal family, normal job.’
(Greg, Interview 1, October 2010)

normal 2a. Constituting or conforming to a type or standard; regular, usual, typical; ordinary, conventional. (The usual sense.) (Oxford English Dictionary online)

Greg’s statement that he wanted a ‘normal house, normal family, normal job’ was echoed by many of the young adults. However, it was Greg’s interviews that most strongly expressed this sentiment and therefore make a useful starting point for exploring expectations of a ‘normal’ life. Greg was 18 at the time of his first interview and lived in a medium-sized seaside town in the South West of England. He lived at home with his parents, both of whom were employed full-time. His mother worked in a managerial role for the probation service and his father in a technical job overseeing police radio communications. Greg’s parents seemed to be in a comfortable position and were able to support him financially whilst he was unemployed. When asked how he managed to live before he was eligible to claim benefits he explained:

Scab off my parents really. I don’t really ask for much. Just can you top up my phone? Pretty much that’s about it. Other than that can you get me some new clothes or something, because mine are too small?
(Greg, Interview 1, October 2010)

For Greg, then, a normal life consisted of being able to own your own home, a family life and having a job. It should, perhaps, be no surprise that when asked about his hopes for the future, he expressed his aspirations in these terms:

Interviewer: What would you want for yourself for the future?
Greg: [...] I don’t want to be rich, to be famous or anything like that. I just want a normal house, normal family, normal job.
(Greg, Interview 1, October 2010)

In his first interview, Greg’s use of the word ‘normal’ served to emphasise that he did not aspire to be rich or famous. Instead he wanted what he considered to be a reasonable standard of living, as epitomised by a ‘normal house, normal family, normal job.’ In the second interview with Greg a year later, his hopes for the future appeared to have remained consistent:

Greg: [...] But other than that I just want a house, a family and a car, just the normal stuff. I don’t aspire to like having a big yacht or anything like that, just little things.

Interviewer: Just regular lifestyle really.

(Greg, Interview 2, November 2011)

Whilst Greg had added a car to the things he aspired to have in his life, he again emphasised that he was not seeking anything extravagant such as a ‘big yacht.’ He sought to make it clear that his aspirations were modest and reasonable; a standard of living that should be achievable. Understandably, Greg’s hopes for a ‘normal’ life were modelled on the experiences of his parents. Put simply, he wanted, and perhaps expected, what they had achieved for themselves. Notably, he also hoped to attain these things within the next few years.

Andy, in contrast to Greg, had grown up in an inner-city location. The area of Plymouth in which Andy lived was ranked as the second most deprived neighbourhood (of a total of 39 neighbourhoods) using the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010 (IMD2010). A total of 23.9% of the population in the neighbourhood claimed benefits of some kind (Plymouth City Council, 2014b). Andy’s parents were separated and when I first met him he was living with his
mother and younger sister. He described them as follows:

The younger [sister] one’s the most annoying. My Mum’s got a job at the local shop. She sleeps a lot, umm not much I can say about her. Not much very interesting. She’s got a police record the size of the A38.
(Andy, Interview 1, July 2010)

Andy was expected to use his benefits to pay rent and contribute to the household bills, something which left him with little spare money:

I live with my Mum but she’s dependent that I pay rent, which is really annoying. […] Bills, rent, bills. Occasionally I have a bit of money left over, which I’ll either put back for something, buy something, or a bottle of Southern Comfort which will last about a week.
(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

At the time of our first meeting, Andy’s father lived around 40 miles away in a rural location that was difficult to travel to by public transport. Andy’s father juggled self-employment with paid part-time work:

My Dad, he lives up in [Berkeley] [a very small village] between [Ashton] and [Colesworth] and he’s self employed at the moment […] He’s an IT Technician. He’s got a part-time job and he’s a barman at [Fisherman’s Oasis], that’s about it.
(Andy, Interview 1, July 2010)

Despite Andy’s father’s willingness to work, it seemed that the work was often sporadic:

He tries to, here and there. He er, he basically, he goes round fixing people’s computers, does call outs, like £20 an hour. And he does, I think, one or two days in the shop in [Colesworth], which is [Colesworth Computers].
(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)
As a result his father sometimes struggled financially, something which had an impact on how frequently he was able to visit Andy:

*I’ve seen him twice this year. Usually it’s every month but he’s had no money.*

(Andy, Interview 1, July 2010)

Andy had actually lived with his Dad in [Colesworth] previously. However, he had returned to live with his mother and sister as he believed the job prospects would be better in Plymouth:

*I moved back to Plymouth because, um, I was looking for job opportunities at the time and I thought Plymouth would be a better place.*

(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)

By the time of our final interview, some two years after our initial meeting, Andy was again living with his father in the [Colesworth] area. They lived in rented rooms on a working farm in a very rural location.

Andy’s background, then, was different to Greg’s in many ways. He had yo-yoed between his separated parents, spending time living in both inner-city and rural localities. He had also experienced periods of time where he saw his father infrequently because of the travel costs involved with meeting up. Despite being on benefits, his contribution to rent and bills when living with his mother was important to the household income. Initially, it seemed that Andy spoke about the future in very similar terms to Greg:

Yeah. Um, um, I know what I want to do in the future. I don’t want to be this guy who owns lots and lots of companies and making a million pounds a year. Um, because that’s just crap. I want to be an average guy who can pay his bills, have a car and be able to afford to go somewhere where he wants to, and um has a job.
In the same way as Greg, Andy sought to emphasise that he was not seeking an unrealistic or flashy lifestyle in which he was ‘making a million pounds a year.’ Instead, he stated that he wanted to be an ‘average guy’ who was able to afford basic comforts such as a car and to be able to pay his bills. However, despite the similarities in what Greg and Andy described as average or normal, there are also subtle differences. Andy did not focus on having his own home in the same way that Greg did. Indeed, he was content to think that he and his Dad might be able to afford to move away from their rented rooms at the farm:

Um, hopefully me and my Dad will have our own place, I’ll have my bike [a motorbike], that’s pretty much it. All I want is a job, my bike and to be somewhere like [Colesworth].

(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)

Andy also emphasised the importance of being able to fund his future: specifically mentioning that the ‘average guy’ should be able to pay his bills and afford to go where he wants to. Andy’s descriptions were steeped in a language he understood since paying bills and financial shortages were something he had direct experience of. Despite the similarities, Andy’s vision of ‘normal’ was somehow more modest than Greg’s and took into account the difficult realities he felt he was likely to encounter.

Greg’s aims for a ‘normal life’ seemed reasonable. However, in many ways his hopes of what he wanted to achieve in his early to mid-twenties are outdated:

In the UK, for example, between the end of the Second World War and the mid 1970s the employment market was relatively stable. A large proportion of young people (over 70%) went directly from school into the labour market at the minimum school leaving age, and other markers of the transition to adulthood – leaving home, marriage and
family – followed soon after.

(Henderson et al. 2007: 46)

Greg’s aspirations would have been realistic in the mid-twentieth century but are less so in the early twenty-first century where it is broadly acknowledged that transitions are ‘long’, ‘broken’, ‘extended’, ‘protracted’, ‘uneasy’ and ‘fractured’ (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2007: 590). The traditional markers of adulthood are more challenging to reach, with it becoming increasingly difficult for young people to find permanent employment, purchase their first home or even live independently from their parents. What, then, were the consequences for Greg of holding expectations for a ‘normal’ life that seemed based on a more traditional transition to adulthood? How did his experiences vary from Andy’s, who seemed to hold a set of expectations more in keeping with the lives of young adults in the twenty-first century?

When I first met Greg he had been unemployed for two years and was on the first day of a government funded work placement with a social enterprise. When this came to an end after six months, the setback had a significant impact on Greg:

[…] since then I’ve been trying to find work and it’s not happened. It’s really, really difficult … I’ve been really struggling.

(Greg, Interview 2, November 2011)

After a period of unemployment, Greg managed to find temporary work undertaking two different customer service roles, the longest of which lasted four months. However, Greg disliked temporary work and perceived that it was often offered to young people:

I find employers are quite happy to take on young people in temporary work, because they’re quite happy to tell them to piss off in a few months time when they’ve cleared all the backlog for them. They don’t really care about what it means to the individual when it comes to employment, whether they’ve got family or kids they couldn’t care less.
Greg wanted a permanent job role and felt dissatisfied with the insecure temporary work he was able to find. For him a ‘normal job’ was a permanent one that would allow him to have the ‘normal house’ and ‘normal family’ he aspired to.

Andy was unemployed the first two times I met with him. However, by our third and final interview he was an apprentice working in an independent computer shop where his father also worked part-time. His father had negotiated the apprenticeship with the shop owner. However, Andy did not anticipate there would be work there for him once the apprenticeship came to an end:

> It’s a really small business and the guy can only afford me on an apprenticeship wage. That’s why I’m doing an apprenticeship.

(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)

However, Andy did not seem concerned by this prospect:

> […] he [the shop owner] said, if um, I don’t get a job afterwards I’ll be leaving with a really, really, really good reference um, and he knows plenty of people in [Colesworth] anyway, so the chances are if a job opportunity became available, he’d be able to say something.

(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)

Andy was less troubled than Greg by insecure work. He was also less focused on the future and more interested in his immediate experiences.

> […] at the moment I’ve got to sort out what I can do now. What I can do then, I’ll come across that bridge when I get to it.

(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)

Andy’s attitude was perhaps unsurprising, given that his Dad was used to
juggling part-time work with self-employment. He was also used to change, with the possibility of moving between a rural location and the city very real to him. Financial shortages, making it essential to focus on the present rather than the future, were also familiar to Andy.

Over a two-year period, both Greg and Andy spent a considerable amount of time claiming Job Seekers’ Allowance (JSA) whilst looking for work. Their response to claiming benefits had both similarities and differences. Greg explained his experience as follows:

*Miserable. The government put me under pressure to get a job, but they don’t help me to get a job. I’m under pressure because like, if I don’t get a job and start helping out with the family and other things, I’ll get kicked out. And it’s just that pressure of not being able to pay your way, it means you end up on the streets. So…*

(Greg, Interview 2, November 2011)

Greg’s parents had actually supported him financially in the past, and there seemed no real likelihood that he would end up on the streets. However, his words expressed his frustrations and the pressure he felt to pay his way. Andy, like Greg, had found aspects of the experience of claiming JSA frustrating and in particular struggled with the attitude of his adviser:

*It’s just her overall attitude and I would just like to see her put in my shoes for 18 months, to have to look for work, no experience and a couple of qualifications, and I’d love to see her in those shoes, because she wouldn’t be able to do it, and she wouldn’t be able to cope.*

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

However, he still responded positively when the Jobcentre planned to send him on an unpaid work placement and was optimistic and enthusiastic about the contribution he could make:
The engineering side of it I’m not sure, I’ll push them to maybe let me have a look at that and if they, if they ever get any PCs in, which will be a bonus, because my knowledge with IT repairs is pretty good. So I’m happy with that, and I think I’d do well for them and earn them a bit of money through that.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

For Andy, if you were not in work, claiming benefits was a part of life that needed to be accepted as there were still bills to be paid and a contribution to be made. Though he did not enjoy the experience, it was something that some of his friends had also done. He was therefore able to cope when ribbed by some of his other friends, as he explained:

I’m an unemployed person trying to live his life, trying to pay for things. A lot of my friends say I’m a JSA bum, and I disagree with it, but I just tells them to shut the hell up. [...] Chris does a lot of the time, says I’m a bum on the dole. But Stevie doesn’t because he’s been on the dole and he’s experienced it. The only reason Chris hasn’t is he lives with his Mum. He may be my age, but he’s got no bills to pay. He’s pretty much living free so he doesn’t need an income.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

As discussed above, claiming benefits was relatively common in the area in which Andy lived and this, perhaps, made it easier for him to accept. Greg’s background, by contrast, had done nothing to prepare him for the experience of being on JSA and it is therefore unsurprising that he found it ‘miserable’.

Greg and Andy were both grappling with complex transitions to adulthood, facing particular challenges around living independently and finding stable employment. These challenges were heightened by the difficult economic climate in which they found themselves. Whilst the extended and complex transitions that Greg and Andy experienced are not uncommon, Greg’s experience was individualised and sometimes painful. His ideas about what constituted a ‘normal’ life, modelled on the experiences of his parents,
certainly seemed to contribute to this. Further, his middle-class upbringing meant that he had no sense of a shared understanding of the difficulties he faced. Instead, Greg’s experience was privatised and personal, leaving him to believe he alone was responsible for overcoming the challenges he faced:

“The main reason is lack of support from the government, bad education because they didn’t help you, they didn’t help me, or suit me, it was … Yeah, that’s it really, just nobody’s there for you, you’re always on your own.”

(Greg, Interview 2, November 2011)

As discussed in Chapter 3, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) identified this sense of individualisation and risk that Greg expressed as the ‘fallacy of late modernity’ (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 113). Greg was constrained by structural influences yet sought to find individual solutions to the challenges he faced:

“Blind to the existence of the powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure. (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 114)

Greg did not seem to recognise that the challenges he faced were, at least in part, the result of socioeconomic changes in the labour and housing market. He seemed to cling to the notion of a ‘normal life’ that reproduced the markers of a ‘golden age’ of transition (see discussion in Chapter 3). As such he experienced, at times, an uncomfortable reality that was at odds with his hopes and expectations. By viewing having his own home, a car, a job and a family as ‘normal’, Greg judged himself as abnormal when he struggled to achieve these things.

Andy had experienced similar setbacks to Greg. However, he did not seem to feel them in such an individualised way. Perhaps because some of his friends and many of those around him also claimed benefits, he was able to see that
he was not in a situation entirely of his own making. Unlike Greg, Andy seemed able to see beyond the personal and considered the broader structural influences that affected his situation. He had thought about the impact of government cutbacks and how this affected the local labour market:

There’s too many cuts and employers are having to make cuts and it’s having a knock on effect on the er jobs. Nobody’s able to hire anyone because they can’t afford it because they’re having to cut back on everything [...] because at the moment with the country with the state it’s in, it’s David Cameron being a complete pleb.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

Andy had also considered what his job prospects would have been like prior to the recession:

Yeah. I reckon if there was a lot more jobs available, like there was about, I reckon if the jobs, I don’t know, say go back about five years time [...] I reckon I would have got a job.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

By acknowledging these factors, Andy recognised the interdependency between social contexts and individual responsibility. This did not mean that he devolved accountability for his situation, nor had he given up hope. However, it prevented him from the feelings of ‘vulnerability and risk’ described by Furlong and Cartmel and experienced by Greg. Andy sought to maintain a positive attitude towards the future, stating,

I always try and look positive. I don’t like looking negative. I’ve tried that before and it just doesn’t work.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

Andy and Greg, then, had different backgrounds and different ideas about what constituted a ‘normal’ or ‘average’ life. Their expectations seemed, at least in part, to have been formed by the lives they had seen their family,
friends and neighbours leading. Greg’s background of relative privilege does not, in this instance, emerge as an advantage. By holding on to an outdated idea about what his transition to adulthood should entail, Greg felt setbacks all the more keenly. Andy, on the other hand, held expectations more in keeping with the realities he encountered. Furthermore, Andy did not face the challenge of unemployment and claiming benefits in isolation since both family and friends shared similar experiences. This enabled him to see beyond his personal experience and acknowledge broader structural influences.

Whilst Greg was certainly miserable with his situation, he nevertheless came from a supportive family who were willing to provide for him. He felt unhappy because he hoped for better things which those around him had managed to achieve. For Andy, unemployment was more normative to the neighbourhood in which he grew up. Whilst this protected him from the personalised and unhappy experience of unemployment that Greg had, it perhaps also made him more accepting of his situation. Though Andy was able to understand his position in relation to the economic climate in which he found himself, it is easy to see how this could, over time, lead to a sense of hopelessness; recognising structural limitations does not necessarily enable a person to overcome them. Furthermore, the very fact that Andy’s expectations were more modest than Greg’s is cause for concern. Greg might well have been more miserable when faced with a situation outside of his frame of reference. However, is it more concerning that Andy’s expectations of what the ‘average guy’ can expect were already restricted by his life experiences to date?

Greg and Andy’s narratives highlight the young adults’ unequal access to material resources. Further, they reveal the extent to which an individual’s background might influence their expectations and hopes. However, Greg and Andy’s experiences also suggest that an individual’s sense of identity is tied to these hopes and expectations. It was not simply that Greg was disappointed when he ‘failed’ to secure a ‘normal house, normal family, normal job’ (Greg, Interview 1, October 2010). Rather, his failure to achieve these things seemed to threaten his sense of identity. In the same way as Tom (discussed above)
seemed locked into a future identity that was connected to a view of himself as a ‘manual’ worker, Greg seemed locked into a future identity that reproduced his parents’ attainments. Though based on different culturally embedded ideas, Greg and Tom’s sense of identity was linked to expectations that were increasingly difficult to achieve. They hoped for what du Bois-Reymond (1998) described as a ‘modernized ‘normal biography’ ’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66) based on achieving the traditional markers of adulthood in a linear way. When they struggled to achieve it they were left feeling frustrated and seemed disconnected and lost.

As discussed above, it seemed that Tom was asserting his ‘masculine’ identity through his drinking and nights out, which also afforded him a sense of belonging. He was making sense of his life in new ways, through means other than paid work. This emerged as an important idea, which I explore in more detail in the next chapter. I return to Greg and Andy’s narratives and consider the contrasting ways in which they attempted to maintain a positive self-image. For Greg, it seemed he was developing a compensatory career identity; a version of himself that was not based on his lived experiences, but which was important to his self-understanding. Andy engaged in alternative occupations that changed the way he thought about himself and his capabilities. The next chapter builds on some of the ideas introduced in relation to Becky’s narrative. Indeed, some of the young adults appeared to be moving towards the perspective of life as an ‘ongoing, neverending project of self reflection and self actualisation’ (Kelly, 2006: 25). Rather than the expectation of a ‘modernized ‘normal biography’ ’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66) they seemed engaged in something quite different. They were finding ways to live life without a ‘road map’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 362) and were redefining themselves as part of this process.
Chapter six
6. Findings: Part II - Twenty-first Century Living

6.1 Defining life in new ways

As has already been emphasised ‘young people today are growing up in a world that is significantly different, and is experienced as different, from the world in which their parents grew up’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361). The preceding chapter emphasised the tension between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’; there was often evidence of a struggle between culturally embedded ideas about what life should offer and the realities encountered. This chapter focuses on the ways in which some of the young adults defined their lives in new ways; through means other than paid work. It explores the young adults’ housing careers, compensatory career identities and alternative occupations. However, it is not concerned purely with the ways in which the young adults made sense of their lives across ‘multiple terrains’ (Dubet, 1994). Rather, the chapter also considers how the young adults maintained a sense of identity in the face of significant social and economic change. It should therefore be unsurprising that late-modern ideas about identity are pertinent to this chapter, particularly those of Giddens and Côté.

6.1.1 Giddens - the reflexive project of the self

The concept of the self as a ‘project’ was introduced in Chapter 5 (above) in relation to Becky’s narrative. It recurs throughout this chapter and was an important idea in relation to my findings. Grounded in the work of Anthony Giddens (1991), the concept of the reflexive project of the self suggests that self-identity in the late modern-era is something that ‘has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual’ (Giddens, 1991: 52). It is not something that is ‘just given’ (Giddens, 1991: 52) through some kind of internal ‘action-system’ (Giddens, 1991: 52). Neither can self-identity be achieved by seeking to emulate ‘our parents or reproduce the models of adult life around us. There are no jobs for life and we no longer
follow gendered fates as typical men and women’ (Henderson, 2007: 19). From Giddens’ perspective the conditions of post-industrial insecurity leave people with no choice other than to engage in this reflexive project: the self ‘has to be reflexively made’ (Giddens, 1991: 3, emphasis added).

According to Giddens, self-identity is ‘made’ through ‘narratives of the self’ which enable an individual to understand the past and anticipate the future. These narratives are not simply a tool through which self-identity is formed, but self-identity is ‘a person’s own reflexive understanding of their biography’ (Gauntlett, 2002: 99):

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self. (Giddens, 1991: 54, emphasis in original)

Though Giddens acknowledges the influence of external events, it is the individual who holds the capacity to organise and integrate these into their life story. Whilst this is an interesting concept, it is necessary to question where this capacity to construct a narrative of the self comes from. Whilst it sounds like an individualised effort, these narratives must surely ‘reflect the cultural and social resources’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 20) that the individual has access to.

The notion of the reflexive project of the self is based upon particular assumptions about ‘the erosion of tradition and security in late modern western cultures’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 19). Late modern society is viewed as one which ‘introduces risks which previous generations have not had to face’ (Giddens, 1991: 4). It is a world in which ‘the influence of distant happenings on proximate events, and on the intimacies of the self, becomes more and more commonplace’ (Giddens, 1991: 4). The ‘post-traditional order
of modernity’ (Giddens, 1991: 5) is seen as different from that of previous eras, since the global and local are closely interconnected through electronic media. This networked and connected world is perceived by Giddens as a reflexive society. It is not one that is bound by the traditional order, but which is made and re-made through social systems that are 'largely autonomous and determined by their own constitutive influences' (Giddens, 1991: 5). The late modern society then, is one that is always in flux and which fails to provide ‘stable ‘anchor points’ for the self’ (Zhao and Biesta, 2008: 1). It is a society that requires individuals to hold the capacity to ‘renegotiate core values in ways that promote reflexive life management and the framing of life as an ongoing project largely devoid of explicit markers’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 362).

Giddens’ notion of the reflexive project of the self might be understood to grant individuals agency against a backdrop of uncertainty and insecurity. Indeed, an important aspect of Giddens’ theories is that the future becomes a ‘territory [that …] is carved out and colonised’ (Giddens, 1991: 4) through the ‘reflexive organisation of knowledge environments’ (Giddens, 1991: 3). This does not mean that the future is fixed, since the colonisation is never complete. However, anxiety about the future is mediated through reflexive life management. Whilst Giddens’ ideas seem to offer a means of establishing ‘a sense of identity and agency in times of profound social and economic change’ (Thompson et al., 2014: 68), they are not accepted unquestioningly. Indeed, Giddens’ work has been subject to a number of criticisms, not least that it emphasises change over continuity; masking the persistence of inequalities and the resilience of tradition (see for example Jamieson, 1998). As has already been discussed in Chapter 5, tradition in the form of culturally embedded ideas exerted a powerful hold over some of the young adults. This was not separate to their identity, but was an important part of it. Though they sometimes struggled to match their experiences with the sense of identity they held, these culturally embedded ideas were nevertheless part of who they were.

6.1.2 Côté – pilots of their own destinies?
Like Giddens, Côté (1996) attempted to explore and re-define identity for the late-modern era. Côté’s suggested that in the late-modern era,

... individuals are encouraged to (continually) discover their identities through consumption and pleasing others.

(Côté, 1996: 422)

This seems to imply a ‘shallow’ view of identity; with a focus on meeting the approval of others. Indeed, Côté described social identity in the late-modern era as being ‘‘managed’ [this] means reflexively and strategically fitting oneself into a community of ‘strangers’ by meeting their approval through the creation of the right impression’ (Côté, 1996: 421). Personal identity in the Late-modern era is described similarly as,

... image-oriented [...] based on a projection of images that meet the approval of a community, gaining one access so long as the images remain acceptable. Personal identity refers here to interpersonal styles that have been shaped by the actual life experiences of individuals.

(Côté, 1996: 421)

Côté, like Giddens, suggested that the very nature of late-modern society is problematic since it fails to provide the individual with the means of ‘establishing a stable and viable identity based on commitments embedded in a community of others’ (Côté, 1996: 423). Without a template of how to live one’s life and the influence of a 'benign guidance' (Côté, 1996: 423) individuals are left with two alternatives. Firstly, they might,

...drift in the currents and eddies of changes orchestrated by the captains of consumer industries who profit from manipulating identities, especially among the young.

(Côté and Allahar, 1994 paraphrased in Côté, 1996: 423)
However, the alternative is that the individual is able to take control by playing an ‘active role in their own development by becoming pilots of their own destinies, to the extent that this is realistically possible’ (Côté, 1996: 423). Similarly to Giddens, Côté suggests that individuals in late-modern societies operate ‘without institutional support and guidance in making developmental transitions, individuals are left largely to their own internal resources more so than in the past’ (Côté, 1996: 423).

This chapter focuses on the ways in which the young adults defined their lives in new ways: through their housing careers, compensatory career identities and alternative occupations. At times Giddens and Côté’s ideas seem to resonate with the young adults’ narratives; they appear as ‘pilots of their own destinies’ (Côté, 1996: 423) engaged in a reflexive project of the self. However, there is also evidence in my findings that calls into question the extent to which self-identity can be understood at the level of the individual. My engagement with the ideas of Giddens and Côté should therefore be understood as critical. Rather than accept the ‘individualisation thesis’ (Heinz, 2009: 397) unquestioningly, I was alert to ‘structural continuities of social inequality and the different opportunities for putting agency into practice’ (Heinz, 2009: 397). If the young adults are to be understood as ‘producers of their biography’ (Heinz, 2009: 397), it is important to consider the extent to which this biography is shaped by the resources they had access to.
6.2 Housing careers – Libby and Anna

Nearly all of the young adults I interviewed spoke about their hopes and plans in relation to their living situation. It was one of the areas that revealed the greatest diversity amongst their aims and expectations. Whilst some seemed happy to remain living with their parents (at least for the foreseeable future), others (for example Greg) hoped to own their own home within the next few years. This section of my findings explores housing careers in more detail, through the narratives of Libby and Anna. They were two young women from very different backgrounds, yet housing emerged as important to both of them. Unsurprisingly, there are contrasts between the housing careers the two young women pursued. For example Libby, who came from a background of relative privilege, was focused on home ownership; whereas Anna hoped to move to a council house with her boyfriend. However, my interpretation resists a narrow focus on the material differences between their housing careers. Instead, I also consider why housing emerged as significant to them: the meaning it held and its importance to their sense of identity. For both Libby and Anna it was through their housing careers that they seemed able to maintain a sense of agency and control. Though they operated within different frames of reference, they both emerged as young women who attempted to be ‘pilots of their own destinies’ (Côté, 1996: 423).

My interpretation of both Libby and Anna’s housing careers is complex and multi-layered. In part this complexity is a result of the longitudinal nature of my research. Indeed, the meaning housing held for Libby and Anna changed over the course of the two years I met with them. In Anna’s case housing did not seem particularly important to her in our first two interviews, but by our final interview it had assumed a new importance. It seemed connected to her relationship with her partner, but also a response to her labour market experiences. For Libby, housing was a goal she identified in our first interview. However, her understanding of that goal altered over the course of the three interviews I undertook with her. Not only were her priorities changing, but she also seemed to reappraise her life. It seemed that Libby’s self-understanding
shifted, and with it how she understood her housing career. However, that self-understanding might also be said to have been influenced by her housing career which assumed a position of importance in her life.

6.2.1 Libby – looking for escape and searching for meaning

Perhaps the most obvious way of understanding Libby’s housing career was as a means of escape from her family situation. It emerged that Libby had a strained and uneasy relationship with both her mother and father, something that she spoke about in all three interviews. Libby claimed her parents had never really been interested in having children and were only concerned in the way their accomplishments reflected upon them:

> It was like expectations, and just like, they didn’t really want children around. They didn’t, they had like me and my sisters, but they didn’t have any time for us. So it just seemed always a bit pointless.

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

She described her separated parents (her mother, a Barrister and her father, a successful IT Consultant) as ‘high achieving’ (Libby, Interview 3, November 2012). Libby perceived this was something that was also expected of her and her younger twin sisters:

> … my parents don’t really do proud very easily […] I think they just kind of expected me and my sisters to be quite high achieving.

(Libby, Interview 3, November 2012)

Yet as Libby’s story unfolded, it seemed she felt both she and her sisters had failed to meet their parents’ expectations.

Libby (aged 18 at the time of our first meeting) claimed that her GCSE results had not been at the grades her father anticipated. Consequently he had refused to pay for her to continue to study at the boarding school where she had been educated from age 11 – 16 years:
Basically my Dad is really kind of hard on education, and urm, he didn’t think my GCSE results were enough to justify him paying for me to stay at boarding school […] it was gutting, so erm, yeah I had to go to my local comprehensive.

(Libby, Interview 1, October 2010)

She also described her mother’s response when her twin sisters did not obtain their predicted A Levels to secure their conditional offers at Oxford University:

[…] they’ve finished their A levels. […] my Mum kind of disowned them because they didn’t get into Oxford. It wasn’t that she was upset for them, she was angry that they, like they didn’t get in. Like they’d ruined it. It was more that she wanted it for her than for them, like how it reflected on her …

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

Though Libby never implied that her parents were overtly cruel or unkind, it seemed she felt the weight of their expectations and felt under pressure to succeed. When she or her twin sisters failed to achieve as anticipated, Libby felt her parents were ‘angry’ because of the way this reflected upon them.

In the two years prior to my interview with Libby she had started post-compulsory education twice. At first she had lived with her father in Somerset and attended the sixth form of the local comprehensive. However, when this didn’t work out her mother enrolled her to study for the International Baccalaureate at a Further Education College. Libby relocated to live with her mother in a seaside town in the South West of England and started the course. Yet she only attended regularly for the first term and eventually dropped out. Libby explained that she had been diagnosed with depression both whilst living with her father in Somerset and more recently:
Uhhh [exhales audibly] Yeah I was really fed up and I ended up having really bad depression, and then I took my final grades, didn’t do very well, because I hadn’t been there.

(Libby, Interview 1, October 2010)

When she spoke about her experiences Libby highlighted how much she missed her close friends from boarding school and struggled living at home:

Um, I think the worst thing was living at home. I really needed the boarding kind of environment … and I didn’t get that. I was really, really lonely.

(Libby, Interview 1, October 2010)

It was her loneliness that she emphasised, again indicating that she did not feel close to her family.

When I first met Libby her life was out-of-step with that of her friends from boarding school. They had all either recently started University or were on gap years, whereas Libby was on a government funded work placement after a period of claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance. She was unsure about her future aims in relation to work, but expressed clearly her ambition to buy her own house. When she spoke about her expectations for the coming year she stated:

I think I’d probably still be living at home and just trying to save enough money so at some point I can get a deposit on my own house. I don’t really see the point in renting anywhere at the moment ’cause it would take the majority of my money and at the end of the month I wouldn’t have anything to save, so I’ll probably still just be living at home.

(Libby, Interview 1, October 2010)

She seemed to have thought carefully about the type of living situation she would enjoy and liked the possibility of living with a friend:
I don’t want to live on my own, so like living with a friend maybe. I’m not really keen on shared houses. I wouldn’t like the idea of just moving in with strangers. Just locked doors and then like a communal kitchen or living room because that’s what my house is like anyway. I want homely …

(Libby, Interview 1, October 2010)

It seemed Libby wanted to re-create the atmosphere of boarding school where she had been happiest, hoping to share her living space with a friend whom she had a close bond with. However, Libby’s goals in relation to housing also seemed to indicate that she was looking for an escape from her family situation. She spoke about how she wanted something ‘homely’ and implied that living with her mother was like living in a shared house with ‘locked doors.’ Notably, Libby did not envisage renting a flat with a friend and was focused specifically on home ownership. She seemed to understand what was involved in buying a house, which contrasted sharply with some of the other participants who struggled to contemplate living independently. Home ownership was firmly in Libby’s frame of reference and something she felt was realistic, despite the recent setbacks she had experienced.

By the time of our second interview around a year later, Libby’s life had changed considerably. She was working full time as a general assistant in a budget supermarket, but earlier in the year had been working three part-time jobs:

I was working 3 days a week [in office administration], 3 days a week in the pushbikes [a bicycle shop], weekends in the pub.

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

Her living situation had also changed and she no longer lived with her mother. Instead she had moved to the nearest city and now lived with her boyfriend. My impression that Libby was keen to escape her family situation was something that Libby articulated in our second interview. She reported that
she felt happier after moving out and she seemed to find a sense of security that she had not found in her family life:

It’s really different. I had quite a lot of emotional issues, like I don’t want to say mental issues, but I did have like ongoing depression, whilst I was in [the seaside town] and all through, basically, through just growing up. I felt like I really haven’t had any like, kind of breakdowns since I’ve been in my house. I think it’s just because I’ve managed to shut them out, I don’t have to speak to my family.[…] Like they’re probably the main people that upset me all the time and now, I don’t have to have anything to do with them.

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

Libby commented that she managed to ‘shut them out’ and that she didn’t ‘have to speak to my family’ now that she lived independently from them. However, as a means of escape was not the only way of understanding Libby’s housing career. Over the course of our second and third interviews, it became clear that it also afforded Libby a sense of status and gave her life meaning.

Significantly, Libby had not moved into rented accommodation but had purchased a house with her boyfriend. She explained how she had not been expected to contribute towards rent or bills whilst living with her mother and had therefore saved a lot of her earnings. Though her boyfriend was five years older than her, she explained how she had persuaded him to buy somewhere with her when she realised the possibility of fulfilling her aims:

[…] my boyfriend, he saved nearly the same amount as me, and um, I’ve said I don’t really want to move in with you, but I really want to buy a house. And he said, I know, I really want to buy a house too, and I was like, it’s really important to me too. It’s just, it’s always been my goal, like I know I’m going to do it. […] And um, it took him a while to say yeah because he’s really like, not suspicious, but like, um, a bit
wary, finally said like yeah, we’re not ready to move in together, but we’ll just buy a house then as an investment.

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

The fact that Libby became a home owner, as opposed to renting, is important to the way her narrative is interpreted. It was also something Libby was proud of and became the focus of our second and third interviews. Libby consistently maintained that she and her boyfriend had paid for the majority of the deposit, with a small amount of help from his parents:

Interviewer: So did you do that entirely you and your boyfriend, or did you have some extra financial support?

Libby: It was me, my boyfriend and his parents put in some money too. But theirs is a loan, and when we sell the house they, they can take a percentage of it. So I think, what have they got ...10 per cent saving, so I own 45 per cent and my boyfriend owns 45 per cent and they own 10.

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

Certainly she had saved a considerable amount of money and explained how she set financial targets for herself each month. Nevertheless it seemed like a large amount of money to have saved in a very short space of time, even without any outgoings.

When considered in the context of Libby’s recent past, her housing career might be understood as a way in which she reasserted her privileged position and maintained a sense of status. Unlike her contemporaries from boarding school, Libby had not obtained A Levels and progressed to a ‘good’ university. However, through owning her own home she was able to project a positive and successful image in a different way. Libby was keen to emphasise to others that she owned her home, even the ‘carpet guy’ who mistakenly thought it was a council property:
 [...] the carpet guy came round and um, he was talking about, oh, how the council was paying or something, and I actually said, no, excuse me, I own this house. And he was going on about how he thought it was a council house, and it’s just nice to say [...] I bought my own carpet for my own house.

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

Whilst Libby was pleased with her achievements, an important aspect of this was sharing her accomplishment with others. When people assumed she rented her house, she took pleasure in telling them she owned it:

*Just the fact that I bought it, I know I bought it with someone, but I was still in my teens when I did it [...] and I didn't have any help from my parents, and um, I just feel a bit smug about it really. And I just love it, if you’re talking about houses or, like apartments, people just assume that you’re renting and it just makes me feel really good saying no, actually, I’ve got a mortgage.*

(Libby, Interview 3, November 2012)

It seemed Libby’s *housing career* was linked to a broader concern with meeting the approval of others. This might be associated with the way in which she perceived her parents’ held high expectations and how she found it difficult to please them. However, it also resonates with Côté’s theories about *personal identity* in late modern societies, described as:

*image-oriented [...] based on a projection of images that meet the approval of a community, gaining one access so long as the images remain acceptable.*

(Côté, 1996: 421)

Unable to project this image through her academic achievements, it seemed that Libby sought other ways of meeting ‘the approval of the community’ (Côté, 1996: 421).
Côté’s assertion that people now ‘(continually) discover their identities through consumption and pleasing others ‘(Côté, 1996: 422) might be applied to Libby’s narrative. Indeed, she demonstrated a concern with what other people thought of her that extended beyond her *housing career*. She was interested in material items and was considering buying a sports car at the time of our final interview:

> I’ve got a car, but I’ve only got, I’ve got like your average starter car, I’ve got a Ka, Ford. And now I’m thinking I want to get a really nice car […] I really want to get an Audi TT.  
> (Libby, Interview 3, November 2012)

Libby’s career ambitions also revealed a focus on the impression she made on others. Though she was unclear exactly what she wanted to do, she was interested in the idea of being a self-employed business woman:

> I want to do something really good. By really good I mean go, I want to get somewhere … like business wise, but I just don’t know how to go about it. […] I just want something like a wow factor, businessy thing. I don’t know.  
> (Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

She stated she wanted a ‘wow factor' indicating the importance she placed on how she was perceived. Further, Libby was open about the fact she hoped others would recognise her achievements:

> Um, it’s both. More to stretch myself, but there is a hint, like, I want other people to see it …  
> (Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

It seemed important to Libby’s sense of identity that she was recognised as successful. Indeed, though she had ‘escaped’ her parents’ expectations and was living independently, it seemed she carried with her the need to receive the approval of others.
Whilst Libby’s identity in some ways seemed ‘image oriented’ (Côté, 1996: 421), her housing career also revealed a need for a deeper sense of meaning. Initially, Libby articulated the need to set goals; recognising how targets motivated her:

*I need to find a new goal to have, I haven’t thought of it yet, so […] For my house I had tons of monthly money targets, with the goal of buying a house attached to it at the end. So, ’cause I need the instant gratification of doing something, before I have like something in the long run.*

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

This need for ‘instant gratification’ was also what Libby felt accounted for her struggle with motivation when it came to studying. Though she knew it might offer long-term rewards there was nothing short-term to sustain her enthusiasm.

*Like I think motivating myself to study is completely down to me, and there’s no kind of reward, like significant reward, I feel, at the end of it. […] Not in the short term, not in the short term. So like instant gratification, which is really child like.*

(Libby, Interview 2, November 2011)

However, in our final interview Libby was reflective and revealed that holding the goal of purchasing a house had been about more than simply having something to aim for. Neither was it the impression it made on others that she recognised as most important. As she explained:

*I’m one of those people, where I don’t really know what the point of life is. I just kind of think everyone is like alive, and then they die, and there’s no real point to it. And I feel like I made myself a point, and the point was to get a house, and I feel like I really struggle if I don’t have kind of a goal, because I find myself back in the situation where I go,*
what’s the point? [...] And then if you think about it like that, obviously it’s really sad. If that’s you know, you go home, you go to work, come back, but what’s at the end of it? So I feel like I really need to set myself these goals just to keep me going. So it’s really important that I have a goal. I need to find something as big as a house!

(Libby, Interview 3, November 2012)

In struggling to find a point in life, Libby expressed a sense of ‘personal meaninglessness – the feeling that life has nothing to offer’ (Giddens, 1991: 9). Giddens described this as a ‘fundamental psychic problem in the circumstances of late modernity’ (Giddens, 1991: 9). However, through holding a significant goal, Libby managed to regain a sense of ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991: 202). As she stated, she ‘made myself a point’ – a purpose in life that she could focus her energies on. For Libby, the real value in buying the house was that it filled her life with a sense of meaning that she otherwise struggled to find. What was interesting about this statement was that Libby also revealed a self-understanding that was different from that held by her younger self. Initially she had been concerned with escaping her family situation; then with the sense of status the house brought her. However, by the final interview she seemed to recognise that her need to find a sense of purpose was important to her ontological view. Hence her words, ‘I need to find something as big as a house!’

6.2.2 Anna – attempting to secure the future

It would be easy to compare the housing careers of Anna and Libby with a narrow focus on the contrasts between their backgrounds. Indeed, Anna had grown up in an inner city locale quite different from Libby’s upbringing in a Somerset village. However, to do so risks overlooking some of the similarities between the two young women and the way they made sense of their lives. Both sought to exercise agency through their housing careers; attempting to take control of an area of their lives. For Libby this seemed to link to her need for escape, but also to her sense of identity and her search for purpose and meaning. Anna’s housing career was equally complex. It seemed connected
to her relationship with her partner, but also a response to the difficulties she experienced in the labour market.

Anna’s living situation and her aims in relation to housing did not emerge as important until our third and final interview. Instead, she focused in our first two interviews on her attempts to find employment that met with her career goals. It was the day before Anna’s 21st birthday when I first met her. She had been unemployed for just over a year and had been claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance whilst seeking work. Anna hoped to find work that related to her qualifications which she described with some pride:

*I got my NVQ Level 2 in Learning and Development; Pre-School Practice Level 2 in Childcare as well. I got ‘Managing the Behaviour of Children and Young People’; ‘Helping Children with Disabilities and Special Needs with their Families’; and all the things like that. I got a variety of them.*

(Anna, Interview 1, July 2010)

However, she had not managed to find employment that matched with her aims. Instead, she had settled for work in the related field of care as a support worker for adults with mental health difficulties. The role lasted for five months before she felt forced to leave the job, primarily because of a poor relationship with the home owner:

*Yeah, I was working at the home. So I had to leave there due to discommunication and just getting blamed for things that I hadn’t done, and doing jobs that I shouldn’t have been doing.*

(Anna, Interview 1, July 2010)

Whilst Anna had resigned from the role she felt that she had no choice. There was no indication that she was unwilling to work, yet she had struggled to find employment of any kind for over a year.
Over the course of the two years I met with Anna, her relationship with the labour market was very similar to that of Nick and Luke’s (discussed in Chapter 5). Whilst she managed to secure work it was always temporary, low paid and interspersed with claiming benefits. Like them she maintained a ‘strong, resilient work motivation’ (Shildrick et al., 2010: 7), though she acknowledged how challenging she had found the past few years:

It’s been a struggle, but yet it’s been like, I’ll try that job, I’ll try that one. And then you try jobs that you’ve never done before and then while you’re still looking for your ideal job. And it’s a little frustrating when they say you haven’t got no experience, but how about you give it to me then, and then we’ll go from there!

(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

Sometimes public transport had proved a barrier to Anna. Even though she lived in a city with relatively good transport links, she found it difficult to get to work on time. Though Anna had found work that she enjoyed as a support worker for adults with learning difficulties and mental health needs, the early starts posed a problem:

… it used to take me about an hour and a half to get there by bus, because they are every half an hour to an hour first thing in the morning. They used to want me to get there by quarter to eight, but with my first bus I couldn’t get there until bang on half past eight, which did cause a little friction even though I told my employer that.

(Anna, Interview 2, July 2011)

As a result Anna had agreed with her employer that the role was not working out. Undeterred she applied for other work and soon secured part-time work cleaning the offices and platforms of railway stations. The work involved extremely early starts and Anna spent between four and six hours per day travelling to and from work. Her shifts, paid at minimum wage, would only last around four or five hours. She persevered with the role for a few months, but eventually decided to leave:
With the early hours I was always tired [...] It just got all too much, and it just wasn’t worth it.

(Anna, Interview 2, July 2011)

Though Anna remained motivated, the work she subsequently found seemed to be taking her further from her initial aims of working in childcare. Anna had taken work as a charity fundraiser where she was paid on a commission basis.

It was all commission [...] To put it bluntly, pretty crap. I’d rather hourly, because if you don’t get one person signing up for the whole time, that’s it, you just don’t get paid, you don’t get any. And it’s pretty rubbish really because if you’re going somewhere [outside the city …] you got to pay the driver £5 fuel.

(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

In Anna’s own words she ‘walked out’ (Anna, Interview 3, October 2012) as the outdoor work, going door-to-door throughout the day, had aggravated her asthma. At the time of our third and final interview Anna was, for the first time, claiming Employment Support Allowance (ESA) for health reasons.

In our final interview Anna was keen to speak about the relationship with her partner Paul, whom she referred to as her ‘chap’. By this time they had been together for two years and she spent a lot of time with him. She was animated when she spoke about the things they enjoyed doing together:

When we’ve got the money, what we will do is we’ll go to the beach, even though it’s freezing cold in December. Down to like Cornwall […] I will grab a hot drink and then we’ll go on the beach and walk and look for driftwood. […] Um, he’s got loads of it. He wants to make like a driftwood mirror and that. He’s got like a little tiny round one and a big massive one that he got for free. And he’s going to play with that and then give it to his brother or something for Christmas.
However, Paul had recently become unwell and Anna had spent a lot of time caring for him:

... I had to take care of my chap because he fell quite ill.

Though he had previously been working as a chef in a care home, he had recently given the work up due to his health. The main cause of Paul’s illness, according to Anna, was stress and anxiety caused by the behaviour of the neighbour in the flat above Paul’s.

Anna explained how she frequently stayed with Paul, splitting her time between his flat and staying at her mother’s house. However, Anna hoped that they would soon be able to move in together, ideally to a council house. It was her aim to get Paul away from the situation with the neighbour, but she also felt that ‘it will be a bit more permanent then’ (Anna, Interview 3, October 2012):

Um, hopefully, hopefully, we’ll be able to get a council flat and have that to ourselves. And just be able to do whatever we want without having to travel back and forth […] Yeah. I’m on the waiting list to get one. I’ve been waiting for about 6 months now.

In the same way as Libby seemed to understand the steps involved in buying a house, Anna understood the process involved in applying for a council property. Though she planned to live in the property with Paul, she was on the waiting list as a single person:

Uhh, it, just, it’s just in my name, but if I was able to get a flat then what would happen would be that I would move in, bring him in with me and
we’ll both, I’ll put his name on the tenancy as well, so it would be like a joint one.

(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

She knew that the only way she would be housed would be if her parents confirmed that she could not stay with them, putting her at risk of homelessness:

[…] because the only way I’ve been able to apply for it [a council flat] is having to tell the council that I’ve got nowhere to go. And it’s pretty much in limbo in a way because I’m in between two places […] my Mum’s had to write a letter saying that she doesn’t want me there at all. My Dad’s had to turn around and say he doesn’t want me there because he’s got two young children, and there’s not room because it’s a three bedroom house.

(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

Though she had also obtained a Doctor’s letter explaining about her asthma, Anna had not yet been offered a property that she considered suitable:

It’s like I had a letter, I got my letter from the Doctor, telling them like I’m asthmatic and all of that, and I can’t, well I don’t do the cold, and all I got was the shared house accommodation, the offer of a shared house, which quite frankly I can’t do and I don’t want to either.

(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

Like Libby, Anna was wary of living in a shared house, especially if she had no choice about the other tenants. Of course, being offered a room in a shared house also did not fit with her plans of moving Paul in with her:

[…] you don’t know who you’re going to live with. Even though you get locked doors you don’t know if someone’s going to break in and nick your stuff, and to top it off, it’s like you don’t know their temperament, you don’t know who they are.
Anna felt it was reasonable to expect that she be offered her own living space, but was also aware that some people took advantage of council property:

[…] they should be able to offer you somewhere to sleep, like your own little flat or something. But not let you take advantage as well.
(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

Her use of the word ‘little’ seemed to emphasise that she was not seeking something extravagant or beyond what she should be entitled to.

Unlike Libby, Anna had not identified housing as a specific goal during our first two interviews. As discussed above, she was more focused on pursuing work options. It was not until our final interview, when her relationship with her ‘chap’ appeared to have assumed a new importance, that she discussed her hopes in relation to living with him. Anna’s housing career, then, might be understood to be linked to her relationship with Paul. She was clear that she hoped they would stay together and knew that he was keen to start a family with her in the future:

If I let my chap have anything to do with it, he’ll probably get me bunged up, pregnant. If I let him, probably […] It would be funny seeing like little ‘mini me’s’ running around, like him. But scary at the same time, because shall I let you or not?
(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

There was no implication that Anna planned to start a family in the immediate future. Further, she remained attached to the idea of working and wanted to have her own income, explaining that it was important to her confidence:

[…] that way I feel I’ve actually earned my own wages, I’m not sponging off tax payers. Because that way it keeps your confidence
going up, if you’re earning your own money because you’re doing something, you get more money so that you can enjoy more things […] [Being unemployed] knocked me before quite badly, and then I got my job which I can’t remember what it was now, and I felt absolutely fine after that. I just went on from there, in and out of part-time jobs.

(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

Anna envisaged having children at some point, but she also anticipated being a mother who worked. In the future she hoped to be,

[…] somewhere where I’ve got a job, got my own income coming in, but yet still got my own family at home.

(Anna, Interview 3, October 2012)

It is therefore important not to assume that because Anna wanted a council house, her attitude to work had somehow changed. Rather, her close relationship with Paul seemed to motivate her to want to live independently from her parents for the first time. Though children featured in her expectations for the future, this was not an immediate plan. It was also clear that Anna felt in control of whether she and Paul started a family by stating it was her decision whether she ‘let him’ get her pregnant.

Libby and Anna seemed very different, particularly around their goals in relation to housing. Whilst Libby managed to purchase her own home by the age of 19, Anna at age 23 hoped to move to a council property because it would ‘be a bit more permanent’ (Anna, Interview 3, 2012). However, it is possible to question whether they are really so different. Like Libby, Anna cared about what other people thought of her. She did not want to be seen as some ‘little scrounger’ (Anna, Interview 1, July 2010) whilst on benefits, and frequently emphasised her keenness to work. Anna also took pride in her appearance, dressed fashionably and was always well groomed. When she did have spare money she went to exercise classes or swimming with her best friend. Though she would never have contemplated buying an Audi TT, she did care about the image she projected to others. Like Libby, she might
be said to be ‘image-oriented’ to some extent. For these reasons, it is possible
to understand that Anna’s attitude to applying for a council house was
different to her view of unemployment. Whilst she was always worried that
people would think negatively about her if she didn’t work, applying for a
council house was not treated by Anna with the same stigma. Instead the way
that she described it seemed to be as a practical decision; a solution to
splitting her time between her mother and her boyfriend’s house. Living in a
council house did not imply, for Anna, that a person was unwilling or unable to
work.

Similarly to Libby, Anna seemed to be trying to exercise agency in relation to
her housing goals. In applying for a council house she adopted a proactive,
determined approach with a clear goal in mind. Anna, like many young adults,
wanted to be able to live independently from her parents and move in with her
partner. However, in applying for a council house rather than considering
private rental, Anna was also pursuing a ‘more permanent’ secure solution. It
is possible that her experience of the labour market made Anna acutely aware
of the importance of a secure home. She had struggled for several years to
achieve her aims in relation to employment, despite adopting a flexible
attitude where she tried work in a range of sectors. Permanent work had
proved elusive and she frequently had to return to claiming benefits. Whilst
she hoped for more secure employment, she was unsure how easy this would
be to achieve. Therefore Anna’s pursuit of council accommodation might be
understood as an attempt to take control of a different element of her life. She
might not have been able to control the insecure work situation, but perhaps
she could ensure she (and her boyfriend) were permanently housed
regardless of their employment status.

Both Libby and Anna might be described as taking an ‘active role in their own
development by becoming pilots of their own destinies, to the extent that this
is realistically possible’ (Côté, 1996: 423). However, it is important to
acknowledge that what was ‘realistically possible’ was influenced by a number
of factors. For example, the availability of work within the local labour market
restricted the options available to them. Reliance on public transport also
impaired Anna’s ability to undertake some roles. Equally significant were what Anna and Libby felt was realistic or possible for them; influencing their expectations and their responses to the situations they faced (see also Lawy and Wheeler, 2013). Yet their housing career emerged as an area both young women felt able to exercise control over. Though they did this in different ways, in accordance with what seemed realistic and the resources they had access to, there were similarities between their actions and motivations. Both Anna and Libby might be understood as seeking security: Libby through an escape from her family situation, Anna through a stable environment for her and her partner. In doing so, they seemed to be attempting to manage their futures, making it a ‘territory [that …] is carved out and colonised’ (Giddens, 1991: 4). This did not mean that they had somehow overcome future challenges and uncertainties, but rather that they were able to ‘propel [themselves] into the future’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 20) through their narratives of the self. Crucially, this narrative allowed them to understand themselves as individuals capable of exercising agency over some areas of their life.

Libby and Anna’s housing careers also suggested that their sense of identity or self-understanding was dynamic in nature. Indeed, the way that both young women understood their lives seemed to change over the two year period I met with them. Not only was their sense of identity ‘multiply constructed across different […] discourses, practices and positions’ (Hall, 2000: 17), but it seemed to evolve over time. Their housing careers were a significant area of their life that seemed to feed into this iterative process. This was an important idea in relation to my findings, one that extended beyond Libby and Anna’s narratives. Indeed, when I first wrote about Nick and Luke (discussed above) it included a small section entitled ‘awareness of time passing by.’ It recognised the ways in which their priorities (as they approached their mid-twenties) seemed different than those of the younger participants. For example, Nick spoke about how he hoped to start a family within the next five years:
I want a girlfriend and kids and that in five years. I’m 23. Thirties … maybe twenty, so by the time they’re twenty I’ll be coming up fifty.
(Nick, Interview 1, October 2010)

Though Luke focused on a different area of is his life, he also seemed to be considering the future and spoke about the need to have something to aim for (echoing Libby’s sentiment of needing a goal):

I need something. I need to aim for something. I can’t like just sit here and work. I need, I decide, I want to aim for it …
(Luke, Interview 1, October 2010)

Luke also explained how he wanted a more ‘professional’ work role that would offer him security.

When I thought about this small section more carefully and in the context of my broader findings, I realised it was more significant than simply being aware of time passing by and of shifting priorities. Instead, it seemed that the young men at age 23 were able to think about their lives in a different way than a younger cohort might have, particularly in relation to the future. They were able to project themselves five years ahead and consider what life might be like. For some of the young adults who were aged 18 at our first interview, this still proved difficult. For example, Chloe, aged 18 when I interviewed her, simply replied ‘no, too difficult’ (Chloe, Interview 1, July 2010) when asked about the future. However, the older participants were all able to articulate detailed answers. This concept should not be confused with some kind of developmental stage linked to age, per se. Rather, as the young adults accumulated experiences it seemed that their self-understanding was continuously shifting. It is this process that Libby and Anna were also engaged in, hence why their understanding of their housing careers seemed to change over time.

In the next two sections I continue to explore young adults’ self-understanding. First, I consider the way two of the participants sustained
career identities that were not grounded in their actual experiences. Rather than interpret these as idle fantasies, I consider the significance they held for Greg and Simon. These compensatory career identities existed only in their imaginations, yet seemed to serve a useful purpose for the two young men. When they faced challenges and setbacks, it seemed their compensatory career identities helped them to maintain a positive self-image. By contrast, the final section of my findings reveals two of the young adults ‘doing’ rather than ‘thinking.’ Nicola and Andy both engaged in alternative occupations that enabled them to understand their lives in new ways. The varied activities they engaged in gave them a sense of purpose. Over time, they also seemed to act as a vehicle through which their self-understanding was transformed.
6.3 Compensatory career identities – Greg and Simon

Compensate vb –sating, -sated [...] 2 to cancel out the effects of (something) [...] 3 to serve as compensation for (injury or loss) [Latin compensare] compensatory adj

(Collins English Dictionary, 2008: 171)

Two of my participants, Greg and Simon, held what I have chosen to describe as compensatory career identities. In both cases, they discussed these in more than one interview and in Greg’s case this spanned a period of two years. Initially I thought to describe these as ‘fantasy career identities’, but decided that this implied the careers were unrealisable. Eventually I decided that ‘compensatory’ best fitted my interpretation of this concept. Further, the enduring nature of these career identities sets them apart from the short-lived ‘flights of fancy’ or ‘fantasy future[s]’ discussed by Ball, Macrae and Maguire (1999). Indeed, there are significant differences between Greg and Simon’s compensatory career identities and the imagined futures of Ball, Macrae and Maguire’s research. I have found contemplating the meanings of these career identities intriguing, and feel they warrant a thorough exploration because of the insights they offer. In order to understand my interpretation, it is first necessary to give a brief overview of Greg and Simon’s backgrounds.

I first met Greg and Simon on the same day in October 2010. For both of them it was their first day on a government funded work placement provided through the Future Jobs Fund. Greg’s background has already been discussed in Chapter 5, but it is useful to briefly reiterate this. At age 18, Greg had not worked since dropping out of sixth-form over two years previously, and had largely been dependent on his parents for handouts until he became eligible to claim Job Seekers’ Allowance (JSA). His family background, as discussed above, was one of relative privilege. Greg’s parents had been willing to provide for him for over two years, and although he said he ‘didn’t really have the ability to go out and buy things or go out and do things. I didn’t have the money’ (Greg, Interview 1, October 2010) it is clear that he did not go without. Food, accommodation, clothing and mobile phone top-ups were all
provided by his parents. Whilst Greg clearly did not enjoy relying on his parents, describing himself as a ‘scab’, he found this a more palatable experience than being on JSA:

*Because I just don’t see the point of being on benefits. Just there’s no need for it. I was doing fine, just the way I was. I didn’t really need to be claiming, I didn’t need it. I just needed to look for a job. I didn’t need money to look for a job.*

(Greg, Interview 1, October 2010)

There was nothing in Greg’s background that prepared him for the experience of claiming benefits. Furthermore, whilst he managed to ‘cope’ with being unemployed when supported by his immediate family circle, he felt the experience all the more keenly when his situation was forced from the private to the public sphere.

Simon was 24 when I first met him and was one of my oldest research participants. He was one of two graduates that I interviewed, though his path to obtaining his University degree had not been a smooth one. Simon had performed extremely well academically at school and Further Education College (FE), gaining two A grades and one B in his A Levels (Physics, Maths and Computing). He had then obtained a paid workplace on a prestigious Gap Year programme with an energy company before taking up his place at a ‘good’ University. Simon initially embarked on a Joint Honours Computing with Physics programme but explained,

*I didn’t do so well and found it stressful and I was the only one on my course which made timetable clashes difficult and stuff, so I dropped the Physics, went back and started Computer Science from year 1.*

(Simon, Interview 1, October 2010)

Having changed courses, Simon continued to struggle at University, largely, it seemed, because he found it hard living away from the support network of his family. The result was, in Simon’s own words:
Ur, came back without having finished my degree officially, because I failed one module. Rather than try and re-sit the whole thing I went on an appeal and that kind of dragged on longer than I had hoped, so I ended up sitting around at home looking for work but not entirely knowing when, or if, I’d end up getting a degree or not.

(Simon, Interview 1, October 2010)

Like Greg, Simon had spent a considerable amount of time out of work and claimed JSA for over 6 months. However, unlike Greg this did not seem to have particularly troubled Simon. What had clearly bothered Simon over this period was his uncertain status as a ‘graduate’:

Um, I mean to begin with I have to say I wasn’t sure how long the appeal was going to take with University and that was kind of, kind of hanging over my head the whole time. Yeah, I wasn’t sure if it would be a couple of weeks or a year or what. There was kind of a sense that kind of my expectations kept getting pushed back a little bit further throughout the whole thing. The whole time I felt like I was in kind of a limbo situation, that I wasn’t quite able to move on and go anywhere, that I wasn’t quite, yeah …

(Simon, Interview 1, October 2010)

When I first met Simon, he had just found out that he had been awarded his degree. However, this was ‘well over a year after leaving’ (Simon, Interview 1, October 2010) and he was awarded a basic pass, rather than a specific classification.

Having offered some insight into the immediate pasts of both Greg and Simon, it is now interesting to consider the career identities they discussed. When I first interviewed Greg he spoke of his interest in the Army and being a soldier. At first this sounded like a career goal, or ‘imagined future’ (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999) that could well have been within his reach.
However, as our conversation progressed the way in which Greg spoke about being a soldier changed:

Greg: Well, my Year 2 final report as a student comment said that I particularly like learning about World War II. I was five years old and I like War and military sort of stuff, and I'm fifteen and I still want to do the same thing. So pretty much all my life I've wanted to join the Army.

Interviewer: What is it you're interested in about it?

Greg: Being a soldier. Being on the front line, getting in there. Getting all mucky and dirty, running around keeping fit.

[...]

Personally I feel like being a soldier is in my blood, this is my destiny. I mean I know loads, I know more about military than I do about anything else in the world. But, she [my girlfriend] means too much to me just to go out and get shot at, so …

Interviewer: Kind of holds a fascination for you?

Greg: Yeah. It’s a passion of mine. [...] It’s something I’m good at. [...] Mainly the outdoor side of it. Being a soldier, pretty much.

(Greg, Interview 1, October 2010)

What struck me as notable was that Greg slipped comfortably into either the past or present tense (as opposed to the future tense) when he talked about being a soldier. He speaks of ‘being on the front line, getting in there’ and says that ‘It’s something I’m good at.’ Greg did not actually have any experience of being a soldier; he had not been in the Territorial Army (TA) or even the cadets. Nevertheless, he spoke as if he had lived experience of being a soldier in the Army. It is this, more than anything that persuaded me that this was somehow different than an imagined future. Greg was not imagining a potential future for himself, one which he might or might not go on to fulfil. In his mind, at least, Greg already was a soldier.
It was only when talking about being a soldier that Greg used tenses inappropriately. It cannot, therefore, be seen as an idiosyncrasy of his manner of speech. Furthermore, in both his second and third round interviews, Greg again spoke as if he had experience of being a soldier:

*It’s still deep down inside me. It’s still, like I said last time, I probably said last time, it’s in my blood, and I still think it’s in my blood. I think it’s what I’m really best at.*

(Greg, Interview 2, November 2011)

*Well had I not met her [my girlfriend] four years ago I’d be in Afghan by now, no doubt, so, and I’m quite happy to have done that. I don’t mind being shot at, it’s quite cool [slight laugh].*

(Greg, Interview 3, December 2012)

By the time of his third interview, Greg had not done anything to pursue joining the Army (Regular or Territorial). The main reasons he gave for not joining were that his girlfriend, whom he had been in a relationship with for four years by the time of his final interview, would not let him:

*My girlfriend doesn’t particularly want me to go off and get shot, so that’s why. Otherwise I would have joined the regulars a long time ago. I would have joined infantry when I was 16, but my girlfriend sort of stopped me from doing that, which I can understand why.*

(Greg, Interview 1, October 2010)

Before discussing the possible meanings of Greg’s career identity as a soldier, it is now useful to return to Simon. From my first meeting with Simon he was clear about his short-term career goals: to find work as a computer programmer, ideally at a graduate level. However, it was his long-term aims that he spoke passionately about:
I mean I’ve got some kind of longer term interests, um, but they’re kind of a bit up in the air and I don’t know […] Well I’m kind of interested in cybernetics, and yeah […] I mean it’s more of a kind of an idol science-fiction kind of thing in a way, but just the idea of integrating machines and the human nervous system. Like being able to control machines with your mind […] I suppose what you might call the technical side of that as well. How nerves and electrodes or whatever interact, and how, how to create a machine that can be used by a human in that respect. Um, yeah, I don’t know […] I kind of read a lot of science fiction and just one bit kind of caught my imagination a bit.
(Simon, Interview 1, October 2010)

It was not clear from the way Simon spoke about cybernetics whether he courted hopes of working in this field in the future, or if it was purely an area which held an enduring fascination for him. However, it became clear that his interest in cybernetics fitted with a certain image he held of himself:

*Um, generally one of the main things that, um, kind of been a motivator and an interest to me throughout most of my life has been scientific inquiry, research, and I had this, this idea when I was young, that I wanted to be an inventor, I wanted to invent things, so I think that’s still, still with me.*
(Simon, Interview 1, October 2010)

The notion of being an inventor or scientist is one that Simon returned to in his second interview:

*I like learning, I like ideas and abstract concepts quite a lot, um, and I like the notion of inventing things and research and knowledge for knowledge’s own sake. […] I think from about as young as I can remember I wanted to be an inventor or scientist or something.*
(Simon, Interview 2, November 2011)
Similarly, when asked how his family would describe him, it is this aspect that he again honed in on:

* I think my Mum once described me as a kind of a nutty professor or mad scientist type. Bit of a geek, um, I don’t know really.  
(Simon, Interview 2, November 2011)

In his second interview, Simon also re-visited his interest in cybernetics. However, rather than talking about it in terms of a future career possibility, he focused on a very specific area that captured his imagination:

* Um, but I think the, one of the thing that interests me is, I, I, I’ve sort of come across a few ideas is this notion that in 50 years we might have computers so sophisticated you can download an entire human brain into them or something [...] I mean it’s quite frightening but it’s, it’s fascinating at the same time in this notion that you could almost redefine the human condition if that makes sense.[...] like I say it’s kind of sci-fi a bit, um, but yeah.  
(Simon, Interview 2, November 2011)

Simon’s image of himself as an inventor or ‘nutty professor’ is, in some ways, more complex than Greg’s description of himself as a soldier. Simon did not state that he was an inventor. Nevertheless there is clear evidence that this is a self-image that he held and which acted as a key motivator in his life. What Simon and Greg had in common is that they sustained a career identity through childhood and into early adulthood. These identities were not reflective of the career paths they were actually following, nor did they seem to serve the purpose of bridging a gap between one set of possibilities and another. What, then, was the purpose of holding these career identities, and why were they so important to Greg and Simon?

As discussed above, Greg and Simon’s career identities (soldier and inventor respectively) did not seem to be future oriented. Rather, they provided a way of picturing themselves that enabled them to escape from their day to day
lives, and see themselves as someone altogether different. They provided a form of escapism that enabled Greg and Simon to cope with situations (discussed above) that were sometimes uncomfortable or frustrating and often beyond their control. Greg and Simon were at their most animated when talking about being a soldier or inventor, and seemed to take pleasure from the career identities they held. Kappes et al. (2012) claim that:

[…] positive fantasies do something that other forms of imagery cannot: They allow people to mentally enjoy the fantasized future in the present moment, free from restrictions. Thereby, positive fantasies should allow people to mentally address their needs when they cannot immediately do so in reality.

(Kappes et al., 2012: 300).

According to Kappes et al. these positive images (whether future oriented or not) allow individuals to address certain needs. An obvious assumption might be that the ‘need’ Simon and Greg are addressing is that of employment, or more accurately, what employment offers to the individual. If the findings of Jahoda’s seminal research are accepted, this would seem fitting since she claimed employment ‘assigns social status and clarifies personal identity.’ (Jahoda, 1982: 83). Creating positive career identities, or focusing on identities held since childhood at this time of ‘need’, would therefore seem logical. However, the fantasy career identities Greg and Simon spoke of had notable differences. It is perhaps, therefore, useful to consider the possible reasons for these differences.

When considering the difference between Greg and Simon’s career identities, Jahoda’s statement that employment ‘assigns social status and clarifies personal identity’ (Jahoda, 1982: 83) is an interesting starting point. It is possible to question whether the distinction between Greg and Simon’s career identities derive from what they afford status to, and what was important to their personal identity. As discussed above, Greg came from a middle-class background where both his parents held positions of responsibility and were able to provide the family with a comfortable lifestyle. He considered it
‘normal’ to be able to provide a reasonable standard of living and to own a car and a house. This is not to say that Greg was focused on material items, but rather that he wanted to be able to provide for himself and his girlfriend, whom he was in a committed relationship with. From my first interview with him he expressed his desire to live independently from his parents and move in with his girlfriend:

Save up to get out of my house, get my own place with my girlfriend, hopefully.
(Greg, Interview 1, October 2010)

By our third and final interview he had achieved this, but they were struggling to make ends meet. Though his girlfriend was working as a beautician, Greg’s temporary administration role had come to an end and he was again claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance.

Greg: I’ve got like a grand’s worth of bills to pay every month so it’s a bit difficult […] I get Housing Benefit and I get Job Seeker’s, but they don’t give me nothing. They give me 16 quid a week.

Interviewer: Is that because your girlfriend’s working?

Greg: Yeah but, even, even though she’s working we still shortfall every month. We’re about 20 per cent less than what we need, even with benefits, so …
(Greg, Interview 3, December 2012)

Further, Greg would not let his parents come and visit him because of the poor condition his rented house was in:

I try not to let them into my house. It’s because it’s a shit house, it’s in really bad condition, so I don’t want to get them in it or anything.[…] It’s just us, it’s to ourselves, but it’s in really, really bad condition, it’s all damp and mouldy and all that stuff.
In all three of my interviews with Greg he expressed frustration with aspects of his situation, but there was perhaps also a sense of shame that he had not yet managed to achieve the things he hoped to:

> You know, like I grew up in a nice house, you know I didn’t get that, I didn’t earn that, I was just born into it, my parents could afford something for once. So you know, I didn’t achieve anything. They have, other people have, but I haven’t yet.

(Greg, Interview 3, December 2012)

Greg’s career identity as a soldier, then, might be understood as a response to his frustrations at being unable to provide, something which seemed central to his sense of identity. As mentioned above, he found the experience of claiming benefits extremely uncomfortable and hated to see himself as a passive receiver. By contrast, the image of the soldier that Greg portrays is heroic, active and masculine. The soldier Greg doesn’t mind getting ‘shot at’ (Greg, Interview 3, December 2012) and is happy to be ‘on the front line, getting in there. Getting all mucky and dirty, running around keeping fit’ (Greg, Interview 1, October 2010). Greg sustained an identity that is active and in control of challenging situations, allowing him to cope with the forced inactivity of unemployment and the feelings this provoked.

Simon, in contrast to Greg, was relatively untroubled by his dependency on others; in fact he never mentioned how he felt about claiming JSA and discussed how he was comfortable living at home with his family with whom he had a very close relationship. However, Simon repeatedly spoke about the impact of the drawn out University appeal process and the potential consequences of receiving a pass for his degree:

> Um, I still hold some hope of getting back into academia. It’s kind of a bit awkward, I mean I only got a pass for my degree, a lot lower than most people would expect if I was going to go on to do a Masters. So
figuring out the time and getting together the money to go back to that, it’s somewhat awkward um, and I’m not necessarily very good at dealing with awkward.

(Simon, Interview 2, November 2011)

As discussed above, Simon had achieved extremely well academically through school and in his A Levels. However, living away from home, he struggled at University and did not achieve the results he had aimed for. Simon hoped to return to postgraduate study, or ‘academia’, but was unsure whether his unclassified degree would allow him to do this. Despite these setbacks, Simon maintained an idea of himself as an inventor or scientist, pursuing ‘knowledge for knowledge’s own sake’ (Simon, Interview 2, November 2011). Indeed he described this as an interest that had acted as a ‘motivator’ (Simon, Interview 2, November 2011) throughout much of his life. The inventor is not bound by such things as entry requirements for postgraduate programmes or degree classifications. As such, the idea of the inventor transcended Simon’s recent negative experiences in education and allowed him to hold onto a sense of identity that was academically able; capable of making important discoveries in the pursuit of knowledge.

Both Greg and Simon held career identities that did not relate directly to the career paths they were pursuing. They did not, therefore, appear to be future oriented. Instead they seemed to provide a way of allowing Greg and Simon to maintain a positive self-image when faced with frustrations and setbacks. Further, they can be understood to address specific areas that seemed important to Greg and Simon’s personal identity: to be able to provide (Greg); to see himself as academically able (Simon). It is for these reasons that the concept of compensatory career identities best seems to describe my understanding. It is important to note that holding a compensatory career identity of soldier or inventor did not prevent Greg or Simon from acting; they were not lost in a form of fantasy or unproductive daydream. Rather, holding these positive, compensatory career identities seemed to help them assert control and maintain a belief that they were capable of acting.
It is interesting to consider aspects of Giddens’ and Côté’s identity theories in relation to Greg and Simon’s compensatory career identities. Côté raised concerns about how individuals might establish ‘a stable and viable identity’ (Côté, 1996: 423) in the late-modern era. However, both Greg and Simon managed to sustain a career identity over a prolonged period of time. This seemed to offer them a degree of stability in the way in which they viewed themselves. Whether or not these career identities are viable is perhaps irrelevant, though certainly neither is beyond the realms of possibility. Their value, perhaps, lies in what they are able to offer the individual rather than whether or not they are ‘real’. Through sustaining these positive career identities Greg and Simon were able to maintain a sense of control; to feel that they were ‘pilots of their own destinies’ (Côté, 1996: 423) despite the setbacks and frustrations they experienced in their day-to-day lives. These ideas are in keeping with Giddens’ theories who described the self as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991: 32). According to Giddens, the very ‘settings of modernity’ (Giddens, 1991: 33) fail to provide a template for identity development. As such,

 [...] the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change. (Giddens, 1991: 33)

Greg and Simon’s compensatory career identities, then, might be said to be one way in which they were exploring and constructing the ‘self’. Since modern life fails to offer stability or a clear set of markers to adulthood, they were actively constructing their identity in a reflexive way.

Greg and Simon held the ‘capacity to keep a particular narrative [of the self] going’ (Giddens, 1991: 54). Whilst Giddens maintained these narratives ‘cannot be wholly fictive’ (Giddens, 1991: 54), it seemed that holding a fictive element was important to Greg and Simon. It did not prevent them from being able to ‘integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self’ (Giddens, 1991: 54). Rather, it seemed to
be an aspect of *how* they made sense of external events; allowing them to hold onto a positive self-image and to move forward with their everyday lives.
6.4 Alternative occupations – Andy and Nicola

In Chapter 3 I discussed the difficulty of defining terms such as work and employment. It was suggested that they do not hold some kind of intrinsic meaning, but rather that the ‘language and discourse of work are symbolic representations through which meanings and social interests are constructed, mediated and deployed’ (Grint, 1991: 9). In the UK the primacy of formal paid work is often accepted unquestioningly, something which Taylor (2004) and Glucksmann (1995, 2000) claim is a relic of the industrial era (see discussion in Chapter 3). Its continued elevated position appears to uphold interests that are primarily economic, with a strong emphasis placed upon the importance of generating tax revenue. However, as was outlined above, researchers such as Henderson et al. (2007) have argued that, when undertaking research with young people, focusing narrowly on paid employment risks creating false divisions. They suggest that ‘work’ now requires a ‘broader focus’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 48) as a result of de-industrialisation, globalisation and the blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres. Not only is it important to investigate paid work within the broader context of a young person’s life, but it is necessary to consider a much wider range of occupational activity and its meaning. It is only by doing so that we might move towards a fuller understanding of how individuals make sense of their lives.

In this section I focus on the importance of ‘alternative occupations’ in the lives of the young adults. I have used the word ‘occupation’ as the activities discussed assumed a significant place in the young adults’ lives. They not only occupied their time, but also seemed to offer the young adults some of the benefits associated with formal paid employment. The discussion is not limited to volunteering, but includes ‘work’ undertaken in the ‘informal’ economy (discussed in Chapter 3); activity that might be described as part of ‘the gift economy’; along with the blending of leisure and work activities. It therefore takes a broad view of the ‘occupations’ that were important to the young adults; allowing an exploration of the meaning these activities held for
them. In doing so, the negative connotations of the ‘informal’ economy (also referred to as the ‘shadow’, ‘hidden’ or ‘submerged’ economy) are challenged. Primarily portrayed as problematic in ‘monetarist economic’ (Pahl, 1987: 38) terms, the ‘informal’ economy emerged as significant for Andy. Though the ‘occupations’ he engaged in were not recognised in any official way and operated outside the tax system, this did not diminish their importance. Indeed, they enabled Andy to collaborate with others towards a shared goal, and instilled in him confidence in his capacity to do things for himself. To some extent they seemed to fulfil the ‘human needs’ Jahoda (1982) suggested might only be met through paid employment. I therefore return to Jahoda’s ideas (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) to explore what Andy’s alternative occupations offered him; not only in terms of fulfilling particular ‘needs’, but also in terms of his self-understanding.

It was Andy’s narrative (see Chapter 5) that first prompted me to consider how the young adults made sense of their lives through means other than formal paid work. Perhaps it was so striking because of the range of activities he engaged in, which tended to be informal and were often unexpected. However, in this section I also return to Nicola’s story (see Chapter 5). My interview with her felt particularly poignant, both at the time and when I reflected on it afterwards. I often wondered what happened to Nicola and in 2015 decided I would try and find out. She had an unusual surname and I thought it might be possible to discover what she was doing via social media or the internet, looking for information that was in the public domain. I did not expect to find the volume of information that I did, but Nicola had made a film about her experiences with the assistance of a national charity whose aims were to give young people a voice. As is discussed below, this led to Nicola’s engagement with a range of ‘alternative occupations.’ Whilst there were similarities between her experiences and those of Andy, the nature of the activities Nicola engaged in was different. Rather than being part of the ‘informal’ economy, they might best be described as part of ‘the gift economy’: where material items or time are given without the expectation of a reciprocal return. They are acts that happen beyond the ‘quid pro quo’ of ‘market
exchange’ (Vaughan, 2015: 39). For Nicola, these seemed to provide a sense of purpose but also assumed a cathartic quality.

It is worth reiterating from the outset that Nicola and Andy had both grown up in Plymouth in areas recognised as deprived by the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Andy lived in an area that was the second most deprived of 39 neighbourhoods (IMD2010), whereas Nicola lived in the tenth most deprived neighbourhood (IMD2010). Though Andy was not specific about his educational needs, he had attended a school that specialised in education for 5 – 16 year olds with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties and learning difficulties. As was outlined above, Nicola had been an alcoholic since she was 18 years old and had spent time both in prison and rehabilitation. As understood by policymakers, these were perhaps the two young adults I met with who were most at risk of social exclusion. However, they both emerged as capable of using the resources available to them to instigate change. This did not provide them with some kind of ‘silver bullet' for the challenges they faced, but rather their self-understanding was transformed and they were able to find a sense of meaning in their lives.

6.4.1 Andy – ‘being able to do everything myself’
(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)

Andy, like several of the other young adults, was a participant on the Prince’s Trust Team Course when I first met him. Before I started the interview he told me that his group had predicted, at the start of the course, that he was the member least likely to finish. Andy had a laid back manner and would often slouch and yawn, he also spoke slowly with few changes in his tone. It was easy to see how this could give the impression that he was disengaged and in our initial interview he did not seem very confident. For example, when I asked him about his achievements he told me:

I haven’t really achieved a lot. [...] Umm, there’s not really a lot that I have sorted out yet.

(Andy, Interview 1, July 2010)
Most of the young adults were able to recognise something they had done in the past as an achievement. However, Andy really struggled with this in our first interview.

It was not until Andy spoke about casual work that he became animated and talked in more detail about his experiences. Through an acquaintance he had been offered the opportunity to do occasional paid work with a mobile disco:

[Groovy Nights] Mobile Entertainment [...] discos. [...] Well it’s run by my mate and he’s got an FM station now up in North Park and I’m part of that, doing a Drum and Bass show. Well, I met him at a local under 18s Night Club ’cause he was one of my mate’s mates and they bumped into each other, and erm sort of like started speaking from there onwards. He was like ‘Oh, I’m taking on staff, do you want to come work with me?’ I said ‘What is it, like mobile discos?’ and I said ‘yeah, I’ll give it a shot.’ So I went along and I enjoyed it and it went on from there.

(Andy, Interview 1, July 2010)

It was through Andy’s informal networks that he was offered casual work; a chance meeting in a night club presented Andy with an opportunity and he was keen to ‘give it a shot.’

When Andy spoke about the work with the mobile disco it was the fact that he enjoyed it that he emphasised. He also explained how the work had led to him being offered a regular ‘Drum and Bass’ night on a local radio station that his friend had set up:

It’s er, once a week. Saturday night from 12 midnight ’til one o’clock. It’s more of a hobby. I don’t get paid cash for it. Because he’s short of money he said he’d pay us on old, on his equipment. Fair enough. I’m trying to work towards a pair of vinyl decks at the moment. He said 6 shows and I’ll get a pair of vinyl decks, which is really fair.
Andy seemed happy to undertake his DJ slot in exchange for second-hand equipment and did not appear to mind that he was not paid. He was offering a service in exchange for goods and was participating in the ‘informal’ economy. There was nothing in my interview with Andy that indicated he recognised the activity in this way. Rather, he emphasised how he saw the DJing as ‘more of a hobby’, which again implied his enjoyment of the activity. It seemed Andy was able to blend his leisure interests with work activities, and though these were informal and sometimes unpaid they were nevertheless important to him. Andy valued the fact that he was gaining experience, even though he had no immediate plans to pursue a career in a related field:

Yeah, there are opportunities there. It’s more experience. If ever I decide to get a job in like the sound, music industry, I’ve got experience.

(Andy, Interview 1, July 2010)

However, it was not the work dimension that seemed crucial to Andy, but rather the importance he attached to being part of a group. His words ‘I’m part of that, doing a Drum and Bass show’ suggested that being a DJ afforded Andy a sense of belonging; of being part of a group with common goals and interests. The importance of holding a sense of belonging emerged as a common theme amongst the participants and has already been discussed in relation to Tom’s narrative. Whilst Tom found a sense of belonging going out and drinking with his friends, Andy seemed to find this through his regular DJ slot and felt ‘part of’ the radio station.

When I met Andy for a second time around a year later he was still unemployed and claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance. He had continued his involvement with the radio station but explained how it had got shut down by Ofcom (the communications regulator) a few months previously:
Yeah, that got shut down by Ofcom [laughs]. Nearly had my door put through, so that kind of went down the drain. Lasted about a year and six months altogether, I reckon. [...] We just bought an FM transmitter off eBay, set it up and broadcasted. And um, it was going well, but one of the DJs had a fall out with the Manager and grassed us up. If that hadn't have happened we'd have still been on FM.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

In my first interview Andy explained how the radio station was already set up and that his friend had invited him to have a regular DJ slot. However, in this extract Andy states ‘we just bought an FM transmitter on eBay, set it up and broadcasted.’ I did not get the impression that Andy had been part of the radio station from the outset, but rather that his use of the word ‘we’ indicated the extent to which he now felt part of it; invested in the venture. Undeterred by their brush with Ofcom, he and his friends were in the process of re-launching the station as an internet-only broadcaster:

Just on the net, online radio station. And um, it’s [Drum and Bass] radio, and hopefully we’ll start getting out on events and stuff as well. We’ve got our noses in on a few people, and they want in on the radio station, which we said yes sure, but we want in on some access to events and stuff, promotions. [...] I spend an hour a week on [Studio Trance] Radio UK, and that’s trance, dance music, and [Drum and Bass] radio I haven’t, it’s not set up yet, it’s launching on the 22nd of this month. And that’s going to be a good one because we’ve got loads of people that are interested.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

Andy spoke with enthusiasm about their plans; he and his friends hoped to use the interest in the station to get involved with promotional events and build the popularity of the station. It did not seem to be generating any kind of income for Andy, yet he seemed to be gaining a lot from his experiences. In our second meeting Andy seemed more confident than when I met him a year previously. His official employment situation had not changed, and by this
time Andy had been without paid work for around 3 years since leaving school. However, Andy seemed to have found an ‘alternative occupation’ that united him and his friends in a common goal and helped him build his self-esteem.

There was something entrepreneurial about the activities of Andy and his friends. They shared a passion and were prepared to take risks in order to share this with a wider audience. They showed considerable resourcefulness and the ability to use their initiative, firstly by purchasing the FM transmitter and then by setting up an internet-only station. This same entrepreneurial spirit was evident when Andy spoke about a film company he had got involved with:

*It’s um, nothing major. I’m pushing it a bit saying really it’s a company, because it’s not really a company. It’s a group of us and we, we’re on our second film now that we’ve made. And what we do is we make a film, we enter it in a competition. Apparently from what I’ve heard, this one’s come second in a competition for small film producers [...] the last one we done, which was [‘The Warehouse’], which was meant to be a horror, but failed epically. But we got it into a cinema in Plymouth, had a viewing for it, so. And we nearly made our profits, we was about 20 quid off our profit.*

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

Andy and his friends did not have any previous experience of making films but one of them had some equipment and decided it would be possible to make a film and get it in the local cinema. His friend, also 19 years old at the time, had hired the small screen from an independent cinema in the city. The group had then promoted the film via ‘facebook, local advertising, word of mouth’ (Andy, Interview 2, July 2011) and ‘filled up all the seats’ (Andy, Interview 2, July 2011). Though his friend had fallen short of covering his costs with the first film, they had completed a second one and were again going to show it in the local cinema.
Andy seemed to have enjoyed making the films, but his attitude towards it was different to how he spoke about his role with the radio station. He was passionate when he spoke about the DJ work, whereas the film making seemed to be more of a novelty and a source of entertainment. Nevertheless, Andy had invested a considerable amount of time in the film and explained they had been filming it for most of the year. The importance of the venture seemed to lie in what Andy gained from it on a personal level; in this instance a way of occupying his time and as a source of entertainment and enjoyment.

Andy’s narrative challenges Jahoda’s (1982) suggestion that paid employment fulfils ‘human needs’ that are rarely met through other types of activities. Indeed, his regular slot as a DJ and the amount of time commitment involved with filming helped ‘impose a time structure on the waking day’ and involved ‘regular activity’ (Jahoda, 1982: 83). Through his role as a DJ Andy shared common goals and felt he was part of something. In Jahoda’s words, he recognised that the ‘purposes and achievements of a collectivity transcend those for which an individual can aim’ (Jahoda, 1982: 83). It did not matter to Andy and his friends that they achieved this within the ‘informal’ economy, exchanging goods and skills and occasionally breaching regulatory laws. The value of the activities lay not in the way in which they might be categorised, but rather in the meaning they held for the individual.

Though Andy had taken the opportunities that were presented to him, his involvement with the radio station and the film company might be described as serendipitous. He was not the instigator of the ventures, though once involved he seemed to play an active part and gained a lot from his experiences. However, these were not the only two ‘alternative occupations’ that Andy engaged. He also participated in activity that related to his career goals which were to work in IT:

I wouldn’t mind that as a career [referring to working in the music industry], there’s so many things I wouldn’t mind doing. It’s like the main realistic one is the IT, ’cause everybody needs that. IT’s the main thing at the moment. Everywhere there’s computers now.
Andy had left school with no GCSEs, but with a Level 2 qualification in ICT. He seemed to know a lot about computers and his father worked in this field. He felt that IT was the area where he had the most ‘realistic’ chance of building a career, but had so far struggled to find any formal paid work in any sector. However, during our second interview he spoke at some length about how he had recently set up his own web hosting service:

[… at the moment I’m selling web hosting accounts, um, I’ve made a facebook chat application in Visual Basic. Um, I’ve done a few things actually. […] Yeah. I’ve bought a re-seller account, ur, it’s hosted in Germany, and basically I’ve got an unlimited account set up and that, and all I do is, for £1 a month is host somebody’s website.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

Unlike the other alternative occupations that Andy engaged in, this seemed to be something that he had instigated himself:

I’ve done most of this off my back. I’ve got a few friends who have helped me out, little bits here and there, but I’ll only ask them if I’m really stuck on something, and then I’ll get an answer straight away. One of my friends in particular, he’s a PHP developer, he’s helped me loads and loads with my web hosting.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

He was happy to draw on his informal networks for support when he needed to and readily acknowledged this. However, it seemed that he was gaining a lot of satisfaction from experimenting and teaching himself new skills:

At the moment I’ve been self studying a lot, that’s in the sort of areas I want to get my er, well basically, how can I put it, I’ve only been looking in areas that I want to learn about to do with my ICT and that. […] On the computer, just messing around with software, seeing what I can do.
Once I do something I look at it and say right, I can make that better, I can make that work better, where I can make this work better, let’s get rid of this and try something else.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

At the time Andy was only providing his web hosting service for people he knew, but had plans about how he might expand it in the future:

Yeah. It’s just people that I know at the moment. Once I reach a profit, all the profit’s going to go onto a new web editor’s account. I’ll advertise it on google search results, and once I do that, profits should start raising and then I’ll just have a hobby that pays for itself. I’ve already set up a web host script that does everything for me so I can just sit there, as long as it works itself, I don’t have to touch anything on it.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

Though Andy again described the activity as a ‘hobby’, there was evidence that he thought of it differently than his involvement with the radio station and the film company. He also undertook computer repairs for friends, and when talking about this and the web hosting he explained to me:

Um, I don’t tell jobcentre about it because they’ll just say you owe us such and such, and such and such. It’s like nah, I’m not telling you.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

By specifically saying that he didn’t tell the jobcentre about it, implied that Andy thought of his web hosting and computer repair activities as ‘work.’ Further, he had thought about the possibility of working in a self-employed capacity and had discussed this with the jobcentre:

Actually I’ve been thinking about it an awful lot the last couple of days. Mainly since Friday when the bloke [at the jobcentre] I was talking to referred me to the job. He said to me I can get help in budgeting and
an advisor to help me, er, get self-employed and to help me take off with like a small business. Which if I could do that it would be ideal, but the only thing is, I'm absolutely crap with Maths. [...] Budgeting and stuff like that. Well, budgeting I can manage, but taxes and stuff like that I wouldn't.

(Andy, Interview 2, July 2011)

Andy had already demonstrated entrepreneurialism in setting up the web hosting, but unsurprisingly felt nervous at the prospect of launching his own business. Though the possibility interested him, he lacked confidence in his ability to manage his own finances. He was keen to try and grow the business in the informal economy and seemed more confident in this than following official routes.

As discussed in section 5.5 (above), by the time of our third interview Andy’s life had changed considerably. His Dad had negotiated an apprenticeship for him and he was working in a small computer repair shop. He had moved to a rural location and no longer was involved in the radio station or the filmmaking and did not see his friends from Plymouth regularly. Andy was in the process of winding down his web hosting as he felt he did not want to do more work in the evenings after spending a full-day in the shop:

Now when I come back from work, I’ll sit and play the X-Box just because um, I can. And it’s my evening, it’s my time. I used to have all these projects that I used to juggle around like my web hosting and all that sort of stuff, and I’ve just um, I’ve emailed all my clients and [told them] to remove their accounts by the 25th of this month and not put any more payments through ’cause I’m shutting it down and I’m, along with all the other things I was doing on the internet, I’ve all er, stopping it now because I just can’t be assed with it. [...] the fact that now I’m working I don’t want to come back and have to do more work.

(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)
Andy now made a clear distinction between his work and his leisure time, and was no longer blending the two in the way he had been previously. Nevertheless, I felt that Andy's experience gained through alternative occupations remained important to him.

In our final interview Andy reflected on the ways in which he felt he had changed over the two years I had been meeting with him. He recognised that he was more confident and when I asked him what had made the difference he replied:

Setting things up for myself, running, managing things. Um, just being able to do everything myself.

(Andy, Interview 3, July 2012)

Measured in official terms the ‘success’ of Andy's story was obtaining the apprenticeship and ceasing to claim benefits. Whilst this was certainly something he was proud of, it was his ability to do things for himself that Andy recognised as of key significance. His capacity to run and manage things, to ‘initiate, intervene in or reperceive situations’ (Fryer and Payne, 1984: 273) was what he felt had been transformative. This was not something he had gained through formal paid work, but rather through the informal economy and the alternative occupations he engaged in. The importance of these activities to the lives of young adults should not, therefore, be underestimated.

6.4.2 Nicola – finding a sense of meaning through giving back to others

When I interviewed Nicola in 2010 it seemed her life was at a ‘turning point.’ As was discussed in section 5.2.1 (above), she was trying to build a new life for herself free from alcohol. However, when I contacted her again in 2011 to arrange another interview she repeatedly cancelled and sounded distressed when I spoke to her. Though I made the decision not to pursue her further for ethical reasons, I often wondered what happened to Nicola. Aware that people now leave a ‘digital footprint’, I was curious whether the internet and social media would provide any information about Nicola. Looking only at
information that was in the public domain, I undertook some research in 2015 and found a wealth of information. Whilst it would be possible to give direct links to the data I found, I decided for ethical reasons this would not be appropriate. Whilst Nicola used her real name in the information online, the interview she undertook with me was afforded a pseudonym. Therefore I decided it would be unfair to connect the two; conscious that there might be content in our interview that ‘Nicola’ would not have shared without the use of a pseudonym. I therefore report the contents of the online information in the section below (much of which involved Nicola speaking directly about her experiences), in order to protect her anonymity.

In 2013 Nicola had made a film with the help of a national charity. The charity’s aims were to support young people to have a voice about the issues that were important to them. Nicola’s film was about her personal experiences and the lack of support for young adults when they left rehabilitation. In the film she explained that she had served a third sentence in prison in 2011, again for her behaviour whilst drunk. Following this the council had paid for her to spend another 14 months in rehabilitation. In 2013 she returned to live in Plymouth, but this time was placed in a Bed and Breakfast rather than with her family. Nicola spoke on film about the lack of support available and her daily struggles to resist the urge to drink alcohol. She also explained how she had attended Alcoholics Anonymous but found it difficult as she was half the age of the other people, who were nearly all male. When speaking about her life and her struggles with alcohol she stated:

For me it’s a daily struggle, and as a young woman I feel alone.

(Nicola’s film, 2013)

As in our initial interview (undertaken in 2010) Nicola’s sense of isolation was apparent since she states she felt ‘alone.’ However, I felt it was interesting that she highlighted her age and her gender in this statement, indicating that she perceived these were important factors. This seemed to particularly relate to the alcohol services that were available, which she perceived as dominated by older male clients. In Nicola’s film, she again seemed to be at a ‘turning
point’; attempting to raise awareness of the difficulties she faced whilst still acknowledging that she was engaged in a daily struggle. I noted that the same ‘raw’ quality was present in the film as when I interviewed her, which made a very powerful impression.

On the charity’s website, Nicola had a page that featured a personal statement she had written about her film. There were also statements from supporters and updates that Nicola had added. It linked to two other films (made by local news programmes) that Nicola featured in, providing a further 10 minutes of footage in total. From the films and the updates Nicola had provided, it was clear that her film had received a lot of attention locally. Following a meeting with an MP, Nicola was asked to present her views to leading stakeholders including councillors, service providers and the police. She did this willingly hoping that it would leverage additional financial support for services for recovering addicts. One of the news films featured Nicola at this meeting, fielding questions from councillors and the police in front of a large audience. Her thoughts are articulated clearly and in the direct manner I had previously observed. As a result she was asked by the Police and Crime Commissioner for the county to feed her ideas into the new alcohol strategy for the area. In 2014 she also provided written evidence to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) inquiry to explore children and young people’s relationships with the police. After making her film, Nicola was invited to give talks in schools about her alcohol addiction and did this on a voluntary basis.

Nicola was active on social media and updated her Twitter feed regularly; which again focused on her personal experiences and how she perceived her life. It seemed that Nicola had come to see herself as a ‘fighter’ who was moving forward and striving to overcome the difficulties she had faced:

Life ain’t been easy but I’m fighting through everything in life. There’s a lot more positive things in my life now, just can’t believe it.

(Nicola, via Twitter, 2014)
Via her twitter account Nicola also spoke about her motivation to make the film and to share her experiences for the benefit of others:

_It’s about giving bk [sic] what I have learnt in life and I’m doing this through my project that I have done, because I wanna help others in life._

(Nicola, via Twitter, 2014)

Reading Nicola’s Twitter feed and watching her film, it seemed that Nicola had found a way of making sense of her life and the challenges she had encountered. Rather than try and move forwards without acknowledging the difficulties she had faced, she sought to highlight her experiences for the benefit of others. Nicola not only campaigned for better services, but also hoped that her ‘story’ would help other young people become alcohol aware.

The projects Nicola got involved with not only seemed to fill her life with a sense of purpose, but also enabled her to work with other stakeholders towards shared goals. Given the way in which Nicola’s sense of isolation came across in both our interview and her film, I wondered if this motivated her to share her story. Indeed, in making the film she was intent on sharing her story with an audience. Whilst she hoped to raise awareness of the lack of services available for young adults, the film also had a cathartic quality; allowing Nicola to express her feelings and emotions. The comments she made on Twitter were also very personal, and it seemed that sharing her feelings in this way was important to Nicola. This should not be taken to imply that Nicola sought to evoke pity from others; this was certainly not the impression she gave either in person or on film. Rather, it seemed that Nicola was actively making sense of her experiences and emotions; seeking to find a way to turn them into a positive narrative through which she might understand her life.

Nicola’s story was, in some respects, similar to Andy’s since she participated in _alternative occupations_ that seemed to transform her self-understanding. However, there are also some important differences between their narratives.
and the things that were meaningful to them. Whilst the alternative occupations Andy engaged in were often entrepreneurial in spirit and were linked to his interests, Nicola focused on addressing social issues that were personal to her. Andy sometimes earned small amounts of money through his alternative occupations, or undertook tasks in exchange for goods (for example a set of vinyl decks). His activities might therefore be understood as part of the informal economy, though he also blended leisure and ‘work’ interests on a number of occasions. However, the projects Nicola engaged in seemed to operate beyond the ‘quid pro quo’ of ‘market exchange’ (Vaughan, 2015: 39). She stood to gain nothing material from them, though they seemed to offer her much in terms of affording her a sense of purpose. They also appeared to enable Nicola to find meaning in the challenges she had faced and allowed her to express her emotions. Rather than experience a sense of personal meaninglessness (Giddens, 1991: 201), Nicola understood her life as having a purpose, stating:

_It’s about giving bk [sic] what I have learnt in life._

(Nicola, via Twitter, 2014)

Andy and Nicola’s narratives provide a powerful illustration of the importance of taking a holistic approach when considering the lives of young adults. Not only did a broad variety of areas hold significance for them, but rather their ‘individual self-understanding’ (Lawy, 2003: 332) seemed ‘multiply constructed’ (Hall, 2000: 17) across these diverse areas of their lives. A narrow focus on formal paid employment would have failed to capture the ways in which Nicola and Andy made sense of their lives. By taking a broader view it was also possible to explore how their self-understanding transformed over time. Whilst Andy initially seemed to lack confidence, his engagement in alternative occupations enabled him to understand himself as a young man capable of doing things for himself. Nicola had been living with alcohol addiction for around seven years by the time she made her film, yet she was motivated to try and share her story with others. In doing so she was filled with a sense of purpose; to help others to learn from her experiences. Making the film also seemed to be cathartic for Nicola, enabling her to express her
emotions. Crucially, it allowed her to tell her own story. Whilst in Chapter 5 (life on the margins) Nicola’s life seemed to be constructed by others, in the film and via twitter it seemed that Nicola was attempting to construct her own narrative about her experiences.
6.5 Summary of findings

If read in isolation, the final section of my findings about Nicola and Andy’s alternative occupations might seem overly optimistic; one possible criticism is that the young adults are portrayed as having too much agency and that structural constraints are not given due consideration. However, when placed within the broader context of the findings chapters a more balanced picture emerges.

In structuring my findings I commenced with the theme that emphasised the young adults’ lack of control. The section life on the margins considered the young adults’ experience of social exclusion. It discussed the way in which their marginality was often constructed by others and highlighted the ‘dynamic process of being shut out’ (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8). Nicola is described as being at a ‘turning point’; keen to move on with her life yet constrained by the way her past behaviour was constructed by others. She spoke of how she felt ‘stigmatised’ (Nicola, Interview 1, July 2010) and judged by others, indicating how this contributed to her sense of isolation. Through Nick and Luke’s narratives the young adults’ marginal position within the labour market was explored. Whilst both young men maintained a ‘strong, resilient work motivation and […] had] repeatedly engaged with work’ (Shildrick et al., 2010: 7), they were trapped in a cycle of low-pay, low-skilled work, interspersed with periods of unemployment. Structural factors such as the opportunities available in the local labour market emerged as important, along with their disrupted educations and lack of qualifications. Though keen to instigate change, like Nicola they appeared to hold a ‘position of inferiority in relation to centres of power, resources and prevailing values’ (Estivill, 2003: 19). As such, all three young adults seemed to struggle to maintain a sense of agency.

In the next two sections gendered career identities and expectations of a normal life, a sense of tension emerged between the ‘old’ and the ‘new.’ Whilst some of the participants seemed to be finding new ways of
understanding their lives, others appeared to be struggling. Despite claims that the ‘traditional parameters of industrial society, including class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11) have eroded, they nevertheless exerted a powerful hold on the imaginations of some of the young adults. Both Tom and Greg held particular culturally embedded ideas that influenced their self-understanding. Tom’s future identity was connected to the way in which he understood himself as a ‘manual’ or ‘masculine’ worker. Not only did this prevent him from considering other work possibilities, but he seemed to explore alternative ways of becoming a ‘man’ beyond the world of paid work. Tom’s masculinity is understood as displaced through his ‘nights out’ and drinking; enabling him to express his ‘masculine prowess beyond the workplace’ (Nayak, 2006: 820). Crucially, Tom’s ‘nights out’ are also understood as providing a sense of camaraderie and belonging that he otherwise struggled to find.

Greg held a different set of culturally embedded ideas that were linked to emulating the achievements of his parents. His expectations of a normal life were modelled on their experiences; expressed in terms of a ‘normal house, normal family, normal job’ (Greg, Interview 1, October 2010). When he struggled to achieve these things, Greg was left feeling ‘miserable’ (Greg, Interview 2, November 2011). Both Tom and Greg might be understood as aspiring to a modernized ‘normal biography’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 66), based on achieving the traditional markers of adulthood. Further, the self-understanding of both young men seemed bound to the aspirations they held. Their way of making sense of their lives seemed somehow outmoded; not quite fit for the realities of the twenty-first century. This was particularly apparent when juxtaposed with the experiences of Becky and Andy. Becky initially seemed to hold a gendered career identity that was similar to Tom’s; focused on her aspiration to become a hairdresser. Yet by our final interview she seemed to have developed a flexible career identity that was quite different to Tom’s. Rather than hold fixed ideas about her future, Becky seemed confident in her capacity to make informed choices. She seemed able to view her ‘career as a personal journey that involved particular personal
qualities rather than a position or pathway within an occupation or organisation’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 502).

In the section *expectations of a normal life*, Andy’s self-understanding seemed to enable him to remain more positive than Greg. Though he experienced around three years of unemployment after leaving school, Andy’s experience did not seem to be as ‘miserable’ (Greg, Interview 1, October 2010). One possible reason for this was that unemployment was more normative to the area in which Andy grew up. Friends and family members had been unemployed, which meant that Andy’s experience of it was not as isolated and individualised as Greg’s. Whilst this protected Andy from the painful experience of Greg, it also raised questions about the extent to which the young adults’ expectations were influenced by their background. Greg’s upbringing, with access to his family’s *economic capital* (Bourdieu, 1986: 47), contributed to high expectations against which he judged himself harshly. Indeed, his sense of identity seemed threatened when he struggled to achieve what he considered to be a ‘normal’ standard of living. Yet it was precisely because he hoped for and *expected* more, that he felt the experience of unemployment so keenly. It was perhaps more concerning that Andy had already accepted that unemployment was a reality he was likely to encounter. He certainly *hoped* for more, but his expectations already seemed more modest than Greg’s.

In the second chapter of my findings I consider how some of the young adults were able to re-define their lives. Significantly the chapter focuses on how they achieved this through means other than paid work: through their *housing careers, compensatory career identities* and *alternative occupations*. The chapter has a more positive tone than the preceding chapter, with the young adults at times emerging as ‘pilots of their own destinies’ (Côté, 1996: 423). However, the chapter comes with an important caveat: I was conscious throughout of the ‘structural continuities of social inequality and the different opportunities for putting agency into practice’ (Heinz, 2009: 397). This should not be taken to imply that any of the young adults lacked ‘agentic abilities or attitudes’ (Evans, 2002: 261). Rather, their agency might be understood as
‘socially situated […] influenced but not determined by structures’ (Evans, 2002: 248). This was particularly apparent in relation to Anna and Libby’s housing careers, through which both young women attempted to exercise agency. Whilst there were similarities between the two, with both seemingly motivated by the need for security, there were also differences. Their frames of reference contrasted, with Libby focused on home ownership: something she managed to achieve by the age of 19. Though Anna adopted a similar approach to Libby, researching her options and taking practical steps to achieve her goals, her aim was to move to a council house with her partner. However, it would be wrong to suggest that Anna somehow exercised less agency than Libby. Rather she might be understood as operating from a different starting point, with access to different resources.

Libby and Anna’s narratives also revealed the ways in which the young adults’ self-understanding changed over time. This happened not separately from external events, but rather was interconnected with them. For example, Libby initially seemed concerned with ‘escaping’ her family situation and her housing career seemed motivated by this. In our second interview, however, her identity might best be understood as ‘image oriented’ (Côté, 1996: 421); with her home ownership a vehicle through which she was able to assert her sense of status and meet the approval of others. By our final interview, Libby’s self-understanding was notably different. She was reflective and now recognised that holding a goal had filled her life with a sense of meaning that she otherwise struggled to find. She stated that she ‘made myself a point’ (Libby, Interview 3, November 2012), indicating that having a sense of purpose was important to her ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991: 202). Libby did not understand her life in this way in our initial interview at age 18. However, by age 20 she had reappraised her life and her self-understanding seemed to have transformed. This was not a mental act that she engaged in separately from her experiences, but rather it seemed to be an iterative process through which her self-understanding was dynamically constructed.

The final two sections of my findings further explored the young adults’ self-understanding but from two very different perspectives. Compensatory career
identities returned to Greg’s narrative, but also introduced Simon. Both young men sustained career identities that existed only in their minds, yet seemed important to their self-understanding. When they faced particular challenges and setbacks, it seemed their compensatory career identities helped them to cling to a positive self-image. Rather than drifting into an unproductive fantasy, it seemed that these ‘envisaged’ career identities enabled them to understand themselves as capable of acting – supporting them to move forward with their everyday lives.

In the final section of my findings I returned to the narratives of Andy and Nicola. The section focused on how the participants’ self-understanding was transformed through their engagement with alternative occupations. The varied activities they participated in not only seemed to offer them some of the benefits associated with paid employment, but also enabled them to understand their lives in new ways. Andy seemed to change from a young man who lacked confidence, to someone who was assured of his ability to do things for himself. He gained this new perspective through his participation in the informal economy and through a blending of leisure and work activities. Nicola’s motivations and interests were different to Andy’s; focused on social issues that were important to her. She seemed to find a way of making sense of her past by focusing on helping others to learn from her experiences. This not only filled Nicola’s life with a sense of purpose, but also enabled her to assume control of her own ‘story.’ No longer constructed by others, she seemed to have found a ‘voice’ and a way of sharing her narrative.

Nicola and Andy’s engagement with alternative occupations did not significantly change their social position. These types of activities should not, therefore, be understood as some kind of panacea for social inequality. However, they did seem to allow the young adults to ‘establish and maintain a sense of identity and agency in times of profound social and economic change’ (Thompson et al., 2014: 68). It is this interplay between structure and agency that forms an important part of the next chapter, where I discuss the broader implications of my research. I draw together ideas from across my findings, and consider policy implications. The chapter is also reflective,
considering the contribution to knowledge the research makes; ideas for extending the study and the process of personal change.
Chapter seven

7. Discussion and Conclusions

In this final chapter I reflect upon the research undertaken. I begin by revisiting the research questions, considering carefully the meaning of the word ‘experiences’ in the context of the research. Next, I discuss some of the broader issues that arose when the findings were considered as a whole. The complex tensions between structure and agency form an important part of this discussion (and indeed my findings). Whilst acknowledging that structural factors remain influential, I also discuss the ways in which some of the young adults seemed able to redefine their lives; finding meaning beyond outcome-based measures of success. The interplay between structure and agency was not an entirely unanticipated finding. However, I also consider the surprises that the research revealed. Indeed, a sense of belonging emerged as important to the young adults; a motif that ran through nearly all of the narratives. I question whether young adults in the early twenty-first century now seek this sense of belonging through a broader range of mediums than in the past. Next I explore the aspect of my findings that I least expected would emerge as significant; the gendered differences between the young men and the young women I interviewed. Though it would be wrong to understand the experiences of the young adults by their gender alone, there nevertheless was the sense that the young women had somehow better grasped the opportunities available to them. This is not understood in relation to their outcomes, but rather with regard to how they managed their lives.

The contribution to knowledge is discussed in the next section; with the important point made that the young adults I interviewed came from a diversity of backgrounds. As such, the research is not understood as pertaining to a minority group. Rather, the experiences of the participants are those of ‘ordinary’ (Brown, 1987) young adults sometimes overlooked by researchers. I then move to considering policy implications, suggesting that narrow outcome-driven approaches fail to recognise important sites of meaning in the lives of young adults. In the next two sections I reflect on the
research process; recognising the limitations of the study and making suggestions for how it might be extended. I also discuss the ways in which I feel the research process has instigated personal change; prompting me to consider my assumptions and evaluate my working practice. In the final section I return to issues of structure and agency, but discuss them from a different angle; focusing on questions of change and continuity.

7.1 Reflections on the research questions

It was through reflecting upon my research questions (discussed in Chapter 4) that I came to a deeper understanding of my research. Indeed, it helped me recognise what was important about the findings; where my work supported existing ideas and where it extended upon them. When I revisited my research questions it was the word ‘experiences’ (present in all three questions) that struck me as significant:

1. What are the experiences and interests of long-term unemployed 18 – 24 year olds in the South West of England?

2. How do these experiences change over time?

3. What might be learnt from deepening our understanding of these experiences?

This encouraged me to consider its meaning more carefully, drawing on the following definition:

experience  

1 direct personal participation or observation of something […]  

2 a particular incident, feeling, etc, that a person has undergone  

3 accumulated knowledge, esp of practical matters  

(Collins English Dictionary, 2008: 295)
I realised that when I initially formulated my research questions I did not fully appreciate the extent to which the young adults ‘individual self-understanding’ (Lawy, 2003: 332) would emerge as important. Though certainly I was aware that questions of identity might prove pertinent to my research, my focus leaned towards the young adults’ experience of external events. My understanding of the word ‘experiences’ best matched the first use: ‘direct personal participation or observation of something’ (Collins English Dictionary, 2008: 295). Whilst this remained important, as the research progressed I came to realise the significance of how the young adults made sense of those experiences. By this I do not mean an isolated ‘feeling’ relating to a one-off incident. Rather, I was interested in how the young adults assimilated a myriad of experiences (observations; activities; incidents; feelings; accumulated knowledge) into something that might be termed ‘individual self-understanding’ (Lawy, 2003: 332).

7.2 Structure and agency

The above definition emphasised the extent to which structural issues play a part not only in outcomes, but also in an individual’s experience and self-understanding. Indeed, the phrase ‘accumulated knowledge’ implies the importance of information that is amassed over a period of time; transferred through an individual’s social milieu or background. Researchers reflecting on the post-Second World War period (see for instance Ashton and Field, 1976; Goodwin and O’Connor, 2007; Roberts, 2004) have emphasised the extent to which background (family background; social class; education; location) influenced young people’s transitions to adulthood. Structural issues were understood as key determinants for the destinations of most young adults; with their ‘aims and expectations’ (Roberts, 2004) shaped to expect and accept their ‘niche’ (Evans and Furlong, 1997). However, the extent to which structural factors continue to determine individuals’ self-understanding and outcomes is now more open for debate. It is this debate that my research plays into; at times confirming existing research, but at others expanding on (or challenging) it.
I was conscious of the varying perspectives of researchers who attach ‘different levels of significance to the inputs and influences of human agency’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11). As outlined in Chapter 3, work which attributes ‘maximal individual input to the shaping of life chances’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11) often draws upon Beck’s concept of ‘individualisation’ (Beck, 1992). Individualisation is understood as a process ‘whereby agency takes precedence and structures assume a secondary, and much reduced, position’ (Furlong, 2009: 348). This is not to say that social inequalities cease to exist, but that they ‘operate at the level of the individual rather than the group or social class’ (Evans et al., 2000: 12). By contrast, the persistence of structural factors is emphasised by other researchers (for example Worth, 2005; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Bottrell and Armstrong, 2007). Further, it is maintained that individuals, looking for solutions to structural problems, often blame themselves for their perceived deficiencies:

...failure may be very differently experienced, as internalised deficiency, uncertainty and sense of disconnection.

(Bottrell and Armstrong, 2007: 357)

It is this, they maintain, that leads to the feelings of risk and anxiety (see Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 144) experienced by young people and young adults in the early twenty-first century.

My data revealed conflicting evidence in relation to whether or not the young adults sought individual solutions to structural problems. Greg’s experience of unemployment (discussed in Chapter 5) did seem individualised and painful. However, several of the other participants (for example Tom and Andy) recognised the lack of opportunities available to them; the restricted nature of the work available and the impact of the economic crisis. It is possible that the global financial crisis of 2008, and the subsequent recession in the UK, heightened the young adults’ awareness of the structural issues that affected them. Perhaps this accounted for why many of them did not appear ‘blind to the existence of the powerful chains of interdependency’ or why they did not
always) ‘hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure’ (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 144). The participants did not emerge as dupes who were unaware of their own situation or social positioning. Rather, they were perceptive, and often revealed an awareness of broader factors and seemed conscious of their social milieu. Yet recognising these structural constraints did not mean the young adults were always able to act freely; to ‘become the agent of his or her own identity making and livelihood’ (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002: 202). The young adults’ lives, then, might be understood as the arena in which complex tensions between structure and agency were played out. However, rather than view structure and agency as binary opposites, I found it useful to take an approach that instead considered the two to be interconnected.

The concept of bounded agency (Evans et al., 2001; Behrens and Evans, 2002; Evans, 2007) was useful to my understanding of the research. Indeed, there was parity between my research and the interests and findings of researchers such as Evans et al., with the concept providing a ‘middle ground’ approach that does not construct structure and agency as mutually exclusive. The concept of bounded agency is used to ‘explore and explain the experiences of control and personal agency’ (Evans et al., 2001: 2), whilst at the same time acknowledging that ‘the effects of those struggles [to take control of their lives] are bounded in important ways by wider societal features as well as social background and institutional environments’ (Evans et al., 2001: 2). In many ways this captured the way in which I treated my data, enabling me to consider both personal agency and structural factors.

Certainly structural factors remained influential to the lives of young adults; especially if understood through a focus on outcomes. Indeed, as was observed in relation to Nicola and Andy’s narratives (see Chapter 6), neither significantly changed their social position through the alternative occupations they engaged in. Yet both emerged as capable of exercising their ‘agentic abilities’ (Evans, 2002: 261). They were not only able to experience a sense of control, but Nicola and Andy were also capable of instigating change within their own lives. When compared with someone like Libby (also discussed in
Chapter 6) they might still be understood as ‘disadvantaged’; for example they were unlikely to consider home ownership or buying a sports car. However, this understanding of the young adults’ lives adopts an outcome driven approach; accepting ‘normatively defined ‘success’ criteria’ (Lawy et al., 2010: 344) as the default measure. What I found interesting about the research (and where it expands upon existing ideas) is that it raises questions about what was actually important to the young adults; to their self-understanding and how they made sense of their lives. In doing so, the relationship between structure and agency becomes reconfigured since some of the young adults seemed able to redefine their lives; finding meaning beyond outcome-based measures of success.

It is important to acknowledge that the ‘traditional parameters of industrial society, including class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles’ (Evans et al, 2000: 11) continued to exert a powerful hold over the imaginations of some of the young adults (see Greg and Tom’s narratives, Chapter 5). Further, others struggled with a feeling of personal meaninglessness (Giddens, 1991: 201); finding it hard to see the point in life (as was clearly articulated by Libby in Chapter 6). At times, then, some of the young adults seemed to struggle to make sense of their lives; with ‘uncertainty and [a] sense of disconnection’ (Bottrell and Armstrong, 2007: 357) aptly capturing their experiences. Yet these same young adults, at other times, seemed better able to manage. When I considered what it was that made the difference, the answers did not seem to lie in their family background or whether or not they were in work; who they lived with or where they lived. Instead, the two factors that emerged as significant did not relate to some kind of objective measure, but rather to how the young adults perceived their lives. These were: 1) whether they experienced a sense of agency, and 2) a feeling of belonging. These factors transcended their employment status, the localities they lived in and the networks they had access to; but did not preclude the possibility that these might be important vehicles through which ‘agency’ or ‘belonging’ might be conveyed.
The young adults’ emerged as ‘active, initiating, future oriented agent[s], striving to make sense of, and influence events’ (Fryer, 1990: 167). They did this in different ways; in accordance to the resources they had access to and through a broad range of mediums. This ranged from Libby and Anna’s housing careers, to Andy and Nicola’s alternative occupations, from the compensatory career identities of Greg and Simon to the ways in which Tom and Luke sought to exercise control over their narratives (discussed below). In order to be valued by the young adults, the ways in which they exercised their agency did not necessarily need to alter their social position. Rather, they needed to feel that they were able to exercise ‘agency over their own lives’ (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000: 147); to feel that they were able to influence events and that they were in control. It was this that emerged as fundamental to their ability to move forwards with their day-to-day lives.

7.3 A feeling of belonging

I had pre-empted the possibility that to experience a sense of agency would prove important to the young adults; to their ability to manage their day-to-day lives. However, I had not anticipated the extent to which a feeling of belonging would emerge as significant. ‘Belonging’ has been discussed by other researchers, including Inui and Kojima (2012) and Henderson et al. (2007). Henderson et al. described belonging as:

…linked with a sense of place, of feeling part of a larger entity, whether family, national or even global forms of community. It implies connectedness and relationships with others, saying something about inclusion, acceptance and identity.
(Henderson et al., 2007: 113)

This is a broad definition which fitted well with my findings, since they did not link to one specific aspect of belonging. Whilst Henderson et al. (2007) focused specifically on religious and political belonging; neither of these emerged as significant to the lives of the young adults I met with.
Nonetheless, I found there were many diverse ways in which the young adults might experience (or seek to experience) a feeling of belonging.

The importance of a feeling of belonging was emphasised through Tom’s story (see Chapter 5). It seemed that he sought to experience a sense of belonging through his drinking and nights out; something he was unable to find through the labour market, from which he seemed disconnected. As a younger teenager, leisure and lifestyle choices seemed to have afforded Tom this same feeling of belonging; through his skateboarding and BMXing which he enjoyed with a group of (male) friends. Informal leisure activities were also valued by Andy for the way in which they made him feel ‘part of’ the radio station and united him in common goals with his friends. Whilst these forms of belonging have already been commented on above, when I considered my findings carefully, belonging emerged as a motif that ran through several of the narratives. For example Libby (discussed in Chapter 6) spoke about how she felt lonely after leaving boarding school and of her difficult relationship with her family. Her housing career might be understood, at least in part, as a search to find a sense of belonging or community; through hoping to share her house with a close friend. This need for belonging might also be understood as evident in the way in which Libby’s identity seemed ‘image-oriented’ (Côté, 1996: 421). Indeed, though owning her own home offered Libby a means of reasserting her privileged position, it might also be understood as driven by the need to experience a sense of belonging; to be accepted. Indeed, Côté’s description of the image-oriented self lends itself to this interpretation:

...based on a projection of images that meet the approval of a community, gaining one access so long as the images remain acceptable.

(Côté, 1996: 421, emphasis added)

I would not suggest that this need for belonging is something new, but rather that the young adults were seeking to find it through a broader range of mediums. Whilst in the past this might have been more readily provided
through work and colleagues; through family relationships; close-knit
neighbourhoods or religious groups (i.e. the church), it would seem the
participants now found a sense of community in different ways. Côté (1996)
suggested that one of the fundamental problems of late-modern society is that
it fails to provide the individual with the means of ‘establishing a stable and
viable identity based on commitments embedded in a community of others’
(Côté, 1996: 423). However, perhaps it is simply that those commitments or
that sense of community is now found through alternative means. Nicola’s
narrative (see Chapters 5 and 6), for example, suggests that young adults
now utilise virtual networks to connect themselves to a ‘larger entity’
(Henderson et al., 2007: 113); which might include friends, associates or even
strangers.

In Chapter 5 in the section life on the margins, Nicola’s sense of isolation was
clear. Indeed, she spoke about how she felt ‘stigmatised’ (Nicola, Interview 1,
July 2010) by others and judged by some of her family members. However,
when Nicola came out of rehabilitation in 2013 she made a film about her life
and shared it on the internet. Though she wanted to highlight the lack of
support for recovering addicts, it also connected her to a community of others
(recovering addicts; members of the public; service providers; the Media; local
Councillors). Through the webpage she shared a narrative of her life that she
was able to control; she also received messages of support from other
people. Nicola was also an active user of social media and regularly updated
her Twitter account. She again shared her own story and her feelings about
her life, but also followed the Twitter accounts of others. It seemed that these
virtual networks provided Nicola with a useful medium through which she was
able to receive support, but also validation from others. She no longer
appeared as an ‘outsider’; instead she seemed to have found a way of
connecting to others and feeling a sense of belonging.

Whilst recognised as powerful, some forms of social media (Facebook;
Instagram; Snapchat) also tend to be perceived as a waste of young people’s
time; a distraction from ‘real’ communication with others that is somehow
viewed as more valuable. However, it is interesting to consider whether these
forms of social media actually provide young adults with new (and much needed) ways of ‘feeling part of a larger entity, whether family, national or even global forms of community’ (Henderson et al., 2007: 113). To fully investigate this lies outside the scope of this thesis, but it is potentially an interesting area for further investigation.

7.4 Grasping the opportunities – a gendered response to the twenty-first century?

I had not anticipated that gender would emerge as a significant area. Indeed, for some time I was resistant to discussing the differences between the experiences of the young men and the young women. However, when I reflected upon my findings as a whole, I found it was an area that it was impossible to avoid engaging with. The discussion below is linked closely to the section above. It considers the ways in which the young men and women were responding to the demands of the twenty-first century; whether they were finding ways to make sense of their lives and whether or not they were able to grasp the opportunities available to them.

In Chapter 2 I discussed changing social attitudes in the UK, with a particular focus on ideas about the roles of men and women. It was observed that ‘notions that a woman’s place is in the home have eroded’ (Scott et al., 2008: 1) over the past 50 years. Further, that ‘women have overtaken men in numbers pursuing higher education and women have made inroads into some previously male-dominated sectors’ (Scott et al., 2008: 1). Though much of the discussion focused on the changing role of women within the labour market, I also highlighted the extent to which men have had to adapt to significant changes in the nature of work available in the UK. Not only might this be understood in terms of deindustrialisation and the increase in service sector roles, but also in the rise of part-time working and ‘zero hours’ contracts. Cohen and Ainley (2000) have suggested that, as a result, the ‘sexual division of labour is no longer anchored to material differences in the work process or the musculatures of the labouring body. In this context, the
persistence of the distinction between so-called ‘men’s and women’s work’ is now open to question along with the whole social construction of gender’ (Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 83). The implication is that individuals must now explore what it means to be a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’ beyond the distinctions imposed by different forms of labour. If gender is understood as socially constructed, work is no longer the vehicle through which these constructions are conveyed.

These ideas proved pertinent to my research, with the social construction of gender proving to be an issue that affected the lives of the young adults. In this sense they were no different than the wider population of the UK, but rather were affected by the same challenges (and possibilities) that affect ‘ordinary’ people in the early twenty-first century. It was through the narratives of Tom and Becky in the section *gendered career identities*, that ideas about gender were discussed in some detail. Significantly, Tom was found to hold culturally embedded ideas about what it meant to be a ‘man’. These seemed bound to a view he had of himself as a ‘manual’ worker, suited to the lost ‘masculine’ roles of the industrial era. Through Tom’s narrative it was possible to see how ‘the relationships between employment and the social construction of gendered identities’ (McDowell, 2004: 47) have been called into question. Indeed, he found it difficult to reconcile the view he held of himself, with the service sector work he found available. Rather than adapt this view, his masculinity is understood as ‘displaced’ (Nayak, 2006) through his nights out and drinking; allowing him to assert ‘masculine prowess beyond the workplace’ (Nayak, 2006: 820). Though Tom’s nights out afforded him a sense of belonging that he otherwise struggled to find, they also seemed to lock him into fixed ideas about his future identity. Instead of renegotiating what it means to be a ‘man’ in the twenty-first century, Tom seemed invested in ‘older forms of acceptable ‘macho’ behaviour’ (McDowell, 2000: 206).

Tom worked hard to create a particular impression, sometimes swearing and choosing examples that portrayed him as a cheeky troublemaker. Yet for all his bravado, I felt Tom was aware that he was struggling to locate himself in the world around him. Though he attempted to control his narrative, projecting
himself as a confident prankster, this only served to highlight the frustrations he felt. When I thought about Tom within the broader context of my findings, it seemed that several of the young men were struggling with the demands of twenty-first century living. Greg, for example, seemed to judge himself against different (but equally powerful) culturally embedded ideas. When he failed to acquire what he considered to be a ‘normal’ standard of living (as experienced by his parents), it seemed he struggled to ‘establish and maintain a sense of identity and agency’ (Thompson et al., 2014: 68). Greg, along with Simon, sustained a compensatory career identity. He envisaged himself as a soldier, describing how he was happy to be ‘on the front line, getting in there. Getting all mucky and dirty, running around keeping fit’ (Greg, Interview 1, October 2010). It is an active, heroic and masculine image that Greg portrayed, which seemed to help him cling to a positive self-image. Yet it is important to recognise that this was an exercise of his imagination; a positive fantasy that seemed to arise from the frustrations Greg experienced in his day-to-day life.

Both Greg and Tom seemed to be struggling to establish themselves as ‘men’ through means other than paid work. Put simply, they were grappling with what it means to be a ‘man’ if you are a man out of work. Though occasionally both were able to find employment, it did not match with their expectations, or crucially with the ways in which they viewed themselves. As such, it seemed they sought other ways both to establish their masculine identity, but also to take control of their lives (or at least an aspect of it). It is as a means of control that the way in which Tom told his story was interpreted. Unable to exert control over other areas of his life, it seemed that his narrative style was a vehicle through which Tom was able to present his life in a particular way; opting to portray himself as a confident prankster. Though Luke (discussed in Chapter 5) held a different view of himself than Tom and their narratives were markedly different, it seemed Luke also sought to exercise control through his narrative. In doing so it highlighted the extent to which (like Tom) he was struggling with other areas of his life; experienced as beyond his control.

My research was undertaken with a small opportunistic sample, restricting the possibility of generalising from my findings. Nevertheless, when I considered
the experiences of the young adults I interviewed there was a sense that the young women had somehow better grasped the opportunities available to them. By this I do not mean that they necessarily achieved better ‘outcomes’ than the young men. Rather that they demonstrated the capacity to respond flexibly to life in the twenty-first century. They seemed able to utilise the resources available to them to take an ‘active role in their own development by becoming pilots of their own destinies, to the extent that this is realistically possible’ (Côté, 1996: 423). Becky, for example, developed confidence in her capacity to make choices and seemed to view ‘career as a personal journey that involved particular personal qualities rather than a position or pathway within an occupation or organisation’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 502). Her career identity seemed flexible and adaptable, enabling her to evaluate choices against the availability of work in the local labour market. Unlike Tom, who seemed locked into fixed ideas about his future identity, Becky seemed able to view her life as an ‘ongoing, neverending project of self reflection and self actualisation’ (Kelly, 2006: 25).

Libby and Anna came from very different backgrounds, yet both young women seemed able to exercise control over their lives through their housing careers. In contrast to the young men discussed above, they took a pragmatic approach to addressing their situation and emerged as ‘active, initiating, future oriented agent[s], striving to make sense of, and influence events’ (Fryer, 1990: 167). Greg and Simon also tried to make sense of their lives, utilising their compensatory career identities to address the frustrations and setbacks they experienced. However, in doing so there was a sense that they were escaping the challenges they faced; creating a positive self-image that existed in their imaginations only. Though certainly this was important to their self-understanding, they nevertheless seemed to find it harder to ‘influence events’ (Fryer, 1990: 167) that occurred in their everyday lives.

Of the young men I interviewed, it was Andy (discussed in Chapter 6) who seemed to have best grasped the opportunities available to him. Through his engagement with alternative occupations, Andy seemed to have gained a sense of control over his life. By our final interview he was undertaking an
apprenticeship with a small computer repair shop. However, he did not anticipate that they would be able to afford to sustain his employment once the apprenticeship came to an end. Yet Andy was not disheartened and seemed confident that other opportunities would present themselves. He had developed confidence in informal networks since they had played a pivotal role in helping him find both ‘regular [and] irregular work’ (Johnston et al., 2000: 31). Though his future was uncertain, he seemed to have faith in his capacity to use the resources available to him and manage what lay in store.

It would be wrong to divide the young adults’ experiences by gender alone. Indeed, Andy’s narrative illustrates the importance of resisting the temptation to do so. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider why some of the young men seemed to be struggling with life in the twenty-first century in a way that the young women (and some young men) were not. One possibility is that, during the industrial era, paid work would have been an important aspect of the social construction of identity for most working and middle-class men. Though the role itself may not always have been of key significance, they nevertheless would have been ‘regarded primarily as workers’ (Holloway, 2005: 201). This was an important part of their self-understanding, upheld through societal values and expectations. By contrast, even after the Second World War, the underlying belief that ‘a woman’s place was primarily in the home’ (Holloway, 2005: 202) was sustained. Whilst social attitudes towards the role of men and women have changed significantly over the past 50 years, it is important to question whether the past continues to influence individual self-understanding.

My research suggests that ‘traditional parameters’ (Evans et al., 2000: 11) continued to exert a hold over the self-understanding of some of the young men. This is evident in the culturally embedded ideas of Tom and Greg, but also in the ‘hyper conventional attitude to work’ (MacDonald et al., 2005: 882) of Nick and Luke. Put simply, the way in which they made sense of their lives was still strongly bound to their relationship with paid work. When they struggled to achieve what they hoped to in relation to paid work, it was difficult for them to experience a sense of control over their lives. Whilst paid work
was not unimportant to the young women (or to Andy) it was situated within broader loci of meaning. It was not that they were necessarily faring better within the labour market, but rather that they made sense of their lives across ‘multiple terrains’ (Dubet, 1994). As such, they were able to maintain a sense of control over their lives, even when they were faced with unemployment and an insecure labour market.

For those young adults who seemed able to better grasp the opportunities available to them, it appeared they also held a broader understanding of what constituted work. Becky, for example, did not understand her career as bound to a particular role or organisation, but rather as part of a ‘personal journey’ (Stokes and Wyn, 2007: 502). Similarly, Andy valued a number of alternative occupations that were not limited to formal paid work: ranging from blending his leisure interests with ‘work’, to participating in the informal economy.

In considering the contrasts between the experiences of those involved in this small study, I found that questions were raised about whether the young men and young women made sense of their lives in different ways. To some extent it seemed that they did, but there were also notable contrasts between individuals of the same gender. I would therefore hesitate to suggest that there was something essentially ‘male’ or ‘female’ in the differences that I found. Rather, I feel that they emphasise the importance of placing individuals within their social, cultural and historical context. It seemed that the primacy of paid work exercised a hold over the ‘sociological imagination’ (Wright Mills, 1959) of some of the young men. Despite significant changes to the nature of work available in the UK and the extent to which social attitudes have changed, it would seem that some ideas remained culturally embedded. That the young women appeared more flexible and adaptable, better able to make sense of their lives in new ways, also demands careful consideration. Have they developed this capacity through engaging in life as an ‘ongoing, neverending project of self reflection and self actualisation’ (Kelly, 2006: 25)? Or is it that paid work does not hold the same level of significance for them? This is certainly the (controversial) suggestion of researchers such as Hakim (1991) who maintained that, despite the changes in social attitudes the
‘majority of women aim for a homemaker career in which paid work is of secondary or peripheral importance [...] A minority of women are committed to work as a central life goal’ (Hakim, 1991: 101).

Whilst Hakim was writing over 20 years ago, more recent research has suggested that there is something different in the work orientations of men and women. Work orientations might be understood to,

…reflect individuals’ prioritizations of different rewards from employment which shape their work attitudes and behaviour by providing meaning to their responses to work situations. (Goldthorpe et al., 1968 paraphrased in Zou, 2015: 4).

Rather than maintain that work is less important to women, Zou (2015) suggests that men and women’s work orientations are different; they value work in contrasting ways and it holds different meanings for men than women. Zou’s analysis is interesting when considering the findings from my research; it offers possible insights into why some of the young men were struggling in ways that the young women were not. Zou found that,

…compared to women full-timers, men were more likely to value pay and when compared to women part-timers, they placed more emphasis on promotion, pay, opportunities to use initiative and abilities, fringe benefits and variety in work. Women, on the whole, valued: relations with their supervisor or manager; work they liked doing; convenient work hours; choice in hours of work; physical working conditions; and friendly people to work with. (Zou, 2015: 9 – 10)

If Zou’s analysis is accepted, it would seem that men value extrinsic benefits (pay and fringe benefits) more than women. Further, women seem orientated towards the social value of work (good relations with supervisors and friendly people). Might it be easier for women to replicate those things that are important to them through means other than paid work? Do the (sometimes limited) opportunities available still enable women to meet their priorities? For
the young men I interviewed the ‘poor work’ (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007: 597) they found available seemed to offer few opportunities for promotion, fringe benefits or to use their initiative and abilities. This might go some way to explaining why they often seemed frustrated with their situation.

From the small study I undertook, I felt unable to make the kind of claims Hakim (1991) and Zou’s (2015) quantitative studies enabled them to make. I did not feel there was sufficient evidence to suggest that work was not a ‘central life goal’ (Hakim, 1991: 101) for most women. Neither was I confident that the young adults’ work orientations fully explained the differences between the experiences of the young men and the young women; or the differences between those of the same gender. However, my research does raise important questions about why the young women seemed to better grasp the opportunities that twenty-first century living presented. Is it easier for them to make sense of their lives through means other than paid work? Does the post-industrial labour market pose particular challenges for (some) young men? Whilst these are important questions, it is important that gender does not somehow become disembedded from the broader context of the young adults’ lives: their family backgrounds; their historical context; their ethnicities; their educations; the discourses that influence their lives; their location. To do so would be to neglect that gender is a social construction. It should be unsurprising that work is no longer the only vehicle through which the construction of gender is conveyed. Work, too, is a social construction and its meaning is constantly renegotiated. In the past different forms of labour may have constructed what it meant to be a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. Now both work and gender might be understood as contested arenas; with individuals forced to (re)negotiate the meaning of both.

7.5 Contribution to knowledge

In considering the contribution to knowledge that the research makes, I find it important to return to my original rationale (discussed in Chapter 1). Whilst there does seem to be a growing interest in the 18 – 24 age range (for
example Edelman et al., 2006; Rosen et al., 2010; Hollingworth and Williams, 2010), there is still comparatively little research that focuses on this cohort. Further, what does exist differs from my research in its methodology or focus. Whilst the Teeside Studies (discussed in Chapter 3) take a similar qualitative, longitudinal approach, the research has a more specific focus on ‘disadvantaged young people’s transitions’ (MacDonald, 2011: 432). Undertaken entirely in ‘neighbourhoods of multiple deprivation’ (MacDonald, 2011: 432), the participants’ backgrounds were less diverse than those of the young adults I met with. Rather than have a specific focus on poverty and social exclusion, my research sought to capture the experiences of those from a broad range of backgrounds. Though there is some overlap between my findings and those of the Teeside Studies, particularly in relation to social exclusion and the young adults’ experiences of the ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ (Shildrick et al., 2010), there are also notable differences.

Several of the young adults who participated in my research might be understood as coming from a background of disadvantage, at least as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD2010). However, in many ways my research is not about a minority group. Rather, it captures the experiences of everyday living for ‘ordinary’ young adults in the early twenty-first century. It also highlights that unemployment, at least during times of economic difficulty, is not a ‘problem’ that is restricted to a small group of young adults from a particular background. The research, therefore, offers insight into the ‘missing middle’ (MacDonald, 2011; Roberts, 2011) that has been commented on as absent in much youth transitions research. It considers the experiences of young adults beyond those who are most disadvantaged, exploring their experiences both in and out of the labour market.

Whilst there are sections of my research that explore the differences between the young adults based on their backgrounds, I also found similarities and connections between those whose lives were seemingly diverse. Libby and Anna, for example, both appeared to take control of their lives through their housing careers; enabling them to experience a sense of agency. They also
both seemed motivated by a need for security: Libby as a means of escape from her family, and Anna to find something ‘a bit more permanent’ (Anna, Interview 3, October 2012) for her and her chap. Though I would not deny the significance of background, I would argue that to focus too much on the inequalities between different groups might also be problematic. Indeed, I feel that to do so might obscure the things that are important to individual self-understanding; imposing instead external values that might not hold significance for the young adults themselves. I was motivated from the outset to enable the young adults to talk about the things that were meaningful to them. This might not, perhaps, tie my findings to policy implications in the neat way that a specific focus on social exclusion might have done. However, I feel that there were many insights to be gained from listening to a small group of young adults as they attempted to make sense of their lives.

By taking a holistic approach, I was able to place the young adults’ experiences of employment and unemployment within the broader context of their lives. The research therefore offers interesting insights that are not limited to understanding the participants’ relationship with the labour market. Indeed, it was also possible to consider those things that were important to them and to their self-understanding. In this respect there is parity between my work and that of Henderson et al.’s (2007) *Inventing adulthoods*. Their biographical approach to both collecting and analysing data, along with their interest in narrative resonates with my work. However, their research has a more specific focus on ‘place’, with the work undertaken in five diverse research localities (see Henderson et al., 2007: 4 – 10). By contrast, all of the participants in my research were based in the South West of England. My findings are therefore particular to a specific region, one that is not commonly associated with high levels of unemployment. It has not, therefore, previously been the focus of many studies of this nature; contrasting with the North East of England which is recognised as facing specific difficulties following rapid deindustrialisation. Yet the South West labour market is interesting, with very little industry and a heavy reliance on the service sector and tourism leading to high levels of seasonal work. Further, there is local variation within the region, with Plymouth and North Devon having above average levels of
unemployment (Crowley and Cominetti, 2014: 6). My research, therefore, makes an interesting comparison to that undertaken in other more disadvantaged regions. Though some of the young adults (notably those from Plymouth) had grown up in areas recognised as deprived, others had not. This enabled me to consider the experience of unemployment when it was not normative to the individual’s frame of reference: as was exemplified by Greg and Libby’s narratives. Gaining insights into their experiences and responses, I believe, makes an important contribution.

7.6 Policy implications

In considering the broader implications of my research, I hold a reservation about the inevitability of imposing ‘normatively defined ‘‘success’ criteria’ (Lawy et al., 2010: 344) upon the lives of the young adults. My findings reveal some of the young adults ‘successfully’ making sense of their lives in new ways. Yet as judged by the ‘success’ criteria of policymakers they might still be perceived as falling short. The challenge, it seems, is to consider how the experiences of the young adults might be used to inform policies that better respond to their needs. This is not to suggest that these ‘success’ criteria are unimportant, but rather that there is much to be gained by taking a broader view of the lives of young adults. Not only were the participants found to make sense of their lives across ‘multiple terrains’ (Dubet, 1994), but the ‘terrain’ of work was found to demand a wide lens. Consider, for example, the importance of the informal economy to Andy, or the way in which he was able to blend leisure and work activities. Nicola, similarly, was able to find a sense of purpose through highlighting social issues that were personal to her. She was not paid for the work, yet valued it for the meaning it brought to her life.

More subtle, yet equally important, was the way in which Anna assumed the role of carer for her partner Paul when he was unwell (discussed in Chapter 6). She was not recognised officially as his carer, yet she was engaged in activity that in another context would have been recognised as work. There was nothing essentially different about the activities she undertook. Indeed,
she had previously been paid as a care worker. However, because the activity took place in the home supporting her partner, it was not recognised by her (or by others) as work. These examples, along with broader evidence from my findings, calls into question the narrow outcome driven focus that drives policy. Researchers undertaking research with NEET young people (for example Finlay et al., 2010; Furlong, 2006) have previously criticised a narrow approach which focuses on ‘moving young people across a boundary between participation and non-participation’ (Thompson, 2011: 785). Yet it would seem that for this older cohort of unemployed young adults, this remains the key measure of success (at least as defined by policymakers).

Adopting an approach that focuses primarily on the movement of young adults from one status (unemployed) to another (employed) is not necessarily the most effective way to respond to their needs. This fails to consider the quality of the jobs they move into ‘whether they pay enough to live on, the stability of those jobs, and whether workers are able to progress to higher pay or better working conditions’ (Ben Galim et al., 2011: 3). Whilst the Work Programme, introduced in June 2011 by the Coalition Government (2010 – 2015), rewards welfare-to-work providers for moving people into ‘sustained’ job outcomes, this only addresses the longevity of the role. Questions about the quality of the job or the extent to which it might lead to opportunities for progression remain unanswered. Consider, for example, the way in which Nick (discussed in Chapter 5) had worked in roles that were below the minimum wage and was happy to take almost any work he was offered. Just because a job outcome is ‘sustained’ is no guarantee of its suitability or quality; nor does it address issues of underemployment since the measure is simply whether an individual is in work. Though the Coalition Government heralded the Work Programme as an exemplar of ‘payment-for-results public services’ (DWP, 2012: 2), it should not be assumed that it is necessarily in the best interests of those it proclaims to ‘support’ (DWP, 2012: 2).

The difficulty with policy and provision that purports to support unemployed young adults is that it is, perhaps inevitably, driven by ‘monetarist economic’ (Pahl, 1987: 38) concerns. Ultimately it is concerned with moving individuals
away from a reliance on benefits and towards making a contribution towards tax revenue. It is this that leads to its narrow focus and contributes to the elevated position that paid work holds in the UK. However, by taking this approach, there are a range of possibilities that remain largely unexplored. My research suggests that there is much to be gained from paying attention to the broad spectrum of activities that young adults engage in. Not only were these important sites of meaning in the lives of the young adults, but they also sometimes acted as a bridge between ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ opportunities. Whilst some of these activities might be recognised as useful by policymakers, the majority would either be dismissed as irrelevant or (worse) treated as problematic or even illegal.

As was discussed in Chapter 6 it was Andy and Nicola’s _alternative occupations_ that were important to their sense of identity; transforming their self-understanding. The activities they participated in also seemed to lead to new opportunities for the young adults. Yet these were not activities that changed their status from being unemployed. Further, in Andy’s case his _alternative occupations_ drew him into the ‘informal’ economy; understood by policymakers as negative because of its associations with tax avoidance (as discussed in Chapter 3). However, for Andy they presented a means of occupying his time; of working with others towards a common goal and of developing confidence in his ability to do things for himself. They also helped him develop specific skills; for example through the way in which he researched how to solve IT problems connected to his web hosting.

In terms of policy, Nicola and Andy’s narratives pose a number of challenges. Questions are raised about the implicit assumption that underpins employment policy: that to be ‘unemployed’ equates to being workless; not engaged in labour of any kind. This is implied through the European Commission’s (EC) ‘activation’ policies (discussed in Chapter 2), with the language used suggesting that unemployed people need to be ‘activated’ in order to find employment. They must ‘step up their job search’ with receipt of benefits ‘conditional on participation in programmes’ (European Commission, 2006: 136). The policies not only play into the narrative of individual
responsibility for unemployment (as discussed in Chapter 2), but also contribute to the impression that the unemployed person is lazy; lacking the motivation to work. This has also been observed by researchers outside of Europe (for example Munive, 2010) who observed how unemployed young people in Liberia were depicted as ‘unproductive, idle and a security risk for the stability of the country’ (Munive, 2010: 331), despite the evidence of their ‘hustling’ (Munive, 2010: 331) in the informal economy.

In the UK, the Conservative Government’s 2015 Budget announced welfare reforms that further build on the narrative that the young unemployed are inactive. A new ‘Youth Obligation for 18 to 21 year olds on Universal Credit’ (HM Treasury, 2015, emphasis added) will be introduced from April 2017. The stated intention being to ensure young people,

...will participate in an intensive regime of support from day 1 of their benefit claim, and after 6 months they will be expected to apply for an apprenticeship or traineeship, gain work-based skills, or go on a mandatory work placement to give them the skills they need to move into sustainable employment. (HM Treasury, 2015)

In the same Budget, it was announced that those ‘out of work aged 18 to 21 making new claims to Universal Credit will no longer be automatically entitled to the housing element’ (HM Treasury, 2015).

In justifying reforms to welfare for young adults, David Cameron (Prime Minister 2010 – present date) stated:

From day one they must play their part and make an effort. That could mean making meals for older people, cleaning up litter and graffiti, or working for local charities […] Your first experience of the benefits system should be that yes, you can get help - but it isn't something for nothing, and you need to put something back into your community too. (David Cameron, quoted by Hawkins, 2015)
His words imply that the young unemployed expect ‘something for nothing’ but also make clear the community focused element of the 30 hour a week mandatory work placement. In emphasising the need to give back to the community, there is a further indictment that the young unemployed are not only lazy, but also suffer from some kind of ‘cultural malaise’ (Thompson, 2011: 795); there is something ‘wrong’ with them that accounts for their situation.

When reflecting on the experiences of the young adults who participated in my research, the policy assumptions seem to misunderstand or (perhaps more accurately) misrepresent their lives. By focusing only on the young adults’ engagement with ‘formal’ opportunities, it is possible to represent them as doing nothing. Yet this was far from the reality for the young adults I spoke to, with most seeking out ways to occupy their time through: volunteering; addressing social issues; engaging in ‘fiddly work’ (MacDonald, 1994: 508) in the ‘informal’ economy; teaching themselves new skills and through their leisure activities. By failing to acknowledge these activities, not only are opportunities missed to better understand the lives of young adults, but a ‘fruitful and productive area of human effort is being overlooked’ (Snyder, 2004: 237). Rather than policies that emphasise the perceived failures of young adults, it is interesting to consider the possibility of policies that recognise and value the broad spectrum of activities that are important to individuals. This might prevent young adults from feeling like some ‘little scrounger’ (Anna, Interview 1, July 2010) whilst on benefits; better enabling them to maintain a sense of self-worth whilst unemployed.

It is possible to question whether a change in policy approach might provide some young adults with alternative routes to the labour market. Whilst this might sound overly optimistic, consider for example the way in which Andy had set up a small web hosting service. He explained how he did not mention it to Jobcentreplus because he thought it would affect his benefits. When his Adviser suggested the possibility of self-employment, he felt unable to pursue this option, concerned about his ability to manage his finances. Instead he continued to pursue his web hosting through the ‘informal’ economy. If Andy
had felt able to have a more open conversation, might this have helped the Adviser to better understand his situation and provide the type of support and training he needed? Yet because the activity belonged to the ‘informal’ economy it was not discussed; the potential to build upon Andy’s achievements remained unexplored. I am not suggesting that this would provide options for all young adults, but rather that for some a ‘fruitful and productive area’ (Snyder, 2004: 237) of their lives is overlooked.

7.7 Limitations and suggestions for extending the research

From the outset I was conscious that undertaking the research as an individual researcher would impose limitations. A number of these were practical, linked to time constraints and the amount of interviews it would be possible to undertake and analyse. However, some restrictions were not anticipated and were encountered and addressed as the research progressed. Of particular note in relation to my findings are the challenges I faced around access. As acknowledged in Chapter 4, I had initially intended to access participants via mandatory welfare-to-work programmes. This, I hoped, would give me access to young adults with the broadest possible diversity of backgrounds. Whilst local managers were happy to agree access, when they asked for approval from national or regional managers this was not granted. Having worked on a range of welfare-to-work programmes in the past I could understand their reticence. All programmes are awarded on a contract basis, often to ‘private providers’ who deliver the programmes on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions. It seemed they were cautious about any negative findings, despite my assurances that the programmes were not the focus of my research.

Eventually I decided to pursue other options and easily gained access to services that were being delivered to unemployed young adults on a voluntary basis. Indeed, I accessed the majority of the participants via local providers of the Future Jobs Fund and the Prince’s Trust Team Programme. Whilst this offered me access to participants from a broad variety of backgrounds, there is a possibility that this did not include those who might be understood as
hardest to reach. Indeed, since the services were voluntary, they required some degree of personal motivation to have engaged with them in the first place. It is important to acknowledge that this might have had an impact on the participants I accessed and the data gathered. It would therefore be interesting to undertake a similar study accessing participants through mandatory programmes. However, it is worth considering that even this might not guarantee the participation of those hardest to reach; they might not offer their voluntary consent, or simply might not attend the setting.

None of the young adults with whom I met were parents. There were, in fact, two mothers who were participating in the Prince’s Trust Team Course at the time I undertook my initial interviews. However, they were never in attendance on the dates I accessed the organisation. I feel this is an important dimension that is missing from my study and it would have been interesting to explore the perspectives of young parents. The fact that they were absent from the Course on a number of occasions was, in itself, interesting. It raises questions about whether they face particular challenges in accessing services that are specifically aimed at their age group. Further, it suggests that if their views are to be captured in small scale qualitative research a different approach might be required. At the very least it might be necessary to consider accessing young parents through settings that are specifically aimed at them and their children. Their absence from the study also acts as a reminder that it is important to take a broad view of those who might be hardest to reach.

When I first considered undertaking research with unemployed young adults in 2008, it was not possible to predict the ways in which online forms of communication would extend their reach. As discussed in Chapter 4, this has created new forms of data which present possibilities, as well as new dilemmas, for researchers. In terms of undertaking further research with young adults, it would be interesting to combine data collection from online sources with more traditional means of data collection. Another possibility for extending the research might be to analyse purely online data; for example focusing solely on blogs or vlogs (video blogs). Though online sources have the potential to provide rich sources of data, it is clear that they also raise
methodological questions. A blog or vlog, for example, is constructed very differently from an interview. Their treatment and analysis would therefore require careful consideration; taking into account their intended audience and purpose. Despite these challenges (and the potential ethical issues discussed in Chapter 4), these new forms of data seem vital to fully understanding the experiences of young adults and the narratives they construct about their lives. I would therefore be keen to explore them more fully in future research. Moreover, the issue of how to work with online data is a challenge that many researchers are increasingly likely to face.

Since completing my data collection I have become increasingly aware that, though longitudinal, the study freezes the young adults within a particular period of their lives. It captures their experiences (and their reflections on those experiences) within the period July 2010 to January 2013. There are two observations that I would make in relation to this. The first is that imposing a timeframe on the research creates a kind of ‘false ending’ to the young adults’ narratives. Their lives have continued to move forwards since that period in ways that I (or indeed they) might not have anticipated. One way in which the study might have been usefully extended would have been to follow the young adults into their late 20s or early 30s. I feel that this would have offered interesting insights; providing the possibility of exploring whether they made sense of their lives in different ways as they moved beyond their mid-twenties. It would also have been interesting to observe whether some of the challenges they faced as young adults (for example around living independently or finding secure employment) extended into their later life. Would these continue to affect them or were they indicative of a particular phase in their life that they were passing through?

My second observation is that the period during which I undertook my data collection was one of political instability and economic uncertainty in the UK. As has been observed earlier in this thesis (Chapter 1), the youth unemployment rate in the UK peaked at its highest ever recorded rate (22.1 per cent in September 2011) during this period (European Union Committee, 2014: 18). It is interesting to consider the extent to which this affected the
participants I gained access to and the ways in which they made sense of their lives. For example, how many of the young adults would have experienced a period of unemployment (lasting six months or more) during more prosperous economic times? Did the economic uncertainty have an impact on the ways in which they reflected on their lives and anticipated the future? Undertaking the research during a period of instability and high unemployment made the process feel highly relevant. However, I am conscious that the findings might be viewed as specific to the period during which the data was collected. I do not view this as a weakness, after all research is inevitably situated within a time and place. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to undertake a similar study outside of a period of economic uncertainty. This would offer the possibility of exploring whether similar themes emerged from the data, or whether different concerns or interests emerged. Yet it is worth noting that since the study is not replicable, it would be difficult to attribute the cause of any similarities or differences.

As with all studies of a qualitative nature, the greatest limitations of the research might also be viewed as its greatest strength. By undertaking a small scale, longitudinal study it is not possible to generalise from the findings. Indeed, they are specific to the sample with whom I undertook my research. There is a limit, therefore, to the conclusions that might be drawn and the extent to which their experiences might be viewed as representative of other young adults; even those in similar situations. Yet for me, the strength of the research lies in the individual narratives of the young adults. One of my main motivations to undertake research of this nature stemmed from my working practice. When working with unemployed young adults and considering the policies that were relevant to them, there was a notable lack of research that informed policy. Further, what did exist rarely ‘explore[d] it from the perspective of the unemployed’ (Cullen and Hodgetts, 2001: 46). The value of my research is that it pays attention to the voices of the young adults. I was interested in the ways in which they made sense of their lives and the things that were important to them. This, I believe, offers important insights that might improve the way in which their lives are understood.
7.8 Personal change

Through the research process I feel that my own self-understanding has been transformed. I would not suggest that a dramatic change has occurred, but rather that there are subtle differences in the way I think about things and about myself. Whilst I was not conscious of it when I embarked upon the research, I came to realise that I held a very strong ‘work ethic’, together with a firm belief in the value of paid work. Indeed, I believed that everyone capable of working *should* work and felt that there was a strong connection between employment and self-esteem. However, through reading the work of other researchers and through the research process I have come to question my previous perspective. I became aware of the economic, cultural and historical discourses that contributed to the assumptions I held. This has not entirely changed my view, but it has certainly prompted me to critically re-examine ideas that I previously accepted unquestioningly. Further, it has made me question which discourses I contribute to by holding particular ideas.

It was with particular interest that I learnt more about the use of the word employability (discussed in Chapter 2). Having held job roles with the word ‘employability’ in the title for the past five years, I could not help but pay attention. To understand how the language used has contributed to the rhetoric of individual responsibility was fascinating. Though now it seems obvious, I had not previously considered how the word ‘employability’ constructs unemployment as a ‘supply-side’ issue. This new understanding encouraged me to reflect upon my working practice, considering whether I was comfortable with the narrative I contributed to. I believe this was a valuable exercise, especially given that my role involves encouraging University students to engage in activities that develop their employability. Whilst my work remains the same, I have become more sensitive to the language I use and the messages I convey; conscious of the potential for the language of employability to result in self-blame.
This French saying, used by MacDonald (2011), was an interesting one to consider in relation to my research. Its literal translation ‘the more it changes, the more it stays the same’ is used to ‘express resigned acknowledgement of the fundamental immutability of human nature and institutions’ (Oxford Dictionaries online). It acts as a warning to researchers who might be tempted to emphasise change over continuity; to fail to pay attention to the persistence of structural factors. This same view was expressed by Roberts (2009) who maintained that ‘structuring agents [have] changed over time’ (Roberts, 2009: 355) but ‘that their combined predictive power is undiminished’ (Roberts, 2009: 355). The thrust of Roberts’s argument is that, though ‘family backgrounds, education, labour market processes and employers’ recruitment practices’ (Roberts, 2009: 355) have changed since the post-Second World War period, they continue to determine the outcomes of individuals. Whilst Roberts’s position is persuasive, there is a fundamental difference between his approach and mine. Indeed, Roberts suggests,

... seeking the sources of change in the opportunity structures that surround young people, thereby initially decentring young people themselves, is more fruitful than probing young people’s minds. The constituents of opportunity structures have all changed interactively, and young people have not been agents of change but have had no choice but to exercise individual agency within their reshaped opportunities. (Roberts, 2009: 358)

In attempting to highlight the persistence of social inequality, Roberts has removed the young people themselves from the equation. He does not value ‘probing young people’s minds’ (Roberts, 2009: 358) as a means of exploring continuity and change in their lives. It is easy to see, if young people are reduced to their employment status or to their position in a social hierarchy, that this approach is most effective. However, it neglects to consider the
perspectives of the young people themselves; those things that are important to them and to their self-understanding. These things might only be gained by attempting to ‘probe their minds’; or by listening to them as they try to make sense of their lives.

Whilst the obvious observation is that my approach is different to that of Roberts, I have a deeper concern about research that excludes those who it purports to pertain to. Indeed, by doing so an external value system has been imposed. Whilst I recognise the importance of considering social exclusion and inequality, is there a danger that by focusing on this rather than individual self-understanding, the young adults’ might be further marginalised? Indeed, it plays into a narrative in which young adults’ are perceived as dupes; conned into the illusion of exercising choice when the opportunities available to them are (more or less) determined. It does not consider the extent to which a feeling of agency is important; nor does it question the implications or meaning(s) of the different ways in which an individual might make sense of their lives. Crucially, it does not enable the individual to construct their own narrative or tell their own story; constructing them instead from a perspective that might be more meaningful to others than to the young adults’ themselves.

As outlined at the start of this chapter, the research paid attention to individual self-understanding and the ways in which this changed over time. I do not simply mean that different sites of meaning waxed and waned in significance. Rather, what emerged was a dynamic process through which self-understanding continuously evolved. This dynamic process was not understood as separate from the external events the young adults participated in - or from their ‘accumulated knowledge’ (Collins English Dictionary, 2008: 295). Instead, it was understood as deeply interconnected with the young adults’ experiences. Thus self-understanding (or self-identity) might be understood as a reflexive process through which an individual’s interaction with the world around them becomes internalised; in turn this informs and influences their future interactions. When perceived in this way, it was easy to see why the perspectives (or self-understanding) of 18 – 24 year olds seemed to differ from those of 16 – 18 year olds. Indeed, they were able to project
themselves further into the future and seemed to hold an awareness of time passing by. It was not their age, per se, that made a difference. Their accumulated experiences might, instead, be understood to continuously transform their perspectives and priorities; their self-understanding.

When understood at the level of the individual, it would seem that change can and does happen. It was something that I found when I considered whether the research process had changed my own self-understanding. Whilst the changes might be small, not immediately apparent from the outside looking in, they are nevertheless important. This calls into question the ‘fundamental immutability of human nature’ (Oxford Dictionaries online), suggesting that (at the level of the individual at least) it is continuously in flux. However, I also found it important to consider whether social ‘institutions’ might also be subject to change. As was observed in Chapter 2, the nature of work has changed in the UK; young people now remain in education for longer; social attitudes about the roles of men and women have changed; a discourse of individual responsibility has replaced the notion of state responsibility. Yet for all these changes, inequalities persist and the opportunities for individuals remain heavily influenced by their backgrounds (see Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Roberts, 2009). Whilst acknowledging this, I remain conscious that these ‘opportunities’ are tied to particular understandings of what it means to be a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’; to ‘normatively defined ‘success’ criteria’ (Lawy et al., 2010: 344). It was interesting to consider whether, over time, ‘new and distinctive forms of consciousness’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011: 361) might challenge these deeply ingrained measures of success.

To illustrate my point, it is useful to consider the nature of work in the UK. As has been discussed, this has changed significantly over the past 50 years. Yet the primacy of paid work continues to occupy an elevated position; with culturally embedded ideas about work continuing to exert a powerful hold over the ‘sociological imagination’ (Wright Mills, 1959) of many. However, some of the young adults I interviewed seemed engaged in an active process of (re)negotiating their relationship with the labour market; viewing work through a broader lens. From Roberts’s perspective these young adults would not be
viewed as agents of change, but rather to be exercising ‘individual agency within their reshaped [and sometimes limited] opportunities’ (Roberts, 2009: 358). Whilst this is plausible, this does not quite fit with my understanding of ‘work’ as a social construction. Indeed, if we accept that what we understand as work is ‘created, challenged, altered and sustained through […] contending discourses’ (Grint, 1991: 9), it must ultimately be subject to change. I would acknowledge that there are powerful discourses at play that might seek to preserve the privileged position of paid work. However, this does not preclude the possibility that in redefining their lives through means other than paid work, individuals might construct new (and contending) discourses.
Appendices

Appendix I – First round interview schedule

**Themes** - Start general: Tell me about yourself

**Background**

How old are you?

Where did you grow up?

**Leisure Interests**

What did you do last weekend?

How did you spend the day yesterday?

What things do you enjoy doing in your free time / what are your hobbies or leisure interests?

**Family**

Tell me about your family?

How many brothers and sisters have you got?

Tell me a bit about your parents / brothers and sisters?

**Friendships**

Tell me about the friends who are most important to you. How did you meet them?

Who do you spend most of your time with?

*Did you go out on Friday? Who with? Who did you spend the day with yesterday?*

**Aspirations**

What do you see yourself doing in a year’s time / in 5 year’s time?

Do you have any goals for the future?

**Living arrangements / Locality**

What are the best things about the town / city you live in?

What are the worst things about the town / city you live in?
Who do you live with?

Do you go to [CITY] often? Do you use public transport? Do you drive?

Opinion of self / self esteem

What would you consider to be an achievement of yours?
How would your friends describe you? (replacing what are your best qualities)

School / college

What are your friends from school doing now?
Describe a lasting memory from school.
Did you enjoy school?
Did you go to college after leaving school / stay on in 6th Form?
Was it different from school? In what way?
What do you know about the local college?
What do you know about the courses they offer?

Work

Tell me a bit about previous work experiences?
Have you done paid work before?
What were the people like that you worked with? How old? Friendly? Etc.
Did you think there were opportunities to develop in the company you worked for?
What do you think other people in (name town) think about people who do not work?

Criminality / Drugs / Alcohol

Likely to be more of a lead on from other questions …
i.e. What do you spend your money on?
Do you manage to do that with your JSA?
How do you spend your weekends? Etc.
Appendix II – Example of a third round interview schedule

Round 3 Interview Questions [Andy]

Tell me about your life over the past 9 months. (Last met you at the end of last Summer and you were about to go on a four week work placement with a small place that recycled electrical items. You had also just finished filming with friends.)

Tell me about your life at the moment. (Tell me about your move, how that came about.)

Family Relationship with Mum, Dad, sisters

In what ways has your life changed?

Education

Tell me about the course that you are doing at the moment.

Have you done any training courses over the last year?

How did you choose what course to do?

How was it the same / different than other training courses you have done?

Have you done any learning at home?

How are you taught?

What is the placement like? Is it paid / unpaid?

Do you think you will be able to get a job there?

Do you want to do any more study after you finish this course?

Jobs (Over past year)

Are you still doing the web hosting? How is that going?

Have you been in work since I last met you?

Tell me about your job.

How do you go about looking for work?

What type of things do you apply for?

How did you apply for your job / find out about it?

What was your job title?

Can you describe a typical day at work?
How many people do you work with?

Who do you get on best with?

Do you feel there are opportunities for you to develop in the job you’re in now?

Is there any training attached to the job role?

Do you enjoy it?

**Leisure time**

Are you still involved with DJing?

Are you still involved with making films?

How has your leisure time changed since moving?

What did you do last weekend?

How did you spend the day yesterday?

What do you enjoy doing when you’ve got free time?

Who are the friends who are most important to you?

Who do you spend most of your time with?

**Benefits**

Have you claimed any benefits over the past year?

How does it make you feel? Other people’s opinions.

**Location**

What do you think of [Colesworth]?

How does [Colesworth] compare with Plymouth?

What do you think the opportunities are like?

Transport?

**Aspirations**

What do you see yourself doing a year from now / five years from now?

Do you have any goals for the future? (personal life as well as career)

Is there a career that you can see yourself doing in the future?

Are you still interested in the Police Force?

How do you feel about the future?
Do you feel there is enough support for you?

**Opinions of self / self esteem**

What would you consider to be an achievement of yours?

How would your friends describe you?

How would you compare your confidence now with last year?

**Society**

What do you think about the current government?

What do you think about the government’s spending cuts?

Were you aware of the ‘occupy’ movement? What do you think about that?

Why do you think people chose to riot last year?
Appendix III – Examples of reflections written after interviews

Interview 1 – [Andy]

When I spoke to the group before I interviewed them individually, the group had expressed that Andy was the member they thought was least likely to make it to the end of the Team Course. I was therefore both pleased and surprised that he volunteered to speak to me. Andy was quite difficult to read, as he was both shy but also undertook the interview with an air of bravado. I felt that at times he possibly told his story through the actions of his friends that he talked about. He found it difficult to think about the achievements that he had, but as the interview progressed there were quite a few areas that he had skills in. Has an interesting hobby in DJing a regular drum and bass night on a local radio station. He does this to earn pieces of DJ equipment rather than for money. Interestingly, although he could have claimed EMA for doing the Team Course he claimed he had not got around to filling in the forms. Andy had no clear idea of what he wanted to do in the future. He agreed to be interviewed again.

Interview 1 – [Nicola]

Nicola was able to express herself clearly and for me was the person who took the most responsibility for her situation. She is quite a serious character and could seem a little defensive at times. However, she was extremely open in her answers and disclosed quite a lot about her past including time spent in rehab and her criminal record. Nicola has made a lot of effort to turn her life around and has won an award for this. She has very clear goals for the future as she would like to train as a Youth Worker. She did not seem to have examined in detail how to go about this. I found this interview quite difficult as Nicola discussed the fact that she did not feel she had access to the advice she needed about work and training. In my work capacity this is the type of area that I would advise on, but I did not feel in this context it was appropriate.
Interview 1 – [Tom]

Tom was interesting as he was the first person in this group to volunteer to be interviewed by me, but tried to perfect a look of disinterest throughout the interview. This was not to say that he was negative about the process, but rather that it seemed to be part of his ‘image’ to appear unenthusiastic. Of all the people I interviewed, Tom was least optimistic about his future. Or at least he voiced that he was least optimistic and did not really seem to know what the future held. Tom is currently on a health-related benefit rather than JSA, although he is capable of participating in a full-time course without any obvious difficulties. His main barrier seems to be that he has occasionally had black-outs and this has meant that he has been unable to pursue the lines of work that have interested him. Tom was articulate and could express himself clearly. Tom felt strongly that the migrant and immigrant population contributed to the difficulties in finding employment. However, he could not really give much first-hand evidence of this.
References


Cohen, P. and Ainley, P. (2000). In the country of the blind: Youth studies and cultural studies in Britain. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 3 (1) 79 – 95.


LSE (The London School for Economics and Political Science) and the Guardian (2011). *Reading the riots: Investigating England’s summer of disorder*. Available from: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46297/1/Reading%20the%20riots%28published%29.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46297/1/Reading%20the%20riots%28published%29.pdf) [Downloaded 11 December 2014]


