Young people's transitions in London and temporal orientations of agency

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This article presents findings from the Changing Youth Labour Markets and Schools to Work Transitions in Modern Britain projects undertaken between 2009 and 2010. The projects examined young people's experiences and perceptions about study, work, and the future while going through transitions. The target group was young people on vocational courses at further education colleges in London aged between 18 and 24. This group is an under-researched cohort, who is neither NEET nor following 'tidy' pathways. We apply the conceptual framework of temporal orientations of agency, originally proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). We discuss the interplay between young people's agency and the contexts in which they live.

Keywords: transition; young people; FE college; temporal orientations of agency; iterational, projective, and practical agency

Introduction

A number of authors have demonstrated the complexity and diversity of young people's transitions (for example, Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, 1999; Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). Although their focuses may vary, it has been a common understanding among scholars that transitions are a political concern in the UK. This article aims to tease out how young people make choices and decisions during complex transitions and to explore whether transitions of FE college students could be categorized into certain types, drawing on the concept of 'agency' which has been widely discussed in youth transition studies.

The research[1] was a two-year study. In the first year it involved a questionnaire survey targeting young people who were about to complete a vocational course at an FE college in London. The research followed up the same cohort a year later to examine diverse transition processes through interviews. This article's focus is on the discussion of the qualitative findings from those interviews. The research captured authentic voices of young people who were in the middle of the transition from an FE college to employment or further study.

The article begins with a discussion of the target group and the contexts in which they experience their transitions. This discussion is followed by an examination of major arguments in recent youth transition studies. We acknowledge ongoing discussions about middle-ground theories between structure and agency and the danger of simplifying theories (Woodman, 2009). Our purpose is to consider how to break down individualization processes in order to interpret individual young people's transition experiences. The interview data are analysed borrowing Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) framework of the orientations to the past, the present, and the future – the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative agents. The main argument is that the group of young people whom we studied exercise temporal-oriented agencies, which are contextualized, in making decisions. We conclude with a discussion on the usefulness of the framework.

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Positioning the study

'*Missing*' *young people*

Our study targeted a group of 18- to 24-year-olds[2] from London, male and female, who were on vocational courses at FE colleges. We consider that our target group is missed out from both policy and academic discourses. As indicated by Roberts, 'a missing middle' is excluded from discourse because of the dichotomy between 'NEET' (not in education, employment, or training) and 'tidy' pathways (Roberts, 2011: 22), positioned outside 'policies aimed at widening participation or increasing the skills base' (Tomlinson, 2005 cited in Roberts, 2011: 22). We do acknowledge that the boundaries between 'NEET', 'middle', and 'tidy' groups are not necessarily clear. Our aim is to listen to the voices of a group of under-researched young people, following Roberts's (2011: 22) call for 'inclusion of detailed documentation and analysis' of missed-out young people.

FE college students have been researched in the past. One example is the four-year longitudinal study undertaken by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997 and 1999), which examined the progression of young people from 15 to 19 at FE colleges. The study focused on 'learning careers', which refers to 'the development of a student's dispositions to learning over time' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997: 61). The study teased out young people's processes of 'becoming somebody' (Ecclestone *et al.*, 2010), which was prompted by specific occurrences in their lives. Targeting slightly older young people whose transition is more related to 'work', our study focused on young people's decision-making in their career development.

The political and economic context within which the young people in our study went through transitions was indeed significant. Continuous changes since the 1990s in the structural and organizational arrangements in the FE sector have been widely criticized (for example, Hodgson *et al.*, 2011; Keep, 2011). Failing to address the fundamental skills 'problem', which involves simple readings of human capital and market failure, the 'lopsided' policy that focuses on skill supply leads to more initiatives (Keep, 2006: 59–60). The issues of 'the fundamental skills problem' and 'the lopsided policy' were elaborated in Wolf's (2011) review of vocational education and training (VET). It is argued that VET, which is designed to help young people's transitions into employment or further learning, is not playing the right role. A number of vocational qualifications that young people obtain have 'little or no labour market value' (Wolf, 2011: 7). Many young people end up moving 'in and out of education and short-term employment', not being able to find 'either a course which offers a real chance for progress, or a permanent job' (Wolf, 2011: 7). It was anticipated that our study would encounter those young people described in the review.

Having provided the context in which the study aimed to explore FE college students' diverse pathways, we will now draw on the individualization theory and agency theories.

Starting point: The individualization theory

The research team hypothesized that the examination of FE college students in London would reveal individualized pathways. The individualization thesis originates from theories on late modernity, such as 'liquid life' by Bauman (2000, 2001 cited in Field, 2010: xvii), 'institutionalised reflexivity' by Giddens (1991 cited in Field, 2010: xvii), and 'risk society' by Beck (1992 cited in Field, 2010: xvii). Neo-liberal politics have promoted an autonomous and independent self, questioning the sustainability of the welfare state. Consequently, individual choice and responsibility have been normalized. 'A prescribed script' is absent from individualized transitions, and traditional 'habit and routine no longer provide a reliable guide to decision making' (Giddens, 1990 cited in Ingram *et al.*, 2009: 2).

A number of recent youth transition studies have already applied the theory of individualization in interpreting the diverse nature of young people's transitions (Field, 2010; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Evans, 2002; Ball *et al.*, 2000). The authors of those studies are of the view that 'the transitions of the past, dictated by such structural factors … give way increasingly to individualized routes' (Evans and Furlong, 1997; Roberts *et al.*, 1994 cited in Bynner, 1999: 66), and that 'the established linear models of transition to adulthood and future careers are increasingly inappropriate' (Wyn and Dwyer, 1999 cited in Evans, 2002: 246). 'Normal biographies' – the tidy or linear pathway from youth to adulthood – have become 'choice biographies'[3] – the non-linear pathway constructed by individual choice – or 'risk' biographies, which are not predictable (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002 cited in Woodman, 2009: 245).

With the individualization theory, the study initially considered possible individualized pathways as follows. Where the young person engaged in more than one activity from the list, the activity that involved the greater number of hours was to be regarded as the main activity:

A. on an apprenticeship/other government supported training, or in paid work (full-time/part-time)
B. in full-time education at university, college, or school
C. looking for paid work
D. looking after family/home, doing something else (e.g. voluntary work), or NEET (not in education, employment, or training).

This categorization helped an understanding of 'what the young people are doing' a year after completing a vocational course at an FE college. However, we needed to look further into individual experiences and perspectives and to consider the ways in which those experiences and perspectives interacted with societal issues and contexts. At this point, we turned to agency theories.

Focusing on individual young people: Agency theories

The dichotomy of structure and agency has been long debated in the sociology of youth. Recent studies undertaken by Furlong and Cartmel (1997, 2007) have reinforced the position that structural influence is greater and argued that the interpretations of individualization are based on 'an epistemological fallacy'. The majority of researchers, however, have suggested some kind of middle ground between structure and agency, recognizing that agency is exercised within contexts. We are in line with the argument of Ingram *et al.* (2009: 2) that people's transitions are determined by 'a lived context of external factors', as well as by agency.

One of the authors that took 'middle ground theories' further is Evans (2007), who has developed the concept of 'bounded agency', which indicates 'socially situated agency' that 'operates in the social landscape involving the dynamics of multiple, interlocking sociobiographical journeys in a social terrain' (Evans, 2002: 264). Woodman identifies the bounded agency theory as 'the most explicit' approach to fill 'a middle ground between the agency of Beck, and Giddens, and the structural determinism of others, including Bourdieu' (Woodman, 2009: 246). For our purpose, the significance of bounded agency is that it highlights the contextualized nature of agency. As a small-scale study, we focus on exploring the different dimensions of 'agency', drawing on the framework developed by Emirbayer and Mische.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) approach agency as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement', emphasizing that the full complexity of agency can only be understood if agency is 'situated within the flow of time'. By this, they mean that agency is:

informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963)

Emirbayer and Mische go on to elaborate on the relationship between structure and agency. 'The structural contexts of action are themselves temporal as well as relational fields'; therefore, when actors move within these contexts, 'they switch between (or "recompose") their temporal orientations – as constructed within and by means of those contexts – and thus are capable of changing their relationship to structure'. Their suggestion is that the interaction between structure and agency will become clearer by treating agency as the composition of 'variable and changing orientations within the flow of time' (964).

In the next section, we further discuss the temporal orientations of young people's agency, and explore some of the implications of these for their transition experiences.

Temporal orientations of agency

As Emirbayer and Mische identify, agency is a complex concept involving the interplay of the elements of routine (past), purpose (future), and judgement (present), as well as structural contexts of action:

Conception of agency is intrinsically social and relational … since it centres around the engagement (and disengagement) by actors of the different contextual environments that constitute their own structured yet flexible social universes … agency entails actual interactions with its contexts, in something like an ongoing conversation.[4] (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 973)

We suggest that the agency defined by these authors is applicable in youth transition analysis, particularly within the framework of 'iterative', 'projective', and 'practical-evaluative' elements of agency.

It should be emphasized that these three elements of agency are found within any human action, although the degrees of each may vary. These elements resonate with the action that is 'more (or less) engaged with the past, more (or less) directed toward the future, and more (or less) responsive to the present' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 972), respectively. Hence, the three dimensions are not necessarily consistent, and one of them can be more prominent at a particular point. This is what Biesta and Tedder (2007: 136) refer to as the 'composite nature' of temporal orientations. It is 'the dynamic interplay' of those elements within different contexts that determines 'the ability' to exercise agency to respond to the contexts (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 133). While Biesta and Tedder consider agency as something that is achieved through learning, we follow Emirbayer and Mische, who maintain that agency is a process in which all individuals engage actively. Emirbayer and Mische go on to identify the internal structure within each of the three analytical dimensions. For the purpose of our analysis, we apply their internal structures more generously in the following way.

The iterational element signifies that agency is 'not purely voluntaristic, but builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 136). As defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 971), the iterational element is 'the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time'. Thus, the iterational element is oriented to the past.

The projective element refers to 'the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). We apply the projective element as

something forward-looking, not 'the maintenance of existing situation' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 136), following Emirbayer and Mische's (1998: 971) interpretation that the projective element is oriented towards the future with 'structures of thought and action' that are 'creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future'.

Both the iterative and the projective dimensions are 'acted out' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 136) in the present, and this is the practical-evaluative element: 'the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). In this study, we call the practical-evaluative element, the 'practical' element.

In summary, what we look out for in each element of agency is as follows:

- The iterational element is expressed in aspirations, opportunities, and decisions informed in agreement with young people's previous experiences and the experiences of the people that are part of their social networks. This element involves continuity in relation to past patterns of work and study.
- The projective element is prominent when young people engage in education or employment in search of a 'different' future. This element entails a strategic view towards the future, building a 'portfolio' or working temporarily as a step towards a different future, in which young people were often supported by their networks.
- The practical element involves agency oriented to the coping strategy of the current challenge with a pragmatic and circumstantial approach, accepting what is 'available', whether it is a job or further education. This pragmatism results in a desperate portfolio without coherence, and involves some level of frustration with not being able to pursue what young people previously wanted.

We analysed our data, focusing on which of the three elements of agency could be most explicitly detected from the individual young people that we studied. Before reporting on the analysis, we will briefly explain the methodology and sample of the study.

Methodology and sample

The research design was to conduct a questionnaire survey of 400 respondents, followed by another questionnaire survey a year later with the same cohort with a target sample of 200 respondents, with a view to examining the transitions that those 200 had made. Young people between 18 and 24 were recruited from four FE colleges in London. The following criteria were set to obtain an overall picture of young people who were on vocational courses at FE colleges. The college had: (1) to be a 'mammoth' college accommodating a large number of students from diverse backgrounds; and (2) to offer a range of vocational courses.

The quantitative method was supplemented by qualitative interviews. In the second year 65 young people who volunteered to be interviewed were contacted. Between August and October 2010, 33 young people out of the 65 volunteers were interviewed. Either a face-to-face or a telephone interview was undertaken depending on the preference of the interviewee. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one hour. These 33 young people who completed a vocational course and participated in the questionnaire survey in 2009, and who were interviewed in the follow-up interview in 2010, are the sample of the qualitative study that this article addresses.

The young people were categorized by their major activity into the aforementioned four groups as follows: 9 students were in employment or participating in training on a job (group A); 18 were in education (group B); and 6 were looking for jobs (group C). There were no young

people who had other activities as their major activity (group D). Most of the young people belonged to more than one group. This is depicted in Figure 1. A closer view of the data allowed us to find that of the 9 young people in group A, 4 were also in education, and 1 was following an additional pathway (ballet classes); in the case of the 18 young people in group B, 7 were also working, 3 were looking for jobs, and 1 was following another pathway (looking after her own children); and, of the 6 young people in group C, one was also following another pathway (undertaking voluntary work).
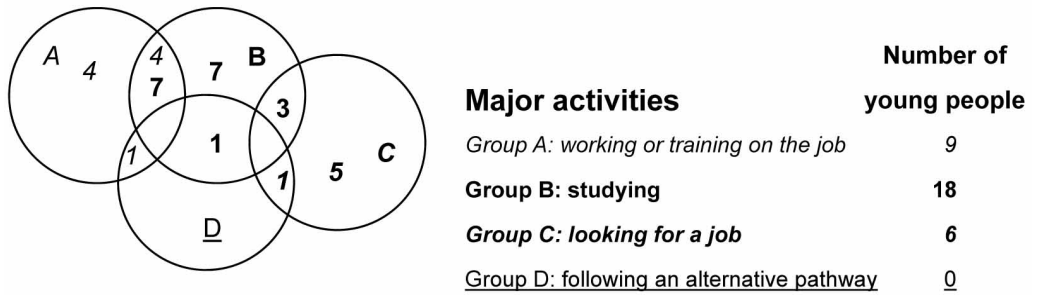
Major activities	Number of young people
Group A: working or training on the job	9
Group B: studying	18
Group C: looking for a job	6
Group D: following an alternative pathway	0

Figure 1: Young people's activities

This diagram shows that the range of activities varies quite a lot among the young people interviewed. The diagram shows, for example, that the most dominant activity is **studying (B)**, with 22 students; 18 (7+7+3+1) people study as their major activity (in bold) and four more study as a secondary activity to work (in italic). The most common combination of activities is to both study and work (11), where seven young people study as their main activity, and four additionally go to work.

This categorization does indicate which 'pathway' is most common among this group of FE college students in London. The interviews with the young people clearly showed a lack of homogeneity in terms of their transitions: the pathways from compulsory schooling to FE and beyond were diverse and, for many, quite complex. There are two main findings here. First, most of our cohort was engaged in more than one activity and, second, many were in education. We elaborate on these two points in the next section and also examine the data more closely, with the use of the iterative, projective, and practical elements of agency developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). In order to present the data we use the sequential number assigned to each participant.

Young people's temporal orientations

While the temporal orientations of actors tend to be 'mixed', we could identify an emphasis in young people's temporal orientations, linked either to 'iterative', 'projective', or 'practical' elements of agency. As we will see, these orientations in turn seem to contribute to the construction of 'individualized trajectories' in the current labour market. Almost half (15) of the 33 young people interviewed could mainly be identified with the 'practical' temporal orientation of agency. We argue that young people's temporal orientation was 'practical' as they had to decide and act in relation to the particular conditions of not being able to undertake their planned pathways.

Agency oriented to the iterational element

A number of young people alluded to past patterns of thought and action as the most important aspect that influenced their decisions. The aspects of the iterational element identified in our

sample were largely to do with methods used to find jobs or further educational options, and ways in which young people constructed their aspirations in agreement with what close members of their social networks had also done.

In this case, young people's options and choices were informed by their networks; that is, the experience, advice, encouragement, and support of the people around the young person influenced her/his decision. These 'networks' included family, friends, and educational or professional contacts. In some cases, this support even included actual jobs or placements in which they could become apprentices and their opportunities were in direct agreement with their previous experiences or the experiences of the people around them. Many approached friends and family asking if they could help (for example, 50). A young man reported that he was invited by a brother's friend to gain work experience at his garage (51) and another one was offered a job by a friend of his family (103). Similarly, another young man got a job in a relative's restaurant, although he was studying mechanics (197). One participant summarized the importance of the networks as follows:

> It's who you know, and who basically your links are in the industry. So if you had a parent in the industry you're more likely to get a job than if you just didn't know anyone, and was coming from a different background. (147)

Their networks not only offered support, but also had an impact on the aspirations of the young people. A young woman wanted to be a chef, following her father (9). Although she would not be able to work on liners like her father due to her illness, she kept the aspiration to work as a chef in restaurants. Young people's aspirations were also informed by past activities that they had enjoyed or which they had performed well, such as their ability to cook (61), to use their hands (197), or to work with computers (242).

Thus, aspirations, experience, advice, and support originated in their previous experiences and in their social networks represent agency oriented to the past, in which the iterational element is prominent. This means that the orientation to the past colours the decisions taken in the present and the possibilities foreseen in the future. Young people in this group felt confident about the skill required in the job, and comfortable with the received support and the job opportunity, even if it was not the field for which they had been preparing. Their transitions tended to go more 'linearly' in relation to their previous experience or the experiences of the people in their social network.

Agency oriented to the projective element

Many young people were actively engaged in the construction of a different future from their parents or close networks, either through education or employment. This projective orientation was expressed in terms of the need to study and gain work experience through apprenticeship in order to have better opportunities in a field that was new to them or their networks:

> Because, if I looked for a job I wouldn't have got much experience as people who stay in college. So I think to myself I would rather stay in college, continue my studies till I'm older, and think of like my own business or my own garage or something for example, or become a teacher. (51)

There was a strong theme in the interviews about the importance of being more prepared. The young people devoted their time and energy to finding courses that fulfilled their aspirations:

> I wanted to do that course (in ticketing and fares) for a long time so I was research [*sic*] where I could do it and finally I found out they do it in ... (130)

Previous education and additional qualifications already gained were not viewed as sufficient. This latter aspect was a very strong concern for young people. Some of them were actively in the process of building a 'portfolio'. For this reason, young people often returned to college to gain additional qualifications in their field (25, 53). For example, one moved on to a course on computer networks, after having studied computer programming (242). For other young people, hopes rested in higher education and the opportunities to have a better chance of securing employment in the future that might result from having a degree. A young man mentioned:

> I'm the first member of my family … to go to university, so I thought that was a very big step. I decided to move forward in today's life like you have to have a very good degree and you have to have some sort of educational background. So I decided that going to university would give me the boost that I needed to get a good job, a well-paid job. (137)

This particular young man was aware that he had to consider making additional efforts in the future, such as getting a placement and studying even to a master's level degree in order to cope with competition:

> When I've finished my course I'll have one year experience plus my master's as well. Cos it's only a year to finish master's in Engineering. (137)

As in this case, some young people were aware that they could no longer rely on traditional pathways and employment opportunities that might have been the norm in previous generations, as competition has increased.

The role of the networks or jobs was different for this group of young people compared to the previous group. Families and tutors encouraged them to explore and take the risk to embark on new pathways, and they actively supported their endeavours. A young woman, who was a mother of two young children, was supported financially by her father and with the care of her children by her partner and her mother, in order to study law at university (256). In her case, her decision was triggered by her hope for the future. The role of a temporary job in this group was 'instrumental' in allowing them to pursue the future that they really wanted. Examples include a young woman who took a gap year and engaged in a temporary job to gain experience and then started her bachelor degree in business (126). A young man took a gap year and got a job to save money in order to continue studying (147). Another young man, decided to study plumbing to gain a greater range of skills:

> I've got electrician, carpenter [*sic*], it includes everyone's job and that's why I took on plumbing. Electricians just know about electrics and that's it. You are limited on the electrician side and plumbing you explore it. (53)

Themes of competition and 'selling yourself' were strong in this group, and many spoke about the need to have something extra on their CV that made them stand out from the crowd:

> You have to do extra activities as well … They want to know like that you're involved in university life as well, you join different groups and you join different sports or you're doing this and that. Cos that'll give the advantage over other students. (137)

This group of young people oriented their agency to the projective element. Even though a strong sense of constraint can be identified, the young people in this group focused on the future and worked with determination to achieve their goals.

Agency oriented to the practical element

Engagement with the present, a practical orientation, was prevailing among the participants in the study. They talked at length about how few opportunities there were to gain work experience or

employment. This meant that young people were often forced to apply for any kind of work and accept anything available to them for financial reasons. Such opportunities were not necessarily related to their previous studies or long-term career plans, and contributed little to improving their portfolio. In these cases, a job only meant the means of getting an income:

> Well in the beginning cos I finished my hairdressing I'm looking for an apprenticeship or a junior in a salon. But now I'm not too fussy and picky so anything, whatever comes, I'll just take it. (24)

In other cases, young people aimed to accrue some work experience in customer service or other 'general' positions, which was not really contributing to their portfolio. Often this meant that young people frequently moved from one form of casual, relatively unskilled employment to another with little or no direction. Such jobs rarely had anything to do with their long-term career goals. A young woman who had wanted to find an apprenticeship in beauty therapy gave up on it and started looking for a job as a sales assistant or a receptionist (128); another young woman had studied ticketing and faring, but she was looking for a job in retail (131). These non-linear trajectories imply a desperate portfolio of qualifications and work experience that lacks coherence and direction. Such a portfolio represents the frustration of struggling young people.

In this group, we found that young people's methods of searching for employment were quite varied. These included job centres, job agencies, searching online, making online applications or submitting online CVs, speculative CV drops, and making personal visits to employers to ask about potential vacancies:

> Sometimes if you go into shops and they don't have the vacancies or they don't have the application forms there and then and they just say apply online or they let you down by saying we haven't got any vacancies, sorry. (128)

This group of young people often mentioned the economic downturn, which had had a significant impact upon their decision making and actual pathways. As they strove to pursue their dreams but failed to find a way forward, they focused on finding casual, practical, and available alternatives. These young people were willing and able to adapt themselves to pathways that were not their first choice. They needed to think about 'what's plan B or what's plan C or what shall I do next' (147). Some considered their practical decisions as temporary strategies that they were forced to take, postponing their real goals (137). The paths they followed were those that were realistically left to them. One interviewee's response was typical:

> The reason why I didn't go straight into employment was it's hard to find a permanent thing, everyone was on the credit crunch, and businesses and companies were 'down folding' ... so it seemed like jobs were scarce at that stage. (147)

The awareness of this situation made some of them consider the economic downturn as a key barrier in their immediate future. The competition for jobs was a serious concern:

> I did get good grades, because I did come prepared – I found out what kind of questions they'd ask me beforehand. But the weird thing was that I just like … I don't know why to be honest, I don't know why I didn't get through … other people were previous nurses … why would you want someone that's inexperienced. (127)

Experience was indeed one of the main elements which they lacked (128, 134, 147, and 187). Even for apprentices, experience was required. A young man expressed outrage:

> What kind of crap is that? How are you going to find an apprentice with experience? The idea of an apprenticeship is that they train you up! (50)

Unlike the projective group who intentionally engaged in courses related to their previous studies and their imagined career, this group continued with their studies because they were not able to find a job. A young man said:

> I got my qualification and stuff but now as such I am still thinking what shall I do next or what shall I go to next course or another course [*sic*] – I didn't end up in a job or end up in anything successful to be making a living. (147)

They were frustrated because they could not achieve their goals. Without a job, some of them could not go to university (24, 134). Their agency was temporally oriented to face that current challenge.

On some few occasions, circumstantial opportunities were opened to them, such as a young man who won a good place in a plumbing contest and as a result was offered a job as a teacher (53). This unexpected opportunity became for him an important factor in the construction of his trajectory. By contrast, some believed that they had bad luck (128).

Faced with challenges, young people were proactive in making pragmatic choices by 'learning to sell yourself' (174) or lying (50). At the same time, some were actively developing their own competitive strategies:

> It is extremely difficult to get a placement now. You have to be very determined because a lot of companies will let you down and say they're not taking you on board. But if you give up you'll not get the opportunity to have it, so you have to keep on striving and striving and trying different companies and try telling your tutor that you really need to do it. (137)

A few had lost hope: 'Nothing, I'm not doing anything' (187). Another one said: 'when you go shop-to-shop looking [for a job] and then you just give up' (128). Apart from these two cases, however, the young people presented in this section responded practically to the challenge of the job market. They studied without longer-term goals or entered into any form of temporary employment that they could find for the time being. With this group, the past was detached, and the future was unknown.

Contextualized agency in the present

This discussion leads us to conclude that agency appears to be pivotal in the definition of young people's lives and trajectories in the current context, and that young people's temporal orientation shapes how they exercise agency and engage with the contexts in which they live.

One of the conditions with which the young people had to cope was 'the implosion of the youth labour market' (Wolf, 2011: 9). It can be argued that the struggling transitions of the young people studied are largely a result of the competition derived from the economic downturn and VET policy uncertainty. Until the 1980s, vocational pathways were secure routes to employment for young people – 'it was a different world, and above all, a different economy and labour market' (Wolf, 2011: 9). As argued in the Trades Union Congress (TUC) (cited in Allen, 2010) report, when the economic recession hit the country, it was the young people that were affected most severely. What makes matters more difficult for them is that in the current knowledge economy, employers expect employees to be well-qualified and skilled and, in addition, to have work experience. Young people have responded by staying longer in post-compulsory education or training to gain higher qualifications. The relationship between VET and the labour market today has become more complex, and it is within this complexity that young people have to make decisions for their future.

We are not implying that the group of young people studied are in a state of 'fatalistic acceptance' (Evans, 2007) in their decision making. However, they can be characterized as

exhibiting 'frustrated agency' (Evans, 2007). They are forced to accept whatever they can in order to cope with the current situation. Coming out of college, the young people face a world that challenges their purposes and efforts, and these challenges narrow opportunities for development and close the door to their orientations to the future possibilities they had imagined. Nonetheless, they exercise agency in the midst of difficulties, even if they do not know what to aim for. It was the case with the young people studied that they chose practical options, accepting whatever was available.

As we have seen, agency does not mean freedom without constraint; on the contrary, it implies self-determination and being highly proactive (Biesta and Tedder, 2007) in the construction of options in the particular context. Such options tend to be risky, erratic, and highly circumstantial in competitive and complex contexts. It is suggested that today's conditions direct young people's agency towards the practical element.

Conclusion

In this study, we have engaged in the examination of agency empirically, and we have found the way in which temporal orientations are constructed in relation to the contexts in which agency is exercised. In doing so, we have analysed the implications of temporal orientations of agency on individual trajectories.

The outcome of our analysis is that, out of 33 participants, 15 young people – nearly half – direct their 'choices' to respond to the immediate conditions. Among the conditions they face are the economic recession, the high level of competition for employment, and the spiralling costs of education. Their paths are constructed on the basis of the practical element of agency.

Those who were making their decisions oriented to the past were the second largest group, consisting of 10 young people. They relied on the support of their networks and 'chose' to continue with what their prior context could offer them. On the other hand, the group that had 'hopes', showed a strong projective element. They were the young people who knew what they wanted to be and how that could be achieved. It is our speculation that, in a time of a higher employment rate in a better economy, the proportion made up by this group could rise. We hope to be able to undertake research under such circumstances.

We conclude that the temporal orientation framework developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) has been a useful tool in understanding how young people make decisions in their transitions towards careers. Agencies oriented towards iterational, projective, and practical elements have provided us with a tool in further looking into individualized decision-making processes, although our work is still a work in progress. We have acknowledged the overlapping nature of the three elements. However, after elaborating on the criteria for each temporal orientation, we were able to analyse our data with a certain level of clarity. We aim to consolidate the framework, taking into account that young people's temporal orientations are not only focused towards a particular time.

We would also like to return to the discussion about the interplay between structure and agency. Emirbayer and Mische alluded to agency's contribution to change (or not, as the case may be) in the contexts in which actors participate. The young people studied were exercising agency, even if it was constrained. This has an impact on their individual trajectories. In return, we suggest that young people's agency does have an impact on contexts – because they are reinforcing the contexts in which they are at the present. We have seen young people who had been struggling with their transitions, such as the young man who decided to stop searching for jobs due to the 'credit crunch', the one who registered on the course without a clear purpose, and the young woman who accepted any sort of job available. These frustrated agents collectively

play a part in 'the implosion of the youth labour markets' (Wolf, 2011: 9). The agencies interact with the contexts. The tendency that we foresee, unfortunately, is towards the exacerbation of the present situation.

Notes

1.   The Changing Youth Labour Markets and School to Work Transitions in Modern Britain projects were funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.
2.   The young people were between 17 and 23 in the first year of the research project.
3.   Although a number of authors associate the concept of 'choice biography' with Beck, Woodman (2009: 243) argues that the concept is 'neither orthodox nor pervasive, but instead is the result of a poor caricature of Beck.'
4.   We understand that the 'ongoing conversation' meant by Emirbayer and Mische as continuing discussion between structure and agency, which is separate from Archer's (2003) 'internal conversation'. An important aspect of agency is brought about by Archer, who underlines the co-constructive relationship between structure and agency. Agency not only 'responds' to structure, but also has 'causal powers'. In this way, agency is both associated with the resistance and the eventual transformation of such a structure, while it also mediates structural forces and contributes to their reproduction via 'internal conversation'. Regardless of Archer's strong split between 'internal/subjective' and 'external/objective' forces, her approach is useful to characterize the active role of agency in the mediation of 'structural and cultural properties'.

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