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Whose choice? Young people, career choices and reflexivity re-examined

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Abstract

Young people making future career choices are doing so in an environment that often highlights the benefits supposedly wrought by individualisation and reflexive choice. It is argued that those who demonstrate reflexivity in their decision-making would have an

advantage in the negotiation of future risks. The authors of this article agree with theorists who note that career choices are still strongly influenced by a person's location in the class structure. However, unlike some writers who suggest youth from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to evaluate risk and demonstrate reflexivity, the authors suggest the opposite. Interviews were conducted with young people aged 16–17 who are participating in an ongoing project designed to follow a cohort of young Australians from adolescence into later life. Our findings suggest that while a more privileged location may afford young people security from many potential risks and problems, this may in fact encourage a non-reflexive perspective and they may choose careers based on social norms rather than ability. Instead, we argue that it is young people from less privileged backgrounds who tend to demonstrate reflexivity in their career planning.

Keywords: Career choices, class, reflexivity, risk, young people

Introduction

Young people and their future career choices occupy a broad spectrum in recent academic and policy discussions. This has occurred particularly in light of suggestions that we live in an increasingly individualised society, where many traditional restrictions on work opportunities are argued to have broken down. Instead, it is said that personal choice has been prioritised and 'it is up to the individual to find out what she or he is capable of doing' (Bauman, 2000: 62). Evidence, however, suggests the educational and career options undertaken by young people once they leave school are still profoundly influenced by their location on the socio-economic spectrum (e.g. Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007; Reay et al., 2001a; Teese, 2000).

This article engages with pertinent debates relating to the issue of today's youth and career choices. Theoretically, while the individualisation thesis has been critiqued and moderated over time (e.g. Elliott, 2002; Howard, 2007; Threadgold, 2011), it continues to exert influence in current discourses around career choice confronting today's school leavers (Grytnes, 2011). In Australia, personal ability and individual choice, rather than traditional determinants such as class or socio-economic status, are increasingly seen as the guiding principles for young people as they consider their future career options. Discourses of personal choice and responsibility abound in Australian school career education policies and students are encouraged, regardless of their circumstances, to consider careers that align with their individual interests and abilities (e.g. Department of Education, 2013; Education Queensland, 2013; myfuture, 2012). Post-secondary institutions also reinforce this message of personal choice. Universities, for instance, run advertising campaigns encouraging students to choose their institution (e.g. Monash University, 2012; University of Queensland, 2011). Likewise, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) undertakes regular recruitment campaigns promoting the armed forces as a career option for young people (Department of Defence, 2013). Alternatively, for those who feel their skills are better suited to a trade, options are provided via the government run 'Australian Apprenticeships' initiative (Australian Apprenticeships, 2013). In short, a consistent message is being delivered to

young people in Australia that they have the choice to follow the education and career path they believe will best suit their own interests and strengths.

The extent to which young people engage with such discourses of choice, and whether they identify barriers to reaching their future educational and career goals is the focus of our study. In doing so, however, we do not restrict ourselves to considering young people's aspirational upward mobility. While there has been a tendency to focus on barriers to the career choices available to less privileged youth (e.g. Teese, 2000; Threadgold and Nilan, 2009), there has been little critical engagement regarding the factors that influence the transition options available to youths who are positioned higher on the socio-economic spectrum. Nader's observation that the social sciences tend to 'study down' (Nader, 1972: 289), potentially at the expense of what could be learned by 'studying up', continues to be a relevant criticism for much current research in this area. In order to gain greater insights into the influences on the choices of young people across a range of socio-economic positions, we compare the career considerations of youth from working class backgrounds with those from more privileged backgrounds.

At the core of the individualisation thesis is the suggestion that people are increasingly responsible for their own destinies. There is an expectation they will make their own choices and ensure that they have taken the appropriate steps to negotiate potential hazards and mediate any associated risks that threaten their success. Early advocates of this theory included Giddens (1991), Beck (1999), Bauman (2001) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). More recent efforts have taken more measured approaches. Howard (2007), for example, provided an effective overview of contested areas of the individualisation thesis – yet most contributions still argue that one of the fundamental changes wrought by individualisation is the changing relationship between choice and security. It has been argued that in the past, people knew where they were placed within the social fabric and, despite being limited in their life choices because of the restrictions brought about by structural expectations, these restrictions, nevertheless, provided a degree of security and certainty.

Now, it is suggested, this sense of security has disappeared. The change in the social fabric and reorganisation of structures such as the family and social class means that individuals must make their own life decisions and accept personal responsibility for their actions. Failure will be less likely to be attributed to external factors, but to their own inadequacies or inability to adjust. It is argued that success in this era therefore requires reflexivity – a persistent critique of self, an awareness of risk and a drive to adjust in the face of life's challenges. A need to act reflexively has resulted as a consequence of an increased societal expectation that individuals should strategically manage their own lives and actions, independently assessing the options and obstacles that affect their life chances (Giddens, 1991). They must be aware that their environment is fraught with risk and that they have the responsibility to negotiate those risks carefully.

Habitus, reflexivity, individualisation: Examining young people and their career choices

Individualisation as a theoretical framework has, however, been criticised both generally and in terms of its relevance to the study of youth. One argument is that the degree to which the individual has the power to act as an independent and self-determining agent has been overestimated, especially for those positioned at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. This may be because, despite ‘the progressive individualisation of behaviour’, the authority of traditional structural powers such as class still have considerable influence (Nollman and Strasser, 2007: 96), or because new structural factors in areas such as information and communications are creating inequalities of opportunity for different social groups (e.g. Willis and Tranter, 2006). Questions have also been raised regarding whether the individualisation thesis provides an appropriate theoretical framework with which to develop an understanding of the factors that influence young people and their life path directions. Furlong and Cartmel (2007), for example, believe that for young people, the impact of structural factors such as social status cannot be discounted. They argue that while there is now an individualised discourse of choice and personal control which young people are expected to subscribe to, in reality there are forces at play that are outside of their control.

Social habitus may provide resistance to the demands of individualisation (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu theorised the habitus as a structure or system of dispositions which mediate an individual’s thoughts and actions. These dispositions are the product of a person’s social location, but are developed in a taken-for-granted manner such that the individual tends to react in a habitual and relatively unconscious way to many circumstances. He calls it ‘the practical sense’ – a type of knowledge which reflects the social class or milieu in which an individual grew up and which in turn influences how people think and respond to their experiences (Bourdieu, 1990: 13).

In considering the influence of habitus upon how a person interacts with the social, it should be noted that Bourdieu acknowledges there are certain situations when individuals are more likely to act in a manner suggesting their own conscious reflection is overriding habituation. His use of the term ‘reflexivity’ incorporates these situations – he suggests that reflexivity is an adaptive ability that emerges in response to adversity. When a person is faced with disruptive or unfamiliar situations where there are ‘gaps between expectation and experience’ (Elder-Vass, 2007: 329), Bourdieu believes people have the capacity to step from their habitual comfort zone and deal with the task at hand. In this article our use of the term reflexivity closely aligns with Bourdieu’s original intent.

If a person’s habitus influences how they might engage with their social environment, but can be potentially overridden by disruptive or changing circumstances, then it might be argued that the powers of social habitus are likely to diminish in a society increasingly driven by the demand for reflexive choices. There is, however, another viewpoint to be considered – the possibility that the capacity to act as a reflexive individual is contingent on having been raised within and developed by particular social locations As Sweetman (2003: 543) states:

... reflexive orientation towards the contemporary environment may itself be regarded as a form of habitus, itself the outcome of an *adaptation to* [original emphasis] – rather than a distancing from – the changing nature of the social terrain.

When applying this notion to the topic of youth and the factors that determine their life course, it is possible then that not all youths have equal capacity to reflexively manage their lives. Such abilities may be developed and nurtured within the habitus of some, but not of others. The question, therefore, is what conditions facilitate the reflexive capacity in young people, and how might a reflexive habitus manifest when considering future careers?

A common assumption is that in order to engage fully with the opportunities in the contemporary social environment, one must not only have the motivation to act as a reflective agent, but also the cultural capital and material resources to do so. For more privileged youth, it is suggested the freedoms afforded by higher cultural and economic capital offer considerable advantages in negotiating opportunities and avoiding risks and restrictions (Skeggs, 2004). Moreover, advantages accrue to more privileged young people whose parents reflexively engage in their education to ensure the continuation of their privileged positions (Ball, 2003). As Threadgold and Nilan (2009: 48) argue, reflexivity can be seen as ‘cultural capital deployed in habitus’ by young people from privileged backgrounds.

In essence, the suggestion from theorists using this perspective is that social advantage facilitates reflexive advantage and those who are more privileged are more adaptive. As a consequence, a tacit assumption has been adopted that reflexive capacity is the inherited right of those who are raised in such environments, whereas others positioned at the lower end of the class spectrum are reflexively marginalised. This is a supposition we believe requires more critical engagement, for two reasons. First, on a theoretical level, little research has been done which has prioritised an understanding of what constitutes the conditions for reflexivity for young people making important life choices. Arguing that privileged youth are more able to adapt to life risks due to material or social advantage is potentially at odds with the notion that reflexive habitus develops by an adaptation to changing social conditions. Second, there are contradictory findings emerging from field research. While some argue the case for reflexivity residing in the ranks of the more socio-economically favoured, other studies suggest the opposite. In particular, findings from theorists such as Reay et al. (2001b, 2009), who have examined the progress of British youth into higher education institutions, suggest reflexive awareness and activity is more likely to be found amongst working class youth who progress to university, whereas those higher on the class spectrum display far less critical self-engagement. Huppatz (2010) has made a similar observation. Her research into the motivations of women working as nurses and social workers indicated greater reflexivity amongst those from working class backgrounds than those from middle class backgrounds whose habitus appeared to have limited their career choice.

Our research widens the net by making the starting point a comparative study of the planned educational and career choices of Australian secondary students from working class backgrounds compared to those from more privileged backgrounds. The aim is to gain an

understanding of the processes that influence their decisions regarding what they would do once they finished school, and to assess whether there were any significant differences in the intentions or attitudes of young people from different socio-economic locations. We investigated what they were considering as viable career options, and how they felt they might achieve their plans.

Method

This study is associated with the larger project titled 'Social Futures and Life Pathways of Young People in Queensland'. Also known as the 'Our Lives' project, this study has been following the lives of a single age cohort of young Queenslanders as they make the transition from early adolescence into adulthood. The baseline cohort participants in the Wave 1 survey in 2006 consisted of 7031 young people then aged 12–13 years old and were recruited from across Queensland. A survey has since been administered to the cohort every two to three years. A number of semi-structured face-to-face interviews have also been carried out with some members of the cohort.¹

In this study, we present data collected from 50 members of the Our Lives cohort who took part in semi-structured individual interviews during 2009–2010. They were then aged 16–17 and in their final two years of school. At that stage they were undertaking study that would count towards achieving their senior school qualification, tertiary entrance rank and/or International Baccalaureate.² The need to decide what they would do after leaving school was becoming a looming reality and we considered this an important juncture at which to investigate their plans for the future.

The participants were selected from members of the Our Lives cohort living in south-east Queensland.³ The sample was balanced for gender. Twenty-six participants attended government funded schools and 24 attended private schools, run by either church organisations or independent boards. In order to ensure a representation of young people from varying socio-economic positions, we controlled for parental occupation using group categories described in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Three interviewers were involved in the collection of data. The majority of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, and the remainder at local cafés. They each took between one and two hours to complete. Topics covered in these interviews included future study plans, career goals, financial issues, relationships and family. The interviews were audio recorded, later fully transcribed and open coded. Links with theoretical concepts were then made via the process of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Ascertaining the 'class' position of the individual participants was important for understanding nuances in the data. This was, however, a conceptually challenging task. There are a number of ways socio-economic status can be determined, and there has been considerable literature over the years devoted to efforts to delineate and define positions on the class spectrum (e.g. Crompton and Scott, 2000; Wright, 1985). In Australia, the task of

locating class can be challenging (e.g. Huppatz, 2010) and our experience was that asking Australian teenagers their 'class' provided inconsistent accounts. Although receptive to questions relating to perceptions of economic privilege, many of our interviewees neither recognised nor identified with the concept.

A retrospective analytical framework provided a more practicable strategy for determining class position. We amalgamated participant information previously collected via survey data (i.e. parental occupation, school 'type', residential location) with interview data obtained from the participants' personal stories and descriptions of their economic and social circumstances. We would argue that this technique demonstrated a degree of methodological pragmatism encouraged by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), where the conceptual concerns of the research guide the choice of methods. In this way, we determined that 23 participants could be viewed as 'working class'. They typically attended government run schools, lived in lower socio-economic areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), were receiving a youth allowance and/or their parents either had occupations requiring lower skill levels (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) or were also receiving income support. By comparison, the remaining 27 participants were determined to come from more privileged circumstances – i.e. middle class backgrounds or higher. They tended to live in suburbs classified as having a medium to high index of relative social advantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), they more often attended independent or church run schools and/or at least one parent had an occupation classified as requiring a skill level commensurate with a diploma, bachelor's degree or higher qualification (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

We are also mindful that Brannen and Nilsen (2005) have been critical of much research that employs the individualisation thesis to youth studies. They believe it 'has become so commonly accepted in the social sciences that it is rarely tested nor operationalised adequately through appropriate research designs and conceptualisation' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005: 413). We took their lead in adopting a comparatively small-scale qualitative enquiry aimed at ensuring the participants had the time to consider and describe the various issues discussed, and the contexts in which their experiences were gained and decisions made. This assisted in establishing a connection between the theoretical concepts and the lived reality of the participants' lives.

Analysis and discussion

Articulating plans, making choices

The question 'What are you going to do when you leave school?' is commonly asked of young people today. Behind that simple question, however, is a telling indication of the apparent changes which have been wrought by individualisation. It implies the notion of free choice rather than expectation; of decisions made without the restrictions of religion, tradition, class or other factors. Instead, more youths are now being encouraged to finish their secondary studies, and post-school education options have expanded in many western countries (Arum et al., 2007). It is an environment in which individual interest and ability dominate the discourse, and are posited as the primary criteria upon which choices should be made.

As may be expected, the future plans of the 50 participants ranged from very concrete and determined ideas, to the very vague. Some knew exactly what career they eventually hoped to follow, and had well-researched plans to follow specific study or work experience paths in order to achieve their goals. Some were definite about wanting to pursue a specific field of tertiary study or post-school skills training, but were less articulate about what job they expected to be doing later in their lives. Other young people were vacillating between different fields of study, different fields of work, or combinations thereof, and had yet to make any firm decisions about their immediate post-school futures.

Despite these variances, patterns began to emerge in our discussions with the participants in this study. In Australia, as in many western countries, governments have enacted a number of policies over recent years designed to encourage young people to finish their secondary schooling and continue to some form of further education. In addition, educational reforms in Australia in the 1980s saw a compressed two-tier tertiary system emerge, leading to increased numbers of universities, and supported by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. As a consequence, there has been an increasing trend for school-leavers to attend some form of higher education (for example, as noted in Arum et al., 2007). This was reflected in the plans of the interviewees. Of the 50 participants spoken to, 33 indicated that their first or likely preference would be to attend university, seven indicated they planned to go to TAFE, and a further five nominated joining the ADF, but studying for a university or TAFE qualification in the process. Only five young people did not nominate some sort of further study – one because she planned to get a job immediately, and four because they did not really know what they wanted to do (upon further questioning, however, these four all admitted that higher education was a probable option).

When the class status of participants was taken into account, more distinct patterns began to emerge. The most notable distinction was in the range of choices being considered. Of the 27 interviewees in the upper socio-economic brackets, 25 nominated university as their most likely path after school and only two suggested other alternatives. In comparison, the 23 working class participants provided far more varied answers: eight planned to attend university, four wanted to enter the ADF, seven proposed attending TAFE, one was planning to get a job, and the remaining three had not committed to any career path. What emerged was a decidedly narrower range of options being considered by the middle/upper class young people and university was being privileged over other alternatives. Meanwhile, the preferences of the working class participants seemed to represent a considerably wider range of career possibilities, running the gamut from immediate paid work (requiring no educational qualifications), through to university studies.

Probing further brought more nuanced variations to light. When we looked at the young people who nominated university as their probable post-school destination, another interesting pattern emerged. Fifteen of the 33 interviewees who expected to attend university were very specific about the course or career path they wished to follow. Not only were they able to articulate which course they hoped to enrol in, but most had definite preferences as to

which institutions they preferred, in what order, and why. For example, one of the middle/upper class participants had her entire art conservation study career mapped out, from an undergraduate course at a local university, through to a postgraduate degree at an interstate university. Similarly, one of the working class participants discussed her plans to attend a specific university in order to study physiotherapy.

The remaining 18 participants, however, were less specific about their study plans. When asked what they planned to do after school, their answers were far more general, and consisted of the oft-used reply, 'Go to university'. Further questions regarding what course they actually intended to do at university brought more vague responses, generalist ideas, or sometimes even an admittance that they did not know. Of the respondents in this category, only two were from a working class background. These two were both expecting high tertiary entrance scores in their senior studies and both were vacillating between medicine and architecture. The other 16 were all in the middle/upper class category, and this group provided answers that gave the impression attendance at university was the only decision they had made. The choice of what degree to actually apply for was something that apparently could be worked out later. Responses included: 'Maybe business management', 'It was accounting, but now I'm not sure', 'Probably law', 'Maybe medicine, but I'm still deciding', 'Something science-based' and 'Vet or writing – not sure'.

What was causing these distinctive differences between the different classes of participants – both in numbers of those planning to go to university, and in their ability to articulate what they would do once they got there? Based on the information provided to us from the interviewees, it certainly was not differences in the average academic abilities between the two socio-economic groups. Both had an admitted variety of academic achievement – from those who usually gain high results, to those who admitted that they struggled at school. Not surprisingly, the working class young people reporting lower grades were less likely to nominate university as a tertiary option. Instead, they indicated a preference for TAFE studies or the ADF as their likely post-secondary route – destinations that tend to have lower academic entry levels.

Considering a non-university option, however, was not common amongst the middle/ upper class participants who appeared to be performing poorly at school. Amy⁴ for example, pointed out, 'I actually do struggle quite a bit with my grades because I have dyslexia, so it's harder for me. I'm not sure if I would be able to handle the workload [at university].' Despite this, she still nominated university as her planned study destination. Similarly, Brendan, who was unable to nominate a course of study that attracted him and who commented that his university entry chances might be affected by his low maths results, still said that in five years' time he would be at 'uni, and hopefully moved out of the house'. But what if Brendan did not get admitted to university in the immediate school-leaver intake? His reaction to that possibility was not dissimilar to a number of other middle/upper class participants. Quite simply, he seemed either unable or unwilling to acknowledge that university might not be an option for him. His suggestion that continuing to fail maths might affect his ability to go to university was followed by the casual comment, 'I didn't do so good on the last test, but I still

got a C+ overall – even though I failed that.’ He appeared to assume that things would be okay in the long term.

Young people categorised as ‘working class’ – regardless of academic ability or intended post-school destination – were more likely to have back-up plans. Many had already worked out alternative ways to achieve their study and career goals if they failed to achieve the requisite entry marks. They were also more likely to have considered various other individual or structural possibilities that may affect their choices, and to have thought about how they would achieve their goals if any obstacles presented themselves. These obstacles included financial or geographical limitations, the possibility they may not like their first choice, and the thought that they may need alternative skills to accompany their study regimes in case their planned careers did not go to plan. James, for example, had very specific ideas about wanting to do a double degree in programming and creative writing. When asked how these plans were going to be financed he spoke of first joining the ADF:

I have heard about the Australian Defence Force Gap Year ... Doing military training, also the fact that you get paid quite a decent amount for doing the Australian Defence Force Gap Year, but doing the training for military I think would be good life experience. Then I can also look after myself a bit more then.

The middle/upper class participants did not appear to seriously consider obstacles. When prompted, most could only nominate poor study habits as a potential obstacle, although they often joked about it, rather than treating it as a stumbling block. This was illustrated by Clara who admitted, ‘Spending too much time on MSN instead of doing homework. That would be a fair obstacle to getting into uni!’ Even those who had no idea what they wanted to study did not appear to consider that this, in itself, would be a problem to be negotiated for long-term university success. Only two of the middle/upper class interviewees had actively acknowledged that their academic results might not get them into university. As to other obstacles, certainly the more privileged young people were at an advantage with regards to structural issues, especially financially and geographically (geography being easier to overcome for those with access to cars and/or funds to cover travel). However, when asked if there was anything which might prevent him from achieving his university aims, David looked utterly perplexed, until he finally decided, ‘Maybe if I died or something?’

Reflexive differences in young people’s career planning: ‘Things will work out’ versus ‘I will work around them’

The results of our research suggest that the discourse of individualisation persists amongst the young people who participated in this study. The notion of personal choice was evident in the way they discussed their future plans, and individual effort was prioritised as the key to achieving their goals. Although studies such as Reay et al. (2009) or Aries and Seider (2007) suggest that it is lower class youths most prone to being ‘focused on personal characteristics such as determination, self-reliance, motivation and hard work as important to academic success, accepting the meritocratic myth’ (Reay et al., 2009: 1108), we found that the more

privileged young people in our study also ‘talked the talk’ – even if only to acknowledge they needed to study harder or minimise internet time if they were to achieve satisfactory marks.

However, while we do not deny the evidence supporting continuing inequities between the longer-term outcomes of young people from different socio-economic statuses (for example, Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007; Reay et al., 2001a; Teese, 2000), our analysis of intentions suggests a rethink of some of the common judgements made about socio-economic status and reflexive awareness of today’s young people. In particular, scrutiny should be placed on discrepancies in the range of career options being planned by youths of differing socio-economic statuses, and how this is manifested in differing reflexive responses.

Our research shows the working class interviewees had study and career ambitions ranging from post-graduate university study to short-term unskilled labour. On the other hand, the middle/upper class participants, with very few exceptions, nominated university as a post-school destination. What emerged was a pattern identified by Aries and Seider (2007: 152), who noted that lower class individuals tended to choose occupations based upon ‘their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments’, while ‘affluent’ individuals were more likely to privilege career paths commensurate with the social capital of their families. For the middle/upper class youths in our study, university was nominated as an almost default destination. For them, the notion of ‘choice’ was not based upon the myriad of workforce possibilities appearing in the job guide provided to every high school student (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013), instead, they see ‘choice’ almost exclusively in terms of what university course to pick. Erica, for example, noted how she was having trouble making up her mind because, ‘There’s a lot out there but it’s just like making the choices ... [and] ... there are a lot of things that I would consider doing.’ But for Erica, ‘out there’ actually meant university, and the ‘choices’ were coming from her tertiary admissions booklet. In privileging university as a post-school destination, these young people seemed almost unaware of the limits they were inherently putting on their choices, and in some cases seemingly ignorant of the apparent mismatch between personal abilities and tertiary expectations.

The choices manifested by the middle/upper class youths suggest the continuing influence of habitus upon their actions. Their expectations and aspirations are related to the social and material resources available to them, and through their actions they are – consciously or unconsciously – seeking to reproduce the social position of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1984: 466). Career options outside of university are excluded even from contemplation, suggesting a response conditioned by their habitus rather than – as Bourdieu would put it – an earnest engagement with alternatives (Bourdieu, 1990).

The suggestion that habitus appears to be a guiding force in their decisions is reinforced by the tendency of many middle/upper class young people to inadequately contemplate or countenance problems or pitfalls on the way to achieving their tertiary goals. When asked about specific potential obstacles, a number of participants offered appropriate solutions, but

they almost invariably lacked specificity. The prevailing attitude appeared to be that ultimately, 'things will work out'.

In marked contrast, the working class young people were often quite specific in their proposed solutions and indicated that a significant amount of research had gone into considering alternative options. For example, Hannah summarised one possible option: 'If I couldn't do my forensics through uni, I was also going to do it through the police which meant I had to train five years as a general police officer and then you ... can get into the field.' The attitude of the working class participants to obstacles was responded to more than once with the phrase, 'I will work around them'. They saw themselves as being responsible for their futures and believed they would have to work hard to achieve their goals. As Meg put it:

I'm not saying that my life has been tragic or anything, and I'm not saying it's been really, really hard, ... but I haven't had it really easy. I haven't been paid for my whole life, I haven't been privately educated, I haven't been driven to and from school every day. So I've had to do things myself and be self-sufficient. Showing that hard work does pay off. It's all about application. If you apply yourself to something you can get to where you want to go.

Discussion

The middle/upper class young people's more passive acceptance that 'things will work out' was noted in Threadgold and Nilan's (2009) study of Australian school students. These authors also identified amongst more privileged youth an acceptance of uncertainty relating to their futures, which differed markedly from the more prosaic concerns of working class youths. Like Threadgold and Nilan, we agree that the possession of higher social and economic capital promotes these attitudes, and we concur with them in suggesting that reflexivity is reliant on socio-economic position. Our evidence, however, does not support their claims middle class young people possess 'the "new" cultural capital of reflexivity' (Threadgold and Nilan, 2009: 63) allowing them to accept structural uncertainty and be secure in the knowledge that they 'possess the choice to choose' (Threadgold and Nilan, 2009: 59). Rather, we argue that the passivity evident in the choices of many higher socio-economic young people suggests a *non-reflexive* or pre-reflexive state enabled by the security of their positions and socially located habitus.

The tendency to assume that higher socio-economic status promotes reflexivity, in our view, is confounding likely outcomes with actual actions and abilities. Having resources at their disposal to promote future opportunities or minimise adversity does not mean that middle/upper class youths are actively engaging with their futures in a self-reflexive manner. Neither does it necessarily mean that they are engaging in different 'types' of reflexivity (e.g. Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Grytnes, 2011), where their social advantage has meant they are able to delay making a choice. As Adams (2006: 518) notes, 'reflexivity arises in the specific, concrete negotiation of conflictual fields, not amidst the world of increased exposure to choice-based social systems'. If the middle/upper class youths are acting as individualised subjects and subscribe to the belief that they have the responsibility to take control over what they do, then they will take steps to evaluate and use the resources they have at their disposal

and will be active in planning for contingencies. But as our research has demonstrated, this does not appear to occur on a consistent basis amongst this group of people. In particular, the narrow range of educational options they are prioritising, and their lack of engagement with actual career options indicates reliance not on individual self-reflection, but on social expectation.

We suggest instead that reflexivity is more likely to manifest from *exposure* to adversity. In contemporary society, it is in fact the *lack* of material and/or social resources that is driving young people on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum to actively acknowledge barriers, and take personal responsibility to find ways of negotiating those boundaries to ensure that they live up to the expectations of a more individualised society. Like Sweetman (2003), we build on Bourdieu's (1990) ideas that reflexivity can emerge when individuals find themselves in situations for which their social location has ill-prepared them; for when their available capital does not appear sufficient to negotiate the immediate situational challenge. For Sweetman (2003), a reflexive habitus is encouraged by the insecurity and instability wrought by changes created by individualisation. However, we differ from Sweetman in his suggestion, shared by others, that lower class groups are more likely to be the 'reflexivity losers' (Adkins, 2002: 49). We instead argue that it is within the field of marginalisation that reflexivity is more likely to flourish – it is there that, as McNay (1999: 110) notes, there is more likely to be dislocation between the 'constitutive structures' and the subject's habitus. In the case of working class youths, what this means is that the discourse of individualisation and freedom of career choice, to which they are constantly exposed, is often at odds with the realities of their lived experience.

Unlike more socio-economically privileged young people, for whom certain education paths (that is, university) are almost a 'foregone conclusion' (Atkinson, 2010: 97), working class youths are being exposed to a wider range of options than their social upbringing and material means may afford them. Especially for those with academic ability, the prospect of attending university brings with it an attendant amount of risk – risk that must be engaged with out of necessity, rather than abstracted away as the middle/upper class students are more likely to do.

The working class youths were thus more likely to provide concrete or creative solutions to obstacles to their career goals. As mentioned, many had already researched alternative options for entering their preferred career if they failed to get the requisite university entrance score. Monetary concerns brought solutions such as entering the Australian Defence Force on a scholarship (thus ensuring that the ADF paid for the degree), participating in paid work in order to save money for an education, or exploring various scholarship or welfare options available to them. One student, aware of the potential benefits of attending university compared to TAFE, had even worked out that he could do two years at TAFE, then one year at university, and finish with the skills he required along with a university degree.

This is not to suggest that *all* working class young people will necessarily benefit from the reflexive opportunities the individualisation discourse affords. Adams (2006: 522) notes that:

One's habitus may restrict and condition a proportion of 'choices'; social change may be facilitating a reflexivity which penetrates the fog of structured dispositions; but identities are formed in the ability to translate the choices which emerge from this complex interplay into meaningful realities.

According to Adams (2006) this means that the self-awareness created by reflexivity may often result in fatalism and frustration for lower class youth, who remain rooted to their habitual occupations through an acknowledgement of limits to their social and structural mobility. Certainly, not all the working class participants in our study planned for career trajectories at odds with their social upbringing. In our study, however, the working class interviewees were contemplating a wide range of options – from immediate paid work though to post-graduate studies. This suggests a broadening of outlook for many of them, and a tendency to challenge traditional socio-economic boundaries. While it is likely that some of these plans may not materialise, at least in these early stages they were not closing off options as rapidly as the middle/upper class participants.

It is the more socio-economically privileged youths who instead appear not to be challenging their habitus, and lack reflexive engagement even when it would appear prudent to do so. By conforming to social expectations, and almost consistently prioritising university over other educational or career options as a post-school destination, the middle/ upper class interviewees demonstrated a passivity which debunks the notion that privilege equates to reflexivity, or even greater choice. In particular, what was apparent was that some youths in this group appeared ill equipped to cope with the rigours of university studies, and yet were intending to follow this path. Unlike the working class participants, who mostly appeared to be suggesting career paths consistent with their abilities and interests, there were a number of middle/upper class participants who instead seemed to be prioritising social expectations. While material resources may not hinder their future success, it brings forth the question of whether individual obstacles (such as ability or satisfaction) may jeopardise the potential for these young people to achieve their career goals – and whether their goals are even their own in the first place.

This study demonstrates the distinctive ways that working class and middle/upper class youths in Australia are negotiating the choices available to them as they embark upon their lives after secondary education. The consequences of these choices, however, are not yet known. Our intention is to now undertake follow-up interviews with these same participants to further investigate the choices they have made and the paths they have followed.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that material conditions and social resources play a role in what young people will be able to do once they leave school. Decisions must be based on, and can be limited by, access to various resources. However, we must beware of assuming that a *lack* of resources will automatically block or inhibit reflexive decision-making. What our research has suggested is that the group of people most likely to act reflexively when planning their futures are working class youths – young people who do not wish to close off options because

of their socio-economic status, but recognise the social or material limits which may impede their progress. While time will tell whether they actually achieve their goals, what they are *not* all doing at this stage is discounting options based upon their social location.

On the other hand, the middle/upper class participants in our study demonstrated a marked tendency to conform to the invisible guiding hand of their habitus. The almost universal expectation that they would progress to university after completing their schooling means they are unconsciously limiting their range of career options. While many will likely succeed in this next phase of their education, there are some who appear not to possess the necessary academic ability, individual dedication, or even interest needed for university study. Yet this potential lack of individual resources is not countenanced. It appears to demonstrate not an awareness of choice or the skills to deal with uncertainty, but instead a pre-reflexive or non-reflexive attitude, which has not been tested by any crises created by a mismatch between social expectations and practical conditions.

The implications of these findings should give cause for thought, and are worth future investigative work. While it is important to encourage 'upward mobility' for working class youths, there appears to have been little thought given to the inherent value judgements placed on terms like 'upward mobility' and higher class occupations, and the corresponding effects. If habitus precludes middle/upper class young people – even those with little academic ability or interest – from considering what we prefer to call 'alternative mobility' career options; and if there is encouragement for working class youths to be more upwardly mobile, then what are the implications for those who choose from the range of options at the 'bottom' end of the career spectrum? While there may be increasing democratisation of higher status careers, for some young people the freedom of career choice is unlikely to bring satisfaction or progression unless or until there is as much effort devoted to removing social obstacles from alternative or 'lower status' career paths, as there currently is in removing material and structural obstacles to higher status pathways. In this regard, schools and career counsellors may have a wider role to play as agents in reformulating social expectations (Horvat and Davis, 2011; Reay et al., 2001a) not just in schools educating mostly working class students, but in the middle/upper class institutions as well. For only when choice means *all* choices, and only when all young people are actively engaging in a consideration of problems as well as possibilities, will we see full reflexive participation in an individualised world.

Notes

1. The 'Our Lives' project is an infinite-life multi-wave cohort study. For more details on the project, go to: artsonline.monash.edu.au/ourlives/
2. Equivalent to A-Levels in the United Kingdom. For further information go to www.qsa.edu.au
3. Queensland covers approximately 1,727,000 square kilometres. We restricted our sample to participants living in southeast Queensland for logistical reasons and also because this area accounts for roughly two-thirds of the state's population and includes a mix of metropolitan, semi-rural and rural areas.
4. All participants' names are pseudonyms.

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